I Became a God in a Horror Game

Shadows019

I Became a God in a Horror Game

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/61182493.

Rating:
Explicit

Archive Warnings:
Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Major Character Death

Categories:
M/M, F/M, Multi

Fandom:
我在惊悚游戏里封神 - 壶鱼辣椒 | I Became a God in a Horror Game - Pot Fish Chili

Relationships:
Bai Liu/Tawil (I Became a God in a Horror Game), Bai Liu/Spade (I Became a God in a Horror Game), Fang Dian/Lu Yizhan

Characters:
Bai Liu (I Became a God in a Horror Game), Tang Erda, Mu Sicheng, Du Sanying, Mu Ke (I Became a God in a Horror Game), Bai Liu | 6 (I Became a God in a Horror Game), Liu Jiayi, Su Yang (I Became a God in a Horror Game), Daniel Cinchimani, Xie Ta, wang shun, Armand (I Became a God in a Horror Game), Fang Dian (I Became a God in a Horror Game), Lu Yizhan, Spade (I Became a God in a Horror Game)

Additional Tags:
Other Additional Tags to Be Added, Translation, Beta Reader - Chapter 1 to 525

Language:
English

Series:
Part 1 of GHG - Translation

Stats:
Published: 2024-12-08 Completed: 2024-12-22 Words: 1,385,914 Chapters: 589/589

I Became a God in a Horror Game

by Shadows019

Summary

After losing his job, Bai Liu stumbled into an unstoppable horror live-streaming game teeming with monsters and players driven by bloodlust.

At first, everyone assumed he was just another ordinary person who had wandered in by mistake.

Then they realized—the game itself had been waiting for him, crowning him with victory and whispering, "Welcome home."

THIS IS A TRANSLATION
The story is translated completely. My beta reader has revised Chapter 1 to 525 at the moment. (01/06/2025)

Notes

It's for my enjoyment that I post this story.
My first language isn't English so sorry for the mistake you might see
My beta reader has revised Chapter 1 to 525. If you see any major errors in the meantime, please tell me in the comments.
Have a great day!!

- A translation of I became a god in a horror game by Pot Fish Chili

The small town of Siren

Bai Liu woke up cramped in the backseat of a dilapidated car, the air thick with the stench of stale smoke. The damp seatbacks pressed uncomfortably against him, while water streaked down the fogged-up windows, blurring the dreary landscape outside. The sky hung in a monotonous gray, so bleak it was impossible to tell whether it was dusk or night. A faint, nauseating odor of salted fish clung to the air, stubbornly sticking to his nostrils.

In front of him, a translucent panel flickered to life, its cold, stark text reading:

[Instructions for the Game]

Bai Liu frowned, confusion clouding his thoughts.

Where am I? How did I get here? And what's with this panel?

As though responding to his unspoken questions, the panel shifted and updated:

[You are in a deadly game. You were chosen because we detected a strong desire for money that activated the game after you lost your job.]

The words hung in the air, and Bai Liu's memories slowly came rushing back.

Yes. That's right. He was unemployed.

But more than that, he was a man consumed by an insatiable hunger for wealth. Even as a child, his obsession had been so extreme that a psychiatrist once diagnosed him with "money hoarding disorder." The psychiatrist had warned that his compulsive fixation on money would eventually ruin him if he didn't learn to control it.

At the time, Bai Liu had brushed off the warning. With a steady job, his desires were under control. But losing that job was like releasing a starving dog from its leash. Anxiety gnawed at him day and night, his craving for money spiraling out of control, fueling reckless fantasies of amassing a vast fortune.

His psychiatrist had suggested he relax and "see the world."

"Relax?" Bai Liu had sneered. "Without money, all I'll see is hell—not the world."

The psychiatrist had hesitated, then tried to soothe him. "Well, you won't get rich by traveling. In fact, you'll probably just get poorer."

Bai Liu had stared at him, deadpan. "You knew that already, didn't you?"

"But after becoming poorer, you'll realize..." the psychiatrist began, his tone gentle, "that money is just an external thing. Why torment yourself over it?"

Bai Liu's response had been biting. "Is it painful to have a patient like me?"

The psychiatrist had fallen silent, visibly uncomfortable.

Bai Liu had left the session with a new revelation: poverty wasn't just a weapon to break a man's spirit—it was the ultimate weapon. It hurt the user more than anyone else.

Thankfully, the community psychiatry sessions were free. Otherwise, the cost of his misery would've only deepened.

After losing his job, Bai Liu's days blurred together in a haze of anxiety and impossible dreams. Each night, he imagined sitting atop a mountain of money, laughing with joy. But each morning, reality set in: his dwindling savings were all that remained.

One evening, as he rested his cheek against his palm, a reckless thought crossed his mind:

If only there were a high-risk, high-reward way to make money... I wouldn't care if it was dangerous—I just want it.

He'd shared this thought with a friend, who had glanced at the dusty Criminal Code on Bai Liu's shelf.

"See that book?" his friend had said. "Flip through it. There are bound to be a few entries about high-risk jobs. Work hard enough, and you might even make the expedited list this month."

Bai Liu had scowled. "I'm not breaking the law."

"Then keep dreaming," his friend had replied dryly.

And so, Bai Liu dreamed. That night, his mind clung to the idea of a gamble—anything for a chance to make money. As he drifted into sleep, so too did his grip on reality. And when he woke, he was here.

Snapping back to the present, Bai Liu stared at the glowing panel before him.

[Yes, your strong desire triggered the game. Succeed, and you will gain everything you desire.]

Without hesitation, Bai Liu responded, his voice firm: "I want money."

The panel shifted, silent for a moment before it continued:

[If you succeed, you will earn points. Points can be exchanged for money, or anything else you wish.]

Bai Liu tilted his head slightly. "This... game of yours, it's legal, right?"

The panel hesitated again.

[...] Legal.

It continued:

[This is a horror escape game, filled with ghosts, murderers, and unimaginable terrors. Your task is to find their weaknesses, complete the game's storyline, and survive.]

As the final words appeared, Bai Liu felt the car shudder beneath him.

[Game loading... Loading complete.]

The air grew heavier, the smell of salted fish more pungent, as a low, unearthly sound echoed through the rain outside.

Bai Liu leaned back in the worn seat, a small, unbothered smile curling his lips.

No matter what it is, he thought, if it gets me money, I'll take it.

[Game Details]

[Name of the Game: Siren Small Town]

[Level: 1 (Games with less than fifty percent player mortality are Level 1 games)]

[Mode: Single Player Mode]

[General Description: This is an exciting blend of action and puzzle-solving, popular among players but tough for newcomers, with a very high mortality rate.]

[Player Information]

[Player Name: Bai Liu]

[Life Value: 100 (Life value drops below 60, player's attack power decreases; below 0, the player dies)]

[Stamina: 80 (Full of stamina)]

[Agility: 25 (You've spent years sitting at a desk; your body's stiff and not very agile)]

[Attack: 30 (Only high school girls can hit people with their school bags like you)]

[Intelligence: 89 (Surprisingly smart)]

[Luck: 0 (You've been unlucky all your life; if your company lays off one person, it's always you)]

[Skills: None (No skills yet)]

[Spirit Level: 100 (You're the first player of the year with a full Spirit Level upon logging in)]

[Note: Ensure your spirit level is above 60; below that, insanity will take over and halve all attributes. Below 40, you'll start seeing hallucinations, making the game harder. Below 20, you'll go berserk and randomly spike your attack, killing everything around you. At 0, you'll be assimilated into the game, becoming a monster.]

[Player Panel Rating: F (The lowest rating, though due to high mental and intelligence attributes, this is uncertain. Final Player Level: F (?))]

[Current Status: You have landed in the Newcomers section of the game's TV lobby (1/100), and no one has stopped to watch you yet. Your popularity and recharge rate are both 0.]

[The game is now broadcasting on your small screen for others to view.]

Bai Liu frowned. "What's this?"

The panel responded:

[Your game will be broadcast on a small screen in the Newcomer section of the lobby. No one has watched it yet, and no one has 'recharged' you. You are currently silent.]

He understood now—it was like being an online game streamer, but his focus remained on the "recharge rate": "Someone can recharge me for points, right?"

The panel confirmed:

[Yes.]

[Good luck with your game, new player.]

The screen blinked out of existence as a white light flashed in front of Bai Liu's eyes.

In the game lobby, Bai Liu's small screen flickered to life, showing his calm, clean face. Around it, other screens displayed the terrified expressions of various new players—some cowering, some howling, struggling to accept the reality they faced.

Bai Liu stood apart from the others, an anomaly in the sea of terrified newcomers.

A passing player looked at his screen, eyes widening as they noticed his character panel.

"Wait! This player has a full 100 spirit value!"

"What?!"

"A hundred spirit points on a new player?!"

"Isn't the last person with that high spirit level in the top ten overall?"

The excitement spread like wildfire.

Bai Liu's small screen flickered again as a mechanical voice chimed:

[50 people have gathered around player Bai Liu's TV, and Bai Liu has earned the 'First Time Out' achievement, unlocking the 'One Touch Trifecta' system.]

[28 people liked Bai Liu's video, 56 liked his TV, but no one has recharged him yet. Try again.]

The small town of Siren

Bai Liu was lying on his side in the back row of a cramped van, struggling to turn over. As he moved, he noticed a necklace fall out from under his shirt.

His outfit, consisting of a white shirt and black trousers, hadn't changed since before entering the game. It was typical workwear, but the necklace was a new addition.

The pendant was a dollar coin with a hole punched through it. When Bai Liu touched it, a game panel popped up, the same one he'd seen before, with no additional information.

It seemed like this necklace might serve as a game manager's item.

Not particularly fond of the damaged coin, Bai Liu tucked it back into his shirt.

Peering out from the back of the van, he saw that it was a seven-passenger vehicle, with four other people sitting up front. As soon as his head appeared, one of them looked back at him, surprised. "Bai Liu, hey, my sweetie, you're finally awake!"

The rest of the group was obviously foreign. The person who had called him "sweetie" was a girl with curly brown hair, bold red lips, and brown eyes. She wore hot pants and suspenders. As soon as Bai Liu saw her, a panel with her information popped up.

[NPC Name: Lucy]
[Description: Your classmate, who likes your type of guy. Too shy to approach you, she is ten centimeters taller and more enthusiastic and daring than you.]

Bai Liu's gaze lingered on the part of the description that said, "Too shy," before quickly withdrawing into thought.

This game seemed to require players to focus their eyes on NPCs in order to trigger their info, much like hovering a mouse over a character in an online game. In this case, Bai Liu's eyes functioned as the player's mouse and gamepad.

He paused, realizing that in this game, at least, he couldn't lose his eyesight.

Lucy, still looking at Bai Liu, teased, “Hey, baby, did I wear you out? You’ve been asleep the whole trip.”

Bai Liu, who had long been accustomed to his single life, had mixed feelings. "....."

A painless end to single life.

Bai Liu shook off his thoughts, turning his attention to the view outside the van window. The landscape seemed increasingly remote and cold. “Where are we headed? Why does it look so isolated here?”

From the front of the van, a sarcastic voice cut through the silence: “Looks like someone’s trying to run away again.” A tall man, dressed in tight jeans and a sports T-shirt, folded his arms and looked at Bai Liu with disdain. His massive frame made his shirt stretch tight, giving him the look of a rugby player.

He sneered at Bai Liu, “Too late, Bai Liu. Even if you're a coward and want to run, we're already headed to Siren Town.”

The game panel popped up again.

[NPC Name: Andre]
[Description: Your rival, who loves Lucy but has been rejected by her, is hostile toward you. You proved your love for Lucy by betting that you would protect her in the most dangerous place in the world. Now, you’re heading to Siren Town, where you regret your decision, but Andre forced you into it.]

Bai Liu had seen "Siren Town" twice now, and ignoring Andre’s taunts, he asked, “Siren Town? What’s that?”

Before Andre could continue mocking him, a quiet, continuous chant interrupted the conversation.

“Siren Town, the only seaside town in history where remains of sirens have been found. Many people have claimed to have seen the Siren here, or heard their beautiful songs on the waves. Some even say these demonic-looking mermaid sirens feast on human corpses on the dark reefs...”

“Jeff!” Andre interrupted, visibly irritated. “Those are just stories the town made up to attract tourists!”

A small boy, wearing thick glasses, hugged a book to his chest and

flinched under Andre's harsh tone, but still spoke back in a quiet, fearful whisper. "Then how do you explain the mysterious disappearances of tourists in Siren Town? Twelve people vanished last month, and the police have found nothing. No one saw them leave..."

Bai Liu looked at the game panel.

[NPC Name: Jeff]
[Description: An avid fan of mermaids, sea monsters, and unnatural creatures. He volunteered to join the trip to Siren Town and is very familiar with its legends.]

Andre scoffed, "Most of those people just drowned in the water. It's perfectly normal to drown at the beach."

Jeff retorted in a dark, eager tone, "The police have been searching for a month and haven't found a single body. If they drowned, why haven't they recovered any of them? Unless... their bodies were eaten by a Siren. The police can't recover what's been eaten..."

Andre finally snapped and slapped Jeff on the head. "Shut up, you four-eyed freak! All you ever talk about is mermaids and fish! You look like one yourself!"

The blow was so hard that Jeff's head slammed against the seat, causing him to dizzyingly hit Andre in return. Furious, Andre slapped Jeff multiple times, knocking out one of his teeth.

Jeff, silent and holding his mouth, picked up the tooth and looked at Andre with a subtle but intense hatred. Softly, barely audible, he mouthed, "The mermaid will tear you apart and swallow you, Andre."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow but said nothing. The NPC relationships were complicated, to say the least.

It seemed Andre had been bullying Jeff for some time, and now Jeff had some kind of revenge plan involving the "mermaid."

The driver, a local from Siren Town, had been paid by Bai Liu to drive the group. Bai Liu learned from Lucy's conversation that the driver was wealthy and had arranged for the group's food and lodging.

They drove through the night, reaching Siren Town late. The driver described it as a fishing village that had been rundown until the new mayor promoted rumors of mermaids to draw in tourists.

One example was a visitor who had checked into the hotel one night, only to be gone by morning. The door was locked, the bed was warm, but the person had vanished.

Because of these disappearances, Siren Town was desolate during the tourist season. Many businesses had closed due to poor trade.

Upon arriving, Bai Liu found Siren Town exactly as described: a run-down place with fences, fishing nets, and seaweed everywhere. Only a few hotels had decent decor. Despite the late hour, the streets were busy with people heading towards the beach.

As Bai Liu's group arrived, the townspeople stopped in unison and turned to look at the van. Their eyes gleamed a strange, cat-like green in the darkness, and their expressions were unsettling—smiles that stiffened unnaturally at the corners of their mouths.

They were holding nets and hooks, some carrying oil lamps, and their eyes followed the van as if preparing to strike.

The driver, sensing the tension, warned, "You need to be careful. These people are poor and see you as rich targets."

Because of Bai Liu's wealth, the driver had arranged for them to stay at the best hotel in the area.

The hotel was a luxurious five-star establishment that seemed out of place in the town. A fountain pool sat at the entrance, with a limestone statue of a mermaid standing on a base of cold white wax.

The mermaid was lifelike, her skin glistening in the moonlight, with her long hair flowing over her ample chest. She held a water jug from which a fountain poured into the pool, mimicking the sound of waves.

The driver bypassed the fountain and drove directly to the front entrance.

Suddenly, Jeff gasped, pointing at the mermaid statue. "She just looked at me! She just moved!"

The small town of Siren

Bai Liu followed Jeff's gaze and saw that the wax figure of a mermaid remained perfectly still, staring into the water with her eyebrows furrowed.

Andre, startled by Jeff's shout, punched him hard. "The wax figure isn't moving! It hasn't moved at all! If you keep this up, I'm going to rip your voice box out and stomp on it!" he growled.

Jeff covered his bruised head, fear in his eyes, curled into a ball, and whispered to himself, "She moved... she really moved..."

Lucy, also unnerved by Jeff, forced a smile. "Jeff, how can you be so sure? This mermaid wax figure doesn't have eyes, so how could you know it's looking at you?"

The wax figure, a creamy white mermaid, was made of cold, translucent wax, with half-melted droplets on her face, giving her an eerie look.

The eyes were carved into the figure, but they were pure white, with no pupils, making her appear soulless, like a dead being standing silently in front of the hotel.

"Haven't you all noticed?" Jeff's voice dropped lower and grew shaky. "No matter where we go, this wax figure is always looking directly at us, and her eyes... they're definitely moving..."

"That's... what I thought it was," Lucy said, visibly relieved. She finally laughed, albeit nervously. "It's like that 'Mona Lisa's Smile' portrait, right? No matter where you stand, it always feels like the person in the painting is looking at you."

"No, this isn't the same. A portrait can give the illusion of looking at you from different angles because it's two-dimensional. This wax figure is three-dimensional," Bai Liu replied calmly. "Jeff's right. The eyes on this figure do seem to move."

It felt the same as when the townspeople stared at them upon their arrival, as if they were prey in a hunter's territory.

This thing, Bai Liu realized, was probably some sort of monster.

The coin on his chest suddenly vibrated, bringing up a new panel—a

heavy, antique medieval book slowly flipped open before him.

[Congratulations to the player who found the first game monster and unlocked the Monster Book - Siren Small Town Special (1/4)]

A photograph appeared on the page—an image of the mermaid's wax figure submerged in murky waters, her face half-exposed, her uncarved eyes staring silently at Bai Liu, as though she might crawl out of the picture at any moment.

[Monster Name: Mermaid Wax Figure (Nymph Status)]

[Attack Value: ????? (Unknown, not unlocked, unlocked after battle)]

[Attack Method: ?? (Unexplored)]

[Weakness: ?? (Unexplored)]

The question marks were smudged with what appeared to be wet ink, making it impossible to read. Fluorescent text hovered behind the stains.

A note under the weaknesses section read:

[Note: Completing the information for this monster's page can yield point rewards and special bonuses. Collecting all pages of the Monster Book for a game copy allows you to acquire a monster's most precious items.]

The monster book had four pages, and the next page refused to turn, displaying only unlocked monsters from other game copies.

It seemed similar to a system where defeating a monster grants a reward. The more dangerous the monster, the greater the reward.

But judging by the conditions, it encouraged players to provoke and defeat the monsters...

Bai Liu, a player with the combat skills of a high schooler's book bag, rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

Lucy grabbed Bai Liu's hand in a slight panic. "Is she really moving?!"

"How could that be?" Andre, briefly shaken by Bai Liu's words, quickly suppressed his fear. He mocked, "Bai Liu, you coward! If you're too scared to stay, just go! But when you leave, you'll give up Lucy and get on your knees to lick my shoes!"

That was the bet between Bai Liu and Andre.

The driver, behaving oddly, tried to downplay the situation. "It's late, and you must be mistaken, right? There's no such thing as a moving wax figure! If there were, we'd make it a tourist attraction! Our town produces wax, and the mermaid figures are a feature—nothing unusual about it."

"Here we are! Get off the bus, folks! Rest up tonight, and have fun tomorrow!" The driver opened the door and ushered them out.

Bai Liu glanced back at the mermaid wax figure in the fountain. From a distance, it appeared to still be gazing into the water, her head slightly lowered. It didn't seem to be watching them.

But Bai Liu distinctly remembered that when they first arrived, the figure's front was not facing the entrance of the hotel—it had been turned toward them.

Two mermaid wax figures stood at the hotel entrance, one on each side, each holding a scepter and wearing twisted smiles, almost like they were forced to pose as waiters welcoming guests.

Inside the hotel, more mermaid wax figures were scattered throughout the space. Even behind the reception desk, a large mermaid wax figure held money in her hands, as if ready to check them out.

As the driver had said, the wax mermaids were everywhere in Siren Town, but the sheer number was overwhelming. From the floor lamps shaped like mermaids to mermaid pencil holders at reception, the figures were inescapable.

All these wax figures had one thing in common—wherever Bai Liu went, it felt as though they were staring directly at him.

None of the figures had pupils, which should have made it impossible for them to appear as if they were looking at him. Yet, Bai Liu couldn't shake the feeling that they were.

Even Andre, who had been mocking Bai Liu, got goosebumps once inside and rubbed his arms. Jeff, shivering, hid behind Andre, afraid of another punch.

Lucy clung to Bai Liu's arm, her face pale, still shaken by the strange hotel decor.

Bai Liu, however, calmly approached the receptionist. "Hello, my name is Bai Liu. I have a reservation."

The receptionist, a young man with an unnaturally pale complexion, wore a long kilt and moved awkwardly, his limited mobility making it hard to tell whether he was real or a wax figure.

When the receptionist suddenly moved, it startled Lucy, who covered her face and exclaimed, "Oh my God! You look like a wax figure!"

"I'm sorry," the receptionist apologized. "I have albinism. I didn't mean to scare you! Mr. Bai, is it? You booked four rooms. The reservation was made a week ago, and the fee has been paid. Here are your room cards. Enjoy your stay."

Bai Liu took the cards, relieved that they had four rooms. He hadn't wanted to share a room with Lucy.

Lucy, understanding, quickly recovered and flirtatiously glanced at Bai Liu. He ignored her with a neutral expression.

"I'd like to ask," Bai Liu said, "What's the deal with so many wax mermaids in your hotel?"

The receptionist replied, "The mermaids gave us everything. Before we discovered their remains, Siren Town had nothing. Since then, more tourists have come, and we've prospered. We are grateful to the mermaids. These wax figures are like talismans to us."

Bai Liu gestured to the mermaid wax figure behind the desk. "You've got quite a variety of these mermaid wax figures. The one behind you, it looks exactly like you. It also seems to be made from a different material."

It wasn't that Lucy couldn't tell the difference between the man and the wax figure, but the mermaid behind the desk looked strikingly like the receptionist, even with a more vivid expression, and it appeared more menacing.

The figure's eyes locked on the receptionist, and no matter where the man moved, the figure's gaze followed, as though it wanted to leap out and devour him.

The receptionist nodded. "Yes, that wax figure is my talisman. We have them made to look like us, and when danger comes, these figures will be mistaken for us, melting away to take the disaster in our

place."

Bai Liu found the concept of the [amulet wax figure] intriguing.

[New Discovery - Siren Small Town Monster Book Mermaid Wax Panel Refresh]

[Monster Name: Mermaid Wax Figure (Chrysalis Status), Amulet Wax Figure (Cocoon Status)]

A chrysalis and a cocoon? So the mermaid wax figure had two different states?

Bai Liu mused that a chrysalis was an insect in its shell, while a cocoon was what remained after the adult emerged.

This "protecting the shell" concept seemed consistent with the receptionist's claim about defending against danger.

Bai Liu speculated that the wax figures likely had two states: [Bug] and [Butterfly], with the latter being more aggressive.

So far, the mermaid wax figures in the [Chrysalis] and [Cocoon] states didn't seem inclined to attack. However, their presence could be mentally distressing.

Bai Liu handed out the room keys, brushing off Lucy's attempt to share a room. He didn't want to deal with her flirtations.

Lucy, disappointed, quickly retreated.

Bai Liu entered his room and froze.

He had booked a better room, but it was filled with mermaid wax figures, from the lampshades to the bedside figure, glowing eerily in the dim light.

As Bai Liu entered, the eyes of the wax figures subtly shifted to follow him.

[Main Quest Activated: Player Bai Liu must survive the night in the hotel until morning. Must not be "hatched." Quest Reward: 20 points.]

The small town of Siren

The system gave Bai Liu his first task, but Bai Liu's focus was not on the task. Instead, he looked at the words [Avoid being hatched] and fell into a deep thought.

..... hatching?

Gee, can that bunch of wax figures hatch them?

Bai Liu made a silent note, and as soon as he turned around, he saw a wax figure of a mermaid of equal height standing across the bed.

This is the largest wax figure of a mermaid that Bai Liu has seen in the house.

The wax figure of a mermaid is beautiful, holding a one-person-high polished mirror, the frame of which is also embedded in wax, while the graceful hands of the mermaid are the support for the dressing mirror.

It is also the only wax figure of a mermaid in the room that is not looking at Bai Liu.

He looks into the mirror with a smile on his face, and he is reflected in it, his arms are wrapped around the mirror as if he were in it, making him slightly uncomfortable.

The eyes of the mermaid wax figure fall on the mirror, the brow inward, the corners of the eyes lowered, the fish tail splayed helplessly on the ground, with a realistic and cheerful expression, as if welcoming the person in the mirror.

Bai Liu looks in the mirror, and the [self] inside gives an eerie wax-like smile to the Bai Liu outside the mirror.

Bai Liu covers the mirror with a white cloth unmoved.

This level of horror doesn't work for Bai Liu, who is a horror game maker in the real world and often stays up until two or three o'clock alone to create all kinds of horror scenes. So, this kind of routine horror scene with a man in the mirror laughing at you is almost numb to Bai Liu, and he doesn't feel anything.

It seems that the tourists who disappeared silently directly from the

hotel and whose bodies were never found, as Jeff said earlier, were probably [hatched] by these mermaid wax figures.

Although Bai Liu doesn't know exactly what [incubation] is all about, it can't be good.

Conservatively, Bai Liu covered all the mermaid wax figures with white sheets from the hotel room, including the huge mirror, to block out the eerie and omnipresent view. It doesn't always work, but it's better than nothing.

Most importantly, with so many people looking at Bai Liu in fish wax, Bai Liu couldn't sleep either.

As he shielded himself from the mirror, he touched the mermaid wax figure's fish tail, which did not feel like a glossy, silky touch of wax, but was as slimy and wet as a sea fish.

Bai Liu even felt the scales on the tail of the wax figure under him gently open and close.

Bai Liu paused to smell his fingers after touching the wax figure and was surprised to smell a strong smell of fish, but when Bai Liu got close enough to sniff the mermaid wax figure, he didn't smell anything fishy, only the smoky aroma of the hotel room.

It could be the smell carried off the car...

... More likely Bai Liu himself gave off that fishy smell, and thinking about that mermaid wax figure that can [hatch] tourists, Bai Liu frowned, feeling a little uncomfortable.

What can be hatched from a mermaid wax figure?

Mostly it's just some nasty-looking fish or something.

The word [hatching] reminds Bai Liu of a film called "The Mermaid in the Sewer," which he watched two or three times for its source material and has not had any charming fantasies about mermaids ever since.

Bai Liu was tired after a long night's drive, so he simply cleaned himself up and lay down on his bed to drift off to sleep. His stamina was already at zero, and he desperately needed to sleep in relative safety to replenish it.

In the middle of the night, Bai Liu was awakened by a very dull, dragging, strange sound.

As soon as he opened his eyes, he saw that the white cloth that had previously covered the wax figures of the mermaids had somehow slipped off, leaving only a part of it hanging on these wax figures.

Some of these wax figures are covered by white cloths so that only one eye is visible, and their expressions seem to have changed slightly, from one of divine compassion to one of resignation and resentment, as they look at Bai Liu motionlessly, as if blaming him for covering them with white cloths.

Bai Liu noticed that the wax figures seemed to be closer together than they had been before he went to sleep, like a group of people about to gather at a table for a meal slowly gathering around his bed with their hands raised.

Especially the dressing-glass mermaid wax figure holding a huge mirror. Bai Liu woke up in a daze to see his feet almost on the mirror.

The huge mirror, which was facing the bed, had moved to fit against it.

As soon as Bai Liu sat up on his shrunken feet, he saw himself reflected in the mirror.

In the mirror, [Bai Liu's] skin is pale as rock, his eyes are devoid of black, and the cobwebbed pattern of marble surrounds them. [He] shows a stiff smile at the corners of his mouth to the Bai Liu outside the mirror, but in a flash, it becomes a normal mirror image again, as if it was just Bai Liu's imagination.

Bai Liu quietly got up from the bed and, without changing his face, tied the wax figures of the mermaids up with a white cloth.

To prevent the wax figures from breaking free, Bai Liu used twine to tie them twice, then wrapped the smaller ones in a white cloth and threw them into the wardrobe and locked them, while the larger ones were pushed into the bathroom and locked behind them, with the precision of a skilled kidnapper.

The objects appear to be somewhat restricted in their movement, not being able to move until Bai Liu is asleep, and it appears that even after Bai Liu is asleep, they need to break free of the white cloth and see Bai Liu before they can move towards him.

Some of the little wax figures of mermaids that had not gotten their white cloths off were just scurrying around in the white cloth, not gathering towards the bed but scattering and fleeing.

Once this rule was clarified, Bai Liu took the opportunity to increase the limit to the maximum.

Just as he was finishing this and clapping his hands together to get ready for bed, Bai Liu heard a door open and close and a creeping footstep from next door to him.

Bai Liu had just lain down on the bed. The four rooms he had booked were all adjacent to each other, with Andre and Jeff living in the rooms next to each other on the left and right.

The sound of the door opening and closing came from the left, which was Jeff's room. Bai Liu gets up from the bed and presses himself against the door to look through the cat's eye into the corridor.

Jeff was seen standing in the corridor and after looking around to make sure the corridor was clear, he sneaked down the hotel stairs.

Bai Liu frowned, "What are you doing up in the middle of the night?"

He was just about to open the door and follow him when he saw the door handle of Jeff's room, which had been closed, start to turn slowly again, as if someone else was about to follow Jeff out of his room.

Hotel rooms are for one person.

Lucy could not have gone to Jeff's room in the middle of the night. Andre was not on good terms with Jeff and could not have gone to Jeff in the middle of the night, and Bai Liu was in his room.

So, who is this person coming out of Jeff's room?

Bai Liu's heart skipped a beat as he realized something with a jolt and moved slightly away from his face which was pressed against the cat's eye.

It's not a person coming out of Jeff's room!

Jeff's door handle turned to a click and finally opened slowly from the inside, and Bai Liu heard again that dull dragging sound he had heard half-asleep, as if something was being dragged along on its knees on the floor.

But Bai Liu knew this time how the sound was made.

A human-sized wax figure of a mermaid emerges from Jeff's room, its face frozen in place, its face expressionless, its eyes deadly white from lack of eyes, its fish tail on the ground, scuffing and dragging along the empty corridor in the dead of night.

Its snow-white fishtail trailed across the hotel's sturdy old red carpet, leaving a greasy trail of wax on the carpet, and its full body remained motionless as it made its way up the stairs, reminding Bai Liu of a zombie's rigid ghoul that can only bounce forward.

... This thing can actually run out of the room by itself and open the door...

As the wax figure of the mermaid dragged out of Jeff's room reached the staircase, it seemed to sense something, and the head on its shoulder suddenly twisted rigidly 180 degrees and turned straight back.

The candles on its face are slowly melting away, revealing an almost fleshy lightness.

It then shifted its direction of travel and walked expressionlessly in the direction of Bai Liu's room.

Bai Liu made sure the door was unlocked and took two steps back with his back pressed against the door holding his breath as he wondered what the hell this thing wanted.

Bai Liu soon saw out of the corner of his eye that the cat's eye on the door had turned white and was still turning.

The thing was coming up to look at the person in the door with its eyes, and the thing that kept turning was the white eye of the wax figure.

This thing is searching through the cat's eye to find out who is in the room.

The white eyes on the cat's eyes are still rolling as Bai Liu slowly moves aside with bated breath, reaching out his foot to hook the white cloth on the floor, ready to cover himself with it.

The frightening image was projected onto the screen of the small TV and those waiting in front of the small Bai Liu TV held their breath

and bit their hands with nervousness.

"Fuck fuck fuck, that's scary, I'd have dropped my mental value if I was in-game..."

"Steady on! Hold on! This place has a super high mortality rate for newcomers!"

"The monsters in Siren town are really nasty and it's hard for newcomers just coming in to keep their cool and figure out the weaknesses of this thing..."

The new players on the screens around Bai Liu have almost reached the point where the mermaid wax figure is blocking the door, and some players are playing a little faster and the mermaid wax figure outside the door is clanging against it.

One of the players was whimpering and crying while huddled by the vibrating door with his ears, a wooden stick trembling in his hand, seemingly ready to be used in an attack.

The mermaid wax figure banged on the door and he cried out and screamed a little, but no one came to his rescue. The door to this player's room stopped after two shakes, and the wax figure of the mermaid outside seemed to have left.

The sobbing player wiped his eyes and sighed with relief, propping himself up on the door and standing up weakly on his hands and feet.

But what he didn't notice was that the cat's eye on the door was still white, a pure white stone eye staring silently through it at the person inside.

That mermaid wax figure didn't leave at all, it just pretended to leave.

Seeing the player stand up, a strange and stiff smile appeared on the wax figure's face as it grinned contentedly as if it had found its prey.

The door was slammed twice more and easily broken open, with players who hadn't reacted screaming and being crushed underneath it.

The mermaid wax figure entered the house trailing its fish tail, a grin of strange innocence and odd hideousness on its face as it slowly reached out with open hands to the player pinned under the door.

The moment he was touched by the wax figure of a mermaid, the player seemed to be wrapped in something all over his body, his eyes rolled up, his limbs were curling up in slow motion, his legs were twitching and swaying on the ground together, like a fish struggling madly after being splashed with boiling water, and his skin turned stiff and pale in an instant.

The wax on the mermaid's body melted as quickly as if it had met hot water and wrapped around the stiff player on the floor.

Around the player's eyes appear marbled grey-black lines of the kind seen in Bai Liu's mirror, and the eyeballs disappear, leaving only the whites of the eyes covered with lines and the corners of the mouth stiffened and turned upwards.

He is wrapped in this melted wax as a wax figure of a mermaid.

[Play Yi Zhong Spiritual value is zero, completely alienated by the monster mermaid wax figure, game pass failed]

[Player Liu Xiaohong has zero spirit value and failed to pass the game by Mermaid Wax Figure ......]

[Player Zou Mingri ..... game pass failed]

The small TVs of the failed players went out with a "zippy" sound, and the people gathered around them sighed.

"Eh, I knew it, I guess it's still hard to have a pass this time, 'Siren Small Town' is so hard..."

It's only the first night, and the monster has only had one look, and almost a fifth of the entire [newcomers' area] TV wall is darkened with small TVs.

Bai Liu The TV screens above, below, and to the left and right went out, leaving him alone in a sea of black screens, staring calmly out the door.

The small town of Siren

Bai Liu could hear the crisp clang of marble against the door, and the door handle moved twice this time.

Although the door had been unlocked, the door handle sounded like it was soon to be scrapped with the fragile metallic fracture under the vigorous twisting of the wax figure of a mermaid outside the door.

The thing seemed to be trying to get in, its dead white eyes searched around Bai Liu's room, seemingly noticing that there was no one in the room, it seemed to leave Bai Liu's door, the door handle did not move, the room became silent and silent outside, the other side seemed to leave.

But Bai Liu still held his breath, he remembered that the thing made that dull sliding sound when it moved, and it wasn't right without it.

The mermaid wax figure had not left at all, but was still more or less silently guarding his door.

This thing is tricking him, luring him out, Bai Liu thought as he squinted and noticed that the cat's eyes, which had reverted to the colour of carpet, had suddenly turned back to the white of bulging eyeballs.

That thing is really still there.

The thing waited for a moment seemingly undeterred, still trying to get in, and the door handle was violently twisted into a protruding broken shape, rattling to slide off the door.

The mermaid wax figure outside the door is coming in.

Some of the kind-hearted viewers in front of the TV screen have already closed their eyes in disgust.

"It's rare to see a seeded player...eh, shame."

"The main thing is that this copy of Siren town is so disgusting, it's not even a novice copy of the difficulty, it's totally killing it for newbies."

Bai Liu's mind raced and his breathing slowed.

The game tells him quite clearly that these ghostly monsters have weaknesses that the player can use to escape from these monsters, so the way to break the game at the moment is to find the weaknesses that limit the movement of this thing.

Bai Liu closes his eyes to reflect on the whole process of moving in tonight.

As long as it's a game, it's got a solution, and games without solutions are the worst. Bai Liu has been making horror games for years, and he's beyond sure that there must be something that hints at the weakness of other people's fish wax figures.

What exactly is it .....

Bai Liu calmly begins to sort out all the scenes in which he meets the mermaid wax figure.

The first time was at the fountain outside the hotel, Jeff exclaimed that he saw the mermaid wax figure moving, the movement was silent, just spinning behind the car, the mermaid wax figure wasn't looking directly at them, it was looking into the water.

The second time was in the hotel lobby, where a huge number of various wax figures of mermaids, looking straight at them, did not move.

The third time was in the hotel room, except for the huge mermaid wax figure looking into the mirror, the rest of the mermaid wax figures looked straight at Bai Liu and started moving after Bai Liu fell asleep, the mirror mermaid was the fastest moving, but after Bai Liu woke up these wax figures did not move.

But apparently Bai Liu staying awake is not some condition that restricts the movement of the mermaid wax figure, because the one outside the door is ready to break in.

There will be no situation where the game cannot be broken, he must have something on him, something that can limit the movement of the mermaid wax figure.

It is not something in the room, it is not something in the hotel, it must be something brought by Bai Liu, because the hotel and the room do not restrict the movement of the wax figure of the mermaid, as evidenced by the fact that this wax figure was able to move freely

in and out of Jeff's room before.

What exactly is it?

Mirror...water...sleep .... Look straight ahead!

Bai Liu knows what it is.

Bai Liu jerked to his feet as he pulled the door open and stared directly at the wax figure of a mermaid.

The wax figure outside the door is close enough to be seen from Bai Liu's point of view, the lifeless mermaid's face seemingly pressed against the tip of Bai Liu's nose, its palm still resting on Bai Liu's doorknob, its pure white beadless eyes peering through the cat's eye into the lower right corner - that's where Bai Liu is hiding.

No wonder this thing had to come in, it must have seen Bai Liu hiding in the bottom right corner behind the door.

Its movement stopped, its fish tail having touched Bai Liu's toe, and at the last moment of stepping into Bai Liu's room, it came to a standstill in front of Bai Liu's door.

Bai Liu was relieved to be right, the weakness that kept this thing immobile was the direct view of the human eye.

The crowd in front of the small TV was stunned.

"Holy shit!!! How did he think of that!!! Just pulled the door open without hesitation!"

"The average new player would not even think of it, and even if they did, they would not dare to pull the door open, only to look directly through the cat's eye, and that would still be certain death, because that close to look through a mirror image like the cat's eye, the movement of the mermaid wax figure would only be partially restricted, enough to break through the door."

"Woj, I got goosebumps when he just locked eyes with the mermaid wax figure!"

"What's his name, so awesome this new guy ...."

The crowd gradually gathers around Bai Liu's small TV.

[168 people watched player Bai Liu's mini-TV, player Bai Liu achieved

the Novice 100 achievement]

[102 people liked Bai Liu's TV, 143 people favorited Bai Liu's TV, 3 people charged Bai Liu's TV, 3 points were awarded to Bai Liu].

Bai Liu's expression on the small TV remains calm and collected, as if he doesn't think he's done anything remarkable.

Deducing the weakness that [Human Eyes] restricts the movement of mermaid wax figures when they see it is actually quite simple.

Because the wax figures started moving after Bai Liu went to sleep, and they stopped instantly after he woke up, the only difference before and after he went to sleep was that he opened his eyes, and that means that [human sight] is able to limit the movement of the wax figures of mermaids.

But there is a catch here - and that is that looking at such a thing across a mirror-like object only weakens some of the movement of the mermaid wax figure, and one must look directly at it to stop it completely.

Because there are two other kinds of wax figures that can also move under the direct view of the human eye, the wax figure of the fountain in front of the hotel and the wax figure of the mirror mermaid in the room.

The mermaid wax figure in the fountain pool outside the hotel door looks into the water, then one is looking [directly] at the mermaid wax figure through the water. Although the mermaid wax figure is restricted and cannot move fast, it can still move slowly or even turn, which is why it turns slowly at the door.

And of the mermaid wax figures in the room, the mirror mermaid is the fastest moving, also because the mirror mermaid looks inside the mirror and the limiting force given by the person looking [directly] at the wax figure through the mirror is limited, which is why the mirror mermaid runs the fastest.

The mermaid just now was looking at Bai Liu through the cat's eye, so it can move, while Bai Liu should be able to move if he is just looking directly at the mermaid wax figure through the cat's eye alone, although there will be some limitations.

This close, through the cat's eye is definitely not enough to limit the mermaid's movement to break in, if it is allowed in, the player is

pinned under the door and loses the condition of [Human Eye Direct], the player will soon be dead.

But it has to be said that in this case, there are very few new players indeed who can have pulled the door open to look squarely at the mermaid wax figure.

Most of the players panicked, even if they deduced the condition of [Human Eyes Seeing Straight], they did not have the courage to verify it. Only Bai Liu, the one who wanted money and not life, had this kind of calmness even if he was not 100% sure his deduction was right, but still justified.

[Siren Small Town Monster Book] Mermaid Wax Panel Refresh

[Monster Name: Mermaid Wax Figure (Chrysalis Status), Amulet Wax Figure (Cocoon Status)]

[Vulnerability: Human eye direct vision (1/3)]

[Mode of attack: Hatching]

The wax figure of a mermaid with downcast eyes and a head tilted slightly to the right, the corners of her mouth slightly raised with a hint of a smile, a graceful fish tail, a flawless white body and a posture of indescribable hidden beauty and divinity.

Once this wax figure is fixed still, the spine-tingling invasiveness of its body disappears, transforming it into a wax figure of great aesthetic value, standing silently in front of the door of the house of a stranger in the midnight of the seaside.

[Player Bai Liu gets 3 points for watching player charge and unlocking the game merchandise shop]

[Points are too low to purchase any items, so please keep up the good work!]

That player charged three points, Bai Liu kind of got it, someone who was watching should have rewarded him, and this unlocked merchandise shop, where all the items were black and white, showed a status of [Unavailable for purchase].

After a few brief glances, he found that this merchandise shop had everything from daily necessities to weapons, and a lot of messy things, what with [intact heart], [magic potion at first sight], such

unbelievable-sounding items were also on sale, but accordingly, the prices of such items were very high.

Bai Liu understood the phrase when he entered the game - [Points can buy everything you want].

Bai Liu closes the shop and stares at the wax figure of a mermaid that remains motionless in front of him.

It's true that the thing isn't moving now, but Bai Liu can't stay up all night confronting this thing, and after this incident, Bai Liu has a new appreciation for the destructive power of this thing.

He looked to the stainless steel handle that was just about to come off his own door.

Judging from the behaviour of those wax figures in his room earlier, it seems that although this thing has enormous destructive power, it can only rely on the eyes to locate it, or rather, it is only sensitive to visual things, and once it is covered by the white cloth there is no way to locate Bai Liu, even if it is difficult to find him in the same room.

In other words, the mermaid wax figure appears to have no senses such as hearing and smell.

If Bai Liu was in the same size room as the wax figure of many fish, it would have been easy to locate Bai Liu by listening to his breathing and unscrewing his head like a doorknob, so there would be no need to rip off the white cloth to find him.

.... What a pain in the arse, and such a large quantity, what a burden to keep.

Bai Liu narrowed his eyes slightly and had an evil thought in his mind - now he had a wax figure in front of him that was motionless and at his mercy, could he experiment with it and see what its weaknesses were, like roasting it over a fire and knocking it to pieces with a stick ....

[Tip: If the player attacks the monster directly, if the monster does not die, it will cause the monster's hate value to stay on the player for a long time and will keep attacking the player, reducing the player's survival rate]

Bai Liu strokes his chin thoughtfully and he smiles, a small, harmless pear swirl appearing on the right side of his face.

"Attacking it directly will cause it to hold a grudge against me and take revenge on me, right..." Bai Liu said to himself, "Then I can't be blamed if something happens to it on its own."

Bai Liu did the same trick again, wrapping the mermaid wax figure in a sheet and then tying the openings underneath with string, before he unkindly placed the mermaid wax figure at the entrance to the hotel staircase.

The wax figure of a mermaid walks around headlessly when it cannot be seen. Bai Liu put the wax figure of a mermaid in this place so that the wax figure would actively fall down the stairs.

Bai Liu is not going to break these wax figures if there is hate value, which is fine if he can, but if he can't, he's obviously going to get himself into trouble.

Bai Liu has only one pair of eyes, and if he is surrounded by wax figures in a 360-degree view, the horizontal view of the human eye is only 188 degrees at most, and Bai Liu has no way to see all of them with eyes in the back of his head, then he will surely die.

Bai Liu likes to do things that are more cost effective and although the game says that using weaknesses to escape from monsters is all that is needed, he wanted to know if he could just destroy the wax figures in some way.

Or whether there are other fatal weaknesses in these wax figures.

He doesn't do it by actively cracking or striking the wax figure of a mermaid, the risk is too great for him to take - who knows what will crawl out of this chrysalis or cocoon when it breaks.

But the mermaid wax figure has nothing to do with him if he stepped off the stairs and fell because of his own poor eyesight.

Bai Liu just wanted to do a little test to verify that the thing could be smashed and he retreated back into the room.

The wax figure of the mermaid did move shortly afterwards, and Bai Liu was puzzled. He was still looking at the wax figure, but it was covered by a white cloth and did not know that Bai Liu was looking at him, so it moved on its own.

This proves that [the human eye looking directly at it] is only an objective condition, and that the mermaid wax figure has to feel

subjectively that it is being looked at directly in order to stop moving.

With so many wax figures in Bai Liu's room, there was no way for him to look at them all at once, and before Bai Liu had a chance to look around once he woke up, they had voluntarily stopped moving.

So as soon as the mermaid wax figure [feels] like it's being looked at directly, it will stop moving.

To be self-aware to this level, these things are indeed living creatures, or living creatures with some degree of intelligence, although it does not appear to be a high degree of intelligence.

The wax figure of a mermaid at the stairway struggled a few times, and with a stroke from the side of the stairway steps, it crackled down covered in white cloth, puffing out with a loud dusty thud.

Bai Liu stood on the stairs and looked down, patting the dust from his hands and tsking with some regret as he looked down at the wax figure of a mermaid, unscathed and only slightly curled up, with not even a crack in the marble.

..... really can't be broken ah ..... physical attacks are ineffective ah ....

Bai Liu was unaware that his villain-like appearance was on small TV, causing a crowd of players to gawk.

"Is this guy really a newcomer? Covered head in bed sheet, drops mermaid wax figure downstairs .... Was this new guy a kidnapper before he came in? Or a terrorist?"

"I was just nervous and scared for him, now I'm starting to feel sorry for the mermaid wax figure knocking on the door, it's fallen on its tail, it's so bad..."

"..... Does this guy really think of himself as a player?!"

"All the other players are trying to survive the monsters, but he's good, he just doesn't want the monsters to live..."

Bai Liu was oblivious to these discussions and his attention was soon drawn to something else when he saw Jeff.

Jeff was furtively hiding under the stairs, talking to someone, and after the conversation he walked back.

Jeff was sneaking out most of the night before, and now he's actually back.

Bai Liu had a good view from the stairs and saw that Jeff was followed by a man of the same height and dress as the driver who had driven them here today.

The two men seemed to be discussing something in whispers, and Jeff handed the driver a bunch of fancy things and gave him a few more instructions.

If Bai Liu is correct, the coins Jeff gave to the driver should be of this world.

[You have triggered the hidden storyline of Jeff's Bloody Plot]

[Explore the whole storyline, 50 points awarded, current storyline completion rate is 15%]

Bai Liu's eyes narrowed slightly as his hand reached into his collar and pulled out the perforated dollar coin and pointed it at the driver as the panel popped up with the character's information.

[npc: Driver]

[Your driver, the one who drove your party to Siren Town, was hired by Jeff, who allegedly knows Siren Town well and has a history of arson and robbery.]

Sure enough, this is also a character npc with status.

Bai Liu and the driver had never come into contact with each other before, and the driver was sitting in the front seat while Bai Liu was in the last row, so he could not see the driver's face.

The driver did not get out of the car, so Bai Liu never got a frontal

view of the driver, and therefore never got to identify the driver's character.

He hadn't thought anything of it before, but now that Bai Liu has looked back he realizes that it seems Jeff has been intentionally blocking Bai Liu from the driver, whether by choosing to sit between Bai Liu and the driver, or by the shriek he makes when he's about to get out of the car .....

What conspiracy do these two have to hide from themselves?

Based on what is known about the conspiracy, Bai Liu speculates that Jeff paid the driver, who had a criminal history, to do something for him. This is unknown at this time, but Bai Liu thinks it is likely to be revenge against Andre.

On entering the town the driver had already said that many people in this town had not had an economic source for a long time and that they should be careful.

Previously Bai Liu had thought this was a reminder, but now it seems to be more of a smug and arrogant admonition from the driver, and a sort of zoning out of the hunt.

He was sending a warning to Jeff - away from his cooperation and protection, Jeff could easily be harmed by the other townspeople in this town.

The driver, of course, was a citizen of the small town of Siren and was short of money, and certainly could have done something to rob Jeff's carload of people for lack of money.

The driver had probably done a lot of taking money from people, he didn't look like a good guy and was obviously crazy about the money, he was insinuating threats when they entered Siren Town.

There's no telling what this driver might do if he doesn't get the money in time.

Bai Liu went back to his room before Jeff saw him and helped Jeff close the door to the room that had been left open.

Jeff hesitates for a moment as he passes Andre's room and lowers himself. Bai Liu looked through the cat's eye and saw what Jeff had put down - a large piece of fish.

It wasn't long before Bai Liu saw a pile of gloomy white wax figures of mermaids gathered in front of Andre's room.

A series of dull, cackling wax movements resounded in the corridor again.

To be on the safe side, Bai Liu had covered the cat's eye of his room with a white cloth to keep the mermaid from prying eyes, and had used a cupboard against the door in the hope that if the mermaid broke in it would make some noise and wake him up.

His stamina had been emptied. Once this was done, Bai Liu lay back on the bed and closed his eyes.

A dreamless night.

The next day, Bai Liu woke up to find the wardrobe door and the door to his room closed, but the bathroom door was about to open.

Bai Liu opened the bathroom to find that the wax figures of the mermaids he had covered and tied up had broken free of their white cloths and were moving towards the bathroom door in various contorted and bizarre positions. Some of the wax figures had reached the door handle and were only a step away from turning away.

The poses of these wax figures of mermaids remind Bai Liu of the time when he played 123 Wooden Men and suddenly turned around to see the people behind him unable to control their expressions and gestures.

The way these eerie cold white wax figures chase and surge behind the door in order to get out is inexplicably oozing.

The oppressiveness of these human-like marble wax figures stacked like this is heightened by the high density of their eyes gazing into a small space Bai Liu, which can be uncomfortable, or as uncomfortable as any normal person would feel when being looked at by so many pairs of dead eyes.

Bai Liu closes the bathroom door and he no longer cares about the wax figures, nor does he tie them up anymore.

Because there is no point anymore.

These things are breaking free faster and faster, and if we can't find any more weaknesses to control this thing, constant masking and binding is a cost effective way to do it, and maybe work out the ability of these wax figures to get out of bondage quickly.

The moment Bai Liu opened the door to his room, a new message popped up in the panel.

[Player Bai Liu completed the main quest - Stay in the house overnight without being alienated, awarded 20 points]

[Current balance: 23 points, can buy props, does the player buy?]

Bai Liu opened the shop, he was now so poor that he could count on one hand what he could purchase. Bai Liu bought a 15 point strong searchlight torch and had 8 points left - he pondered slightly.

..... I don't know if there are any of those 3D holographic projection instruments.

[Yes, one for 4 points, on sale for 3 for 8 points, will the player buy 3?

Bai Liu nodded without thinking: [Yes!]

As a social animal who is short of money, two of the words he can't afford to hear in his life are [discount] and [sale].

It was only natural that he bought and played with the 3D projector he had gotten.

The quality of these discounted projectors is not bad at all. Bai Liu recorded his own portrait and the projection was amazing, with no bad quality at all, realistic colours and vivid characters, almost like real people when you look at them in the dark.

Bai Liu is very happy with his purchase.

But his viewers are not happy, and it's a tradition in this game that once a newcomer gets their likes, attention and airplay, they demand a certain amount from that newcomer.

A group of people gathered around the small TV pointing and sighing.

"This newcomer isn't trying to use the projector as a human-eye hokey-pokey mermaid wax figure, is he? It's written in the monster book that you need to see straight through the human eye. The projector will only fool the mermaid wax figure for a while, it won't

last long."

"I can't believe I bought a discounted projector, it looks fancy, but it's useless! Otherwise it wouldn't be a stagnant item that no one would buy for a point a piece! What was this newbie thinking!"

"..... Yes, this projector was on sale when I came in and now, after all these years, it's still on sale ....."

"Fuck, 23 points, clearly the highest number of points in the newbie area so far, and it's all gone to waste, without buying a single useful item! Are you out of your mind?!"

Suddenly, a player shouted in surprise in front of a small screen, "Come here! There's a newbie over here who's bought the Flaming Torch! This thing kills mermaids, he's stable!"

The crowd suddenly left Bai Liu's small TV screen and gathered around the novice who had supposedly bought the right prop, many nodding approvingly.

"Yeah, that's the regular level-breaking prop, that's a good newbie idea."

"The Flaming Torch can be used three times, and with a good grasp, he should be the only newcomer in the group to get through."

.....

Bai Liu's small TV is once again only a handful of people in front of it.

[34 people are watching Bai Liu's mini-TV and 167 people have left]

[50 people unliked Bai Liu's TV, 44 people unliked Bai Liu's TV, 17 people stepped on Bai Liu's TV and no one charged Bai Liu's TV].

.....

After testing his props, Bai Liu left the room and went to Jeff's room to wake him up.

Jeff had obviously slept badly last night, his face was a little pale and there were two large dark circles under his round-rimmed glasses.

The number of wax figures of mermaids in Jeff's room - as Bai Liu has visually estimated - is about the same as in his own room.

Unlike the wax figures in Bai Liu's room, which he had locked up, the wax figures were quietly in place, and he don't know if it was his fault, but he thought the wax figures in Jeff's room looked a little more realistic than the ones in his room, and their faces had become slightly similar to Jeff's... ...

The mermaid wax figure has a translucent flush under its white waxy case, its eyes seem to move in their sockets at any moment, and its expression is pleasant and natural, as if it were a fish that has absorbed enough water to stretch out the scales on its tail.

The room also began to have a faintly fishy smell.

Bai Liu went to Lucy's and Andre's rooms to observe them. He carefully compared them and found that the wax figures of mermaids in these rooms were indeed closer to human skin colour than those in his own room, both in terms of touch and shade, and that they were beginning to resemble the features of the people living in the rooms.

The small town of Siren

Lucy sits at the table, looking like she hasn't slept either, yawning sickly and leaning into Bai Liu.

Jeff has been dozing off all morning and has dark circles under his eyes, his skin is greenish grey and his eyes are sunken.

And I don't know if it was Bai Liu's fault, but he felt that Andre's pupils had shrunk a little compared to yesterday, and his whole being had an uncomfortable air of nervous agitation, with an unmistakable smell of fish.

Bai Liu took out the coin and swiped it against Andre.

[NPC Name: Andre (Mental value decreased, alienation in progress)]

Andre seems to have worked up an appetite at this point, eating large plates of the hotel breakfast buffet as if it were being poured straight down his throat.

As this hotel is by the sea, most of the breakfasts consist of fried fish of all kinds. The fish soup is oily and smooth, and the fillets are golden and crispy, making them look appetising.

Bai Liu smelt a pungent fish smell like rotting dead-fish tails he smelt at the dump where the fishmongers dumped their fish in the market, and he started to gag as soon as he got near the glorious looking fish delicacies.

But both Jeff and Lucy had the look on their faces that these things smelled good.

Bai Liu took out the coin and scanned it. As expected, these two also showed [Alienation in progress], which should be related to the mermaid statue in the room.

Not to mention Andre, who makes Bai Liu a little uncomfortable with the way he eats. Andre chewed heavily, the wet, dark tail of the fish lapping at the side of his mouth as he chewed, often forking the next one into his mouth before he even had finished it.

Lucy looked at Bai Liu with slight surprise as she sliced the fish steak with her knife and fork: "Aren't you going to eat? Baby! The fish steaks here are so delicious, I couldn't help but eat two of them even though

I'm on a diet!"

"You've really found a rather nice beachfront hotel!" With that, Lucy was about to come over and kiss him.

But Bai Liu was choked by the strong smell of fish in Lucy's mouth, and subconsciously pushed her away, but thought better of it and pulled the plate away from Lucy's face, pretending to be serious: "Baby, you're in shape, I won't allow you to lose your beauty for a fish. "

Lucy was delighted to be coaxed into eating the vegetarian salad, although she still had a fondness for the fish and chips.

Bai Liu pretended to drop by again and filled a number of salads for Jeff and Andre to eat.

Jeff ate a little bit.

It was Andre who looked at Bai Liu and taunted, "It's not like our rich man is short of money, is it? Before he came here, he said he'd pay for our food and accommodation, but now he can't even let us eat a fish steak."

" Lucy, look at that, there's your mean boyfriend!"

Lucy immediately cursed in anger: " Andre! If it wasn't for Bai Liu, do you think you could come to a hotel like this and eat this fancy fish and chips? You wouldn't even be able to stay here! If Bai Liu didn't pay for you, you wouldn't be able to enter the hotel!"

" Lucy!" Andre growled, but Lucy tilted her head back and glared at Andre.

Andre can't do anything to the woman he likes, so he's ready to take his anger out on Bai Liu.

As Lucy watched Andre's wide palm open to lift Bai Liu by the back of his collar, Bai Liu wiped his mouth nonchalantly, looked over at Andre and smiled, "If you still want me to pay your bill, you'd better not touch me."

Andre's hand suddenly stopped in mid-air, his nostrils dilating and contracting like a bull as he spat out a furious breath.

He looked at Bai Liu with red eyes and threatened fiercely, "If you

can't do what we bet on by the end of the night, I'll make sure you're a short-handed punk who can't even get laid!"

Andre's eyes were bloodshot, seemingly dazed by the rage that had gone straight to his head, but he couldn't do anything about it, as he was still expecting Bai Liu to pay his bill.

At the same time a piece of broccoli accidentally rolled out of Jeff's plate while he was eating and onto Andre's shoe.

Like a balloon that has been inflated to its limit and then punctured, Andre backhanded Jeff in the back of the head before he could say sorry, knocking Jeff's head on the plate and spitting out everything he had eaten that morning.

"You've soiled my shoes! You disgusting bastard!" Andre seemed amused at the sight of Jeff vomiting, found some sort of mental balance by grunting a laugh out of his nose and giving Jeff another kick.

After wiping the negligible grease stain from his shoes on Jeff's trousers, Andre added, "I don't mess with losers who can't fight back, wipe it off and get the hell out of my way."

Lucy helped a dazed Jeff to his feet as she yelled hysterically at Andre: "You stop it Andre! You've gone too far with Jeff!"

Bai Liu ignored the two arguing men, his eyes focused on Jeff's vomit, a golden fish fillet that had been chewed and spat out with a greenish-black cross-section that looked like dead fish, covered in what looked like wriggling worms.

This rotting dead fish, which is simply not edible to humans, is used by fishmongers to feed larger fish.

Bai Liu remembers a fishmonger telling him that the larger the fish, the more they like to eat dead fish.

The driver came to pick Bai Liu up after his breakfast.

[Main Quest: Visit Siren Wax Museum, 50 bonus points]

[Main Quest: Attend the Mermaid Fishing Convention, reward points 50]

The Siren Museum and the Mermaid Fishing Convention, which sounds like two attractions.

Bai Liu pondered for a moment, and was just about to ask the driver what these two were when Jeff suddenly came up and got between Bai Liu and the driver, his head bowed and silent, his pale, thin cheeks sunken, blood stains from Andre's blows on the side of his mouth, his teeth clenched and trembling slightly.

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow, Jeff seemed to have gone out of his way to avoid contact with the driver from yesterday until now.

This is not quite normal.

Bai Liu's fingers unconsciously turn the coin in his heart.

The coins flip back and forth on the backs of his fingers, a common gesture Bai Liu uses to think things through, and the feeling of having money in his hands, even a dollar, gives him a sense of calm and pleasure.

In the absence of other information, Bai Liu speculated that Jeff's target would be Andre, and that it would be normal for Andre to have access to the driver, who would be looking for opportunities to strike, while Lucy would be an easy character to fool, and there would be no need to be so deliberate in isolating him.

Jeff must have had a reason for isolating him and the driver, and that reason, Bai Liu pondered, would be money.

Jeff clearly doesn't look like a wealthy character, looking at the way he dresses and his daily routine of violence by Andre.

Andre is also a bully, and is not very aggressive with the rich Bai Liu, but he does not take any real action, while he beats and scolds Jeff, whose family situation is not as good as his own, or even Andre's, in this respect.

Last night, Jeff gave the driver what appeared to be a substantial amount of money, and Bai Liu had reason to suspect that Jeff had taken the money he had paid for the driver and the tourists to hire the driver to get back at Andre, which is why he had been so vain in keeping the driver away from him.

But last night Jeff had already paid this driver a sum of money, the deal was reasonably well done, and the work of the apparent driver

and tourist was well executed, and he did not express any suspicion.

Generally speaking, Jeff should have been relieved that there was no need to go to such lengths to isolate him from the driver, which would have aroused his own suspicions.

This is not quite the kind of cautiousness that you would expect if things were not yet in place.

But it’s also possible that Jeff was simply being overly cautious or hesitant, not letting his guard down in case things didn’t go according to plan. After all, Jeff’s subplot was called "The Bloody Plot," so Bai Liu could understand why he might be extra careful with a plan that could involve murder.

Bai Liu wasn’t sure when Jeff would confront Andre, but for now, he wanted to stay focused on the main quest.

Turning to the driver, Bai Liu asked, "Driver, is there anything worth seeing in Siren Town?"

The driver paused for a moment before replying, "Sights? Well, the must-sees around here are the night fishing and the museum."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow at the answer, "Night fishing and a wax museum? What’s so special about those?"

The driver glanced over at him, a strange glint in his eyes. Bai Liu, seeing the driver's face up close for the first time, was taken aback. Even with his high tolerance for horror, he couldn’t help but feel a sense of surprise.

It wasn’t fear, but pure astonishment at the driver's appearance.

The man’s eyes were so filled with whites that they barely resembled normal eyes—more like tiny, erratic flecks, constantly shifting as if they might roll out of their sockets at any moment.

His skin was unnervingly pale, almost translucent, like cheap wax that had been left out too long.

The driver spoke casually, continuing to drive while chomping on a fish and chip sandwich. The fillet inside was a putrid, green-black color, resembling moldy fish, but the driver seemed to enjoy it, his teeth stained with the same sickly hue. He then gave Bai Liu a wide, unnaturally stretched smile.

The small town of Siren

When Bai Liu got into the car, the overpowering stench of fish hit him immediately. At first, he assumed it was Andre—the man had devoured an absurd amount of rotten fish fillets earlier that morning. But now, to his surprise, the smell was coming from the driver.

Thinking back, the faint fishy odor he noticed in the car yesterday must have also been from the driver, though it hadn't been nearly as intense as it was today.

Today, the reek was overwhelming.

Bai Liu cast a sideways glance at the driver. There was something... off about him. The more he observed, the more certain he became.

This driver didn't feel entirely human.

[Warning!!! Player identification error! The NPC is not a monster! Cannot be entered into the monster book! The entity is merely in an alienated state!]

[Player identification error! The NPC's trust in the player has dropped significantly and may act aggressively towards the player!]

The driver slowly bit into the sandwich in his hand, his unsteady eyes fixing on Bai Liu for a moment. His voice turned sharp and bitter as he sneered, "…Do you think I smell disgusting?"

Bai Liu's thoughts betrayed him—yes, you do—but he hurriedly denied it outwardly. "No."

The driver's gaze darkened as he chuckled grimly. "You're looking at me like I'm some kind of monster. Typical—arrogant, rich man." He scoffed and turned away, focusing on his food, dismissing any further questioning from Bai Liu.

This is going to be tricky, Bai Liu thought, his expression impassive.

The abrupt shift in hostility made his task much harder. Extracting information from someone actively suspicious of him wasn't going to be easy—especially when the system had already warned that the driver might act aggressively. Bai Liu wasn't foolish enough to provoke him further.

Bai Liu turned to Lucy beside him, leaning close to whisper a few words. Gently coaxed, Lucy took the cue and asked the driver the question instead.

The driver grunted but, to Bai Liu's relief, he responded.

"Siren Town's attractions? They're certainly tied to mermaids," the driver replied, his grin unsettling. His darting eyes seemed to drift in and out of their sockets, as though he couldn't decide who to look at—or perhaps he was looking at no one at all.

"Our fishing isn't for ordinary fish. We have a special catch: mermaids," he said, his voice chilling. "Only at night. And our wax museum? It's not just any wax museum. We make wax figures of the mermaids we catch and put them on display there."

He chuckled, his expression twisting further. "The first mermaid skeleton we ever caught—it's still in the museum."

"Mermaid fishing?" Bai Liu asked, narrowing his eyes. "Did you really catch mermaids?"

The driver ignored him entirely.

Lucy repeated the question, her voice soft yet persistent. Only then did the driver bother to reply.

With a cryptic smile, he said, "Yes. The first one we caught was beautiful—truly stunning. But the ones we've caught since… inferior. Imperfect. Incomplete forms. But mermaids nonetheless."

Andre snorted loudly, his voice dripping with disdain. "It's just a gimmick. Don't tell me you people actually believe this crap."

Jeff looked like he wanted to say something, but his lips snapped shut. After the beating he'd taken from Andre earlier that morning, he clearly wasn't eager to challenge him.

But Lucy wasn't about to back down. She shot Andre a disgruntled glare and exclaimed, "I'll believe it! What about you, Bai Liu?" Turning sharply, she fixed Bai Liu with an indignant look, as if daring him to disagree.

"Seeing is believing," Bai Liu replied evenly, his tone calm. "We'll find out when we watch the fishing event tonight."

Andre didn't seem to mind Lucy's defiance, but he made a point of mocking Bai Liu with every word. "I just hope some people don't start crying and try to run off when they see the fishing tonight," he sneered.

His wicked grin widened, and his gaze raked over Bai Liu with malicious glee. "It'd be a shame if you fell into the water, screaming, and got caught by the fishermen. Imagine them mistaking you for a mermaid and turning you into one of those wax figures."

Andre shrugged theatrically, his grin impish, as if he could already see the scene unfolding in his mind.

Bai Liu remained unfazed, though his mind wandered to the unfinished business between him and Andre: the bet.

This morning, he had coaxed Lucy into revealing the full details.

The wager was straightforward but dangerous. Andre and Bai Liu would each hire a canoe and drift out onto the Siren's waters late at night. The one who couldn't endure and turned back first would lose, branded a coward—and, in Andre's words, unworthy of Lucy.

Lucy, for her part, wanted no part of the bet. But Bai Liu's role, his character in this unsettling game, demanded that he participate.

In a horror game centered around [mermaids], venturing out onto the sea in the dead of night was no trivial challenge. Bai Liu couldn't deny it: the night sea would be a terrifying place.

Bai Liu would never agree to a situation like this—venturing into the unknown with someone as devious as Andre—without knowing all the details.

There was no doubt in Bai Liu's mind: if given the chance, Andre would tip his canoe and leave him to drown in the sea.

And Bai Liu? He didn't even know how to swim.

In truth, the fabled mermaid Siren and whatever horrors came with it were far less terrifying to Bai Liu than the sea itself. He avoided the ocean whenever possible and only ventured near it when absolutely necessary.

His scowl betrayed his disdain for this so-called "betting event."

Andre laughed mockingly, pointing at him with exaggerated glee. "Look, look, there he is—our pampered young master. What do you have over me except money? You don't even have the guts to go to sea."

Bai Liu nodded in mock agreement, his expression genuinely pleased. "You're right—I have nothing but money."

He said it with such satisfaction that it startled Andre. Bai Liu's unbothered demeanor, as if being called rich was a compliment, only made it worse.

Andre: "…What the hell? Why do you look proud?"

Snorting, Andre leaned closer. "So, you're just giving up on Lucy by not going, huh?"

Bai Liu was about to declare his refusal outright—there was no way he'd risk his life on this absurd death-defying bet.

But then the coin on his chest vibrated.

A mission prompt appeared before his eyes:

[Side Quest Triggered: "Ship of True Love"]
Objective: Complete the bet before leaving Siren Town. Win against Andre in the competition to receive 100 bonus points.

Bai Liu: "…"

A hundred points?!

The lure of that reward silenced his protests. The desire for wealth instantly drowned out his fear of the sea. His face returned to its usual calm as he announced, "No. I'm going. And I'm going to beat you."

Lucy's eyes lit up, and she threw her arms around Bai Liu in delight. "Oh, darling, when you come back, we must celebrate together and have the loveliest evening!"

Bai Liu silently pried her hands off him, his face blank.

The driver, who had been silently watching the interaction, turned his head slightly. "If you're going, you might want to check out our wax museum first. There's no mermaid fishing until the evening."

The group exchanged glances and murmured their agreement.

The driver maneuvered the car onto a narrow path that wove behind the beach, taking seven winding turns before finally stopping.

Bai Liu's gaze drifted to the beach ahead, where an array of sun-dried wreckage lay scattered.

"This," the driver said, gesturing casually, "is where we catch the mermaids. Those fragments you see? They're the broken remains of the ones we hauled in. Some are too damaged to keep, so we dump them here."

Bai Liu scanned the beach and saw what the driver meant. Large fish-tail bones, stark and white, jutted out from the sand, alongside several skulls, their empty sockets staring blankly at the sky. Nets hung nearby, swaying gently in the breeze, as a handful of fishermen emerged to gather the bones and check their gear.

For the first time, Bai Liu saw the townspeople in daylight, and the sight made his skin crawl.

By night, the driver's strange appearance had been unsettling. But in the daylight, these fishermen were far worse.

Their eyes were unnervingly white—so starkly pale that the pupils, no larger than soybeans, seemed lost within their sockets. Their gazes wandered aimlessly, as if unsure where to look.

The eyes themselves were wide-set, positioned unnaturally close to their ears, making them resemble catfish more than humans. Around their eyes and down their necks, grey-black marbling spread like ink stains.

Their movements were equally strange: sluggish, as if the sun weighed them down. As they walked, their feet dragged through the sand, and Bai Liu noticed the backs of their feet were covered in green scales—scales that appeared to be peeling away.

The fishermen froze when they noticed the car. Their expressions were unsettling, like children sniffing out a treat. They grinned at Bai Liu and the others, but the smiles never reached their wandering eyes.

"They look so strange," Lucy muttered, her voice barely above a whisper.

Bai Liu agreed silently. These fishermen weren't just strange—they were more like grotesque deep-sea creatures than people.

The driver finished the last bite of his foul-smelling sandwich, turning to the group with a grin that revealed blackened teeth. "Strange? That's just how we are here. Probably from eating all sorts of fish—it's not the healthiest diet."

Bai Liu narrowed his eyes, suppressing his instinctive suspicion. These townsfolk, though eerily inhuman, might not qualify as monsters within the game's mechanics. He'd already been burned once by misidentifying the driver.

If these fishermen weren't recognized as monsters in the [Monster Book], there were two possibilities:

The first: they truly weren't monsters.
The second: they hadn't yet met the criteria for classification, possibly due to the game's unique rules around [hatching] and [alienation].

In Siren Town, both states seemed to exist simultaneously. The mermaid wax figures could be [hatched], and characters like Andre displayed signs of [alienation]. Bai Liu suspected the townsfolk might be caught in some similar transformative state, though what it would ultimately lead to, he didn't know.

His gaze shifted to Andre, sitting stiffly in the front seat.

It wasn't that Bai Liu couldn't have saved Andre the previous night. But in Bai Liu's calculation, Andre—an aggressive NPC—was more valuable dead than alive.

Andre scratched at his cheeks, which seemed perpetually itchy, and cast a resentful glance at Bai Liu through the rearview mirror.

Bai Liu caught the look but didn't react.

Andre's stomach growled audibly, his eyes locked onto the driver's hands as if he might snatch the remnants of the meal at any moment. But the driver ate quickly, finishing before Andre could act, and leaned back with a sigh of satisfaction, rubbing his stomach.

"Ah," the driver sighed, licking fish oil from the corners of his mouth. "Nothing beats the fish from Siren Town."

Lucy chimed in, her voice light. "It really is delicious. I've never had fish this fresh before."

The driver chuckled, his smile turning unsettling. "Fresh? No, no—it's

not fresh. The secret to Siren Town's fish is that it's never fresh. This kind of fish isn't good until it's rotted a little, cured, and specially treated."

He leaned closer, his tone dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "You're eating a very special kind of fish—something you won't find anywhere else. It's unique to Siren Town."

Lucy's curiosity got the better of her. "What kind of fish?" she asked innocently.

The driver's grin widened, and his voice dropped to a sinister murmur.

"Mermaid."

The small town of Siren

A heavy silence descended over the car, and everyone's faces turned unusually pale.

Lucy let out an awkward harrumph, while Andre sneered—neither of them seemed convinced by the driver's story.

The driver suddenly burst into laughter. "Just kidding! Why would we eat mermaids? It's just sea fish we specialize in around here."

Moments later, the car came to a smooth stop in front of a building. The driver announced calmly, "We've arrived at the wax museum. Time to get out."

As everyone stepped out of the car, the driver leaned out the window. "Take your time inside. Give me a call when evening comes, and I'll take you to see the mermaid fishing."

With that, he drove away.

Bai Liu stood outside the car, taking in his surroundings. In front of him loomed a towering building, so tall he had to crane his neck back to glimpse the top. At its peak, elegant English lettering spelled out the name: Siren Wax Museum.

[System Alert: Scene Unlocked – Siren Wax Museum]

The museum's exterior was painted in deep, somber shades reminiscent of the sea, supported by thick granite columns. From his position at the entrance, Bai Liu could see the faint outlines of wax figures displayed in shadowy alcoves—mermaids, frozen in eerie stillness.

Though the building's interior looked modern and polished, the façade bore signs of wear. Red brickwork, faded and chipped, hinted at its age. Old newspapers plastered the walls, their corners fluttering in the breeze. One of them tore free and smacked into Bai Liu's face.

Peeling the paper away, Bai Liu's eyes caught on a bold headline:

[Police Notice: Twelve people have gone missing in Siren Town this month. If you have any information regarding the individuals in the photographs below, please report to the authorities immediately. Visitors are advised to exercise caution: avoid large fish and stay clear

of the water.]

Beneath the warning were twelve black-and-white photographs. Each showed smiling individuals, their joy from visiting Siren Town captured in an unsettling way. The faded smiles stared back at Bai Liu through the yellowed, brittle paper, evoking a strange, unnatural unease.

Bai Liu carefully folded the newspaper and slipped it into his bag. However, as he pressed the folds together, he noticed something odd —the texture felt too rigid, almost as though it wasn't just paper.

He frowned, turning the folded sheet over in his hands. For a newspaper, even one aged and stiffened by the salty sea air, the material felt unnaturally hard... as though it concealed something more.

Bai Liu inspected the cross-section of the newspaper closely.

It appeared unnaturally thick, yet there was no visible sign of multiple layers. The newspaper had been compressed so firmly by the wind and dampness that even if additional sheets were hidden within, they would be difficult to detect.

He tucked the newspaper under his arm, deciding to test his theory once inside the wax museum. Warm water might help loosen any stuck layers and reveal what was hidden.

[Side Quest Triggered: Find the hot water in the wax museum and separate the newspaper layers. Reward: 10 points.]

The keeper of the Siren Wax Museum emerged to greet them. He was an old man with cloudy, cataract-filled eyes. Despite his impaired vision, he moved with uncanny precision, his gaze seemingly tracking them with ease.

As Bai Liu and the others stepped inside, the keeper inclined his head, his blank eyes glinting faintly under the dim lighting. A polite yet formulaic smile stretched across his aging face as he approached with surprising speed, startling Lucy into a small gasp.

"It's been so long since anyone visited…" The keeper's voice was tinged with melancholy. "No one comes to the Siren Wax Museum anymore, not since the accidents last month. And it's been a while since we've had a new mermaid wax figure for the displays."

Bai Liu's curiosity piqued. "Why haven't there been new mermaid wax figures recently? Does it have anything to do with the lack of visitors?"

The keeper nodded, his tone growing animated as he gestured stiffly with his arms. "Of course! Without tourists, it's hard to justify large events like the mermaid fishery—"

He cut himself off abruptly, as if realizing he'd said too much.

Bai Liu shifted his approach. "Are mermaid wax figures brought in regularly? Doesn't the museum eventually run out of space for them?"

The keeper's demeanor changed, his cloudy eyes narrowing slightly. A peculiar smile played on his lips. "As many new wax figures as we receive, the same number always leave. The Siren Wax Museum can never be filled."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "And where do the wax figures go when they leave? Are they discarded, or returned to the sea?"

The keeper fell silent, his expression tight with hesitation.

Sensing the man's unease, Bai Liu pressed further. "What happens when tourists arrive in Siren Town?"

"Nothing," the keeper muttered under his breath. "They have a pleasant holiday… and then leave."

No matter how Bai Liu framed his questions, the keeper refused to elaborate further.

After asking for directions to the hot water, Bai Liu collected his ticket and led the group into the museum.

At the entrance stood an imposing wax figure of a middle-aged man painted in gold. Unlike the mermaid figures Bai Liu had glimpsed, this one was entirely human—dressed in a suit and hat, with a golden body and a practiced smile. The figure waved stiffly in greeting to visitors.

Dim lighting from above cast long shadows across the figure's face, twisting its polite expression into something unsettling.

Curious, Bai Liu approached the wax figure, which was mounted on a black stone pedestal. An inscription identified it as a depiction of

Mayor Harris, created for the ribbon-cutting ceremony of the Siren Wax Museum.

The engraving beneath the figure extolled Mayor Harris for revitalizing Siren Town by developing tourism through the discovery of mermaid skeletons and funding the museum's construction. It credited him with transforming the once-declining seaside town into a prosperous destination.

Carved prominently into the stone was a peculiar line:

[Mayor Harris loved every villager in Siren Town as unconditionally as he loved his own children.]

Bai Liu studied the engraving carefully.

Suddenly, Jeff, who had been silent for most of the trip, leaned in and whispered, "Do you believe in mermaids? Do you think any of this about Siren Town is true?"

Bai Liu considered the question. Most of the lore surrounding places like this tended to be fabrications—a blend of local myths and promotional gimmicks designed to attract tourists. At best, only a fraction of it was rooted in truth.

But this wasn't an ordinary place. This was a horror game.

"I think it's true," Bai Liu replied calmly.

Andre snorted, clearly skeptical, but said nothing, trailing behind Jeff as they moved further into the museum.

Bai Liu lingered, intending to join Lucy, but his plan shifted when he remembered the newspaper. After explaining that he needed to find the hot water room, he encouraged Lucy to explore on her own.

Lucy hesitated but eventually nodded. "I'll wait for you in the gallery," she said before heading off.

Left alone, Bai Liu turned toward the area the keeper had indicated, determined to uncover whatever secrets the newspaper might hold.

The small town of Siren

The keeper warned Bai Liu that the hot water room was somewhat isolated, with broken lamps leaving parts of the corridor in darkness. He added, with a mischievous smirk, that piles of mermaid wax figures were scattered along the way. “Be careful not to bump into them,” he said with an impish gleam in his eye.

Bai Liu walked along a dimly lit corridor framed by towering marble columns, each wide enough to conceal two or three people behind them. At regular intervals, mermaid wax figures were stationed along the path.

Their forms were eerily lifelike yet unsettlingly static, tails draped limply on the ground, and their faces blank of any emotion. What unnerved Bai Liu most was their gaze—almost every figure was turned toward the windows, as though yearning to escape.

At the end of the corridor, the hot pool was already active, steaming water cascading out and filling the passageway with a thick, humid fog. The wax figures near the pool seemed to glisten under the mist, wax dripping faintly from their forms. They appeared to shift imperceptibly as if subtly melting, their shapes in flux.

As Bai Liu ventured deeper into the mist-shrouded hallway, he felt like he was walking through an underwater dream. The mermaid wax figures, half-hidden by the haze, seemed to sway gently, their movements just beyond comprehension.

Soon, Bai Liu noticed something unnerving. The mermaid figures, once facing the windows, began to subtly turn their heads toward him. Their necks crooked at unnatural angles, their blank faces now unmistakably focused on him.

Step by step, the figures drew nearer. Their melting forms began encroaching on the path, closing the distance between him and them. The tails of the mermaids dragged across the floor, leaving behind trails of greasy, waxy residue.

The silence of the grand, darkened corridor was oppressive. Bai Liu’s soft footfalls echoed faintly, each step accompanied by the unsettling realization that the wax figures moved whenever he glanced away.

With each blink, the figures appeared closer, their positions and expressions subtly altered. The once-expressionless faces now bore

faint, eerie smiles. Their pale, flawless forms glimmered under the dim light, their presence like a haunting tableau of restless phantoms frozen in time.

Bai Liu began counting the wax figures, trying to keep track of their movements. Every few steps, he'd glance behind him, locking eyes with those following. But each time he turned back to the path ahead, a figure seemed closer than before—its hand nearly brushing his neck.

The figures' movements were slow but deliberate, their sheer numbers and resilience making escape seem increasingly unlikely. Bai Liu maneuvered carefully, using the massive columns to prevent the figures from encircling him. He calculated their movements, deliberately forcing gaps to keep them from closing in completely.

Despite his strategic positioning, the figures continued their relentless approach. Their faces, originally generic and unremarkable, began to change. The wax melted and reformed, their once-uniform features now eerily mirroring Bai Liu's own face.

The resemblance was uncanny. The closer they came, the more the figures' grotesquely curved smiles twisted into a macabre mockery of Bai Liu's expression.

These malformed replicas advanced toward him, their once-static forms now brimming with life, clawed hands outstretched. The mist seemed alive with their presence, their distorted faces inching ever closer as they surrounded him.

Bai Liu finally arrived at what the keeper had referred to as the "hot tub." It turned out to be a yellowing old lavatory sink, its rust-stained tap darkened with streaks that could have been either dried blood or corrosion.

Above the sink, a rectangular tin can used for boiling water trembled and hissed, the sound of boiling liquid filling the damp air.

Without hesitation, Bai Liu calmly placed the folded newspaper he had been carrying onto the counter, his eyes scanning the room with quiet composure. As he turned back toward the sink, a group of mermaid wax figures stood silently behind him.

They loomed in rows of varying sizes and heights, completely blocking his path to escape. Their eyeless faces bore twisted, malicious grins, mouths cracked unnaturally at the corners. Under the dim light, their waxy forms shimmered faintly, and their expressions—grotesque

parodies of Bai Liu's own face—seemed to mock him.

The figures tilted their heads downward, their melting features distorting further. Their greedy stares locked onto Bai Liu, who now felt as if he was surrounded by dozens of twisted reflections of himself.

The group wasn't just passively looming. They were hunting.

Bai Liu had earlier remarked that these wax figures lacked intelligence. Yet, here they were, seemingly learning on the spot, encircling him with a grim determination. Their unnerving ability to adapt and strategize reminded him of humans—a realization that made them all the more unsettling.

Hot water continued to pour out of the sink behind him, spilling over the edge. But Bai Liu didn't move to stop it—not yet. Any sudden movement, he knew, would invite immediate retaliation. His gaze stayed fixed on the figures, holding them in their place as they edged closer with every passing moment.

Instead of panicking, Bai Liu methodically reached back without turning and shut off the tap.

The mermaid wax figures inched forward, their expressions growing more menacing. Their distorted grins stretched wider, their faces curling into something almost unrecognizable. Bai Liu, however, seemed unconcerned. He stroked his chin, muttering to himself as if the advancing threat was no more than a curiosity.

"Hatching, huh? That's what this is. The closer they get, the more they resemble me. So, I guess what they eventually become will look exactly like me. Interesting... The ichor on me seems to have an effect when they get too close. Is that why the townspeople are all 'hatching' like this?"

Meanwhile, spectators watching Bai Liu's situation through small TV monitors weren't nearly as composed.

"Look at him! Still analyzing at a time like this," one sneered. "And what's with those cheap projectors he bought? Is he planning to show a movie to the mermaids?"

"Yeah, what a joke," another chimed in. "I spent my points on this guy? Should've gone for the torch guy instead. He's breaking through!"

Indeed, on a nearby screen, another player wielding a blazing torch was charging through a group of wax figures, shouting threats and forcing them to retreat. The audience erupted in cheers for the torch-wielding player's bold actions.

"See? That's how you handle it! Mermaids are photophobic, so a torch is the perfect prop!"

Bai Liu's small TV screen, however, remained mostly ignored, save for a few viewers sticking around to witness what they assumed would be his inevitable demise.

Their jeers continued as Bai Liu casually pulled out three cheap 3D projectors from his pocket.

"What is he even doing now?" someone mocked. "Projections won't work for long. At best, they'll confuse the wax figures for a few minutes. Then what? He's still stuck!"

Unperturbed, Bai Liu placed the projectors strategically—one behind him, one to his left, and one to his right. With a faint smile, he flipped them on.

In an instant, three identical projections of Bai Liu appeared, surrounding the wax figures. The figures hesitated, their movements halting as they turned their focus toward the projections.

The audience's laughter turned into awkward murmurs.

"Okay, so maybe that bought him some time," one admitted reluctantly. "But projections won't hold them off for more than ten minutes. The wax figures will figure it out. They're already reacting!"

Sure enough, after a few moments, the mermaid wax figures began to close in again, their suspicions seemingly growing.

But Bai Liu wasn't done.

Before the audience could fully dismiss him, the three projections mimicked Bai Liu's actions exactly. All four of them—Bai Liu and his projections—simultaneously pulled out torches and aimed them directly at the wax figures.

The room was suddenly bathed in bright, searing light.

The wax figures recoiled violently, their movements chaotic and

disorganized. The once-confident spectators watching Bai Liu's screen were now struck silent.

Bai Liu smirked, his calm voice cutting through the tension. "One torch wasn't enough. But four?" He glanced at the retreating wax figures. "That should do the trick."

The small town of Siren

Four intense beams of light blazed from every direction, converging on the mermaid wax figures. For a moment, Bai Liu's small TV screen was so dazzlingly bright that the pure white glare overwhelmed the neighboring screens, forcing viewers to shield their eyes.

The mermaid wax figures recoiled under the assault of the torchlight. Their stiff forms jerked backward as if in agony, their melting hands moving instinctively to shield their hollow, eyeless faces.

Under the relentless beams, the figures began to shrink and curl into themselves like criminals caught in a spotlight. Some crouched low, their bodies folding inward, while others tried to bury their heads in their arms, desperate to escape the glare.

Bai Liu crouched before them, a devilish grin playing on his lips. His voice was soft but cutting: "I was right. You really are afraid of the light."

The crowd watching his small TV screen fell silent.

One player, who had just criticized Bai Liu moments earlier, broke the quiet, his voice raised in disbelief. "No way! There's no way those cheap projectors could reproduce torchlight this perfectly! That's not scientific!"

Another spectator snorted. "Scientific? Really? You're looking for logic in a game where mermaid wax figures are a thing?"

Someone else added, "Actually, I just checked the manual for those projectors. They're optical projectors. Most of their specs are garbage, but they're crazy efficient at reflecting light. Something like 80% energy efficiency."

"Seriously? You didn't even bother reading the system instructions before trashing the guy?" another viewer laughed. "Kind of embarrassing, no?"

"I mean... I just bought three of those projectors myself. Couldn't resist," a viewer admitted sheepishly.

Meanwhile, on the neighboring screen, the torch-wielding player was having a much rougher time. Waving his blazing torch frantically, he shouted threats at the encroaching wax figures. His movements were

panicked as he attempted to force his way toward the newspaper floating in the "hot tub."

The wax figures, their grim faces and outstretched claws, pushed him closer and closer to the brink. The scene was tense, thrilling even—a chaotic, life-or-death struggle.

But compared to Bai Liu's side, it felt almost comical.

Bai Liu, accompanied by his three projections, had encircled the wax figures like an officer leading a tactical operation. The intense torchlight kept the wax figures cowering pathetically in the center, their once-menacing forms now helpless and motionless.

As the wax figures quivered under the light, Bai Liu stood calmly by the hot tub, casually reading the newspaper as if on vacation.

The contrast was undeniable, and the audience couldn't ignore it.

[347 people liked Bai Liu's TV, 355 people favorited Bai Liu's TV, 21 people charged Bai Liu's TV, awarding him 21 points.]

[Player Bai Liu has gained over 300 likes in under a minute. His reputation is soaring!]

[Congratulations! Player Bai Liu has earned a promotional spot on the central lobby game screen's fringe section. Views are rapidly increasing...]

The sudden surge in attention left viewers stunned.

"I've never seen a newbie player make it onto the central gaming lobby screen—let alone so quickly," one muttered in awe.

"It's like we're witnessing the rise of a new star..." another whispered.

[Siren Town Monster Book Updated!]

[Monster Name: Mermaid Wax Figure (Nymph Status), Amulet Wax Figure (Cocoon Status)]

[Weaknesses: Direct eye contact with humans, exposure to strong light (2/3).]

[Mode of Attack: Hatching.]

[Player Bai Liu is one weakness away from completing the "Mermaid

Wax" Monster Book page. Completing it will unlock a corresponding reward at the end of the game.]

Bai Liu had long suspected that the mermaid wax figures had an aversion to light. It wasn't a difficult deduction.

The driver had mentioned earlier that large fish are typically caught at night because they tend to avoid light. Since the mermaid fishing event in Siren Town also occurred at night, it stood to reason that mermaids—and by extension, mermaid wax figures—were light-averse creatures.

Still, Bai Liu hadn't yet drawn a definitive connection between mermaids and their wax figure counterparts regarding this particular trait. His observations provided a clue: during the day, no mermaid wax figures were visible anywhere in Siren Town.

This absence was telling. If mermaid wax figures truly feared light, then perhaps they only emerged at night when the shadows offered them protection.

Bai Liu, as always, would patiently piece together the puzzle in due time.

The dimly lit hotel and the Siren Wax Museum were rife with mermaid wax figures. Bai Liu had already deduced that these figures were creatures devoid of hearing or smell, relying solely on their extraordinary vision. This heightened sensitivity to light was likely their greatest weakness.

The conclusion was almost self-evident: mermaid wax figures fear strong light.

Once Bai Liu arrived at this hypothesis, he resolved to test its limits systematically.

How much light would it take to repel a mermaid wax figure?

How long would the effect last?

Could light effectively break an encirclement formed by the wax figures?

To find answers, Bai Liu deliberately lured the wax figures into an enclosure. Using intense beams of light and a 3D projector, he attempted to force his way out.

Failure was always a possibility, but Bai Liu wasn't one to shy away from taking risks.

With a 10% or better chance of success, Bai Liu would gamble without hesitation.

For him, risk was intrinsic to the nature of games—and even more so in their creation. Failure wasn't discouraging; it was part of the process.

Having dealt with the wax figures, Bai Liu's attention shifted to the softened newspaper soaking in the sink.

Grabbing the paper, he carefully tore it apart at the back.

Sure enough, it wasn't an ordinary newspaper.

[Player Bai Liu has completed the task: Separate the newspaper at the hot tub. Bonus: 10 points.]

[Charge points: 21. Current points balance: 31. Would you like to buy props?]

Bai Liu declined the offer and examined the torn newspaper.

Upon closer inspection, the thickness of the two halves was different. One section was visibly thinner. Curious, Bai Liu gripped the thicker half and tore it again.

It separated once more.

His brow furrowed. Despite the system confirming the task was complete, the hidden layers within the newspaper suggested otherwise. If Bai Liu hadn't scrutinized it further, he might have missed crucial information.

This game really knew how to bait players into traps.

After seven or eight tears, the sink was filled with soaked scraps of old newspaper. Satisfied that there were no further tricks, Bai Liu scanned their contents.

The headlines were uniform across all nine newspapers: police reports and missing persons notices for tourists.

The number of disappearances was staggering.

The earliest case dated back to the previous year, coinciding with the Siren Wax Museum's opening. Initially, there were only a few reports of missing tourists, often accompanied by signs of robbery.

In a popular seaside tourist destination, a couple of disappearances per month weren't unusual. Crowded attractions often attracted crime. Some incidents were dismissed as accidents—overboard falls or abductions. These cases were typically handled quietly.

But according to Jeff, the outside world remained oblivious until just last month. Despite the growing number of disappearances, tourism in Siren Town thrived unabated.

It wasn't until twelve tourists went missing in a single month, accompanied by increasingly eerie occurrences, that the situation could no longer be suppressed.

Bai Liu suspected Mayor Harris, the so-called "people-loving" leader of Siren Town, had concealed the earlier disappearances to maintain the town's tourism-driven economy.

But now, the truth was unraveling too fast to hide.

From these newspapers, one thing was clear: the townspeople of Siren Town were experts at covering up crime.

After pocketing the newspapers and projector, Bai Liu shone his torch backward. The mermaid wax figures remained motionless in the corridor, allowing him to leave unimpeded.

He made his way to the central gallery of the Siren Wax Museum, where Lucy and the others awaited him.

The central gallery was a circular hall, dominated by a glass display case at its center. The case, made of bulletproof, crystal-clear glass, contained what the driver described as "the immaculate mermaid skeleton"—the catalyst for everything.

The lights illuminated the case from every angle, creating an ethereal, almost reverent glow around the figure within.

Bai Liu stopped dead in his tracks as he entered the gallery.

The figure in the case wasn't what he would consider a "skeleton."

Lucy, gazing at the figure with fascination, murmured, "It's so

beautiful... I've never seen anything this perfect—not even computer-generated models."

Jeff, the bespectacled boy, stood frozen, his disbelief evident as he stared up at the display.

Andre, ever skeptical, scoffed. "You've all been fooled. It's a trick—probably just a human body with a fish tail sewn on to draw attention."

Still, even Andre couldn't resist a grudging compliment. "But... it does look well-made."

The figure in the glass was mesmerizing.

Its right arm, from shoulder to hand, was stripped to bare white bone, while the rest of its body retained lifelike flesh.

Its sinewy musculature was elegant and severe, the contours of its body framed by the deep, sapphire-blue liquid in the case.

Delicate bubbles rose slowly through the water, curling through the figure's dark, flowing hair before settling like pearls on its long, pale lashes.

Its eyes were closed, its face breathtakingly flawless. Long, slightly curled hair framed its sharp features, and tucked behind the strands were ears unlike any human's.

Its left ear was shaped like a shell, shimmering with a mica-like texture. Its right ear, however, was skeletal—bare white bone exposed through the waves of hair.

The figure's lower body ended in a magnificent tail, like a silver-blue ribbon glinting under seawater. Translucent scales caught the light, while the fins between its fingers and along its tail shimmered like fragile glass.

Its left hand, skeletal and stark, rested across its chest, intertwining with its flesh-covered right hand.

The small town of Siren

Bai Liu now understood why the driver had described the first salvaged mermaid as “beautiful and high.”

The wax figures of mermaids scattered throughout Siren Town were crude and lifeless in comparison—cheap tourist souvenirs of shoddy craftsmanship. The skeleton displayed before him, however, was intricate, elaborate, and hauntingly elegant.

Drawn in by its allure, Bai Liu, with his inherent fondness for expensive-looking things, stepped closer to examine the profile plaque next to the skeleton.

[Siren, discovered in Siren Town on the night of XX during a collective fishing activity. Verified by relevant institutions to have grown under purely natural conditions without any synthetic factors. Categorized as a rare organism.]
[Recovered in a carcass state. Preserved in a curing solution and displayed in the central gallery of the Siren Wax Museum for public viewing.]

Bai Liu’s sharp eyes traced the skeletal structure as he finished reading.

This isn’t just rare. This is a powerful monster, he mused.

But as his gaze lingered on the mermaid’s right hand encased within the display cabinet, something shifted—so faint it could have been his imagination. The skeletal fingers twitched, almost imperceptibly.

The coin on Bai Liu’s chest abruptly erupted in violent vibrations, spinning wildly as if possessed. Panels of bright red text popped up in rapid succession, cascading over his field of vision like a malfunctioning system.

[Siren Small Town Monster Book Refresh: Siren King (2/4)]
[Monster Name: Siren King]
[Weaknesses: None currently available (Players are not required to explore the monster’s weaknesses at this stage)]
[Mode of Attack: ????? (Unknown, further exploration needed)]
[WARNING! You have triggered the wandering god-tier NPC, Siren King.]
[The survival rate for this game instance is dropping rapidly. Recalculating...]

[Original pass rate: 51%. Current pass rate: ??%.]

[CRITICAL WARNING: This NPC is extremely dangerous. No known weaknesses exist. If the Siren King initiates an attack, escape is impossible, and death is inevitable. Players must accelerate game progress to escape Siren Town before the NPC awakens.]
[Estimated time until full awakening: One day.]

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow as he calmly read through the barrage of warnings.

Something extraordinary, indeed.

While Bai Liu remained unfazed, considering his next move, the scene unfolding on his "Little TV" in the central gaming lobby sent shockwaves through the crowd.

Wang Shun, a veteran cloud player who had spent years analyzing and watching gameplay, was crouched in front of the massive screen in disbelief. His usually composed expression was replaced by a slack-jawed stare as he fixated on Bai Liu's broadcast.

"Wait... am I seeing this right? Is that a god-tier wandering NPC?!"

Cloud players—spectators who preferred watching gameplay over participating—had one clear advantage: their vast database of knowledge. Wang Shun's expertise was in cataloging gameplay information for guilds and player organizations.

But in all his years, he'd never seen a god-tier wandering NPC appear on a Little TV.

Horror games within the system were countless and isolated, each operating like a standalone world. Players entered self-contained instances with unique NPCs, rules, and monsters. Cross-instance interference was unheard of—until wandering NPCs emerged.

These bizarre entities transcended the boundaries of individual games, capable of appearing in any instance without warning. Worse, they could possess monsters within the game, transforming them into god-tier threats. Their sheer power was unmatched, leaving destruction and wiped-out teams in their wake.

The odds of encountering such an NPC were astronomically low. In fact, Wang Shun had only heard rumors of them. The few confirmed sightings were so brief—most players didn't survive long enough to

relay detailed information—that these wandering gods remained shrouded in mystery.

But now, Wang Shun was witnessing it live.

“This is... top-tier information,” Wang Shun muttered, his voice trembling with excitement. If he could document the Siren King’s behavior, it would be worth a fortune in points.

He planted himself firmly in front of Bai Liu’s screen, ignoring everything else in the lobby. It was rare enough to see a god-tier wandering NPC in action, but what truly amazed him was Bai Liu’s composure.

The broadcast itself was pushed to the far corner of the central screen—an obscure position typically reserved for novice players or unremarkable gameplay. Wang Shun had only noticed it because of his habit of scanning the entire display.

“Why is this buried in the margins? The algorithm must be glitching,” he muttered.

Leaning closer, he observed Bai Liu’s movements carefully. “This player... he’s calm. Too calm. He’s already unlocked the second page of the monster book and even triggered a god-tier wandering NPC without panicking. And he’s still progressing in the game?”

Curious, Wang Shun opened the game manager to check Bai Liu’s profile. The data loaded quickly, and as he read through it, his jaw dropped even further.

“...This guy is a newbie?!”

Wang Shun leaned back, stunned. “This is his first time playing?!”

For a moment, Wang Shun just stared at the screen in silence, his mind reeling.

Who is this player?

[Game Forum - Has anyone seen the new player on the central screen who just moved up from the newbie section?]

1L: Moved up in his first game? That's impressive! Is he going to be the new star of this year's rankings?

2L: No way. This guy is in serious trouble. I'm watching his "Little TV" feed right now, and he's unlucky enough to have triggered a godly wandering NPC. This is probably his last game.

3L: He was doing well in the newbie section before, but now... well, he's still good, but it's not necessarily a death sentence, right?

4L: Does no one else think this wandering NPC thing is a bug? It has no weaknesses, and whenever it appears, the player team is basically wiped out because they can't escape. I think the system just gave this wandering NPC a fancy name to cover up a bug they couldn't fix...

5L: I was rooting for him earlier. I thought he might break the record for the highest points in Siren Town. His strategy seemed really solid.

6L: The highest points record in Siren Town is held by God Mu, right? God Mu's now ranked fourth on the Nightmare Rising Stars list. This newbie's probably not even going to survive this game, so forget about crossing that line.

7L: It's a shame. The newcomer has a good look, though. If he survives, he might have a chance to hit the top ten high-value players.

8L: Pfft, this guy's face won't get him far. The top ten high-value players look at skill first, then appearance. He's done for in this game...

[1 new person liked Bai Liu's TV feed, 416 new people liked Bai Liu's feed, no one recharged the player].

[512 new people are watching Bai Liu's mini-TV feed, but no one is liking it. Is it because he's not doing well? Come on, watchers, give him a like!]

[The number of new likes is too low, and Bai Liu's central screen edge promotion is about to expire.]

Unaware of the discussions surrounding him, Bai Liu stood in front of the mermaid in the glass cabinet, silent and contemplative. The mermaid, with its skeletal form and haunting beauty, was undoubtedly the highest-level boss in the game. The system had made it clear that there was no escape from this boss by exploiting its weaknesses.

[Warning: Siren King NPC triggered. Upon awakening, certain death.]

Bai Liu frowned. He disliked the feeling of being completely out of control, but he couldn't deny the game's warning. There was no way around it.

But until the Siren King fully awakened, Bai Liu had a chance to outwit it.

He stroked his chin, mulling over his next move. Could he somehow use the Siren King to his advantage?

The thought might have seemed foolish to onlookers, but Bai Liu wasn't intimidated by the idea of facing a higher-level monster. In his mind, there was always a way to deal with any boss, no matter how tough they seemed. A monster might have a scary-looking panel, but as long as the game didn't have any bugs, it could always be overcome.

After all, if the system made a monster seem invincible, it was probably part of the designer's strategy to hook the player, to make them want to explore further.

What Bai Liu didn't know was that he had encountered something far beyond a typical game challenge. The [God-Class Wandering NPC] was an anomaly—commonly considered a bug within the game. It was not a challenge players were supposed to face, and it was nearly impossible to survive when triggered.

As evening approached, Bai Liu and the driver prepared to leave the wax museum. The keeper, his voice faint and weathered, waved them off with an eerie, almost gleeful smile.

"It's been a long time since we had such a big mermaid catch. The Siren Wax Museum will finally be able to welcome new wax figures tonight..."

He rolled his eyeless gaze toward Bai Liu, a strange satisfaction in his expression. "Have a pleasant evening."

The small town of Siren

The keeper remained in the doorway, watching silently as Bai Liu and the driver left. Behind them, in the dim light, the wax figures in the museum seemed to stir. Their marble faces, expressionless and frozen, poked out from the shadows like fish emerging from the deep sea.

[Main Quest: Explore Siren Wax Museum - Completed. 50 bonus points awarded.]

[Current point balance: 81. Do you wish to purchase items?]

Bai Liu stroked his chin thoughtfully. [Is there a high concentration of alcohol available?]

[Open shop - 218 types of special alcohol are available. 18 can be purchased in this copy.]

[What's the cheapest option?]

[9 points for 25L of alcohol. Reminder: Alcohol in the game is not the same as real alcohol; after system modification, its effects may vary. We advise players to read the instructions carefully before purchasing.]

[System Suggestion: Detected that player has sufficient points. We recommend purchasing the Flaming Torch prop for better efficacy and safety.]

Bai Liu, considering his options, decided to take a look at the instructions for the alcohol first. As expected, they were long and tedious—full of dense text designed to overwhelm the reader. But Bai Liu had seen this before. As a savvy consumer in a world of e-commerce, he knew that the cheaper items often came with more convoluted instructions to discourage players from buying them.

Despite the complicated read, Bai Liu was accustomed to parsing through such details. He finally noticed the price adjustments for items he had previously considered.

[Flaming Torch price lowered to 17 points.]

[3D Projector "Siren Small Town" price back to original at 6 points each.]

The price changes intrigued Bai Liu. These adjustments suggested that the player market had influenced the system's pricing, likely due to the amount of demand for these props. He read through the descriptions of the available alcohols and, without hesitation, chose the cheapest one.

[Bai Liu purchases 9 bottles of high-strength alcohol. Welcome to your next adventure.]

Meanwhile, on the central screen, Wang Shun gasped in disbelief as he watched Bai Liu's actions.

"What's this newbie doing?" Wang Shun slapped his thigh in frustration. "Is he really going to use alcohol to burn the wax figures? Wax figures are photophobic, but they're not afraid of fire! If he burns them, the monsters inside will emerge! And why would he spend all his points on this?!"

Around him, whispers of confusion spread among the watching players.

"Is this guy really buying all that alcohol? No one's ever bought it before. Is he some kind of alcoholic?"

"What a fool. The mermaid wax figures aren't afraid of fire, but they are sensitive to light. Someone made this mistake before, using a torch and getting wiped out when the light faded."

"It's over. I thought he might be a big deal, but it looks like it's just luck. This newbie's going down."

"Why does he even have a spot on the central screen? Before, it was God Mu and that whole legendary group—now we're stuck with this guy."

[0 new likes for Bai Liu's TV. 2 new dislikes. 166 people stomped on Bai Liu's feed.]

[1,447 new viewers tuned into Bai Liu's mini-TV, most of them stomped on his feed. Player Bai Liu has been awarded the title of "Not Worthy of the Name." People are eager for his demise.]

[Player Bai Liu's center-screen edge promotion expires.]

As Bai Liu's feed flickered and his spot on the edge of the central screen disappeared, Wang Shun adjusted his glasses. He knew that Bai

Liu had triggered the godly wandering NPC, and the situation was dire. But, unable to resist the allure of rare information, Wang Shun made his way to the Death Comedy section, where Bai Liu's impending failure would surely entertain the crowd.

.....

In-game.

Night had fallen, and the van rumbled through the darkened streets, lit only by the flickering streetlights. Fishermen, carrying their nets and machetes, eyed the van with a strange, almost vacant expression as it passed by.

These were the fishermen who would participate in the mermaid fishery tonight.

The dim, uneven streetlights cast eerie shadows on their faces, revealing marble-like green and black veins that intertwined across their skin. Mucus dripped from their faces, giving them an even more grotesque appearance. The townspeople looked even more ghastly in the dark, their eyes glowing a dull green as they moved.

The driver, still munching on a sandwich, gave a warning. "These townsfolk are dangerous. They haven't had an income in a long time. Stick to your designated boat for the mermaid fishing later. Don't engage with them. You look like outsiders, and you'll be easy targets for robbery."

The driver took a big bite of his sandwich as he spoke.

Bai Liu, in the back of the van, could barely suppress the urge to vomit as the putrid smell of the fishy sandwich filled the air. The others, however, seemed unfazed. Andre, eagerly watching the driver eat, swallowed nervously, his discomfort evident as he fiddled with his ear.

Lucy couldn't help herself. "This sandwich smells so good," she said with an excited tone.

Andre shot a glare at her, clearly irritated. "What did we have for dinner? I'm starving!" he grumbled, casting a disparaging look at Bai Liu in the rearview mirror.

Earlier, during their stop at the Wax Museum, Bai Liu had ordered the cheapest vegetarian meal, refusing to touch any fish. His choice had

angered Andre, who, along with Lucy, had been shocked at Bai Liu's refusal to eat fish. Despite ordering the least expensive meal, Bai Liu had paid for the entire group, insisting that they all accompany him. This had caused some tension.

Andre had cursed under his breath, frustrated by the situation. "Don't come out here playing big-boy games if you can't afford it! Go home and drink your vegan milk!" he had snapped.

Bai Liu, unfazed, had simply smiled. "In that case, Andre, you can order your own meat," he had replied calmly. He'd taken away Andre's meal, but given the exorbitant prices at the wax museum, Andre couldn't afford any other meal. Bai Liu had refused to hand it over unless Andre paid for it himself.

Andre had been forced to swallow his pride, unwilling to anger Bai Liu further—after all, Bai Liu had also paid for his hotel room. Andre didn't want to risk sleeping rough in a town like this.

However, Jeff, not caring about the others, had been the one to snatch Andre's meal and, when Andre protested, had been punched in the stomach. He had cowered in the corner, silently clutching his stomach in pain.

Now, as the pungent scent of the sandwich wafted through the van, Jeff's longing was palpable. His throat worked with suppressed desire, his gaze lingering on Andre, and his eyes burned with a hunger that seemed almost unnatural.

[Jeff's Bloody Plot - 30% Progress on Branch]

Bai Liu, keenly aware of the rising tension, shot a brief glance at Jeff, who kept his head lowered in shame. Andre, on the edge of irritation from both hunger and the food's aroma, couldn't help but snap, his anger flaring.

Bai Liu noticed something odd—Andre's skin, where he had been scratching behind his ear, suddenly twisted and contorted. The area seemed to breathe, folding in on itself like gills flaring open for a moment before quickly closing. The skin, slightly inflated, puffed out as though alive.

Bai Liu, intrigued, glanced at the display panel.

[NPC Name: Andre (High Alienation)]

Coming out of the Wax Museum, Andre's alienation has increased...

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "Andre, did you touch the mermaid wax figures in the museum?"

"So what if I touched them?" Andre growled, his voice dripping with malice. "Bai Liu, tonight we'll see who's going home to drink milk!"

In that moment, Andre's gills flared open once more, the fin-like protrusions visible behind his ears, shaking violently in the dim light of the van.

The driver, noticing the tension, barked a warning. "Hey, boys! No fighting in my car!"

Andre reluctantly retracted his gills but glared at Bai Liu, still seething with anger.

The driver, almost amused, chuckled to himself. "I've set up a place for your bet, like you asked—remote beach, two wooden boats. Take care of yourselves out there. I'm not responsible if you drown."

After a brief pause, the driver's voice dropped, almost darkly, "But with how long you've been here, you shouldn't drown. You should all know how to swim by now."

Bai Liu's face remained calm, though internally, he was tense. He couldn't swim.

The inhabitants of this town had all transformed into these fish-like creatures, and his group, after only being here for a short while, was already beginning to exhibit some strange traits—an unusual craving for fish meat and the subtle but pervasive fishy odor emanating from them. Bai Liu, however, had resisted the pull of the transformation. He hadn't eaten the bizarre fish meat nor gotten close to the mermaid wax figures at night.

Bai Liu couldn't help but speculate that these two things—eating the fish meat and interacting with the wax figures—were causing the others to evolve into something fish-like. But for him, the transformation seemed to have bypassed him. He would be more vulnerable in the coming challenges, especially with the impending bet on the remote beach. His danger had only increased.

And with Andre's strange transformation, Bai Liu was left to wonder: what if Andre, or any of the others, had already turned into monsters?

Would they sabotage him during the upcoming challenge?

No wonder the side quest [Ship of True Love] had a hundred points — the danger level was far higher than several other quests combined.

Andre, unable to control his appetite, lunged for the driver's sandwich. "Give me a bite!" he demanded.

The driver didn't resist, watching with a strange, almost pitying look as Andre devoured the sandwich. Andre wolfed it down, chewing only a few times before pounding his chest and swallowing in one quick motion.

The driver didn't try to snatch the sandwich back. Instead, he simply observed Andre, who was hunched over and eating with a wild hunger, as though feeding an animal. "Eat, my boy, eat. You're starving, aren't you? Haven't eaten much, have you? Enjoy your dinner."

Bai Liu glanced at the scene and dryly commented, "This is his second dinner tonight. The first was when Andre stole Jeff's meal."

The mention of Jeff's stolen dinner made the man flinch. His face darkened as he lowered his head, but not before the same gill-like pattern appeared around his ears. For a brief moment, Jeff's gills opened in anger, and his teeth elongated, sharp and thin like a shark's.

But the unsettling scene was fleeting. As soon as Bai Liu glanced over again, Jeff had covered his face and avoided looking at anyone, though his eyes, reflecting eerily in the rearview mirror, still rested on Bai Liu.

[Jeff's Bloody Plot - 50% Progress on Branch]

Bai Liu frowned, sensing something had shifted. The quest progress jumped again. How was this task advancing so quickly? It seemed tied to something Jeff had triggered earlier, but what was this new development? Could it be linked to Andre's behavior? Bai Liu couldn't shake the feeling that things were accelerating dangerously.

When the van finally reached the port, Bai Liu couldn't ignore the fact that the driver's trust level was low, which likely meant he was somehow involved in Jeff's bloody plot.

As they disembarked, Bai Liu handed the driver a penny as a tip, in an

attempt to gauge the situation. The driver looked at the money in Bai Liu's hand, his expression dark and sullen, before cracking a grim smile. He kissed the tip as if it were a prize, then waved it away carelessly.

"Have a good time," the driver said, his voice laced with a strange satisfaction.

[Jeff's Bloody Plot - 80% Progress on Branch]

Bai Liu, unfazed, noted the driver's greedy eyes fixated on the money in his pocket. "We will," he replied with his usual calm smile, as if nothing were amiss.

The place for the mermaid fishing was a massive ship.

The colossal vessel slowly pulled out of the harbor into the dark night, its deck silent except for the hushed movements of sailors. Some smaller boats, tethered to the larger ship, were filled with the fish-like fishermen.

These fishermen, who had been eyeing Bai Liu's group since boarding, stared at them with emotionless faces as the darkness settled in.

There was a stark contrast between the sailors on board the ship and the fishermen below. Most of the sailors looked human — no strange fish-like patterns on their skin or fishy smell emanating from them. They appeared paler, almost albino, similar to the receptionist at the hotel.

Bai Liu noticed that there weren't many people on board, which puzzled him. Why fish on such a large, seemingly extravagant ship? It seemed wasteful. Furthermore, the boat's draft was unusually deep, suggesting something heavy was on board, hidden beneath the surface.

As he surveyed the surroundings, Bai Liu caught sight of several sailors standing in dark corners, watching him intently. They whispered to one another, their smiles twisted and satisfied, as if sharing some private joke.

The ship sailed deeper into the night.

The sea was eerily calm, with only the light from the ship's searchlight illuminating a small patch of water. Beyond that, darkness seemed to swallow everything whole. The occasional sound of waves passing on

either side was the only noise breaking the silence.

The sailors continued their work, distributing tasks methodically, while the fishermen began to lay out their nets, preparing for the night's catch.

The boat sailed further into the abyss of the night, its destination unclear but its atmosphere growing more ominous with each passing moment.

Lucy stood beside Bai Liu, wrapped in her cloak. Her lips, stained with lipstick, were now a deep purple from the cold wind as she huddled next to him for warmth. "Why is it so cold, Bai Liu? I asked the crew, and they said we need to go to the sea where the first mermaid was caught to catch more. They called it [Siren's Gift], a sea with a legendary tale."

Bai Liu turned his head slightly. "Siren's Gift?"

"Yeah," Lucy shivered as she pulled her cloak tighter. "It's freezing. I feel like we're heading into a hell filled with ghosts — the only place that's this cold and windy."

Bai Liu didn't feel the cold, but something nagged at his mind. He reached into his pocket and flicked a coin towards Lucy.

[NPC Name: Lucy (in alienation)]

Bai Liu touched her hand, noticing it was cold and oily, like freshly solidified wax.

Lucy smiled, her face stiff. Despite the attempt to express affection, her expression was frozen, twisted into something unnatural, as if trying to mimic emotion but failing, like a surreal Picasso painting.

Her voice grew dry, edged with an unsettling eagerness. "Your hands are so warm... Can I kiss you?"

Bai Liu gently declined. "I can't." He quickly added an excuse. "There are too many people here."

Lucy wasn't shivering from the cold. Her body temperature was dropping.

Jeff, who had appeared next to Bai Liu without warning, looked out at the sea with an almost reverent gaze. He murmured, "Yes, Siren's Gift.

Legend says the sea is a gift from the Siren King, capable of bringing the dead back to life."

Jeff's voice dropped, almost as if lost in the story. "Swimmers who fall into the waters and drown are reborn as mermaids, gifted with the Siren King's power. That's why fishermen can catch them here."

Bai Liu's thoughts flickered. If the Siren King had been fished out and placed in a wax museum, how could these waters still produce mermaids?

And if the Siren King had been caught long ago, why did the waters continue to create mermaids? It seemed less like a blessing and more like a curse, a mythos that had twisted over time.

Bai Liu mentally pieced the story together — the mermaids were no longer a divine gift but a revenge of the dead. Their wax figures were harvested, displayed for tourists, and some even made into food for the townsfolk. The wax figures, however, began to act on their own, and tourists started disappearing one by one...

A sailor approached with an air of authority. "We're entering Siren's Gift waters. Please stay close. We're not responsible for anything that happens if you wander."

The sailor's warning echoed as he turned to leave, heading below deck. Bai Liu noticed all the sailors were heading to the lowest part of the ship, leaving the deck eerily empty.

Bai Liu narrowed his eyes, pretending to follow one sailor discreetly.

The sailors moved with purpose, descending into the lower cabin. Bai Liu observed them as they filed down a wooden ladder, their faces empty of emotion. When they returned, it was accompanied by whispers.

"I... no problem."

"Make sure these are fine."

"A few broke before, but after these four are eaten, there will be new ones to replace them."

The sailors were checking something crucial — something important and heavy in the lower compartment. Bai Liu's suspicions deepened. The weight in the bilge was significant, and the sailors' strange

behavior only added to the mystery.

Once the last sailor left, Bai Liu noticed the bilge door had been left unlocked, the lock swaying with the ship's motion, almost inviting him to explore.

He couldn't resist. Bai Liu opened the door and descended a narrow staircase, the creaking wood making each step feel ominous. The darkness of the compartment swallowed the light from his torch, but he pressed forward, determined to find out what was hidden.

As he reached the bottom, Bai Liu's breath caught in his throat.

The entire compartment was filled with wax figures of mermaids — so many that the floor seemed to disappear beneath the sea of white, eerie forms. Each wax figure was arranged with its head tilted back, eyes fixed forward, all staring blankly at Bai Liu as if waiting for something.

The eerie stillness was broken only by the scraping and rustling noises coming from the shadows, places that the light from Bai Liu's torch couldn't reach.

He didn't recoil. Instead, he dropped the torch and reached out to touch one of the figures.

On the other side of a small TV screen, Wang Shun gasped, eyes wide in shock. "!!!!"

The small town of Siren

"Holy shit!" Wang Shun blurted out, his voice filled with panic. "I haven't gathered any information on god-tier NPCs yet, don't do anything reckless!"

"That wax figure will alienate you when you touch it," Wang Shun continued, his tone urgent. "And once you're alienated, your mental value will drop. If it reaches zero, you'll start to lose your grip on reality and spiral into delirium. Before you know it, you'll be screwed!"

Wang Shun's animated warning caught the attention of several players watching the broadcast on the small TV. The [Comedy of Death] division, where the game is often played with deadly excitement for the sake of entertainment, was buzzing with reactions. Some players loved the thrill of such risky moves, while others preferred to avoid danger at all costs.

As the audience watched, their eyes widened when they saw Bai Liu reaching out to touch the wax figure of a mermaid. "Wow, I've never seen this kind of death. He's touching a monster by himself... what's he thinking?" one spectator commented, clearly fascinated.

Wang Shun turned toward the audience, his voice dripping with disdain as he pointed at Bai Liu on the screen. "I followed this player all the way from the center screen. He's been racking up points so quickly—almost a hundred points in one go! And do you know what he spent those points on?"

"Hundreds of points?" the spectator replied, surprised as they glanced at the time record on the TV. "It's only the second day in the game and he's already got hundreds of points? That's impressive. So, it must be leading up to the [Comedy of Death] division."

Before the spectator could finish, Bai Liu on the screen was already nearly pressing his face to the wax figure, tracing its features with his fingers. The crowd gasped, eyes wide with disbelief.

"But it makes sense. With his style of play, he would've made it here quickly... But what did he buy?" the spectator mused. "If there's something useful for Siren, a hundred points could buy a lot... maybe a flaming torch or some water bubbles. That would be perfect for this situation."

"No, he didn't buy any of those," Wang Shun said, a sly grin spreading across his face. "He bought nine barrels of high-proof alcohol."

"No way?!" The audience collectively stared in disbelief. "Nine barrels of alcohol?! Who even buys that stuff?"

Wang Shun nodded, his face serious. "In theory, the flame and light intensity from burning alcohol wouldn't be enough to affect the mermaid wax figures or the sailors..."

He leaned in closer to the screen, his curiosity piqued. "But what's going on? He's been touching it for so long, why hasn't he started to alienate? He should've already begun to lose his mental value."

Other viewers furrowed their brows in confusion. "It's been five minutes… he should be alienated by now, his spirit value should be dropping to zero."

Bai Liu, unfazed by the situation, continued to casually touch the wax figures of the mermaids, his fingers moving along the lines of the sculpture as if he were a sculptor admiring his own work, not a player interacting with a monster.

His expression was calm, almost detached, as he spoke aloud to himself, as if conversing with the wax figure.

"Your face hasn't changed into mine yet. When those mermaid wax figures tried to attack and hatch me before, their faces would resemble mine. But yours… your face remains in the cocoon form, unchanged, meaning touching you doesn't alienate me. You're still in your chrysalis state — you can't hatch me because you're—"

Bai Liu smiled up at the wax figure.

"You're a talisman for the sailors. A cocoon for them. You won't hatch me. You're not coming back."

Bai Liu was holding a wax figure of a mermaid with the exact features of a sailor he had seen on deck. Up close, he noticed something unusual — the wax figures had lost their color, and the material felt brittle and thin, unlike the wax figures he had encountered elsewhere.

These wax figures seemed similar to the one in the hotel lobby known as the [Talisman], which, in monster lore, was called the [Cocoon Form]. If Bai Liu's theory was correct, the wax figures of the mermaids were amulets for the sailors on board. These figures were their

[cocoons], lifeless and incapable of attack. When a wax figure transformed from [chrysalis] to [cocoon], it meant the creature inside had already metamorphosed into something else, leaving behind an empty shell.

The sailors wandering around the ship were the monsters trapped inside these cocoons.

[Siren Small Town Monster Book Update – Mermaid Sailor (3/4)]

[Monster Name: Mermaid Sailor (Butterfly Status)]

[Weakness: ???? (To be explored)]

[Attack Method: ???? (To be explored)]

Wang Shun and the spectator in front of the small TV were both staring in stunned silence.

Leaning closer to the screen, Wang Shun watched the refreshed monster book in disbelief. "I've watched the Siren Small Town clearance video so many times," he muttered, "and never once did I notice a monster here that I didn't have to avoid. Even God Mu, the top scorer for this version of Siren Town, missed the fact that this place is a cocoon, not a chrysalis."

He rubbed his eyes, trying to process what he was seeing. "Usually, you have to get chased by these amulets to trigger the mermaid sailor monsters and unlock this page of the monster book. How the hell did Bai Liu know he could avoid the wax figure?"

The spectator, equally bewildered, gasped. "Wait... is he going to collect all the monster books in Siren Town to clear the level? That's insane! The last time someone did that was God Mu!"

Wang Shun snapped back to reality, immediately shaking his head. "No way." He adjusted his glasses, eyes narrowing as he gave Bai Liu a mixture of appreciation and regret. "He wasn't lucky with the second page... the monster book that was swiped was a wandering NPC."

He leaned in, explaining further. "The Siren King has no weaknesses. To collect that page, players need to trigger the Siren King's awakening. But once that NPC attacks, it's game over — players are guaranteed to die."

The spectator was left speechless. "Wait, he even swiped a roaming

NPC?!" The crowd's excitement surged. "I've never seen a player with a wandering NPC still alive! Everyone who swiped it just quit the game... this guy is still going, and he's not even panicking?!"

Wang Shun chuckled. "You're all uninformed, I guess. He's new."

Their loud conversation drew the attention of more spectators, who were now gathered around, captivated by the unfolding drama on the screen. Bai Liu's actions, combined with the refresh of a three-page monster book on the very first day, drew in many curious onlookers.

The viewers in the [Comedy of Death] section, known for their love of players who break the mold, were particularly impressed.

"This is awesome!" one player shouted. "I love it when he plays like this, so crazy and fearless!"

"Don't back down, Bai Liu! Go for it! Let's see what you do next!"

[205 new people liked Bai Liu's TV, 200 new people favorited Bai Liu's TV, 35 people charged Bai Liu's TV, player Bai Liu earned 35 points.]

[297 people are currently watching Bai Liu's mini-TV.]

[Congratulations to Bai Liu for becoming a hit in the Death Comedy Zone! You've been awarded the title of Death Comedian! Keep entertaining your viewers with your clever gameplay and keep them on the edge of their seats!]

Despite the growing excitement around him, Bai Liu's focus remained sharp. He had paused his ascent when he realized the sailors were monsters. "If I'm right," he mused, "the doorway to the warehouse that lured me down is definitely guarded by sailors. If I go up there now, I'll trigger a chase with the sailors — not a good idea."

The real danger came from the wax figures. "If players don't know these wax figures are harmless, they'll get ambushed when they rush away, and the sailors will attack. It's a death trap, no less."

Bai Liu smiled wryly, a slight amusement crossing his face. "The game design is so obvious; it's easy to figure out how to crack this chase. All I need to do is jump into the sea."

He paused for a moment, gazing out at the waves. "But I don't like the sea."

The small town of Siren

Bai Liu was browsing through the store when he came across a highly popular item called "Water Bubbles." It promised players the ability to breathe and float in a bubble for two full hours, while also repelling fish and keeping them at bay.

It seemed like a decent feature, but at a hefty price of over 70 points and a limit of only two uses, it was clearly an expendable item.

To Bai Liu's sharp eye, the bubble's only value was that it allowed someone to breathe underwater, and charging more than 70 points for it was nothing short of extortion. Anyone who bought it, in his opinion, was just paying an "IQ tax" to the game shop.

Of course, this had nothing to do with the fact that he didn't know how to swim or had no intention of jumping into water. As a gringo, Bai Liu naturally found this feature wasteful and wasn't interested in pursuing such a route in game design—one he found unattractive.

He glanced up at the warehouse door, which had started to creak, as though someone was preparing to lock it behind them.

A typical player would have felt nervous by now and would have scrambled to hide from the eerie, looming wax figures. Bai Liu, however, remained calm. He turned off his torchlight, walked over to a wax figure, found a dark corner, and wrapped himself in the grey cloth from the floor, pretending to be another motionless figure. He stayed still, blending in.

The group of cocooned mermaid wax figures, whose eyesight wasn't exactly sharp, searched the room blankly, but stopped once they couldn't find him.

The warehouse door creaked open a few times, and two sailors entered, their dim oil lamps casting faint light as they descended the stairs, whispering hoarsely to one another.

"Count the number of wax figures..." one muttered.

"I've counted them several times, can't be wrong..." the other replied.

"After tonight, there will be four more wax figures here. We'll send them over to the wax museum first. The ones there have been guarding Siren King for too long. It's time they moved on with their

talismans..."

"Keep a close watch on Siren King and don't let him wake up in the water again, or we'll all..."

The two sailors stood above the warehouse, holding their old-fashioned oil lamps. As they descended, Bai Liu could barely make out their features in the dim light, unsure whether they were wax figures or actual people.

Their skin was so unnaturally pale, it looked like the color of death itself. Even from up close, Bai Liu couldn't see any veins in their faces or hands.

He was certain they weren't human, though. As he flicked his gaze at them, a quiet certainty settled in his mind.

But it wasn't quite right. These sailors, though resembling humans, were identified as "Mermaid Sailors" in the monster book. Bai Liu frowned, an unsettling feeling growing in his chest.

One of the sailors was the one who had told him to stay put on the deck. His eyes were lifeless, staring blankly. "Make sure these amulets are secure. If they're okay, lock them up so they don't break when the waves hit the ship."

The sailors immediately began securing the wax figures with chains.

Bai Liu held his breath, carefully eyeing the open warehouse door. He began to move closer, inching toward it.

Suddenly, one of the sailors paused, as if hearing something. He frowned and turned toward the wax figure Bai Liu was pretending to be. Muttering to himself, he asked, "You said you just saw a tourist come here?"

Bai Liu's face darkened in an instant.

It was a blunder. He hadn't realized that these sailors could actually communicate with the wax figures.

The chase seemed like it was going to be a non-chase, but it was already much better than being on deck, where there were only two sailors. Bai Liu's mind raced as he tried to come up with the best countermeasure. His physical condition was poor, and if it came down to a chase, it would likely end badly. That's why he wanted to avoid it

from the start, but now, it felt like he was stuck in a dead-end loop. Whether he stayed or left, it seemed like he was bound to be caught.

He couldn't run, and going up the stairs wasn't an option either. If he went up, there would be even more sailors, turning it from a chase into a group confrontation, forcing him to jump overboard. Bai Liu didn't want to jump into the sea. So, he had to think carefully about what to do next.

The sailor approached the wax figure and suddenly, as though he had heard something amusing, let out a low laugh that echoed through the barn. "I didn't expect an honored guest would arrive early. Don't worry, you'll be here sooner or later."

As the sailor moved around the corners, his oil lamp cast an eerie light on his face, making his smile look more sinister. "Come out now, the evening catch is about to begin. The mermaids are waiting for you in the sea."

Bai Liu's mind quickly shifted gears. These sailors were clearly more dangerous than the wax figures. They were some kind of monster, too. What could their weakness be?

Within seconds, the sailor was right in front of Bai Liu. Reacting instinctively, Bai Liu pointed his torch directly at the sailor, but the sailor simply blocked his eyes with one hand before lowering it, as if unaffected. His smile grew even more secretive. "We're not like those things. We're not afraid of light."

The weakness wasn't light, then. Despite the sailors' reaction to the glare looking similar to that of a human, Bai Liu's mind raced for another solution. Almost immediately, he grabbed a barrel behind him and hurled it at the sailor. The barrel smashed into the sailor's body, scattering into wood chips.

These two sailors had tough, solid exoskeletons, unlike the fragile mermaid wax figures. It was as if they had broken free from their cocoons.

The sailor's eyes locked onto Bai Liu from the dim warehouse, and he reached out, grabbing Bai Liu's wrist. He turned his head sideways, flashing a wry smile. His teeth were thin and sharp. "Come on, guest, let's go watch the fishing below the surface."

Bai Liu studied the sailor. These sailors had no obvious weaknesses, but Bai Liu knew from the system's information that the Sailor King

had no such weakness either. That meant there must be something that could be used to fight back. Otherwise, there would be no point to the game.

The sailors, though seemingly invulnerable, had a softness to them, both physically and optically. That shouldn't be the case, though. The mermaids and mermaid sailors, as Bai Liu had reasoned before, should be photophobic—afraid of light. The mermaid wax figures had confirmed this deduction, but these sailors were unaffected by the light...

Something was masking their weaknesses.

Earlier, the receptionist had mentioned that amulets could help protect them. Bai Liu's eyes scanned the wax figures around him, and he noticed one with a small crack on the top of its head. It looked like it had been struck with a wine cask. The wax figure's expression changed from affectionate to pained, and its hands were raised in front of its eyes as if shielding them from a light.

Bai Liu's mind clicked into place. He quickly kicked the wax figure of a mermaid in the face, sending it crashing to the ground. The figure shattered into pieces, oozing black, putrid blood. The sailor behind him, who had been holding Bai Liu's wrist, let out a shrill, fish-like cry that stung Bai Liu's ears.

The sailor's exoskeleton began to crack and break apart, falling away like lime, revealing his true form.

Bai Liu then grabbed another wax figure of a sailor, tore off its head, and smashed it onto his knee, breaking it.

As the sailor's body had been tough, like an exoskeleton, the wax figure acted as a fragile talisman, easily shattered. It was no wonder the sailors kept them in the bottom compartment for protection.

The two sailors let out a piercing shriek as their once-pale faces faded to a sickly greenish-black. Their eyes shifted to the sides, eventually settling into their temples.

One of the sailors, smelling strongly of fish, had his lower body transformed into a wet, curly, eel-like tail. His jagged teeth glistened as he crouched on the floor, moving like a gecko toward Bai Liu, his hands bulging with strength.

Bai Liu aimed his torch at the other sailor, who had just been

unaffected by the glare, and the sailor immediately shuddered, letting out another high-pitched, shrill cry.

It was clear now—shattering their amulets made the glare effective against them.

Bai Liu backed up slowly, pointing his torch at the two sailors who were now crawling on the floor like geckos, recoiling from the light. They hissed, reluctant to come closer, but still trying to reach Bai Liu. He backed up further, turning his back on the door and exiting the warehouse, locking it behind him.

Even after closing the door, Bai Liu could still hear the pattering of fish tails slapping against the floor and the banging and shaking of the door as the sailors tried to break through.

The system's Monster Book updated:

[Siren Small Town Monster Book Refresh - Mermaid Sailor (3/4)]
[Monster Name: Mermaid Sailor (Butterfly Status)]
[Weakness: Fear of light, amulet (2/3)]
[Attack: Biting and scratching (a chance to trigger alienation status upon being scratched)]

Bai Liu straightened his collar as he made his way down the warehouse stairs. Lucy spotted him instantly, grabbing his arm with a mock pout. "Where were you? They said the fishing was about to start."

"We've reached the sea," Lucy continued with a smile, her face now bearing fish-scaled patterns and her eyes glowing in the darkness. She grabbed Bai Liu's hand with an odd, slippery grip, but he pulled it away without a word.

"Really?" Bai Liu asked.

"Yes," Lucy chuckled lowly, her voice becoming more guttural. "The mermaids are here."

The small town of Siren

The sailors lowered their nets on either side of the boat, murmuring something Bai Liu couldn't quite make out. All he heard were words like "gift from Siren King" and similar phrases, and Jeff, looking somewhat manic, explained, "They're praying to the Siren King for a bounty of mermaids."

Before Jeff could say anything more, the sailors on the edge of the boat began to jump over the nets, one by one. Lucy screamed in terror, "What are they doing? I thought we were catching mermaids! Why are they jumping down themselves?"

Bai Liu's response was calm and quiet: "They're just fishing for mermaids."

A long silence followed, before, slowly, a large net began to rise from beneath the sea's surface. The sight was gruesome—scattered limbs and fish tails, a dozen mermaids trapped in the net, broken and dead. Their tails were rotting, and the limbs stuck upwards in a haunting display.

The mermaids looked like discarded dolls, twisted into unnatural poses. Their eyes were wide open and lifeless, staring blankly at the sailors on board. Their faces bore expressions of fear and grimness, their bodies covered in bite marks, as though they had been attacked by deep-sea creatures before being thrown into the net.

Bai Liu took a deep breath, slowly calming himself as he observed the faces of the mermaids in the searchlight's glow.

The faces of these mermaids resembled those of the twelve missing tourists from the newspaper. Bai Liu's heart sank.

The sailors whispered among themselves in joyful tones.

"They'll be made into wax figures and sent to the wax museum..."

"But the museum can only handle four wax figures tonight, since only four visitors are coming. What about the extra mermaids?"

"Let's stash them in the bottom for now, it'll give us a reprieve..."

The sailors quickly hauled the mermaids away to an unknown destination, while Bai Liu and his group were left to eat some of the

freshly caught common sea fish that had been caught along with the mermaids.

However, the fish had a strange taste, carrying the unmistakable scent of the mermaids. The taste was unusually sour and rotten, though once it passed through the throat, it turned into something that resembled normal fish meat, with a refreshing sweetness.

The three people, apart from Bai Liu, were eagerly devouring the fish, their fingers covered in the grease and fishy scent. Lucy had grabbed the fish's head, slurping it down so quickly that strands of hair clung to her cheeks. She looked up at Bai Liu with a greasy smile, "Bai Liu, why don't you come over and eat? The fish is really fresh tonight."

The small white eyes of the fish head in Lucy's hand seemed to glare menacingly at Bai Liu.

Meanwhile, Andre, holding a fish tail, had transformed almost entirely into a fish-like creature. His eyes were nearly invisible, positioned on the sides of his face, his nose flattened, and a foul-smelling substance dripped from his mouth as he chewed rapidly.

Jeff, barely holding onto his sanity, sliced through the fatty belly of his fish. His hands moved faster and faster as he stuffed the fish mechanically into his mouth, almost as if he had no control over himself anymore.

The sailors observed Bai Liu with an eerie smile, forcefully placing a plate full of sea fish in front of him. "It's a waste of time coming here if you don't eat fresh fish, Mr. Bai."

Bai Liu hesitated, tempted to refuse, but then the panel in front of him popped up with a clear message:

[Task Tip: If you don't eat the fish presented by the sailors, the fishing roundup will be considered a failure.]

He paused, considering the implications, and after a couple of seconds of silence, he picked up a piece and ate it.

The taste was strange at first—sour and rotten—but as it passed through his throat, it transformed into something more familiar. The fresh sweetness of the fish filled his mouth, and despite himself, Bai Liu felt an overwhelming urge to keep eating. The fish seemed to take on a strange allure, even for someone like him, who had never been particularly fond of fish.

Seeing Bai Liu eat, the sailors left, seemingly satisfied with their catch.

Bai Liu fought to keep his thoughts from sinking, refusing to glance at the fish laid out on the table. He stood up and stepped onto the beach, the sea breeze brushing against his face as he inhaled the metallic scent of the coin lodged deep in his heart.

The scent of money had a calming effect on Bai Liu.

He could start piecing things together.

The Siren King had been restored, falling into a deep slumber, and with it, the power over these waters was lost. This allowed those who perished here to rise as mermaids, returning from death to walk the earth—a tale that had long been told, but the mermaid corpses of the twelve tourists confirmed the truth of this myth.

Indeed, those who died here could turn into mermaids.

But the question remained: why did this small, remote stretch of sea yield so many dead souls transformed into mermaids, enough to fill an entire wax museum? Why were there so many fatalities in these waters?

When Bai Liu saw the twelve mermaid corpses of the tourists that had been salvaged, he finally understood the grim reality.

This sea was a dumping ground for bodies.

The bodies of the missing tourists were likely cast into these waters before being retrieved by sailors, who treated them as large fish, transforming them into mermaids and later immortalizing them as wax figures.

But who had killed these tourists?

Bai Liu suspected that this town, notorious for its robberies, had likely seen many tourists lose their belongings. The town's economy wasn't driven by tourism itself, but by a parasitic looting industry tied to it.

What better prey than a tourist, far from home?

With so many dead tourists in such a treacherous place, Bai Liu was inclined to think that the tourists were robbed and murdered, then discarded in the sea. Though, it couldn't be entirely ruled out that the mermaids hunted them.

But considering how the mermaids feared bright light, it seemed unlikely that they hunted tourists during the day. At night, during the busy tourist season in Siren Town, the mermaids were captured and put on display for the visitors. The likelihood of mermaid attacks seemed low...

Wait a minute, Bai Liu thought.

Mermaid fishing only made sense if people had died here in these waters—without death, there would be no mermaids.

For instance, Bai Liu himself, the tourist rescued during this fishing trip, was the one who had gone missing previously...

It dawned on him that the people of this town may have deliberately killed tourists, disposed of their bodies, and transformed them into mermaids. These mermaids were then showcased as a tourist attraction, a way to lure more visitors and make it easier to rob them.

No wonder the keeper had said there would be no mermaid fishing without tourists—every captured mermaid had once been a tourist who met a tragic end.

The mayor of this town was a [people-loving] individual.

To stimulate the economy and cover up the townspeople's crimes—preventing their criminal records from being exposed—he likely oversaw the creation of wax figures from the bodies of the captured mermaids. These corpses were either preserved as waxwork or disposed of entirely.

It was clear that the police would never uncover the bodies, which had been hidden or transformed into exhibits in the wax museum.

These mermaid wax figures were filled with the souls of past visitors, now vengeful spirits. They turned into monsters, incubating a curse that haunted the townspeople, turning them into talismans of revenge.

As the inhabitants of the town underwent a transformation into fish-like creatures, the mermaid wax figures shifted into human forms, and the two exchanged identities.

The sailors wandering the ship were no longer human—they were ghosts, lost to the depths, and had become monsters.

By this logic, something crucial was still missing.

The mermaid wax figure has all three stages of transformation—pupa, cocoon, and butterfly. But Bai Liu narrowed his eyes, realizing that, according to the laws of growth, there was one state still absent: the larvae, the most fragile and numerous of them all.

And the larvae are...

Bai Liu slowly pressed his hand against his stomach. The piece of fish he had just eaten seemed to squirm wetly within him. As he gazed at his fingers, now beginning to glow with an eerie greenish-white hue, and the faint fish-scale patterns appearing on his skin, he could feel his jawline starting to itch, as though gill flakes were about to grow.

He turned slowly to the three men who had accompanied him, all still devouring their food, already on the verge of losing their human forms, especially Andre.

Andre had practically collapsed against the table, furiously shoveling food into his mouth. His hair had morphed into bony, fin-like spikes, and his nose was now covered in dark green fish scales.

[Warning: Player Bai Liu has entered a state of alienation. Mental value is decreasing. Please differentiate between game reality and game illusion.]

In his mind, Bai Liu realized that this was the final stage of the mermaid wax figure's transformation—the larval stage.

Any visitor who entered Siren Town, or any resident who stayed too long, was alienated into this form: the weakest and most vulnerable, susceptible to being preyed upon and robbed.

And now, Bai Liu was experiencing the mermaid wax figure in its most vulnerable state—the larval form.

[Siren Small Town Monster Book Updated - Mermaid (4/4)]

[Monster Name: Mermaid (Larvae State)]

[Weakness: ????? (unexplored)]

[Attack Method: ????? (unexplored)]

[All pages of the Siren Monster Book have been unlocked. Explore the missing parts of the book.]

Andre wiped the rotting froth from his mouth, pushing himself away

from the table. His lips had turned into thin, sharp teeth that extended all the way through his jaw like a clown's grin. More bloody pieces of fish fell from his mouth as he spoke, "Bai Liu, remember our bet?"

Bai Liu, drawn to the distinctive, fishy scent emanating from Andre's body, blinked slowly, "I remember. We're spending the night on the boat, right?"

Andre grinned grotesquely, the smile stretching all the way to the back of his head. He then flicked out a long tongue to lick the remaining flesh from his face. "Why don't we just spend the night right here, in these waters full of mermaids?"

The small town of Siren

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Andre gazed at Bai Liu, his eyes filled with open hunger.

He let out a soft, humorless laugh. "I'm still hungry. If a man-fish shows up and capsizes my boat tonight, I'll drag it up, bite it to death, and feast on it."

The man was clearly talking about killing the mermaid, yet his eyes kept drifting to Bai Liu's neck, as though it wasn't the mermaid he was planning to bite, but Bai Liu himself.

Bai Liu's thoughts started to slow. The decline in his mental state was evident—his mental values were taking a toll.

He suddenly realized that Andre exuded an irresistible scent. For a moment, Bai Liu even considered biting the man himself. If Andre found him so aromatic, then Bai Liu, now more alienated than ever, would surely be an even more desirable target.

Andre was contemplating eating him.

But Bai Liu's stamina, intelligence, and reflexes had all dwindled. His panel attributes were steadily turning red, and his spirit level had fallen to the brink of sixty. If he were to spend the night at sea with someone like Andre, who had already undergone alienation, his survival was virtually impossible.

There had to be a way to counter Andre.

Yet, it felt as though a veil had covered his mind. He could faintly discern options, but couldn't summon them. He vaguely remembered preparing for such a moment, but the solution eluded him.

Bai Liu blinked and swayed slightly, murmuring to himself.

The spectators watching in front of the small TV screens could see Bai Liu's hesitation, their hearts leaping with concern.

Wang Shun, who had been following Bai Liu, knew the man was a highly skilled player. He'd seen others navigate Siren Town before, but never with this level of mental intensity.

Wang Shun held his breath, eyes wide. “He’s alienated, his spirit level is dropping to sixty. He’s about to start hallucinating.”

Nearby players were glued to the screen.

A player standing with Wang Shun spoke with a tinge of dread. “Sixty spirit... it's life and death now.”

A spirit level of sixty marked the dividing line between reality and illusion. Above sixty, you fought monsters. Below, you fought your own mind, your own illusions.

Illusions were far harder to combat.

Monsters had weaknesses you could exploit, but illusions—those were born from within. Their weaknesses were unpredictable, and you never knew what was real and what was a product of your mind.

The advantage a high-spirit player had in the game was immense, which was why Bai Liu had drawn so much attention before.

Players with low spirit levels often succumbed to the monsters’ influence, slipping into illusions that could kill them. This point, sixty, was referred to by players as the [Life and Death Level].

The audience sighed, sensing the inevitable.

“It’s a shame... it’s taken him so long to fall below sixty.”

"Without any spirit-cleansing items, his spirit level is just going to keep dropping. He’s hanging by a thread now."

“Siren Town is tough—it gives a 50% pass rate, but for newcomers who don’t know the strategy, survival is almost impossible.”

“Didn’t someone clear it in the last batch of newcomers?”

“Yeah, but that guy came out with 25 spirit points, totally crazy, barely made it out.”

“This guy's probably headed down the same path.”

The sailors aboard the ship appeared to be watching a show, preparing two small boats for both Andre and Bai Liu to launch into the deep waters.

Bai Liu, appearing disoriented, stood by the rail, requesting an extra

blanket from the sailor, saying he might be cold during the night.

The sailor gave him a mocking glance, placing a few thick blankets in the boat. “Have a good night, Mr. Bai. If you wake up, that is.”

Bai Liu gave a dry laugh. “I will.”

Around the ship, small boats full of fishermen, resembling deep-sea fish, bobbed on the water. These fishermen looked eerily like Andre. In the dim light, their eyes glowed a ghostly green.

Standing motionless in their boats, the fishermen stared at Bai Liu, who clutched his blanket. The gills in their ears twitched slightly, making a faint, unsettling sound—like they had found their prey.

Andre, in another boat not far from Bai Liu, eyed him with an unsettling hunger. His lips glistened with saliva, his eyes glowing green like the fishermen’s. “Bai Liu,” he rasped, “take your foolish quilt and go sleep at the bottom of the sea.”

The large ship slowly sailed off, leaving them behind. The sailors told them they’d return in the morning to pick them up.

Bai Liu looked around, realizing that, apart from Andre, many of the fishermen had stayed behind and were now circling his boat.

Even in his foggy state, it was clear to him that, as the weakest of the “larvae” here, he would be torn apart and devoured by these ravenous fishermen in less than half an hour if he stayed with them.

And with Andre watching, he was even more vulnerable.

Although Bai Liu was still alienated, jumping into the sea wasn’t a good option.

His gills, which should have allowed him to breathe underwater, weren’t functioning properly, leaving him uncertain if he could survive submerged. Even if he could, swimming among these highly alienated fishermen and Andre would only guarantee his death.

Bai Liu also had a mission aboard this ship—his goal was to win over Andre, even with his mental state deteriorating. Surviving the night was looking increasingly impossible.

Wang Shun sighed deeply, setting down his pen. “If only he had a water bubble.”

“That item can repel the fish—buy two, use them three times, and it’ll get him through the night until dawn. It’s a bit expensive at 140 points, but it works. If Bai Liu hadn’t spent his points so recklessly earlier, it would’ve been easy for him to survive.”

A nearby player nodded, shaking his head with a helpless smile. “He’s a rookie. It’s normal to make mistakes. Bai Liu’s good, but he’s not perfect—he’s still learning, like every novice.”

“Well, that’s it then,” another player said, ready to leave.

Just as they turned to go, a loud noise erupted from Andre’s boat. A figure—no, a mermaid—leaped onto it, sharp teeth bared, sinking into Andre’s flesh with a vicious bite.

The audience, who had been about to leave, froze.

Wang Shun adjusted his glasses and leaned forward. “What’s going on? Shouldn’t the fishermen and Andre be in the water, attacking the players? Why are they going after Andre?”

The mermaid aboard Andre’s boat was wild with fury, flipping under the surface before latching onto Andre’s neck with a savage bite.

Andre screamed, his gills flapping from the pain. Black blood sprayed everywhere, coating the boat and splashing into the dark water.

The scent of blood hung in the air, and the fishermen’s eyes shifted toward Andre’s boat.

The fishermen, attracted by the smell of fresh blood, turned their small boats around and surrounded Andre, their hungry gazes fixated on him.

The sound of gnawing echoed as Andre’s boat was swarmed by hungry mermaids. Panicked, Andre tried to leap into the sea, but his legs were dragged back as mermaids devoured him.

With one last, pitiful whimper, Andre raised his hands in a futile gesture of surrender, only to be overwhelmed by the relentless swarm.

Chapter End Notes

Oh noooooo, poor Andre !

The small town of Siren

Bai Liu stood on the boat, rocking gently as he watched the chaotic scene unfold in silence. After a moment, he muttered to himself, almost as if in a daze, “Ah yes, I made sure to prepare well when I boarded, so I wouldn’t be vulnerable when my mental values dropped.”

On the small TV screen, Bai Liu appeared to be feeling a little cold after speaking. He wrapped himself in a quilt and drowsily continued watching the unfolding drama.

The viewers watching the small TV: "....."

What did he do before boarding the boat? Why did Andre suddenly die?

None of them had ever seen a fisherman eat Andre in the other games, and they were eager to find out what Bai Liu was up to—what they were missing.

“He must have pulled some kind of stunt before boarding!” someone said.

A nearby player, equally curious, closed their eyes in deep thought. “Wait! Let me think back. It was just the usual process: came here by car, paid the driver, then boarded the boat. The driver said he would prepare the venue and props for the night’s bet...”

Several players, who were about to leave, stayed behind as the crowd gathered once more, some shouting:

“Can anyone from the game system check the video replay to see what he did? I’m not a member, so I can’t access the gameplay replay.”

“I can! I’ll play it! I’ll project it for everyone to see!”

“Hmm, it feels like a normal game process. But how? Bai Liu only has a luck value of 0. It’s unlikely that luck caused a fisherman to take it upon themselves to bite Andre.”

“So how did he manage it?”

“F**k, I’m posting this to the game forum. I’ve watched it three times and still can’t figure out what he did to set it up—this is insane.”

[Game Forum - Help! Does anyone know how to get through the mermaid-eating-Andre situation?]

1L: “I just saw an amazing gameplay video from a player. Some of you have played 'Siren Small Town' before, right? Can anyone explain the mermaid-eating-Andre event in [True Love’s Ship]? I’ve never seen that before. (Attached is Bai Liu’s gameplay video.)”

2L: “I’ve got so many questions???”

“Wait, how did this play out? I’ve never seen a monster voluntarily help a player eat Andre for a quest. Is this some messed-up relationship line?”

3L: “This player must have a high luck value, right? High luck can lead to these kinds of unbelievable developments.”

Owner’s reply to 3L: “No, his luck value is 0. He’s extremely unlucky. His first dungeon was Siren Town, and the monster book drew a wandering NPC. Super unlucky. Then this happened... I can’t even explain it.”

4L: “This newbie... has some guts. How the hell did he pull that off?”

5L (Mu Sicheng): “You can trigger it if you hit the right spur.”

“When this branch is over 80%, the driver will lurk in the sea, waiting for the right moment to kill Andre. The smell of his blood attracts the fishermen, who will eat him.”

“But to trigger this, you need to control the mermaid sculpture on the first night of the sleepover and discover Jeff’s plot without Jeff realizing it, or you’ll be assassinated.”

“Is this player a total newbie? I’m impressed. I didn’t hit this spur on my first playthrough, and I had to struggle through it with skill. I only realized this spur existed when I replayed it later.”

6L: “Shit! God Mu!!! Front-row group photo!!!”

7L: “The gods have revealed themselves! Bless me to pass this difficult dungeon once and for all!”

8L: “God Mu, kudos to the awesome newcomers! I want to see it! Owner, tell me which section the newbie is in! I want to join the strong huddle!”

9L: “Me too!”

“I’m still wondering how he pushed [Jeff’s Bloody Conspiracy] to 80%. It was only at 50% when we were in the car,” Wang Shun said, clearly puzzled. As a cloud player, knowing how to trigger the branch was vital to him.

Wang Shun pulled up his game manager and asked God Mu in the forum.

God Mu replied: “[He paid the driver again.]”

[The driver’s fee was already settled, but the player tipped generously. This tempted the driver to rob and kill them, but with the added spinoff, the driver killed Andre first.]

[To push the branch to 80%, you need to make the driver aware that you have valuable belongings. This tempts him to follow you, rob you, and kill Andre in the process.]

Wang Shun read God Mu’s reply and muttered, “So that’s what happened.”

But after a moment of thought, he was left in confusion.

Wang Shun typed his follow-up question: [God Mu, but wouldn’t the driver rob the player right after killing Andre?]

Mu Sicheng replied: [Yes, but the player must hide in water bubbles that can expel the fish.]

[The driver can kill Andre stealthily, but he isn’t as strong as Andre, who is the boss of this level.]

[Once Andre is dead, the bubbles will handle the driver and the other fish. After triggering this branch, the ‘True Love’s Ship’ mission becomes significantly easier.]

Wang Shun frowned as he watched Bai Liu on the small TV, scrolling through the forums: “Did you see God Mu’s reply? He said the mermaids will finish eating Andre and then turn on the players.”

“I saw,” the viewer beside Wang Shun replied with a sigh. “God Mu even praised this great newcomer. It’s a shame though. If he hadn’t wasted so many points on alcohol, he could have passed the level by buying water bubbles.”

Wang Shun shook his head, feeling helpless: “The difficulty has been reduced to this level, and we’re still stuck here!”

It wasn’t just Wang Shun who felt this way—many players who had come to watch because of God Mu were equally frustrated.

They saw Bai Liu, still lounging under his covers, as the mermaids devoured Andre and turned toward his boat.

Bai Liu, seemingly oblivious, continued to doze, unaware of the mermaids silently approaching.

The scene left the players speechless, unsure of what to say.

The small town of Siren

As Bai Liu was about to be bitten, the audience grew frantic, transforming into grumpy old men as they yelled at the small TV.

“Wake up! Get up and fight the monsters!”

“Why are you sleeping? You’re missing the action! Didn’t your mother teach you not to give up while playing games?”

“I’ve watched so many gameplay videos, but I’ve never seen someone like this. It’s clear he could win, but he's giving up!”

Bai Liu slowly opened his eyes, as if woken by the noise from the small TV.

He looked out at the fishermen who had cut through the surface of the water, their heads rising with their mouths open, reaching toward his boat.

Bai Liu could see their legs, transformed into eel-like tails, slithering beneath the water, flipping like snakes as they darted toward him.

Not far from Bai Liu, Andre’s boat was covered in blood, with a broken skeleton and torn flesh scattered around it.

Andre’s lower body had started to fuse, taking on a fish-like appearance, while the remnants of his clothing hung from the boat, floating alone on the water—a grim testament to the ferocity of these mermaids.

In a desperate move, Bai Liu slowly dipped his blanket into the sea, pulling it back up to cover his boat. He shivered underneath it, as if trying to escape his own body, an act that sparked a frenzy of frustration from the onlookers.

But Bai Liu continued, despite the difficulty, as if his body had turned to ice.

His once-white fingers now spread with marble-like veins, the cold seeping deeper into his bones.

He was now in the same state as Lucy had been before—his body temperature had dropped so much that it felt like he was turning to stone, leaving him sluggish in both mind and movement. The shaking

was uncontrollable.

Bai Liu glanced at the barrels of alcohol in his panel and ordered: [Take out a barrel of alcohol].

[System Alert: Removed]

A barrel of alcohol appeared on the boat, weighing it down and frightening the spectators even more. The monster was almost at his boat.

Bai Liu pulled a box of matches from his pocket, huddled under the wet blanket, and, with trembling hands, struck a match.

His expression remained calm as he lit the match, then lifted a corner of the quilt, stood up, stepped onto the alcohol barrel, and carefully poured the liquid into the sea.

The audience covered their eyes in disbelief at this move.

“Pouring alcohol into the sea... Did he come up with this because his spirit level is down?”

“It’s not that we can’t burn it, the highly concentrated alcohol can float on the surface for a few minutes, but it’s a drop in the bucket. It won’t work on these mermaid monsters—they’re not afraid of fire.”

Bai Liu tossed the match onto the alcohol-soaked water. A fire flared up, and Bai Liu, still draped in his wet blanket, gazed at the approaching mermaids through the warmth of the flames, looking as calm as if he had been waiting for them all along.

A searing bonfire blazed in the deep, cold sea, as the mermaids circled the boat, waving their tails in hunger. Bai Liu sat in the middle of the fire, his eyes reflecting the flames and the sea.

With pupils the color of fire and alcohol, Bai Liu resembled a Siren more than a human, his alienated face exuding a strange, magnetic allure.

As the mermaids, desperate for food, poked their heads out of the water, they were swept into the flames with a sizzling sound, their bodies cooking and sending an eerie smell into the air. The mermaids let out a piercing scream, flipping onto their backs and floating to the surface to struggle.

The burned mermaids gave off a rancid aroma, and the remaining creatures swarmed to devour the cooked ones, the sickening sound of bones cracking filling the air.

The stench of blood and charred fish thickened in Bai Liu's nostrils, turning into an oddly appetizing scent that made him lick his lips, though his face remained emotionless.

Surrounded by mermaids devouring each other, Bai Liu sat still, his face pale and distant, but with a healthy flush from the heat of the fire. He glanced at Andre's empty boat and smiled softly.

It was a contented smile, one that mirrored the expression on the faces of the mermaids, though it was much more unsettling.

Bai Liu whispered hoarsely, "Good night, Andre."

[Side Quest - Ship of True Love: Bai Liu wins a bet against Andre, completes the quest, and receives 100 bonus points.]

[Side Mission - Jeff's Bloody Plot: 90% Progress]

[Main Quest - Participate in Mermaid Fishing Convention: Completed, reward: 50 points]

[Siren Small Town Monster Book Update - Mermaid (4/4)]

[Monster Name: Mermaid (Larvae State)]

[Weaknesses: Fire, light, fragility, proximity to humans.]

[Attack: Biting and scratching. Does not trigger alienation. Low intelligence. Does not use tools.]

The monster book has been updated. We hope you continue your research.

A long list of rewards and achievements flashed on the screen, almost blinding the viewers glued to the small TV.

After a long pause, the viewer who had previously criticized Bai Liu's "lying delivery" spoke up incredulously, "What the hell?!"

The exclamation snapped everyone back to attention, and the questions came flooding in.

"What just happened?!"

“Lying delivery, my ass! This guy actually won by lying down? This is insane.”

“Shit, I’m going to the forum to ask God Mu what happened!”

“Why didn’t the alcohol dissolve in water?!”

“I looked up the alcohol he used, and holy crap—it’s a semi-solid oil-based alcohol that’s been modified to be insoluble in water. How did this new guy find it?”

“Did he actually read all the instructions?”

“God Mu replied! He said that mermaid sculptures and sailors aren’t afraid of fire, but mermaid larvae are. A mermaid without an amulet is vulnerable to fire.”

“And Bai Liu figured out that cooked mermaid meat is highly attractive to these monsters, so instead of attacking the players, the mermaids went after the cooked larvae...”

...

[2,300 people liked Bai Liu's TV, 2,670 people favorited it, 499 people donated to his TV, player Bai Liu gained 499 points.]

[Player Bai Liu has gained over 2,000 likes in under a minute, and his reputation is soaring!]

[Congratulations to Bai Liu for entering the recommended position in the single-player leaderboard, with views skyrocketing...]

...

Bai Liu sat idly in the boat, watching the mermaids tear each other apart, his wet blanket protecting him from the flames.

Once they finished fighting, he poured more alcohol and lit it again.

The grilled mermaid meat proved far more enticing to the creatures than Bai Liu himself, so they continued to feast on each other, leaving him undisturbed. Bai Liu, like a barbecue chef, stood by as the mermaids enjoyed the cooked fish.

As he calculated, Bai Liu estimated that four or five more barrels of alcohol would last until dawn. That’s only 45 points, a small fraction of the 140 needed for two water bubbles.

And he still had five large barrels left.

Bai Liu had bought the alcohol after hearing from the keeper of the Siren Wax Museum that mermaids could be cooked—grilled, in fact—and everyone loved it.

It was surprising that fire worked so well, and the cooked mermaids proved just as irresistible to the monsters as raw fish.

It reminded him of Andre's craving for fish and chips—Andre had eaten far more cooked fish tonight than he had that morning.

The small town of Siren

Although Bai Liu knew his plan had a chance of success, the outcome was even better than he had expected.

The game's props seem to have an enhanced effect, as these barrels of highly concentrated alcohol burn much more intensely than anything Bai Liu has seen in real life. Similarly, the torch, which was blindingly bright earlier, continues to shine with an exaggerated intensity.

As the sun rises over the sea and the day begins, the photophobic, diurnal mermaids gradually dive beneath the surface and disappear from view.

Bai Liu made sure there were no mermaids nearby before he detached his mind and accessed the panel.

He hadn't had time to check it earlier because he was too busy… well, grilling—no, fighting off mermaids—but now Bai Liu examined the information on the panel and couldn't help narrowing his eyes.

[Side Mission: Jeff's Bloody Plot, 90% Completion]

Andre has been killed, the driver has been burned by Bai Liu, and there's still 10% of this side quest left to complete… How can he finish this remaining 10% of the Bloody Conspiracy?

[Points balance: 684. Do you want to buy props?]

Bai Liu stared at the unexpectedly high points balance for a moment. He clicked through the panel to check the points breakdown and found that over five hundred points had come from [Recharge].

In other words, after tossing and turning all night, more than eighty percent of his points were earned not from completing in-game quests, but from the rewards of those [viewers].

Bai Liu considered this—audience points are easier to earn than game points, and far more plentiful.

This didn't quite make sense. The game itself rewards players less than the external rewards, which could discourage players from progressing in the game and lead them to focus on appeasing the viewers, or even quit and resort to gimmicks to attract rewards.

Especially with the ability to buy props directly with points—if Bai Liu had enough points from bounties, he could bypass the game entirely and brute-force his way through without any experience.

But Bai Liu wouldn't have designed the game this way, and he didn't think the system would either.

There must be some sort of reward inside the game that balances the reward systems, motivating players to seek in-game rewards rather than relying on external ones.

Bai Liu's fingers repeatedly flipped a coin as he thought. All quest rewards in the game are instantaneous—points are awarded immediately upon completing tasks—but there was one exception:

—The Monster Book.

Rewards from the Monster Book can only be claimed once all pages are collected, and they are given after completing a level. Typically, these kinds of rewards are substantial.

Bai Liu now realized he had underestimated the value of the Monster Book rewards.

He believed that the rewards for completing the Monster Book would be significant—so valuable, in fact, that points alone couldn't easily buy them. This would help balance the game's reward system and ensure that players prioritized in-game achievements.

Bai Liu opened the Monster Book, glancing over each page before his eyes landed on the unlocked page for the [Siren King] and paused.

[Siren Small Town Monster Book - Siren King (2/4)]

[Monster Name: Siren King]

[Weaknesses: None at this time (players are not required to explore the monster's weaknesses)]

[Mode of Attack: ????? (Unknown, to be explored)]

[Note: A wandering god-level NPC. Danger level is extremely high. Explore with caution.]

Bai Liu mused, This attack method needs to be explored… In previous monsters, attacks were typically revealed once the player encountered them.

But with a monster of the Siren King's caliber, Bai Liu felt certain that if he attacked, he'd be in for a tough time.

Yet, it wasn't Bai Liu's style to leave a major reward hanging. He was sure that such a big, fat prize wouldn't just be left for nothing.

If Bai Liu had known the true viciousness of this NPC and heard rumors of this bug-like NPC, he probably would have given up. After all, when designing a game, the most feared thing is a bug—something that's not part of the game's logic and can't be fought.

But Bai Liu didn't know that now.

Not only did he not know, he considered this NPC just another boss. If he could defeat it, the reward would be great, and surely there was a solution. There had to be a way to defeat any boss.

He stared at the page for a moment, clicked his tongue, and closed the Monster Book. He opened the game shop: [I want to buy props].

[What props do you need? There's a recent sale on water bubbles. Do you need any?]

Bai Liu saw that the "Water Bubbles" item from "Siren Town" had dropped from 70 points to 40 points per item.

Beside it was [Highly Concentrated Alcohol], an item Bai Liu had bought before. Its price had risen from 9 points a barrel to almost 13 points a barrel.

Bai Liu smiled at the price change.

He had guessed correctly—the game's events were feeding back into the viewers, influencing their buying preferences, much like live bandwagoning. As long as Bai Liu could replicate the same effect with cheaper props, players would flock to buy them, causing a shift in the price curve.

This Siren event seemed like a copy of a game that didn't have a large user base, which is why the prices fluctuated so quickly.

For instance, Bai Liu had used a 3D projector and a torch to cross the map [Siren Wax Museum]. Normally, the solution would have been to use a flaming torch, but Bai Liu bypassed it with persistent props, treating the flaming torch as a consumable item.

For roughly the same price, players would prefer to buy long-lasting props, so the price of the torch dropped, while the price of the 3D projector rose.

Now Bai Liu was pulling the same trick again, taking advantage of the lower price of [Water Bubbles] to save money.

Bai Liu smiled: [I want to buy a water bubble].

[Good, 40 points. Thanks for your purchase.]

Wang Shun, who had rushed over from the Deadly Comedy section to the single-player section, was puzzled when he saw Bai Liu preparing to buy water bubbles. He approached the small TV.

After confirming that Bai Liu had indeed bought a water bubble, Wang Shun was even more confused: "Why did he buy water bubbles again?"

"Doesn't the back of 'Siren Town' mostly involve land chases? What would he need the water bubbles for?"

A player next to him offered a reasonable analysis: "Now that Bai Liu has more points, he probably bought one just in case, considering water bubbles are inexpensive at 40 points. It's like buying insurance —alcohol is too risky."

Having followed Bai Liu, Wang Shun had come to understand Bai Liu's style of spending his points at the edge of a knife. Previously, Bai Liu had favored riskier, lower-commitment options, like buying alcohol, rather than spending more points on the safer, higher-commitment option of water bubbles.

But now, to hedge his bets, Bai Liu had opted for the extra safety net of a water bubble, spending the additional 50 points.

Wang Shun couldn't quite believe it.

In fact, Wang Shun even entertained the absurd idea that Bai Liu might have manipulated the prices through some series of actions, waiting for the price of water bubbles to drop so he could buy them at a discount.

Wang Shun muttered to himself.

Caught in his thoughts, his voice was louder than he realized, and a

nearby spectator overheard.

The player retorted casually, "You haven't become a fan of Bai Liu, have you? Price manipulation? He's just a newbie and hasn't really played the game yet. Sure, he's got game skills, but manipulating prop prices is a bit much."

The player dismissed the idea, "I think he just had an exciting night, maybe even a bit scared. As soon as he had the points, he bought whatever could save his life. Alcohol is more of a gamble."

The player sighed, "It's just a risky play—nothing special. I can't believe I'm even thinking of using this to advance to the Single Player Division."

There was a trace of jealousy in the player's expression. He seemed to think Bai Liu had used some clever strategies to reach the Single Player Division, but ultimately, it was just gambling his way through.

Forums were buzzing with discussions about Bai Liu's alcohol-fueled victories. After an initial wave of praise, more and more people began mocking Bai Liu for being opportunistic.

[What's the big deal with this strategy? I thought of it first, but there were safer options available, so why would I take the higher-risk route?]

[It's not the first time I've seen someone trying to act tough. Are there more of them in Dead Comedy?]

[In reality, you'd get a lot more than just a few bottles of alcohol. Four of them are already used, and five are saved to keep the fish. For those who praise this money-saving tactic, let me do the math for you: the 81 points spent here are 11 points more than the original price for water bubbles!]

[Some people just don't get it, huh? This strategy is all style with no substance.]

[If you really want to buy water bubbles after getting your bonus points, fine, but don't be a coward. If you think alcohol is no good and water bubbles are better, feel free to keep using the alcohol. Let's see how you'll handle burning the mermaid wax figure on land later!]

The small town of Siren

Chapter Notes

> Trigger Warning: The following chapters contain content that may be distressing to some readers. Please proceed with caution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was a lot of debate on the forum about whether Bai Liu's performance was impressive or not, but Wang Shun had anticipated this.

Bai Liu's past performance was so extraordinary that he earned a substantial number of charge points, surpassing 500—an impressive feat for a newcomer. For comparison, Mu Sicheng, the previous record holder in Siren Village, had accumulated over 1,000 charge points.

Reaching over 500 charge points was a significant achievement for someone like Bai Liu, who was still new to the game.

While players at the bottom of the leaderboard struggled just to survive Siren and barely earned a couple of hundred points after deducting the cost of props, Bai Liu effortlessly fought monsters with only a few dozen points worth of props, still managing to accumulate hundreds of points.

His approach was both highly effective and cost-efficient, and in Wang Shun's eyes, if nothing else, Bai Liu would surely make it onto the Nightmare Rising Stars list.

However, Wang Shun was also curious about what Bai Liu was doing with the extra barrels of alcohol he had purchased.

He had always thought that Bai Liu was a player who wouldn't spend points recklessly, but his decision to purchase five barrels of alcohol and bubble water was something Wang Shun couldn't quite understand.

The next phase of the game required the player to reach the shore, where there were mermaid wax figures. Alcohol wouldn't be able to burn effectively there, and the light it emitted wasn't strong enough to affect the mermaids, who were sensitive to bright light...

Wang Shun, lost in thought, watched Bai Liu's performance on the

small TV screen in the single-player section.

The single-player section was much larger than the previous Death Comedy section, which had looked like a 1980s arcade hall. Now, it was a spacious, clean gaming room with different recommended areas.

Bai Liu was currently in the [System Recommendation] section.

This area was located at the entrance to the single-player lobby and had a high traffic flow. The conditions for gaining entry here were relatively lenient, making the competition fierce. It was typically occupied by veteran players with a fan base who used their popularity to secure a spot in the next round.

The [System Recommendation] section was a prime location, offering good visibility and a boost for players who performed well, making it an ideal springboard for advancement. However, the spot was usually reserved for veteran players, and newcomers rarely made it this far.

Bai Liu, as a complete rookie, had secured this spot, sparking a lot of controversy and drawing curious spectators. The forum debates about his past actions only added to the intrigue, and more people came to watch this newcomer with a seemingly unusual approach to the game.

As Wang Shun pondered, the crowd behind him grew larger.

The viewing area around each player's small TV was vast, capable of holding thousands of viewers, even though it appeared small from the outside. A dense crowd of players gathered to discuss Bai Liu’s gameplay.

"Isn’t the [System Recommendation] slot usually reserved for veterans? How is this newbie here?" one player whispered.

"This new guy’s stats are impressive for a pure rookie. Looks like the system is giving him a boost. No wonder he got the recommendation spot," another player commented.

"But what about the player who was in this slot before? Who did Bai Liu push out?"

"Wait... is it Dog? He got squeezed out by Bai Liu?"

"Wow, this newbie is in for a tough time!"

As they spoke, a tall, burly man with a long scar over his right eye

entered the area. His imposing figure stood out—his cheeks were heavy with flesh, and his teeth were clenched, resembling a savage beast ready to attack. He wore a black steel-studded belt with a machete strapped to his waist.

A few audience members quickly stepped aside.

This was Dog, a notorious player known for his brutal tactics. In his previous game, he had killed his own teammates for show and robbed them of their props and points, gaining a significant advantage in the process. His notoriety made him a feared presence in the game.

Wang Shun instinctively backed away when Dog approached, nervous about losing his prime viewing spot.

Dog sat down with a grunt, glaring at the screen. "I want to see what this brat can do. If he's taken my spot, I'll follow him into the next game and show him how it's done."

The murmurs among the players faded into silence.

Despite Bai Liu earning his spot through merit, facing off against a ruthless player like Dog meant that survival in this game would be difficult, and survival in the next round would be even harder.

In his last game, Dog had ruthlessly killed a teammate, collecting over 36,000 points and a stash of valuable props. His wealth from that game made him a formidable opponent for any newcomer.

Wang Shun frowned, opening his game manager to look up Dog's profile.

[Player Name: Li Gou]

[Occupation (Before Entering the Game): Butcher]

[Reason for Entering the Game: Imprisoned for the brutal rape and murder of a high school girl who bought meat from him. Entered the game after developing a strong desire to survive during his trial.]

[Core Desire: To escape prison, take revenge on those who testified against him, and burn down the family of the girl who reported him.]

[Recommended Items in Wish Fulfillment Shop: Crime Erasing Face Cream (changes your face, giving those with certain death sentences a new life and identity, lasting ten years, 12,000 points per bottle), No

Trace Arson Match (starts accidental fires with a single match, costing 21,000 points)]

Beneath the profile, there was a record of Li Gou's criminal history. Wang Shun hesitated before clicking on it.

Li Gou has a criminal record for forcing and killing a female high school student in an alleyway.

The girl, who was in her senior year of high school, had come down to help her parents, who were cooking, to buy some meat during a break in her studies. She was raped by Li Gou, who cut off the girl's hand in anger because she resisted so violently leading her to bleed to death in the process.

Li Gou, who didn't want to be discovered, destroyed the girl's body.

The girl's parents, who thought their daughter had gone for a walk because she was tired from revision and had come down to buy meat for herself, almost collapsed when they learned the truth afterward.

Li Gou, on the other hand, insisted that he had killed her unintentionally, that he had only wanted to flirt with her, but that he had accidentally killed her and subsequently destroyed her body because he regretted it, not because of any intentional abuse.

The girl's parents, on the other hand, sued him to death even though they had lost all their money, He was indeed sentenced to death, thus stirring up his resentment and vengeance.

This brutal background was the reason Li Gou had entered the game.

Chapter End Notes

Gonna root for Bai Liu now! I hope he gets rid of Li Gou

The small town of Siren

After reading Li Gou's biography, Wang Shun felt, for the first time, that having the ability to access a player's former [Know-it-all] was not such a great skill.

This game is for people with incredibly strong desires, and there's no shortage of vicious players here. On the contrary, this game serves as the perfect stage for them. Many high-rollers have blood on their hands.

Wang Shun glanced at Bai Liu on the small TV screen, concern creeping into his expression as he let out a long sigh.

The game hasn't logged out yet, and there's already a butcher watching from this side.

Bai Liu, you truly are a troublemaker.

[126 people liked Bai Liu's TV, 675 people favorited it, 0 people donated to it, 378 people disliked it.]

[Player Bai Liu gained 3,000 viewers in one minute, but with a like rate of less than one-tenth, it seems most viewers are just here to watch the drama and join in on the fun.]

[A high-ranking player, Li Gou, is watching Bai Liu's mini-TV. Congratulations to Bai Liu for getting his first high-ranking viewer!]

[Li Gou gave Bai Liu a stomp. It seems this high-level player doesn't like you.]

Bai Liu waited alone on the sea until dawn. Not long after, the large boat he left the previous night returned. Jeff and Lucy were at the bow, with Jeff comforting Lucy, his hand gently resting on her shoulder.

Lucy buried her head in Jeff's arms as if on the verge of collapsing, and Jeff softly soothed her.

Every now and then, Jeff kissed Lucy's tear-streaked face lovingly. Lucy didn't push him away, instead snuggling up to him with a hint of dependence. Bai Liu raised an eyebrow at this scene.

It seemed that after just one night, not only had Bai Liu's true love

boat safely reached shore, but Jeff and Lucy also seemed to have boarded their own love boat.

But as the boat approached, Lucy and Jeff saw Bai Liu, wrapped in a blanket as if he had slept through the night. Lucy screamed sharply, clutching her chest and pushing Jeff away.

Jeff staggered back, unable to believe it, looking flustered as he gestured wildly, “Bai Liu, are you okay? I mean, are you really okay?”

Bai Liu calmly climbed up the rope ladder lowered from above. With a knowing smile, he looked at Lucy and Jeff, his eyes flicking between them. “I’m fine. Good morning, Jeff, Lucy. I had a rather pleasant evening. Looks like you two did, too?”

Lucy, panicked, reached out to hug Bai Liu’s arm, but he silently stepped back.

Tears streaming down her face, Lucy sobbed, “No, last night Jeff and I talked about how you and Andre were going to die, and I was so scared. I thought it was my fault, and Jeff comforted me.”

Bai Liu smiled but didn’t dwell on the matter, his attention shifting elsewhere.

Lucy’s face was pale, almost translucent, and her movements were off —there was a brittle, waxy texture to her skin, similar to the mermaid wax figures Bai Liu had touched earlier in the barn. The feel was like thin paraffin, and she lacked the strong ichthyological odor that typically accompanied mermaids.

Jeff began to defend himself, eyes averted. “Yes, Lucy thought something was going to happen to you and Andre, and stayed with me because she was scared. Nothing happened between us, I promise.”

He forced a smile, “I know she’s your girlfriend, Bai Liu, but I respect you. You’re my best friend.”

Bai Liu remained noncommittal. “Where did you spend the night, by the way? Siren Wax Museum, right?”

Lucy gasped, “How did you know?”

Then she rambled on, “Yeah, they wouldn’t let us go back to the hotel. Apparently, after participating in mermaid fishing, you need to stay overnight at the Siren Wax Museum to wash off the smell of murder

and blood."

"It was horrible. The place was full of wax figures. It felt like they moved at night, and wherever Jeff and I went, there was always a wax figure in our way."

Jeff maintained a stiff smile, "Bai Liu, where's Andre? Where did he go?"

Bai Liu grinned. "He should be at the Siren Wax Museum right now, waiting for us."

Jeff glanced suspiciously at Andre's boat out on the sea.

The boat was covered in dark, blood-like paint, and pieces of leather resembling Andre's shirt were visible.

Jeff's eyes briefly flashed with grim satisfaction, and he lowered his head, unable to suppress a quick, twisted smile.

Bai Liu observed Jeff, noting that Andre's death seemed to please him.

But soon, Jeff approached Bai Liu with feigned confusion, pointing at Andre's boat. "But, Bai Liu, Andre's boat is still here. He can't be back on shore…"

Jeff glanced at Bai Liu, then scowled, choosing not to speak further.

Lucy gasped again, her voice trembling with disbelief, "Oh my God, Andre's not really dead! Bai Liu!"

She looked at him, shocked and disappointed. "You killed Andre, didn't you? You didn't push him into the sea, did you?"

Bai Liu briefly thought she might cry, but her eyes were dry. He absentmindedly wondered how a wax figure could shed tears.

Jeff, looking solemn, turned to Bai Liu. "You shouldn't have done that. Even though Andre wasn't a good person, he deserved to live."

Bai Liu chuckled softly, meeting Jeff's gaze. "I could probably say the same thing to you."

Jeff narrowed his eyes, wary of Bai Liu.

Bai Liu shrugged and smiled at Lucy, who was still accusing him. "You'll see Andre when we get to the wax museum. I wouldn't lie to

you."

"If I did, we'd break up," he added with a sly grin.

Lucy hesitated for a moment, her gaze flicking to Bai Liu's pockets—where he kept his wallet. At the thought of the expensive vacation, she finally fell silent.

Bai Liu had figured out the final piece of [Jeff's Bloody Plot] side quest.

He realized that he had been overestimating the humanity of the game's NPCs. Not a single teammate was even slightly kind to him.

Bai Liu was used to being pressured by his boss to promote friendship and goodness in game design or at least create one pure-hearted character. But here, he found a cast of complete villains—Andre, who resorted to violence; Jeff, who was obsequious and cold-blooded; and Lucy, who seemed nice but was only dating him for money and could cheat at any moment.

This setup where everyone was bad… He actually loved it.

A small smile tugged at Bai Liu's lips.

Once he stopped thinking that NPCs like Jeff, who knew about the mermaid setting, had to be good guys, the last ten percent of [Jeff's Bloody Plot] fell into place.

No wonder Jeff was so guarded against Bai Liu. The progress bar for the Bloody Conspiracy quest had increased twice. From the start, there had always been two people Jeff wanted to kill—Bai Liu and Andre.

The task assigned to him wasn't just to kill Andre but also Bai Liu, possibly involving robbery and sharing the loot.

Thinking back, it was strange that the player and his group had arrived at Siren. The player was designed as a timid person who would never willingly go to a creepy place like Siren. Andre obviously didn't know about it, and Lucy was a first-timer. The only one who would recommend such a terrifying place was Jeff, a mermaid enthusiast.

Bai Liu's role as the cowardly player was likely due to Jeff's encouragement.

He had studied Siren and knew the town was rife with corrupt figures and a police force unable to solve crimes, with many missing persons never found.

Siren was the perfect place to dispose of a body.

Jeff, with his fake mermaid knowledge, had designed the entire scenario to set players up for murder.

[Side Quest - Jeff's Bloody Conspiracy, 100% progress, completed, 50 points earned]

[Unlock the hidden status of character - Jeff, who resents everything]

Bai Liu gave Jeff a coin swipe.

[npc name: Jeff (?????) status]

[Character Bio: An avid fan of mermaids, sea monsters, and unnatural creatures, Jeff joined Lucy and her group on their trip to Siren Town.]

[Character's hidden profile: After years of abuse from Andre, Jeff harbors a deep hatred for everything inside…]

[… After gaining your trust, he becomes jealous of you, feeling you're a hypocrite and trying to take everything from you. He wants to use you to kill Andre.]

[Once given the opportunity, Jeff realizes Siren is the perfect crime scene… He plans to have the mermaid he loves so much kill you and Andre.]

[Warning: Jeff has very low trust in the player and may attack at any moment, so take care of your safety.]

Wang Shun, watching the small TV, finally understood. "So that's what happened. No wonder Jeff kept trying to get players killed during the land chase. Even God Mu almost got screwed."

Other players were discussing their complaints.

"Damn! Jeff, so that's what you were really like! With his knowledge of mermaids, I thought he was one of those NPCs who just provided information and couldn't die. I even saved him a few times when I was being chased in this game!"

Before the audience could finish, Li Gou slammed his knife down

impatiently, and the room fell silent.

Li Gou snorted, staring at Bai Liu on the small TV. "It's just a side quest. I thought it was something amazing. The forum's blowing it up like he's the next Mu Sicheng."

"The guy who said that must not have played many games or watched many streams. Him? The next Mu Sicheng? Please."

Wang Shun opened his mouth but didn't retort, shaking his head in resignation.

Less knowledgeable?

He had watched so many live streams of Siren Village that the only players who had beaten the nearly complete spinoff were Mu Sicheng and Bai Liu.

Mu Sicheng's Siren gameplay was in the system's VIP library, costing 40 points to watch.

That price showed the value of the video. Mu Sicheng's branch wasn't something anyone could just clear easily, or it wouldn't be in the VIP pool.

Even Mu Sicheng himself failed to get through all of Jeff's Bloody Plot.

Given that Bai Liu could do this, it was clear— Bai Liu was far superior to Mu Sicheng.

The small town of siren

After Bai Liu disembarked, the sailors insisted—following an old superstition—that he remain in the wax museum until evening. They believed this ritual would cleanse him of the sins from witnessing the mermaid hunt. Only then would he be allowed to leave and redeem himself.

Lucy and Jeff accompanied him to the wax museum.

In the early morning light, the wax museum felt dark and irrelevant, its atmosphere oppressive. A sailor dropped Bai Liu off, sternly warning him not to leave until nightfall. The keeper was left behind to ensure Bai Liu stayed put.

Lucy curled up behind Bai Liu, whispering uneasily, "Why does this wax museum feel so scary, even in the daytime?"

Wax figures lined the museum, their hollow gazes following Bai Liu and the others. The faces of the mermaid wax figures appeared even more vivid than those Bai Liu had seen the day before.

As he observed them, Bai Liu noticed something disturbing—two of the wax figures had tails that had partially transformed. Their fish tails now only extended to the knees, while their upper legs resembled human limbs.

Looking closer, Bai Liu realized these two figures bore an unsettling resemblance to Lucy and Jeff.

The wax figures smiled eerily, their lifeless eyes locked onto Bai Liu and his companions.

Bai Liu's suspicions deepened. The Lucy and Jeff who had stayed here overnight had likely been sacrificed, transformed into "mermaid wax amulets." Meanwhile, the mermaid wax figures who had enjoyed the sacrifices were slowly becoming Lucy and Jeff.

The transformation wasn't complete, though. The "butterfly" inside the wax figures had not fully hatched, leaving the "cocoon" that was Lucy and Jeff with a slim chance of survival.

Bai Liu didn't care for heroics. He wasn't interested in saving Lucy and Jeff out of altruism but rather because their completed transformation would result in two powerful butterfly-type monsters he'd have to

face.

With this in mind, Bai Liu pulled out his torch, planning to force the mermaid wax figures back.

As soon as the torch's light ignited, Lucy and Jeff reacted violently, screaming in agony before the wax figures even moved.

Lucy collapsed, her body trembling, her head tilted back with a faintly hostile glare. "Bai Liu, your torch is too bright! Are you trying to blind us?"

Jeff clung to one of the wax figures, shouting hysterically, "Don't ever turn that thing on again!"

Bai Liu raised his hands mockingly, feigning innocence. "My bad. I didn't know you were so sensitive to light."

Of course, he had known. When people began turning into wax figures, they developed photophobia. But he hadn't anticipated how violently they would resist. Lucy and Jeff lunged for the torch, their movements unnervingly fast—matching his own.

This complicated things. If they could attack him each time he used the torch, it rendered the tool useless.

The game, it seemed, had reached the point where it was actively restricting his use of the torch. This likely meant a chase sequence with the mermaid wax figures was imminent, and the lack of light heightened the suspense.

Bai Liu himself often used such tricks when designing games—granting players tools like a demon mirror to repel enemies but adding cooldowns to keep the stakes high. The thrill of avoiding enemies during these intervals made the game scarier.

It was amusing when he was the designer. Experiencing it firsthand was less enjoyable.

Bai Liu sighed, stowing the torch with a gesture of surrender. He raised his hands, showing he wouldn't use it again—at least for now.

Still, his remaining light swept across the entrance of the wax museum. The figures stationed there seemed to inch closer, as though preparing to seal off any escape routes.

Turning on the torch would provoke Lucy and Jeff, but not using it left him vulnerable to the mermaid wax figures. Waiting until nightfall would mean certain death.

Not only would the wax figures possess him, increasing his alienation level and eventually turning him into a talismanic wax figure, but also very importantly—

Bai Liu flipped a coin in his hand, bringing up the system panel.

[Warning: Siren King will awaken in seven hours. Please clear the level before then.]

The audience watching Bai Liu's small TV let out collective gasps at the ominous message.

Li Gou, dragging his knife, leaned closer to the screen, squinting. Moments later, he burst into laughter. "A god-class NPC? This guy's done for! Serves him right for stealing my spot. He's going to be obliterated before I even get a chance to mess with him."

Other viewers were less amused, their reactions tinged with pity and disbelief.

"This map's normal strategy is to play hide-and-seek with the wax figures until nightfall, then escape Siren Town. But with a god-class NPC involved, he'll never survive the night."

"Escaping Siren Town only gives you a NORMAL END anyway. The rewards are mediocre."

"God Mu played the true ending—he sealed the ghost by returning Siren's corpse to the sea. But Bai Liu? He's facing the Siren King directly! There's no way he'll make it!"

Wang Shun, watching intently, clenched his fists.

He hadn't expected Bai Liu to walk willingly into the wax museum.

If Bai Liu had fled during the earlier chase, there might have been a slim chance to escape Siren Town. Now, he was trapped.

Wang Shun sighed, conflicted. Bai Liu was a skilled player, perhaps even on par with Mu Sicheng, but luck wasn't on his side this time.

Bai Liu strode toward the central exhibition hall, Lucy and Jeff trailing behind him.

At the heart of the gallery stood a glass display case holding the body of the Siren King. Suspended in a transparent, viscous liquid, the mermaid's form seemed almost alive. Wisps of snowy foam floated between the Siren King's long hair and pale eyelashes, giving the eerie illusion of frost settling on his still, lifeless body.

Bai Liu stepped closer, his gaze fixed on the figure. Despite the mermaid's decomposed state, its beauty was otherworldly, captivating and menacing all at once. It felt as if, at any moment, those eyes would snap open, the long, powerful tail would shatter the glass, and the creature would erupt into a massacre before vanishing into the sea.

Lucy glanced around uneasily. "Bai Liu, you said Andre was here in the wax museum. Where is he?"

Without looking away from the display, Bai Liu replied flatly, "Didn't you pass him on your way in? Jeff even helped him up."

Jeff frowned in confusion, pointing at himself. "Helped him up? Bai Liu, there's no one else in this museum but us."

"Exactly." Bai Liu's tone was casual, almost amused. "When did I ever say Andre was still human?"

Lucy instinctively stepped back, rubbing her arms as a chill ran down her spine. "Bai Liu, stop joking around. Where is Andre?"

Before Bai Liu could answer, a faint, shuffling sound echoed through the hall. His ears twitched, and he slowly turned his head.

Standing just behind Jeff and Lucy was a wax figure—grim-faced and lifelike. Its resemblance to Andre was unmistakable, and its posture suggested it was preparing to strike.

Bai Liu's lips curled into a faint smile. "Lucy, Andre is right behind you."

Lucy and Jeff turned as one, and their synchronized screams—a shrill male-female duet—reverberated through the hall. Bai Liu, anticipating the reaction, calmly plugged his ears.

Last night, the Siren Waxworks claimed two fresh offerings: Jeff and

Lucy. Their transformation into mermaid wax figures was inevitable. Meanwhile, Andre's skeleton, taken by the mermaids, had been repurposed to fill the museum's collection.

Now, Andre's wax figure loomed behind them, and outside the hall, a crowd of other wax figures pressed against the entrance. Their expressions were eerily lifelike, with subtle, unsettling resemblances to Bai Liu's face. It was clear they sought to possess him next.

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow, evading Lucy's desperate attempt to cling to him.

For Lucy and Jeff, these figures posed no threat—they were already transitioning into wax figures themselves. But for Bai Liu, they were a deadly danger. His options were limited: the torch was useless with Lucy and Jeff nearby, and alcohol wasn't potent enough to burn these figures.

His only viable weapon was direct eye contact, which could temporarily immobilize the wax figures. However, the method had a glaring flaw—humans blink.

Lucy and Jeff, no longer fully human, couldn't help him hold the wax figures at bay. Bai Liu could feel them creeping closer every time he blinked, the air thick with the stench of fish.

In the dim gallery, the wax figures began to distort. Their once-pristine faces melted, grotesquely shifting into uncanny approximations of Bai Liu's features, with wide, toothy grins. Scales flaked off their fish tails, revealing jagged, skeletal remains.

Jeff and Lucy stood unnervingly close to Bai Liu's sides, their instability a ticking time bomb. If he turned on the torch, they would attack him before the wax figures even had a chance. Killing Jeff and Lucy would escalate the situation further, as their wax counterparts would instantly transform into deadly mermaid sailors.

Bai Liu sighed, weighing his dwindling options. His stamina was in the red, and without the terrain advantage of the wax museum's bunker-like structure, he'd be overwhelmed.

At this point, Wang Shun, a spectator watching from the small TV feed, let out a sigh and prepared to turn off his recorder. Like many others, he was certain Bai Liu had no chance. The situation was hopeless, and no one wanted to watch a doomed gameplay video.

Yet just as Wang Shun turned away, he caught sight of Bai Liu on the screen—and froze.

Bai Liu was smiling.

“Why is he smiling?” Wang Shun muttered, leaning closer.

On the screen, Bai Liu lowered his head, his expression calm and composed. He was... enjoying himself.

It wasn’t panic or despair. He flipped through various system panels with practiced speed, his fingers a blur. Prop shops, monster books, quest objectives—they all popped up in rapid succession, dazzling the audience.

“What’s he doing?” one viewer whispered.

“Is he going to spend all his points before dying?” another speculated.

Wang Shun, however, recognized the method to Bai Liu’s apparent madness. He reopened his recorder, his heart pounding. Bai Liu wasn’t flailing aimlessly—he was executing a meticulously calculated plan.

“Pickaxe, 17 points. Sold,” Bai Liu muttered.

“Mobile cart, 7 points. Sold.”

“System, open Monster Book: Mermaid Wax Figure and Mermaid Sailor.”

Panels opened in quick succession, their glowing light reflecting off Bai Liu’s determined face. His movements were so precise that even seasoned players were left stunned.

The tension in the room shifted. Those who had dismissed Bai Liu as doomed fell silent, captivated by his sudden burst of action.

“What’s he planning?”

[The Siren Small Town Monster Book - Mermaid Wax Figure (1/4)]

[Monster Name: Mermaid Wax Figure (Chrysalis Status), Amulet Wax Figure (Cocoon Status)]

[Weaknesses: direct human eye contact, strong light exposure (2/3)]

[Mode of attack: Hatching]

[The Siren Small Town Monster Book - Mermaid Sailor (3/4)]

[Monster Name: Mermaid Sailor (Butterfly Status)

[Weakness: Fear of light, amulet (2/3)]

[Attack: Biting and scratching (a certain probability of being scratched will trigger the alienation status)

[Both your first and third pages are just one weakness away from being set, so please players, keep up the good work!

The small town of siren

Wang Shun's eyes lit up with realization. "He's completing the monster book! He's identifying the final weaknesses of all the fish monsters and planning to use those weaknesses to push them back!"

Around him, the crowd buzzed with disbelief.

"No way! Is he really trying to complete the monster book?"

"Impossible! Only God Mu has ever managed to complete the monster book for Siren Village. Most players are lucky to unlock even a single page. This newcomer thinks he can do it?"

"I don't buy it. I've watched countless Siren Small Town gameplay videos, and no one's ever figured out the third weakness for the mermaid wax figure or the mermaid sailor. It's just not possible."

.....

Bai Liu paid no attention to the incredulous remarks around him. With a lazy expression, he raised his pickaxe and brought it crashing down on the glass display case containing the Siren King.

The glass shattered with a deafening crack. The Siren King's figure slid out, carried by a viscous liquid that pooled around Bai Liu's feet.

Lucy and Jeff, standing nearby, screamed in terror. Covering their heads, they bolted from the central gallery like they had seen a demon.

Wang Shun's eyes sparkled with realization as he watched Bai Liu calmly dry his fingers, one by one, ignoring the chaos around him. Wang Shun inhaled sharply.

"The third weakness of the mermaid wax figures and mermaid sailors... is the Siren King!"

Bai Liu crouched next to the Siren King, tilting the figure's chin with calculated indifference.

The liquid dripped from the Siren King's lashes onto his full, glossy lips, forming a line of moisture that glistened in the dim light. His face, even in this vulnerable state, exuded an otherworldly beauty that seemed beyond human comprehension. Siren—the word itself was the

only frame that could hold such allure.

Bai Liu ran his fingers over the Siren King's cool, delicate skin. Inwardly, he mused, The NPC modeling in this game is absurdly good. To create a character this stunning... impressive work.

But then, he remembered he was on air. This wasn't the moment for idle admiration. Instead, it was the perfect opportunity to deliver a dramatic, audience-captivating performance.

Exhaling slowly, Bai Liu smiled faintly and said, "It all starts and ends with you, beautiful Siren King."

He leaned down, loaded the Siren King onto his trolley, and with a playful tilt of his head and a confident smirk, pushed the trolley forward with his foot. He exited the wax museum, the Siren King in tow.

None of the mermaid wax figures dared to follow. They cowered in the shadowy corners of the gallery, too frightened to approach.

A notification blinked on the screen:

[Siren Small Town Monster Book - Update: Mermaid Wax Figure (1/4)]

[Monster Name: Mermaid Wax Figure (Nymph Status), Amulet Wax Figure (Cocoon Status)]
[Weaknesses: Direct human eye contact, bright light, Siren King]
[Mode of Attack: Hatching]
[Page Completed! Keep up the great work, players!]

Another notification followed:

[Siren Small Town Monster Book - Mermaid Sailor (3/4)]

[Monster Name: Mermaid Sailor (Butterfly Status)]
[Weaknesses: Fear of light, amulet, Siren King]
[Mode of Attack: Biting and scratching (High chance of triggering alienation status upon scratching)]
[Page Completed! Only one more page to go!]

The system chimed in:
[Player Bai Liu is just one page away from completing the entire Siren Small Town monster book. Keep up the good work!]

For a moment, a pin-drop silence hung in front of Bai Liu's small TV. Even Li Gou, mid-motion, froze in his tracks.

The silence shattered when Wang Shun shouted excitedly, “He’s almost there!”

Like a drop of water hitting a hot pan, the audience erupted into chaos. Players watching Bai Liu’s live broadcast couldn’t contain their excitement.

“Only one page left!”

“I can’t believe it—a pure newcomer making it this far? That’s insane!”

“I wish those smug forum trolls could see this. Bai Liu’s here grinding the monster book, and they’re just digging their own graves!”

“Unreal! He’s turning god-tier NPCs into tools. Smashing through with a pickaxe like it’s nothing!”

Meanwhile, Li Gou scowled, slamming his knife into the counter. No amount of frustration could silence the rising tide of praise for Bai Liu.

Even those who had mocked him on the forums found themselves drawn to his mini-TV. Many of them, forced to eat their words, grumbled, “Big deal. It’s just a single-player section...”

As if on cue, the system announced:

[10,003 people liked Bai Liu's TV. 9,607 people favorited it. 1,300 viewers donated, earning Player Bai Liu 1,300 points.]

[Player Bai Liu’s TV received over 10,000 likes in under a minute. His reputation is skyrocketing! Achievement unlocked: Notorious!]

[Congratulations! Bai Liu has earned a center-lobby promotional spot on the main split-screen display. Viewer count is rising rapidly...]

The world was watching now. Bai Liu, unfazed, continued onward, one step closer to making history.

Wang Shun took a deep breath, his heart pounding for reasons he couldn’t quite place.

The exhilaration of witnessing such an unpredictable and exciting game was something he hadn’t felt in ages. He cast a final, lingering

glance at Bai Liu's extinguished small TV before turning to sprint away.

I can’t afford to miss a single moment of this player’s future games!

His abrupt departure caught the attention of the other players.

“Central promotion slot?! Are you kidding me?! A pure newbie in his first game?!”

“Stop shouting and go! If you miss anything now, you’ll regret it later. They’ll move this to the VIP library for sure, and you’ll need membership to watch it again. Seeing it live is a privilege!”

A player who had smugly declared earlier, “If he’s that good, they’ll put him on the center screen,” turned red-faced as others threw teasing glances his way. Furious, he glared at Bai Liu's small TV before storming off.

At the back of the crowd, Li Gou stood silently, his expression thunderous. His grip on his sword tightened until it creaked. Without a word, he also made his way toward the central hall.

Central Hall.

In the center of the vast room, a young man crouched on the floor, wearing a massive headset shaped like a monkey gripping the ear hooks with its long arms. The monkey's design was unsettling—a cartoonish face with red eyes and sharp, cloth-stitched teeth resembling a children’s cult classic. Its eerie cuteness mirrored the man’s appearance: a round face, faintly red eyes, and sharp tiger-like teeth that peeked out when his mouth closed.

He lazily sucked on a lollipop, puffing one cheek out, while scanning the massive central screen.

“Not a single decent player,” he muttered, his voice impatient. “This list gets worse every day. None of them can even collect monster books. How are they getting featured here?”

Annoyed, he slapped his knees and stood, ready to leave.

Just then, one of the screens near the center flickered. A new small TV lit up, replacing the previous broadcast. The fresh image displayed a

clean-cut young man with a deceptively harmless face, dragging a cart behind him.

The man on screen smiled as if handing in homework. But his actions were anything but innocent—he deftly shoved a stunningly beautiful mermaid straight toward an ugly, terrified mermaid sailor.

The sailor let out a high-pitched, terrified shriek before scrambling away. Its grotesque eyes brimmed with tears of fear as it fled.

Behind him, Bai Liu chuckled softly, his laughter tinged with satisfaction as he calmly pursued the fleeing creature.

The young man in the monkey headset froze mid-step.
"...?"
Then again:
"???"
"Who the hell is this guy?!"

He leaned closer, watching intently. "What kind of lunatic pushes monsters all over the map like they're props?!"

Curious, he tapped on the player profile attached to the small TV. His brow furrowed as he read the details.

"Bai Liu..." he murmured. "Why does that name sound familiar?"

He scrolled further, muttering to himself. "Three pages of the monster book collected... 100% completion on the side quest... Wait a second!"

Recognition dawned on him. This is the same rookie people were hyping up on the forums—the one they said might surpass the single-player points record for Siren's Town.

He recalled the mocking posts earlier: "That guy won't even get past True Love's Ship!" Yet here Bai Liu was, nearly completing the monster book and finishing the notoriously tricky Jeff's Bloody Plot side quest—something even he hadn't managed in his first run.

Worse still, Bai Liu had already earned more charge points in Siren's Town than he had at the height of his own run.

Intrigued—and a bit defiant—the man adjusted his headset and headed toward Bai Liu's small TV.

The system chimed with an announcement:

[Mu Sicheng, the fourth-ranked player on the Rising Star Rankings, has entered Bai Liu's mini-TV! He hasn't expressed his opinion yet, so make sure to impress him~]

The onlookers gasped. Heads swiveled, searching for Mu Sicheng.

"God Mu is here!"

"Holy crap, he's actually watching this live?!"

"This rookie's insane! Even God Mu's interested. He hasn't watched anyone's mini-TV in forever—he only checks the VIP library. The last time he did this was for Spades!"

"Spades is the king of the game—the number-one ranked player. It makes sense for God Mu to watch him. But what's so special about this newbie that he's drawn God Mu's attention?"

Standing quietly in the corner, Mu Sicheng had swapped his oversized monkey headset for a hat with a duck-bill brim. Shadows obscured his face, but his eyes glowed faintly red as he gazed at the small TV.

Onscreen, Bai Liu, dressed casually but exuding confidence, continued his antics with a sly, unbothered expression.

Mu Sicheng bit down on his lollipop, crushing it between sharp canines. Slowly, he tilted his head and broke into a faint, mischievous smile.

"This newcomer..." he murmured, almost to himself. "He's... interesting."

Bai Liu pushed the cart along the street with a calm, serene smile on his face, making the tense, thrilling atmosphere of the horror game feel like a casual stroll in a mini-game. Siren King sat atop the cart, seemingly oblivious to the chaos around him.

Trailing behind Bai Liu at a distance, the mermaid sailor grimaced, trying to get closer. However, his gaze remained fixed on Siren King, filled with both fear and resentment. The sailor couldn't help but eye the king with distrust, knowing full well the power Siren King wielded.

As Bai Liu pushed the cart toward the sea, it was as if he were holding

the emperor hostage—completely indifferent to the tension he was causing. However, the relationship between Siren King, the mermaid sailors, and the mermaid wax figures was far more complicated than the simple bond of a ruler and his subordinates.

Bai Liu deduced that Siren King was the key weakness of both the mermaid sailors and the wax figures. This conclusion was based on two main observations:

First, Siren King had no weaknesses, making him the most formidable creature in the game. This, in turn, made him an even greater threat to the player than other monsters. But the twist was, his strength made him equally dangerous to other monsters. By manipulating this, Bai Liu shifted the focus of Siren King's threat from the players to the surrounding monsters, ensuring they were the ones who would suffer most.

Secondly, the storyline provided more context. The mermaid, the mermaid wax figure, and the mermaid sailor represented three stages in an evolutionary chain: larva, pupa, and butterfly. But beyond their progression in form, there was also a clear hierarchy among them.

The mermaid sailors and wax figures were known to consume weaker mermaids. During the process of alienation, mermaids could only serve the mermaid sailors, almost as subservient workers, taking whatever scraps remained after the sailors had eaten. These sailors controlled which wax figures could be hatched, effectively deciding who would join their ranks. This reflected a social hierarchy similar to an oppressive, corporate structure—where those in power (the sailors) determined the fate of the lower ranks (the wax figures and weaker mermaids).

This hierarchical chain was clear: mermaids were seen as mere slaves or food, the wax figures as henchmen, and the sailors as the elite. Siren King was the apex predator in this structure, holding power over all the lesser monsters. The sailors, and other fish monsters, feared him, knowing that any act of defiance would lead to their doom.

What Bai Liu discovered, however, was that these mermaid monsters weren't just afraid of Siren King—they were terrified of him.

He realized this through the peculiarities of the Siren Wax Museum. Despite the mermaids' dominance over the town, the museum's continued existence made little sense. There was no practical reason to keep the wax figures fixed in one place when they could be

scattered throughout the town. But Bai Liu soon deduced the real purpose: the wax figures were guarding Siren King.

In essence, the Siren Wax Museum was less of a museum and more of a prison. The wax figures were stationed there to keep a watchful eye on Siren King, preventing him from awakening. The liquid inside the glass cases, which Bai Liu initially assumed was just for display, had a restraining effect on the Siren King—though it wasn't a permanent solution. Siren King would eventually awaken, and when he did, it would spell the end for the mermaid monsters.

Bai Liu was quick to understand this dynamic. He knew the system had set a timer: Siren King would not awaken for another five hours. His goal was clear—get to the sea, use the Siren's Gift to sink Siren King back to the ocean depths, and end the game before the King could regain his full strength.

The system suddenly notified Bai Liu:

[Congratulations to the player for unlocking the entire story plot and entering the finished prologue.]

[Due to players escaping from the wax museum during the day, and the fact that the mermaid wax figures cannot move during daylight, the weather is about to change to weaken the player's current advantage. Please prepare accordingly.]

[Weather Change: Cloudy → Stormy]

At that moment, the rain came down in torrents, a sudden downpour that struck with the force of beans being tossed from the sky. Dust and water mingled on the ground, and Bai Liu was instantly drenched, though he barely flinched.

Bai Liu held the cart in one hand, while with the other, he pushed his wet hair back from his eyelids, the droplets falling from the tips of his hair and cascading down his face. The rain poured heavily, the mist from the downpour quickly enveloping the world around him, turning everything into a haze of white.

Despite being soaked to the bone, the mermaid sailors trailing Bai Liu behind him raised their heads and eagerly gulped down the rain. It seemed as though the rain invigorated them, as their bodies transformed—gills sprouted from their mouths, fleshy membranes expanded over their hands, and green light began to glow from their eyes. They stepped forward, closing in on Bai Liu, one step at a time.

Nearby, some mermaid wax figures that had been lurking in the shadows began to stir. Their pure white stone fish tails came to life in the rain, moving across the ground with an unnatural speed, as if lubricated, swimming faster than ever before. Their faces, once frozen in serene smiles, twisted into grimaces and feral grins. The grey-black cracks around their eyes spread across their bodies, transforming their upper forms into jagged, fish-like shapes from the deep sea.

Meanwhile, Siren King's long eyelashes fluttered twice as the rain moistened his slimy fishtail. The rain began to wash away the remnants of the liquid that had restrained him, causing the silvery-blue scales on his body to gleam in the downpour.

Bai Liu scanned the monsters ahead using the coin game manager hanging around his neck:

[Monster Name: Mermaid Wax Figure (Rainwater enhancement in progress: faster movement on land, Siren King deterrent power reduced, attack power enhanced)]

[Monster Name: Mermaid Sailor (Rainwater enhancement in progress: faster movement on land, Siren King deterrent power reduced, attack power enhanced)]

[Monster Name: Siren King (Rain has no reinforcing effect, but due to the washing away of the restraining liquid, Siren King's awakening time has been accelerated—only three hours remain before Siren King will awaken. Please accelerate the game.)]

Bai Liu quickly scanned the panel messages, his expression unreadable. He sighed and muttered to himself, "This game is a bit of a rogue. It forces players to cut down if they can't play."

"And isn't this a bit too much? Not only have they enhanced all the monsters and shortened my clearance time, but this heavy rain has also slowed me down and muddled my sense of direction. My panel index is still glowing red. It's easy to die playing chase in this situation…"

"But it's not impossible." Bai Liu pushed the dripping hair back behind his head with his fingers, his movements calm despite the chaos around him.

The rain trickled down his jaw, soaking into his collar, making his soaked clothes cling to him and leaving him slightly breathless in the downpour. He unbuttoned the top button of his shirt, lifting his gaze

with a faint, confident smile. "I just hope the game rewards me appropriately for all this effort. I don't play games with unbalanced rewards."

The system responded immediately:

[If you win, you will not be disappointed. Our rewards are sure to satisfy your innermost desires.]

Bai Liu smiled, "Thank you in advance for the reward, then."

His tone was so casual, as if he had already received the reward. This confident demeanor left the group of spectators watching his mini-TV dumbfounded.

Bai Liu's stream had gained a new wave of viewers, some of whom were drawn by the attraction of [Mu Sicheng watching the new main player mini-TV], due to his strong position in the central lobby. They hadn't seen Bai Liu's earlier miraculous actions but were now watching with disbelief as he casually dealt with the monsters' enhancements and a shortened game time, all while seemingly unphased by the threat around him.

"I thought God Mu was observing some amazing player, but it turns out it's just one of these guys. With monster enhancements, his own panel in the red, a shortened game time, and he's still cool enough to chat like it's nothing. Maybe I just don't get it…"

"I was reading the forum earlier, thinking this guy was something, but now I see he's playing like this? It's nothing impressive. How did he even get into the Power Push promotion spot—by face?"

Bai Liu, meanwhile, was aware of the mocking comments but paid little mind to them. He had been pursued by monsters from the [single-player section], and now the audience was bickering about his progress.

"Three pages of a monster book and you're still weak? Only one with long hands can play? Show us how many monster books you've collected."

"Let's see who's better than Bai Liu now. Oh, a bunch of viewers who haven't even charged over ten points, sure."

Players could check each other's charge points, and now those mocking Bai Liu found themselves in a heated argument, as their

points were quickly called into question.

Despite the tension in the chat, Wang Shun continued watching Bai Liu's mini-TV, worry etched on his face. He remained silent, feeling the weight of the situation.

Bai Liu was indeed unlucky to be targeted both inside and outside the game. Worse still, he was now facing some of the meanest audience members in the system.

Wang Shun sighed deeply. In this game with a guild system, certain players, backed by their guilds, liked to stir up trouble. These players, while not particularly skilled, were known for bullying newcomers with potential, hoping to stomp out anyone who might take their spot at the top.

Bai Liu was now facing such an audience.

[32 people liked Bai Liu's TV, 89 people favorited Bai Liu's TV, 0 people charged Bai Liu's TV, and 3,807 people stepped on Bai Liu's TV.]

[Player Bai Liu has been stepped on by over 3,000 people in one minute, and your mini-TV has been stepped on by more than 5,000 people, earning you the title of "Abomination."]

[It seems everyone is eager for you to leave here… oh no, they want you to die here.]

[Player Bai Liu's Central Lobby Single Player Power Play promotion is about to expire.]

Wang Shun saw the system notification and let out a long sigh of relief, realizing this was the outcome he had expected.

Some viewers who had followed Bai Liu from the division were angry and red-faced, while others in the Central District, resentful of Bai Liu for taking the promotion spot, were smug.

At that moment, someone exclaimed, "There's another one in the newcomer section over here on the Central Hall fringe promotion!"

Another newcomer, following in Bai Liu's footsteps, was about to take

their turn. Wang Shun looked over curiously and saw a player with a flaming torch, snorkelling and swimming on the surface of the water, using the torch to ward off the mermaid sailors chasing him. He was holding a mermaid's skeleton in his right hand—a real, bony skeleton, quite different from Bai Liu's version of the Siren King.

This player, too, had undergone some alienation, with his face covered in fish scales and his lower body resembling a fish's tail, allowing him to swim swiftly through the water.

It was clear this player had also reached the final prologue and would likely clear the level once he returned the Siren Banshee to the sea.

The survival rate of this player was much higher than Bai Liu's on every front, which provoked even more jeers from the guild players in the audience.

"I'm laughing my ass off! Didn't you brag about Bai Liu? Other newcomers with traditional programs are still ahead of him!" one of the viewers sneered.

"This Bai Liu just likes to play hard to get. I advise you to watch more serious gods' videos and spend more money instead of watching his free stream," another mocked.

"Let's go. We, the esteemed players from big guilds, don't have time for retail players like them. Don't bother watching. It's a waste of time."

As people continued leaving Bai Liu's TV, the once crowded viewing area quickly emptied out. Wang Shun sighed and walked to the front of Bai Liu's TV, a spot he had wanted but had been pushed away from due to the crowd.

[7,060 people left player Bai Liu's TV, of which 3,900 went to the newcomer's TV next door.]

[Player Bai Liu's performance was so poor that no one watched or liked his stream. Instead, there was a lot of stepping on it. All this resulted in scorn, and the system that highly recommended him was so disappointed that it decided to swap Bai Liu's promotion spot with the newcomer's next door.]

Wang Shun froze, and a system notification soon popped up.

[Player Bai Liu drops down to promotion spot in Central Lobby

Fringe.]

[Player Muke has been promoted to the Highly Recommended promotion in the Single Player section of the Central Lobby.]

Bai Liu had barely held his promotion spot for ten minutes before he was removed.

There weren't too many viewers who had followed Bai Liu's promotion along with Wang Shun, but one man with a strange monkey hat caught his attention. The man stood at the front of the small TV area, similar to Wang Shun.

Wang Shun gave him a curious look.

Bai Liu's ups and downs had been a sad experience for Wang Shun, as a viewer who had followed him. So he approached the man who had come along for the ride.

"Why did you come along? Do you like Bai Liu too?" Wang Shun asked.

The man in the monkey hat lifted the brim slightly, revealing a pair of sly red eyes. "Because I think this man, who is said to be able to replace me, is definitely more than that."

"Replace you?" Wang Shun was stunned. He nearly exclaimed but stopped himself when the man made a shushing gesture and laughed softly.

"And he played really well before, didn't he? Three pages of the monster book. It's the first time I've seen a player other than me collect it to that extent. And if it weren't for the Siren King, I'm sure he would have completed the last page by now."

"This guy isn't playing hard to get, he's really strong," Mu Sicheng said with a grin, looking sideways at Bai Liu's mini-TV. "I've never seen the system go so far to undermine a player's advantage."

Mu Sicheng continued with a chuckle, "The system says it's pursuing game balance, which means Bai Liu is so strong that they had to nerf him to make it 'balanced.' With a player this strong, it's amazing anyone thinks he couldn't clear this..."

Mu Sicheng let out a soft laugh. "This group of guild players who think they're above it all is just a bit funny."

[Mu Sicheng, the fourth-ranked player in the Rising Stars standings, enters Bai Liu's mini-TV.]

[Mu Sicheng liked player Bai Liu's TV. He seems to have a soft spot for players~]

[Mu Sicheng used his access as the fourth-ranked player in the Rising Stars standings to recommend Bai Liu's ongoing mini-TV on his own, drawing a massive audience to it.]

Wang Shun was completely dumbfounded. It took him a moment to react before he asked Mu Sicheng, somewhat puzzled, "So, God Mu, if you think Bai Liu is strong, then why didn't you just say so? Why wait until he fell to the fringe before recommending him?"

Had Mu Sicheng stepped in sooner, Bai Liu might have kept his highly recommended promotion spot. A recommendation from a god like Mu Sicheng could have helped a newcomer like Bai Liu.

Mu Sicheng curled his lips and gave Wang Shun a sidelong glance. "But I was waiting for him to fall to the edge."

"For strong players, snow is better than icing on the cake," Mu Sicheng continued. "My aim in recommending him now is so he'll owe me a favor."

Wang Shun choked on Mu Sicheng's blunt shamelessness and looked at the legendary player with incredulity.

This Mu Sicheng was nothing like the cold, calculating persona he had seen in the game.

So cheeky and shameless.

Bai Liu was unaware of the happenings outside his immediate environment.

Pushing his cart forward, moving slowly, Bai Liu was overtaken multiple times. Each time he was passed, he would swipe the Siren King backhandedly against the cart, forcing the pursuing mermaid monsters to retreat for a moment.

But it wasn't enough anymore. As the rain poured down, more and more monsters began chasing him, and the Siren King seemed to lose

its ability to deter them.

Bai Liu was suddenly caught on the arm by the sharp claws of a mermaid sailor. Blood spurted from the wound as he hastily dragged the cart into an alleyway. Just as he did, his mind buzzed, and a red warning panel appeared on the system screen.

[Warning: Player Bai Liu has been scratched by a mermaid sailor and has become alienated. His spirit level has dropped to 60 and will soon fall below the safe threshold.]

Bai Liu clutched his still-bleeding arm and leaned back against the alley wall, taking a moment to catch his breath. His clothes were soaked from the rain, making him appear as if he had just been pulled out of the sea.

He closed his eyes to steady himself, trying to counter the dizziness and weakness creeping up on him.

Bai Liu had fallen once before, but after enduring the initial discomfort, his high mental strength had allowed him to recover quickly. This time, though, it wasn't the same.

Weakness overcame him, and Bai Liu collapsed to his knees. His face quickly became streaked with grey and black lines, dark green scales began to grow beneath his eyes, and his complexion turned deathly pale.

His breathing grew heavy, his head down as rain poured over him, resembling a dying fish that had been caught and stranded.

"That was a mistake on my part," Bai Liu murmured calmly. "I didn't expect the drop in spirit value to 60 to affect me so much."

Wang Shun, watching the scene on the small TV, tensed with worry. "His mental value is really low now (approaching below 60), if it drops one more point, hallucinations will start."

Mu Sicheng, who had been watching closely, seemed more serious. "When it hits 60, the player's chances of surviving a chase drop drastically. Hallucinations will make it impossible to tell real monsters from illusions, and they'll lose the way to escape."

"Would it help if he buys a spirit rinse now?" Wang Shun asked nervously. "Bai Liu has enough items to buy one. It would restore his spirit value."

Mu Sicheng, however, shook his head. "In this game, it's better not to use spirit rinse."

Wang Shun grew more confused. "Why?"

Mu Sicheng remained silent, not offering any explanation.

On the small TV, Bai Liu suddenly managed to stagger to his feet, using the wall for support. He squinted at the alley entrance, where several mermaid sailors and wax figures were slowly encroaching. Their black silhouettes loomed ominously through the foggy downpour.

If he tried to rush out now, they would catch him without question. Another scratch, and his spirit value would immediately fall below 60.

In the rain and with hallucinations clouding his mind, Bai Liu had no way of telling where he was going.

He needed a plan. His mind raced as he leaned against the wall.

The mermaids outside the alleyway began to sniff the air, crawling up the walls like geckos, moving quickly with angry green glints in their eyes and mucus dripping from their mouths.

They reached the alley entrance, tilting their heads, sniffing twice. A disturbing fish-lipped grin spread across their faces as they began to crawl closer, their hands and feet pressed against the wall.

Wang Shun held his breath, the words [Bai Liu, run!] almost slipping from his lips. His fists were clenched.

At this point, running was futile. Bai Liu’s speed was nowhere near fast enough to outrun the mermaid monsters. Running would only draw attention and lead to certain capture.

The only hope left was that the monsters wouldn’t find him in the alley.

But with the monsters closing in on the alley entrance, things were looking grim.

Wang Shun's thoughts were still racing when, to his shock, Bai Liu—dragging the cart, drenched in rain—suddenly dashed out of the alley without hesitation.

Wang Shun: "!!!!"

He was so anxious that he blurted out, "We can't run! If we do, we're finished!"

As Wang Shun feared, in an instant, the mermaid monsters converged at the alley entrance, swiftly followed by the wax figures. The narrow alley entrance was surrounded.

Bai Liu continued to move at a steady pace, calmly facing the monsters closing in on him.

Wang Shun: "No, he's trying to break through the circle!"

Wang Shun stamped his feet in panic, unable to comprehend why Bai Liu would make such a fatal mistake at this crucial moment. Even if he managed a breakthrough, the mermaids were faster and could catch him before he could escape.

Mu Sicheng furrowed his brow. "The drop in his mental value must have affected his decision-making. He shouldn't have run out like this."

Wang Shun: "Right." Wang Shun exhaled deeply, "We forgot to account for how the drop in mental value affects Bai Liu's thinking. He must be really panicking right now."

The expressions of the other viewers reflected a mix of disbelief and concern.

Some viewers began to complain that Mu Sicheng had recently developed a strange taste in players, liking to follow "vegetable" players.

Mu Sicheng, hearing this, pretended not to notice, pulling the brim of his hat lower.

Bai Liu, using the cart with the Siren King, slammed it into the circle, the monsters' eyes fixed on him as he ran away.

Wang Shun's heart was in his throat—they're catching up! The monsters were gaining on him!

But then, the mermaid monsters strangely stopped by the alley entrance, momentarily hovering before completely ignoring Bai Liu. Instead, they all poured into the alley.

Wang Shun: "???"

Mu Sicheng: "????"

Other viewers: "????????????"

Why weren't the monsters chasing the player? What were they doing in the alley?

The small TV's view shifted to show the interior of the alley. There, at the far end, stood another Bai Liu, holding the cart in front of the monsters, making aggressive moves.

Bai Liu tilted his chin slightly, hooking his index finger in a challenge, as though deliberately provoking the mermaid monsters to come and face him. True to his baiting, the monsters snarled and, teeth bared, charged at him in response.

This unexpected move sparked immediate discussions among the viewers.

"Wow, what is this?!"

"Shit, is this some kind of cheat? Can you really use such a diversionary prop in a level 1 copy like Siren Town?"

"You can't use high-level props in low-level areas, right? If you do, the system will kick you out for breaking the balance."

"So, what's going on here?"

The first mermaid monster lunged angrily, its claws swiping at Bai Liu. But, as the attack landed, Bai Liu's form dissolved into a stump before quickly reappearing, still sporting that lazy, almost mocking smile.

Wang Shun suddenly recalled something from Bai Liu's arsenal, his eyes widening with realization. "It's a 3D projector! Bai Liu is using a 3D projector!"

"The monsters in this copy of Siren Town have low intelligence, so they can't distinguish between a projection and a real person," Wang Shun continued, clicking on the projector's manual for further details. "In the rain, the 3D projection becomes more physical. With Bai Liu's provocative gestures, these low-intelligence monsters get angry and focus on attacking the illusion instead of the real Bai Liu."

Wang Shun's eyes gleamed with excitement. "So, when these monsters

see someone acting like a threat, they instinctively target that person. Bai Liu has managed to shake off the monsters with this trick!"

A viewer raised a concern. "But no matter how low their intelligence, if they keep attacking an ineffective target, they'll eventually figure out it's a trick. Then they'll target the real Bai Liu, who's much slower than they are."

"Even if he dodges here, he'll still get caught unless he can restrict the monsters' movements."

No sooner had this remark been made than the monsters on the screen sniffed suspiciously at Bai Liu's projected image, one of them swiping with its flippers as it realized the illusion. With a howl of frustration, the monsters shrieked in rage, realizing they'd been tricked.

The group of mermaid monsters, now enraged, surged forward, ready to exit the alley and pursue the real Bai Liu.

But as they moved, Bai Liu, standing behind them, smiled slyly. Calmly, he took out a torch, pointing it at the backs of the monsters and flicked the switch, as though pulling a trigger.

In an instant, blinding beams of light shot through the alley, cutting through the wax figures of mermaids as they wailed, their eyes covered. The intense light pierced through the rain, directly targeting the advancing monsters.

The small town of siren

In the rain, far off, another beam of light appears from across the street and merges with the one in the alleyway, forming a powerful beam that stretches down the avenue of the town of Siren.

The light-fearing mermaid wax figure is immediately halted by the intense glow.

This blinding light stretches across almost the entire town of Siren, trapping the photophobic mermaid wax figures behind it, preventing them from advancing further to catch up with Bai Liu.

Even the mermaid sailors, who are protected by amulets and are less affected by the light, hesitate to cross it. They hover around, cautiously testing the boundaries.

Meanwhile, Bai Liu leans against a wall, catching his breath. Beside him is a 3D projector, with a projection of Bai Liu himself holding a torch, syncing with the light beam from the alleyway, creating this formidable barrier.

He wipes the rain from his forehead and exhales in relief. “Good thing this 3D projector is waterproof.”

On a small TV nearby, the blinding beam of light continues to shine brightly.

The viewers, watching intently, fall silent for a few moments. One of them, who had earlier doubted Bai Liu’s ability to escape, stares in stunned silence before muttering, “Well, that's impressive...”

“I doubted God Mu's judgment before, I was wrong! It’s not the player; it's me who couldn’t see it. I’ll get my eyes checked,” another voice says, reflecting a moment of realization.

“This new guy plays like he's in a Dead Comedy Zone—he’s treating this horror game as a game, focusing on the experience rather than the points.”

Mu Sicheng’s eyes narrow in amusement, his grin widening as he bites into a candy. “The system gave the rainy weather as a restriction for Bai Liu, but he’s using it to his advantage.”

Bai Liu, dragging his cart, eventually reaches the beach. After a brief

hesitation, the mermaid sailors behind him decide to cross the beam and give chase—mermaid sailors are not afraid of the light.

However, the light-fearing mermaid wax figures remain trapped behind the beam, significantly reducing the danger.

At this point, the player only needs to dive into the sea and send Siren King to the bottom to complete the level. Since most players here are highly alienated, resembling mermaids, they can just descend and banish Siren King back into the depths.

Wang Shun now understands why Mu Sicheng had warned against drifting the spirit value.

The spirit value is tied to the alienation status—if it rises, the player will revert from [Mermaid] back to [Human] status, making it impossible to enter the deep and banish Siren King.

Wang Shun feels relieved that Bai Liu didn't drift, feeling a bit ashamed of his earlier doubts.

Mu Sicheng's gaming instinct is in a league of its own, far beyond his own, yet Bai Liu, despite being a newcomer, managed to stay afloat...

Shaking his head at his own thoughts, Wang Shun can't help but admire Bai Liu.

Instead of heading into the sea to evade the mermaid sailors, Bai Liu turns and heads toward the large boat where he had boarded the mermaid fishery earlier!

The boat is docked on the beach, and Bai Liu races toward it, dragging his cart!

Wang Shun feels a surge of panic, clutching his chest. "We're almost there! Why is he heading to the ship? What's he doing?"

Mu Sicheng is also caught off guard by Bai Liu's bold maneuver, biting his lollipop in surprise. He coughs a few times, his eyes narrowing as he analyzes the situation.

"Bai Liu is in danger of being caught by the mermaid sailors behind him, as they're faster in the water. Normally, players would use items to slow down the mermaid sailors, like floating on the surface with a fiery torch, or they'd tough it out as long as their spirit value holds out."

"Bai Liu probably hopes to lose the mermaid sailors by getting on the boat," Mu Sicheng continues. “But that wouldn't work. There are still mermaid sailors on board, and in such a confined space, Bai Liu would be easily caught. Plus, the mermaid sailors in the water can climb aboard, and they move faster than the boat, so getting on the boat doesn’t make sense.”

Just as Mu Sicheng finishes speaking, Bai Liu faces a new challenge.

He pushes his cart across the plank connecting the boat to the shore and races toward the vessel. The mermaid sailors aboard the boat spot him and rush to intercept, their sharp flippers extending to scratch Bai Liu’s face.

Wang Shun watches in horror, but Bai Liu remains unfazed. He calmly pulls a 3D projector from his pocket and tosses it overboard.

The projector lands and bounces twice, projecting an image of Bai Liu. The mermaid sailors hesitate for a moment, confused between the two projections, before heading toward the other Bai Liu.

Wang Shun breaks into a cold sweat. “Is Bai Liu using his old trick again, using the projector's light to control the mermaid sailors, or is he just stalling for time?”

But soon, doubt creeps in again. “But mermaid sailors aren’t afraid of light. Even if Bai Liu’s projection holds a strong torch, it wouldn’t stop them. The beam of light on land didn’t hold them back, and it won’t here.”

Mu Sicheng’s gaze sharpens as he watches Bai Liu on the TV, a spark of realization lighting up his eyes. “You missed something in the Mermaid Sailor’s monster book. Take another look at their weaknesses.”

Wang Shun quickly pulls up his electronic recorder and examines the details of the Mermaid Sailor's page:

[Siren Small Town Monster Book - Mermaid Sailor (3/4)]

Monster Name: Mermaid Sailor (Butterfly Status)
Weaknesses: Fear of light, amulet, Siren King
Mode of Attack: Biting and scratching (with a chance of triggering alienation status)
Mu Sicheng smiles as he watches Bai Liu’s calculated moves, impressed by his strategy. “Now it makes sense. This guy’s clever. No

wonder the system is throwing everything at him."

"Eh, this is strange." Wang Shun pointed to the "Weakness" item on the electronic recorder, muttering to himself, "The Mermaid Sailor's weakness is clearly a fear of glare. So why does the Mermaid Sailor seem unaffected by light when on land?"

"The amulet," Mu Sicheng nudged Wang Shun. "With the protection of the amulet, the glare doesn't work on the mermaid sailors."

Wang Shun's eyes widened as realization hit. He looked up at the small TV. "Yes! That's it! So Bai Liu, this means—"

Mu Sicheng smiled, glancing at the screen. "Exactly. Bai Liu is heading to the ship's lower compartment. That's where the monsters store their amulets. He's going to smash their amulets, and without protection, the light will restrict their movements."

On the small TV, Bai Liu had already shaken off the monsters behind him and was making his way to the lower compartment. With his pickaxe, he smashed through the bulletproof glass and began destroying the wax figures of the mermaid amulets one by one.

The shattered wax figures crumbled underfoot. As Bai Liu continued to break the amulets, the [Bai Liu Projection] on the deck raised a torch. It looked as if two Bai Liu were fighting in synchrony—one below deck, the other above.

A bright beam of light cut through the group of mermaid sailors surrounding the [Bai Liu Projection], with Bai Liu's projection calmly holding the switch, a subtle smile on his face.

Wang Shun, Mu Sicheng, and the audience in the front row all raised their hands to shield their eyes from the blinding light.

"This new guy is too ruthless," Wang Shun said, conflicted. "I almost feel sorry for those monsters."

But the mermaid monsters began to swim away from the light, some diving into the sea to reemerge on the opposite side, preparing to ambush Bai Liu.

Wang Shun frowned. "Even with the torch, Bai Liu only has one beam of light. His 3D projector is out of commission. While the light can restrict their movements, it won't trap them completely like it did on shore."

Mu Sicheng hugged his chest and explained, "That's because two light sources, even if linked, won't fully restrain the mermaid sailors here. The ship's layout is different from the town's."

"Bai Liu could use the light to block the town's sea entrance, but here, with just one light, the mermaid sailors can escape into the sea from both sides."

"Right," Wang Shun muttered, deep in thought. "It's too late to buy another projector, so we'll need another torch. If we can create a triangle of light, we can trap the mermaid sailors inside."

"I had the same thought," Mu Sicheng agreed, nodding. "But at this stage, props are expensive. As we approach the end, crucial items like torches are going up in price. Right now in Siren Town, a torch costs at least 100 points."

"100 points?!" Wang Shun gasped. "That's ridiculous, isn't that a scam?"

Mu Sicheng shot him a sidelong glance. "So, do you want to buy a torch for 100 points right now?"

Wang Shun paused, then sighed, "Buy."

Bai Liu emerged from the basement, pickaxe in hand and a torch in the other. It seemed he had the same idea as Wang Shun and Mu Sicheng—heading to the system shop to buy props.

As Bai Liu scrolled through the shop's interface, Wang Shun caught sight of the price for the torch. "250 points for a torch? That's a total rip-off! What a crazy price!"

Bai Liu remained unfazed as he passed over the torch's sales page. Wang Shun, now worried, added, "Bai Liu, don't let the price stop you! It's life or death now! Don't worry about the points!"

The audience grew anxious as Bai Liu took his time selecting items, still seemingly unable to afford the torch, even though they were close to finishing the level. The tension mounted.

"Bai Liu! Don't worry about the money! I'll pay for the torch—just get it!"

"Yeah, yeah! Give us a torch! Bai Liu, your life is worth more than this!"

"Forget the price! Just get the torch and finish it! I'll chip in for you!"

Even Mu Sicheng tapped his [Points Wallet] panel, ready to recharge Bai Liu.

Finally, Bai Liu stopped scrolling, as if he had found what he needed. A faint smile appeared on his face as he confirmed his purchase.

[Does the player buy a high-definition reflector?]

Bai Liu: [Yes] without hesitation.

[System Alert: 3 points. Thank you for your patronage.]

Bai Liu placed the reflector in a corner of the boat and secured the torch to the bow with a flick of the switch.

The bright white light from the torch cut through the fog over the sea, reflected back through the reflector, merging with the light from the [Bai Liu Projection]. The result was a brilliant triangular area of light surrounding the ship. The mermaid sailors writhed in the light, covering their eyes and wailing, but they couldn't escape.

Bai Liu kneeled at the boat's bow, the sea wind and rain tousling his hair. His eyes were hidden beneath the dark strands, but his lips curled into a smile. "Stay on board, sailors."

[System Notice: As most of the monsters have been restricted by player Bai Liu, the heavy rain can no longer weaken him. The weather is changing, prepare accordingly.]

[Weather Conversion: Heavy Rain → Sunny.]

The light behind Bai Liu rose slowly as he stood, one foot on the trolley, the other stepping off the boat. The overlapping clouds parted, and golden sunlight poured down, casting a regal glow on Bai Liu's disheveled face, enhancing his calm smile.

[Player Bai Liu enters the final chapter of Siren Small Town - Returning the Siren King.]

After a brief silence in front of Bai Liu's small TV, the room erupted in a frenzy of shouting and charging. Players were hugging and high-fiving each other, as the number of likes surged exponentially every second.

Mu Sicheng pulled his hand away from the reward, and after a

moment of stunned silence, he began clapping, a smile spreading across his face. "You really are something, Bai Liu."

Wang Shun joined in, his hands red from excitement, sweat streaming down his face.

The rest of the audience was just as animated as Wang Shun, so excited they seemed ready to break into song, singing "A Night to Remember."

"When it rains, it rains, and when it’s sunny, it’s sunny again! Are you a weather god, Bai Liu?!"

"Give me red! Give me a blast! If you've got my charge money, you'll be at the forefront! Bai Liu, go for it! Go to the top of the new star list!"

[12,011 people liked Bai Liu's TV. 12,000 people favorited it. 2,077 people charged Bai Liu’s TV. Player Bai Liu earned 3,011 points, with over 300 players contributing more than one point.]

[Player Bai Liu has gained over 10,000 likes and more than 3,000 points in under a minute, and his reputation is soaring! Bai Liu has earned the Frontrunner achievement!]

[Congratulations to Bai Liu for advancing to the highly recommended single-player split-screen position on the central lobby screen.]

[Welcome back to your original position, Player Bai Liu.]

As soon as Bai Liu made it to the power push screen, nearly all of the previously overlooked players flocked to him.

An impressive crowd of excited, red-faced spectators surged through the gaming hall, drawing the attention of passersby who approached to ask what little TV they were watching.

"What’s all the fuss about? Why’s there so much shouting?"

"Son of the Weather!" "Reflector God, damn!" "God Mu’s newly adopted son of a bull!"

Confused players asked, "?????? What’s on that little TV you’re watching?"

Curiosity led more players to join the growing crowd.

The fastest to run over were Wang Shun and Mu Sicheng. As Wang Shun kept up, he noticed Li Gou in the distance. Li Gou had spotted Mu Sicheng and, realizing that Bai Liu wasn't an easy target, had taken refuge behind him.

Now, Li Gou was trailing the group, carrying a knife, his face dark and sullen. It was clear that he understood Bai Liu was no longer someone he could easily take advantage of.

Wang Shun couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief for Bai Liu. For players like Li Gou, it was better for Bai Liu to stay as far away as possible.

By the time Wang Shun and his group arrived at the push position, the area in front of Bai Liu's small TV was packed with spectators—from those who had watched earlier but left midway to those now witnessing Bai Liu's rise.

Among them were members of the Central District Guild, who had previously mocked Bai Liu as a pretentious aesthete.

Although these viewers had once disdained Bai Liu, now that he had risen, they began complaining loudly.

"Why is it rising again? This is so annoying to watch."

"How can so many people give him credit? What's the point? He's dragging down the strong push position. Ugh, I'm going to stomp him out. Someone, do it quickly!"

"I don't understand. What's so great about this guy pretending to be something he's not? He gets tens of thousands of likes, 4,000 or 5,000 people charging him, and they're all idiots spending points on him? Waste of life."

"Can't someone else get in? Can we get someone up there who's actually on God Mu's level?"

The group's interference disrupted the regular viewers who were trying to watch the mini-TV, but most didn't want to provoke this group of die-hard guild-backed fans, so they stayed quiet.

Mu Sicheng looked at the rowdy crowd. The corners of his mouth curled down slightly, his expression darkening just enough to hint at offense, though he still wore a smile.

He casually removed his monkey hat and walked to the front row, turning to face the shouting crowd. With one hand on his chest and the other holding the hat behind him, he gave a formal salute.

The sight of Mu Sicheng in a stuffed monkey hat performing a gentleman's salute was almost comical, but it didn't stop the audience from gasping in awe.

"God Mu!!! You're God Mu, aren't you! You're actually watching his little TV!"

One of them boldly asked, "God Mu, can I ask why you're recommending this player? It's so annoying. Why does he keep occupying a top spot when he has no skill?"

Mu Sicheng smiled. "Hey guys, I overheard your conversation, and it made me feel a little nostalgic."

The audience fell silent, their attention completely captured by his words. They murmured about Bai Liu as they processed his statement.

"God Mu, you find him annoying too, right? A pretentious monster. He should have dropped out by now, but he keeps blocking the spot for people who actually deserve it."

"I can't even enjoy the live stream because of people like him hogging the screen. I just hope he crashes out soon."

"God Mu, why don't you just go in and stream to kick him out?"

These voices rang loud and clear, and it was obvious they enjoyed the idea of a newcomer being pushed out—especially guild players who often disliked newcomers taking up their space.

Mu Sicheng's smile took on a more thoughtful quality as he spoke, casually licking his lollipop. "When I first made it onto the Power Push promotion spot, a lot of Central Screen viewers stepped on me, cursed me out, and said all kinds of things."

The audience fell suddenly silent. They exchanged uncomfortable glances and then fell quiet.

Mu Sicheng chuckled softly at the once-voicing crowd, now restrained in front of Bai Liu.

He leaned forward slightly, his eyes glinting with playful innocence as

he addressed the silent group. "Do you know what happened to all those viewers who cursed me?"

The front-row viewers found themselves frozen by his gaze, the dark red of his eyes catching their attention.

It took a moment for them to realize that the dark red color wasn’t natural—it came from the monkeys reflected in his eyes, bright and eerie.

The small town of siren

Faced with the unsettling gaze of Mu Sicheng, the audience—who had been so full of pride moments ago—swallowed nervously, took two steps back, and shuddered, fear creeping down their spines.

Mu Sicheng grinned, pulling a cartoon monkey hat from behind his back and pointing at it casually: "I hate the audience, so I killed all those annoying people in the game."

He spoke nonchalantly, as if killing were an everyday occurrence, nothing to fuss about: "If Bai Liu shows up, I'll gladly support him in killing all of you noisy people too. Just a suggestion, of course."

"You guys are just so loud," Mu Sicheng added with a polite smile, "Disturbing me while I'm watching his TV, you bunch of idiots."

At that moment, the monkey on Mu Sicheng's hat suddenly opened its mouth and let out an eerie laugh, its eyes glowing red, as if in agreement with Mu Sicheng's ominous suggestion. It was both strange and unsettling.

The once overconfident audience, now terrified, screamed and fled in panic.

In their frantic escape, some of them collided and stumbled over each other, scrambling to crawl out in disarray, ending up scattered on the floor near Bai Liu's small TV viewing area.

Mu Sicheng stood calmly in the front row, slipping the hat into his pocket as if nothing had happened, resuming his indifferent posture while tilting his head back to continue watching Bai Liu’s broadcast.

The audience stepped back, giving Mu Sicheng plenty of space to watch from the front row.

Their conversations had quieted down significantly, as if they feared disturbing Mu Sicheng’s private viewing time with Bai Liu.

Behind Mu Sicheng, Wang Shun stood, his expression a mix of emotions.

This was the first time Wang Shun had confronted Mu Sicheng’s dangerous side head-on.

It was moments like this that explained why top streamers rarely faced finger-pointing or criticism from their viewers; most fans only praised them.

If you offended a god, it could be as easy as crushing an ant to be silenced.

Criticism was mostly reserved for the smaller streams, where new players or more passive viewers still had the courage to voice their opinions.

For someone like Mu Sicheng, even the idea of pushing him around in his own stream was tantamount to digging your own grave.

Many of Bai Liu's audience were from guilds, mostly low-level players with limited skill, some relying on cheats or brute force to get through games. These players, although not powerful themselves, often had a tendency to criticize newcomers who might steal their spotlight or paying audience. As a result, they harbored ill will toward players like Bai Liu and, at one point, Mu Sicheng.

Wang Shun hesitated, then sat beside Mu Sicheng, still a little wary of his presence but determined to stay in the front row.

Suppressing his curiosity, Wang Shun whispered, "God Mu, did you really kill those audience members who cursed you?"

Mu Sicheng smiled faintly and shook his head. "Of course not. I don't have time for that. I just said it to scare them off. It's annoying when they keep pushing me."

Wang Shun let out a relieved sigh. "Oh, I see. So it wasn't true."

"I didn't kill anyone, but my monkey hat loves to eat people I don't like," Mu Sicheng added with a sly grin. He turned his attention back to Bai Liu on the small TV and chuckled softly.

With a slight shrug, hands still in his pockets, he defended himself in a half-hearted way. "But honestly, they brought it upon themselves by insulting me. I don't think I should be blamed for what happened to them."

Wang Shun was speechless.

Bai Liu was back on the boat, his cart in tow.

A few mermaid sailors trailed behind, but their presence no longer commanded fear—Bai Liu was now dealing with the Siren King.

The mermaid sailors, lacking the advantage of weather manipulation or protective amulets, could only watch from a distance, their eyes filled with resentment and greed.

But Bai Liu was no longer concerned with these mermaid sailors.

What struck him as odd was that the system had stated that most land-based monsters were already constrained. This was why it had stopped using weather effects to weaken him. Yet, the monster book for Siren Town still had four pages: one for mermaid sailors, one for mermaid wax figures, and one for the Siren King.

What was missing, however, was the larval form of the mermaid—the weakest of these creatures.

Bai Liu had been chased along the shore for so long without encountering a single mermaid, which seemed impossible. If the system wasn't lying to him, the land-based monsters had already been mostly restricted. This meant that the weakest of the mermaids were most likely hiding in the sea.

Bai Liu's gaze turned to the calm, unruffled waters in front of him.

It was highly probable that the vast numbers of mermaids were lurking beneath the surface.

[System Notification: One hour until Siren King awakens. Please accelerate your pace and clear the level.]

For the next hour, Bai Liu mentally calculated how fast he could move the Siren King, but he was uncertain about the mermaids hiding in the sea. With these monsters potentially interfering, he wasn't sure if one hour would be enough.

Shrugging off the concern, Bai Liu left the cart on the beach and knelt beside the Siren King.

The Siren King, who had been unresponsive throughout the chase, was now showing signs of life. His fins fluttered gently, his chest rose and fell, and his jade-like skin glistened with vitality.

Bai Liu could sense that the Siren King was about to awaken. He placed a hand on his shoulder, took a deep breath, and ran toward the sea.

As the water enveloped his legs, Bai Liu's body began to transform. Silvery-green scales covered his legs, waist, and face, while cracked gills appeared on his cheeks. His eyes narrowed to slits.

Bai Liu took another deep breath, grasped Siren King's hand, and plunged into the endless blue depths.

Meanwhile, Wang Shun, watching on a small TV, sighed with relief. "Finally, they're in the sea. We should be nearing the end."

"Not necessarily," Mu Sicheng replied, arms crossed, a slight grimace on his face. "When I dragged the Siren Demoness to the sea, I thought I was done for, but as I neared the [Siren's Gift] zone, I found myself surrounded by mermaids with glowing green eyes. I almost died there."

Mu Sicheng grimaced at the memory. "I had to buy a powerful torch to drive them off, and it cost me over two hundred points."

Wang Shun's eyes widened. "Over two hundred points? That's insane!"

He quickly added, "The torch was already over 250 points before. When Bai Liu gets there, the price will likely go up even more, right?"

"Yeah, the system's pricing depends on two factors: market demand and how badly the player needs a particular item. The more desperate the system thinks you are, the higher the price," Mu Sicheng explained, smirking. "Bai Liu will have to spend at least 400 points for a torch when he's surrounded by mermaids. It's going to be a bloodbath for him."

As they continued to chat, Muke, a rookie player, had already reached the waters of [Siren's Gift].

Clutching the Siren's bone in one hand, Muke swam deeper into the dark waters, his fishtail propelling him forward. He seemed to be on the verge of clearing the level, his face lighting up with a triumphant smile.

Wang Shun, watching Muke's progress, sighed. "Muke is probably going to clear the level faster than Bai Liu. He'll be the first rookie to do so."

He continued, "The first player in each batch of newcomers gets a special reward: a personal skill. Bai Liu could have had that reward."

Looking at Bai Liu, still slowly swimming with the Siren King, Wang Shun shook his head. "If he hadn't wasted so much time, he could have been the first to clear it."

Because Bai Liu had fallen behind, Muke now ranked higher in the [Single Player Zone Highly Recommended Promotion] by the system.

Seeing Muke so confidently heading toward victory while Bai Liu appeared lost in thought, Wang Shun was convinced that Muke had the upper hand.

"It's like watching a gifted child who's too distracted to beat the average kid next door," Wang Shun muttered.

Mu Sicheng, however, wasn't convinced. "It's not over yet. We still don't know who the first rookie will be."

Most of the spectators watching Muke on his mini-TV agreed with Wang Shun. Many of them were mocking Bai Liu.

"Oh, Bai Liu is so far behind. Muke is going to clear the level and get the skill bonus. Bai Liu is just wasting time with these tricks."

They couldn't understand why Mu Sicheng was protecting a rookie who was destined to fail.

Some of the spectators, tired of the mockery, responded with frustration. One particularly bold player, unimpressed by the trash talk, retorted, "If you think people without skills are doomed, why don't you show us your skills? Or should I just kill you right now to make your dream of dying skill-less come true?"

The crowd of mockers fell silent. Several of the loudest voices shrank back, clearly reluctant to reveal their own lack of skill.

The tense silence was broken when Muke, nearing the sea floor, suddenly froze in place. Green eyes appeared all around him, at first just a few, then hundreds, glowing eerily in the dark waters.

Muke's vision adjusted, and he was horrified to see thousands of mermaid corpses staring at him from the sea floor. Their bloated, decayed bodies were being eaten by small fish, leaving only their glowing green eyes.

The sight was so disturbing that even the audience watching from Muke's mini-TV gasped and recoiled in shock.

Realizing the danger, Muke turned and swam frantically, pulling the Siren's skeleton away from the fish and mermaids, scrambling to open the shop and buy a prop to fend off the monsters. The fish, small but vicious, were already biting at him.

As he struggled to escape, blood stained the water, drawing more mermaids and fish to the scene.

The spectators, now fully engaged in the drama, urged Muke to buy the props, shouting in desperation, "Hurry, buy the props! Or you're going to die!"

Muke, with only one hand left, desperately tried to open the game shop to purchase an item that could keep the monsters at bay.

[I need a strong torch!]

[417 points. Thank you for your patronage.]

Muke, utterly dumbfounded, asked incredulously: [How many points?]

[417 points. Thank you for your patronage.]

Muke didn't have that many points. He was completely stunned, but quickly composed himself. It didn't have to be a torch to drive the fish back—the [Water Bubbles] also had that function.

However, with so many fish in the water, there was a good chance the [Water Bubbles] would be overwhelmed, but Muke had no choice but to take a gamble. He bit his tongue in frustration.

[I need bubbles in the water!]

[322 points. Thank you for your patronage.]

Muke's chest tightened. He was suffocating under the weight of his situation—he didn't have that many points!!!

The price of [Water Bubbles] had been reduced to 40 points before, but now it had been jacked up eight times! It felt like a complete robbery!

But there was no point arguing with the system. Muke frantically

scanned his remaining props in panic and desperation. The Flaming Torch would work, but it couldn't ignite underwater. He had bought [Water Bubbles] twice before, but it was mostly used up during the [True Love's Boat] quest. He only had half an hour left.

Half an hour of [Water Bubbles] wouldn't be enough to get him through. He wouldn't even make it to the bottom of the sea in that time...

To make matters worse, his points were nearly exhausted from buying various props.

In his desperation, Muke suddenly remembered he could beg the audience for points. So, he began pleading for help, his voice pitiful, eyes filled with desperation.

As he ran, his cries echoed, but his tears dissolved into the sea, unseen by anyone.

The people who had once predicted a bright future for him, hoping to use him to stomp on Bai Liu, were now speechless.

Wang Shun could vaguely make out the situation on Muke's side. When he saw that Bai Liu had swum into the dark waters, he quickly opened his game manager and checked his point balance, visibly concerned.

He feared the same fate might befall Bai Liu. At least Wang Shun could help by contributing a few more points.

Mu Sicheng noticed Wang Shun's actions and spoke up, "Don't worry, this guy's got over 3,000 points. Even if the torches cost 400 points each, he can still buy ten."

Even so, Mu Sicheng couldn't resist checking his own points balance. After a quick glance, he relaxed, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Bai Liu would have enough to make it through the game if he topped up his points.

Not just Wang Shun and Mu Sicheng, but many viewers watching Bai Liu's mini-TV also noticed the commotion on Muke's mini-TV. They immediately checked their own score wallets and murmured among

themselves.

"Wait, if Bai Liu doesn't have enough points for props, I'll chip in ten points."

"I've got three or four points, that should be enough."

Mu Sicheng raised an eyebrow, watching the viewers' reactions. Many of them seemed eager to donate points to Bai Liu, not wanting him to fail.

"This guy really has quite an audience," Mu Sicheng thought. "So many people are willing to spend their points on him."

It was a stark contrast to Mu Sicheng's own audience, who were divided—some adored him for his skills, while others despised him, calling him immoral.

Meanwhile, on the sea floor, Bai Liu soon noticed the eerie green glow beneath the water. Wang Shun held his breath, his anxiety mounting as he clenched his fists.

"Buy props, Bai Liu, buy props! We'll be too late if the monsters wake up down there!" Wang Shun urged.

Mu Sicheng, ever calm, responded, "Relax, he's not going to die anytime soon."

Despite his words, Mu Sicheng's eyes were locked on Bai Liu's mini-TV, his game manager in hand, ready to charge points if necessary.

The audience waited in suspense, many of them poised to hit the charging button at any moment.

But Bai Liu, unfazed by the monstrous schools of fish and mermaids, continued to swim downstream, provoking the creatures before darting away.

The audience gasped in shock, some screaming at the screen.

"Bai Liu, what are you doing?!" Wang Shun cried. "Why are you messing with the monsters?!"

The viewers were frantic, shouting in dismay.

"Get the props! Bai Liu!!!"

"Stop playing around! Come out and I'll play with you slowly!"

"We're almost there! Don't die now, Bai Liu!"

Wang Shun was on the edge of his seat, sweat dripping down his face, unable to blink as the mermaids and fish closed in on Bai Liu.

Even Mu Sicheng, usually composed, was frowning, his arms crossed, tapping his fingers in agitation.

"What the hell is Bai Liu doing?" he muttered.

Bai Liu glanced back casually, ensuring that most of the monsters were tailing him. He kicked his legs, making slow progress through the water as he tried to create some distance.

But the monsters quickly closed the gap. Their decaying faces and lifeless eyes sent chills through the water as they lunged toward him.

Bai Liu briefly considered the origins of these creatures. On land, they might have been something else entirely, but in the sea—where Siren's gift turned them into corpses—they had returned to their true forms. The only thing missing was the Siren King, which would turn them into real corpses upon its arrival.

As the mermaids attacked, Bai Liu awkwardly swerved to the side, but was still bitten on the palm. The blood quickly stained the water.

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu has been attacked by a mermaid corpse, and his spirit value is dropping. Current value: 41.]

[System Warning: Only 21 minutes until the Siren King awakens. Hurry!]

Bai Liu's head spun, a sense of numbness spreading through his limbs. His movements grew clumsy, his legs tangling as he tried to swim.

Wang Shun, voice tight, observed, "With only 41 spirit, he's about to start hallucinating... and there's just 21 minutes before the Siren King wakes up."

Mu Sicheng, clearly frustrated, replied, "He could make it through, but..."

The spectators were in a frenzy, some of them practically screaming in panic.

As predicted, Bai Liu began to hallucinate. The monsters in front of him multiplied in his vision, each mermaid growing multiple heads. But Bai Liu simply shook his head and continued to avoid them.

Instead of diving straight toward the bottom, where he could escape, he swam in circles, confused and stumbling.

Bai Liu was attacked twice more—one mermaid took his foot, and another ripped at his injured palm. The pain caused him to curl up defensively, exposing his back to another monster.

The mermaid, grinning wickedly, swung its tail at him. The blow was so powerful that it created waves in the water, and though the sea softened the impact, the force was enough to break Bai Liu's spine.

Everyone instinctively closed their eyes, waiting for Bai Liu's death—when suddenly, a large plastic bubble appeared between him and the mermaid, bouncing the creature away. Bai Liu cowered behind the bubble, gasping for air.

Wang Shun exhaled in relief. "The water bubble! He bought one!"

The audience, though relieved, still looked uneasy. They knew something was bound to happen next.

"Bai Liu, give us a chance to live! Stop messing around and finish this!"

"Seriously, Bai Liu! I'm going to have a heart attack watching you!"

Mu Sicheng, still processing the situation, asked, "When did Bai Liu buy that bubble? Did he spend points on it?"

The bubble was an expensive item for mid-to-late stages, and Mu Sicheng hadn't seen Bai Liu buy it. If Bai Liu had hoarded it since the beginning, spending 70 points to keep it unused seemed risky.

Wang Shun, with a complicated expression, replied, "No, when Bai Liu bought it, the price was only 40 points."

"40 points?" Mu Sicheng raised an eyebrow. "The usual price is 70. How did he get it for 40?"

Wang Shun explained how Bai Liu had timed the purchase to take advantage of a price fluctuation, and Mu Sicheng was momentarily impressed by the newcomer's cleverness.

Early on, Bai Liu had anticipated that the prices of props would rise, so he stocked up on [Water Bubbles] when they were cheapest.

While Muke's [Water Bubbles] are now almost 400 points each, Bai Liu bought one for a fraction of the price—just a tenth of a point. As Muke gets caught in the system's trap, Bai Liu is already capitalizing on the system's price fluctuations to gain the upper hand.

The same viewer who previously criticized Bai Liu for hoarding props to save his life, and who claimed he knew nothing about the system shop, now watched in disbelief as Bai Liu's actions unfolded.

It was clear now that Bai Liu not only understood how the system shop worked but was using it to his advantage.

This viewer felt a pang of shame—how could people be so different from one another?

Mu Sicheng observed Bai Liu from the screen, who was hiding behind a bubble to catch his breath, and thought to himself, What a monster this newcomer is.

The last person Mu Sicheng saw daring enough to play with the system like this was Spades, the number one player in the rankings.

"I'm still curious, though," Mu Sicheng mused, tapping his chin thoughtfully as he watched Bai Liu. "How did he know that this [Water Bubble] would work for sure?"

"There are two possible endings to this part of Siren Town," Mu Sicheng continued, "The first is the NORMAL ending, where you just need to run out of Siren Town to clear the level. The later stages are all land-based chases, with no need for water bubbles. That's the route most players will take."

Mu Sicheng went on, "Only the TRUE ending requires going to sea, but that's essentially an additional side quest to return Siren King. The point reward isn't much higher than the normal ending, and the risk is considerably greater. No sane person would choose that path."

Wang Shun looked puzzled. "But Bai Liu is new. He might not know that, right?"

"I think he could have guessed," Mu Sicheng replied, shaking his head. "Bai Liu must have realized that the game allocates points based on the mission type. In terms of risk-reward, the normal ending offers

much higher points than the true ending."

Wang Shun glanced at Mu Sicheng twice, then asked, "So, God Mu, why are you playing the true ending?"

Mu Sicheng fell silent for a moment before responding, "High risk does come with high rewards. The true ending may not offer many points, but the reward is something much more valuable than simple points—something worth the high stakes."

"What's that?" Wang Shun asked, intrigued.

Mu Sicheng gave him a knowing glance. "The reward after completing the monster book. The only way to get that is by taking the TRUE END route and setting the monster book. But Bai Liu won't be able to do that."

"Why not...?" Wang Shun began to protest, but then his eyes widened in realization. "Wait! The Siren King in Bai Liu's monster book is a god-tier NPC!"

Mu Sicheng's eyes darkened as he reflected. "I'm considering the worst-case scenario... Bai Liu probably doesn't know how dangerous the Siren King is, but I have a feeling he's prepared to collect the monster book. He's likely stalling for time, waiting for the Siren King to wake up. That's why he's not rushing to clear the level..."

Wang Shun, stunned, stared at the screen in disbelief. "No way..."

On the mini TV, Bai Liu continued to hide behind the bubble, playing a tense game of hide-and-seek with the mermaids and fish.

The crowd was growing increasingly anxious. Bai Liu always seemed to play his own game, driving everyone else into a frenzy.

"This bubble has very low defense," one viewer noted, "If these mermaids keep attacking, it won't be long before it breaks, and the prop will be wasted!"

Bai Liu glanced at the spot on the water bubble behind him where a crack had formed from the constant mermaid attacks. But the water didn't penetrate; only the mermaid's hand could reach into the bubble. Bai Liu finally smiled in relief, while the viewers watching from their screens were beside themselves, screaming in anxiety.

Meanwhile, Muke had also taken refuge in a bubble, stalling for time

across the sea.

Those who had previously left Bai Liu to support Muke now returned, bored and eager to see Bai Liu's near-death struggle. They whispered amongst themselves, avoiding Mu Sicheng in the center.

"Why did they give Bai Liu and Muke so many points?" one viewer muttered, "It's so frustrating to watch—no vision at all. They might as well give the points to me. At least I won't be stuck in Siren Town."

"I was so close to getting that promotion spot," another complained. "Then these two new players came in and stole it from me. Hurry up and die, Bai Liu. Once you're gone, I can get the spot."

Bai Liu, oblivious to the frustration of the outside world, was now down to 40 mental points, dangerously close to the second mental hazard threshold.

Crossing this hurdle, he began to hallucinate. His vision blurred, and his focus shifted entirely to the bubble behind him.

A mermaid had already snuck in through the crack in the bubble. Bai Liu let go of the bubble, turned, and locked eyes with the decaying-faced mermaid inside. He sank slowly into the sea.

Bai Liu had become the bait, drawing the mermaids into his trap. The viewers, sensing something big was about to happen, watched in confusion.

"What can he possibly do now? The bubble's broken—there's no outer defense left, only the inner barrier, which just keeps the air inside. He doesn't have any props left, does he?"

The bubble was like an embryo, encapsulating the twisting, struggling mermaids. Bai Liu closed his eyes, leaned back, and took a long breath. A stream of bubbles rose from his gills. He released his hand, which had grown a fleshy membrane, and the bubbles floated before him.

Bai Liu then addressed the system: [Take out a bottle of alcohol.]

A bottle of clear alcohol appeared inside the bubble. Bai Liu kicked it away.

The alcohol slowly filled from the bottom. Bai Liu reached in, lit a lighter, and tossed it into the bubble with a nonchalant expression. He

withdrew his hand just before the mermaid could touch it, and a ball of fire erupted in the deepest part of the sea.

The hissing of the mermaids and the dancing flames of the fire illuminated Bai Liu's face, casting strange shadows.

It was at this moment that the audience realized: Bai Liu was actually smiling.

His subtle smile, illuminated by the firelight and the shimmering green of the fish scales on his face, made him appear almost inhuman —a monster subdued deep in the sea, even more so than the mermaids burning in the bubbles.

The mermaid, engulfed in flames, slammed its palms desperately against the transparent bubble, leaving behind blue-green blood and grimy handprints on the walls. Smoke swirled in dizzying waves inside the bubble, quickly obscuring the mermaid's face as it twisted in pain, its features growing uglier and more monstrous with each struggling motion.

Bai Liu floated motionlessly in the water, watching the mermaids that had attacked him burn away effortlessly in the flames. His smile, distant and detached, carried a hint of cruelty that was more unnerving than any monster's grin—it was both chilling and powerful.

After using the burning bubble to dispatch a wave of attacking mermaids, Bai Liu dragged the bubble around, now repurposed as a "Flaming Torch in Water." Not only did it offer defense, but the small opening caused by the bubble's rupture served as a trap to swallow mermaid attacks, turning the bubble into both an offensive and defensive tool.

The rich, oily essence spilling from the burning mermaids fed the fire, causing it to grow more intense. The flames surged as they consumed the monsters at the bottom of the sea, and the strange, almost surreal sight unfolded: the mermaids, driven by pure instinct, burrowed into Bai Liu's bubble one after another to feed.

Bai Liu stood guard, calm as ever, watching the mermaids line up to destroy themselves in the water bubbles. He lounged at ease while the monsters perished around him.

The audience, dumbfounded, could only stare. Many were at a loss for words, unable to comprehend this unconventional, almost glitch-like method of breaking the game.

Even Mu Sicheng, accustomed to seeing strange strategies, couldn't help but sigh. Pulling his hat lower to cover his face, he muttered, "Bai Liu, that's too much. It makes me look ridiculous with my own attempts, running around like a headless chicken."

"I'm convinced," Wang Shun admitted in awe.

"Flame-based props are effective against mermaids, but they can't be used at the bottom of the sea, where there are no burning conditions —just like Muke's fiery torches couldn't be used earlier," Mu Sicheng explained. "But combined with the water bubbles, these props work."

"Exactly," Wang Shun added. "But only if the person inside the bubble lets it break a hole, losing the barrier function against the outside monsters."

"This is essentially sacrificing a defensive prop to turn it into an offensive one," Mu Sicheng continued. "Bai Liu used the broken gap to trap the mermaids and burn them to death—very bold, yet ingenious."

Wang Shun marveled, "How did he come up with that? I feel like I've been playing the game with my brain switched off compared to him."

Mu Sicheng shook his head, "I don't think it's about being clever—it's about his psychological strength."

Bai Liu had the new [water bubble] in his possession, which could have provided a safer route through the game. But instead of relying on its protective qualities, he deliberately broke the bubble's barrier and used himself as bait to lure mermaids in, burning them alive. His calm indifference toward his own survival was both extreme and crazy.

The audience, who had once urged Bai Liu to hide in the bubble, now felt embarrassed.

"Bai Liu bought alcohol so early in preparation for this—before, people mocked him for buying too much, but now we see who was stupid. I mean, I'm talking about myself."

"I counted nine bottles just right, and Bai Liu bought them at the cheapest possible time. His planning is flawless, everything connected perfectly. I'm in awe."

"...Bai Liu just cleared all the monsters in 'Siren Town,' right? I've never seen someone clear an entire map like this."

The players who had previously ridiculed Bai Liu were now silent, their faces flushed with shame.

On the small TV, Bai Liu dragged a burning “mermaid ball” in his left hand, clearing most of the mermaids from the sea floor, leaving only a few scattered ones who kept their distance.

But at that moment, the eyelids of Siren King, held in Bai Liu’s right hand, fluttered. The tail stirred slightly, and Bai Liu’s mind jolted.

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu has been affected by Siren King's awakening. His mental value has dropped to 21, below the safety threshold of 40. He is about to experience intense hallucinations.]

Bai Liu felt his brain buzzing. The drop from 41 to 21 mental value felt like the aftermath of consuming toxic mushrooms—colors fragmented before his eyes, kaleidoscopic shards of light swirling.

It was as if he had stepped into an underground disco from the ‘70s or ‘80s, his head splitting and his limbs out of control. His retina refracted a thousand different colored halos, within which the faces of the mermaids and other people from his life crawled, including his boss and colleagues, all merging with the mermaids’ monstrous forms.

They grinned at him and lunged.

Bai Liu saw Siren King’s eyes slowly open, locking with his. Lucy’s hand reached into Bai Liu’s chest.

Blood dripped slowly, mixing with the water as Lucy devoured Bai Liu’s heart. She smiled in grotesque satisfaction, her mouth frothing with blood and flesh. She leaned in, about to kiss Bai Liu’s cheek.

The sharp, stinging pain in Bai Liu’s shoulder blade cleared his mind slightly.

It seems to be true, he thought absently.

Wang Shun, seeing Bai Liu floating in the sea with glazed eyes, weak limbs, said urgently, “No! Bai Liu’s entering the hallucination phase!”

Soon, something bit Bai Liu’s shoulder. His lack of response, except for a slight twitch of his shoulder, confirmed Wang Shun’s fears.

Wang Shun, desperate, shouted at the screen, “Buy spirit-restoring props! Bai Liu, restore your mental value!”

“No,” Mu Sicheng shook his head, cutting him off. “If his mental value drifts up to 60, Bai Liu will break out of his mermaid alienation state.”

“He’s still in deep water, and if he becomes ‘normal,’ he’ll drown instantly. The pressure difference could tear him apart.”

Wang Shun looked at Bai Liu, floating lifelessly in the water, his worry growing. “What do we do? If his mental value keeps dropping, he’ll turn into a monster!”

Mu Sicheng took a deep breath. “It’s up to Bai Liu himself now. He needs to stay conscious through these hallucinations.”

Bai Liu couldn’t distinguish between hallucination and reality, but he wasn’t unresponsive. He couldn’t tell where he was heading, but he knew he was sinking deeper into the sea. So he took the simplest approach—relaxing his body and letting himself sink.

He was a fish now, not a man, and with Siren King in hand, he could afford to sink. As for the mermaids attacking him during his descent…

Bai Liu closed his eyes and stretched his body fully. The coin on his shirt collar floated strangely, revealing that it wasn’t a real coin. The mermaids swam around him, ready to devour him.

The small town of siren

While the aroma of bubbling mermaid flesh in the water draws most of the mermaids and schools, a few are more intrigued by Bai Liu's raw flesh. They eagerly sink their teeth into his arms and ankles, leaving grotesque, circular bite marks.

Wang Shun stopped breathing as he watched, exclaiming, "Spirituality is dropping by 20!"

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu's Mental Value is 17, below 20. The player is now in the (Berserk) state, and their attributes are about to increase…]

The moment the system notification sounded, Bai Liu's mouth curled into a smile. His attributes, which had always been low, surged upward:

[Player Name: Bai Liu (Berserk Attribute Bonus Panel)]

[Strength: 7 → 151]

[Agility: 3 → 149]

[Attack: 6 → 167]

[Resistance: 2 → 166]

[Combined Defense and Attack Power increased. Total attribute points exceed 500. Player Bai Liu's rank increased from F(?) to C. He can now resist mermaid sailors, wax figures, and larvae.]

Wang Shun stood frozen, before realizing, "Ah, right! When the spirit value drops below 20, players enter the Berserk state, boosting their attributes."

"Once the spirit value falls further, the panel attributes rise even more, up to the player's potential limit," Wang Shun continued, now optimistic. "This is good for Bai Liu. At least he can fight back against the mermaids!"

"Not necessarily," Mu Sicheng disagreed solemnly, his tone darkening. "While his attributes are rising, which is beneficial, most players lose their sanity in this state. The lower their mental value, the more monstrous they become, attacking indiscriminately. Their mental

value drops faster with each attack until it reaches zero."

Bai Liu's eyes slowly opened on the small TV, his hands now sporting sharp claws, and his lower limbs undulated like fish tails. His eyes were no longer black but cracked, grayish veins stretching across the whites. His mouth was distorted into jagged, sharp teeth.

He struck a mermaid, slicing her in two with his claws. She sank to the depths, her gills flapping in agony, while Bai Liu watched coldly, unrecognizable from any other fish monster—if not for the Siren King in his hand.

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu's mental value continues to drop, now at 15. Berserk state is intensifying…]

[Player Name: Bai Liu (Berserk Attribute Bonus Panel)]

[Strength: 151 → 351]

[Agility: 149 → 249]

[Attack: 167 → 667]

[Resistance: 166 → 966]

[Combined Defense and Attack Power rising, panel attributes exceed 2000, rated as B player. Player Bai Liu's rank increased from C to B.]

Wang Shun was stunned. "Bai Liu's attributes are increasing too fast! He's already B rank! What potential!"

But then concern crept in. "But his mental value is still dropping. If it falls below 10, it's over."

No sooner had Wang Shun spoken than Bai Liu's small TV blared with an urgent alarm.

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu's mental value continues to drop, now at 9. Berserk state escalating…]

[System Warning: Siren King will awaken in 3 minutes. Complete the level quickly!]

"Only three minutes left! And his mental value is at 9!!!" Wang Shun's heart raced, gripped by the situation's urgency. He couldn't tear his eyes away from Bai Liu, emotionless and holding Siren King's hand as the mermaids scattered. Siren King's tail and eyes were starting to stir,

but Bai Liu remained unmoved.

"Hang on, Bai Liu!" Wang Shun whispered, clenching his hands in anxiety.

Mu Sicheng, now an A-rank player, was also tense. "Three minutes to send Siren King back to the depths should be enough to clear the level. But I'm not sure how much of Bai Liu's sanity remains under the influence of these hallucinations and his Berserk state."

The rest of the audience was equally rattled by Bai Liu's near-manic gameplay, unsure whether he would survive the level. Even the spectators who had mocked him now watched in awe.

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu's mental value continues to drop, now at 8. Berserk state intensifying…]

[Player Name: Bai Liu (Berserk Attribute Bonus Panel)]

[Strength: 351 → 655]

[Agility: 249 → 733]

[Attack: 367 → 1555]

[Resistance: 366 → 1776]

[Combined Defense and Attack Power rising, total attributes exceed 4000, rated as A player. Player Bai Liu's rank increased from B to A.]

Bai Liu's face was now covered in fish scales, his eyes glowing faintly in the water, every scale radiating danger. As he dragged Siren King downward, Siren King's fins began to flutter, maintaining their own balance.

The moment Siren King spread his fins, all the surrounding mermaids fled, shrieking in terror. The eerie beauty of Siren King's face reflected on the small TV, silencing the room. It was as if the beauty of the creature itself held a deadly allure.

Bai Liu, now fully armored in scales, and Siren King, holding hands, seemed like two mythical figures, moving gracefully in the depths of the ocean.

But this fragile harmony would soon be shattered when Siren King awoke.

"He's risen to A-rank," Wang Shun murmured, torn between awe and worry. "I knew it, Bai Liu has potential, he can really do a lot in Berserk state."

Mu Sicheng narrowed his eyes. "Wait—Bai Liu knows that by lowering his mental value, he can enter Berserk state. And the system warns players when they're about to enter it…"

Mu Sicheng's eyes flicked to Bai Liu, sinking in the water. "Bai Liu is deliberately letting his mental value drop, forcing himself into Berserk state to enhance his attributes. He's using the mermaids to attack him, to drop his spirit and trigger the Berserk state, preparing himself to withstand Siren King's attack."

Wang Shun froze. "But why would he do that? Bai Liu could easily pass without triggering Berserk state."

Mu Sicheng continued, his voice low with realization. "He's not just fighting the mermaids. He's trying to clear the level while simultaneously preparing himself for Siren King's attack. Bai Liu is aiming for the Siren Town Monster Book. He needs to survive an attack from Siren King to complete it."

Wang Shun's jaw dropped. "You mean Bai Liu wants to take a hit from a god-tier NPC? He'd need S-rank attributes to survive that!"

Mu Sicheng's gaze was contemplative. "Exactly. Bai Liu believes there's a perfect solution to this, a way to pass the level and still survive. He's pushing himself to his limits, even if it means risking his life."

Bai Liu's eyes flickered between illusion and reality as he sank deeper into the ocean. Despite the painful hallucinations, he kept calm, trusting in his strategy.

[System Warning: One minute to go until Siren King awakens… 59…58…57…]

Wang Shun, heart pounding, was transfixed. "One minute left…"

The countdown to Siren King's awakening began, and Bai Liu held his breath.

As Siren King's eyes finally opened, Bai Liu released his grip, knowing the time had come.

The water stilled as Siren King hovered in the depths, his eyes gleaming white, his face the epitome of divine beauty. It was a sight that mesmerized everyone, yet also heralded Bai Liu's fate.

[System Warning: Siren King has awakened! Stay away from the small TV! Prolonged exposure risks mental contamination from this god-tier NPC!]

Mu Sicheng observed keenly as viewers began to succumb to the enchantment, their mental values plummeting as they moved closer to the screen.

Wang Shun, dazed, muttered, "So beautiful... don't hurt him."

The system warned of contamination spreading as the image of Siren King blurred, signaling the end of Bai Liu's intense trial.

Mu Sicheng chewed thoughtfully on a lollipop, his eyes narrowing. "God-tier NPCs aren't just powerful—they can warp reality itself. Bai Liu's plan is nothing short of madness."

And yet, in this madness, Bai Liu might just achieve the impossible.

The small town of siren

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bai Liu and Siren King's heads were enveloped in a ball of fire, burning like the sun sinking into the sea. Beneath them lay countless sunken bodies and shipwrecks, while the sea itself was a floating mass of black debris, silently drifting between them. The scene appeared calm, but the constant sound of system alarms reminded everyone that this stillness was deceptive.

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu’s spirit level continues to drop, currently at 6…]
[System Warning: Player Bai Liu’s spirit level continues to drop, currently at 5…]

Bai Liu’s entire face was covered in thick scales, his hands now tough like reptilian claws. His second knuckle curled as his lower limbs elongated, transforming into a fish tail, making him resemble a monster rather than a player.

Wang Shun’s heart pounded in his chest: "Spirituality down to 5…"

"Bai Liu, do you even remember that you're a player and not a monster?" Mu Sicheng muttered to himself, watching Bai Liu’s grotesque face on the small TV.

Siren King’s tail swayed gently as he approached Bai Liu, swimming unpredictably.

On the small TV, Siren King flickered for a moment, then reappeared on Bai Liu’s cheek. The audience gasped, but quickly stifled their shock with their hands.

Siren King, pale with long hair cascading over his high nose, reached out and gently tapped his index finger against Bai Liu’s brow. His lips moved, but no sound escaped; only Bai Liu seemed to understand the words.

"You’ve brought me to the deep," Siren King spoke, his voice low. "What is your wish? Speak, and I will grant it."

Bai Liu’s pupils constricted, the weight of the pressure almost crushing

him. As Siren King neared, it felt as though his mind was being churned like in a blender, his body pressed by an invisible force.

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu's spirit level continues to drop, currently at 1…]

Wang Shun nearly tore at his hands in panic: "One more… only one left! Come on, come on!"

Mu Sicheng didn't speak, but his breathing slowed as he focused intently on the small TV.

The audience seemed to hold their collective breath, some muttering in unison:
"I need oxygen!"
"How many players have I seen who, even in life-or-death situations, still think they can pull off a miracle? My heart is racing…"

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu's spirit level continues to drop, currently at 1 (Berserk). Limit reached…]

[Player Name: Bai Liu (Berserk Attribute Bonus Panel)]

[Stamina: 655→955]
[Agility: 733→1033]
[Attack: 555→955]
[Resistance: 776→1209]
[Combined Defense and Attack Power increase. Total attribute points exceed 4000, classified as Super A level player. Bai Liu's level rises from A to Super A.]

Wang Shun slapped his thigh in frustration, "The panel's only Super A at its peak! That's far from an S—S requires over 10,000 points!"

"Six thousand short of being able to withstand a god-ranked NPC's attack," Mu Sicheng remarked, his voice tinged with regret as he watched Bai Liu on the small TV. "Interesting player... too bad this is his last game."

Bai Liu's mouth and eyes bled, but he wiped it away, smiling as he faced Siren King. "My wish is simple. Attack me. Right now."

The Siren King paused, his silver eyes narrowing as he gazed at Bai Liu. "You want me to attack you? You might die."

"Who knows? Maybe not." Bai Liu's smile widened as his scales bled

and quivered. He was almost entirely like a mermaid now, yet his defiance remained.

Though Bai Liu felt an overwhelming fear of Siren King, it didn't show. His expression was a mix of fear and biting determination. His right side showed controlled terror, tears flowing from his eyes as his lips pressed into a tight line. On the left side, however, his smile was easy and unconcerned, eyes indifferent, corners of his mouth curving up.

Bai Liu inched closer to Siren King, now almost nose-to-nose. He lowered his gaze, as if whispering a joke. "What if you can't kill me, but I can get something out of you instead? Like a reward... or points."

Siren King's pupils fixed on Bai Liu for a long moment before he finally spoke. "Mad traveler, as you wish. I'll attack. But if you survive, I owe you a wish. You can call on me anytime, as long as you hold a part of my body and speak my true name—Tawil."

"Thanks a lot," Bai Liu said, raising an eyebrow.

Siren King circled Bai Liu, his tail curling and flicking before delivering a powerful blow to Bai Liu's waist.

Bai Liu was sent crashing into the sea floor like a torpedo. The force of the impact sent a tremor through the small TV, and the fish scattered, staying clear of Siren King's presence.

Siren King's long hair swirled as he hovered above, his face untouched by human emotion. In the apocalyptic sea, he looked like a god.

The viewers, too stunned to watch further, closed their eyes. One whispered: "Is he dead?"

Wang Shun sighed in resignation, "With only 1 spirit left, even if he survived the attack, his spirit would be gone. He should be dead."

Mu Sicheng stood with his hands in his pockets, eyes narrowing as he watched the screen, his expression unreadable. "He's quite the interesting player. It's a shame this is his last game."

Just as many were about to give up, the small TV emitted a faint, glitchy warning beep, as if the signal was failing. After a brief moment of snow, the screen cleared. All eyes were drawn back.

--The TV hadn't shut off. That could only mean one thing: Bai Liu was

still alive.

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu's spirit level continues to drop, currently at 0.1 spirit level. Please complete the level quickly.]

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu's spirit level continues to drop, currently at 0.1 (Berserk). Ultimate Limit reached!!!]

[Player Name: Bai Liu (Berserk Peak)]

[Strength: 955→???? (Unable to measure)]
[Agility: 1033→???? (Unable to measure)]
[Attack: 955→???? (Unable to measure)]
[Resistance: 1209→???? (Not measurable)]
[Comprehensive Defense and Attack Power increase. Panel attributes unknown. Unable to rate player level. Superiors are intervening…]

Wang Shun stared, eyes wide with disbelief. He was speechless. "Still alive... at 0.1 spirit? How…?"

Mu Sicheng stepped forward, squinting at the dust and trying to locate Bai Liu.

Siren King seemed to sense Bai Liu's continued existence. He slowly sank, sweeping his tail through the mud.

Bai Liu's limbs were twisted and buried in the seabed. His battered tail was half gone, his body covered in blood, but shockingly, he was laughing. His blood spilled as he grinned with a twisted joy.

Upon seeing Siren King, who had nearly crushed him with a tail strike, Bai Liu mustered the strength to raise his broken right hand in a languid wave. "Yo, Siren King."

Wang Shun, both amused and incredulous, burst into tears. "This guy doesn't feel pain? Greeting the monster with a broken hand, like it's nothing—this game's sensory experience is 100%!"

"Madman," Mu Sicheng chuckled, folding his arms.

Of course, Bai Liu was in agony, every part of him hurting. But he remained unfazed by the physical pain, as if it was irrelevant to the peace he felt mentally. His emotions were disconnected, like paint in separate compartments that didn't mix.

Siren King's face remained expressionless. "You're still alive."

"Yes," Bai Liu smiled, blood dribbling from his lips. "I told you, if you couldn't kill me, maybe I'd get something out of you."

Siren King lowered himself to look directly at Bai Liu, his pale lashes dropping. "What do you want from me?"

Bai Liu, in his dazed state, gazed at Siren King's delicate face up close and felt an impulsive urge to tease him.

He chuckled softly, his broken hand brushing Siren King's long hair before pressing it to his bleeding lips with a teasing kiss. "A kiss, perhaps? You're so beautiful, I couldn't have modeled it myself."

Siren King lowered his eyes and murmured, "Good."

Bai Liu blinked in confusion, wondering what he meant. Then, as Siren King's eyelids fluttered shut, he leaned in for the kiss.

Chapter End Notes

They KISSSSSSSS!!!!!!!!!!

The small town of siren

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Good." Siren King closed his eyes, and without hesitation, he kissed down.

Bai Liu was momentarily stunned. He had only been joking, like a player who enjoys teasing the final boss during a level. Bai Liu hadn't expected this boss to be so cooperative. Siren King's lips were soft and cold, with a faint taste of vine. The sensation was immediate.

Siren King leaned against Bai Liu, his expression a mix of wonder and confusion. "You're hot."

"Of course," Bai Liu said, a little amused. "I'm a thermostat. See you next time, Tawil."

Bai Liu gave Siren King a gentle hug, patting him on the back as if he were a child. A boss.

Bai Liu had a soft spot for the final bosses in these games. They were usually the hardest to design and tended to be the most intricately crafted characters. He had rarely seen a boss as well-designed and beautiful as Siren King.

He couldn't help but exclaim, "Tawil, I like you a lot. The design, I mean."

But before Bai Liu could finish his sentence, before Siren King had a chance to respond, Bai Liu's body dissolved into a glowing light in the deepest darkness of the sea. It spilled from Siren King's fingertips and slowly ascended like a star through the black waters, eventually reaching a golden surface tinted by the rising sun.

Siren King watched the trail of light until it disappeared into the sea. He lay there for a long time, his hands folded, eyes closed, before drifting into a deep sleep. "See you next time, Bai Liu," he murmured softly.

[System: Congratulations to player Bai Liu for sending Siren King back to the bottom of the sea. "Siren Town" has been cleared.]

[System: Player has reached the true ending of Siren - "Back to the Peaceful Old Town."]

As the mermaid returned to the depths, the townspeople of Siren returned to normal. The statues were destroyed, and the ghosts of the dead lay dormant on the sea floor. No one knew about the taboo that could awaken the dead beneath the sea. Perhaps one day, greedy humans would touch that forbidden power, but for now, it remained untouched.

[System: Player Bai Liu - "Siren Town Monster Book - Siren King" page has been collected.]

[Siren Small Town Monster Book Updated - Siren King (2/4)]

[Monster Name: Siren King.]

[Weaknesses: None at this time (players are not required to explore the monster's weaknesses).]

[Attack: Fish Tail Strike (1/????) (Note: The maximum number of attacks cannot be determined, so the player is considered to have completed all possible attacks with one.)]

[System: Congratulations to all players for collecting the full Siren Small Town Monster Book!]

There was silence in front of Bai Liu's small TV for a few minutes. Everyone had their heads bowed, and the only sound was the continuous drip of recharging points. Finally, someone couldn’t hold it in and cried out in excitement.

"Number One!!! Bai Liu has become the overall number one in Siren Village!!! We've powered him up to number one! We beat God Mu’s record!"

"I can’t believe it! I can’t believe we actually beat a god-tier NPC!!! This new player is amazing!"

"Damn, Bai Liu, that last 0.1 spirit point, I’m on my knees! That was insane!"

"Wasn't it said that it couldn’t be measured? But resisting a god-tier NPC? Bai Liu must have S-tier potential!"

"I feel like I’m witnessing history. Bai Liu is the second player whose

data the system can't directly determine, after the god-level NPC!"

The crowd burst into tears and laughter, hugging each other in celebration. Even Wang Shun and Mu Sicheng exchanged high-fives and smiles. Only one player, who had been critical earlier, now wore a hard-to-hide grimace.

"Che, what's the big deal? It's just a single-player game," the player sneered.

"Let's see how long this lasts. He's just a newbie, passed his first game, and now acting like he's something special," they mocked.

Mu Sicheng narrowed his eyes, his hand slowly pulling his hat back over his head. The red light in his eyes flickered, and the monkey on his hat grinned menacingly.

Though Mu Sicheng typically didn't engage with new players, he had just enjoyed the show and was now annoyed by the taunts.

He glanced at the smug audience and was about to confront them, but Wang Shun quickly intervened.

"They're from the King's Guild," Wang Shun warned.

"Oh, the King's Guild?" Mu Sicheng scoffed. "A guild full of arrogant players who think they're something when they're not."

Wang Shun coughed awkwardly. "God Mu, I'm actually part of the King's Guild too..."

Mu Sicheng: "..."

"Look, God Mu, I know we've got some idiots in our guild, but just be careful. The president of the King's Guild is—"

Mu Sicheng interrupted, "I know, the president is Queen Hearts, right? She's the second-highest ranked player. She's ruthless. Best not to mess with anyone under her."

"Still, it's frustrating hearing these newbies judge Bai Liu like this..." Mu Sicheng grumbled, cracking a lollipop between his tiger-like teeth. "It reminds me of when I was a rookie."

Wang Shun sighed. "It's tough for newcomers. Especially for players like you who are loners. Big guilds can be a pain."

Many players in the game formed guilds to help each other, increasing their survival chances. Mu Sicheng had been approached by the King's Guild as a newcomer but had refused their offer. Since then, he'd been at odds with the guild.

Wang Shun knew that the lower-tier players in such large guilds often felt threatened by strong newcomers. If a new player rose through the ranks, they would quickly outpace the rest, leaving the lower-ranked members with fewer opportunities. Some of the more extreme players might even try to sabotage these newcomers to keep them down.

As Wang Shun observed the King's Guild members' sour expressions, he couldn't help but feel a little smug. Bai Liu had surpassed all of their expectations.

One of the players scoffed, "What's the big deal? He's not even close to the gods of the core promotion. Why are you all acting like he's something special?"

[System Alert: Bai Liu enters the final mini-TV ranking.]

[24,000 people liked Bai Liu's TV, 26,700 favorited it, 7,190 recharged it, and player Bai Liu earned 10,200 points.]

[Player Bai Liu received 20,000 likes in one minute and 6,000 recharge points! Fame is rising fast! The audience can't get enough of him!]

[Congratulations to player Bai Liu for securing a spot in the central screen promotion, with views increasing rapidly...]

Wang Shun was in shock. "Core promotion?! Bai Liu made it to the core promotion?!"

Mu Sicheng glanced at Bai Liu's small TV, his eyes glinting with amusement. "I should've known not to waste so much on this promotion," he muttered.

The King's Guild members had seen Bai Liu's rapid rise and were in complete disbelief.

"Core promotion?! How can a newbie make it there on his first game?!" they gasped.

The system's response was blunt: [Player Bai Liu is ranked in the top 500 overall and eligible for the promotion.]

"Top 500?! That high?!" they exclaimed. "How is that possible for a first-time player?!"

The system was silent: [Bai Liu's TV composite is currently ranked 497th in the game.]

The King's Guild members were left stunned. Bai Liu was more powerful than they had imagined. His success was undeniable.

They could already imagine a future where Bai Liu would be pursued by major guilds, eventually surpassing them entirely.

If Bai Liu joined the King's Guild, he would become their top player, and they would be at his mercy...

The rest of the audience, meanwhile, continued to cheer for Bai Liu's promotion, eager to see the spectacle unfold.

Central hall, central screen, core promotional bit area.

The area was clearly more lavishly decorated than the fringe hall of the central zone, which had a gold theme, adorned with small TVs framed in gold and posters of prominent players. Players exchanged quiet, polite words as they interacted in the hall.

When Mu Sicheng looked up, he noticed Bai Liu on a small TV mounted on the opposite wall.

Bai Liu's presence was hard to ignore, especially since he was in the core promotion spot. He stood out because, unlike the other players in this spot, who charged for their broadcasts, Bai Liu's was the only one without a fee. As the King's Guild players had mentioned earlier, most of the top-tier players in this space had small TVs with a charge to watch, and only the highlights of their gameplay were available for free, captured by the system. Anyone who didn't pay had to settle for those highlights on nearby TVs.

Though Bai Liu's small TV was free to view, it hadn't yet drawn much of an audience. Compared to the glitzy atmosphere of the core area, the presence of Bai Liu's free broadcast felt somewhat out of place. The crowd was mostly interested in the premium content, which was considered more prestigious. Since players who suddenly reached such high spots were often considered fleeting, the crowd paid little attention.

But soon, the attention of the audience shifted toward Bai Liu's TV because of a system notification that kept interrupting the broadcast.

[System: Player Bai Liu Awarded Overall Rating]

[Siren Small Town True End Completion - 600 Bonus Points]

[Siren Small Town Monster Book - Mermaid Sculpture Pages - Set Reward - Item: Sculpture's Shell (Normal Quality)]

[Effect: Increases Defense by 100 points when worn]

[Siren Small Town Monster Book - Mermaid Page Collection Reward - Item: Sea Stalking (Normal Quality)]

[Effect: Increases Movement Speed by 100 points when worn]

[Siren Small Town Monster Book - Mermaid Sailor Pages - Prop: Mermaid's Amulet (Excellent Quality)]

[Effect: When worn, grants the ability to escape from dangerous situations with a chance to break free from the Golden Cicada, one-time use, automatically shatters upon activation]

[Siren Small Town Monster Book - Siren King Page - Set Reward - Item: Siren King's Scales (Quality Unknown)]

[Effect: Unknown. It represents the Siren King's response to your affection, hoping that the player will wear it for a long time]

[Siren Small Town Monster Book Collection - Prop: Siren's Fish Bone (Quality Unknown)]

[Effect: Bestowed upon you by the Siren King, this divine fishbone transcends time and space, a powerful weapon with unclear effects... it's still being explored by the player]

[System: Player Bai Liu's Overall Rating for this Small TV]

Bai Liu's gameplay video from Siren Small Town received 49,074 likes, 52,899 favorites, and a total of 15,069 bonus points.

[Player Bai Liu's gameplay videos are proving to be incredibly popular!]

His video for "Siren Small Town" earned a Silver badge rating, but due to a high ratio of one viewer to every forty, it was downgraded to

a Brass badge. Nevertheless, Bai Liu's gameplay video was entered into the VIP library.

[To access this video, viewers must subscribe to the VIP library and pay 40 points to the system. The points collected from this charge will be split 50/50 between Bai Liu and the system.]

[Bai Liu has won the following achievements for his small TV:]

[Highest Points Earned by a Newcomer in a Single Video]

[First Newcomer to Reach Core Promotion]

[Highest Points Pass Record for Siren Town]

[First Newcomer in the Cohort to Complete the Game]

...

[System: Congratulations to player Bai Liu for passing the game! Please note that the player must enter a horror game again within a week or face a fatal penalty. The countdown begins now - 7 (days):00 (hours):00 (minutes)]

[6 (days):23 (hours):59 (minutes)]

[We wish player Bai Liu good luck in the next game～]

Chapter End Notes

The first arc is now finished!!

Lobby

After a long list of awards and titles, the system politely bids farewell before Bai Liu's TV shuts off with a crisp "pop."

By then, a sizable audience has gathered in front of the screen, their awe turning into an animated discussion.

"A newcomer?! A pure newbie?! My whole neighborhood is shocked—since when were newbies this good? The pass reward broadcast lasted ten minutes!"

"Forget that! Did you see he collected the entire Monster Book? Even top-tier players struggle to do that before reaching the True End!"

"I already bought his video. It’s bound to be a masterpiece."

"Same! I was floored. That insane reward list? Over 10,000 recharge points? How the hell did he pull that off?"

"But what I really want to know is how he racked up a thousand stomps. His numbers are crazy—why was everyone stomping on him?"

Bai Liu's Siren Town gameplay video skyrockets in popularity, selling hundreds of copies in mere moments.

This is why everyone wants to enter the Core Zone. The audience here is not only generous but also rational. Whether it’s through recharge rewards or simply paying to watch a player’s performance, most are willing to spend a few dozen points to satisfy their curiosity. Is Bai Liu a rising star or a potential new demon?

Some quick-witted players calculate that the minimum guaranteed earnings for a Core promotion are in the thousands.

Wang Shun, still staring at Bai Liu’s now-blackened screen, sighs in reluctance.

"God Mu, when do you think Bai Liu will enter the game again? Do you think he’ll go solo? I kind of want to camp at his little TV."

"How would I know?" Mu Sicheng lazily narrows his eyes. "Bai Liu should be logging out of the newbie zone by now. If you’re that desperate, go find him yourself. Ask him directly. His mental state is probably still shot, so he might not be thinking clearly. If you strike a

good deal now, maybe he'll take you along in the future."

"God Mu, you really... " Wang Shun looks at him with a complicated expression. "That's so shameless."

"So? You going or not?" Mu Sicheng is unfazed by the accusation. He shrugs, a mischievous smile curling his lips—though the effect is slightly ruined by the lollipop puffing out one cheek. "I'm curious about his [Newbie Skill]."

"The first player in a batch of newcomers always gets one, right? But the system hides it. They say the skill reflects the player's deepest desires." He tilts his head thoughtfully. "I wonder what someone like Bai Liu truly wants."

Wang Shun is intrigued as well but hesitates. "But people usually keep their skills a secret. Bai Liu won't just tell us."

Mu Sicheng smirks. "Bai Liu's mental value is at 0.1. Do you think that's normal? The fact that he's not a gibbering mess is a miracle. Right now, he's probably so out of it that he can't even stand properly. If we pretend to be system staff, we could get him to spill everything."

Wang Shun: "..."

Mu Sicheng, you criminal.

Bai Liu emerges from the game drenched, water dripping from his hair and clothes. He's soaked to the bone. His vision is hazy, like looking through frosted glass, and the world around him spins unsteadily.

He tries to stand up a few times, but his legs give out. Eventually, he gives up and slumps back down.

"I'm really weak," Bai Liu mutters to himself.

Taking a moment to rest, he begins sorting through the rewards and items he's obtained. With each new discovery, he lets out a quiet tsk.

He had been right—the Monster Book's rewards were the biggest.

Not in terms of sheer power, though. Items like [Sea Sneak] and [Sculpted Shell] simply increase attribute stats. As a game designer, Bai Liu finds these types of items rather ordinary.

But to him, they're still the most valuable rewards.

Why? Because they aren't sold in the game shop.

Bai Liu checks the shop multiple times but finds nothing that corresponds to his Monster Book rewards.

This means that [Monster Book] drops are [non-marketable] and classified as [limited items]. Players cannot buy them with points; they can only be obtained in two ways:

As drops upon completing a game.
Through player-to-player trades outside the system.
But since completing Monster Books is notoriously difficult, few players manage to obtain these items naturally. This makes them highly sought after in the trading market.

Which means... Bai Liu could sell his for an obscene price.

However, he won't. Not yet. He still needs to build his own foundation first. Bai Liu makes up his mind—he won't sell Monster Book items easily.

Among his newfound treasures, one item stands out: [The Siren's Amulet], a literal life-saving artifact.

Then there's [Siren's Reverse Scale], which comes with an enigmatic [Effectiveness Unknown] tag, and [Siren's Fish Bone], which vaguely claims to "tear through space and time" but offers no concrete explanation. The system doesn't even rate these two items—it simply labels them as [Unknown].

Curious, Bai Liu clicks on the [Unknown] tag, but all he gets is a message:

[System: Unable to evaluate.]

"The system can't evaluate them?" Bai Liu muses, raising an eyebrow. "Useless."

What he doesn't realize is that both items come from a god-level NPC, and to the system, god-level NPCs are nothing more than an unquantifiable mess of bugged data. Attempting to analyze a piece of bone and a scale from a walking anomaly is practically impossible.

Bai Liu moves on, scrolling through his interface, when something catches his eye.

A [Personal Skill Reward] notification—[Unlocked].

Intrigued, Bai Liu clicks it twice.

The interface fades. A prompt appears:

[Please close your eyes and imagine what you desire most.]

Bai Liu clasps his hands together and chants internally, "Money, money, money."

[Players may now open their eyes.]

Floating in front of him is... a tattered, well-worn leather wallet. The edges are frayed, the material scuffed beyond repair, and some areas are peeling enough to reveal the inner lining.

That's his skill?

[Player Bai Liu Skill: An Old Wallet with Nothing in It (Well-used but never discarded, proof of just how little money its owner has.)]

[Player Bai Liu Skill: Poor Vagrant (Unemployed. Broke. Rent is due. Your only path forward is wandering the streets.)]

Bai Liu: "..."

Is this skill designed to mock his poverty?

[System: Of course not.]

[Skill Description: You can trade anything you own with others. Anything they agree to exchange will enter your wallet.]

[Their skills, points, items, even their very souls and beliefs—everything can be turned into coins at your disposal. You are the Devil's Trader, the vagrant who appears destitute, but those who deal with you may lose everything.]

[Though you have nothing now, your desire for wealth is boundless. One day, your wallet will be the richest in the world, though it will be filled with the remnants of the helpless.]

Bai Liu blinks. "Wow. That skill doesn't sound very... human."

[System: Do you dislike it?]

Bai Liu grins. "No. I love it. It suits me perfectly."

"No." Bai Liu smiled, "On the contrary, I really like it, it suits me, and I would like to enquire if a deal is struck with me without the other party knowing I have this skill, does the deal stand?"

[System: A transaction is established when there is a (coin) relationship between the two parties and (coin) enters the prop wallet at least once.]

"A monetary relationship?" Bai Liu rubbed his chin. "Like what?"

[System: For example, if you want to obtain someone's item and you use the points (coins) in your wallet to buy it, the transaction is established the moment they accept—even if they don't know about your skill or aren't sincere in their agreement. As long as they take your points, the deal is sealed, and the item is yours.]

Bai Liu's grin widened. "So even if I jokingly offer just one point for a highly valuable prop, as long as they agree, it still counts?"

[System: Yes.]

"Gee, that's a cheeky skill." Bai Liu remarked with genuine amusement. "But I kind of can't wait to try it out."

[System: You currently have a balance of 15,781 points. Would you like to load all of them into your wallet?]

Bai Liu nodded. "Fake it."

After clearing his props, Bai Liu checked his panel attributes. Almost all of them were in the red—he had significantly overexerted himself during the game.

[Player Name: Bai Liu]

[Life Value: 20] (A two-hundred-pound man could sit on you and kill you. Slowly recovering.)
[Stamina: 7] (Unsteady standing. Auto-recovery in progress.)
[Agility: 7] (Full-body stiffness and muscle soreness. Auto-recovery in progress.)
[Attack: 1] (Your full-force strike is like a two-month-old kitten pawing at something. Auto-recovery in progress.)
[Intelligence: 45] (Originally 89. Halved due to critically low mental value. Will be restored when mental value recovers.)

[Luck: 0] (You've been cursed with misfortune your entire life. If anyone in the game encounters a godlike NPC, it will be you.)
[Skill: Empty Old Purse]
[Identity: Poor Vagrant]
[Mental Value: 3] (By all rights, you should have gone completely insane and become a monster. Frankly, I'm shocked you're still sane. Then again, perhaps sanity is the very thing that makes you monstrous. Terrifying player. (Auto-recovery in progress.)]
Bai Liu, entirely unfazed by the long string of commentary branding him a monster, calmly asked, "How long until my stats recover?"

[System: Based on your current recovery rate, full restoration will take three to five days after leaving the game.]

Bai Liu wasn't one to procrastinate. "Then let's exit the—"

Before he could finish, he noticed two figures hesitantly approaching the boarding gate.

Mu Sicheng and Wang Shun paused, taking in Bai Liu's disheveled state. He was slumped against the exit wall, clearly unconscious until moments ago, resting in a position that screamed exhaustion. The drop in his mental value had hit him hard.

Yet, when they stepped closer, Bai Liu casually lifted his head and met their gazes, his eyes sharp. His first words made both men freeze.

"Are you here to pry information about my personal skills?"

Mu Sicheng smirked, crouching down with his hands on his knees as he studied Bai Liu with amusement. "And what makes you so sure we're here for that? What if we came to kill or rob you instead? You should be loaded with points and valuable props by now."

Wang Shun almost pointed out that killing wasn't possible in the system lobby—but before he could, he realized something. Bai Liu had just exited the game; he shouldn't know that yet.

"It shouldn't be possible to kill anyone in this hall," Bai Liu mused after only a few seconds of thought.

Wang Shun blurted, "How did you know?"

Mu Sicheng's interest piqued. He had seen Bai Liu instinctively flinch when the idea of being attacked was brought up—a natural human response to potential danger. Clearly, Bai Liu hadn't known at first.

And yet, in mere seconds, he reached the right conclusion.

"Reason?" Mu Sicheng raised an eyebrow.

"If killing was allowed here, there'd be people camping the entrance for easy loot," Bai Liu explained with a shrug. "I've been out for ten minutes and haven't seen a single soul besides you two. If murder were an option, this place would be crawling with robbers. But it's not. That suggests killing—and likely theft—are both restricted here."

Mu Sicheng whistled, eyes glinting with appreciation. "Bingo. Nailed it."

Wang Shun looked conflicted. He had planned to trick Bai Liu into revealing his skills. But now, it was clear—Bai Liu hadn't fallen for even a single lie.

"I'm curious," Mu Sicheng said, tilting his head. "What's your mental value right now? You don't seem like someone who just had a 0.1 mental value. Did you use a spirit bleach to recover?"

Bai Liu, looking perfectly composed, replied calmly, "I'm currently at 3. Still recovering."

Mu Sicheng: "……"
Wang Shun: "……"

They both stared at Bai Liu, momentarily stunned into silence.

"Wait—how much?" Wang Shun asked, his voice slightly unsteady.

"Three," Bai Liu repeated, completely at ease. "What's wrong?"

Wang Shun struggled to process it. "Do you even understand what a mental value of 3 means? You should be experiencing overlapping hallucinations and extreme psychological torment. Most players who drop below 20 go completely insane the moment they leave the game. But you—"

He gestured wildly at Bai Liu, as if trying to encapsulate the sheer absurdity of the situation. "You're just sitting here like nothing's wrong! You're talking like a rational person! You should be struggling to form coherent thoughts—your intelligence is literally halved!"

Bai Liu nodded agreeably. "That's true. My intelligence is currently 45 instead of 89. But honestly, that's still more than enough to answer

your questions. They weren't particularly difficult."

Wang Shun was speechless.

In truth, Bai Liu was experiencing an overwhelming wave of dark urges—violent, impulsive thoughts whispering to him, trying to push him into monstrous behavior. But Bai Liu had lived with a ruthless obsession for money long before entering this game. He had always fought against his own greed, resisting the temptation to cross legal or moral boundaries.

Compared to that? This was nothing.

Still, something Mu Sicheng had said caught his attention.

Spirit Bleach.

Bai Liu narrowed his eyes. That sounded like an item designed to restore a player's status, much like a "Blue Pill" in other games. But rather than asking Wang Shun about it—he had already tried to deceive him—Bai Liu turned to Mu Sicheng instead. The man clearly seemed more entertained by the situation.

Wang Shun, still trying to process everything, finally asked, "Bai Liu, how did you guess we were here to ask about your personal skills?"

"If you weren't here to kill me, then your purpose must be to either seek my help, propose cooperation, or gather information," Bai Liu explained leisurely. "As a newcomer, I shouldn't have much valuable information, since all my stats and rewards are publicly visible. The only thing hidden is my personal skill."

He smiled. "So I figured that's what you came to ask about. Normally, I wouldn't tell you. But since my mental value is critically low, you must have thought I'd be too delirious to keep secrets. Am I wrong?"

Wang Shun let out a long sigh. Bai Liu had guessed everything—right down to the loophole they'd planned to exploit.

Mu Sicheng leaned in closer, intrigued. "I'm seriously doubting your mental value right now. There's no way I'm getting your skill info today, am I?"

"Not necessarily," Bai Liu said pleasantly. "How about we make a deal? I'll show you my skill—if you give me a spirit bleach in exchange."

Mu Sicheng narrowed his eyes. "……Are you serious?"

Bai Liu flicked a single silver coin between his fingers. "I don’t expect it for free. I’ll give you a point in return."

Lobby

Mu Sicheng stared at the silver one-point coin balanced on Bai Liu's fingertips with an expression that could only be described as ghostly. He glanced up at Bai Liu, bewildered.

"Bai Liu, are you kidding me?" Mu Sicheng scoffed. "One point? And you want to use that to buy spirit bleach? Do you even know how expensive spiritual bleach is? Mine's all premium—over a thousand points per bottle! What's the difference between that and regular bleach?"

Bai Liu's smile remained unchanged. "One point plus a demonstration of my personal skill. Is that a deal?" He twirled the coin between his fingers. "You can see my skill first, then rinse my spirit. How about it? You'll probably be the first player to witness my personal skill in action."

Hearing Bai Liu's coaxing tone, Mu Sicheng felt momentarily tempted. But skepticism quickly crept in.

He could just watch Bai Liu's skill and refuse to bleach his spirit afterward. Bai Liu, even in his single-digit spirit state, still seemed lucid—though obviously, he couldn't do anything to Mu Sicheng.

Even if Bai Liu's skill allowed him to steal things, personal skills couldn't be forcibly used in the lobby…

But Bai Liu didn't know that yet.

After thinking it through, Mu Sicheng figured he wouldn't be at a disadvantage anyway. Besides, he was genuinely curious about this newcomer's personal skill.

With a smirk, Mu Sicheng rubbed his nose and reached out, plucking the coin from Bai Liu's fingertips. "Deal. Now show me what you've got, Bai Liu!"

[System Alert: A trade between Player Bai Liu and Player Mu Sicheng has been established. Bai Liu, the poor wanderer, has received a bottle of spiritual bleach.]

[System Reminder: Player Mu Sicheng has gifted Player Bai Liu a bottle of high-quality Spirit Bleach, valued at 1,700 points. This item can restore a player's spirit value from below 20 to its original state.]

A sleek aluminum canister dropped into Bai Liu's hand, resembling a spray paint can. He picked it up, shook it, and—before Mu Sicheng could react—sprayed it directly onto himself.

A white mist of spirit bleach enveloped Bai Liu's face.

Mu Sicheng let out a cry of dismay. "That was the high-spec bleach I stocked up on during the sale!!!"

But before he could snatch it back, Bai Liu had already finished spraying.

As the mist dissipated, Bai Liu stood there, visibly refreshed. Mu Sicheng stared at him, looking utterly betrayed. "What the hell is your personal skill?! Stealing? But you can't steal from other players in the lobby! Only trades are allowed, not theft! How did you take the bleach from my system warehouse?!"

Bai Liu smiled, patting the sulking Mu Sicheng on the shoulder. "I just demonstrated it for you."

"Thanks for the spirit bleach, Mu Sicheng. It works great."

Mu Sicheng was completely dumbfounded. He scrambled to his feet, chasing after Bai Liu like an enraged little monkey. "Explain! What's your personal skill?!"

He even used a strange truth-testing scale prop on Bai Liu.

[Result: Yes.] Which meant Bai Liu hadn't lied to him about anything from the start.

This only made Mu Sicheng even more confused.

Meanwhile, Bai Liu approached Wang Shun for some basic information about the game. When Bai Liu asked about the other newcomers, Wang Shun shook his head regretfully.

"Almost all of them have been wiped out," he admitted. "Except for you. There was one other promising newcomer—Muke. He's still struggling, but he won't last much longer. I just checked on him. He's already dropped into the [Death Comedy] section."

Bai Liu's expression subtly shifted. "What did you say his name was? Muke?"

Wang Shun nodded.

Bai Liu was silent for a moment.

Muke.

The same name as the spoiled young master who had cost Bai Liu his job.

One of the reasons Bai Liu had been fired was because the son of a wealthy executive had parachuted into his company to "experience the struggles of the working class." Bai Liu, who had long been disliked by his supervisor, was conveniently dismissed to make room for this privileged intern.

That young master's name was Muke.

He was infamously bad-tempered. The day Bai Liu was forced out, Muke had taken over his desk—and without a second thought, had thrown away Bai Liu's personal computer, along with all his important files, horror game drafts, and data.

Not just the computer. Everything Bai Liu had left on the desk was gone.

When Bai Liu confronted him, Muke had shrugged indifferently. "It looked old and boring, so I threw it away. If you want, I can buy you a brand-new top-of-the-line model."

Bai Liu had wanted to protest—he had dozens of gigabytes of valuable work stored on that machine. But he was also unemployed, and there was no point in arguing. He couldn't exactly beat the other guy up.

Besides, Muke had a pre-existing heart condition. He was pampered, spoiled, and got whatever he wanted. His little "work experience" in Bai Liu's company had been nothing more than a game of corporate musical chairs.

In the end, Bai Liu had simply taken the high-end computer Muke had offered, paid for all the belongings Muke had discarded (including a half-used pack of tissues), and walked away.

Now, that same Muke was in the game.

Bai Liu's gaze darkened with amusement.

"I want to see this Muke," he said.

Wang Shun hesitated, surprised by Bai Liu's interest, but eventually

nodded. "Alright. I'll take you to the [Death Comedy] section."

Muke's small TV sat in a desolate corner.

In Death Comedy, scenes of players struggling to survive were unpopular—too dull, lacking comedic effect. Only one or two spectators glanced at Muke's tear-streaked face as he desperately fought for his life before quickly losing interest and looking away. Players like him—on the brink of death—were a common sight in this game, no longer entertaining or noteworthy to the audience.

Bai Liu opened his game panel to check [Muke]'s progress and found that he had already unlocked two pages in Muke's [Monster Book]. One of them was [Mermaid Sailor], and the reward on that page was the [Mermaid's Amulet]—a highly valuable item in Bai Liu's eyes.

"Muke has a strong will to live," Wang Shun remarked. He had seen countless players meet their end and offered only a small sigh at Muke's predicament, showing little pity. "But his chances of survival are slim. He managed to get a [Bubble in the Water] through a bounty, but the mermaids popped it almost immediately. After that, no one else placed a bounty for him, and he fell into this section."

"That's not bad for a rookie," Mu Sicheng commented, crossing his arms. "If he were willing to trade that [Mermaid's Amulet] after clearing the level, I'd have given him a bounty pass myself. That item is pretty good. But most players won't easily part with a [Monster Book] item, so I'll just have to watch him die."

Bai Liu also coveted the [Mermaid's Amulet]. From his years of game design experience, he could tell that it was an extremely valuable prop.

But as Mu Sicheng pointed out, even if Bai Liu helped Muke survive by giving him a bounty pass, there was no guarantee that Muke would hand over the amulet afterward. Bai Liu wouldn't give something for nothing.

That said, it wasn't Bai Liu's style to let valuable props sink into oblivion without trying to claim them.

He asked the system in his mind: [System, can I trade with Muke while he's inside the game?]

[System: You and player Muke are not in the same spatial dimension and cannot trade.]

Bai Liu lowered his gaze. Trade required both parties to exist in the same latitude.

[What defines a latitude?]

[System: A latitude is a unified, continuous, and unbroken state of time and space. You and player Muke currently exist in separate dimensions, making trade impossible.]

“Time and space, huh…” Bai Liu absently toyed with the coin hanging around his neck, murmuring, “That doesn’t mean it’s entirely impossible.”

[System, retrieve Siren’s Fishbone.]

[System: Loading item.]

A three-meter-long fishbone, glowing with a faint white fluorescence, materialized in front of Bai Liu.

Its pristine, ivory-white surface was almost translucent, with an amber-like luster. Beautiful—like its original owner, the Siren King. But beneath that beauty lay something brutal. This fishbone had been extracted from an entire mermaid spine, and the gruesome truth gave it an edge of eerie menace.

One end tapered into a sharp spike, while the other formed a smooth, whip-like grip, perfectly balanced.

As if alive, the fishbone coiled around Bai Liu’s waist, its cold, scale-like texture sending a shiver down his spine. Eventually, it settled obediently against his skin, resembling an intricate chain of bones draped over his suit trousers and white shirt.

The spiked tip rested just above Bai Liu’s navel, while the grip end dangled at his hip. At a glance, it looked like an odd fashion accessory —one that didn’t quite fit Bai Liu’s usual attire.

Curious, Mu Sicheng reached out to touch it.

The moment his fingers brushed Bai Liu’s waist, the fishbone snapped at him, driving its spike into his hand with alarming speed. Mu Sicheng yelped, jerking his hand back.

“The hell is this thing?!” He clutched his hand, looking both shocked and pissed. “How can it attack me? Players are supposed to be

separated in the system lobby!”

Even as an A-rank player, Mu Sicheng had lost half his HP from a single strike.

But that wasn’t the most shocking part. The real issue was—you weren’t supposed to be able to attack players inside the lobby.

Lobby

How had that thing managed to drop his life bar into the red?

“Siren’s Fishbone.” Bai Liu made no attempt to hide it. Lifting his shirt slightly, he revealed the fishbone wrapped around his waist. Before he could fully expose it, however, the bone whip abruptly contracted, coiling tightly around his torso and covering any skin that might have been revealed.

Bai Liu remained unbothered. “You should’ve seen this prop in my reward list.”

There was no reason to conceal it. The system had already displayed it publicly, and Bai Liu had no particular intention of hiding the prop’s function. However, his personal skill was a different matter—something worth keeping secret for as long as possible.

That said, Bai Liu was still uncertain about the fishbone’s exact capabilities. He needed to test it. Doing so inside a game was too dangerous—if the item backfired against a monster, it could easily lead to his death.

Testing it outside the game required a subject.

Muke, trapped and on the verge of death, seemed like an ideal candidate—desperate, compliant, and conveniently available.

Bai Liu hadn’t intended to experiment on Mu Sicheng, but the latter’s itchy hands had forced his discovery: the fishbone could attack players inside the system hall. In other words, it could breach space itself.

“They say it can tear through time and space,” Bai Liu mused, glancing at Muke’s small TV. “I’m going to test it on him.” He lifted the whip, preparing to strike.

Wang Shun, already struggling to comprehend Bai Liu’s thought process, panicked. “Wait! Bai Liu, what are you doing?! What if you kill Muke by accident?”

Mu Sicheng, quicker to catch on, let out a low chuckle. “Oh? You’re planning to save him? That’s surprisingly charitable.”

“No.” Bai Liu smiled faintly. “I wouldn’t call it a rescue. I’m going to trade with him.”

With that, Bai Liu uncoiled the fishbone from his waist, giving it a few experimental flicks. Then, taking a deep breath, he raised the whip high and swung it down at Muke's small TV.

The instant he exerted force, his left arm felt as if it had been weighed down by a thousand pounds. The fishbone barely made it through the motion before colliding with an invisible barrier in front of the TV. The impact sent it rebounding, but even that slight contact caused the underwater scene within Muke's TV to tremble violently. The screen flickered as if struggling to maintain a signal.

Then, in an instant—everything shattered.

The world around Bai Liu fractured into something resembling broken glass. Mu Sicheng and Wang Shun became distorted, their forms blurring and stretching like figures on a malfunctioning television screen.

A deep darkness pressed in.

Through it, Bai Liu could hear the distant, rhythmic crash of ocean waves. More distinctly—he heard Muke's hysterical cries for help echoing from the small TV, as if he were physically there.

Muke, sensing someone had arrived in the depths, immediately began screaming.

"Somebody help me!!!"

At the bottom of the ocean, Muke had collapsed in a burst bubble of water, his body trembling as he sobbed uncontrollably. He was desperate—willing to do anything.

"Please! Save me!"

Bai Liu lifted the whip again, ready to take another swing—

But the system's voice cut in abruptly.

[System Warning: The use of this item places an extreme burden on Bai Liu. If he attempts to use it again, he will be forcibly pulled into the game.]

Bai Liu immediately gave up the idea.

[So… am I currently in the same latitude as Muke?]

[System: Calculating…]

[Player Bai Liu and Player Muke's latitudes have partially overlapped due to an external force. Player Bai Liu is currently in the rift between two torn latitudes. At this moment, he can transmit sound but not images, allowing for limited transactions.]

"…Only my voice, huh?" Bai Liu murmured, considering the implications.

He lowered his gaze to Muke's trembling figure on the small TV. Then, in a low, measured voice, he whispered:

"Muke."

Muke jerked violently at the sound of his name. He scrambled forward on his hands and knees, gasping, his entire body wracked with terror and desperation. His cries turned raw, almost animalistic.

"I'm here!! Who—what are you?! Please—help me!"

Bai Liu's voice remained calm.

"I'm a vagrant."

He watched as Muke curled in on himself, utterly broken.

It was almost impossible to reconcile this sobbing, pleading man with the arrogant young master who had once dismissed him so condescendingly.

Once upon a time, Muke had treated Bai Liu as nothing more than a worthless drifter—someone beneath notice, someone to be cast aside.

Now, in a bitter twist of fate, he was begging that very same drifter for his life.

And Bai Liu?

He would take everything Muke had left—whatever scraps of value remained.

A terrible bargain was about to be made.

And Bai Liu would enjoy every second of it.

"I can save you, but not for free—I'm poor too," Bai Liu said matter-of-

factly. "You'll have to make a deal with me. In exchange for rescuing you, I'll give you reward points, but you'll need to offer me something in return."

"Yes! Anything you want! Just save me!!!" Muke cried desperately, reaching out as if grasping for an unseen god. "Are you a god? Or part of the system? Where are you?! What do you want from me? Money? Something else? I don't have anything on me right now... but please, don't leave me! I want to live!!!"

"I'm no god," Bai Liu replied coolly. "And objectively speaking, I doubt you'd consider me a good presence in your life."

He had no deep-seated malice toward the young master—just an ordinary level of dislike. But Bai Liu was self-aware enough to know that even his "ordinary" dislike could be terrifying in itself. He thought about it for a moment before concluding, "If anything, you should probably see me as more of a devil."

"A devil..." Muke's breath hitched, his pupils contracting. Then, as if something clicked, his eyes suddenly burned with determination. "Do you want my soul? If you save me, I'll give it to you!"

Bai Liu had originally intended to ask for Muke's [Mermaid's Amulet], but his brow arched in mild surprise. This was... an unexpected proposal.

He did need the amulet, but he also needed a test subject to experiment with his strange skill, [Old Wallet]. One of its descriptions implied that he could trade souls...

"Deal." Bai Liu smiled, pulling two hundred points from his crumpled wallet. He tossed them toward Muke's small TV. The coin on his chest flickered, and the points vanished.

[System: Player Bai Liu has spent 200 points to purchase Player Muke's soul.]
[System Notification: Player Muke has received 200 points.]

Muke gasped, staring at the system notification as though he couldn't believe his eyes. "You really are a devil! I sold you my soul, and all I got was 200 points?! That's barely enough to buy props!"

"I told you—I'm a poor wanderer." Bai Liu responded calmly. "But 200 points, plus that broken air bubble you're in, is enough to keep you alive. Now, open your system shop and buy alcohol. Yes, alcohol. And

can you stop crying already? You're wailing louder than I can talk, brother..."

When Muke finally cleared the level, Bai Liu noticed something new in his wallet—a coin unlike the others. It resembled a Polaroid, with Muke's black-and-white smiling face printed on its surface. In the corner, the number [200 points] was stamped, and on the back, the words [Soul Coin] were inscribed.

[Item: Player Muke's Soul Coin]
[Effect: You own the soul debt of Player Muke and have full rights to dominate, control, raise, and erase Player Muke.]

Dominate, regulate, nurture, erase. Bai Liu narrowed his eyes. That's... everything the system does to players.

So this was called [soul debt ownership]?

In other words, the system held the soul debts of all players. If that was the case, didn't that mean every player had already sold their soul to the system the moment they entered the game?

Interesting.

Bai Liu tilted his head thoughtfully. "So... does this mean I'm Muke's system now? Between me and the official game system, who has more authority over him?"

[System: Calculating...]
[Result: When Player Bai Liu's commands regarding Player Muke conflict with the system's, the system's decision will take priority—due to Player Bai Liu's current lack of power.]

Ah, so it was based on strength.

If I get stronger... can I strip the system of its authority over Muke? He smirked. Or maybe... even dominate the system itself?

The thought was exhilarating.

Stepping out of the dark void, Bai Liu felt an intense dizziness spiral through him, his legs nearly giving out beneath him. The exhaustion from overusing his abilities hit him like a freight train.

Wang Shun rushed over, catching Bai Liu before he collapsed. "What just happened to you? You swung the whip and then suddenly froze!"

Mu Sicheng, however, was watching him intently, eyes gleaming with intrigue. "How did you do that? Just now, Muke cleared the level in exactly the same way you did before."

Reality

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"My personal skills," Bai Liu said, smiling weakly at him. "Curious, aren't you? Want me to show you my personal skills again? I'm at zero stamina right now, so if you give me a bottle of stamina restorer, I'll show you once more."

"Of course, I'm not going to just give you a stamina restorer for nothing," Bai Liu continued, pulling out another point coin and flashing his usual mischievous grin. "How about a point for you?"

Mu Sicheng stared at him, unamused. "....."

Well, I wouldn't trade with you!

One minute later...

[System Alert: Trade established. Bai Liu the Wanderer receives a bottle of Stamina Restorer.]

[System Reminder: Player Mu Sicheng has given Player Bai Liu a bottle of Stamina Restorer, worth 180 points, which can restore 90 points of stamina to the player.]

Mu Sicheng was livid. He wanted to pounce on Bai Liu and strangle him while he lazily drank the rejuvenator. He demanded, "How the hell did you do that?! Stealing and looting are forbidden here! Only trading and giving props to each other is allowed! You can't steal from my game warehouse!"

Twice, Bai Liu had done it. Twice with the plum!

Only Mu Sicheng had ever stolen from others—this was the first time in his life someone had stolen from him!

Bai Liu casually drained the stamina restorer in one gulp. He stretched, feeling the strength return to his arms and legs, and then glanced at Mu Sicheng with a sly smile. "If you want me to show you more, you can..."

"No, it's not necessary," Mu Sicheng interrupted with an expressionless face. He was not going to fall for Bai Liu's trick again.

"Ah, my residency fee from yesterday is due. I need to quit the game," Wang Shun said, stepping forward and preparing to exit. "Bai Liu, to stay in this lobby, you need to pay the system's daily stay fee. For your level, it's 100 points per day."

"My fee's due, so I'll be off now. See you next time." Wang Shun bid Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng a polite farewell.

"Tch, I'm getting off too." Mu Sicheng glanced at his watch and then at Bai Liu. "I've got things to do in the real world, so I'll see you next time, Bai Liu."

"Next time I come to play a game with you," Mu Sicheng added, his grin turning nasty. "I'll get back everything you cheated out of me today."

With those words, the two of them vanished from the game hall. Bai Liu followed Wang Shun to the exit of the [Newcomers' Area], where Muke cowered in a corner, trembling, tears staining his face.

The young master had a delicate, almost boyish look, a soft, Japanese appearance that was undeniably pretty. His red eyes, with tears clinging to his eyelashes, could easily evoke sympathy from any girl.

But Bai Liu, a money-driven, androgynous game designer with little empathy for human appearance, wasn't easily moved. It took someone like Siren King to catch his attention.

Bai Liu crouched down in front of Muke, who flinched warily, his body tense, tears still in his eyes. A fierce hostility lingered on his face as he hissed, "Get out of my way!"

"No," Bai Liu replied calmly, his gaze unwavering. "Second meeting, young master Mu."

Muke froze, staring up at Bai Liu with confusion in his eyes. His tears dripped onto the floor, and he hiccupped, unsure how to react. For a moment, he stopped yelling at Bai Liu and just stared at him blankly.

He knew this voice. This was the voice of the one who had saved his life when he was on the brink of death—the one who had burned away the monsters he couldn't escape, for just 200 points. The one who claimed to be a poor wanderer.

Bai Liu continued to look down at Muke, his tone composed. "It's the second time you've seen me, but it seems you don't remember. That's

fine. We're starting a new relationship now."

Bai Liu extended a hand toward Muke. "So, Muke, first time meeting. I'm the owner of your soul contract. My name is Bai Liu."

It was only after a long pause that Muke suddenly broke into tears, as if he had been holding them back for too long. He rushed forward, clinging to Bai Liu tightly.

"What took you so long to get here?!"

In that moment, Muke felt as though he was embracing a demon he had no choice but to rely on. But later, he would realize that the demon was, in fact, a god in disguise.

He had given his faith and soul to Bai Liu, who in return gave him a new life, and perhaps... something more.

Later that evening, Bai Liu logged out of the game with Muke, who was still clinging to him.

Muke's eyes were red and swollen from crying, and he cried through the night, clutching Bai Liu's sleeve. He had sold his soul to Bai Liu, but he couldn't bear the thought of being abandoned.

It was a strange comfort.

Bai Liu understood that Muke's overwhelming sense of security came from the idea that Bai Liu, the supposed bad guy, was the one he relied on. But Bai Liu knew better: if Muke didn't snap out of his fear soon, he wouldn't be leaving Bai Liu's house anytime soon.

And yet, Bai Liu didn't want to keep Muke in his house for too long.

The reason was simple—Muke was terribly annoying when he cried.

So, five minutes after Muke had finally fallen asleep, Bai Liu called his boss and asked him to collect Muke, who was still staying at his place.

His boss, shocked by the sudden call, spilled coffee on his keyboard.

He had never liked Bai Liu as a subordinate. Bai Liu had too many of his own ideas about game design and rarely followed market trends. Every time his boss asked for something, Bai Liu would insist the game was complete and that adding anything else would break the plot.

It wasn't that Bai Liu was disobedient or seeking a raise. It was just that he was blunt and honest—something his boss had never appreciated until he was the one dealing with Muke.

Now that Muke was under his care, his boss realized what Bai Liu had been putting up with. But he had no choice—Muke was a handful, and he had to pick him up, no matter how awkward it was.

When he arrived at Bai Liu's house, his boss was a little embarrassed to see Bai Liu. But Bai Liu felt nothing.

With the money in his hand, Bai Liu calmly observed everyone around him. Even when he saw the boss, the one who was always trying to tell him what to do and knew nothing, Bai Liu politely opened the door and let him in. "Muke is still sleeping," he said. "He cried all night and just fell asleep. Please, don't wake him."

Bai Liu's intention was simple: let Muke sleep and avoid further aggravating his distress. But as Muke clung to Bai Liu's shirt (which Bai Liu had carelessly handed over to him) and curled up into a ball on the bed, his red eyes and bruised skin – signs of the game's aftermath – became evident. Bai Liu's words prompted the boss to stiffen in realization.

So, Bai Liu and Muke shared that kind of relationship? Why didn't Bai Liu mention this earlier? If he had, the boss might not have dared to fire anyone.

"Well, in that case," the supervisor stammered, "you can let Muke continue to sleep here, Bai Liu. The young master is incredibly temperamental when woken up, especially after such a long night."

The boss glanced uneasily at Muke, noting the strange behavior – Bai Liu had tossed the young master around like this, only to call someone in to collect him afterward. It felt... a bit scummy.

But Bai Liu simply refused. "No. Get rid of him. His crying is annoying me."

The boss froze. What a scumbag! How could Bai Liu get away with making such a callous remark?

Muke began to stir as the conversation continued. His eyelashes fluttered, and he groggily hugged Bai Liu's shirt tighter, murmuring, "Bai Liu…"

Bai Liu didn't acknowledge it. He had grown used to the judgmental looks his boss gave him when he made comments or requested something. Calmly, he called out, "Muke, get up. Someone's here to pick you up."

Muke slowly opened his eyes. Upon seeing his boss by his bedside, he understood – Bai Liu had called someone to take him away.

Muke's reaction was immediate. He tried to grab Bai Liu's hand, scolding his boss irritably, his back arching like a cat being dragged to a place it hated. "Go away! I'm not going back! I'm staying here!"

"This is my place." Bai Liu's voice remained cool as he dodged Muke's hand. "And I won't let you stay here. Muke, go back."

Muke froze, his attempt to grab Bai Liu's hand faltering midway. His eyes started to redden again, and his lips trembled. "Bai Liu, I'll be good. Don't drive me away…"

Bai Liu didn't soften. "I'm telling you what to do, Muke. You don't have the right to refuse."

Bai Liu understood why Muke didn't want to leave. The man's survival instinct was strong, and after Bai Liu saved him, Muke subconsciously equated staying with Bai Liu to staying alive. He feared the environment outside Bai Liu's protection.

Tears streamed down Muke's face as he bit his lip. After a long moment, he finally got out of bed, pale and trembling, standing behind his boss like a frightened child. His fear was palpable.

Bai Liu studied Muke with a cold, calculating gaze. He had to guide this player, whose soul seemed so fragile, just like the system would guide a new player.

"Muke, if you continue being this weak, unable to live without me, and without anything valuable to offer, then I'll abandon you," Bai Liu whispered. "Understand? Because I can always find more people like you, but you only have me."

"I… I know," Muke replied softly, his lips pale. He wiped his eyes, trying to control his sobs. "I'll try to be useful to you."

The boss, who had witnessed the entire interaction, felt as though he had just watched a cold, ruthless display. He stood frozen in shock, fear creeping into his expression. How could Bai Liu speak to Muke,

the young master, in such a way?

Muke, still in a daze, followed his boss. As they reached the door, he asked quietly, “Mr. Mu, what is your relationship with Bai Liu?”

“What relationship?” Muke’s eyes were vacant, as if he were speaking to himself. “I belong to him. He owns my soul. He’s my master.”

The boss blinked in stunned silence. What the hell are they playing at?

Bai Liu, of course, was no stranger to the rumors and reactions surrounding his manipulative nature. In the eyes of others, he was a cunning strategist, an S-type dominant with a grip on Muke’s every weakness.

With Muke gone, Bai Liu sat before his top-tier alien computer, a gift from Muke, and began searching for information on Siren Village. He scrolled through searches, tried reverse lookups, and even checked the name “Jeff Andre.” But nothing came up.

Bai Liu rubbed his stiff neck, deep in thought. If the game was a mere virtual product, then how had it followed him into the real world?

His eyes darkened as his fingers absentmindedly brushed against a coin dangling from a thin thread around his neck, a memento of his in-game manager. But as he fiddled with the coin, something else caught his attention—a translucent, ice-like fish scale hanging alongside it.

It was then that Bai Liu realized he now wore an extra scale, one that had inexplicably followed him out of the game. This was the [Siren's Reverse Scale], an item he didn’t remember pulling out.

The system’s message for the scale lingered in his mind: The fish scale represents Siren King’s reply to your fondness and is expected to be worn by the player for a long time.

Though Bai Liu had worn it overnight without noticing anything odd, he now found himself thinking about the implications. If the game was entirely virtual, how could physical objects like coins and scales manifest in reality?

He sat in silence, pondering the situation. There had to be a reason these traces were here. Yet, strangely, despite hundreds of players logged into the game, no traces of its existence could be found online.

Everything should have left a mark. Bai Liu narrowed his eyes.

Unless the traces had been erased.

He quickly opened his Weibo account, typed out a specific message about Siren and the game, and clicked send. As soon as he did, the message vanished, as if it had never existed.

Chapter End Notes

> The scamming is just, chefs kiss □

Reality

Sure enough, the [Game] has authority over the [real world] and can manipulate [facts] in reality.

This is a world that has been tampered with, and they, the chosen [players] who have discovered this [reality], are [banned] from revealing even the slightest hint of it.

I don't know how far this [ban] can extend, but things that are objectively recorded can be easily altered or erased. For example, the words written on paper or tweets sent to friends can be deleted without a trace.

Bai Liu found his old phone in the drawer, its screen still broken. He dialed a friend's number from it and began explaining everything that had happened to him, cutting him off before he could respond. "Six, five..."

"What are you counting down for? Tell me more about this, is it true? You're not making it up, right? This is too exciting!" his friend exclaimed.

Bai Liu lowered his gaze. "Three, two, one."

His friend's voice abruptly stopped, only to become confused. "Eh? Bai Liu, why are you calling me? When did I even answer your phone? I don't remember anything!"

"It's nothing," Bai Liu replied casually, "I just missed you and called."

Seven seconds—that was the time it took for Bai Liu's tweet to disappear completely, a fact he marked in his mind. He didn't realize that the [game] could tamper with something as [non-objective] as human memory so easily. In just seven seconds, the memory had been erased without a second wasted.

It seems that altering a person's memory is no more difficult for [the game] than modifying a piece of data.

His friend, who knew Bai Liu well, laughed and asked, "Seriously, what's going on? Why are you calling me? What's up?"

"I was thinking about something," Bai Liu said, tapping his fingers absentmindedly on the table. He began writing down his experiences

in the game, watching as the words vanished one by one. “Lu Yizhan, do you think people only have seven seconds of memory?”

Lu Yizhan’s voice sounded confused. “Why are you thinking about such a philosophical question? And isn’t it wrong? The original saying is that a fish only has a seven-second memory.”

“Am I misremembering?” Bai Liu lazily propped himself up. “Maybe. With only seven seconds of memory, misremembering seems normal. But, hey, what if the original saying was [Humans only have seven seconds of memory], and then something tampered with it, changing it to [Fish only have seven seconds of memory], just to fool us humans who only remember for seven seconds?”

Lu Yizhan, used to Bai Liu’s strange musings since he lost his job, laughed and cried at the same time. “What are you thinking about after losing your job? I got paid today; I’ll buy you dinner. Stop thinking about fish and seven-second memories. If people only had seven seconds of memory, what would we do? We’d never be able to memorize the terms and conditions!”

“I’ll come if you invite me to dinner,” Bai Liu said casually, tossing the coin around his neck into his collar. The cool touch of Siren King’s scales pressed against his heart. Before he could hang up, he asked, almost haunted, “If humans and fish both only have seven seconds of memory, then how long do you think a mermaid’s memory lasts?”

“Why are you still stuck on this, and now bringing up mermaids?” Lu Yizhan chuckled helplessly. “According to your theory, if both humans and fish have seven-second memories, then a mermaid’s memory must be even shorter—just a fraction of a second?”

“I suppose so.”

Even though he’d said goodbye to the mermaid named Tawil, the man likely forgot about him the moment Bai Liu left.

Bai Liu rarely felt a sense of loss from being forgotten or ignored. He didn’t seek human approval and was content as long as he had money to entertain himself. But Siren King—he was a beautiful anomaly in the data. Even someone like Bai Liu, who rarely felt emotion, couldn’t help but feel a tinge of regret at having those few seconds erased from his partner’s memory.

But it was just a little bit—a bit the size of a fish scale.

The two had become unshakable friends, bonding over shared information about discount raffles. Some people even thought they only hung out because they were both orphans who understood each other's misery.

When Bai Liu sat down at the barbecue stall, Lu Yizhan winked at him. "Bai Liu, I'm getting married."

"Congratulations," Bai Liu replied without surprise. He'd known Lu Yizhan and his girlfriend had been together for years, so marriage was natural. "Then today's meal is on me. I'll give you two thousand for your share later."

Lu Yizhan nearly sprayed cold beer in Bai Liu's face, his eyes wide with shock. "Are you crazy? Another treat to pay for my share? And two thousand?! Didn't you say you'd never pay for a wedding?"

Yes, Bai Liu had made that statement at a colleague's wedding.

This colleague, who didn't get along with Bai Liu and often gossiped about him, had been trying to get Bai Liu to pay for his share, claiming that others had contributed 12,000, so Bai Liu should do the same.

That's when Bai Liu had coldly said, "I'm not married, so I'm not paying for a stranger's wedding. It's an investment that won't pay off."

The colleague had turned red with anger and cursed at Bai Liu behind his back, saying he'd be cut off from his grandchildren.

But Bai Liu wasn't fazed. He didn't care about having kids, so the curse didn't bother him. It was simply an objective prediction about his future.

"Not necessarily," Bai Liu replied, taking a sip of beer. "I just don't give money to strangers. But you're not a stranger. We've been through some things, and it's not an invalid investment for me to pay for your share."

"I'm just happy you're getting married and invited me. I don't have many friends, so I'm glad you're here. Really, forget about it."

"We'll talk about it when you have money," Lu Yizhan said, waving his hand as if pushing the topic away.

Bai Liu's meticulousness was just his nature, while Lu Yizhan's

tendency to scrounge was a way of life.

Lu Yizhan, a poor policeman, had recently seen an improvement in his financial situation, but he was still better off than Bai Liu, who was unemployed. He really didn't want Bai Liu paying for his share.

After eating a skewer of grilled meat, Bai Liu wiped his mouth and casually said, "I've made 100,000 this week."

"Pfft—!!!" Lu Yizhan sputtered. "What have you been doing?!"

He knew Bai Liu wouldn't lie about earning 100,000, but he was genuinely shocked. "You're not doing something illegal, are you? I'll arrest you myself!"

Lu Yizhan knew Bai Liu had a sharp mind, but it was often used in strange ways, like designing horror games or devising plots for unmarked crimes. So when he heard Bai Liu had become rich, his first reaction wasn't jealousy but to pull out his phone, ready to call the police.

Lu Yizhan knew that Bai Liu had a low moral compass, and with his "money hoarding" issues, it was hard to tell what Bai Liu might do without a legitimate income.

"I changed jobs. Don't be so nervous. It's legal," Bai Liu said, grinning as he peeled peanuts. "The job pays well. It's just a bit more dangerous, but it suits me fine."

"What kind of job pays that much?" Lu Yizhan asked, skeptical. "100,000 a week?"

"Well, it's probably selling my soul to some underground organization I can't tell you about." Bai Liu stroked his chin, trying to explain his experiences in [the game] without revealing too much.

"Then I'd perform on stage, or livestream, selling my body and soul. Some people would abuse and bully me, and then show it to the audience. A few people watching would reward me with money, and that's how I'd make 100,000."

"..." Lu Yizhan looked at him with a mixture of confusion, shock, horror, and finally pity. He sighed, "Are you working as a duck in a nightclub, Bai Liu?"

Bai Liu: "..."

After Bai Liu's explanation, Lu Yizhan reluctantly believed he wasn't doing that, but insisted that he wouldn't accept any money from Bai Liu. He couldn't take it!

Bai Liu: "..."

If this is how Yizhan interpreted things, then maybe it wasn't entirely impossible.

After a brief celebration, Bai Liu returned home to rest for two days. He paid his landlord six months' rent, tidied up his apartment, and prepared to enter the [game].

Although the [game] only required players to log in once every seven days, Bai Liu felt an undeniable pull to enter early. He needed to uncover something else, something more urgent.

But before that, a meal. Even if he died in the game, it would be like a last meal before death. With that thought, Bai Liu headed downstairs to enjoy a bowl of noodles topped with a fried egg.

The small noodle shop downstairs was well-known for its flavor. The greasy television set perched above the counter showed social news, broadcasting directly in Bai Liu's line of sight as he ate.

The female news anchor's voice echoed clearly: "Lawyers for Li Gou, the prime suspect in the rape and murder of a senior schoolgirl, have filed a lawsuit claiming insufficient evidence to uphold his death sentence. They are preparing for a second trial—"

A stark image appeared on the screen: a grim-faced suspect with his eyes mosaicked, juxtaposed with a smiling girl in a school uniform, her eyes also blurred out. The juxtaposition felt disturbingly wrong.

The male owner of the noodle shop glanced up at the screen, wiping his hands on his apron. He shook his head, sighing. "What a sin... Such a good girl ruined. If I were her parents, I'd be going out of my mind right now. Everything was set for the sentence, and now they say there's not enough evidence? Suddenly, the evidence vanishes? The internet's furious about it."

The news anchor's voice continued in a calm, yet unsettling tone: "The victim's family is in deep emotional turmoil and has gathered outside the courthouse, demanding justice. Authorities are investigating and trying to defuse the situation."

The background video cut to a scene where a middle-aged woman, gaunt and frail, was being restrained by a group of people. Her eyes were sunken, hollowed by grief, and she wiped away her tears with a trembling hand, only for more to fall with every breath.

Her cry shattered the silence: "She was only 18! Why is the evidence gone? Where is the proof of what that monster did to my daughter, Guoguo? Are you covering for him?"

A middle-aged man, pinned to the ground by security, screamed in agony. His clothes were torn from the struggle, his face drenched in tears. "Let me go! Give my daughter justice! I swore to her grave I'd make that bastard pay!"

Then, on the screen, Li Gou's face appeared, his eyes mosaicked, his lips curled into a subtle smirk. Despite the mosaic, his smugness seeped through. "I didn't do it. All the evidence was fabricated by those two families to frame me," he sneered.

"I'm a good man," Li Gou murmured in a low, hoarse voice. His smile widened as he continued, "Those who spread rumors about me deserve to burn." His eerie expression grew even more sinister.

"Such a tragedy," the panel boss said from the television, his voice soft and choked as he wiped away tears. "I know these two families. They used to live on our street. Their daughter, Guoguo, was such a good girl... How could something like this happen?"

Bai Liu took the last bite of his noodles, his gaze locked on the screen. He raised an eyebrow, his thoughts shifting. "Evidence disappearing suddenly... That method of erasing things from existence... It's reminiscent of the [game]'s [ban] technique."

"Where is this girl's grave?" Bai Liu asked, looking at the noodle shop owner. "Or do you have her parents' contact information?"

The noodle shop owner blinked, caught off guard. "I do, but... why do you want it, Bai Liu?"

"I might be able to help them," Bai Liu replied, wiping his mouth and standing up. He placed a ten-dollar bill under his bowl and pushed it gently aside.

The noodle shop owner stared at him in confusion. "Help them? How?"

"By using unconventional, but legal means," Bai Liu said coolly.

Bai Liu had already realized the true nature of the game. It wasn't just a game—it was a pyramid scheme, and the players were the pawns. One event after another, seemingly unrelated, was set into motion, leading each player down a path of despair, one that eventually trapped them into violent desires. And then, those desires fed the game itself, turning people into players who sold their souls in exchange for temporary satisfaction.

To enter the game, a person's desire had to be so overpowering it transcended life and death. Bai Liu's own desire for money was a perfect example.

If Bai Liu's assumption was correct, another set of parents would soon be drawn into the world of [players].

Li Gou, too, was likely a player. He must have used some kind of tool to erase the evidence of his crime. His actions had pushed the grieving parents into such desperation that they now sought vengeance—a perfect match for the game's criteria.

It reminded Bai Liu of [Muke], who parachuted into Bai Liu's previous life because of a twisted desire to experience something different, forcing Bai Liu into the game after losing his job and succumbing to his unquenchable thirst for money.

Everyone in this world was just a pawn, a mere block in the game. [The game] toyed with their lives like a god, playing them as if they were nothing more than pieces on a board, each move calculated to bring about their inevitable downfall.

What a cunning, cruel [game].

Reality

The noodle shop owner handed Bai Liu two one-dollar coins, which he tucked into his old wallet. After a long hesitation, the kind-faced shop owner passed him a slip of paper with their phone number and address, speaking with a sigh. “If you can help, do so. It’s not easy to live.”

It was drizzling when Bai Liu left the noodle shop. With a plain black umbrella in hand, he took the bus to the cemetery the shop owner had mentioned. Among the gravestones, he soon found the parents who had appeared on television.

They stood in front of their daughter's tombstone, umbrella-less, red-eyed, and drenched in rain. The only umbrella they had was placed over a black-and-white photograph of a smiling Guoguo on the stone.

“You are... Bai Liu?” The mother’s voice was hoarse, muffled from crying all morning. She glared at him, suspicion in her eyes. “You called, saying you could bring Li Gou to justice. What do you have in mind? Or do you want money?”

Bai Liu smiled through the rain, the mist creating a strange halo around his face. His expression had an oddly holy air to it. “I’ve come to make a deal, but I don’t want money.”

This was probably the first time in Bai Liu’s life he had ever said such a thing.

“I will help you fulfill your wishes,” he continued, “I’ll help you dismember Li Gou, but in return, you’ll sell me your souls.”

The mother snorted. “A soul? Another liar.”

She turned her attention back to the black-and-white photograph of Guoguo, her eyes welling up again.

The father eyed Bai Liu warily. Over the years, they had sought help from many people regarding the Guoguo case, trying all kinds of methods. They had encountered their fair share of scammers.

They had come to this man, believing he could bring retribution to Li Gou, and were ready for him to be a fraud. But still, they were willing to take the chance.

“Liar,” the father spat. “Get out!”

Bai Liu remained unmoved, squatting down on one knee. He looked up at the photograph of Guoguo, reading the details aloud:

“Li Gou, age 47, killed Liu Guoguo, a schoolgirl, at the entrance of Ma Family Lane a few months ago. He was sentenced to death for the severity of the crime. But a week ago, all evidence and documents related to the case mysteriously disappeared. People involved now have vague memories, unsure whether they ever saw the evidence.”

Liu Guoguo’s parents' eyes filled with rage. Both clenched their fists, teeth gritted, glaring at Bai Liu.

Bai Liu continued, his voice steady and calm, unaware that his words were pushing the parents toward a boiling point. “If I’m not mistaken, Li Gou himself said he would get out of jail. He claimed the evidence would disappear.”

“How do you know?” the mother asked, her voice shaking.

They had kept a close eye on Li Gou’s behavior in prison. He had been violent and deranged when he was first incarcerated. Over the last week or two, he’d become unnervingly calm, even humming songs, speaking about how he would eventually be free, how the evidence would vanish, how God wouldn’t wrong the good guys.

“It seems he was expecting to be released,” the mother murmured, her suspicion rising.

“Well, you can understand it as Li Gou making a deal with some kind of devil,” Bai Liu said, his eyes now focused on the hesitant, suspicious parents. “He sold his soul to erase the evidence without even realizing it. I’m here to make a deal with this demon.”

Liu Guoguo’s parents exchanged skeptical looks. They weren’t entirely convinced, but desperation and hope hung in their gazes.

It was possible that Bai Liu was a fraud who knew something about Li Gou. After all, they had already tried everything, even hiring a fortune-teller to perform a superstition for Guoguo’s soul—a practice they would have once laughed at.

“What are your terms?” the mother asked cautiously. “Is it money? Because we don’t have much left.”

Bai Liu smiled. “I told you from the start—I don’t want money. What I want is the right to your soul debts. Unharmed.”

He was just curious what would happen to the system if he preemptively acquired these [player] souls before they even entered [the game].

Would it give him higher access to these players than the system had?

If Bai Liu had more soul authority than [the system] itself over the parents, could he manipulate their systems to his advantage? Ultimately, could he dominate the system?

Bai Liu liked money, but he hated the idea of being controlled in order to earn it. That oppressive feeling, like being the lowliest employee in a company, was something he wanted to avoid. So, he wanted to see if he could turn the tables, seize control, and gain supreme authority.

Suddenly, the coin hanging from Bai Liu’s chest began to glow, sending a jolt of warning signals into his ears.

[System Warning: Zillah – Player Bai Liu – Zillah – is forbidden from preemptively acquiring a reserve player’s soul debt! Player Bai Liu is forbidden from trading with non-players outside of the game!]

[System Warning: About to block player Bai Liu’s old wallet skill!]

Bai Liu sighed, clearly disappointed. “Can’t I even grab the soul of a [reserve player] that [the game] has taken a liking to while the [real world] is under observation...?”

It made sense that [the game] wouldn’t allow a player to have higher privileges than it. If Bai Liu were the game designer, he’d do the same. But still, it was worth a try, even if it didn’t work.

He was about to give up when he noticed something strange: the fish scales hanging from his chest began to grow, slowly wrapping around the coin.

The cool scales wrapped around the warm coin, cooling it down instantly. The system emitted a harsh, electric scream.

[Warning – Zizi – Invasion by anomalous data in fish scale – Invasion by bug data – Undergoing anomalous data clearance – Clearance failed – Anomalous data overwhelming – Zizzy Zizzy]

A sudden jolt of electricity surged through the system, and then a cold, magnetic voice emerged from the chaos.

[System: Hello, Bai Liu. Do you wish to use your personal skills?]

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow, intrigued. The voice had a slight familiarity to it, colder than the system's usual voice but almost... pleasant. It reminded him of the NPC he met, [Siren King]...

He smirked. [Of course, I will.]

Liu Guoguo's parents couldn't make sense of what Bai Liu was saying. They hesitated, but desperation still outweighed their doubt. Even if Bai Liu was a fraud, even if it was all nonsense, they were willing to try anything for a glimmer of hope.

The mother broke down first, covering her face and kneeling. Tearfully, she said, "If you can get Li Gou killed, you can have anything you want! Take it all! I'll give you all the money I have!"

She was treating Bai Liu like some sort of triad.

Bai Liu smirked, shaking his head. "No, I won't ask for a penny of your money. On the contrary, I'll return something to you."

He pulled the two coins the noodle shop owner had given him from his old wallet, spread them out in the palm of his hand, and handed them over.

"I'll buy your souls for a dollar each," he said softly. "Will you make this deal with me?"

The mother gritted her teeth and took the coin. After a few seconds of hesitation, the father took it as well.

"Willingly."

No matter what this man did, as long as he helped them take revenge for Guoguo, they were willing to give it a shot, even if he was a psychopath spouting nonsense.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu used 2 RMB to purchase the souls of Liu Fu and Xiang Chunhua.]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu is the preferred purchaser of Liu Fu and Xiang Chunhua and has the highest authority to transfer the right to sell Liu Fu and Xiang Chunhua's soul debt in part.]

Xiang Chunhua felt a strange warmth spreading through her body, like something heavy was being pulled from her soul and stored somewhere else.

She looked at Bai Liu, who was smiling, and felt an inexplicable sense of trust and sincerity.

“Your name is Bai Liu, right?” she asked drowsily. “What do you do? Where can we find you?”

“I’m unemployed,” Bai Liu answered with a glance at a new coin in his wallet. “You’ll find me in a game, and hopefully, when I see you again, you’ll have made it through the first game alive.”

The coin in his hand shimmered, showing Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu standing beside Guoguo’s tombstone. Their tear-streaked faces were filled with despair, as they gently stroked the stone as if caressing their child’s head. The photograph on the stone was of Guoguo, smiling as if under an umbrella, protected from the rain. At the bottom right corner of the coin was [2 Yuan], and on the back, [Soul Coin]. The coin’s inscription read: [Not issued by the system bank, highest authority does not belong to the system, belongs to the owner Bai Liu.]

Bai Liu smiled slightly.

[Hey, new system, well done.]

The system was silent for two seconds. [Thanks for the compliment.]

The fish scales around the coin warmed before returning to their usual coldness.

With less than two days left before the system’s mandatory weekly game countdown, Bai Liu prepared for the game.

He finished up his tasks, messaged Muke that he was entering the game, and tried calling Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu, but they didn’t answer. They were likely already asleep, ready for the game.

Bai Liu showered, changed into his favorite cozy clown nightcap with pompoms, and pulled on Benny’s pajamas. Lying under the duvet, he held the coin close to his chest and murmured to himself.

[Login to the game.]

[System: Is player Bai Liu confirmed to log in?]

Bai Liu closed his eyes. [Confirmed.]

[System: Accessing…]

Suddenly, Bai Liu snapped his eyes open, jumped out of bed, ran to the bathroom to turn off all the valves—gas, water, and electricity—and then lay back down with a satisfied sigh.

“Now, you can start logging in, or I’ll waste money by leaving these valves open while I’m asleep, leaking water, electricity, and gas.”

[System: ……]

[System: Logging into the game now…]

Bai Liu fell into a swirling black sleep. When he awoke, he found himself standing in a hall full of people.

[System: Since player Bai Liu has a small amount of popularity, would you like to adjust your appearance to hide your identity?]

[You can adjust your appearance? Bai Liu thought, curious. [Can I design my own appearance?]]

He was quite good at sketching faces.

[System: Yes, you can enter the independent face design program for 300 points. Will player Bai Liu proceed?]

[Oh, I have to pay, huh? Bai Liu quickly gave up, thinking, [Then just do whatever you want for free.]

[System: Entering random face adjustment program—eye color change (black → blue), hair color change (black → seven colors), lip color (flesh → black)...]

Bai Liu wasn’t expecting anything too appealing, but he didn’t mind. He accepted the weird, killer look with open arms. After all, he wouldn’t even be able to see it.

Lobby

Bai Liu was browsing the forums on the game manager, walking around to learn more about the inner workings of the game.

The game lobby consists of three areas: the [Live TV] area, the [Game Login] area, and the [Game Logout] area.

Players can log in to the game in the [Game Login Area]. After logging in, the game will be featured on various mini TVs in the [Live Mini TV] area. Those who succeed will log out in the [Game Logout Area], while those who fail will be trapped in the game forever, either fully transformed into monsters or dying.

The most complex of the three areas is the [Live Small TV] area.

This area is a maze, with different sections decorated in a variety of ways, set in a mosaic of each other. Bai Liu almost lost his focus in the overwhelming variety of zones and promotions, with millions of small TVs showing different players playing the game.

Bai Liu's TVB has been to the [Newcomer Zone], [Deadly Comedy Zone], and [Single Player Zone]—just three of the thousands of zones in the [Live TVB Zone]. The promotions vary greatly, with dozens of different categories in one zone.

However, some promotion spots are more prestigious than others.

Among all the promotion spots, the most difficult to attain and the most valuable is the [King of Central Hall Promotion Spot]. This can only be accessed by the top 10 players in the day's overall stats, and it has almost become a place for the gods.

Bai Liu had seen on the forums that no newcomer has reached this promotion spot in a long time. The first and second places are so unchanging that as soon as [Spades] and [Queen Hearts] enter the game, their little TVs are the first and second on the [King's Promotion].

The top promotion for newcomers is the [Central Hall Nightmare Rising Star Promotion], where Mu Sicheng is perennially in fourth place.

The [Central Lobby Core Promotion] that Bai Liu was in last time is decent, but among all the promotions, it's considered a [Premium

Promotion], a spot with more paying users. It’s still one level below the [Top Promotion], the most prestigious spot that nearly all players pay attention to and spend points to view.

Mu Sicheng often says he has trouble getting into the Central Lobby core promotion because his performance is inconsistent. When Mu Sicheng plays well, he skips the promotion and heads straight for the Nightmare Nova promotion. But when his performance is lacking, he can't even reach the core promotion.

Along with the best promotion spots, there are, of course, the worst.

Bai Liu's footsteps stopped at the entrance of a deserted, dump-like area.

The walls in this area were pure white, and the small TVs were stacked haphazardly in a small mountain of crookedly arranged screens. The players inside appeared to be struggling to survive.

Most of the TVs were full of static. It didn’t look like the small TVs were of good quality, and some were even snowy, making it unclear whether the players inside were dead or alive.

The ‘TV mountain’ stretched endlessly, like a train spilling out from the doorway where Bai Liu stood, into a void of pure white.

The sounds of countless players, twisted and desperate, filled the space, much like the futuristic, abandoned electronic landscapes Bai Liu had seen on TV. The sign at the entrance of this area, which looked ready to fall off at any moment, read in crooked letters: [The Land of the Nameless].

This game is so blatantly cruel that the highest player rank is [King], while the lowest-ranked players don't even deserve a name.

This is the only area without categorized promotion spots, and there’s no need to differentiate. The promotion in this area should be the same for every small live TV, as there isn’t a single viewer. Players who fall into this area have almost no chance of turning things around. It's like a prison for the game, a place where only those who have been completely abandoned and given up end up.

Bai Liu stood in this cold, silent [no man's land], pondering something, while the forum buzzed with discussion about him.

[The seven-day countdown is almost up for Bai Liu, the new player

who made it into the VIP pool on his first video. Place your bets on what game he picks next!]

1L: He's really good at playing with unconventional strategies. I've replayed his last gameplay video of Siren Smallville three times, and each time, I have a new experience. I'm dying to see him play a new game!

2L: Me too! I want to see him play multiplayer! Single-player games aren't nearly as rewarding or exciting as multiplayer. In multiplayer, it's so much more competitive and fun. It's like I'm watching Bai Liu go up against the big boys!

3L: It's true that Bai Liu likes to play unconventional strategies, but in multiplayer, it's easier to do that, right? I can't be sure that everyone will follow his strange ideas. Multiplayer is far more variable than single-player.

Second, if he encounters killer-type players, those who steal points and props, Bai Liu could easily become a target and get killed. The lobby prohibits stealing and murder, but the game doesn't.

4L: I think he'd be better off staying in the single-player area. The multiplayer area, where all the big players are, is not suited for Bai Liu. His F-level panel attributes might not even allow him to complete the first main quest before he's killed by other players...

5L: Not necessarily. Didn't Bai Liu reach Super A level in Siren Town by dropping his Mental Value and going berserk? It doesn't mean he'll get abused when facing big players, does it?

7L: ... I weakly say this, but I think Bai Liu's "Berserk Peak" from last time, with his spirit value of 1, to reach Super A player level, was pure luck. If his spirit value doesn't stabilize, he could die right away.

8L: Multiplayer areas need players with balanced attributes. Bai Liu's intelligence is too high, and his attack value is too low. He's really not suited for multiplayer. He'd be seeking death if he entered that area.

9L: The core point of multiplayer games is competition. The first-place player in the game gets the rewards, and other players get nothing. In multiplayer, everyone is racing to the top, but Bai Liu has no competitive advantage in a single-player environment. Seems like he's depending on some big player as his think tank...

10L: If a guild is willing to support him, equip Bai Liu with a high-

attack team, and let him manipulate other players as the “brain,” it could work in multiplayer. Just like that one player, ranked 199th in the leaderboard, [the Puppet Master], who reached the top 200 by controlling other players.

11L: What’s wrong with you upstairs? I’m actually a fan of [Puppet Master]. You clearly don’t get it. [The Puppet Master] is a big name in the King’s Guild, and the Guild is supporting him lavishly! All the [Puppet Players] under his control are hand-picked by the King’s Guild. Each one of them could easily beat Bai Liu in terms of panel attributes, and [Puppet Master] himself has an intelligence value of 93, okay?

Bai Liu is only at 89! Except for last time when he was lucky and there were no big gods on the stream, Bai Liu accidentally made it into the top 100. But now, his ranking has fallen to over 3,000. [Puppet Master] is consistently in the top 200!

12L: [Puppet Master] is so cautious and smart. I’ve followed his game videos for many periods, but I still can’t figure out what he looks like. Sometimes I can’t even figure out which player he is...

12L: Speaking of which, didn’t the [Wire Puppeteer] lose a [Puppet Player] last game? The King’s Guild seems to be recruiting new [puppet players] for [Puppet Master]. The treatment there is great! Even though they’re just puppets, they get a thousand points for each game and receive props. If I wasn’t qualified, I’d want to apply too...

13L: Don’t even think about it, they’ve already recruited. A player named Li Gou seems to have applied...

Wang Shun chuckled at most of the comments on the forum, particularly those claiming that Bai Liu’s success in the core promotion was just luck. He shook his head and closed the game manager.

It seems everyone has completely forgotten that Bai Liu’s Luck is only 0. If Bai Liu is lucky, then aren’t they the darlings of the gods of luck, with the average player having a random Luck value of 30?

However, Wang Shun did agree with some points made on the forum.

Bai Liu isn’t really suited to multiplayer games right now, since they concentrate over 80% of players in one place, and the competition is fierce. Bai Liu did achieve Super A player-level physical quality last time, but he had to drop his mental value to 1 to do so.

With a spirit value of 1, it's far too dangerous for him to even try clearing the monsters.

Although Bai Liu has potential, he's still in the developmental stage. It's best not to jump into the brutal [multiplayer zone], where the death rate is high and competition even more intense. It's better to focus on building up his panel attributes in the [single-player] zone first.

Or, he could join a Grand Guild directly.

Lobby

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As a member of the King's Guild, Wang Shun's personal skills were primarily focused on information gathering, so he was responsible for two main tasks: one was to collect data on all kinds of game passages, and the other was to find potential newcomers for the guild and recruit them. Wang Shun hesitated when he saw the announcement that the King's Guild was recruiting [puppet players].

If he reported Bai Liu now, Bai Liu's superior intelligence and mental stats would likely be noticed by the [Puppet Master], forcing him to be selected as a [Puppet Player].

For the average player, being chosen as a [puppet player] seemed like a good opportunity, but for a newcomer like Bai Liu, who had the potential to develop into an S-rank player, it would be a waste to become a puppet.

When Wang Shun analyzed the stats, he found that the players who had been turned into puppets by the [Puppeteer] had either stagnated or their stats had slowly deteriorated after becoming puppets.

The [Puppeteer], on the other hand, had gone from a mere 71 IQ points to 93, with the rest of his stats also soaring.

Only Wang Shun, who handled data collection and analysis within the King's Guild, knew these figures well. He had suspected for some time that the [Puppeteer]'s personal skill was not just [Player Manipulation] but also [Potential Siphoning]. Many players were unaware of this, believing the [Puppeteer]'s skill was only [Player Manipulation].

Wang Shun had seen many high-potential players he had rated end up as puppets, their abilities drained, becoming mediocre or even dying in the game. They went from being a polished gem to a broken piece of clay.

Wang Shun, though feeling sorry for them, had to accept the unavoidable reality: the game was a harsh place where the weak were exploited and discarded by the strong.

This was why joining a guild wasn't always the best option for players like Bai Liu, who was too valuable and could easily be controlled and exploited by the guild's higher-ups.

Coincidentally, it was the same [Puppeteer] who had wanted Mu Sicheng to join the King's Guild. Mu Sicheng had outright rejected the invitation, stating that he would never be a puppet under anyone's control.

Mu Sicheng had suffered greatly at the hands of this [Puppeteer] but later grew stronger, climbing to around 300 in the overall rankings before being abandoned by the [Puppeteer].

But Bai Liu, a promising new player ranked in the mid-3,000s, was not so easily overlooked by the [Puppeteer].

Although Wang Shun had refrained from submitting Bai Liu's information to the King's Guild for selfish reasons, Bai Liu's exceptional performance and stats had caught the attention of the [Puppeteer].

The [Puppeteer] had been stuck at 93 IQ points for a long time, needing a player with high intelligence as "sustenance" for his growing mental capacity.

Who better than a new player like Bai Liu, who had only played one game? No one.

Wang Shun wanted to warn Bai Liu about the [Puppeteer], who was also eyeing him, but Bai Liu's bizarre appearance—wearing a colorful chicken's nest head and black lipstick—was so unusual that even Lu Yizhan, who had known Bai Liu for over ten years, might not have recognized him.

Surprisingly, someone did recognize Bai Liu through his odd appearance.

Mu Sicheng crossed his arms and looked at Bai Liu, standing at the entrance of the game. "...Bai Liu, what has the real world done to you, turning you into this...thing in just a few days?"

"You can recognize me?" Bai Liu was slightly surprised.

He had been wandering around in this disguise for several rounds without anyone recognizing him, but Mu Sicheng recognized him instantly.

Mu Sicheng smiled smugly, revealing a hint of his tiger teeth. “I can recognize you in any disguise, Bai Liu. I told you I’d make you pay back everything you stole from me last time. You can’t hide from me! I can find you!”

“You don’t recognize people by appearance...” Bai Liu glanced at the creepy hip-hop monkey hat on Mu Sicheng’s head. “You recognized me by my sense of smell, didn’t you? Your skill is related to this monkey, right? Enhanced five senses?”

Mu Sicheng’s smile grew wider. “Wrong guess. My skill isn’t enhanced five senses, but I did recognize you by your smell. You have a strong scent of copper... or money.”

“That should smell pretty good.” Bai Liu shrugged noncommittally as he looked at Mu Sicheng. “What do you want from me?”

“One player looking for another player…” Mu Sicheng glanced at the massive game login screen behind Bai Liu, a smile on his face. “To play the game, of course. I won’t let you hunker down in a single-player game. It’s too boring and the death rate is too low.”

Bai Liu nodded approvingly. “I gave up on this poverty division once I found out that multiplayer rewards ten times the points of single-player.”

“...” Mu Sicheng’s attempts to scare Bai Liu were falling flat. He looked at Bai Liu, who was carefully choosing a multiplayer game, with an incomprehensible expression. “Wait, Bai Liu, aren’t you afraid? It’s easy to die in multiplayer games.”

Behind Bai Liu, the huge entrance screen displayed a variety of games. Bai Liu, with his chin resting on his hand, scanned through them without sparing Mu Sicheng a glance. He spoke lightly: “Objectively speaking, I have a fear of death, but this fear is nothing compared to the fear that poverty brings.”

Mu Sicheng, still puzzled, asked, “You didn’t panic when you entered this game? Aren’t you too calm?”

Bai Liu, still looking at the screen, responded with two minds. “The reason I’m calm and not scared is probably because I came to this game with the mindset of coming to work.”

“Come to work?” Mu Sicheng was speechless. “You came to work in a horror game?”

“Yeah, I get five days off a week for a good job, make at least 200,000 each time, there’s no boss docking my pay, and I don’t have to deal with humans who don’t understand me, or fudge or barely communicate with them. I just do what I’m good at—play horror games. That’s it.”

Bai Liu finally turned to look at Mu Sicheng and shrugged. “Apart from the slightly higher mortality rate, but I work late at night in the real world and don’t know when I’ll suddenly die, so the high mortality rate doesn’t bother me. Honestly, this job pays well, and I would never find that in the real world.”

Mu Sicheng: “…”

Mu Sicheng felt like he’d just been convinced by Bai Liu.

“Can I ask you something?” Bai Liu pointed to the variety of games displayed on the huge wall. “Are there only 100 horror games on this screen? The number of small TVs and players suggests there should be more. I’m curious if there are other games.”

Bai Liu had been browsing for a while but hadn’t found any popular threads about the games. Now that Mu Sicheng was here, he took the opportunity to ask.

“There are more types of horror games, and we don’t know exactly how many there are.” Mu Sicheng shrugged. “This wall only shows 100 games at a time. Once those 100 are filled, the screen refreshes with new games. Sometimes, the same games appear again.”

Bai Liu rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “So, there’s a general ‘pool’ of games, and players don’t know exactly how many are in there.”

“Right.” Mu Sicheng confirmed.

Bai Liu nodded. “So, each time the system picks 100 games from the pool and shows them here. Sometimes we get a repeat, but usually, it’s all new questions. Guilds probably track the answers to difficult games, helping members clear them faster. New players get recruited and learn these answers to progress.”

Bai Liu’s gaze hardened slightly. “And once they hit a certain level, guilds stop relying on answers and focus on senior players. That’s when the exploitation begins. Low-level players pay points and give up their props to senior players who keep them in the guild.”

Bai Liu sighed. “The guild’s structure is designed for exploitation. Newcomers are the bottom leeks, harvested by those above them.”

Mu Sicheng stayed silent, but Bai Liu’s analysis was spot on.

Bai Liu glanced at him. “What are you looking at me like that for?”

“I was thinking…” Mu Sicheng raised an eyebrow. “Is your intelligence really only 89? You’re more perceptive than that!”

Bai Liu shrugged nonchalantly, as if it were no big deal.

Just outrageous! How the hell did this guy deduce that?

He had only answered a few words about the type of game, and this guy had already flipped the whole system of guilds in the game over and over to smooth it out!

"A lot of newcomers join guilds in order to survive, because the high rollers in the guild protect them through the levels. Although they need to pay a third of the points they get for passing, it makes them safer and less likely to die. But a high-potential newcomer like you should be groomed straight away. I was just about to ask you why you didn’t join the guild," Mu Sicheng ripped open a lollipop and held it in his mouth, looking somewhat defeated. "Now I don’t think I need to ask."

"Because it’s stupid to join a guild," Bai Liu said bluntly. "There won’t be any public interest groups in a game like this that will kill you, and it’s bound to be profitable to help you."

"Although in the short term it may seem that the guild helps you reduce your mortality rate, paying large amounts of points to the guild is self-defeating in a game like this, where personal performance is what attracts an audience. And by the time the guild can no longer benefit from you, it will surely give up on you. With most of your points and props surrendered, you’ll have no capital to survive on your own, and you’ll inevitably die."

Mu Sicheng looked at Bai Liu with amazement, a little amused. "What exactly do you do in the real world? How do you know so much about how guild organizations work?"

Indeed, many useless low-level players were rarely brought in by later guild high rollers.

"That's how the vast majority of companies in this world run," Bai Liu said flatly. "They paint a big picture and supposedly offer internal resources to attract employees. Then, when the employees are worn out and their productivity drops, they fire them to hire younger workers and squeeze them dry."

Bai Liu's face remained expressionless. "I'm just a bottom-tier social animal who gets fired and exploited in the real world, so entering the game and joining the guild to be exploited is absolutely out of the question."

Mu Sicheng: "..."

This guy exudes so much resentment when he talks about life as a social animal…

"So, have you decided which game you want to go to?" Mu Sicheng glanced at the screen. "Is there a game you like, or do you want to take another look?"

"The login limit for single-player games is one hundred, and all the single-player games on this screen are already full," Mu Sicheng pointed to the [FULL] symbol in the bottom right corner of a game icon. With a lollipop in his mouth, he vaguely explained to Bai Liu, "If the game icon has this mark [FULL], it means the game is full, and no new players can log in."

"And for multiplayer games, each one has a different login limit. I've played games with only four people and others with fifty, depending on the game. By the way, this Haunted Mansions, City of Doom, and Ghost Power multiplayer game are all games that have appeared before."

Mu Sicheng pointed at a few games. "Do you want to play any of these? I can help you find some clearance information for them, but not for free."

"No." Bai Liu refused without hesitation. "Even with the information, playing an old game would mean I'm much slower to react than players who've been in the guild for a long time and are familiar with the strategies. My strengths would be better used in a new game."

"That's true," Mu Sicheng said, nibbling on his lollipop. "You're quite adventurous. Most newcomers still go for the old games for stability."

"My aim is to earn money, not to survive," Bai Liu replied flatly. "I

need to win, and I need to be number one to get enough points."

"You're really weird—" Mu Sicheng thought for a moment, giving up on understanding Bai Liu's reasoning. He wrinkled his nose in a thoughtless manner. "You earn so many points, but if you die in the game, you won't have anywhere to spend them."

Bai Liu replied naturally, "I don't earn points to spend them. I earn them to hoard, and..." He suddenly smiled in a strange, unsettling way. Bai Liu turned his head to look at Mu Sicheng, who froze for a moment at the suddenness of his smile. "Do you think I'll die in the game?"

"I'm still a bit confident that playing horror games, which is what I'm best at, I probably won't die that easily," Bai Liu smiled. "I'm better at designing levels in games and letting other players die, but I've never died in a game designed by someone else."

Mu Sicheng: "..."

What the hell does this guy do in real life? Is he really not a criminal or something?

"Why isn't there a single logged-in player for this game?" Bai Liu tapped on the game icon of a burning train on the screen. The icon zoomed into the game manager on Bai Liu's chest. Bai Liu tapped on the icon to check the game's specific information. "Burst Last Train?"

It stood out a bit among the hundred games on the screen, being the only one still empty.

[Game Copy Name: "Bursting Last Train"]
[Level: Level 2 (games with a player mortality rate greater than fifty percent and less than eighty percent are Level 2 games)]
[Mode: Multiplayer (0/7)]
[General Description: This is an exciting collection-oriented multiplayer game. The burning last train in flames, shattered glass fragments, and charred corpses hanging from hoops have made many players linger and stay forever~]

Mu Sicheng furrowed his brow at the icon. "You want to play this?"

"What's wrong with this game?" Bai Liu asked.

Mu Sicheng paused. "It's actually an old game that's been on the game screen a few times, but there's no clearance information available."

Bai Liu instantly understood. The game wall refreshes only when all games are full, so several groups of players must have entered already. But there were no records of any passes…

Bai Liu looked sideways at Mu Sicheng. "All the players who went in before died?"

"It's strange. If there aren't any players passing..." Bai Liu's eyes swept over the "Burst Last Train" icon. His finger tapped twice on the "mortality rate" line. "How is the mortality rate of this game less than 80% and more than 50%? The mortality rate should be 100% based on the number of players wiped out."

Mu Sicheng scoffed, poking his pocket in disbelief. "It's just a grading system for games. Almost all games have this kind of grading."

"If the mortality rate is actually measured like you said, then any game that doesn't have a 100% mortality rate should have pass players and pass stats. But I've watched VIP library videos and asked a lot of qualified players, and I haven't found any who've cleared this 'Burst Last Train.' I think there really haven't been any clearances."

Bai Liu suddenly gave Mu Sicheng a meaningful look. "Just because you haven't noticed it doesn't mean it's not there."

"The mortality rate of 'Burst Last Train' is between 80% and 50%, so if you're saying that at least 20% of players who've cleared this game actually exist—" Mu Sicheng started to speak but paused, realizing the implications. "With such a small group of players having successfully cleared it, they would have posted about it on forums, or someone would've seen the TV or video, right? There can't be no trace of them."

"How many players do you think there are in this game?" Bai Liu turned his head to look directly at Mu Sicheng.

Mu Sicheng was stunned. "I don't know, but there must be a lot."

"Has such a group of players ever existed in real life?" Bai Liu rhetorically asked. "Can everything we say about the game be seen by people in the real world? Can what we say about the game exist in any form or be remembered by anyone outside the game? For those not in the game, does the player even have a trace of existence? Of course not."

Mu Sicheng was completely dumbfounded by Bai Liu's question.

Bai Liu asked the final question without skipping a beat. "Okay, now back to the first question: If game players have no trace of existence in the real world, do you think we exist?"

"Of course we exist," Bai Liu answered quickly. "Our traces of existence have just been erased. So is it possible that at least 20% of the players who've cleared 'Burst Last Train' are the same way? That their existence has been erased by the game or the system?"

Mu Sicheng enlightened. "Their clearance data and player data have been deleted!"

"It's likely that they've been 'deleted' themselves," Bai Liu said, staring at the icon for 'Burst Last Train.' "These players who cleared the game are probably dead, or they wouldn't have returned for a second look."

Mu Sicheng got goosebumps from Bai Liu, but he was still a bit offended. "But everything you say is based on the fact that the game's mortality rate is actually measured. What if the player mortality rate is just virtual in the game…"

Mu Sicheng froze mid-sentence.

Bai Liu glanced up at him. "As you've probably realized by now, mortality is a statistic that can't be measured virtually."

"Have you studied statistics?" Bai Liu asked Mu Sicheng. "There are two values in statistics that must actually be measured: one is the birth rate, and the other is the death rate."

As he spoke, he casually tapped twice on the 'Burst Last Train' icon on his game panel. To Mu Sicheng's horrified stare and screams, Bai Liu eased into the game.

Mu Sicheng broke down. "How did you suddenly get in there?!"

Bai Liu faded from view, thoughtfully replying to Mu Sicheng's words, "I'm curious about what exactly this player data from the cleared 'Burst Last Train' the system specifically removed. Experience has taught me that the deeper something is hidden by the higher-ups, the more lucrative it is..."

[The game "Burst Last Train" has gathered one player; six more players are needed to start]

Chapter End Notes

YEAH!!! Another arc begins :)

Statistics make my head hurt, thought 🤯

Burst Last Train

Bai Liu's silhouette disappears under Mu Sicheng's frantic jumping feet.

Mu Sicheng bit his nail caps and circled anxiously around the spot where Bai Liu had disappeared, crouching down and pulling his hair out a few times, crushing the lollipop in his mouth, before finally stifling and gnashing his teeth as he clicked on the "Burst Last Train" icon on the screen and entered the game right after Bai Liu.

Mu Sicheng, a second before entering the game, was mumbling to himself in a depressed voice: "Shit, this Bai Liu guy, he's got me curious too, I've never entered a secondary game without any preparation!"

Two players have been added to the game, five more players are needed to start the game.

Two minutes after Mu Sicheng disappeared, four players of almost identical height, build, and appearance appeared outside the screen.

Their faces were covered in those bizarre oil-painted puppet masks, and they walked as if they were puppets on strings, their limbs stopping at each step in a strange way, as if they were four identical puppet toys made by one skilled craftsman, the difference barely discernible to the naked eye.

The man at the head, or puppet, inquired in a low tone, "Bai Liu is into this game?"

The 'puppet' spoke with a wide curve of his mouth moving up and down, much like a puppet show in which the lower lip pretends to move and speak while the low, hoarse voice emanates from the string-bearer behind him.

The other puppet, who carried a butcher's knife behind his back, had a flash of vengeance in his eyes as he answered him with a respectful arch of his hand, "Yes, Lord [Puppeteer]."

"Bursting Last Train, is it?" The ink eyes painted on the puppet's face narrowed realistically, eventually giving an evil laugh, "A level 2 game, it seems that even if I don't lay a hand on Bai Liu, Bai Liu is unlikely to come out of this game alive. Such a high talent, what a shame to die, just the thing to use as my puppet."

"Go!"

In one neat movement, the four puppets tapped the screen for Burst Last Train and disappeared in unison to the boarding gate.

[The game "Burst Last Train" has 6 players and needs one more player to start]

A man in a pullover jumper, with thick flat glasses and a very thick, large part in his hand, a student boy at first glance, appeared on the screen next to the boarding entrance.

His beer-bottle-thick, square-framed glasses are so large they cover half of his face, and the bottom half of his face, with scattered freckles on the bridge of his nose and his head cowering under his jumper, might, if Bai Liu were to look at him, identify this player as Jeff from Siren.

But he looks a little softer and more normal than Jeff, and seems to be a normal student.

But it's in the game, a normally dressed student, that seems surprisingly out of place.

"Eh, let's see, which game do I pick ....." The player pushed his glasses, looking closer to the screen as if he was wearing presbyopic glasses, tapping on his Game Manager's admin panel as he did so.

The personal panel on his game manager clearly shows:

[Player name: Du Sanying]

[Today's Rising Star Ranking: 3rd place - You have surpassed Mu Sicheng, the 4th place player in the Rising Star Ranking, by 170,000 points, he will never be able to catch up with you in the near future.]

[Achieved: The winner who did nothing, the lucky one who survived, the player who was inexplicably ignored by the monster, the fighter who missed a hundred shots against your attacks.]

[The items you bought in the game shop are being discounted from 10,000 points to one point, do you want to buy them?]

[Congratulations to player Du Sanying who has won the top player prize pack with a 1 in 100,000 chance of winning! Will you collect it now?]

...

Du Sanying seemed to have grown accustomed to these skyrocketing fortunes to the point of numbness. He did not claim any of the rewards or freebies and crossed off the screens all the way to the last page of his personal panel. Du Sanying pushed his glasses on and almost put his face to the panel squinting his eyes, searching for the information he wanted on the panel.

[Luck Value: 100 (You are also the luckiest person in the world today, you are the favored one by the god of luck, follow your intuition and choose the game you want! Choose the one that makes you the luckiest!]

"Is the luck value a hundred today too?" Du Sanying scanned the entire screen a little hesitantly, "In that case, then it's best to go with your gut instinct and pick, then-"

Du Sanying's hand hovered over the icon, and he had a sudden, creepy feeling that something very lucky and very unlucky would happen if he clicked on it, something he had never felt before when Du Sanying was 100% lucky to choose a game.

He's always had the feeling of being very sure that he'll be lucky if he picks it before, but this time it feels like if he picks this game something will happen that will make him suffer a lot but make him very lucky at the same time ...

Du Sanying tossed his head and hesitated for a long time before double-clicking on the game icon for "Last Train to Burst".

[Game "Explosive Last Train" is complete, the game begins -]

A [FULL] mark pops up in the bottom right corner of the icon of the train under fire on the big screen in "Explosive Last Train," and the next second, Bai Liu opens his eyes in a crowded underground station.

At the same time, seven small TV screens lit up in the hall, one of which showed Bai Liu's calm, unmoving face in a crowded underground station.

Wang Shun's game manager, standing in the hall looking for Bai Liu, suddenly vibrated in quick succession.

[System Alert: Your favorite player Bai Liu has logged in to the game~ Please go and watch~]

[System Alert: You have collected the small TV player Mu Sicheng ……]

[System Alert: You have bookmarked …… player Zhang Gui Login to the game ……]

[System Alert: Your Collection …… Du Sanying Login to the game ……]

"No way ……" Wang Shun fell into an unprecedented trance after checking the message alerts on his game manager, "This guy, Bai Liu, 3rd and 4th on the Rising Stars list, and [Lift the Line Puppet Master] actually got into a multiplayer game, this is going to be a godsend ……"

As soon as Bai Liu opened his eyes, he received a system alert.

[Welcome players to "Bursting Last Train"]

[You are a passenger, now, please use the ticket in your pocket to enter the station in ten minutes and wait to board the last train that will explode.]

Bai Liu reached into his suit trouser pocket and took out a thin rigid metro ticket which read [Metro Line 4: Antique City → Antique City]. Bai Liu raised his eyebrows in slight surprise. The starting and ending stations on this ticket were actually the same name, if not for the fact that the two platforms were renamed...

Bai Liu glanced at the interior of the station, trying to find a map of the line inside this station, and soon Bai Liu saw it next to the ticket counter.

Line 4 is a very eye-catching red line, which Bai Liu instantly found on the line map.

"It's true, Line 4 is a closed loop metro line." Bai Liu looked knowingly at the red Line 4 that wrapped around the city, "The starting and ending stations overlap, they're both the same, they're both this station called Antique City."

Bai Liu wandered around the station and found no extra information other than a few more advertisements. The only thing he found a bit out of place was the design of the station, which normally has escalators at both the exit and entry points.

Normally, the escalators at the exit should go up for the convenience of passengers, while the escalators at the entrance should go down, but here the design of the station is reversed, which is slightly unnatural for Bai Liu.

Another thing that struck Bai Liu as odd — he glanced at the electronic LED clock hanging on top of the station.

[07:34].

It seemed relatively normal, but Bai Liu looked at the time a few more times and realised that it was not going forward, but backwards, and Bai Liu's eyes blinked and it became [07:12], which made him react quickly.

"It's a countdown clock watch, not a clock." Bai Liu pondered, "And it still looks like a countdown for me, meaning I have six minutes left before I have to enter the station."

Bai Liu was in no hurry, even though there were only six or seven minutes left in the countdown. He exited the station once and found that it was pitch black outside, no sound, no light, nothing.

Bai Liu took his time to look at the map again, this time focusing on the names of the stations on Line 4.

"The name Mirror Museum ....." Bai Liu's eyes fell on it, caught up in a seemingly enlightened memory, "Why do I feel like I've heard that name before..."

Bai Liu was trying to remember where he'd heard that name before when a male voice interrupted his memory: "Shit! Bai Liu! Why aren't you inside yet!" Mu Sicheng glanced back from the platform to see a pervert stroking his chin and squinting at the underground map, and walked over to him while speechless: "Only a minute or so left, what are you doing here? Remembering the map?"

Bai Liu was not surprised that Mu Sicheng had followed him in. He glanced at the red LED light, which was already counting down the seconds, and replied to Mu Sicheng with a nonchalant "hmm": "I was wondering if I had been to this place before... ..."

Mu Sicheng was stunned: "You've played this game?" But he quickly denied it again, "No way, you are indeed new."

"Yes, I haven't been to this place in the game." Bai Liu admits.

Mu Sicheng frowned at Bai Liu: "Then how could you have been to this place ....."

"Just because I haven't been here in the game doesn't mean I can't have been to this place, I think I should have been to this place in reality." Bai Liu withdrew his gaze from the underground line.

"Reality?!" Mu Sicheng was shocked, "You've been to this underground station in reality? How do you know?"

"If I'm right, it's supposed to be a horror game based on real-life events, have you heard of [Mirror City Bombing]?"

"Just social news about two thieves hiding a bomb in an antique mirror and robbing the museum by threatening it when they were about to deliver it to the local museum, only for the bomb to go out of control on the way and the whole underground to explode?"

Bai Liu talks to Mu Sicheng as he walks, he pulls out his ticket and [beeps] at the entry point and enters the station without a hitch: "I studied the underground station distribution and the underground map just now, and it's very likely that the game was designed after [the Mirror City bombing]."

"I've heard of it ....." Mu Sicheng also pulled out his ticket and followed him into the station, "but it's useless even if we knew, right? That case is so important because of its implications and it's still not known how the perpetrators hid the bomb. The case is not known because of its implications and it is still unknown how the perpetrators hid the bomb in the mirror to avoid security checks, and a lot of information has not been released to the public."

Mu Sicheng, after analyzing it, mocked with a noncommittal show of hands, "Even if we knew that the game was based on this case, we still don't know anything about what's going to happen on this last train that's going to explode, we don't know the details, we just know a source of inspiration, it's not useful at all, okay?"

"I might actually know what's going to happen on this train ....." Bai Liu rubbed his nose and gave Mu Sicheng an amiable smile, "I was on that underground train that day, I got off at the explosion stop before the explosion."

Mu Sicheng: "....."

Bai Liu shrugged innocently and said kindly to a stunned Mu Sicheng,

"Am I, in fact, getting important information that makes this game passable?"

"Sure, Mu Sicheng, I can tell you all the information I know, but not give it to you for free. If you don't believe me, you can verify if what I'm saying is true, I remember you have a prop to take a lie detector test."

This is what Mu Sicheng had said to Bai Liu before he entered the game, and now Bai Liu had returned it to Mu Sicheng intact.

Mu Sicheng was silent for a long time, then let out a stifled "fuck."

So, can you fucking well! This shit is actually on this train!!!

Mu Sicheng was quiet for a moment before tapping his points wallet. "Tell me what you know. How many points do you want? I'll consider buying your information for under three hundred points."

Mu Sicheng, who had watched Bai Liu's games once, had already discovered Bai Liu’s money-loving nature.

This man would never refuse a point that came his way, nor would he waste one more.

Bai Liu survived the blast, and he was one of those players who had managed to survive this [last train] in reality.

"Just give as many points as you like." Bai Liu reached into his jacket pocket, found an old wallet, and smiled more sincerely. "Mu Sicheng, what I want to talk to you about is this: I’ll tell you the settings and information of this game, and you can help me out when necessary. How about we cooperate for mutual benefit?"

Mu Sicheng looked Bai Liu up and down. Bai Liu met his gaze with sincere eyes. Mu Sicheng crossed his arms, raised an eyebrow, and showed a meaningful smile. "Cooperate with me? So you're giving me your information for free?"

"It can't be free," Bai Liu sighed, pretending to be generous as he waved his hand. "You're such a wealthy player, it’s a bit shameless to whore out my rich game material..."

He paused. "How about this: you give me a couple of hundred points, just a symbolic amount."

Mu Sicheng’s smile turned nasty. "A couple of hundred? You want to cooperate with a high roller like me, and you want me to spend a couple of hundred points on a reference material that you don’t even know how much it’s worth? You’re a dreamer. I still haven’t settled the account with you for stealing my 2,000-point prop for one point!"

Bai Liu: "...one point is fine."

"Wait," Mu Sicheng said, narrowing his eyes suspiciously. "I find it strange that you would seek cooperation with another player in this game. You don't seem like such a naive and gullible player. Do you really think that if I verbally promise to help you, I'll actually come through when the time comes?"

"Even though you're a newcomer, I see you as a competitor, and I don't underestimate you. You've got a lot of tricks up your sleeve—maybe even I'll fall prey to you. It's too strange for you to ask me for cooperation. It feels like a conspiracy."

Mu Sicheng eyed Bai Liu suspiciously, unable to believe that Bai Liu hadn't thought of this.

Apart from player collaborations in guilds, which have some credibility, the cooperation of other players in this game is essentially a blank check with no real guarantees.

For example, Mu Sicheng is a Super A player. When he gets information from Bai Liu, he can help if he wants to, but if he doesn't, what can Bai Liu do to a player ranked fourth in the Rising Stars?

"There is no conspiracy," Bai Liu spread his hands. "I truly want you to cooperate. This is a game with a level two mortality rate, and my panel attributes are only F. I die too easily if I don't seek cooperation with a great player like you. Also, I think we have a common enemy."

Mu Sicheng raised an eyebrow. "A common enemy?"

"The Puppeteer is also in this game," Bai Liu smiled. "I don't suppose you want to face a swarm-type player like the [Wire Puppeteer] alone?"

Mu Sicheng's face changed. "How did you know he's in this game?"

It was no surprise Mu Sicheng reacted strongly, as this man had haunted his mind during his struggling rookie days.

At one point, the Puppeteer had tried to make Mu Sicheng his puppet, and after being rejected multiple times, the Puppeteer still didn't give up. He joined forces with other players to capture Mu Sicheng, relentlessly hunting him with no regard for his life.

Each time, Mu Sicheng barely escaped. If not for his personal skills

allowing him to move very fast, he would have been captured and turned into a puppet.

Even now, though Mu Sicheng was stronger, he was still extremely disgusted by the Puppeteer and didn't want to encounter him again.

If Bai Liu's approach to the game was unconventional, the [Puppeteer]'s approach was downright twisted.

The [Puppeteer], having failed to catch Mu Sicheng using conventional methods, soon devised a new plan using his brilliant mind—93 points of intelligence—and quickly found a way to trap Mu Sicheng.

Mu Sicheng had almost been turned into a puppet.

No matter how fast Mu Sicheng ran, there was always someone who could catch him—someone he couldn't outrun.

At the time, Mu Sicheng was collaborating with a friend as a rookie. The two often played together, and because of their real-world relationship, they were close.

The Puppeteer somehow managed to turn this friend into a member of the King's Guild and secretly cooperated with his plan to ambush Mu Sicheng.

Mu Sicheng had been deliberately introduced into a game by this friend, where the Puppeteer was waiting to ambush him.

Mu Sicheng was unprepared for the chaos and danger that awaited him.

Eventually, Mu Sicheng lost a hand, dropped to 18 spirit level, and had to fight his way out, killing all of the Puppeteer's [puppet players] before escaping. His body was half-alienated and drenched in blood, looking miserable and near delirium.

Since then, Mu Sicheng had become very hostile to the idea of cooperation.

It made sense that Bai Liu, the first to enter the game, didn't know who the other players were, so how could Bai Liu know that the later players included [The Puppeteer]?

Unless Bai Liu had made an arrangement to enter the same game as

the Puppeteer.

This reminded Mu Sicheng of his own ambush, and his face grew more unpleasant. The red light in his eyes flashed like a warning signal.

Mu Sicheng's hand turned into a sharp, grey-black monkey claw, flexing his fingers as he concealed it behind his back, staring at Bai Liu. "Bai Liu, if you can't give me a reasonable explanation as to why you know that [The Puppeteer] is in this game, this could be the end of your journey."

Bai Liu opened his game manager for Mu Sicheng to see. The game panel had a red post: [The Puppeteer has entered the "Last Train to Explosion" and said he wants to capture Bai Liu as a puppet!]

Mu Sicheng froze, his dangerous expression momentarily stunned. "How can you open the forum? I don't remember being able to access it once I enter the game."

"My personal skill," Bai Liu explained, smiling as he extended his hand to Mu Sicheng. "I saw the forum post. I know you've been hunted down as a puppet."

Without saying much more, Bai Liu added, "All in all, we're on the same side now. Cooperation?"

"Of course, I don't accept freebies. One point is a good way to show your sincerity," Bai Liu joked, smiling.

Mu Sicheng narrowed his eyes as he ripped open a lollipop and popped it into his mouth. After a long stare, he finally reached out and conjured a point coin from thin air.

With a condescending smile, he pressed the coin into Bai Liu's hand. "Okay, let's work together. We'll share information and help each other. One point for good faith."

Mu Sicheng still held a grudge against Bai Liu for using the one-point trick and gave him one point in return.

Bai Liu closed his fingers around the point coin, his smile deepening. "I sense your sincerity now."

"My sincerity is—if you're crying and begging for my help by then," Mu Sicheng flicked the giant monkey headset he wore on his head, hanging it around his neck. The eerie voice ceased as he stuck his

hands in his pockets and snorted. "Bai Liu, if you cry sincerely, I might reluctantly lend a helping hand."

Bai Liu raised the corner of his mouth, complying with Mu Sicheng's words. "No problem, I'll cry so sincerely, you won't be able to resist helping me."

At the same time, a system beep sounded in Bai Liu's head.

System Alert: A partnership deal between player Bai Liu and player Mu Sicheng has been struck.

In this game, player Mu Sicheng must help player Bai Liu whenever asked. If Mu Sicheng refuses, the system will force him to comply.

Looking at the meek, smiling Bai Liu, a sudden chill ran down Mu Sicheng's spine before he could ask for more details.

What's with this feeling of being taken advantage of?

While Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng waited for the last train, the game lobby and forums were buzzing with activity. The multiplayer section was packed with players eager to witness this rare gathering of gods.

"Holy shit! It's really the Puppeteer, God Mu, and the Parrot! How did the three of them end up in the same game?"

"It's so rare for gods to even crash a game anymore. They usually avoid each other. Three gods in one game? And it's a tier 2 game that hasn't been cleared before?!"

"Looks like the gods want something thrilling, huh... but this is way too exciting!"

"I'm so torn on who to watch. I'm a fan of the Parakeet, but he's always winning and the game ends too quickly. I want something more intense. Who should I pick for my show, God Mu or the Puppet Master?"

"I'm in the same dilemma. I just discovered Bai Liu! Ooooh, he was so cool last time. I recommend checking out his stream. It's just as good as God Mu and Puppet Master's!"

"Ugh, not this guy again. Why does Bai Liu always force his encore? It's a multiplayer game—no one's opening their mic, okay?"

"I just saw that he's talking about cooperating with God Mu. Does he not know that God Mu never teams up with anyone because he's been backstabbed? I think Bai Liu's gonna get tricked by him."

Bai Liu was becoming quite the sensation. Though his rank wasn't very high, his name was everywhere.

Last time, his intensely personal videos caught the attention of some viewers who admired him.

But, of course, opinions were divided. Some liked him, but others couldn't stand him—especially given his rapid progress despite his terrible personal stats, making him seem unconvincing. As a result, Bai Liu had a pretty bad reputation among the lower-tier players.

Burst last train

Most of the threads on the forum discussing Bai Liu end in heated arguments, especially when it comes to the recent [core promotion] and whether Bai Liu deserved it or not.

Many players believe Bai Liu doesn't deserve such a prestigious promotion because, despite his cleverness, his performance is poor. Others argue that if Bai Liu's on the promotion list, who cares whether he deserves it or not?

Wang Shun has watched a few of the debates and concluded that most players who dislike Bai Liu feel that he [doesn't deserve his position].

The last player to stir up such a major debate was Du Sanying, a newcomer.

Du Sanying's luck rating is 100, and everything he does seems perfect. His points flow into his account like money.

Some say Du Sanying is strong, that he has great personal skills, but this argument is often met with the response, [You can get Du Sanying's luck to clear it before you call him strong].

However, this criticism softened over time as Du Sanying rose to the top three on the Rising Stars list, and fewer players dared to speak out against him.

Now, Bai Liu, who has zero luck and has earned his [core promotion] purely through skill and ideas, still faces the same scrutiny. These players continue to believe he's [unworthy of his position].

It seems that it doesn't matter whether it's "virtuous" or not; what matters is the position itself. Anyone who reaches that level, regardless of who they are, is always deemed undeserving. As long as it's not themselves, others will always find a way to criticize and magnify their flaws.

Wang Shun shook his head and stopped listening to the discussions, but as he glanced at the small TVs in front of him, he struggled with the same question: whose small TV should he choose for the huddle?

Du Sanying is ranked third among the Rising Stars, but because he's never made a splash in the game, he doesn't attract many paying viewers. As a result, Du Sanying's TV streams are never pay-to-view.

Bai Liu, a newcomer, isn't on a paid model either.

However, Bai Liu, being a non-paying player, had far fewer viewers than Mu Sicheng and [Puppet Master], and he was even less popular than Du Sanying.

Du Sanying was always popular, and with no charge for his streams, this time—especially with the three gods in one game—many players who didn't want to pay flocked to Du Sanying's mini-TV stream. His audience was far larger than Mu Sicheng's and Puppet Master's.

Even the three [puppet players] under [Puppet Master], like Li Gou, were more popular than Bai Liu, thanks to the presence of a great god like [Puppet Master].

There was only one Bai Liu, and his stream was nearly empty.

With a sigh, Wang Shun walked into Bai Liu's section.

With so many gods crashing into the game, most viewers couldn't even watch their mini-TVs. Why would they pay attention to a newcomer? Bai Liu's mini-TV had lost most of its audience, so it was no surprise that no one was interested in it.

[301 people liked Bai Liu's TV, 170 people favorited it, 210 were watching, and no one was paying for it.]

[Please support player Bai Liu! Your likes are only one-hundredth of Du Sanying's, the top-ranked player in the combined small and medium TV stats for "Bursting Last Train"!]

"Du Sanying's likes are already at 30,000... How long has it been since the game started?" Wang Shun sighed deeply as he saw Du Sanying instantly claim the top spot and leave for the central lobby. Wang Shun gave Bai Liu a like, muttering, "Come on, Bai Liu, don't get stuck in the no-name section..."

Du Sanying stood outside the platform, almost pressing his glasses to the ticket to read the location. "How strange," he muttered to himself, "this ticket starts and ends at the same station..."

The countdown on the station LED clock reached [00:10], and as the stopwatch ticked into the 10-second countdown, the station lights suddenly flickered out. After a brief moment, they came back on, but now the light was a flickering, dark red.

At the end of the track, a train with red headlights emerged from the dark tunnel, like a beast with glowing red eyes ready to devour its prey. It slowly came to a stop in front of Du Sanying.

The female voice of the underground station announcer came through in a mechanical and cold tone: "Passengers on the train have arrived at the terminal station of Antique City. Please disembark at Antique City. The train will begin its next round of operation. If you need to depart, please board the train now—please get off at the destination of..."

As the announcement ended, the train doors slowly opened before Du Sanying. The smell of burnt meat wafted out, mixing with the wind from the train's high-speed arrival.

Du Sanying looked up at the underground line 4 train he was about to board. Under the flickering lights, he saw the train was empty at one end, the handrails swaying, and at the other end, it was filled with blurry-looking passengers, as crowded as a rush hour subway in a major city. Du Sanying couldn't even get on.

The red LED clock behind him flickered to [00:05], and the sound of the countdown made the station's air vents suddenly stop working.

The temperature in the station began rising rapidly, the loudspeakers distorting as the female voice became garbled, stuck on the strange word [44444], repeating endlessly. Du Sanying thought she was supposed to be saying "Line 4."

Around him, passengers slowly walked toward the train, their figures flickering eerily under the red and black light. Some suddenly burst into flames, turning into violently burning corpses.

The skin of these burning passengers cracked as flames consumed them, edges blackening and curling to reveal the yellowish, melted human fat beneath. The fat dripped to the ground as their limbs spasmed, sending up pungent black smoke. But they seemed oblivious to their condition, continuing to walk toward the train.

The train filled up with these charred bodies, some sitting, some standing, some holding onto handrails, others leaning against doors. The plastic handrails began to melt like butter under the heat, dripping onto the passengers, while the glass cracked under the pressure.

The passengers, oblivious to the horror, continued looking at their

phones, which were so badly burned that the wiring was exposed.

If not for the flames on their bodies, they would look like tired commuters on the last train home.

[System Alert: Player Du Sanying, please board the train quickly.]

"No way..." Du Sanying muttered, "What's with this game? A drive-by kill? This train is burnt to a crisp. Am I not just walking into a live barbecue?"

The audience watching the mini-TV laughed.

"Drive-by kill, this is hilarious! Don't worry, the only one dying is your little parrot!"

"Parrot, you need to believe in your luck! Maybe the flames will go out once you get on!"

"Shit, no!! Watch out, guys! There are players on the train!!!"

Among the passengers—burned, blackened, and smoking—one man in a white shirt and suit trousers, who appeared to be a regular office worker, leaned toward a man next to him, speaking in a strange manner.

The other man, a college student with a lollipop in his mouth, listened intently, his head tilted as he smiled impishly. His features were handsome, and the pair stood out like a beacon amid the chaos.

On a train full of charred and burning passengers, these two normal-looking figures were an eye-catching anomaly.

The small TV audience exploded in excitement:

"Shit, shit, shit!!! It's God Mu!!! God Mu is so handsome!!!"

"Holy shit, who's that commuter player? So calm."

Mu Sicheng watched with some amusement as Bai Liu reverted to his usual self. "Why have you switched back? You're not a killer anymore?"

"It's live, so of course I have to turn on the charm to seduce the audience." Bai Liu straightened his shirt sleeves and shamelessly added, "People are creatures of appearance, and I've got a good face, so I have to make the most of it to earn some money."

"But there's another reason." Bai Liu gave Mu Sicheng a sideways glance. "It makes it easier for the puppet master to find me."

The smile on Mu Sicheng's lips tightened, his annoyance barely concealed. "Bai Liu, are you really going to use yourself as bait to lure Zhang Gui? He's good, and your plan has a lot of holes. Even if I help, we might not be able to pull it off..."

"Shh." Bai Liu put a finger to his lips, glancing at the LED countdown clock that read [00:01]. "The countdown's almost up, a player's about to board."

"Suit yourself." Mu Sicheng leaned against the car door, arms crossed. "You're the one risking your life, not me. I don't care. You're just willing to get yourself killed."

Burst last train

The bodies hanging from the hoops and the other passengers in the carriage stayed in place, not attacking him. The flames blazing through Du Sanying's hair were a little hot but lacked the true texture of fire.

Bai Liu smiled kindly at Du Sanying. "Hello, my name is Bai Liu. I'm one of the players in this game."

Du Sanying awkwardly extended his hand. "Well, hello, my name is Du Sanying..."

Mu Sicheng looked at Du Sanying with surprise, as if he hadn't expected him to be in this game. However, he soon grunted, crossed his arms, and smiled coldly, ignoring him without saying a word.

Du Sanying, seemingly having expected this, grew more and more embarrassed. He cowered in the corner, barely speaking, until he couldn't hold his curiosity anymore and finally asked, "Bai Liu, how do you... know that the car won't be attacked?"

"These should just be a simple transitional animation," Bai Liu analyzed. "Since we haven't gotten the first mission that gives points, which means the game hasn't officially started yet, these are probably just here to scare the players and explain the background of the story. They won't really kill anyone."

Bai Liu then turned to Mu Sicheng and Du Sanying, who clearly had issues with each other. He asked Mu Sicheng, who hadn't said anything since Du Sanying's arrival, "What, do you have a grudge against this Du Sanying guy?"

Mu Sicheng shot Du Sanying a cold, hostile glance. Du Sanying was left feeling awkward, cowering behind a burning corpse as he peeked at their conversation.

Du Sanying wasn't very tall, a head shorter than Bai Liu, with thick bottle-cap glasses and a small frame that made him seem like a nerdy, over-prepared senior—harmless in that way that made Bai Liu call him "little friend."

"You'll understand after playing a game with Du Sanying once." Mu Sicheng seemed to recall something unpleasant, and the lollipop in his mouth creaked. "This guy's luck value is 100, and no matter how hard

you try, he always ends up first in the game, taking your winning results in ways you wouldn't expect."

Du Sanying's small fanbase instantly burst into laughter.

"Didn't God Mu just remember the last multiplayer game where the little parrot picked up his slack and came in first?"

"That's not called picking up by the little parrot; that's called a heavenly delivery. He didn't even bend down to pick it up. It was God Mu himself who delivered it. I must say, God Mu's delivery service is still spot on."

"So Du Sanying, this guy, even though he's third on the Rising Stars list, doesn't even know stuff like [opening animation]." Mu Sicheng snorted. "This guy's just luck. He has no game sense at all. I advise you not to deal with him, or all the clearance props, messages, and such you collect will end up in his hands somehow."

"He's lucky, but everyone around him is unlucky. Every time a player is in a game with Du Sanying, their luck drops."

Mu Sicheng spoke with disdain, but in truth, he was shocked when Bai Liu calmly pulled him onto the burning train. It was only when Bai Liu mentioned that they hadn't received their points yet and that the opening might just be an animation effect that Mu Sicheng realized.

It wasn't common for players to think about opening animations, and even when they did, most wouldn't dare board with such certainty. But Bai Liu did so without hesitation.

Bai Liu was a gambler at heart. If gambling weren't illegal, he'd probably be doing it. He's the type of person to guess there's an 80% chance of success and then try for 100%.

Mu Sicheng would never have been so honest about getting into a car with the bold Bai Liu, but he didn't understand this aspect of Bai Liu and was easily fooled by his confident expression.

That said, Mu Sicheng continued to explain Du Sanying to Bai Liu.

"No," Mu Sicheng said, opening the game manager to show Bai Liu his luck panel. His face darkened. "My luck has dropped from 56 to 43. Tsk, Du Sanying's getting more dangerous. Bai Liu, your luck will also drop..."

Bai Liu silently exchanged a glance with Mu Sicheng. “What, you can have negative luck attributes in this game?”

Mu Sicheng: "....."

Shit, he forgot Bai Liu only had 0 luck.

Du Sanying noticed Mu Sicheng explaining his ability to make people’s luck drop and seemed aware of his ability to make others uncomfortable.

Suddenly, all the burning corpses in the carriage turned into normal passengers. Their heads turned in unison, smiling eerily at Bai Liu, then vanished into ashes as the female voice in the carriage sweetly announced, “Passengers, welcome aboard Line 4. Next stop—Mirror City Museum.”

Bai Liu turned to see the LED countdown light on the underground station, now showing [60:00] after clearing.

The one-hour countdown. Bai Liu mused, that’s about the time it takes for a train to travel from the starting station to the final stop. It looked like the explosion would happen in an hour.

Bai Liu remembered that in the Mirror City bombing, the game prototype for "The Last Train" took place at the Mirror City Museum, the underground station where he got off at the last stop. But in reality, the last stop wasn’t the Antique City where Bai Liu boarded, nor was the underground line designed to circle the city.

Bai Liu had been on the last train with Lu Yizhan. He was supposed to get off a few stops after Mirror City, but Lu Yizhan had dragged him off at the last moment. Otherwise, Bai Liu—unlucky both in and outside the game—would have been blown to bits in the Mirror City bombing.

The Mirror City bombing occurred when two thieves stole a valuable antique mirror, pretending to be its owner. They claimed they wanted to donate it to the local museum, but only if they were escorted personally.

The antique mirror was said to be worth over a hundred million dollars. It was rare for the museum to receive such a large donation, so they agreed to the thieves’ unreasonable requests.

Bai Liu’s city was called Mirror City, and the museum was called the

Mirror City Museum. The thieves' real goal was to rob the museum's collection by transporting the antique mirror backstage, where they planned to threaten the museum with a bomb hidden inside the mirror.

During the transport, the bomb inside the mirror exploded, killing nearly everyone on the train, including the thieves and the museum commissioner escorting the mirror. Almost everyone died instantly.

Soon after, the thieves' crime was revealed: they had stolen the mirror and planned to rob the museum. It was concluded that the bombing was a terrorist theft.

Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan discussed the bombing, and both agreed there were still suspicions surrounding it. Two things stood out:

First: How did the thieves manage to get enough explosives to blow up an entire train carriage past security and transport them hidden inside the mirror?

Second: If the thieves were after money, why did they generously donate the mirror, worth a fortune, to the museum instead of selling it privately?

According to Bai Liu, the Mirror City Museum's collection wasn't valued higher than the mirror. If the thieves were after money, they could have sold the mirror themselves, rather than going through the trouble of transporting it into the museum and looting its contents.

Such an operation was too risky, and if they used bombs, they would have no chance of escaping, even if one of them wasn't injured.

When Bai Liu discussed the bombing, he said that if he were to rob the museum, he would've sold the mirror, bribed the guards to let him in, then killed them and framed them for the theft. This way, he could make a clean getaway and sell the goods abroad.

Lu Yizhan was speechless and said, "Bai Liu, I asked you about this bombing to get ideas for solving the case, not so you could think of a more perfect way to commit the crime!"

Bai Liu then apologized insincerely, saying he only thought in terms of those with the highest vested interests.

Lu Yizhan, outraged, accused Bai Liu of saying, "With that kind of thinking, you're going to get yourself into big trouble one day!"

Now, the question was, as Bai Liu was in the game “Bursting Last Train,” he had to figure out why the two stupid thieves would do something so foolish.

Bai Liu narrowed his eyes, his mind racing. These two thieves didn’t want to be alone in a car with the mirror. They preferred public transport, like the underground, where there were many people. They weren’t afraid of damaging the mirror by hiding explosives inside it.

It went against a thief’s nature to enrich themselves by risking everything for a mirror, rather than exchanging it for other valuable items in the museum’s collection.

The obvious conclusion: the thieves were afraid of the mirror.

The two thieves didn’t dare to be alone with the 100 million mirror, possibly having struck it but failing for some unknown reason. After the incident, they pretended to donate it, hoping to hold the mirror in the museum.

The thieves even stuffed the mirror with explosives, hoping to destroy it. But despite everything they did to try and get rid of it, something unfortunate happened—the mirror exploded on the underground.

If Bai Liu was right, the key to this game wasn’t the last train that was about to explode, nor the burned-out passengers, nor the underground stations that Du Sanying was gawking at.

It was the mirror.

[Congratulations to player Bai Liu for first triggering the main quest: Collect the broken lenses from the last train (0/?)]

Burst last train

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The system notification echoed through the underground, meaning everyone could hear Bai Liu triggering the main quest.

Du Sanying and Mu Sicheng stared in disbelief as they watched Bai Liu, casually leaning against the underground station, mindlessly fiddling with the coins in his hand.

Bai Liu had just been sitting there while Mu Sicheng and Du Sanying were actively searching for clues in the carriage. Bai Liu had simply said, “I need to sort out the information in my head,” with a blank expression, and then sat still. Mu Sicheng had been speechless.

Bai Liu had told Mu Sicheng everything he knew about the bombing, but Mu Sicheng hadn’t thought much of it, focusing instead on searching the carriage to trigger the main mission.

The Last Train was a collectible horror game. In Mu Sicheng’s experience, the first thing you needed to collect was usually the item that triggered the main quest.

What Mu Sicheng didn’t know was that the game could also trigger a collection-oriented main quest by parsing out key items in the background of the game.

Mu Sicheng couldn’t be blamed for not thinking deeply about it—it was all in the mind.

Usually, newcomers to the game weren’t given enough information to locate the first item needed to trigger a quest.

But Bai Liu was a bug in the system. He was new to the game but also a game designer, so he didn’t have the usual mindset. He was accustomed to thinking from the game’s background and knew enough to work backward to find the things he needed to collect.

And Bai Liu’s lack of hesitation only proved this further.

When the system beeped to signal Bai Liu had triggered the main quest, Mu Sicheng and Du Sanying both froze, turning to look at him,

still sitting in his seat.

Du Sanying didn't know Bai Liu well enough to ask him directly, but curiosity filled his gaze. How could this man trigger the main quest without moving?

Mu Sicheng didn't hold back. He stepped forward and asked, "How did you trigger the main quest? You didn't even move!"

It was the question on everyone's mind. When the system beep had sounded just moments ago, no one had expected the first player to trigger the main quest to be a new player sitting still, especially when players like the third and fourth-ranked Rising Stars, or even the [Puppeteer], were present.

It didn't make sense.

"Shit! How did he trigger it?" one of the viewers muttered. "I swear he didn't move an inch!"

"Did he just sit directly on the broken lens to trigger the quest?" another said. "Hiss, I suddenly feel a pain in my butt just thinking about it."

"Doesn't this kind of thing usually happen to the little parrots? How did this newbie get the chance?" someone else added.

Mu Sicheng hoisted Bai Liu up by his arms, looking suspiciously under his seat. "Did you sit on the lens or something? Did that trigger the main quest?"

Bai Liu clenched his fist, his expression unchanged. "Mu Sicheng, put me down."

Bai Liu was 177 cm, and he hated when people lifted him like this. As a child, his dream had been to cut down anyone taller than him with a machete.

Someone dared to lift him? They would soon learn that being tall was a crime—if not for the fact that Bai Liu would need Mu Sicheng later.

Bai Liu paused, catching himself before his tyrannical thoughts ran wild. Hesitantly, Mu Sicheng set him down, turning to face him with a chill at his back.

"How did you trigger the quest, then? You didn't move," Mu Sicheng

asked.

“Why would I need to move?” Bai Liu said, brushing off the non-existent dust on his clothes where Mu Sicheng had touched him. He gave Mu Sicheng a smile. “My brain is moving, Mu Sicheng.”

Mu Sicheng, at a loss for words, was left staring at him, utterly bewildered.

After straightening his clothes, Bai Liu looked at Mu Sicheng again. “Didn’t I tell you the key information? You couldn’t figure it out yourself? What’s your intelligence worth if you can’t even grasp something like this?”

Mu Sicheng frowned deeply, biting back the urge to say more. "You told me about the broken mirror, Bai Liu. If it was up to you, you’d kill the keeper and steal the mirror and the collection. What key information are you talking about?"

Bai Liu's expression was one of mock innocence. "You should be grateful for the information I gave you. But you’re just too slow to put it together."

Bai Liu clapped his hands together, walking ahead. Du Sanying cautiously followed, not too far behind. Bai Liu didn’t lower his voice, and Du Sanying was left somewhat surprised as he listened—so this is how you deduce it?

The audience reacted with similar astonishment.

"Who’s this new player? He’s got an interesting way of thinking. I want to watch him more closely."

"I’ve never seen anyone trigger the main quest in a collection game like this. Even Du Sanying, with his 100% luck, didn’t trigger it this fast. This newcomer’s impressive."

Mu Sicheng bit into his lollipop and glanced sideways at Du Sanying, who was following behind them, pretending to search. “So you’re just going to give him the information? He’ll find plenty of mirror pieces later.”

"This guy’s luck value is insane," Mu Sicheng added. "He’s good at finding things, and if anyone’s going to collect the lenses, it’ll be Du Sanying, in all sorts of strange ways. Don’t you think we should keep an eye on him?”

Bai Liu looked back at him, his gaze calm. “Why should I protect myself from him?”

Mu Sicheng frowned. "Didn’t I tell you? The lenses we’re looking for could be taken by Du Sanying. If we try to grab them, he’ll make us pay for it."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "Who told you we’re looking for lenses?"

He glanced at Du Sanying behind them before continuing, "Let Du Sanying search. Isn’t he good at it? Let him take his time. It would be even better if he collects them all, right?”

Mu Sicheng was stunned. “Wait… You want to wait for Du Sanying to collect them, and then you’ll just rob him?”

Bai Liu’s smile was cold. “Exactly.”

Mu Sicheng ran his tongue over his teeth. "As much as I’d love to see that, Bai Liu, it won’t work. You have no idea what Du Sanying’s luck value of 100% means."

Mu Sicheng’s expression turned grim. He seemed to remember something unpleasant as his teeth ground together. "If you try to rob Du Sanying, your luck value will start falling. Everything will go wrong for you, and even if you get close to his system storage, monsters will interrupt you. You just won’t be able to grab anything from him."

Bai Liu remained unfazed. "That’s because you can’t. I might be able to."

Mu Sicheng was genuinely frustrated. “You really don’t get it, do you? Du Sanying’s luck value is 100%. No one can steal from him—not even Spades.”

The system had confirmed it: [Du Sanying is a favorite of the gods of luck.]

Bai Liu glanced at him. “You’re saying Du Sanying influences the fortunes of things around him, right? But I can’t be affected by him. My luck is zero, and it can’t go lower. His luck can’t make me any more unlucky.”

Mu Sicheng was taken aback.

Bai Liu smiled faintly. "But my misfortune might make him even more miserable. Don't you think so?"

Du Sanying, trailing behind, felt a chill run down his spine. He suddenly had goosebumps, feeling an ominous premonition.

Mu Sicheng raised an eyebrow. "If you're not after the broken lenses, what's your plan in this game, Bai Liu? Just sitting still like you did earlier?"

Bai Liu smiled, his eyes glinting as he looked ahead at the empty carriage, clearly satisfied. "Of course not. You told me robbery is allowed in this game, right? Do you think Puppeteers have money?"

Mu Sicheng snorted. "You talk big, but you might end up the one who dies when the time comes."

Bai Liu was noncommittal. "It's possible. But if I were him, I'd let me live. There's value in keeping me alive, and he should've realized that when he tried to turn me into a puppet."

"Let's see who becomes the puppet of whom." Bai Liu's smile was soft but deadly.

Zhang Gui's eyes narrowed as he scanned the carriage. His ten fingers manipulated transparent silk threads that extended out and stabbed into the necks of the other three players.

One of them, crouched on the ground searching for something, suddenly straightened, as if tugged by a slight movement of Zhang Gui's finger.

Li Gou answered. "No."

Zhang Gui clicked his tongue impatiently, his puppet-like face displaying frustration.

"Been searching the carriage for almost half the time, and you haven't found it yet?"

The three puppets trembled, heads bowed. Sweat dripped down their foreheads in large blue drops, like animated raindrops.

Li Gou winced and stepped forward, repeating in a low voice, "Master, we haven't found any broken lenses yet."

"Don't bother looking," Zhang Gui commanded. His fingers snapped,

and the puppets stood in formation before him, perfectly aligned.

Li Gou hesitated. “Master, aren’t we supposed to be collecting broken lenses? How can we pass the game without them?”

“Stupid,” Zhang Gui sneered. “Don’t question my decisions, you idiot.”

"We didn’t trigger the main quest, but we should’ve been the first to start searching. We had the numbers advantage, yet we found nothing. Do you understand?" Zhang Gui glared at Li Gou.

Li Gou, cold sweat running down his face, looked utterly confused. “U-Understand… What?”

Chapter End Notes

> 177 cm is 5 ft. 8 inches
>
> THIS IS A SPOILER : Bai Liu is the second shortest in the Wandering Circus at 177cm

Burst last train

Zhang Gui grunted arrogantly. "Stupid! One of those three is Bai Liu. This guy has a poor panel and can't move as fast as you guys under my control. There's no way he can search the carriage faster than you."

"Mu Sicheng is fast, but not as intelligent as Bai Liu, so he can't match my intelligence and your puppet players in finding things."

"But these two will certainly not cooperate." Zhang Gui's smile turned malicious as he casually kicked one of the three puppets in front of him. The puppet fell and bowed its head, clattering to its knees before Zhang Gui.

Zhang Gui stepped carelessly on the back of the kneeling puppet, leaned down, and laughed. "Hey, Mu Sicheng's once good friend, Liu Huai, don't you think?"

The puppet player, Liu Huai, didn't respond, his limbs trembling slightly.

"I brought you here specifically when I knew there was Mu Sicheng in this game," Zhang Gui tsked. "Mu Sicheng wouldn't expect you to become a puppet player under me, would he?"

"He almost became my puppet because of your betrayal. But in the end, Mu Sicheng stayed calm with his spirit level down to 18 and escaped by killing four of my puppets. With so many puppet players dead, I had to take your place."

"But I think you're happy to be my puppet, aren't you? If you see Mu Sicheng later, make sure you do a good job of messing with his mind, okay? If you let him get away again, you won't have a good job as my puppet."

Zhang Gui patted Liu Huai's face, a cold sweat dripping down the puppet's face. Liu dared not say a word.

Zhang Gui seemed bored and quickly withdrew his hand. "Mu Sicheng will never cooperate with anyone, let alone someone like Bai Liu, who has a lot of heart. Even if Bai Liu is willing to cooperate with him, Mu Sicheng will definitely go against him. We should be the fastest players in the game to find something, but we still haven't found it. So, there are only two possibilities—"

He held up two fingers and elaborated. "First possibility: the broken lenses this game says it wants to collect aren't even in the train."

"There's another way," Zhang Gui's eyes narrowed meaningfully. "There are seven players in this game: Mu Sicheng, Bai Liu, the three of you, and me. That makes six spots. The last player to enter—if they have the ability—could find all the broken lenses before we do."

Li Gou, though fearful, still looked up, confused. "But master, we've searched half the car at full speed and still haven't seen any broken lenses. Not all the lenses may be in the other half of the car, collected by the last player who came in, is it?"

"How is that impossible?" Zhang Gui gritted his teeth when he said the name of the man. "If the last person to come in was Du Sanying, then even if all the broken lenses were piled up in front of him, waiting for him to pick them up, it would be possible!"

Bai Liu glanced behind him at Du Sanying, who looked somewhat distressed, searching the carriages from seat to seat. He had yet to find a single broken lens, despite having followed Bai Liu and the others through two carriages.

"It shouldn't be..." Du Sanying muttered to himself, genuinely surprised. "How come not a single broken lens was found?"

He had done collection-oriented tasks like this before without fail, but this time, after searching for so long, he had come up empty.

Du Sanying pushed up his glasses and checked his luck value through the game manager. Still at 100 percent, he was deep in confusion.

"...How can that be? Luck 100 percent is always great for finding things..."

Du Sanying had a strong feeling that following Bai Liu would get him through, though it came with a creeping discomfort. Still, he never doubted his instincts—his instincts told him that if following Bai Liu would get him through, it would.

Bai Liu, seeing Du Sanying check the panel's luck value, withdrew his gaze and turned to Mu Sicheng. "There aren't any broken lenses in this compartment."

Mu Sicheng, having given up trying to figure out Bai Liu's reasoning, asked directly, "Why?"

"If there were broken lenses in the train," Bai Liu said, "Du Sanying, with his 100 percent luck, would have found them."

Mu Sicheng raised an eyebrow. "Have you forgotten that there's a puppet master in this game? Du Sanying is very good at finding things, but there are four of them on the Puppeteer's side. The puppet player moves quickly under his manipulation and could very well find the broken lenses in these carriages before we do."

"Not likely," Bai Liu shook his head. "Firstly, you said Du Sanying's luck value is an advantage in this kind of game. Secondly, if the puppet master had found the broken lens and identified the key to pass this game, he would most likely come to attack us by now. We've gone through so many carriages without encountering them. I think they are intentionally avoiding us to avoid conflict. It doesn't seem like a sign of having found it."

Mu Sicheng clutched his chest and averted his eyes, giving a sarcastic laugh. "You smart people understand each other, you all like to play this game."

"I don't like that kind of thing about him," Bai Liu clarified lightly, understanding Mu Sicheng's mockery. "If I need someone to work with me, I will make him willingly work with me."

"Like my partnership with you, right?" Mu Sicheng smiled twice. "Bai Liu, my verbal agreement with you without proof isn't very solid."

"It's a money deal," Bai Liu emphasized, smiling slightly. "You gave me a point, Mu Sicheng."

Mu Sicheng laughed mockingly but didn't dwell on the matter. "So if there were no broken lenses on the train, as you say, where would they be? Outside the train? In an underground station? Do we wait until we get off the train to look in the underground station?"

Bai Liu rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a moment. "I actually think it's highly unlikely that the broken lens is at the underground station."

"Not on the train, not off the train. The map is that big," Mu Sicheng spread his hands. "So where else do you think it could be?"

Bai Liu didn't answer as the train arrived at the station. The female announcement voice of the train arriving at the station interrupted Bai Liu, who had his lips slightly parted: "The train has arrived at [Mirror City Museum]. Please get off the train in an orderly manner if you

need to get off at this station, and please get on the train in an orderly manner if you need to get on at this station..."

The doors of the train slowly opened, and Mu Sicheng and Du Sanying, upon seeing what was outside the train, instantly changed their expressions. Bai Liu, however, kept his bemused expression as expected.

On the platform outside the doors were charred corpses of all kinds. Some had their eyes burned away, others had their limbs shriveled, and their teeth were exposed.

The eerie thing was that the bodies all maintained normal human forms—one was even looking down at his watch, though the watch on his wrist had long since burned beyond recognition.

The charred passengers were scattered thickly throughout the station. Their heads all raised in unison as the doors opened, their dark eyes staring into the car at Bai Liu's group.

The underground station was a mess, littered with blackened charcoal marks from flames. The smell of burnt human flesh was so strong it made the throat itch.

Du Sanying leaned weakly behind Bai Liu and asked in a small voice, "Bai Liu, do you think this will also be an over-the-top animation? Will they... will they attack people?"

"I probably wouldn't design two similar transitions in the opening scene of a game," Bai Liu responded. "It's too boring and a waste of time."

Du Sanying, getting weaker, his sweat standing on end, felt a rising sense of danger that made him want to run.

But once he left Bai Liu, the overwhelming feeling of misfortune that he might die loomed large. Feeling he had no choice, Du Sanying asked, "Bai Liu, what will you design?"

"If it were me..." Bai Liu spoke as he darted through his system interface, looking for props. When he found what he was looking for, he continued, "I would probably design a very high-risk train chase to add excitement to the opening scene."

Mu Sicheng caught Bai Liu's meaning and looked out of the car door at the charred corpses. He muttered darkly, "This is going to be a

chase war."

Burst last train

"I suggest you use props that increase your movement speed." Bai Liu glanced at the [passengers] gathering outside toward the car door after putting on the prop. "This monster should move fast."

Mu Sicheng quickly put on his prop wrist guard, which increased his movement speed, and let out a sudden, strange laugh with his lollipop in his mouth.

Bai Liu turned his head at the sound of the eerie laugh and saw Mu Sicheng with his feet on the wall of the train, gripping it with his monkey paws, attaching himself to it, and wearing a speed boost. It was a pose ready for escape.

When Mu Sicheng saw Bai Liu looking back at him, he grinned and uncrossed one of his monkey paws to give Bai Liu a two-fingered salute, a distinctly mischievous look in his eyes. "I'll leave you to it then, Bai Liu. I'm not going to be part of your flawed plan to kill the Puppeteer. You do your best."

"And—" Mu Sicheng raised his eyebrows and waved a small white mermaid sculpture in his hand at Bai Liu, "Your prop [Mermaid's Amulet], I, Mu Sicheng, will take it. That's the price you pay for cheating me out of two thousand points. As I said, no one can make me suffer."

"By the way, Bai Liu," Mu Sicheng stepped on one monkey paw and disappeared into the carriage like a gust of wind. All Bai Liu could hear was Mu Sicheng's nasty grin. "I hate working with people. This is a lesson for you. If you survive, don't thank me. Bye!"

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng used the skill (Thief's Monkey Paw) to steal the item (Mermaid's Amulet) from player Bai Liu's system backpack.]

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng uses skill (Thief's Sneak), movement speed +7000.]

In a flash, Mu Sicheng disappeared from Bai Liu's sight, leaving a dumbfounded Du Sanying and a still calm Bai Liu staring at each other in disbelief.

Du Sanying was dumbfounded. He looked at Bai Liu and questioned him with an even more shocked expression than Bai Liu, gesturing

back and forth between Mu Sicheng's direction and Bai Liu. "You two aren't working together? Why did Mu Sicheng leave you and run away? Why did he steal from you? Aren't you friends?"

Seeing that Mu Sicheng had indeed made his move, Wang Shun let out a long, complicated sigh in front of the small TV. It was true that Mu Sicheng, the thief, had followed Bai Liu into the game because he wanted to steal the items he wanted from him.

"Siren Town" has recently been a warm-up game for newcomers, but the game wall is rarely refreshed. Old players can't get in, and new players can't get out. Props like the "Mermaid's Amulet," which can only be obtained by collecting the back pages of the monster book, are hard to find. The amulet is also a rare item.

But it was probably Bai Liu's stinginess and shamelessness that made Mu Sicheng realize that Bai Liu would never appreciate him selling him the [Mermaid's Amulet] and was ready to steal it from him straight away.

But Bai Liu was lucky to be 0. Wang Shun sighed. He ran into Du Sanying, who is 100% lucky and best at this, and sought cooperation with Mu Sicheng, who hates his companions and has bad intentions, and the ruthless Zhang Gui. He was also told by the ruthless Zhang Gui that he would be captured and made into a puppet...

It's like stepping on every mine that can be stepped on. It's hard for him.

But not everyone is as sympathetic as Wang Shun, and most viewers are thin-skinned and realistic. Bai Liu's initiative to seek a partnership, only to be backstabbed by Mu Sicheng, disappointed some viewers who were expecting him.

Bai Liu had already been sucked away by the three big players. The remaining viewers were few, but he played a series of mistakes. Although no viewers stepped on it, the number of viewers who liked it was also small, leading to Bai Liu's small TV data being quite unattractive.

[107 new people liked Bai Liu's TV, 161 new people favorited Bai Liu's TV, no one recharged the player.]

[120 new people are watching Bai Liu's mini-TV. The difference between the last gameplay video data is too big. Player Bai Liu will be dropped from (Multiplayer Zone) to (Graveyard Bounce Zone). Please

player Bai Liu, take the game seriously!]

[Graveyard Bounce Zone's welcome banner for player Bai Liu: yo~ you're acting like you're jumping across the death line repeatedly~ yo~ so clumsy I want to laugh~ yo~ Graveyard Bounce Zone welcomes players who don't want to play the game properly, and has prepared a small TV in the shape of a premium eight-hearted eight-brick grave for you to bounce around on!]

In stark contrast to this was Mu Sicheng's mini-TV. The effect of this back-stabbing Bai Liu's stealing operation brought about an instant spike in Mu Sicheng's mini-TV's numbers, with Mu Sicheng leaving the section immediately after Du Sanying's mini-TV and making it into the central hall without incident.

"Grave Bounce Zone?" Wang Shun's face finally sank when he saw the name of this zone, turning ugly. "Only players who performed too badly between last time and this time will enter this zone. Although Bai Liu's stats aren't too good now, it's not so bad as to directly beat Bai Liu to this zone! It's only been how long since the game started!"

But it soon dawned on Wang Shun why Bai Liu had been knocked straight into this section. It wasn't a bad performance this time; it was a great performance last time.

The system assessed Bai Liu as not taking the game seriously—i.e., paddling—and therefore issued a warning to him.

But no matter how much he disagreed, there was nothing Wang Shun could do to change the fact that Bai Liu was going to this [Graveyard Bounce Zone].

There were some who followed Wang Shun, but many more left Bai Liu's TV with a frown and a sigh of relief and moved on to other gods' TVs.

Wang Shun arrived almost alone in the miserable white graveyard bouncy area. The small TVs all had crosses on their heads and looked like little tombstones, with two large wreaths placed at the entrance. Elegiacs fell to the ground from the center of the wreath, which read on one side: [All Stars] and on the other side: [Death Without a Burial].

The [Graveyard Bounce Zone] is decorated in a style very much like a storage room for bone altars, and the images on the small TVs held inside are in black and white.

The players above are mostly described as miserable, with the black and white tones resembling posthumous photos. At a glance, it's not some small live TV area in the yang world; the atmosphere is very nether-seeping.

The crowd here was also small, mostly anxious and cranky, cheering on the players on the small TVs, everyone with an unbelievable look of hatred, similar to the look on Wang Shun's face right now.

This is normal because the [Graveyard Bounce Zone] is alias [Land of the Falling Nova]. Players whose stats were too high last time and too bad this time are judged by the system not to be serious about the game and are then sent to this place.

This is also considered the [cold room] of the game hall.

Many players have been knocked into the [Cold Palace], but few can leave because the requirement for a player to be able to leave the [Graveyard Bounce Zone] is that the player's small TV stats have to surpass the last small TV stats in this [Graveyard Bounce Zone] before the system will assign a new promotion spot to leave.

Bai Liu's last small TV composite figure was over 100,000. Wang Shun has never heard of a player being able to live stream over 100,000 in the Graveyard Bounce Zone since he entered the game. But if Bai Liu gets trapped in this Graveyard Bounce Zone, he could easily fall into No Man's Land and never get up again...

But unlike Wang Shun, who is now in a sombre mood, the forum is a frenzy of underclass players who can't stand Bai Liu.

[Congratulations to Bai Liu, the newcomer who is touted to be the star of tomorrow, for his 8 hearts and 8 diamonds graveyard TV!]

"I'm in a hurry! I'm in a hurry! I'm in a hurry—when the hell did Bai Liu fall into no man's land! Come on! I bet he falls in three hours later!"

"I'd like to ask now, where are all the people who were so vocal about this Bai Liu? Have they all gone to the cold palace to be with the White Queen? Did they not praise Bai Liu before? Now you're out on the line!"

Bai Liu, who knew nothing of the bloodshed that had fallen upon him,

now faced an even more daunting challenge.

The charred corpses outside the car poured frantically into the carriage. They crouched on the ground in strange positions, their heads raised up to their backs, their necks appearing as though they had been snapped off. Their feet ploughed desperately on the ground, resembling human-faced spiders, while their charred faces contorted into all manner of expressions.

It was as if normal passengers, numbly swiping their mobile phones, were squeezed into the underground with the crowded passengers. Some passengers had no time to run and were crushed against the window glass by those who poured in from behind, their bodies instantly reduced to bloody messes, giving Bai Liu the illusion that this train was during the morning rush.

Du Sanying dodged a corpse passenger that came in, slapping his chest and laughing heartily, "This monster is so fast and strong." As he spoke, he equipped himself with a prop.

[System Alert: Player Du Sanying uses the prop (Lucky Bumper Car) to move at a speed of +1890 and can luckily avoid all creatures that come at you.]

Du Sanying instantly hopped into a pink, colorful bumper car adorned with pictures of little BMWL, which looked juvenile, but the skinny Du Sanying didn't feel out of place in it.

He waved anxiously at Bai Liu. "Bai Liu, come up here! I'll drive you away! The monsters are coming in!"

Du Sanying wasn't just trying to save Bai Liu. His strong sixth sense told him that Bai Liu was the key to his success in this game, and no matter what, this man could not die.

Bai Liu, still calm, politely declined Du Sanying's help and equipped himself with a prop as well.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has equipped the item (Sculpture's Shell), Defense +100. As this is a heavy item, player Bai Liu's movement speed is reduced by -13.]

"Pfft!" Du Sanying sputtered upon seeing Bai Liu wearing a bulky marble armor shell that crushed his entire body, causing him to sway and fall to his knees.

His face split open in disbelief. "Bai Liu! You've got the wrong prop! You're wearing a defensive prop! It's clearly a speed reduction prop! Take it off!"

Bai Liu, weighed down by dozens of pounds of marble armor, could not stand up but spoke with conviction. "It's not the wrong prop. I'm not taking it off."

Bai Liu's face made Du Sanying's small TV audience erupt.

"What's he doing?! A self-loathing fool falling into the graveyard area?"

"He shouldn't have known he's in the graveyard area, but carrying a rock in a chase station is definitely confusing behavior..."

"I see the little parrot looking so distraught! Stop saving this fool! Screw him on his knees and go to hell! Run away yourself!"

Du Sanying felt desperate. His premonition screamed at him to rescue Bai Liu. "Do you have any transport? The speedy kind! Forget it, get out of that useless armor! It's too late to get into my car!"

"This armor has a use." Bai Liu calmly clicked on his personal skill and added, "I've got transport, don't worry about me."

Du Sanying was in a rush. "What's your transport prop speed? If it's less than 1890, you'd better take my car!"

"Movement speed?" Bai Liu clicked on his personal skill [Old Wallet] in his panel and smiled strangely. "Probably Mu Sicheng's movement speed."

Du Sanying was shocked. "A 7,000 movement speed transport prop? Is there such a thing?"

Bai Liu's back burned as twisted, flaming passengers rushed toward him, their blackened hands smoking and sparking, trying to reach his back. Sparks drifted across his pale cheeks, but his eyes remained unmoving.

At the last moment, Bai Liu cupped his hands to form a trumpet and shouted lazily, "Mu Sicheng, I need your help, help—!"

Du Sanying was confused. "?????"

Didn't Mu Sicheng just steal your stuff and leave? Why are you asking

him for help? I don't think Mu Sicheng is going to help you!

The audience on Du Sanying's mini-TV was just as puzzled, some even considering that Bai Liu might be a psychopath.

But the viewers of Mu Sicheng's mini-TV were even more baffled.

They watched as Mu Sicheng, who had fled the scene of the burglary with pleasure, stopped dead in his tracks when he heard the voice, [Mu Sicheng, I need your help]. His face changed as if he had been strangled by something.

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng must cooperate with all actions of player Bai Liu as he has activated his personal skill.]

[- Now, player Bai Liu asks you to rewind and do everything he wants, give everything you have to help him and get him out of harm's way -]

"FUCK YOU!!!" Mu Sicheng's face darkened as if he had been manipulated to stiffen. He turned and started speeding toward the carriage he had just left. "Fuck you, Bai Liu!!!"

"You actually manipulated me with your personal skill!!! Isn't your guy's personal skill stealing things!!!"

Mu Sicheng's face was twisted with rage. He almost looked like he was about to snap.

In almost the same breath, Du Sanying saw Bai Liu about to be swallowed by the monsters behind him. Du Sanying scratched his ears, but Bai Liu just smiled, kneeling on the ground in his heavy marble armor, his head tilted up, his arms slightly open, as if waiting for someone to come and get him.

Du Sanying was bewildered and intrigued by this action. "Bai Liu, what the hell are you doing in your armor?"

"This armor adds defense." Bai Liu shrugged, but the armor was too heavy, making him struggle. "I'm afraid my 7,000 mph transport will beat me up later out of anger, so I'll put it on first to make myself a bit more resistant."

"?????" Du Sanying was at a loss.

A vehicle for beating people up?! What the hell is all this?!

The moment Du Sanying wanted to curse, a figure almost too fast to see grabbed Bai Liu's collar and yanked him up.

"Bai Liu—! You bastard—! What have you done to me—! Why am I under your control—!!!"

Mu Sicheng yanked back with all his strength, but the flaming passengers behind Bai Liu and fireballs from his arms swept right past Bai Liu's face. He dodged them, but they still singed his eyelashes.

Bai Liu calmly lifted his burned eyelashes, blinking them out slowly, and smiled indifferently. "I just asked you for help, Mu Sicheng. Didn't we agree on that?"

"I asked you for help and you came to help me. Isn't that what you promised to do? How can you say it's control? How insulting."

Mu Sicheng grimaced, and Bai Liu ran forward a few carriages. Du Sanying saw that Mu Sicheng was not in the right state and hurriedly followed in his little bumper car.

Mu Sicheng backhanded Bai Liu, slamming him to the ground like a rag doll. His expression was full of rage as he stomped on Bai Liu's neck, his eyes bloodshot and breathing erratic. His chest heaved violently, veins bulging on his forehead and arms as he gripped Bai Liu's shirt collar.

Mu Sicheng laughed darkly, lowering his head to glare at Bai Liu, squeezing the words out through clenched teeth. "Very good, Bai Liu. You're a bully."

"All my life, I've hated it when people control me." Mu Sicheng gritted his teeth and gave a creepy grin. "You're really pissing me off."

The marble coat on Bai Liu's body slowly crumbled into pieces, like dried plaster, and fell to the ground.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu's armor has been completely damaged after resisting a blow from player Mu Sicheng and cannot be repaired. Player Bai Liu's life value has dropped to 40 due to the attack.]

"Are you sure you want to kill me?" Bai Liu asked, his lips stained with blood as he smiled. "This skill I used on you is a control skill that binds both my life and yours. If I die, you might die too, Mu Sicheng."

Bai Liu was scamming Mu Sicheng.

The control skill bound the life values of both the person being controlled and the manipulator.

Mu Sicheng took several deep breaths to steady himself, his eyes wide with shock as he gritted his teeth. "After this game, I'll find a way to end our relationship and kill you, Bai Liu."

Bai Liu smiled, knowing he had succeeded in his swindle. "That's later. What about now?"

For a moment, Mu Sicheng and Bai Liu, who seemed to have everything under control, locked eyes. Then, Mu Sicheng cursed, "I'd love to fuck you to death, you son of a bitch!"

After cursing, Mu Sicheng glanced at the charred corpses trailing behind him. With a swift tug on Bai Liu's collar, he darted forward, his expression cold.

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng uses skill (Thief's Sneak), movement speed +7000, speed reduced due to carrying player Bai Liu (weight 57kg, lightly injured). Final movement speed: +6900.]

Du Sanying stood dumbfounded, staring at Mu Sicheng's back as he sped away. Then his gaze shifted to Bai Liu's armor, shattered by Mu Sicheng's punch, and muttered, "So that 7,000 movement speed vehicle Bai Liu was talking about—was Mu Sicheng?"

Du Sanying, a naïve player who had never seen Bai Liu's deadly use of players as transportation, watched as Mu Sicheng carried Bai Liu, gritting his teeth. He couldn't help but shudder.

What was happening was the chilling realization of the future of someone like Mu Sicheng—a tool used by Bai Liu.

It was horrifying. How could Bai Liu be so calm, knowing that Mu Sicheng might actually kill him in a fit of anger? He was so casual about using his transport skill to "beat people up." Mu Sicheng really seemed to want to kill him...

Dazed, Du Sanying drove his little BMW bumper car, trailing Bai Liu and the others.

For several minutes, everyone watched the small TV in silence, unsure of what to say. Anything they said now would feel like a slap in the face for mocking Bai Liu earlier. Finally, one audience member coughed awkwardly and pretended to speak.

"This Bai Liu... has a couple of tricks up his sleeve, hahahaha..."

"More than two, huh..." someone else muttered, emotions mixed. "He actually controlled Mu Sicheng. This is something even the wire-puppet guild couldn't do..."

"Does this guy have the same skill as the Puppeteer from Lifeline? All about controlling players?"

"I think so. This is a battle between two players with manipulation skills. Even though the Puppeteer has three puppets, Mu Sicheng became Bai Liu's puppet. Four against two. I still think the Puppeteer has a better chance, but Bai Liu's move is too powerful. The win probability is down to 40%..."

"Poor Mu Sicheng. He escaped the first day of the month but not the fifteenth. In the end, he became a puppet after all..."

"I'd like to see Mu Sicheng's reaction on Bai Liu's small TV... Does he even realize what's happening?"

"I'll go watch Bai Liu too... He's in the graveyard bounce zone, right? Pity, he wouldn't have fallen into the graveyard if he had gotten out of that situation earlier..."

Mu Sicheng's audience continued to lose ground to Bai Liu.

Gradually, the crowd gathered around Bai Liu's small TV in the graveyard bounce zone, but none of it caught Wang Shun's attention.

Wang Shun was focused on Bai Liu on the small TV, stunned for a few seconds. He recalled that Bai Liu's personal skill wasn't stealing, was it?

Eventually, Wang Shun shook his head in disbelief. Could it be that Bai Liu had been planning to trick Mu Sicheng all along? Get Mu Sicheng to lower his guard, believing Bai Liu's skill was stealing, just to control him?

Bai Liu would have been wary of any other personal skill, but Mu Sicheng would never have suspected the skill of stealing.

Why? Because Mu Sicheng was the strongest thief in the game—he had stolen from Spades and was unbeatable.

But Bai Liu stole from him again and again, the most powerful thief of all.

The first time it was mental bleach, the second time it was a stamina supplement, and the third time Mu Sicheng had his entire body stolen by Bai Liu.

And for the fourth time—Wang Shun's eyes locked on the growing audience in front of him, his emotions overwhelming—Bai Liu had stolen Mu Sicheng's audience.

Burst last train

[Added 1,776 likes for Bai Liu's TV, 2,006 favorites, and 345 people charged for Bai Liu, totaling 345 charge points.]

[2,004 new viewers are watching Bai Liu’s mini-TV. The player has received over 1,500 likes in a minute—Bai Liu is finally getting serious!]

[Yo~ Your performance is back on track~ Yo~ My punishment will not be shirked~ Yo~ Until you keep flying~ Yo~]

[47,294 likes, 50,860 favorites, 14,724 points needed before Bai Liu leaves (Graveyard Bounce Zone).]

Mu Sicheng had run around the car more times than he could count. Only after reaching a new platform did he finally get a chance to catch his breath. Lying on his back, he downed a stamina rejuvenator, wiped the sweat from his face, and shot Bai Liu a grim look as the other player rested.

"Bai Liu, did you already guess that my personal skill was theft?" Mu Sicheng asked, coming to the same conclusion as Wang Shun. "You baited me by stealing from me, making me assume your skill was theft, lowering my guard."

"You deliberately pretended not to know my skill at the game entrance and casually claimed it was Five Senses Enhancement. But you already knew, didn't you?" Mu Sicheng’s gaze was sharp as he stared Bai Liu down.

"Yes," Bai Liu admitted without hesitation.

Mu Sicheng took a deep breath, eyes locked onto Bai Liu. "When did you figure it out?"

Personal skills weren’t openly discussed on the forums. Revealing them could offend people—except for Puppeteers, who had to expose their skills by nature. Bai Liu was a newcomer, and the only way he could know Mu Sicheng’s skill was by purchasing gameplay videos.

However, a player's skill panel wasn’t visible to viewers, meaning Bai Liu would have had to either buy multiple videos or discuss Mu Sicheng’s skills with veteran players.

But Bai Liu had never bought a Mu Sicheng video. And since he was the first to find Mu Sicheng this time, he hadn't even had the chance to ask around.

So how the hell did he know?!

"I figured it out after logging out of Siren Small Town and meeting you," Bai Liu said.

Mu Sicheng looked at him in disbelief. "Siren Town? I found you almost the second you logged out—there's no way you had time to figure out my skill!"

"I only meant to con you out of a bottle of mental bleach at first—I wasn't planning on setting you up," Bai Liu admitted, rubbing his nose. "But your reaction gave it away. And since you yourself said you were fourth on the Rising Stars list, I thought it'd be a waste not to do something about you."

What the hell?! A waste?! Was this guy some kind of evil mastermind?!

Mu Sicheng's chest rose and fell sharply as he glared at Bai Liu. "How did my reaction reveal my skill?"

Bai Liu turned his head toward him. "Because when I stole your mental bleach, your first reaction was to assume my skill was theft."

"...What else could it be?" Mu Sicheng scoffed. "What other skill could take items straight from my system storage?"

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "In the system lobby, theft is explicitly forbidden. But even when I took your stamina supplement the second time, you were still convinced my skill was theft. A normal player would have at least considered other possibilities—like how I might've tricked you into gifting it to me. But you didn't."

"You stuck to that assumption until we entered the game."

Mu Sicheng froze.

Bai Liu scanned him. "That was your subconscious reaction. It means you have a deep-seated attachment to the concept of theft. And since personal skills are tied to desire, I figured your skill was probably related to theft."

"Fuck," Mu Sicheng muttered, his face darkening. "Even if you were scheming to manipulate me that early, there was no guarantee I'd follow you into the game. If I didn't, all that effort would've been wasted!"

"I wasn't 100% sure you'd follow," Bai Liu admitted matter-of-factly. "But I was about 80% sure."

His eyes glinted. "Because I had something you wanted to steal—the Mermaid's Amulet. Right?"

Mu Sicheng exhaled sharply.

"Something else didn't add up," Bai Liu continued. "Why did you come find me after I logged out? You're a top player. Even if you were curious about my skill, you wouldn't have stuck around after losing 2,000 points."

Bai Liu looked up at him. "You're not stupid. If you weren't interested in me, there had to be something I had that you wanted—and that you were confident you could steal. In thief jargon, that's called stamping, isn't it?"

Mu Sicheng's expression turned completely black. "You knew I wanted to steal the Mermaid's Amulet?! You used it as bait?!"

Bai Liu gave him an easygoing smile. "Now, now, God Mu. How can you call it bait? I was seeking your cooperation. Consider it a gift from me to you. You see? I can manipulate you now, and I'm not even asking you to give it back, am I?"

He couldn't force Mu Sicheng to hand over the amulet, so at this moment, their skills were truly working together.

Mu Sicheng's expression eased slightly. At least Bai Liu wasn't treating him like a disposable puppet.

Still, Mu Sicheng refused to talk to him anymore—this guy was so infuriating it made his liver hurt. Instead, he opened his personal panel.

[Player Mu Sicheng's Personal Panel]
Vitality: 94 (reduced due to burns)
Stamina: 30 (depleted, recovering)
Mental Value: 75 (mild alienation from passenger attacks)

If Mu Sicheng had been running alone, his stamina wouldn't have dropped so drastically, and he wouldn't have been burned by the monsters. But because he was carrying Bai Liu, the energy cost of maintaining his top speed had nearly doubled.

Mu Sicheng didn't dare attack Bai Liu outright—he wasn't sure how much control Bai Liu had over him yet. But that didn't stop him from being sarcastic.

"You actually ran out of stamina while being carried by me? With panel stats this weak, you should've been dead a long time ago."

Bai Liu, ever shameless, lazily replied, "Didn't God Mu lend me a helping hand? I didn't die, did I?"

He opened his panel. "A great disaster brings great fortune. We triggered the first monster book."

[Bursting Last Train - Monster Book Unlocked: Bursting Passenger (1/3)]
Monster Name: Bursting Passenger
Traits: Extreme movement speed (1,000 speed points, flame bonus effect)
Weakness: ????? (To be explored)
Attack: Burns with flames, reducing life and mental value

Mu Sicheng scoffed. "So what if we triggered the first monster book? You're not planning to collect all the monster books in a Level 2 instance like Bursting Last Train, are you? Bai Liu, even I wouldn't dare do that in a game no one's cleared before."

Bai Liu smiled idly, his words as infuriating as ever. "There's always a first time for everything. I'm here, aren't I? God Mu, why don't we give it a shot? Let's cooperate."

The way he said cooperate made it clear he was threatening Mu Sicheng into helping.

Mu Sicheng felt his anger surge all over again. He took two deep breaths to steady himself before he actually died from frustration. "You have zero panel life, and you still want to collect monster books? You really would risk your life for money."

Bai Liu nodded serenely. "You're right. That's exactly the kind of person I am."

Mu Sicheng: "……"

He was so done.

Bai Liu's stats really were pitiful compared to his own top-tier A-list panel.

[Player Bai Liu's Personal Panel]

Life: 31 (Dropped after being attacked by Player Mu Sicheng and burned by flames)
Stamina Value: 8 (Depleted, recovering)
Mental Value: 90 (Mildly alienated by passenger attack)

Mu Sicheng exhaled deeply, forcing himself to suppress his frustration. Now that he was stuck in the same boat as Bai Liu, he barely maintained his composure as he spoke.

"You've already experienced the consequences of a drop in mental value. Maybe you don't realize how crucial life value is, so let me explain."

"Life value is the only attribute players can't restore automatically in the game. If it hits zero, you die. No items can bring it back. Bai Liu, you only have 31 life value left—that's already dangerous. A random monster in this Level 2 instance could finish you off in just a few hits. I strongly advise you to forget about collecting monster books."

Bai Liu neither agreed nor disagreed. Instead, he changed the subject. "We still need to collect that broken lens."

Mu Sicheng closed his eyes, choosing to rest and recover his strength rather than argue. Bai Liu, however, continued his analysis.

"This game seems to operate like a single train station where passengers board and exit simultaneously. When we board, we face a chase. When they exit, the underground doors close immediately after. If the broken lens isn't on the train but on the station outside, then we only have one chance to search for it."

Bai Liu's gaze sharpened. "That means when the passengers board, we need to search the station for the lens and return before the doors shut. Otherwise, we'll be trapped with the 'passengers.' I think the Puppeteer must have been on the station during the chase."

"How do you know?" Du Sanying, who had been hiding in the corner,

finally spoke up, his curiosity piqued.

Out of all of them, he was in the best condition. His bumper car was covered in blood, and Ma Baoli's face was a mess of charred flesh, but Du Sanying himself remained unscathed.

"Because we ran back and forth through the entire train during the chase and didn't encounter anyone else," Bai Liu replied, leaning against the wall as he wiped the sweat from his face. "If we never once ran into this Puppeteer, it means he wasn't on the train when we were being chased."

Du Sanying's anxiety spiked. "Then wouldn't the Puppeteer be able to quickly collect all the mirror pieces and clear the level?"

"I don't think so." Bai Liu's eyes flickered as he glanced at Du Sanying. "It's likely that he didn't find the broken lens on the platform."

Du Sanying blinked in confusion. "Why do you think that?"

"If I were him, there's only one thing I'd do after confirming the broken lens was on the platform." Bai Liu raised a single finger, his tone steady. "I'd come to us."

Du Sanying's face twisted in bewilderment. "Why would he come to us if he already knew the lens was on the platform?"

"The train only stops for two minutes at each station," Bai Liu explained. "I analyzed the size of the platform—there's no way the Puppeteer could search the entire area and return to the train in that time. Even if he had three puppets as fast as Mu Sicheng—"

Mu Sicheng ground his teeth audibly at the remark.

"—finding something takes time. It's not just about speed; it requires searching. There are 11 platforms on this subway line. Apart from [Antique City], where we boarded, there are 10 more. It took us over three minutes to reach the first station, plus two minutes for the stop. That's about five minutes per platform. Since the countdown timer is only one hour, we likely get just one full loop before the explosion."

"If the lens is on the platform, that means we have exactly one chance to find it. But even with three puppets, the Puppeteer wouldn't be able to search an entire platform in just two minutes."

"So, he'll come to us," Bai Liu concluded.

Du Sanying's head spun. "Why?!"

Bai Liu's last sentence didn't logically connect with his conclusion at all!

There's no way the Puppeteer would come to them just because he couldn't search the whole platform. It's not like they'd help him—

Wait.

A sudden realization dawned on Du Sanying, his eyes widening in alarm as he looked at Bai Liu.

"He needs more people," Bai Liu said, his gaze drifting toward the empty end of the swaying train. "Once he confirms that the broken lenses are on the platform, he'll need a way to bring us under his control."

"But he won't make a move on us until he's sure."

"My Lord, the broken lenses aren't on the platform."

Li Gou's voice was hushed, his posture reverent to the point of trembling. "The three of us searched most of the area near the tracks as you ordered, but they weren't there."

"Not a single one?" Zhang Gui's puppet-like face remained expressionless, his narrow eyes dark as ink. "Strange. The game should allow players to find the lenses on the station… unless we didn't search thoroughly enough?"

Li Gou hesitated before answering. "Only the upper part of the platform remains unchecked, but the burning passengers made it impossible for us to go up there."

"I know," Zhang Gui said coldly. "I was standing by the doors, controlling you. Do you think I need extra eyes to see?"

Li Gou immediately stiffened, kneeling as Zhang Gui's transparent puppet strings tightened around his limbs.

"I'm strategizing our next move. Don't interrupt me," Zhang Gui snapped impatiently.

Li Gou clenched his teeth, remaining silent. But after a moment,

unable to suppress himself, he spoke again in a low voice. "My Lord, if we're at a dead end, why not deal with Bai Liu and the others first?"

A deep-seated resentment flickered in his eyes. He still hadn't forgotten how Bai Liu had stolen his promotion spot. If not for that, he would've collected enough points to escape the prison and be enjoying himself by now.

Zhang Gui looked down at Li Gou as if he were an idiot.

"Not until I confirm where the lenses are hidden."

"If we attack them now, we risk starting a conflict. They have Mu Sicheng, who holds a grudge against me. He'll definitely cause trouble. Our priority is clearing the game. Everything else comes after. Don't get ahead of yourself."

Li Gou clenched his jaw but bowed his head in obedience. "Yes, Master."

A heavy silence settled before Li Gou hesitantly asked, "Then, Master, if the broken lens isn't on the platform or the train… where could it be?"

Zhang Gui's fingers twitched. His expression shifted suddenly, his pale cheeks flushing as a realization struck him.

"Wait—" His voice dropped to a whisper.

"Could it be in—?"

"Mu Sicheng, did you try to steal something from the monster?" Bai Liu asked as he moved closer to Mu Sicheng.

Mu Sicheng impatiently pushed Bai Liu away. "No way. I can steal from players—I've stolen from Spades—but not from monsters."

"Why?" Bai Liu pondered. "Did the system decide it was invalid and couldn't be stolen, or...?"

Mu Sicheng shot Bai Liu a sidelong glance. "I don't know what you're scheming, but let me tell you straight—yes, I can steal some items from monsters. But once I do, the monster's hate value gets permanently locked onto me. It'll chase me until the end of the game, and I'll be dead in no time. Even in a level 1 game, I'd be done for, let

alone in a level 2 game. So if you're planning to use me again, you better not waste me on something this suicidal."

"Hate value..." Bai Liu fell into thought, fingers idly fiddling with the coin in his hand. Suddenly, he lifted his gaze to Du Sanying, who was sitting in the corner, nibbling on a biscuit to recover his strength.

Bai Liu's eyes narrowed with a smile that looked suspiciously like the Big Bad Wolf tricking Little Red Riding Hood. "Du Sanying, have you ever played a major online game?"

Little Red Riding Hood—aka Du Sanying—blinked in confusion, biscuit crumbs still stuck to the corner of his mouth. He hesitated for a second before answering the Big Bad Wolf's question honestly. "Yeah, I have."

"Do you know how to play with hate transfer?" Bai Liu crouched closer.

Du Sanying didn't know why, but the back of his neck felt chilly. He instinctively scooted back, swallowed nervously, and mumbled, "A little... Something about OT, right?"

"Exactly!" Bai Liu snapped his fingers, his smile growing even more suspiciously kind. "It's just like how, after Mu Sicheng steals from a monster, the monster's hate value gets locked onto him. But if I attack the monster, the hate value transfers to me. Then, we can drag the monster along behind us while Mu Sicheng keeps stealing. Kind of like driving a train, you know? Pulling a long chain of monsters behind us..."

"Wait!" Du Sanying was too distracted to notice how Bai Liu's wording had subtly changed from I to we. He interrupted, stammering in confusion, "Isn't this a collection-oriented game? What does this have to do with online game mechanics and hate transfer and train driving?! Isn't our main task supposed to be finding broken lenses?"

"Right." Bai Liu spread his hands. "But if the broken lenses aren't on the train or the platform, where else could they be?"

Du Sanying's confusion only deepened. "Where else... could they be?"

Bai Liu smirked. "I've been thinking. It's unlikely that the broken lenses ended up outside the train since the explosion happened inside the carriage. If they're not on the platform either, then... isn't it possible that the broken lenses got embedded in the passengers' bodies

when the mirror shards scattered during the explosion?"

Du Sanying: "....."

Mu Sicheng: "....."

Fuck.

"So—" Bai Liu turned to Mu Sicheng with an expression of feigned innocence. "God Mu, looks like you'll have to try stealing from some non-human things after all."

Burst last train

"One minute until the next stop at Hexagon Avenue. Please prepare to disembark," the sweet, mechanical voice of the train's announcement system rang out. "To prevent congestion, please allow passengers to board before exiting—"

Mu Sicheng's expression was as dark as the bottom of a pot. He flexed his fingers anxiously, then shot a sharp glance at Bai Liu, who was comfortably seated in the small Ma Baoli kart with Du Sanying. "Bai Liu, what if you can't shift the hate? If these monsters keep their aggro locked on me, I'm dead."

"You still have my [Mermaid Amulet]," Bai Liu said smoothly. "It gives you one free escape. We're just testing things out this time—if it doesn’t work, you can teleport away."

Mu Sicheng's face twisted in frustration. "Don't tell me you made me steal that thing just for this!" He gritted his teeth. "Teleporting won’t change the fact that the monsters will chase me the moment they see me!"

Du Sanying, watching their exchange, hesitated. "Bai Liu... are you sure the broken lens is on the passengers? If that's true, then this game is a bit too..." He swallowed the word he wanted to say—'impossible.'

"If the lens really is on the passengers," Mu Sicheng scoffed, swapping his wristband for an acceleration buff, "then this isn't just a tough Tier 2 game. This is insane. Bai Liu, you've got a real talent for picking games."

Bai Liu barely reacted. "I should be able to redirect the hate," he said. "I have a weapon with strong aggro-shifting mechanics, though it's a bit of a gamble. Oh, that reminds me—"

As if suddenly remembering, Bai Liu fished out a thousand points from his pocket and handed them to Du Sanying, who was still dazed. "Keep buying stamina supplements for me. The price will probably rise on my end, so if it doesn’t go up on yours, stock up for me."

Du Sanying, still jittery from the impending battle, instinctively took the points. "Oh, uh... so, I just buy energy supplements, right? Got it."

Bulk-buying the same item would drive up the unit price in the player shop.

The moment Du Sanying accepted the points, Bai Liu suddenly smiled and patted his shoulder. "We're in this together, so help me out when I need it, alright, Du Sanying?"

Still holding the points, Du Sanying nodded dumbly. "O-okay."

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has used 1,000 points to enter into a partnership with Player Du Sanying to purchase stamina supplements. Player Du Sanying is now required to assist Player Bai Liu when requested.]

"The train has arrived at the station—"

Outside, the charred corpses—or rather, passengers—stood waiting. Mu Sicheng clicked his tongue impatiently and pressed the monkey-shaped headset over his ears. The moment he did, his entire form began to shift—his face taking on a more simian appearance, his eyes glowing a piercing red, fangs peeking from his lips. His hands transformed into long, dexterous black claws tipped with sharp nails, coarse yellowish fur sprouting at his collar. A black-and-white tail curled into a question mark behind him.

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng has activated the personal skill (Thief's Full Armor) -]

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng has entered the status of Personal Skill Identity Form Change - "Monster Book: Capuchin Tamed by Thieves."]

Bai Liu crouched in the small kart behind him, secured by a seatbelt Du Sanying had fastened to keep him from being thrown off.

He reached for his waist, drawing out a snow-white bone whip. With a flick of his wrist, he adjusted his grip, his focus sharpening to an eerie degree.

Du Sanying barely even heard Bai Liu breathing anymore. His entire presence seemed to shrink, locking in on Mu Sicheng with an almost mechanical intensity.

The simple words "concentration" or "focus" weren't enough to describe it.

Du Sanying watched, awestruck, as Bai Liu's pupils contracted—he hadn't blinked in nearly a minute.

He wasn't just a player. He was a finely-tuned weapon, calibrating its next strike.

The doors slid open.

A wave of scorching heat rushed in, distorting the air. Charred, flaming corpses clawed their way into the train, their blackened flesh crackling, their jaws twisted in silent wails. Even the gelatinous door frames of the train melted under the sheer heat.

Mu Sicheng's breath hitched.

The passengers' bodies burned and writhed in the flames, trapped in their endless torment.

If Bai Liu was wrong—if there were no lenses inside these things—if Bai Liu failed to shift the aggro—if Bai Liu was just using him as a disposable pawn...

Then Mu Sicheng was the first one dead.

The visions of burning passengers overlapped with his own potential fate, filling his mind with a suffocating mix of doubt, anxiety, fear, and outright despair.

Anyone would hesitate.

Anyone but Bai Liu.

"Mu Sicheng," Bai Liu said suddenly, his tone light, but his eyes gleaming cold and inhuman. "You're the most useful card in my hand. You're too valuable. I won't let you die—you will survive."

"So stop hesitating. Do your job. Leave the rest to me."

Through the smoke and leaping flames, Mu Sicheng locked eyes with Bai Liu.

The train car had become a battlefield where death was all but certain.

Bai Liu's words sounded less like reassurance and more like a ruthless general forcing his soldiers into war—for his own gain.

But bizarrely, Mu Sicheng actually felt... motivated.

Somehow, looking into Bai Liu's unwavering gaze, he believed him.

"Tch." Mu Sicheng exhaled sharply, forcing a grin. His heart pounded, but he took a deep breath to steady himself. "If I die, Bai Liu, I swear I'll haunt you."

The red light in his eyes flared.

The monkey's laughter screeched through his headset.

Mu Sicheng's tail wrapped around the overhead rings as he launched forward, darting between the burning creatures with inhuman speed. Du Sanying could barely follow his movements—only flickering shadows gave him away.

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng has taken flame damage. -1 Life, -1 Spirit.]

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng has taken flame damage. -1 Life, -1 Spirit.]

Sweat dripped from behind Mu Sicheng's ears, sizzling as it hit the searing metal floor.

And then—finally—the alert changed.

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng has obtained a broken lens (1/????). Congratulations to Player Mu Sicheng for being the first to obtain a broken lens!]

A shattered fragment, about the size of a three-carat diamond, glinted between Mu Sicheng's blackened fingers.

He whistled, tossing it up once before catching it again. "Got it. Damn, Bai Liu, you were right. This game is a hellscape. The lens is tiny—I nearly missed it! Do you know how much effort I just put into catching this thing?!"

But before he could celebrate, the situation turned.

The burning passengers—now aware they had been robbed—staggered to their feet. Their molten eyes locked onto Mu Sicheng, their bodies igniting even further as they lunged toward him.

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng has stolen from five passengers. The passengers are furious and have decided to catch this despicable thief and punish him severely.]

Mu Sicheng dodged an outstretched, flaming hand by swinging

himself upward. But four more lunged for him.

Veins bulging, he shouted, "Bai Liu—!! Pull them off me!!!"

Atop the pink bumper car, Bai Liu stood tall, one hand gripping the bone whip.

The scorching wind billowed his loose white shirt, making it balloon slightly. His hair lifted, revealing his laser-sharp gaze.

With a flick of his wrist, the whip cracked through the air, striking the back of a passenger's outstretched hand.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu used (Siren's Fishbone) to attack a passenger. Target's hate value has shifted. The passenger now finds Bai Liu extremely naughty and has decided to punish him severely.]

Bai Liu smiled.

Burst last train

After the whip, Bai Liu's stamina bar was nearly depleted from using the high-level fishbone. With a gasp, his legs went weak, and he collapsed halfway onto the car hood. His face was pale, and sweat soaked through his shirt.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu's stamina has dropped by 80 due to the use of an item (Siren's Fishbone). Please replenish your stamina in time! Avoid running out of stamina and becoming unable to move!]

The passenger Bai Liu had struck let out a pained whimper, his burnt eyes twisting unnervingly in their sockets. Without hesitation, he turned and scuttled toward Bai Liu on all fours.

Bai Liu tilted his head back and downed a bottle of stamina supplements, his expression calm. He backhanded another passenger lunging at Mu Sicheng, his voice hoarse. "Second one. Three more."

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu used (Siren's Fishbone) to attack the passenger. Target hate value shifted. He has decided to capture Bai Liu…]

Whip after whip, Bai Liu kept his focus on the passengers while repeatedly calling for more stamina supplements. The rapid depletion and replenishment of his stamina pushed his condition to a visibly alarming state.

His face was ghostly white, his body drenched in cold sweat. His wrist trembled as he wielded the whip, barely able to stay upright in the car, held in place only by a seatbelt tied around his ankle.

Yet, even in this weakened state, every strike landed precisely. Each time a passenger raised a hand to attack Mu Sicheng, Bai Liu's whip would lash down on the exact same spot, over and over.

Du Sanying stared in disbelief.

This is insane… Are newcomers always this overpowered now?!

He couldn't understand how Bai Liu's aim remained so precise despite his rapidly draining stats. Bai Liu's stamina hovered dangerously close to zero, while Du Sanying himself already felt like a half-dead dog from exhaustion.

And yet—Bai Liu's attention never wavered from Mu Sicheng.

"The fifth one." Bai Liu looked as if he had been pulled from a lake, hair damp and clinging to his forehead. His dark eyes, shadowed by sweat, reflected only Mu Sicheng. He smiled faintly and exhaled, voice steady. "Go on, Mu Sicheng. The plan's working. Keep going."

His legs gave out, and he nearly slipped off the bike, but Du Sanying grabbed his ankle just in time, hauling him back up. Bai Liu slumped against the car hood, panting as he downed another bottle of stamina supplements.

Driving his go-kart around the carriage, Du Sanying glanced worriedly at Bai Liu, who was barely staying upright. "Bai Liu, you're in a terrible state! Do you need to rest?!"

"No. The train is about to leave." Bai Liu's tone was flat, issuing orders to both himself and Mu Sicheng. He forced himself to his feet, leaning on the car hood for support. "Keep going, Mu Sicheng. Don't grab every passenger—you're losing life points too fast. Focus on the ones with lenses."

"I don't want to!!!" Mu Sicheng snapped. Every time he grabbed a passenger, he got burned, losing life points. With this many passengers, catching them all was suicide. "But I can't even tell which ones have lenses!"

The passengers were nothing but charred black husks, still burning. Who the hell could spot a broken lens barely a few carats in size?

"Isn't finding stolen goods what thieves like you do best?" Bai Liu had the nerve to tease him.

The swirling flames and drifting ashes made it impossible for Bai Liu to identify the right targets. But then, his sharp gaze flickered to the five passengers trailing behind Du Sanying's kart. One of them—Mu Sicheng had stolen a broken lens from him earlier.

Bai Liu narrowed his eyes.

That passenger was moving slower than the others, wandering aimlessly like a headless fly. Yet Bai Liu distinctly remembered that before losing the lens, this passenger had been much faster.

"Mu Sicheng, the passengers with broken lenses are weaker without them!" Bai Liu spoke quickly. "The lenses must give them some kind of

buff. Focus on the ones moving faster and burning brighter!"

"I can't see that from here!" Mu Sicheng groaned, back pressed against the carriage roof, waving ashes out of his face. He squinted at the chaotic mess of red and black below. "All I see is a giant fireball and a bunch of passengers clumped together! I was catching them blind!"

With that, Mu Sicheng suddenly let go of his grip and plunged into the flames, gritting his teeth as he reached for another passenger.

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng was injured by the flames. -1 Life, -1 Spirit.]

"Stop, Mu Sicheng!" Bai Liu's whip lashed out just as a passenger tried to bite Mu Sicheng, knocking it aside. "You're too injured! If you keep going, you'll die! Only one out of every five attempts has been effective so far—there's an 80% chance this won't work!"

Mu Sicheng smirked and held up another broken lens. "Guess what? This time, it worked."

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng has obtained a broken lens (2/????).]

Bai Liu glanced up at him. "You can tell now?"

"Yeah, by diving straight into the passenger pile." Mu Sicheng wiped the soot from his face and grinned. "You guessed right. Otherwise, I wouldn't have dared. Falling in blind would've gotten me torn apart."

"I promise I'll whip accurately every time," Bai Liu said, eyes glinting as he raised his whip in invitation. "Keep going."

Suspended by his tail from the hoop, Mu Sicheng dove into the flames like a monkey leaping for the moon. Passengers lunged at him, their hatred locked onto him—but before they could sink their teeth in, a snow-white bone whip would always lash through, striking true.

It was a theft without worry.

Mu Sicheng stole two, three, four, or more lenses at a time, never once having to look over his shoulder. Bai Liu's whip cut down every threat before it could reach him.

Bai Liu was, as he claimed, precise every single time. No matter how reckless Mu Sicheng got, Bai Liu always had his back.

Perhaps that's why Mu Sicheng completely forgot that he was entrusting his life to a player with an F-rank panel, only in his second game.

With each swing of the whip draining 60% of Bai Liu's stamina, and all the stolen passengers now locked onto Du Sanying's kart, Mu Sicheng felt the pressure easing. Stealing became almost… fun.

But for Bai Liu and Du Sanying, the situation was only getting worse.

Du Sanying's kart sped along the carriage walls, bolstered by his [luck buff]. Even so, his face was ghostly pale as he glanced back at the long line of burning, snarling corpses chasing them. Some were moving so fast they nearly caught onto the car, only to be whipped away at the last second by Bai Liu.

"B-Bai Liu…" Du Sanying stammered, staring at the horde of flaming monsters gaining on them. "We can't keep this up! If we pull any more, we'll tip over!"

"You won't." Bai Liu didn't even look at him, still focused on clearing passengers for Mu Sicheng. His tone was almost encouraging. "Believe in yourself. You're 100% lucky."

It was the first time anyone had called Du Sanying's luck '100%' in such a positive way.

But he wasn't happy at all.

"I'M NOT INVINCIBLE!" Du Sanying wailed. "LUCK DOESN'T MEAN I CAN'T DIE!"

Then, a sudden chill ran down his spine.

For the first time, Du Sanying had a very strong feeling.

An overwhelming sense of bad luck.

Du Sanying had always been an intuitive person, and his instincts were nearly always right. They had saved him from countless disasters. Generally speaking, such a premonition meant something bad was about to happen, and it was time to run!

"I told you to believe in yourself, Du Sanying." Bai Liu stood in the car, his gaze cold as he looked out of the corner of his eye. His eyes were as black as burning carbon, devoid of warmth. The smile on his face

was deceptively kind, making it even more unsettling—sending a shiver down your spine. Bai Liu whispered to Du Sanying, "I need you, Du Sanying."

Du Sanying's sweat stood on end. The sense of danger hit him so hard it almost physically choked him. This was the strongest crisis signal he had ever felt in the game. It wasn't just from a player; his instincts screamed to escape. He subconsciously wanted to leap out of the car and run—but then—

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu needs help from player Du Sanying. Player Du Sanying must assist player Bai Liu and cooperate with all his actions.]

Du Sanying panicked. "!!! When did you control me?! I put on a [control-proof coat]! Even the [Puppet Master] can't control me with this! Why can you still control me?!"

"I told you I had no control over you." Bai Liu coughed weakly and wiped away the stamina supplement spilling from his mouth, smiling all the while. "I'm just a collaborator asking for your help. Just a little trick to ensure things go smoothly."

"Keep driving." Bai Liu looked at Du Sanying and said, "Du Sanying, if you run now, Mu Sicheng and I will both die. You must stay calm, understand?"

Bai Liu glanced down at the trembling Du Sanying. "Don't worry, I won't let Mu Sicheng die, and I won't let you die either."

He smiled. The bloodstains and ashes on his cheeks only made the smile seem colder, more dangerous. "You are all valuable to me."

"The train is about to start. All passengers who wish to alight, please line up and exit in order—"

A group of charred corpses shuffled out of the bloody carriage one by one, leaving behind three men so drained they leaned together, barely standing.

Du Sanying lay in his disfigured go-kart, staring blankly, feeling like he might foam at the mouth at any second. "I don't want to drive anymore…"

Mu Sicheng, kneeling with his head resting against the car door, had transformed from a capuchin monkey back into his human form. However, his body was charred beyond recognition. His cheekbones, the corners of his mouth, and the backs of his hands were badly burned, with red flesh exposed. The monkey on his headphones seemed to be dying, curled in a pitiful ball, making faint, gibbering noises. The red light in its eyes was dimming.

But Bai Liu was in the worst shape of the three.

His body was bloodless, pale like a snow-white mannequin. Blood dripped from the corners of his mouth after a few weak coughs, his mouth full of blood and bits of his insides, which he wiped away carelessly. His fingertips absently played with a diamond-like fragment Mu Sicheng had gathered from the broken lenses.

Repeated stamina supplements and overdrafts had taken a heavy toll. A depleted physical state was just as draining as a drained mental state.

Mu Sicheng knew the nauseating feeling of being drained and forcibly replenished—it felt like being washed in a tumble dryer with his internal organs about to explode. Bai Liu looked like a hungover man, dazed and unsteady.

Mu Sicheng glanced at the empty bottle at Bai Liu's feet, giving a soft, bemused tsk.

This insane bastard, so full of stamina supplements that he could barely stand when he got off the train, and now, the first thing he asks for is broken lenses?

"Bai Liu, how much life do you have left?" Mu Sicheng asked.

Bai Liu nodded slowly at his panel, his wrist no longer able to move as quickly from the whip wielding.

[Player Bai Liu's personal panel]

[Life: 21 (Drops after being attacked by player Mu Sicheng and burned by flames)]

[Stamina Value: 31 (depleted, recovering)]

[Mental Value: 89 (mildly alienated by passenger attack)]

"21," Bai Liu replied, looking up from his panel. "That last wave took 10 life points from me. What about you, Mu Sicheng?"

Mu Sicheng opened his personal panel, his face darkening as he checked it.

[Player Mu Sicheng's personal panel]

[Vitality: 70 (drops after being burned by flames)]

[Stamina: 59 (depleted, recovering)]

[Mental Value: 61 (mildly alienated by passenger attack)]

"Tch, I got eaten for 24 life points," Mu Sicheng muttered, eyes shadowed. "I paid attention back there, but the flames burned so hot that my spirit value barely dropped. Still, my spirit value is still low, and I need to float it."

"Don't you dare drift yet. Your low spirit value is useful to me." Bai Liu said, continuing to check his panel, scrolling through the monster book and the progress on the main quest:

[Main Quest - Collecting the Broken Lenses on the Last Train (20/)]

[Bursting Last Train Monster Book Refresh - Bursting Passengers (1/3)]

[Monster Name: Burst Passenger]

[Features: Very fast movement speed (1000 points of movement speed, flame has a bonus effect)]

[Weakness: Broken Lens (1/3)]

[Attack: Burned by the fire from the bursting passenger's body, life and spirit value will be reduced.]

"This is bad. I'm in big trouble here..." Bai Liu's expression hardened.

Bai Liu rarely admitted to difficulty, but when he did, it was unsettling. He usually said, "Don't be afraid of anything! Overcome the challenges by facing them head-on!" Yet now, he looked as if he were losing control of the situation.

"What's wrong?" Mu Sicheng and Du Sanying asked in unison, their faces taut with worry.

"I bought 80 bottles of stamina supplements, and I've used 33," Bai Liu muttered, looking deep in thought. "I still have 47 left, but there are more stops coming. Those 47 bottles might not be enough... And I just realized that I can't buy more. I'm poor, and that's a big problem."

[System Alert: Bai Liu account points balance 179. Balance cannot be used to purchase stamina supplements.]

"I need your help!" Bai Liu looked at Du Sanying and Mu Sicheng, his expression pleading. "Can you sponsor me some points? Please! I need your help!"

Du Sanying and Mu Sicheng just stared at him.

Using them and asking for money at the same time—could he be any more shameless?

[Graveyard Bounce] Zone.

The area was a rare crowded place, with almost everyone flowing into one spot. Bai Liu's small TV was filled with spectators, all looking up at it with rapt attention.

From the second round of the chase—or theft war—that had just started on the passengers, to Mu Sicheng stealing the broken lenses and being attacked, Bai Liu wielding the whip to shift the hate value, Du Sanying breaking down and backtracking, and Bai Liu taking control of the whole situation, so much had happened in just two minutes.

Everyone watched without blinking, subconsciously holding their breath. A steady stream of spectators came from all directions, silently joining the ranks of those tilting their heads to watch Bai Liu's small TV.

Almost no one spoke. In such a fierce battle, until the result was known, all discussion would pale in comparison. This was a battle led by Bai Liu—a big gamble, a win-lose showdown. Until we knew who had won, the judgment of the audience outside the game would be one-sided.

Only the results of success or failure could assess the rightness or wrongness of Bai Liu's crazy move.

And he, the madman, manipulated the third and fourth players on the Rising Stars list—and succeeded.

Wang Shun, who stood closest to Bai Liu's small TV, let out a long breath. He had been breathing slowly for two minutes because he was so nervous, but now he took deep breaths all at once, his heart racing, his fingertips numb.

Wang Shun looked at Bai Liu's still quiet face on the screen in a trance, unable for a moment to find a reasonable word to assess this newcomer.

Bai Liu once again refreshed Wang Shun's perception of him.

Finding the broken lenses and deciphering the monster book was a normal part of the game process, but few people could maintain the high level of clarity and almost brutal calm that Bai Liu had, executing decisions without hesitation.

Like Mu Sicheng's faltering, Du Sanying's fear—humans often find it difficult to put life and death behind victory in a game where life and death are decided. Though the two are somehow linked, few players are willing to recklessly give up their lives to ensure victory in a lethal situation.

But Bai Liu... from start to finish, he considered Mu Sicheng’s survival rate, Du Sanying’s survival rate, and the course of the game. But the only thing he didn’t consider was whether he himself would survive.

Strength drained and filled up in seconds, his body spilling blood from extreme exertion, his vitality dropping rapidly, Bai Liu swung the whip an unknown number of times. By the end of it, his body was slumping back and forth, his ankles dangling from a seatbelt because of his terrible state.

But his whip never lost its precision. The first thing Bai Liu did when he got out of the car was grab Mu Sicheng’s shirt in a death grip and demand the broken lens.

Bai Liu’s insane, chilling desire to win shocked Mu Sicheng and Du Sanying inside the game, as well as everyone watching outside the game. They couldn’t help but come to the Graveyard Bounce area to get a first-hand look at how far this newcomer could go.

"This guy... he's so uncompromising." Wang Shun moved his tingling fingertips as he took another deep breath and opened his points

wallet. "It's too stifling to see you fight so hard only to lose because you don't have the money."

The rest of the audience kept their heads down, whispering.

"If Bai Liu gets out alive this time, he'll be a god in the future."

"Only 21 life points left... yet I always feel like he won't lose, what's going on?"

"It's horrible... 33 bottles of stamina refills in two minutes, isn't this rookie panel an F?! My God, how can he stand it? With my C-rank panel, a minute of draining and refilling my stamina three times and I'd throw up..."

"...I'm a viewer on the small TV side of Du Sanying and I've never seen a cockatoo fight so hard..."

"I'm from God Mu's side, and I've never seen God Mu pushed like that..."

"Bai Liu, a newcomer, is so strong that Du Sanying, third in the Rising Stars list, and Mu Sicheng, fourth, are completely overwhelmed by him and are acting on his command..."

There was a steady stream of whispered discussions, exchanges of opinions, and the sound of heads tapping their wallets. Wang Shun looked back at the crowd and the audience that had somehow gathered behind him, their expressions filled with impressed praise, with a mixed and slightly relieved sigh.

Bai Liu, the man who dropped to [Graveyard Bounce], was able to turn it around with an absolute performance.

It's a match for Spades, who topped the table.

[9706 people have liked Bai Liu's TV, 10006 people have favorited Bai Liu's TV, 7990 people have charged Bai Liu's TV, and 12081 points have been credited to Bai Liu.]

[15,900 new people are watching Bai Liu's TV, you have 99% of the viewers in the Graveyard Bounce section. You are the King of Graveyard TV here!]

[37,588 player likes, 40,854 player favorites, and 2,643 points to recharge before player Bai Liu leaves (Graveyard Bounce Zone)]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has gained 12,081 points. Is he buying props?]

Bai Liu's lips curled into a faint smile: [A great harvest, I want to buy props.]

After finishing his deception of the audience, Bai Liu quickly navigated the system shop interface. As his finger swiped, it finally halted as he discovered something. He paused and asked, [Why aren't rocket launchers, atomic bombs, fire hydrants, and high-pressure water guns available for purchase in this game?]

[System: The game will prohibit players from purchasing items that would significantly damage the balance of the game.]

Items that drastically affect the balance of the game... Bai Liu's eyes narrowed. [Help me check if there are any items related to bombs or water that I can purchase.]

The system remained silent for a moment. [Sorry, player Bai Liu. These items are not available for purchase.]

Bai Liu chuckled quietly to himself. So it really is impossible... No wonder Mu Sicheng didn't try to buy props to douse the flames on the passengers earlier. It turns out it just can't be done...

An idea seemed to cross his mind. [Looks like bombs and water will have to be sourced locally...]

At that moment, Mu Sicheng snapped Bai Liu out of his thoughts. "Bai Liu, you guessed right. The broken lens is indeed inside the passenger, but your plan is draining all of us too much. I've lost 24 life points in one station. I won't last the remaining 8 stations. I'll only survive 3 stations at full health."

Mu Sicheng paused and added, "And you, Bai Liu, only have 21 life points left. You can last at most two more stations. We won't be able to collect all the broken lenses."

Bai Liu glanced at the broken lens in his hand and tossed the pile to Du Sanying, who was nervously huddling in the corner. "You keep the broken lenses, Du Sanying."

Du Sanying, in a daze, pointed to himself. "Me? Are you sure you want

to give them to me?!"

"It's for you," Bai Liu replied, cutting off Mu Sicheng before he could speak. "Du Sanying, you're the safest choice to hold these. No one can easily take them from you, especially not the [Puppet Master]."

Mu Sicheng looked at Bai Liu, urgency flashing in his eyes. "What are you planning now?"

Instead of answering directly, Bai Liu sat cross-legged and began writing on the ground with his finger, analyzing the game's mechanics. "I just checked the shop. All water and fire-related props are banned. This means players can't use props to put out the [passenger's] body flames."

Bai Liu dipped his finger into some black ash and wrote two numbers: [700] and [20].

"We have seven players with a total of 700 life points. Given this game's mortality rate of 50-80%, one life point equals one shard. This means the total number of shards will be between 350 and 560," he said, scribbling the range on the ground.

He continued, "In one station, we collected 20 fragments. With the three of us occupying half the carriage and the other four players in the other half, we can assume they're collecting the same amount. That means about 40 fragments in total per station."

"There are 10 stations. So, the total number of lenses we need is around 400." He made a note of this and then circled the range of [350-560] again. "This is the number of fragments we need to collect, and I think it's most likely correct."

"400 fragments means 400 life points will be spent. There are two options: First, we could partner up. If each of the seven players spends 57 life points, we could all survive and collect the shards. But Zhang Gui will never agree to this."

He paused. "The second option: sacrifice four players, using 100 life points each, to pass the game." Bai Liu looked at them, his calculated smile returning. "I know you two were forced to work with me before, but I'm sure you've seen how hard I'm trying to keep you both alive. I know you don't want to be one of the four players sacrificed, do you?"

Mu Sicheng snorted. "You can't control us? Why are you talking about cooperation when you could just manipulate us?"

"There's a good chance I won't be able to control you for the rest of the game," Bai Liu answered honestly. "You can leave if you don't want to cooperate. But I'm sure you'd prefer not to be targeted by the Puppeteer, right?"

There was a strange silence that fell between them. The only sounds were the wind howling through the train, its creaks and groans, and the faint breathing of the three men.

Bai Liu's words hung heavily in the air. The implications of his plan were far from subtle.

Finally, Mu Sicheng spoke, his expression grim. "Tell me your specific proposal."

Du Sanying, still hesitant, chewed on his lip. His luck value kept him from being one of the expendable players, but Bai Liu's ruthless style made him wary. He'd already been burned by him once before...

Bai Liu seemed to sense Du Sanying's reluctance and tilted his head, laughing. "Du Sanying, did you really think the Puppeteer would let you off the hook if you didn't cooperate? That you'd somehow survive after the Puppeteer picked you out as a target?"

Du Sanying blinked, his confusion apparent.

Bai Liu smirked, his eyes narrowing. "Let me tell you something. Even if the Puppeteer kills me and Mu Sicheng, it won't be enough to win. He'll choose to sacrifice you before us."

He let the words sink in. "Mu Sicheng and I are far more valuable to the Puppeteer. The reason he came into this game was to capture us as puppets. And you, Du Sanying, are just a roadblock to him. With your luck value, you're the first player he'll sacrifice."

Du Sanying's eyes widened in shock. "Why me? He has more of a grudge against you two!"

Bai Liu chuckled darkly. "Wrong. He'll sacrifice you first, then take control of me and Mu Sicheng. After turning us into puppets, he'll randomly sacrifice three of his own inconsequential puppets. And with that, the Puppeteer wins with a full load."

Du Sanying stood frozen, the weight of Bai Liu's words sinking in. The back of his neck tingled, and for a moment, he couldn't speak.

Mu Sicheng, watching this exchange, felt a sense of déjà vu. This was eerily familiar—the exact same manipulation that had been used on Bai Liu earlier.

Bai Liu had set them up from the start. Now, all three of them were tied to his plan. There was no escape. To survive, they would have to cooperate.

Du Sanying finally looked up at Bai Liu, his voice trembling. "Bai... Bai Liu... What's your plan?"

Burst last train

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bai Liu slowly curled his lips into a smile. "If I'm right, the Puppeteer will come looking for us soon, and they'll figure out that the broken lenses are inside the passengers' bodies. The Puppeteer will be short on manpower, and they'll need to control us to help search for the pieces. We obviously can't defeat the Puppeteer, so here's my plan—"

He paused briefly, then added, "-How about we propose an alliance with the Puppeteer, in exchange for Mu Sicheng and I being under his control?"

Mu Sicheng listened for a moment before his anger flared. "Bai Liu, what the fuck are you talking about?!"

Zhang Gui fiddled with a diamond-shaped object formed from the broken lenses in his hand, his long, narrow eyes glaring at it with cold calculation. "I have twenty of these. Mu Sicheng, a man skilled in stealing, must have twenty as well—almost forty at one station, and there are ten stations in total..."

His three puppets stood motionless, staring at Zhang Gui, who had abruptly stopped talking. They seemed unresponsive, lost in a daze.

The truth was, Zhang Gui had stopped short of revealing more because he feared the others would realize something was wrong with the game.

But Zhang Gui remembered how long he'd been using these puppets, how he'd drained the intelligence from all of them, save for Li Gou, who wasn't particularly bright to begin with. So, it wasn't surprising that these fools couldn't grasp the game's key aspects.

One life for one shard. Four hundred shards would cost four lives. Even if he killed all three of Mu Sicheng's men, he'd still be short of one puppet to complete the collection.

Zhang Gui never cared about his puppets—they were always expendable. The King's Guild had a stockpile of spare golems, and if

his puppets were lost, they'd recruit new ones for him. The only ones he cared about were the ones particularly useful to him.

Despite his ruthless treatment of his puppets, there was a steady stream of people willing to become his, drawn by the fact that surviving the game on your own was far riskier than following Zhang Gui.

"We've identified the key clues," Zhang Gui said, feigning amiability. "We're going after Bai Liu's group next. We can't just wear you out."

"I'll control them, get them to help me search for the shards and consume them," he added smoothly.

Li Gou, burned and battered, brightened up. "Master, is it time to deal with Bai Liu?"

"No." Zhang Gui glanced at the monstrously shattered mirror shard in his hand, a slow smile curling on his lips. "First, we'll deal with the seventh player who stirred things up. I'm now certain the seventh player is most likely Du Sanying."

Li Gou looked more confused. "Master, how did you confirm that?"

"Just a guess," Zhang Gui replied nonchalantly, twirling the broken lens in his fingers. "Bai Liu is a player with zero luck. With his bad luck, he must have run into me during both chases. He should've crossed paths with me long ago."

"After all," Zhang Gui added with a smug smile, "the fact that I'm in this game is likely Bai Liu's greatest misfortune."

Zhang Gui grinned arrogantly, then tossed the broken mirror to Li Gou, who caught it with a start, his eyes filled with fear. "Master? Why are you giving me this?"

"Of course it's because I think highly of you, Li Gou," Zhang Gui said with a saccharine smile, patting Li Gou's shoulder. "Keep it safe. This is an important task for you. Do it well."

If Bai Liu were present, he would have recognized Zhang Gui's smile as the signature "fake leader smile."

In fact, Zhang Gui giving the broken lens to Li Gou was no different from Bai Liu's action of giving it to Du Sanying—both were strategies to reduce the risk of carrying important items, while also creating

confusion.

Du Sanying and Li Gou were both under the control of Bai Liu and Zhang Gui, respectively. Even if they exchanged these items, it wouldn't affect either of them significantly—they could always retrieve them before the game ended.

But both of these manipulative figures wrapped their dark intentions in seemingly sweet, trustworthy gestures.

Bai Liu's was: [This is the trust I give you, Du Sanying.]

Zhang Gui's was: [It's because I value you, Li Gou.]

"Now, let's find out where those three are hiding," Zhang Gui said, flicking his finger. The transparent silk threads attached to his finger snaked into the joints of his three puppets' hands and feet. As he flicked the threads, the puppets trembled as if shocked by electricity.

"But before that, I've got a little reinforcement for you. Puppet players other than Liu Huai, reinforcement!"

[System Alert: Player Zhang Gui uses his personal skill (Puppet Enhancement) to sacrifice half of his puppet's spirit value in exchange for doubling the puppet's panel attributes.]

[Player Li Gou's personal panel.]

[Spiritual Value: 80 → 40]

[Stamina: 251 → 502]

[Agility: 270 → 540]

[Attack: 310 → 620]

[Resistance: 350 → 700]

[Combined Defense and Attack Power increased, total panel attribute points exceeded 2000, rated as A- player, Li Gou's level increased from B to A.]

[Player Fang Ke's personal panel.]

[Spiritual Value: 82 → 41]

...

[Combined Defense and Attack Power increased, panel attribute points total over 2000, rated as A- player, Fang Ke's level increased from B to A.]

Li Gou and Fang Ke's eyes glazed over, their expressions blank, as though in a trance. They were clearly in pain, their puppet faces contorting with strange, agonizing expressions. The drop in their mental values triggered a hallucination phase, leaving them mentally paralyzed and suffering.

Zhang Gui, however, showed no concern for their suffering. His fingers moved with casual satisfaction, manipulating his powerful puppets to perform various actions, a look of raw superiority in his eyes.

"Although losing mental value makes you lose your ability to think on your own," he mused, "your stupid brains were doing nothing useful anyway. Might as well make them do something else."

The only unenhanced puppet, Liu Huai, cowered in a corner, trembling so violently that he could barely speak.

Zhang Gui regarded his puppet like an artist admiring a perfect, mindless masterpiece. It was a creature that obeyed his every command without thought—completely under his control. The sight sent a chill down Liu Huai's spine.

Zhang Gui was a cruel player who took perverse pleasure in controlling and destroying others.

Liu Huai regretted betraying Mu Sicheng. Though Mu Sicheng wasn't a kind person, at least he didn't discard people like Zhang Gui did. But there was no use in regret now. There was no way back for him.

Zhang Gui settled into a chair in the underground lair. Li Gou and Fang Ke's eyes were blank, like dolls with no batteries, their limbs spread out at his feet. With a sly smile, Zhang Gui beckoned Liu Huai. "Come here, I've got a job for you. Go to Mu Sicheng and tell him you betrayed me and want to join them. Tell them you want to defect."

Liu Huai swallowed hard. "They won't believe me, will they? I'm still a puppet for you, master."

"Isn't it hard to believe a betrayer's second betrayal?" Zhang Gui spread his arms in a mock shrug and sneered. He reclined in his chair, crossing his fingers under his chin. "Just tell them I'm inhumane,

ready to consume you endlessly for shards, and you don't want to die —you're betraying me to survive."

"But—" Liu Huai's voice faltered, panic rising. "Even then, they won't accept me, will they? I still have your puppet silk on me! You can control me anytime!"

At that moment, Liu Huai felt a sharp cramp in his limbs, collapsing to his knees with a scream, clutching his elbows.

Liu Huai, dumbfounded, hadn't expected Zhang Gui to so easily retrieve the Puppet Silk. He stood frozen, unsure how to react.

Zhang Gui wiped the blood from the puppet silk on Li Gou's body, speaking slowly as he did so. "They'll definitely accept you, as I said. They're short on players, and they need expendable ones. Even if they see through your ulterior motives, they'll use you as a pawn to search for shards."

Liu Huai said nothing, carefully removing the puppet hood from his neck and placing it on the seat. "Then… I'll go, Master."

Before Liu Huai could leave, a slow voice came from behind him.

"Liu Huai, do you know how to control someone who might betray you repeatedly?"

Liu Huai's spine stiffened, his voice trembling. "No, master, I don't."

Zhang Gui suddenly laughed. "Then don't give them the opportunity to betray you." He grinned, a predatory gleam in his eyes. "You don't think I've removed all the puppet silk from you, do you? Look down."

Liu Huai glanced down, his heart sinking as he saw a nearly invisible thread—like fishing line—running through his chest. It led directly to Zhang Gui's little thumb.

Zhang Gui smiled coldly. "Do you think I'm a fool, like Mu Sicheng, relying on trust to keep people in line? Liu Huai, if you misbehave, I'll kill you."

"I have no shortage of anything but smug fools and puppet players," Zhang Gui continued, withdrawing his hand and raising an eyebrow at Liu Huai, who was pale and trembling. "And unfortunately for you, you seem to be both."

Liu Huai's face shifted between shades of blue and white as he staggered through the swaying train. He might have entertained the idea of betraying Zhang Gui before, but now, he realized there was nothing he could do to oppose him.

Zhang Gui left no room for error in his plans.

Liu Huai didn't believe Mu Sicheng and Bai Liu could challenge Zhang Gui. The disparity in rank was too vast.

Liu Huai had seen Bai Liu's videos before. He had to admit, Bai Liu was clever, but not nearly as clever as Zhang Gui, who would never mix with Mu Sicheng and Du Sanying in a collector's game. One was a thief, the other a scavenger.

But Zhang Gui didn't underestimate Bai Liu.

Liu Huai's mind replayed Zhang Gui's strategy.

"Now, this game has turned into a head-hunting competition due to the life-value requirement for broken lenses. We have three heads on our side, though I'm not counting mine."

"Three heads on Bai Liu's side. But because the four on our side are bound, they won't be able to grab them easily. Bai Liu will likely assume we'll take the initiative and set a trap, so I'm sending you to test the waters."

"Because this damn game requires 400 shards, I'm not about to deplete myself. I need you to tell them that my golem stormed off after I tried to use it for shards, causing our side to implode. I'm not in a position of absolute protection right now."

"My puppet manipulation skills aren't flawless. If there's a struggle, I'll face backlash, so I'll retract the more obvious puppet strings from you. The one on your heart will be invisible to everyone except you and me. You can tell them that it's a result of your struggle and that I retracted the visible puppet silk to avoid backlash."

"Du Sanying is irreplaceable on their side. Bai Liu is a panel F player, and Mu Sicheng is definitely expendable. His spirit should be encrusted by now after two rounds of pursuit. Although it can be restored with bleach, I think Bai Liu will prevent that."

"I don’t think Bai Liu can control Mu Sicheng. He needs Mu Sicheng in a berserk state to increase his strength."

"Before the next train arrives, I’m sure some thief, cornered and with a grudge against me, will try to steal from us. Once I’m under control, things will be easier. My golems are all B-rank players without my skill enhancements and should be easy to take down individually."

Liu Huai couldn’t understand why Zhang Gui’s plans had to be so complicated.

Why all these spy-counter-spy tactics? Zhang Gui was strong enough to defeat his opponents head-on.

But Zhang Gui only gave Liu Huai a look of disdain, the same stupid expression he always wore: "Of course it’s to preserve everyone’s life points. I don’t want to deplete our side’s life points, nor Mu Sicheng’s or Bai Liu’s. It’s better to play ambush one by one. Head-to-head conflicts are too costly for all of us. If our life points drop below 400, we all die together."

"For Bai Liu to have lasted this long, I think he’s partnered with Mu Sicheng. But it’s a shaky alliance."

Zhang Gui smiled, then patted Liu Huai’s face with the back of his hand, lowering his eyelids and elongating his tone: "When Mu Sicheng sees you, Liu Huai, he’ll remember his bitter partnership with you. Just keep reminding him you betrayed him."

As Liu Huai recalled these words, he wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth, a result of Zhang Gui’s earlier attack, trying to make his betrayal seem convincing.

But deep down, Liu Huai still feared Mu Sicheng wouldn’t believe him. After all, he had once betrayed him just to survive.

Zhang Gui, his eyes glinting with amusement, added, "It’s because you betrayed Mu Sicheng to live that makes your betrayal of me seem so believable. Remember, you really wanted to live. You really did betray me for that reason. That’s why I chose you."

Liu Huai took a deep breath, continuing his journey. Bloody handprints slowly began to appear on the train's interior, remnants of previous battles. Clearly, other players had been here not long ago.

[The train is approaching the station. The next stop is Yellow Springs

Road. Please line up by the door if you want to disembark. First board, then get off.]

The lights in the carriage flickered erratically as Liu Huai walked to the last car. Mu Sicheng leaned against the wall with his arms crossed, while Du Sanying crouched beside his battered go-kart.

As soon as Liu Huai stepped inside, Mu Sicheng opened his hands warily. Liu Huai raised his hands, showing embarrassment and fear, and whispered, "Fourth Brother, I've come to surrender to you."

Mu Sicheng's expression darkened. His hands contracted, and he snorted, "Zhang Gui actually brought you along?"

"I… Fourth Brother…" Liu Huai didn't dare look Mu Sicheng in the eyes, lowering his head as his voice faltered. "I did it to survive."

"To survive, you offered to cut off one of my hands and give it to Zhang Gui as proof of loyalty?" Mu Sicheng laughed coldly, the red glow in his eyes blood-like. "Didn't you join the King's Guild? Did Zhang Gui bring you here? You've been treated well, a high-ranking player willing to take you on, and now you want to betray him? It's the same trick again, isn't it? I won't fall for it twice."

Du Sanying tried to stop Mu Sicheng before things escalated. There was no point in pushing someone out the door if they were fake!

Liu Huai relayed exactly what Zhang Gui had instructed him to say.

Du Sanying and Mu Sicheng exchanged glances. Liu Huai's story mirrored Bai Liu's and their own analysis—Zhang Gui had sacrificed his golem for the shard.

"Wait!" Mu Sicheng's eyes darkened as he pulled out a balance prop, his expression growing suspicious. Suddenly, he grabbed Liu Huai by the throat.

Liu Huai's vision blurred as he struggled to breathe, his blood splattering onto his eyes. I'm really here for help!

Mu Sicheng grunted, his grip tightening, "You said you weren't lying. I have my ways of knowing."

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng uses prop (Judge's Scales) on player Liu Huai – Honest or not, the weight of your conscience.]

[The Judge's Scales can only be used three times per day on one player, and can only determine simple yes/no answers.]

"Alright, now you'll answer," Mu Sicheng sneered, a wicked smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. One hand still choking Liu Huai, the other raised the strange scale, marked with "Cheng" on the left and "Lie" on the right. "First question: Did Zhang Gui send you here?"

Liu Huai choked out a response, fear clouding his voice as he lied instinctively, "No, it's not!!!"

The scales tilted toward [Lie].

Mu Sicheng sneered. "Second question: Is Zhang Gui safe now?"

Liu Huai gasped, his eyes watering from the choking. "Fourth Brother! Fourth Brother! I didn't know you had this prop! Please let me go! You still need me!"

Mu Sicheng was unmoved, tightening his grip. "Answer me."

"YES!!!" Liu Huai screamed, driven to the brink of madness. Tears streamed down his face, "He's safe now! He's protected by the two enhanced puppets! I came here because he asked me to! But I didn't come here to harm you! I came here to be with you! I won't betray you again like I did before! I won't cut off your hands for Zhang Gui anymore! He's a madman! I couldn't survive without coming to you, Fourth Brother!"

Mu Sicheng's eyes gleamed with an unsettling intensity, his hands trembling as blood seeped from his fingers. The hallucinations began. Liu Huai could see the blood, like a cruel reminder of the past.

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng's mood has fluctuated too much. Mental value has dropped to 60%. He's experiencing mild hallucinations. Restore mental value!]

Mu Sicheng blinked slowly, blood dripping onto Liu Huai's face, his expression unreadable as he lowered his head. "Okay, one last question. You say you won't betray me again—"

He paused, eyes unwavering. "Are you still loyal to Zhang Gui, still part of his plan, or have you truly betrayed him and joined our side?"

Liu Huai's chest heaved as his palms grew sweaty. Every muscle tensed, knowing that his answer could mean life or death.

This was the look Mu Sicheng wore when his spirit dropped below a dangerous threshold, a state that could easily lead to a killing spree.

It was in this state that Mu Sicheng killed Zhang Gui's four puppets, and Liu Huai barely escaped by betraying him and overloading his spirit.

"I came to you as part of Zhang Gui's plan, but I'm truly betraying him..." Liu Huai's words faltered as the transparent puppet strings in his heart suddenly surrendered to his will.

At that moment, Liu Huai realized something—Zhang Gui had planned this all along, knowing Mu Sicheng had the scales prop.

Shivers ran down his spine.

Mu Sicheng continued his questioning, but this time, Liu Huai told the truth. Even if he had planned to strike later, he was instructed to separate from Bai Liu.

Suddenly, Liu Huai noticed something strange. He hadn't seen Bai Liu at all.

"Where's Bai Liu?" he asked, looking around.

Du Sanying scratched his face awkwardly. "Well... Bai Liu wanted to cooperate with the puppet master, but Mu Sicheng disagreed. They fought, and Bai Liu broke off from us, joining Zhang Gui."

Mu Sicheng scoffed, turning away. "Bai Liu and I don't need anyone to divide us. We can break up on our own!"

Liu Huai stood there, utterly confused.

What was going on? Who did Bai Liu join?

[The train is coming to the station, the next stop is Yellow Springs Road, please line up next to the door if you want to get off, first get on then get off -]

Bai Liu made his way to the front of the car and found Zhang Gui sitting neatly in his seat with two hollow-eyed puppets standing in front of him. He didn't seem surprised to see Bai Liu and greeted him naturally. "Here you are. Have a seat. It's a bit quicker than I thought."

Bai Liu sat down opposite Zhang Gui and sighed. "You sent Liu Huai here, so Mu Sicheng is no longer a pawn for me. Now, I have no choice but to defect."

"You're the smart one," Zhang Gui smiled meaningfully. "Just a little unlucky to have run into a smarter me."

Zhang Gui crossed his legs and spread his arms on the back of his seat in a very relaxed and conceited posture. He raised his chin and looked at Bai Liu askance, smiling. "This game requires the sacrifice of four people to pass. If you choose to stand on my opposite side and fight me, your panel attributes are so poor that I'll definitely win. But then the overall life points will be consumed ineffectively. After I have you under control, I'll most likely sacrifice you to get four hundred life points to help me pass the game."

"For you, Bai Liu, I actually think the best plan is to work with me. Although there's a possibility I'll control you, at least I won't sacrifice you so easily."

"But Mu Sicheng will definitely not agree to work with me," Zhang Gui smiled, his tone falsely regretful. "And you won't come to me easily to seek cooperation. After all, not many people want to be subject to others. You might even have the idea of asking Mu Sicheng to steal from me. I have no choice but to ask Liu Huai to persuade you."

The fish Zhang Gui wanted to catch from the beginning was Bai Liu, not Mu Sicheng.

To catch Bai Liu, it was necessary to shake up the partnership between Mu Sicheng and Bai Liu.

There was nothing like Liu Huai to shake Mu Sicheng's trust in his teammates.

While a sane Mu Sicheng might have been able to maintain his partnership with Bai Liu despite the fact that this was a secondary game, an abnormal Mu Sicheng—especially with Liu Huai present, reminding him of what happened—would be unable to control his suspicion and hatred toward his teammate. The team's suspicion and hatred of him would become uncontrollable.

Of course, Mu Sicheng could bring his spirit back to normal, but this was definitely not what Bai Liu wanted. If Bai Liu chose to continue his partnership with Mu Sicheng and stand against Zhang Gui, he would need Mu Sicheng to go berserk in order to maintain a high level

of combat power to defend himself against Zhang Gui.

Bai Liu could certainly put himself into a berserker state and become a strong fighter, but Zhang Gui didn't think Bai Liu would do so easily.

Bai Liu, an F-ranked player, had much weaker basic attributes than Mu Sicheng, an A-ranked player. Bai Liu was a fragile, high-output player who could easily die in a berserk state.

Zhang Gui's plan was to take Bai Liu first, then use Liu Huai to control Mu Sicheng.

As for Du Sanying, Zhang Gui didn't care about him. He wasn't interested in a man like Du Sanying, who had no power and relied on luck to get ahead.

Bai Liu was honest. "I actually tried to persuade Mu Sicheng to work with you. But not only was he reluctant, he beat me up."

Bai Liu showed Zhang Gui his personal panel. The life expectancy item clearly showed: [Attacked by player Mu Sicheng -40].

This was the result of Bai Liu taking Mu Sicheng as a transport vehicle at the beginning. Mu Sicheng's anger and frustration when he punched Bai Liu down were now used by Bai Liu as evidence of his own defection, and he didn't even blush.

Bai Liu sighed regretfully. "I only have about 20 lives left, so I can't get through with them. I was hoping that Mu Sicheng would be able to kill you when he was berserk. But after I learned of Liu Huai's existence, I gave up working with Mu Sicheng altogether."

Zhang Gui gave Bai Liu an approving look. "Because in Liu Huai's presence, Mu Sicheng's berserk state will be more unstable, and he will be more inclined to attack his own teammates when the time comes."

"It's too easy to die with the amount of life I have," Bai Liu spread his hands. "As much as I want to win the game, I want to stay alive more than anything. So, I've come to you for cooperation."

If Mu Sicheng were here, he would have cursed Bai Liu, a psychopath who wanted money rather than life, for speaking such nonsense. But Zhang Gui didn't know that Bai Liu was a psychopath who wanted money more than life. So, Zhang Gui smiled with satisfaction as he drew out a roll of transparent puppet silk and raised an eyebrow.

"Then you know what working with me means: you have to be my puppet."

"Yes." Bai Liu agreed, or perhaps he had expected this outcome, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "But cooperation is a mutual matter, right? Zhang Gui, I'll be your puppet, so you have to show me your sincerity. What are the benefits of being your puppet?"

Zhang Gui quickly replied, "What do you want me to do to show my sincerity in working with you?"

"I have a prop that Mu Sicheng stole. It's called the [Mermaid's Amulet]." Bai Liu's eyes fell slowly. "I also fought with Mu Sicheng because of this. I'd like you to help me get it back if you can."

"That's it?" Zhang Gui seemed a little surprised, as if he hadn't expected Bai Liu to make such a simple offer.

"It's a life-saving prop." Bai Liu's eyes rolled as he whispered, a brilliant smile curling at the corners of his mouth. "I'm low on life, so I want you to grab it for me before this train leaves. That way, at least I'll be safer back there. You wouldn't want to go through all the trouble to get me, and then I just die, would you?"

"Fine," Zhang Gui smiled. "I prefer a willing puppet, and surprisingly, Bai Liu, you know so much and are willing to make a deal with me. So I'll—"

The puppet thread in Zhang Gui's hand trembled violently. The sharp, needle-like end dug into Bai Liu's bones, wrapping several times around them.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has become the puppet of player Zhang Gui.]

Zhang Gui slowly pulled back the corners of his mouth, his normal smile turning eerie and wicked. "- It's come to this, and you actually think you can still negotiate with me, Bai Liu. I'll have to teach you the rules."

[System Alert: Player Zhang Gui has used his personal skill (String Doll) on Bai Liu.]

"Now, Bai Liu, take everything you have on you and pay me, especially the weapons." Zhang Gui tickled the silk threads on his fingers. "I won't give you any more chances to roll over."

Bai Liu moved stiffly, his face still pale with pain. His hand froze as he clicked on his system panel, tossing out various items.

A snow-white fish bone, some small messy things, an old wallet. Bai Liu's face changed violently when he saw the old wallet being thrown out, catching Zhang Gui's attention. He lowered himself to pick it up. "What's this? Your personal skills?"

Zhang Gui patted the wallet and gave a dismissive laugh. "That's pretty shabby." He flipped it open and raised his eyebrows when he saw the contents. Zhang Gui pulled out a stack of point notes and showed them to Bai Liu with amusement. "What's this? A tangible points wallet? You like this mess, but there's a lot of points in it... Let me count: 12,000."

"Then I'll laugh at it all," Zhang Gui laughed.

Bai Liu, who was already under control and whose face was still pale, lowered his head without saying a word. He bit his lower lip as if he was suffocating, not knowing what to say. Finally, he only said stubbornly, "Take it, and I'll take it as payment for your help."

Zhang Gui sneered meaningfully. "If you want to be so self-congratulatory, that's fine."

But if Zhang Gui had looked at Bai Liu's expression, he would have seen a calm gaze and a small, slow curve in his bitten bottom lip.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu gives Player Zhang Gui 12,000 points to make a deal. Player Zhang Gui needs to retrieve the item (Mermaid's Amulet) for Player Bai Liu before the train starts again.]

[If one of the parties does not complete the deal, the system will impose a penalty. The party that does not complete the deal will be imprisoned in the system (old wallet) and become soul money.]

Chapter End Notes

> Mu Sicheng is referred to as '4' in the author's notes because of the 四 (4) in his name.
> It's why Liu Huai calls Mu Sicheng : Fourth brother.

Burst last train

This is a warning from the system to Bai Liu when he receives the [Old Wallet], designed to restrain him from abusing the skill.

It's a restrictive measure aimed at Bai Liu's trustworthiness, akin to the [small dark room] used by Taobao merchants. However, it's suspected that Bai Liu uses it to manipulate trade objects.

For someone like Zhang Gui, who relishes setting up traps and thinking himself clever, the best strategy is to play along with Bai Liu's plan, letting his prey fall deeper into his trap. Only then, at the moment Bai Liu might seek a breakthrough, can Zhang Gui strike.

Bai Liu's gaze dropped as he thought this over.

But Mu Sicheng was in trouble. He had just learned about Mu Sicheng's complex relationship with Liu Huai, and Zhang Gui had brought Liu Huai up here. For someone like Mu Sicheng, who has normal emotions and desires, the psychological effect of hallucinations involving a betraying friend could be devastating.

Mu Sicheng's behavior was erratic whenever Liu Huai was mentioned.

Bai Liu also learned that most people in this game had mental capacities around 70, with 60 being dangerously low. Anyone with a mental capacity under 20 who could escape the game without going mad had extreme mental strength. But Bai Liu needed Mu Sicheng's mental capacity to drop even further—down to 18, where the hallucinations and psychological effects would intensify.

With Liu Huai as the trigger, Mu Sicheng was bound to experience serious problems.

It was a difficult task, but necessary.

[The train has arrived at the Yellow Springs Road – please board and disembark in order.]

Zhang Gui's fingers moved like a pianist's, pulling on the transparent threads in his hands, immediately dragging Bai Liu behind him.

"I know you're not entirely willing. You might be pretending to surrender to me, or maybe you've got something else planned with Mu Sicheng," Zhang Gui's lips curled into a malicious smile, as though Bai

Liu were trapped in chains, the heavy puppet hood slowly dropping over his head.

Bai Liu's face was gradually covered by the puppet's hood. As he looked up at Zhang Gui, the last expression he saw before the hood fell was one of malice and certainty. His eyelids lowered, eyes filled with arrogance, as if he already held control of everything.

Zhang Gui's tone was low and raspy. "But Bai Liu, you've overlooked Liu Huai's influence on Mu Sicheng. With Liu Huai around, Mu Sicheng will never stay steady with you. No matter how many backstops you have, as soon as Mu Sicheng breaks down—"

Zhang Gui's laugh was cut off as he maliciously added, "—Mu Sicheng is your strongest card. As soon as he falls, your plan collapses entirely."

Bai Liu's face was still, but his heart raced.

In a way, Zhang Gui was right. Mu Sicheng was crucial to his strategy.

[Mermaid's Amulet] was on Mu Sicheng.

If Mu Sicheng completely crumbled and lost his resistance, and Zhang Gui acquired the [Mermaid's Amulet], the deal would be sealed. Bai Liu had considered using Mu Sicheng just for the amulet before, but—

[System Tip: During the trading period, the item to be traded, i.e. (the Mermaid's Amulet), must exist. Otherwise, the trade is invalid.]

If Mu Sicheng was pushed to the breaking point or refused to cooperate and used the amulet, Bai Liu would be finished, becoming Zhang Gui's puppet.

So Mu Sicheng was an essential part of Bai Liu's plan, and if he broke, the risks to Bai Liu's side would skyrocket.

Bai Liu was gambling, a high-stakes game with only one chip: Mu Sicheng. An extremely volatile one. The chances of winning were slim, but Bai Liu had considered using Du Sanying. However, Du Sanying was instinctive and unpredictable, like a sharp rodent. He might throw the sculpture at Zhang Gui just to reduce the immediate danger, much like how he'd fled the car when he sensed peril.

Du Sanying's instability was a problem. With Bai Liu under the Puppeteer's control, he couldn't remotely command Du Sanying. Mu

Sicheng, with his vendetta against [the Puppeteer] and strong resolve, was far more valuable.

In the end, Bai Liu chose Mu Sicheng.

The doors opened slowly, and the charred [passenger] bodies wailed and burned as they poured into the carriage. Zhang Gui moved quickly, maneuvering the two golems forward to retrieve the pieces, avoiding using Bai Liu, who he knew had a low life expectancy and could easily be killed with casual effort.

Zhang Gui's hand was swift. In less than ten seconds, the two puppets had crossed a carriage and presented Zhang Gui with a pile of shattered lenses, which he took without a glance. His face darkened. "Go, clear the next carriage."

Zhang Gui's precision and speed made it seem effortless. The golems cleared one carriage after another in less than a minute, while Bai Liu —small, weak, and unable to defend himself—was outclassed.

Mu Sicheng had told Bai Liu that Zhang Gui's personal skills consisted of two main techniques. The first was [Puppet with Thread], where he controlled the puppet with thread, but the puppet maintained its awareness, with only the limbs under his control.

This was why Zhang Gui preferred voluntary puppets, as involuntary ones—like Mu Sicheng—were harder to control.

The second skill was [Puppet Enhancement], which came at the cost of 50 mental points for the puppet, stripping away its consciousness but doubling its panel attributes. These puppets were hard to control, as they entered the [Mental Value Danger Zone], experiencing pain and struggle, but in their berserk state, they were immune to fear and relentless in battle.

However, Mu Sicheng warned that this technique couldn't be used on players with a mental value under 20, as they would have entered a berserk state, making them uncontrollable.

"No one in this game has ever tried to control a player with a mental value below 20. Not even Zhang Gui could do it," Mu Sicheng had told Bai Liu. "Except for you, Bai Liu. You tried to make me—at a mental value of 10—remember the mission you gave me. That's impossible."

Bai Liu just smiled. "How will we know unless we try? We don't have

another option, do we?”

As Bai Liu thought, the female voice on the train’s intercom sounded.

“Due to heavy passenger load and special items boarding, the stopping time has been extended to five minutes for the safety of passengers and belongings. Please remain calm and keep away from the doors.”

A huge charred corpse, several times the size of a regular passenger, pried open the door with its massive, burning hands, squeezing its head in.

Its eyes were burnt out, with black carbon marks from the fire. Its skin was burned away, leaving bloody muscle exposed. Embedded in its chest was a hexagonal shattered lens, like a heart guard, glowing in the flames.

The massive corpse roared in frustration, slamming its fist into the roof of the carriage, creating a gaping hole, flames pouring through and filling the carriage with a loud pop.

Zhang Gui’s face darkened as he swiftly retreated into another carriage, pulling the two puppets into his hand.

[System Alert: Players Zhang Gui, Bai Liu, Fang Ke, and Li Gou have been attacked by the monster’s flames, losing -10 Life. Player Zhang Gui and Player Bai Liu lose -20 Spirit, and Player Fang Ke and Player Li Gou lose -9 Spirit due to being in a puppet state.]

Bai Liu coughed from the burn, blood dripping from his mouth. Hidden beneath his puppet hood, his face grew paler as he checked his attributes.

[Life: 11 (decreased after being attacked by Mu Sicheng and burned by flames)] [Stamina: 70 (recovering)] [Mental Value: 69 (slightly altered by monster attack)]

Bai Liu glanced at the monster book.

[Explosive Last Train Monster Book Refresh - Brotherhood of Thieves (2/3)]

[Monster Name: Thief Brothers (Brother)] [Characteristics: Extremely strong, fast, and able to use a wide range of attacks (1400 speed, fire enhances attacks, prefers using fists)] [Weakness: ????? (to be discovered)] [Attacks: Rage Hammer, Flame Blast (if Bai Liu takes

either of these, he's likely finished.)]

Bai Liu licked the blood from the corner of his mouth. "That big broken lens in its heart should be its weakness. We need to collect it."

"You talk too much!" Zhang Gui interrupted, eyeing the approaching monster warily. His fingers moved swiftly as he prepared his golems. "This game's a mess. They extended the stop and now we have a boss..."

The second level of Explosive Last Train had a mortality rate close to eighty percent, and even Zhang Gui struggled to get through it.

"You really picked the hardest game in Level 2 in one go!" Zhang Gui muttered.

"I appreciate the compliment," Bai Liu replied dryly. "Aren't you going to try grabbing that broken lens from the monster?"

"Try my ass!" Zhang Gui spat. "Look at its attack and speed. This monster's at least A-rank, and my golems are just cannon fodder. Even with six full-blooded puppets, I wouldn't guarantee I could clear it."

Zhang Gui ground his teeth and reluctantly calmed himself. "My golems can't take it. Only a berserk Mu Sicheng might stand a chance... but he's close to dying."

"I can handle it in a rage, can't I?" Bai Liu asked, redirecting Zhang Gui's thoughts with a calm gaze.

For Bai Liu, Mu Sicheng couldn't die. If he did, the [Mermaid's Amulet] would explode, and Zhang Gui would have full control, turning Bai Liu into his puppet.

"Indeed," Zhang Gui grunted, narrowing his eyes. "But you're almost dead. One more hit and you're done."

He sneered as he manipulated the puppet threads. "Then you can go to hell."

[System Alert: Player Zhang Gui has used the prop (Good to See You) on player Liu Huai and will move to Liu Huai's location within ten seconds.]

Bai Liu felt a wave of dizziness and, when he looked up again, saw Liu Huai, Mu Sicheng, and Du Sanying, who were also collecting the

broken lenses in the other compartment.

The three of them were working in tandem, struggling but holding up as best they could.

However, it was Mu Sicheng who suffered the most. Without Bai Liu to attract the enemies' attention, most of the passengers were focused on him. Although Liu Huai helped block some of the attacks, Mu Sicheng's condition deteriorated rapidly. His face was drenched in blood, his eyes flickered red, and he was struggling to breathe.

Zhang Gui's expression remained cold as he withdrew his hand and tugged at the silk thread tied around his pinky.

He saw Zhang Gui, hidden behind a carriage, shrouded by countless bodies and flames.

Zhang Gui pointed at Mu Sicheng with a blank expression, then gave him a swift slash across the neck, his lips forming the words: "Change of plan. There's a big boss. Don't worry about life or death."

Liu Huai heard the message and understood the significance of the "big boss." But seeing how easily Zhang Gui was willing to sacrifice Mu Sicheng made Liu Huai's heart tremble, his face paling.

—This "big boss" was probably going to be very difficult to deal with, and it would likely take Mu Sicheng in a berserk state to defeat it.

But wasn't this just a level 2 game? How could there be monsters that would require Mu Sicheng to go berserk to deal with?

As Liu Huai hesitated, the massive corpse surged forward, crashing through everything in its path. The car windows shattered, flames spiraled, and the passengers were reduced to ash, screaming in agony as they were consumed by the raging fire. The power and heat of its attack were overwhelming.

Zhang Gui pulled the three golems forward into the carriage with Mu Sicheng and the others, and the sight of the large corpse startled Du Sanying. He couldn't help but exclaim, "Holy shit! What the hell is that?!"

Zhang Gui tightened the puppet thread around his pinky and shouted at Liu Huai, "Liu Huai! Do it! Or we all die!"

Liu Huai felt the strain of the puppet thread on his heart and gritted

his teeth. He threw down two swords from his sleeves, one in each hand. Standing behind Mu Sicheng, he lowered his head and whispered, "Sorry," before stabbing forward without hesitation.

Du Sanying, horrified, yelled, "Mu Sicheng! Watch your back!"

Mu Sicheng, already sensing the danger, rolled away from Liu Huai's backstab. He sprang to his feet, wiping the blood dripping from his eyebrow with his elbow. His face was a mix of anger and disbelief. "You? Impossible."

Liu Huai's smile was complex, tinged with sadness and a bit of ruthlessness. "Fourth Brother," he said, "We were once the best of friends, the perfect pair—assassins and thieves. We could do anything, take anything, and that included each other, didn't it?"

"We're both doing this for ourselves, Fourth Brother," Liu Huai continued, his voice growing colder as he raised his sword from his sleeve. "You stole from me for yourself, and I assassinated you for myself. We're all just selfish, self-serving people."

"Master!" Liu Huai shouted, his voice filled with urgency. "Grab Mu Sicheng!"

Without hesitation, Zhang Gui threw a sharp puppet wire at Mu Sicheng's ankle. Mu Sicheng narrowly avoided it, his hand hooking onto the hoop to pull himself free.

Du Sanying, his face red and sweat beading on his forehead, struggled to keep his composure. "Bai Liu says Mu Sicheng has to hold out until the train starts without getting caught by Zhang Gui and the others! But how the hell can we hold out like this?"

Du Sanying glanced at Bai Liu. Mu Sicheng was barely holding on, even with the three of them supporting him, but soon the massive corpse would tip the balance. It was about to crash into their carriage. Mu Sicheng's hands were covered in scratches from the puppet silk, his wrists bound tightly by Zhang Gui's threads.

Zhang Gui gasped, "Liu Huai, do it!"

Liu Huai, panting, stepped closer to Mu Sicheng, his hands already raising the sword hidden in his sleeve.

Mu Sicheng suddenly clutched the puppet threads wrapped around his body and said through gritted teeth, "Bai Liu, if you have anything

left, use it now. I can't hold on much longer. I'm holding onto Zhang Gui's puppet threads for you, but my fingers will be cut by the threads soon. You can act now."

Zhang Gui glared at Bai Liu, who had somehow managed to get behind Mu Sicheng. He saw Mu Sicheng's hands tightly gripping the puppet silk, blood dripping from his fingers and hitting the hot floor, evaporating in an instant.

Bai Liu slowly lifted the puppet hood behind Mu Sicheng, his face radiating an innocent smile.

Zhang Gui's expression shifted to one of fury.

"Fuck!!! These two are still in alliance! Liu Huai, do it!!!" Zhang Gui tried to manipulate the puppet wire again, but his efforts failed as Mu Sicheng held the threads tight. He couldn't control Bai Liu. Zhang Gui's face darkened as he tugged at the threads, trying to sever Mu Sicheng's fingers while shouting, "Liu Huai! Hurry! Bai Liu has no offensive power now!"

Du Sanying's voice cracked as he gasped, "Bai Liu! Hurry!"

Without a second thought, Liu Huai struck. Mu Sicheng, feeling the movement, glanced back at Bai Liu, who still wore the same innocent smile. Bai Liu's hands gently pressed against Mu Sicheng's back, giving him a slight push forward.

Mu Sicheng's pupils dilated.

Du Sanying's mouth dropped open in disbelief. Zhang Gui let go of the puppet threads in shock, and Liu Huai stared blankly at Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng. Blood from Liu Huai's sleeve sword slid down the blade.

Bai Liu's hands pushed Mu Sicheng forward into Liu Huai's sword, which pierced Mu Sicheng's shoulder, severing his arms cleanly.

Mu Sicheng's hands fell to the floor with a soft thud, landing silently on the ground.

It was like the last time Liu Huai betrayed him and severed his arms.

But that time it was Liu Huai.

This time, it was Bai Liu.

Blood poured from Mu Sicheng's broken shoulder.

"I think Master Zhang Gui makes a valid point," Bai Liu said, his voice grating and eerily calm. His smile never faltered. "Mu Sicheng, if you don't go berserk, we all die."

"It's no longer useful to work with you. You're too weak to make it through," Bai Liu's voice was chilling, a cool, gentle smile on his face. "So I've decided to wholeheartedly become my master's puppet and follow his orders."

Burst last train

Mu Sicheng staggered twice, his eyes hollow, his movements slow and rigid. He looked down at his hands on the floor, disoriented.

[System Alert: Player Liu Huai has attacked Mu Sicheng with a Dagger of Darkness, corrupting Mu Sicheng's spirit level with darkness.]

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng's mental field has been violently shaken, and his mental value has dropped drastically.]

[System Warning: Player Mu Sicheng's Spirit Level has dropped from 40... 30... 20... 10. Player Mu Sicheng now has a Spirit Level of 8! Entering Berserk Phase!]

[Player Mu Sicheng's Personal Panel (Berserk Status)]

Spiritual Value: 60 → 8
Strength Value: 339 → 797
Agility: 1040 → 2010
Attack: 1311 → 2300
Resistance: 1310 → 2600
[Combined Defense Attack Power increased. Total Panel Attribute Points exceed 6000, Rated as A++ Player. Player Mu Sicheng level increased from A to A++.]

[Player Mu Sicheng's alienation level has increased due to his status in The Book of Monsters: Capuchin Tamed by Thieves.]

Black flesh sprouted rapidly from Mu Sicheng's severed arm, wriggling and gathering until it twisted into two black monkey claws that extended past his waist.

Mu Sicheng tilted his head back, loosening his bones, exhaled a white breath, and flung his newly-formed arms to the floor. His eyes had vanished, leaving behind only blank white orbs. His fangs jutted from his mouth, and his ears had transformed into monkey ears. A tail, now slowly resting on the floor, flapped from side to side. The monkey headset behind him giggled maniacally, its eyes glowing with a piercing red light. In a shrill, monkeyish voice, Mu Sicheng screamed: "Crazy!"

His pure white eyes twitched slightly, and he bared his teeth in a snarl, followed by a creepy, bestial laugh. With a burst of speed, Mu Sicheng flung his arms and, moving faster than the eye could follow,

launched a horizontal kick from his waist, sending the brother of the flaming thief flying out of the carriage.

The thief's brother crashed into another carriage, his massive palms attempting to grab the window to stop his fall, only to shatter the glass and leave a long, dark carbon trail across the floor. Flames flickered in his eyes, and the creature instinctively roared in anger and confusion, unsure how the small man who had been running through the carriage had suddenly acquired the strength to kick him away.

Mu Sicheng exhaled another breath of white, flaming air, his mouth curling into a strange grin. His sharp teeth gleamed as he took a flying leap, stepping off the wall of the carriage and dashing forward. His claws were ready to tear into the heart of the monster.

The thief's brother roared again and delivered a crushing blow to Mu Sicheng, sending them both into a sea of flames that engulfed them in a violent burst of fire.

Mu Sicheng was no longer human, not in any way recognizable as one.

But Bai Liu? He was even less human.

Du Sanying stared at Bai Liu in disbelief, completely stunned. He hadn’t expected Mu Sicheng to be so neatly betrayed by Bai Liu, the mastermind behind it all.

What Du Sanying didn’t expect was that Bai Liu, after buying Mu Sicheng, wouldn’t hesitate to sell Du Sanying out as well.

Bai Liu turned to Zhang Gui with an unbothered expression and spoke calmly, "Master, the broken lens is on Du Sanying. Let’s take him out while Mu Sicheng and the thief’s brother are busy struggling with each other."

Bai Liu’s "master" was more traditional than Liu Huai’s, who had been Zhang Gui’s puppet for some time.

Du Sanying’s anger boiled over as he shouted, his eyes brimming with tears, "Fuck, Bai Liu, you’re really not human! We agreed to go against Zhang Gui! You’ve really turned on us!"

Bai Liu offered a hollow apology, "I’m sorry. This big monster that got on board messed up my plans. He’s so strong that I realized I couldn’t win with you guys, so I decided to submit to my master and abandon

the plan we had."

Liu Huai stood frozen, dumbfounded by Bai Liu's betrayal. He had regretted betraying Mu Sicheng, cursing himself before he ended up serving Zhang Gui. But now, he saw Bai Liu act with no remorse, betraying others with speed and ease, leaving Liu Huai wondering if Bai Liu had always been Zhang Gui's ally.

Bai Liu analyzed the situation coldly. "Du Sanying is trapped in this carriage. He has nowhere to go but forward into the thief's brother, or out the door where passengers are bursting in. With or without luck, he's caught. There's no better time than now to take him."

Du Sanying ran frantically, tears streaking down his face, screaming, "Bai Liu, you fuck! You're not human! Don't you have a heart?!"

As Bai Liu had predicted, Du Sanying was caught in a trap with no escape. Even if he could hold out for a while with his luck, it was only a matter of time before Zhang Gui caught him.

Zhang Gui didn't hesitate. He extended his puppet threads to trap Du Sanying while Liu Huai joined the pursuit. The other two puppets dealt with the passengers trying to stop them.

Du Sanying, crying and cursing, was running in circles, but Bai Liu stood silently in the corner, untouched. Despite the chaos, Bai Liu was safe, even protected by Zhang Gui's puppets who fended off anyone who came near him.

Zhang Gui's instincts began to feel uneasy. Something was wrong.

When had Bai Liu taken control behind the scenes like this?

Zhang Gui's heart sank as he began to piece it together. From the moment Bai Liu had pushed Mu Sicheng into fighting the monster, it seemed like Bai Liu had been in control all along, directing everything without moving a finger. Zhang Gui had unconsciously trusted Bai Liu, thinking him a pawn, but now it was clear he had been led the whole time.

Zhang Gui's face hardened as he realized the truth.

"No!" he shouted, tugging the puppet threads violently. "Liu Huai, come back! Watch out for Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng! We've been played! Du Sanying has no more than 20 shards left, and his luck is at its peak. We're wasting time on him! The real target is Mu Sicheng's

lenses from the monster!"

Bai Liu sighed, looking at the countdown on the train's LED screen. "But it's about time," he murmured. "The train is leaving."

[System Tip: The train will start soon. Please fulfill your agreement with Player Bai Liu and take the (mermaid amulet) from Player Mu Sicheng. Otherwise, as a punishment, your soul will be imprisoned in the Soul Note of Player Bai Liu's old wallet.]

Zhang Gui's face twisted in realization.

"That wallet…" he muttered, looking up at Bai Liu in disbelief. "Your personal skill is trading? What kind of messed up skill is that? Soul debt rights? How do you have something close to system authority? The system wouldn't allow that!"

[System Alert: Soul Debt is a blocked term. A small TV mute has been applied to Player Zhang Gui.]

Bai Liu rubbed his nose, a sly grin spreading across his face. "But I just have it. Sorry."

Zhang Gui's frustration grew, but he didn't have time to argue. The train was about to start, and he had to act quickly.

"Don't worry about Du Sanying!" Zhang Gui barked. "He's Bai Liu's puppet. Focus on Mu Sicheng!"

With a cold look in his eyes, Zhang Gui ordered his puppets to attack Mu Sicheng, "Kill him! Get what's on him and give it to me! He won't last much longer!"

Liu Huai hesitated for a moment but then lunged toward Mu Sicheng. Just as he was about to get close, a burst of flames erupted from the compartment, forcing Liu Huai to stop.

Liu Huai frowned bitterly. "Master, the battle's too intense. We can't get in there. Only Mu Sicheng can withstand the flames."

Zhang Gui's chest heaved as he looked over at Bai Liu, who was lazily leaning against the door. His instincts screamed that something wasn't right.

The entire scene had shifted around Bai Liu.

Zhang Gui's chest heaved violently as he glared at Bai Liu, who was

lazily leaning against the door in the corner. He pulled the puppet strings tighter, dragging Bai Liu toward him.

Bai Liu was jerked forward, choking and coughing from the strangulation as he subconsciously tried to pry the strings off his neck.

Zhang Gui grabbed Bai Liu by the neck and lifted him off the ground, his voice seething with rage. "You deliberately let Mu Sicheng go berserk to fight that monster! You knew we couldn't get in there and retrieve anything, didn't you? That was your plan with him, wasn't it? You pushed Mu Sicheng into such a dangerous situation that he'd have no choice but to cooperate with you!"

"We agreed," Bai Liu rasped, his face red, tears falling from his eyes despite the strangulation. He was still smiling. "We agreed that the most dangerous place is the safest place."

Zhang Gui's rage intensified, his grip tightening around Bai Liu's neck. "Aren't you afraid I'll kill you?" His voice trembled with fury, the stranglehold becoming suffocating.

Bai Liu's eyes bulged as he gasped for air, but his tone remained flat. "My personal skills still work even if I die. You useless master."

He choked and coughed, his face turning a deep reddish-purple from the lack of oxygen, but he continued to laugh through the pain. "Killing me would only waste time and cost you another clever puppet. Go ahead, master. Will you kill me?"

He laughed again, even as the life was being squeezed out of him.

Burst last train

Zhang Gui did want to kill the bastard on impulse, but as Bai Liu said, he had nothing to gain by killing Bai Liu now!

Because Bai Liu's personal skill was already activated, it would not be aborted whether Zhang Gui killed him or not, and killing Bai Liu would cost Zhang Gui the clever puppet he had managed to get his hands on.

The first order of business now was to get the mermaid amulet, then suspend Bai Liu's personal skills. Afterward, Zhang Gui could abuse the damned Bai Liu in a hundred different ways to vent his anger at being teased.

But the cost of killing Bai Liu was too high. He had gone to such lengths to capture a golem with such a high intelligence value; it would not be in Zhang Gui's interest to kill it without reaping some benefits.

Zhang Gui barely calmed down as he loosened the puppet wire strangling Bai Liu.

Bai Liu fell limp, covering his bruised neck as he lay on the ground coughing loudly for breath. His eyes were filled with physical tears, but he actually smiled. "Thank you, Master, for sparing my life."

Zhang Gui immediately wanted to recoil and strangle him to death for that unpleasant smile.

He pushed back the anger surging within him, taking a deep breath to clear his mind and focus. The system indicated that the bottom line for a failed transaction was a train start. He glanced at the LED countdown on the carriage, which had a countdown to the start of the train.

There were still forty seconds to go, and he wasn't completely out of it. Killing Bai Liu was only ten seconds away, and it wasn't too late to wait until the countdown reached ten seconds before making his move.

Zhang Gui's mind raced as he gave orders: "It's not a dead end yet. If the players can't get in—Liu Huai, bring the passengers into the carriage where Mu Sicheng is and have them attack him! He should be almost out of mental strength by now! Let the passengers alienate him

and kill him!"

Liu Huai responded, "Yes!"

Hooking monsters was Liu Huai's specialty, and both his thief and assassin skills were highly effective.

Back in the day, he and Mu Sicheng were a great partnership—Mu Sicheng stealing, Liu Huai luring and assassinating monsters.

Liu Huai's two sleeved swords moved between the passengers, soon drawing their hatred and leading them toward him. They hung upside down at the entrance of the carriage, which was still on fire, as they searched for Liu Huai and entered the carriage. Once inside, the passengers seemed drawn to something, climbing and rolling toward Mu Sicheng.

The fire from the big boss, the Thief's Brother, could still burn these passengers outright, but after tangling with Mu Sicheng for a while, the Thief's Brother's condition had slipped significantly, and the flames were much smaller. Though the players couldn't resist, the passengers were able to get inside.

The flames inside the carriage were fading, and those in the next carriage could barely make out the scene inside.

A blank-eyed Mu Sicheng gritted his teeth, riding the big monster's neck, unable to shake it off.

The bursting passengers, seemingly attracted by the lenses on the big monster, poured into the carriage in a steady stream. They climbed and hissed, overlapping with flaming, charred corpses. The big monster twisted and threw Mu Sicheng off with a backhand.

Mu Sicheng choked and coughed, as if he had finally run out of steam. He released his monkey paw and fell backward into the pile of bursting passengers, who had piled onto his thief brother, the little giant.

The blackened and charred passengers grabbed Mu Sicheng's limbs with their teeth and claws, their fingers scratching his ghastly white face. The passengers poured in, overwhelming him like a mountain. He leaned back, his head sticking out of the sea of corpses, gasping for breath as if suffocating, but his mouth was soon covered by the charred corpses below.

Mu Sicheng's entire body was pulled into a fiery mountain of corpses, never to be seen again.

The Thief's Brother threw back his head and bellowed, his fists blazing with fire. He raised his fists, ready to strike Mu Sicheng, who was drowning in the pile of passengers.

Mu Sicheng lay on his back, eyes lost in the pile of charred corpses. He seemed oblivious to everything around him, except for the slight heaving of his chest, indicating that he was still alive.

But this survival didn't seem like it would last much longer.

The monster landed a punch.

Du Sanying saw Mu Sicheng's side and cried out with a harsh scream. The sound made Mu Sicheng blink as if with difficulty, and he managed to side-step the huge fist coming down from the Thief's Brother. The wind from the punch made Mu Sicheng vomit a mouthful of blood, and his eyelids drooped helplessly. His body sank deeper into the pile of charred corpses.

[System warning: Please flee quickly, Mu Sicheng! Your spirit level is endangered! You are near the borderline of death!]

Mu Sicheng was clearly not going to last much longer.

"Mu Sicheng is definitely dead." Zhang Gui narrowed his eyes. "This monster could even kill you, Bai Liu. Your attribute panel, when you're berserk, may not be able to block it. Liu Huai, as soon as Mu Sicheng dies, immediately throw me the mermaid amulet from his drop item!"

"I can't even hold up my berserk panel?" Bai Liu's thoughtful voice suddenly rang out. "What if I double my berserk panel attributes?"

"How did you double your berserk panel attributes?" Zhang Gui snorted. "Looks like Mu Sicheng told you about my personal skill, Puppet Enhancement."

"I'll be straight with you, Bai Liu. It's theoretically impossible to double the berserk attribute panel. First, you have to drop below 20 spirit points to enter the berserk attribute panel. Then, my personal skill, Puppet Reinforcement, requires sacrificing fifty of your spirit points to do so. But you can't use [Puppet Reinforcement] with less than 20 spirit points left."

"What if I'm partial to it?" Bai Liu asked softly.

Zhang Gui snickered. "But you won't die. You'll just go into a state worse than death."

Zhang Gui now had the time to talk to Bai Liu. He looked at him with a smirk, a sense of victory and achievement after a battle with a clever man. "The countdown to the start of the train on the LED now has 36 seconds left. Mu Sicheng won't last 36 seconds at all. You will lose this time, and I'll definitely get the mermaid amulet."

[System Alert: The train has started. Player Zhang Gui has broken his trust with Player Bai Liu and failed to complete the transaction with Player Bai Liu regarding the Mermaid Amulet. Player Zhang Gui has been given a reputation penalty and has become a Soul Coin in Player Bai Liu's old wallet.]

Zhang Gui's eyes widened as he subconsciously looked at the LED countdown screen and retorted in shock, "How could the train have started when there were still thirty-six seconds to go—"

The train started to shake and move, and Liu Huai stopped in his tracks, chasing Du Sanying in shock.

Du Sanying, who had been running all over the carriage, finally sank into the corner with a long breath. His arms and legs were weak, and his tear-stained face sobbed as he removed the translucent fabric covering the LED screen. He leaned against the door, exhausted, his tear-streaked face still sobbing, saying, "Bai Liu, next time I won't work with you again. It was so exciting. I thought I was going to die! I thought I was going to die."

The fabric slowly fell to the ground, revealing a real screen that read [Countdown: 0 seconds, train will start soon. Passengers, please get ready].

Zhang Gui threw a scouting prop over the dropped fabric with a dark look on his face.

[Reconnaissance result: Player Du Sanying used a prop (disguised fabric) to tamper with the time on the LED screen.]

"Du Sanying!" Zhang Gui lost his cool and broke down, questioning him. "When did you use this prop? How come I have no memory of—"

He suddenly stopped mid-sentence.

Zhang Gui recalled Du Sanying frantically throwing props out to stall for time while they were chasing him. A piece of fabric was indeed thrown out and hung on the screen.

But Zhang Gui had been so overwhelmed by the joy of his impending victory that he didn't even consider Du Sanying's frightened, sobbing performance was faked!

Du Sanying had been so scared by Bai Liu, almost to the point of tears. Bai Liu had played the villain so well that he and Mu Sicheng were really going to be sold out! Du Sanying was genuinely frightened and called Bai Liu inhuman.

When Zhang Gui realized this, he took two steps back, in a bit of a trance. He looked at Bai Liu incredulously. "How is it possible? Your intelligence value is 89, and mine is 93. How can you be smarter than me and anticipate what I want to do beforehand..."

"Maybe mine's natural?" Bai Liu shrugged casually, his expression calm as he quickly pulled a brand-new coin—Zhang Gui's Soul Coin—from his old wallet and pressed it into his system panel.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has used Player Zhang Gui's Soul Coin to intervene in Zhang Gui's system and is cutting into Zhang Gui's system panel...]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has officially cut into Player Zhang Gui's system panel and is available for action.]

Bai Liu's system panel instantly switched to Zhang Gui's, and Zhang Gui realized that he was completely under control. He grunted impotently and turned his head away, closing his eyes in defeat.

He had controlled so many people, but he had never been controlled by anyone before.

Bai Liu, heh, Bai Liu.

This man must have known that Zhang Gui was trying to capture him to draw on his intelligence, and was only emboldened to think that Zhang Gui would not kill him easily.

As it turned out, Zhang Gui had done exactly the same thing, allowing Bai Liu to take advantage of an opening.

Zhang Gui didn't think he was wrong to be greedy. He just lost when

he met someone who was ten times greedier than him.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu uses Soul Coin to intervene in Player Zhang Gui's System Panel. Player Bai Liu uses Player Zhang Gui's Personal Skill (String Doll). Player Bai Liu manipulates Player Zhang Gui to manipulate Player Liu Huai to attack himself.]

Zhang Gui's fingers suddenly moved uncontrollably as they danced around, pulling Liu Huai's heart tighter, as it clenched.

Liu Huai and Zhang Gui both looked up at the same time in shock at Bai Liu, who calmly gave the order, "Attack me, Liu Huai, in the way that costs you the most mental energy."

Zhang Gui was shocked. "You've already won, Bai Liu. What more do you want to do? The door will be closed soon!"

Yes, the train had started, and both the [Exploding Passenger] and the [Thief's Brother] were ready to leave the train, dragging the trophy in their hands—a struggling, minuscule Mu Sicheng—as they walked out the door.

Mu Sicheng seemed to have lost all consciousness. His eyeless eyes were dreamily open, blood dripping from the corners of his mouth and eyes. The only certainty was that he had never used the mermaid's amulet.

[Bai Liu, I'm not sure I could use the mermaid's amulet with less than 10 spirit. The human desire to survive can make people do a lot of strange things, including breaking cooperation and betraying teammates.]

[But if I really never used the prop from start to finish, it means I maintained my sanity with a mental value of less than 10, as you, the madman, demanded.]

[Mu Sicheng, if you don't use the mermaid's amulet, I promise I will save you as long as I live.]

[I don't want to be controlled by Zhang Gui. I'd rather die, but being controlled by you, up to now, I'm okay with that.]

[You're my most valuable card, Mu Sicheng, and I won't let you die.]

"I want to save Mu Sicheng," Bai Liu repeated in a flat tone. "Liu Huai, attack me with that weapon of yours that can drop your spirit value

extremely fast."

Liu Huai's hand jabbed forward uncontrollably, and the two sleeved swords pierced into Bai Liu's chest and stomach. Bai Liu only frowned slightly as Liu Huai let go of his hand with a shudder.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has been attacked by Player Liu Huai's (Dark Sleeve Sword) and has suffered an erosion of his spirit level, dropping -30. Current spirit level 39. Warning! Warning! Warning!]

Bai Liu let out a breath as he slightly covered his bleeding chest, glanced up at Mu Sicheng, who was still barely struggling, and spat out a few words to Liu Huai as if displeased, "Not quite enough, keep stabbing."

Liu Huai gripped the sleeve sword and stabbed into Bai Liu's chest once more, his whole body almost shaking with each thrust.

Bai Liu wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth unconcernedly, then glanced faintly at Liu Huai. "I promised him I would save him."

"It's my deal and my partnership with him, and it's my basic ethics as a Rover to keep the deal."

Burst last train

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has been attacked by Player Liu Huai's (Dark Sleeve Sword). Mental Value has been eroded by -35. Mental Value currently at 4. Warning! Berserk zone has been entered!]

[Player Name: Bai Liu (Berserk Attribute Bonus Panel)]

Strength: 56 → 655
Agility: 249 → 1133
Attack: 37 → 1555
Resistance: 36 → 1776
Combined Defence Attack Power increased. Total Play Panel Attribute Points exceeded 4000. Rated A+ Player. Player Bai Liu's rank increased from F to A+.

"It's okay." Bai Liu finally stopped Liu Huai's relentless assault.

Zhang Gui saw Bai Liu's attribute panel and quickly commented, "Your panel isn't enough to carry [Thief Brothers]. [Thief Brothers] is at least an A+ level monster. It takes a Mu Sicheng-type player, one who has raged to the A++ level, to carry it."

"I know," Bai Liu's attitude remained calm. "You're still here, aren't you? What's the hurry?"

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu manipulates player Zhang Gui to use his personal skill (Puppet Enhancement) on himself.]

[System warning: Player Bai Liu's spirit value is not enough to drop by 50 points! Whether to forcibly strengthen the puppet will cause player Bai Liu's spirit value to collapse!]

[System Warning: Is player Bai Liu forcing the use of his personal skill (Reinforcing Golem)?]

Bai Liu: [Use] without hesitation.

"You're crazy, Bai Liu!!!" Zhang Gui screamed as he was forced to move his fingers to manipulate Bai Liu. Transparent puppet strands invaded the back of Bai Liu's head, piercing the large hole in his occipital bone like a syringe. The rest of the puppet strands twitched his joints, burrowing into Bai Liu's bones in an extremely bloody and painful process. Soon, the pain numbed as his spirit level dropped.

Zhang Gui shouted, frantically tugging at the puppet silk in his hand to stop Bai Liu, the psychopath: "Bai Liu! You only have 4 spirit points! You can't use this [Puppet Enhancement] skill! Forcing a human skill to lower your spirit level won't clear it, but it will collapse your spirit level! You'll go crazy!!!"

Spiritual Avalanche is a state where none of the non-monster alienations in the game lower the spiritual value. It's impossible to clear a player's spirit value to zero.

For example, Zhang Gui can't control a player in a berserker state, and Liu Huai's [Dark Sleeve Sword] attack only briefly reduces mental value. These skills and props can't clear a player's mental value.

Instead, a very strange state occurs. Under constant attack from these [personal skills] and [props], the mental value eventually approaches zero. This state is known as [infinitesimal mental value] or [mental value collapse].

It's said that when a player's mental value reaches this point, their mind becomes trapped between [monster] and [normal human], their brain thinking like a monster but with the shell of a human.

Why describe the collapse of spiritual values as "allegedly"?

Because whether a player goes insane and kills everyone in the game or exits the game and kills themselves, any player who has touched [Mental Break] state has gone mad, one by one.

Moreover, most of these players with [Spiritual Value Avalanche] are boosted with berserk attributes and will kill all players in the game. These players are a nightmare for everyone in the entire copy.

"Bai Liu!!!" Zhang Gui tried desperately to control his hands and stop reinforcing Bai Liu, "Don't go crazy! This state is more dangerous than the last time! Your spirit value is theoretically zero, but it's not! You'll fall into subconscious chaos! You'll go insane, Bai Liu!!!"

Zhang Gui gritted his teeth and pulled at the puppet silk: "Mu Sicheng's death means nothing to you! You could have made it through! You're a smart guy, right? But if your spirit collapses and you go mad, with your high attribute value, we'll all die by your hand! And you can't save Mu Sicheng! You'll only attack him!"

The door closed, and Mu Sicheng was slowly dragged out of the car, his fingers curling and tugging at the door frame as if struggling to

survive.

Mu Sicheng’s eyelids fluttered open, and he looked at Bai Liu, his lips moving as if calling his name with great reluctance.

"I know." Bai Liu had already been warned by Mu Sicheng and Du Sanying about mental value collapse, but his eyes were eerily calm. His tone held a faint, indifferent smirk. "But I don’t like breaking deals."

"Zhang Gui, or master," Bai Liu suddenly turned to Zhang Gui with a smile. "If I go mad, that will be the time to test you. I’ll still be your puppet, and you must control me and make me do what I have to do."

"Damn you!!! Bai Liu!!!" Zhang Gui’s face turned blue with the effort as his hands spasmed, trying to control the puppet silk. "No!!! I can’t do it!!!"

"You can do it." Bai Liu smiled idly, turning his head and waving his hand. "I trust you, Great Puppeteer."

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has entered the (Reinforced Puppet) state, but his spirit value has not dropped enough.]

[System Alert: Claim successful. Player Bai Liu's mental value dropped from 4 → 3 → 2 → 0.000000000... 1.]

Zhang Gui screamed hysterically, "Stop it, Bai Liu!!!"

[System warning (for all players): Player Bai Liu’s spirit level has entered a collapse state. Extremely high-risk creature! All players are advised to flee!]

Bai Liu's eyes gradually lost focus, his breathing halted. The world around him stretched and twisted into a disordered blur, as if he were entering another plane.

He was pulled into the carriage for a split second by a tug at his chest. The thief's brother stepped on his chest and swung a fiery fist. The punch landed with a thud, and Bai Liu turned his head to see his brain, bones, and blood crumbling under the impact. The pain was real, vivid, and all-consuming.

A second later, Bai Liu was dragged into a new scene, standing in the carriage that started it all. A steady stream of burst passengers entered, and Mu Sicheng was grimly talking about a chase. Seconds

later, Mu Sicheng walked away indifferently, the mermaid's amulet in hand. Bai Liu was trapped, flames engulfing him as a passenger grabbed his limbs, burning him alive into a charred corpse, pain coursing through him.

Bai Liu was in Du Sanying's car, on his knees gasping for breath. Du Sanying said, "I can't, Bai Liu. I can't be with you." Locked in hatred and depleted of strength, Bai Liu was left to fall to the ground, devoured by a group of forlorn passengers.

He saw Mu Sicheng use the mermaid's amulet and become a puppet in Zhang Gui's hands, slowly losing his mind, eventually abandoned to die alone in some copy.

The endless visions of death overwhelmed him, each possibility of his death playing out as if they were real. His subconscious fears and hallucinations consumed him, and even Bai Liu couldn't stop them.

And so, he repeated these visions a thousand times.

"It's boring to assume something that didn't happen in something that already has," Bai Liu muttered, pinned to the ground by Mu Sicheng. He had forgotten which death node this was from. His throat had been brutally sliced open by Mu Sicheng's claws, blood spilling down his windpipe as he spoke, choking and coughing, laughing weakly. "But I'm bored thinking about the ways you betrayed me, Mu Sicheng. There are so many ways, maybe eight hundred."

Burned, throat slit, bitten, strangled…

Mu Sicheng looked strangely at Bai Liu, who was dying yet still laughing.

Bai Liu's face was covered in his own blood. His eyes slowly closed as death approached. His voice had a distinctive airy tone as his windpipe was sliced open.

"Of all the possibilities, you chose the one that didn't betray me," Bai Liu's words trailed off as he closed his eyes. "Then I would have chosen that one too, Mu Sicheng. It was a fair trade."

[Bai Liu, if I was really dragged away by the monster, would you really risk your life to save me?]

[Don't worry, if you don't use the mermaid amulet, I'm a man of my word and will remember to save you even when I'm mad, Mu Sicheng]

After listening to Bai Liu's words, Mu Sicheng lowered his eyes and snorted, saying, "I don't believe you, Bai Liu.

Burst last train

All illusions shattered before Bai Liu like broken lenses, and Bai Liu, who had died in a strange way, crumbled into ashes, much like a burning photograph caught in an illusion.

Bai Liu slowly opened his unfocused eyes.

Everyone held their breath, instinctively stepping back. Du Sanying huddled in the corner, staring at Bai Liu, whose eyes were vacant. He swallowed hard, taking another cautious step away.

A strange premonition swept over Du Sanying, his skin prickling as if something dangerous was near. Yet, there was an undeniable rush of excitement in his chest.

"What now...?" Du Sanying muttered. "Is this just another monster on our side, or...?"

Mu Sicheng's blackened paws scraped lightly against the bars, as if trying to hold himself back from being dragged out. The door slowly closed, revealing only his vacant, snow-white eyes, resigned to his fate.

Then Bai Liu moved.

He moved with incredible speed, stomping across the carriage floor. The steel walls of the carriage dented beneath his footsteps, and in the blink of an eye, he appeared above the door from which Mu Sicheng was being dragged away. Bai Liu’s calm demeanor remained as he stepped forcefully between the doors, just before Mu Sicheng's hand was about to be pulled out completely. With a sudden burst of strength, Bai Liu planted both feet on either side of the doorframe and held it open.

Bai Liu exhaled sharply as he gripped the door with both hands, pulling it outward with such force that his shoulder blades tensed under his shirt. The glass of the door shattered into a million pieces with a loud "clack."

With his bare hands, Bai Liu twisted the heavy door open in a seemingly impossible display of strength.

"Shit..." Du Sanying muttered, dumbfounded. "Bai Liu has evolved into King Kong Barbie!!!"

The two figures, one dragging Mu Sicheng out of the door and the other, the thief's brother, froze at the sight. Bai Liu's raw strength in pulling the door open was a visible threat. The thief's brother growled viciously, raising his flaming fist and swinging it down at Bai Liu.

Bai Liu moved too fast to be seen clearly, dodging to the side before dropping low to grab Mu Sicheng and pull him in. He kicked the thief's brother aside, throwing him off-balance.

Enraged, the thief's brother slammed his fist into the ground, his entire body alight with fire. The carriage, which had begun to move, was once again engulfed in flames, locked in place by the thief's brute strength.

Zhang Gui looked completely lost, his voice unsure as he shouted, "Bai Liu? Are you crazy?"

Bai Liu glanced back at him, answering in a voice that could not be misunderstood. "Don't control me. I'm awake. Let go of the puppet strings and grab Mu Sicheng."

Bai Liu attempted to throw Mu Sicheng into another carriage, but Zhang Gui stepped in front, blocking him. The thief's brother, now furious with Bai Liu, abandoned his pursuit of him and returned to attacking Mu Sicheng. His fists, aflame, aimed for the unconscious Mu Sicheng, who had been thrown into the air by Bai Liu.

As Bai Liu reacted, the thief's brother threw a vicious punch at Mu Sicheng, blood splattering from Bai Liu's mouth as it dripped onto Mu Sicheng's pale face.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu's life reduced to 6!]

"Tch." Bai Liu wiped the blood from his mouth and quickly rolled away from another attack. Gasping for breath, he managed to smile faintly, glancing at Mu Sicheng, who lay limp and motionless behind him. "Well done. No wonder the thief's brother had to drag you away. You stole his broken lenses, and now you've got the hate value locked on you."

In Mu Sicheng's clenched right hand was a broken lens the size of a heart. Despite being unconscious for so long, he had still held on to it without the thief's brother taking it.

This, too, was part of Bai Liu's plan to steal the broken lenses, knowing Mu Sicheng would hold onto them.

After struggling with the thief's brother for a while, as he prepared to launch another fiery attack, Bai Liu barked a command to the stunned group: "Help me close the car door. Get the car out of the way!"

Only then did the others scramble to push the door back into place, barely managing to fend off one last punch from the weakened thief's brother, who had lost his heart-shattering lens. The battered train slowly pulled away, creaking and squeaking.

Everyone exhaled in relief.

Zhang Gui and his three companions leaned against the door, gazing in awe at Bai Liu, while Du Sanying sat on a chair, drenched in sweat, catching his breath.

He had bought two bottles of spirit bleach and two bottles of stamina restorer, drinking one of each for himself before giving the other two bottles to Mu Sicheng. Bai Liu had been rough in his handling of the bottles, nearly choking Mu Sicheng in the process, but he eventually woke up. Bai Liu sat next to him, handing him the rest. "Drink it yourself. By the way, these two bottles total 1700 points. I'll charge you a 10% commission for buying them for you. That's 1870 points. Thanks for your patronage."

After saying this, Bai Liu naturally extended his hand to Mu Sicheng, signaling for payment.

Mu Sicheng, still reeling from the near-death experience, stared blankly, then transferred the 1870 points, silently wiping the blood from his face—the blood Bai Liu had spat after being punched to protect him.

Bai Liu said nothing about taking the punch for him, but Mu Sicheng, despite his usual indifference, noticed Bai Liu had held himself in front of him to take the blow. Bai Liu, the heartless man, had done something good without taking credit for it... A strange feeling stirred in Mu Sicheng.

He looked away, pretending to casually hand Bai Liu the broken lens he had been holding. "Here. Take it."

Bai Liu accepted it without hesitation, without asking why Mu Sicheng gave it to him. Everything felt so natural.

Mu Sicheng, unable to hold back, asked, "Bai Liu, back there... you really came to my rescue? I thought you didn't care about me. I didn't

think you had any conscience left."

"It's not about conscience," Bai Liu replied casually, wiping blood from his mouth as if it meant nothing. "If we were just using each other, I'd let you die and save myself the trouble. But we're in a partnership. We agreed that if I said I wouldn't let you die, I wouldn't. It's a deal."

Mu Sicheng snorted faintly. "A deal? What kind of deal?"

"A one-point deal," Bai Liu said, lifting his spirit bleach and sipping it. "You gave me one point when we struck the deal. Don't you remember?"

Mu Sicheng fell silent, bowing his head as if recalling something—perhaps everything, perhaps nothing at all.

His dark red eyes flickered, and then, unexpectedly, he laughed softly. "It really was a bargain for one point... Bai Liu, you're a strange person."

"You're not the first person to say that about me," Bai Liu said, tilting his head and taking a swig of spirit bleach. "I don't think you'll be the last either."

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu uses Spirit Bleach to restore his spirit to 60.]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu obtained the large broken lenses (1 large lens = 20 small pieces) carried by the Thief Brothers and the broken lenses in Zhang Gui's hand, totaling 100 pieces. The progress of the collection task has reached 1/4.]

[System Alert: Collecting Broken Lenses (100/400)]

[Explosive Last Train Monster Book Refresh - Brotherhood of Thieves (2/3)]

[Monster Name: Thief Brothers (Brother)]

[Characteristics: Extremely strong, tall, and fast. Can unleash a variety of attacks in under a minute (1400 points speed, fire bonus). Likes to use fists when angry; extremely powerful.]

[Weakness: Heartbreak Lens (1/3)]

[Attack: Rage Frenzy Hammer, Flaming Blast (The Thief Brother is significantly weakened after losing his heart-shattering lens, reducing

the power and speed of his attacks, increasing player survival during confrontations.)]

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu has only 6 points of life left! He is on the verge of death! Please protect yourself!]

Bai Liu closed his eyes and leaned back against the carriage. After a long exhale, he allowed himself a small, rare smile—something akin to triumph. "Everyone survived. Seven stations to go."

Mu Sicheng was quiet for a moment before he smiled back. "Yeah, we all survived... thanks to your madman plan."

Yes, that's right. From the start, Bai Liu's unthinkable plan was always:

—He wanted everyone to live.

Bai Liu, the psychopath, wanted to control everyone and ensure their survival.

It was the most cost-effective strategy in this life-draining game.

Bai Liu wouldn't waste anyone's life value. This extreme greed made Mu Sicheng believe in him and in the fact that Bai Liu wouldn't let him die so easily.

Five minutes ago.

After Bai Liu had just said he was going to work with the Puppeteer, Mu Sicheng became furious. "Who the hell are you going to work with? The Puppeteer?!"

"We have to work together," Bai Liu replied calmly. "Or rather, not cooperate. I must control everyone to ensure maximum efficiency in mobilizing life values."

"Because our total lifesteal is so low, I only have 21, you only have 70 or so, Du Sanying is full, but even then, we only have a little over 100 lifesteal on our side. After this attack, minus the 20 lifesteal points needed to exchange the shard, and the 10 lifesteal points needed to try it out, the Puppeteer's lifesteal tops out at 370. Combined, we only have over 600 life points, which is too low in a game that requires 400 life points to pass."

"It's the equivalent of one of us having died invisibly," Bai Liu said

calmly. "We've killed a player without even knowing it."

Mu Sicheng couldn't help but spit out, "You lost most of the life points, didn't you! You've lost over seventy alone!"

"Oh, yeah?" Bai Liu quickly pretended not to hear anything, changing the subject. "And if the total shards are 400 and the collection estimate is now 40, that leaves 360 life points for us to throw away."

Bai Liu's tone turned serious. "But there's another important point: we've already passed two stations, but our Monster Book illustration has only refreshed one page."

Bai Liu opened his system's Monster Book panel and gestured to it. "The Monster Book for Burst Last Train has three pages, meaning there are at least two more monsters we haven't encountered yet."

Mu Sicheng's face sank. "If we count the game progress, we're currently past twenty percent. Usually, new monsters appear around this time."

Bai Liu nodded in agreement. "By the general nature of the game, I think the monsters that appear now will be harder to deal with than the [Burst Passenger]."

"It's bound to be harder for us to get the shattered lenses from these new monsters. With the high probability that we'll lose 360 life points, we'll also have to battle two stronger, unknown monsters. With our current 600 life points minus 360, even if all the deaths are on the Puppeteer's side, that leaves us with only two and a half people."

Bai Liu spread his hands. "Do you think we have a better chance of surviving, or a better chance of total annihilation?"

Mu Sicheng and Du Sanying both gave a united thump.

Mu Sicheng looked first at Bai Liu. "So what do you mean?"

Bai Liu was calm. "I mean to keep everyone alive and strengthen the war effort first."

Du Sanying looked confused. "But didn't you say before that it was impossible for everyone to survive?"

Bai Liu answered, "I was speaking from Zhang Gui's point of view earlier. If he controlled the situation, it would indeed be impossible

for everyone to survive. We need their strength to fight the monsters and protect us, so we need them to survive. But they don't need our strength to fight the monsters. We are of limited value to him. If the new monsters are difficult to handle, Zhang Gui could easily throw us out just to get through."

Du Sanying was even more confused. "Then why are we working with the Puppeteer? Isn't that giving him control over us?"

Bai Liu's mouth curved into a slight smile. "Yes, just to make him think he has control over all of us."

Mu Sicheng and Du Sanying both stared in unison.

"If I were Zhang Gui," Bai Liu continued, "I wouldn't confront us head-on, because that would increase the life loss on their side. To reduce the life loss, it would be better to scatter us one by one and take us out individually. For me, who is at a disadvantage for profit, he would bait and cut off my back path, which is obviously you, Mu Sicheng, a player with a strong panel."

"For players with strong panel attributes like you, Mu Sicheng, if I were Zhang Gui, I'd probably play dirty and not confront them directly."

Mu Sicheng's mouth twitched when he heard Bai Liu's flat tone about playing dirty with him.

Mu Sicheng held his chest and raised an eyebrow. "So you're going to ask Zhang Gui for cooperation? How are you going to keep everyone alive after working with him when he's likely to sacrifice us once he takes control?"

"He controls everyone, and I control him through [cooperation]," Bai Liu said, raising his eyes to look directly at Mu Sicheng. "It's that simple."

Mu Sicheng sneered. "How do you control him? What are you going to do to get him to [cooperate] with you?"

Bai Liu's eyes locked onto Mu Sicheng's with intensity. "By you, Mu Sicheng. You will be doing something very risky, with a high probability of death, but I can use this to control Zhang Gui."

Mu Sicheng was stunned.

"But even if you only have a little life left in you, I will still keep you alive," Bai Liu said, his gaze calm yet powerful. "Mu Sicheng, you are one of my most valuable cards, and I promise that as long as you stay within my plan, no matter what happens, I will make sure you survive."

The plan Bai Liu proposed was fraught with uncertainty.

Mu Sicheng didn't even know what Bai Liu's personal skill was, nor did he know if the [Cooperation] skill Bai Liu supposedly had could be stronger than the Puppet Master's [Puppet Silk] judgment, which allowed him to control his opponent.

But in that moment, Mu Sicheng was so intensely stared at by Bai Liu that it was as though he was being uncontrollably persuaded to agree to Bai Liu's crazy, gambling plan.

Mu Sicheng looked at Bai Liu's unwavering reflection in his eyes, remembering Bai Liu's actions—how he'd taken all the hits to draw the monster's hate value, protecting him in the process.

This guy was a madman, never backing down or running away from anything. There were times when Bai Liu had been on the verge of falling off the train, yet never took his eyes off Mu Sicheng. As Bai Liu had said, "I wouldn't hesitate to take every hit to ensure your survival."

Liu Huai, back in the day, had also played such a role, drawing hate for Mu Sicheng.

Liu Huai was a good fit for this job, but Mu Sicheng felt that if Liu Huai had been with him today, he might have failed. He wouldn't have come to his rescue without hesitation, like Bai Liu, the madman.

Bai Liu told Mu Sicheng the key to the plan—the mermaid amulet—and its function. He warned Mu Sicheng that once he used the prop, Bai Liu would become a puppet of [Zhang Gui], and the plan would fail.

Mu Sicheng was silent for a long time before replying, "You just told me that? You're not afraid I'll betray you and actually use it?"

Bai Liu's eyes were dark as he looked at Mu Sicheng quietly. When he raised his head slightly to look at him like this, it felt as though Mu Sicheng was being reflected in Bai Liu's eyes like a mirror, giving the illusion that Bai Liu, a man with an evil heart, was trusting him

completely.

Bai Liu asked softly, "Do you know how to use it?"

Mu Sicheng closed his eyes slightly. After a long pause, he replied, "Bai Liu, I'm not sure I could use the mermaid's amulet with a spirit value of less than 10. The human desire to survive can make people do strange things, including breaking cooperation and betraying others."

Bai Liu didn't urge him further but quietly waited for Mu Sicheng's answer, as the train moved in the wind.

Mu Sicheng took a deep breath. "But if I really don't use the prop, the mermaid's amulet, then it means I've maintained my sanity with less than 10 mental value, as you, the madman, requested."

"If you don't use [the mermaid's amulet], Mu Sicheng," Bai Liu said, "then as long as I live, I will save you."

Small TV wall in the central hall.

Except for Bai Liu, who had the misfortune of falling into the Graveyard Bounce Zone, almost all the players on the Last Train to Burst made it to the Central Lobby promotion. Even Li Gou got a Central Lobby Edge promotion, and Zhang Gui, Du Sanying, and Mu Sicheng were already hanging out in the recommended spots.

Zhang Gui's promotion was the best. He was in the [Central Hall Multiplayer Area Hot Promotion], but when Zhang Gui took control of Bai Liu, his small TV point recommendation charge exploded, smoothly pushing him into the [Central Hall Core Promotion].

But Mu Sicheng and Du Sanying didn't fare as well. After they were under Bai Liu's control, viewers found it less enjoyable to watch and started to slowly drift toward Bai Liu's mini-TV, leading to a slight dip in their promotion.

Zhang Gui was the first player to break into the [Core Promotion] of Burst Last Train by controlling Bai Liu and successfully causing a wave of bounties.

Zhang Gui's small TV audience was thrilled:

“Zhang Gui can do it this time! Not bad for a player with 93 IQ points! He’s successfully controlling the game!”

“Look at this! Zhang Gui controls Bai Liu, and Bai Liu controls Mu Sicheng and Du Sanying. Amazing! Does this mean that everyone is under Zhang Gui's control now?”

“Tears for Little Zhang, I’ve waited so long for this day! You’ve been chasing God Mu for so long, and today, you finally took him down with someone else’s help!”

“I was expecting Bai Liu to interfere, but it turns out Bai Liu can't match Zhang Gui. The difference in strength is just too great!”

The viewers of Zhang Gui’s TV show were talking about it with great interest. But suddenly, one viewer seemed to notice something was off: “Wait, something’s wrong. Zhang Gui is doing so well, so the viewers of Du Sanying and Mu Sicheng’s TV shows should be flowing over, right? Why are they all going to Bai Liu’s TV?”

Burst last train

The audience of several players in a multiplayer game is fluid and generally shifts toward whoever is doing best.

It's Zhang Gui who's doing the best, with a high number of viewers rewarding and liking him as if they were on the verge of victory.

But strangely enough, Zhang Gui's audience, which had just made it to the [core multiplayer promotion], hadn't increased. Mu Sicheng and Du Sanying were losing viewers, yet all the traffic was frantically running to Bai Liu's [graveyard bounce area], not coming to see Zhang Gui's little TV.

Bai Liu, who had just been controlled by Zhang Gui, is the worst player, so he shouldn't be able to attract viewers. He should be losing them!

Some members of the audience could not contain their curiosity and whispered in discussion:

"What is Bai Liu up to? Does he have a plan? No way! He's tied up in puppet wire! There's no way he's going to get out of this!"

"… I think so. Why don't we just go and have a look and come back?"

"You guys go over and watch. I don't want to go away. Zhang Gui is brilliant here. I'll wait for you to come back and tell us what Bai Liu is doing."

"Well, we'll go and watch it, and come back to tell you about it. Don't worry. Bai Liu is probably just pulling off some eye-catching, death-defying stunt! I'll go and watch and come back and tell you all about it as a joke!"

Zhang Gui's small audience went to see Bai Liu's antics.

Then the group who said they would come back to tell a joke about Bai Liu never returned.

The rest of the audience scratched their heads even more:

"Shit, Bai Liu, there's not really some backstabbing going on, is there?! It can't be! I haven't heard of a way to disarm the puppet silk!"

"… Du Sanying and Mu Sicheng's audience are flocking to Bai Liu like crazy. Did they discuss some plan? What the hell is going on aaaahhhhh!"

"I can't help it, I'm going over to see it!"

"I'm curious too, but damn it! I'm a huge fan of Zhang Gui… Forget it, I'll just go have a look! I'll be right back here at Zhang Gui!"

In this way, the audience of all the players on the "Last Train to Burst" started to gather, little by little, flowing from the other players' TVs to Bai Liu's. The originally cold and lonely "Graveyard Bounce" area began to get crowded.

Because the graveyard area wasn't very big, this place, which had never been crowded, was now packed due to the traffic Bai Liu had drawn in.

Wang Shun glanced at the new audience crowding in behind him, then turned his attention to Bai Liu on the small TV, his expression mixed with an unprecedented complexity. "… Actually sucked traffic from the other three big players in reverse. Bai Liu…"

By the time the multiplayer game "The Last Train" started, almost all of Bai Liu's original cumulative audience had been siphoned away by the gods, leaving only a few people to watch Bai Liu.

But by this time, Bai Liu had actually sucked back all the lost viewers. Looking at the number of viewers, Bai Liu had drawn in a lot, and the viewers never left once they arrived.

It was the first time Wang Shun had seen someone suck traffic like this from the three big gods of mini-TV. It felt as though Bai Liu was pulling all the viewers of the game "Bursting Last Train" toward himself.

Most of the viewers here couldn't take their eyes off Bai Liu on the small TV, their eyes glued to the screen as if they were watching the climax of an exciting movie. No one could look away for a second. Only some of the viewers, who weren't so good at handling the tension, could look away and whisper nervously:

"Shit, shit, shit, I'm afraid to look at it! Bai Liu can't fool Zhang Gui! Oh my God, that's Zhang Gui! How dare he play Zhang Gui!"

"Steady! Don't panic! I feel Zhang Gui has taken the bait!"

By the time Mu Sicheng's arms were cut off and thrown over, Bai Liu's little TV was wailing, and many people covered their eyes.

"Oh my God, oh my God! God Mu, what a mess!!! Even if I knew it was part of the plan, I couldn't stand it... Bai Liu hit him so hard! He was laughing when he pushed God Mu over!"

"I have a feeling God Mu might be cool this time… I don't think a profit-minded person like Bai Liu will save him."

"Me too..."

"Shit!!! Mu Sicheng, are you stupid!!! How could Bai Liu have saved you?! I'm so mad at you as a fan! You're just giving it away for nothing!!!"

"I think that although Bai Liu says he wants to save everyone, I don't think it's likely."

"In the end, Du Sanying and Bai Liu are probably the only two who will survive. The others will probably be thrown out by Bai Liu and die carrying the monster."

"Mu Sicheng is so pathetic… Totally fooled by Bai Liu…"

After Bai Liu had finally killed Zhang Gui and used his Psycho Break skill to snatch the unconscious Mu Sicheng from the monster's grasp within ten seconds of the car starting, the audience was left speechless for a long time as they watched Bai Liu's group resting in the wrecked carriage.

In a matter of seconds, he turned the tables, manipulated the field, fought off monsters, took people from them, and most importantly—just as Bai Liu had planned—no one died in either Zhang Gui's or his side's camp.

It was a long time before a member of the audience spoke up, still in an incredulous trance.

"Surprisingly, Bai Liu really let the whole crew survive…"

"I was dumbfounded... I thought Mu Sicheng was going to die when he was dragged out, but Bai Liu was so strong that he dragged him in and gave him a punch..."

"Damn, I got tears in my eyes when Bai Liu saved Mu Sicheng. I

believe in love again, no more partnership!!!"

"Too strong, Bai Liu. Too strong, dammit! Why can I only give one like!!!"

"I'm so excited I want to rip my clothes off! Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng are so handsome! I'm so impressed by the brotherly love they have for each other!"

"Ooooooo I feel so sweet! When will this sweet brotherhood get my turn ooooooooo Bai Liu! Will you work with me too!!!"

"Bai Liu, you're a god! God!!!"

"Bai Liu, God forever!!!"

Wang Shun slowly, slowly took off his glasses, which had a drop of sweat on them, wiped them clean, then put them back on to look at the small TV screen. His eyes closed, resting, his face covered in blood and black stains. Bai Liu's expression was a smile amidst the screams of ecstasy in the background for him.

[41776 new people liked Bai Liu's TV, 40107 new people favorited Bai Liu's TV, 10401 people charged Bai Liu, 15442 charge points.]

[60,004 new people are watching Bai Liu's TV, the player got over 40,000 likes in one minute. Congratulations to Bai Liu for achieving the achievement (10,000 people are bouncing wildly on your grave).]

[Yo~ your grave 10,000 people gathered~ Yo~ coffin board can't hold down the powerful you~ Yo~ break out of the ground, a flight to the sky, you are bull~ Yo~]

[Congratulations to player Bai Liu for reaching the required likes collection charging data to leave the (Graveyard Bounce Zone), unlocking the promotion bit program, player Bai Liu small TV data into re-accounting, reallocation of promotion bit...]

[The system is very disappointed with player Zhang Gui because his stats have dropped so much and has decided to switch the promotion positions of player Zhang Gui and player Bai Liu.]

[Congratulations to player Bai Liu for getting the promotion spot, entering the central screen core home page promotion spot, the number of views is rising rapidly...]

[Player Zhang Gui enters (Graveyard Bounce Zone).]

Upon hearing this system notification, the cheering Bai Liu crowd paused for a second or two before erupting into an even louder cheer as the excited crowd began to scream in unison:

“Bai Liu, Punch!!! Core promotion!”

Bai Liu rested for a while before opening his eyes.

Mu Sicheng was wrapping some protective bandages around his arms and legs. These bandages reduce speed but increase defense, with a restorative effect to stop bleeding, a common item in the game.

When Mu Sicheng saw that Bai Liu had woken up, he subconsciously handed over a roll of bandages, which Bai Liu took naturally, regardless of what it was. He wrapped it around himself, showing no intention of giving Mu Sicheng any money, feeling fully justified in whoring himself out.

Mu Sicheng was speechless. "Did I say free for you?"

"I assumed you gave it to me for free," Bai Liu shamelessly responded. "Of course, you can take it back, but I only have 6 life points now, and you could kill me with one punch."

Bai Liu opened his bandaged hands and looked at Mu Sicheng innocently, as if to say, "If you're not afraid of killing me, you can come and rob me."

Mu Sicheng sighed in frustration, muttering, "..." He looked away from Bai Liu, who only had 6 life points. Seeing that Bai Liu's hands and feet were still bleeding, he subconsciously handed him another bandage.

But Bai Liu, with his usual entitlement, took the bandage without a hint of payment. He charged Mu Sicheng a handling fee for the things he had just given him. Mu Sicheng had already paid Bai Liu 1870 points for stamina supplements and mental bleach, and Bai Liu had taken 170 of those as a handling fee.

Bai Liu took the items without any sense of guilt.

Mu Sicheng didn’t necessarily expect Bai Liu to pay, but he was

irritated by the way Bai Liu seemed so pleased with taking advantage.

There was no point in getting upset. He couldn't very well take advantage of a fragile Bai Liu, who only had 6 life points.

The others in the carriage were also bandaging up. The thief's brother's onslaught had left everyone with some damage, though Du Sanying was still fine. He sat in the corner, slightly embarrassed to watch the others bandage up when Bai Liu suddenly called to him, "Du Sanying."

Du Sanying turned his head reflexively and saw a large mirror diamond tossed idly by Bai Liu, landing in his arms.

Du Sanying held the broken lens that had taken them so long to collect. "Bai Liu, what are you giving me?"

"You're 100% lucky," Bai Liu said casually. "You won't get hurt or drop items easily, so it's safest to leave it with you. If I die, it wouldn't be a good deal if this item exploded and got picked up by monsters."

Bai Liu said it casually, but both Mu Sicheng and Du Sanying's expressions changed slightly when they heard it.

Du Sanying nervously put away the broken lens, stammering, "You're not going to die, are you, Bai Liu? You must have counted your life expectancy and stepped over the line to pass! Just like last time."

Mu Sicheng also gave Bai Liu a sullen look.

Bai Liu answered honestly, "I did count my lives, but there are always more surprises than plans, aren't there?"

"For example, the second monster in this game is a lot tougher than I predicted, and there's still a monster that hasn't even appeared yet, so it's really hard to say what will happen." Bai Liu spoke in a flat tone, as though discussing his own death wasn't worth much thought. "The probability of me dying isn't small, so Du Sanying, it's safest to keep these broken lenses with you. Even if I die, they won't go to waste. Do you understand?"

As he finished, another mouthful of blood choked and coughed out from the corner of his mouth, bits of internal organs mixed in. Bai Liu wiped it away with his palm, unconcerned.

The carriage fell silent as everyone looked at the bloody foam on Bai

Liu's palm.

The impact of having only 6 life points on a player's body was severe. It was rare for someone in such a state to stay awake like Bai Liu, almost as fragile as a terminally ill person. It was incredibly normal for him to die in this condition.

Du Sanying watched Bai Liu, who had saved all of their lives, with a mixture of resignation and a touch of emotion, but he himself...

"Yes!" Du Sanying nodded vigorously, his voice full of emotion. "I'll take good care of it! I'll give it to you when the game is over! Don't worry, I won't give it to anyone but you!"

Du Sanying said this while also casting a wary glance at Zhang Gui, who was sitting next to him silently, as if to ensure this man wouldn't steal his broken lens.

Bai Liu looked at Du Sanying curiously. He was suddenly so highly motivated.

He placed the broken lens with Du Sanying because it was obvious that the monster would target whoever had the lens. Mu Sicheng had been attacked severely because of this.

Du Sanying had the highest life points and the least damage among them, and his luck was still 100%. So, putting the broken lens on him to attract the monster's attacks would ensure the rest of them were safe.

Zhang Gui, watching Du Sanying, sneered with a look of disbelief but didn't speak.

Anyway, now that he was under Bai Liu's control, he didn't have to think about anything else until Bai Liu died. The shattered lens was the safest thing to give Du Sanying, the lucky fool.

The only thing Zhang Gui hadn't figured out was why Mu Sicheng and Du Sanying, the two rising stars of the ranking, seemed to have been completely bewitched and were so obedient to Bai Liu. This was the first time he'd ever seen someone so thoroughly controlled and still counting his money for a game.

But what surprised him even more was that Bai Liu seemed to want to save his "puppet," even if it meant his own death.

Zhang Gui's gaze lingered on Bai Liu's pale face. Bai Liu seemed to notice his stare and gave him a polite nod, as if not seeing him as an enemy, even though they had been at odds just moments ago.

Shit, maybe I've been bewitched too, Zhang Gui thought as he averted his gaze. He didn't want Bai Liu to die either.

But Zhang Gui didn't want him to die out of Du Sanying's foolish touch; it was more practical. With Bai Liu in control, it was clear that this clever guy would regulate everyone's life points, minimizing the overall attrition.

This guy would make sure most players survived with minimal losses.

But if Bai Liu died, Zhang Gui wasn't confident he could control Du Sanying and Mu Sicheng as well as Bai Liu had. Without these two, and his three puppets, Zhang Gui wasn't sure they'd succeed.

This game was hard.

In simple terms, this high-difficulty game required seven players to work together, but no one except Bai Liu could do that.

This guy with only 6 life points was the key to the whole game.

Bai Liu glanced up at the countdown on the platform. "We're about to arrive at the station again. I'll make some general arrangements. Mu Sicheng and Liu Huai will work together to steal the broken lenses from the passengers. Mu Sicheng will be responsible for stealing the fragments, and Liu Huai will be responsible for attracting the monster's attention. My life is too dangerous, so I won't help attract the hate value. Is that okay with you two?"

Liu Huai and Mu Sicheng's faces turned strange as the once-feuding teammates were put together by Bai Liu in such a matter-of-fact way.

Liu Huai turned away from Mu Sicheng's face and murmured, a little sheepishly, "I'm fine with it."

Mu Sicheng remained expressionless and silent. He knew Bai Liu's plan was the best arrangement, but he couldn't help but feel some subconscious aversion to working with Liu Huai, which made him hesitant. Even a second of hesitation could cost him in this high-level game.

When Mu Sicheng and Bai Liu had worked together before, they didn't

fall apart because Bai Liu always covered his mistakes.

But Liu Huai was no Bai Liu. He didn't seem like the type to cover for Mu Sicheng.

Mu Sicheng wasn't one to let psychological factors get in the way, so he paused for a moment before being honest: "I'll do my best. I might have some subconscious rejection of working with Liu Huai, but I'll try to control it."

"No." Bai Liu interrupted him, looking directly into Mu Sicheng's eyes. "You're not working with Liu Huai. You're working with me. He's just a puppet I control through Zhang Gui. You're working with one of my puppets. Can I say that to remove your sense of psychological rejection?"

Mu Sicheng and Bai Liu locked eyes for a moment before he snorted, "That'll do."

"Okay." Bai Liu turned his attention to Du Sanying. "Du Sanying, later I'll need you to hang the broken lens outside and not store it in the system backpack. Is that okay?"

Du Sanying, a bit confused, nodded. "Yes, okay."

Bai Liu continued, "Li Gou and Fang Ke will work with Liu Huai and Mu Sicheng to clear some of the passengers who attack them, to reduce their stress and prevent injuries."

Li Gou and Fang Ke responded, "... good."

Bai Liu's gaze shifted to the last person. "Zhang Gui, your task is to protect me."

Du Sanying and the others were shocked. Mu Sicheng frowned deeply, clearly disapproving. "Bai Liu, Zhang Gui is very cunning. Even if you have him under control, you can't be 100% sure he won't break free to kill you. Not to mention, you only have 6 life points. It's too dangerous for you to stay with him..."

"It's because I only have 6 life points," Bai Liu interrupted him calmly. He didn't look at the others, instead focusing on Zhang Gui, his eyes filled with certainty. He changed his tone to a polite one, "Master, will you kill me?"

Bai Liu's lips curled into a sly smile, a dangerous gleam in his fragile

expression. “I don’t think you will, Master. You missed your only chance to kill me, so you can’t kill me anymore. There’s only one thing left for you to do...”

He whispered softly, “...that is to save me, Master.”

Bai Liu was right to call Zhang Gui his master. Bai Liu was still Zhang Gui’s puppet, but the way Bai Liu said it sent chills down Zhang Gui’s spine.

The title, so clearly subservient, was pronounced slowly and deliberately by Bai Liu’s pale lips. Yet, it felt more like Bai Liu was playing with him.

The only chance Zhang Gui had to kill Bai Liu had passed. He remembered it well.

Eight minutes earlier, when he had strangled Bai Liu and furiously threatened to kill him, Bai Liu had looked at him with the same expression, asking in the same calm voice, “Master, will you kill me?”

At that time, Zhang Gui hadn’t killed Bai Liu.

And now... he couldn’t.

Before the female voice of the underground announcement had finished, the door of the train, which had not yet stopped, was violently blown open by a fist tipped with fire. The burnt, blackened head of the thief’s brother entered, his hands pounding the rickety door. Though the creature couldn’t speak, everyone could feel his rage at having his broken lenses stolen.

“No way!!!” Du Sanying screamed, tugging at his hair as if it was the last straw. “Why are you doing this again, brother!!!”

“Du Sanying, I think you'd better run,” Bai Liu said kindly. “The thief’s brother has stolen the broken lens I placed on you. He’s coming after you now, and I haven’t arranged any protection for you, so you’re on your own.”

Du Sanying stood frozen for a couple of seconds before, with tears in his eyes, he took out his bumpy kart and sped away.

Du Sanying shouted abuse at Bai Liu while rubbing his elbows in frustration, “You did this on purpose, Bai Liu! You put the broken lens on me on purpose! I’m so screwed!!!”

“Yes,” Bai Liu admitted shamelessly. “I’m using you to draw the thief’s brother’s attention. You’ll hang his train to draw him away, then we’ll steal the other passengers’ broken lenses. Don’t forget to make sure you don’t run into us by mistake.”

“I’ll kill you, Bai Liu!!!!” Du Sanying’s features contorted with rage and frustration, his eyes rimmed with tears. “Wooooooooooooo, thanks for me trusting you so much, Bai Liu! You have no heart!!!”

Bai Liu casually waved his fist and cheered Du Sanying on, “Believe in yourself, Du Sanying. You’re the luckiest. You’ll make it.”

“I can’t—!!!” Du Sanying cried, barely holding back tears as he sped off.

The car door slowly opened, and the thief’s brother rushed in, swinging his massive, burning fist. He stopped in his tracks, his mouth opening in fury as he searched for the stolen broken lens.

Bai Liu noticed the blackened skull behind the thief’s brother, where a charred and shriveled brain flower inside seemed to move, suddenly opening an eye before quickly closing again.

Eyes in the brain flower… Bai Liu raised an eyebrow.

Burst last train

The thief's brother scanned the surroundings with his eyeless black eyes, suddenly lifting his head as if sensing the location of the broken lens. He immediately gave chase to Du Sanying, who had already fled.

The whole car rattled and bounced, as if it were about to fall apart under the running pace of the thief's brother.

Liu Huai let out a relieved sigh. He thought he'd have to fight again like before. He bitterly laughed at the thought. He didn't want to slash Mu Sicheng's hand for a third time, forcing him to go berserk. Mu Sicheng, the one being slashed, didn't seem to mind, but Liu Huai, the one doing the slashing, was starting to develop a psychological shadow.

Zhang Gui looked at Bai Liu with a knowing gaze. "Did you have Du Sanying hang the broken lenses outside to lure the thief's brother? You knew there would be one at this stop, so you had Du Sanying draw him away?"

"Exactly," Bai Liu nodded. "I realized at the last station that these monsters aren't new at each stop; they've been following from the previous one."

Zhang Gui asked, "How did you figure that out?"

Bai Liu lifted his eyes. "Because the number of these 'bursting' passengers has been increasing at every station, and we've already attacked some of them."

Zhang Gui paused, realizing that the influx of passengers was indeed larger than at the previous station. The growing number of monsters made it more difficult for the players to steal the broken lenses and escape. It made sense that Bai Liu needed Du Sanying to lure the thief's brother away; otherwise, they wouldn't have been able to handle both the influx of monsters and the threat of the thief's brother.

Zhang Gui's face darkened. No wonder all the previous players had been wiped out. This game was truly insidious. There were still seven stations left, and seven players. If the pattern continued, one player would die at each station, and the final station would mark the end...

But under Bai Liu's command, it was surprising to see that by the

fourth station, not a single player had died. Mu Sicheng had been on the verge of falling into danger at the last station but was saved in time. And Du Sanying at this station...

Tsk.

Zhang Gui glanced at Bai Liu, a man who really knew how to use his head and his people.

Du Sanying, who couldn't seem to do anything right but had a low chance of dying and losing his stuff, was the perfect candidate to hang onto the thief's brother. But...

"Aren't you worried about Du Sanying refusing to lure the thief's brother and putting the broken lenses in his system backpack?" Zhang Gui narrowed his eyes. "It's dangerous. How can you be sure he won't run away? If he does, and the thief's brother turns back to attack us, we'll all be in danger."

Bai Liu responded, "He and I have a cooperative relationship."

Zhang Gui understood, though he was slightly shocked. "Du Sanying has a 100% luck value. How is he under your control?"

He'd tried to control Du Sanying countless times, but his puppet strings couldn't even get close. They were somehow always interrupted!

Du Sanying also had a famous item, [Put Control Coat], which prevented any control skills from working on him. That was one of the reasons Zhang Gui had given up trying to control him.

Bai Liu shrugged and smiled. "Maybe for someone like Du Sanying, being under my control is just a stroke of good fortune?"

Zhang Gui looked at Du Sanying, who was being whisked away by the thief's brother, crying and hopping around. "...Fine, I'll call it Du Sanying's little luck."

The overall process of collecting the lenses went smoothly, with the exception of Du Sanying's occasional expletive. The rest of the group managed to find all 40 pieces with ease. However, Liu Huai and Mu Sicheng, who were responsible for finding the pieces, each lost 20 life points because they couldn't avoid the flame damage from the passengers.

"Using bandages and other defensive items didn't reduce the flame damage," Mu Sicheng muttered. His clothes were burnt, revealing his slightly stained pecs and abs. His face was black from wiping sweat with his hands, making him look like a coal miner.

Mu Sicheng gasped and sat on the ground, lifting his bandaged hand to wipe his cheek before resting his wrists on his knees. He looked up at Bai Liu, his eyes tired. "I've only got 40 life left. I can last maybe two more stops."

Liu Huai wiped sweat from his chin with the back of his hand and collapsed to the ground, panting a little. "I've got 70 life left. I can still last through three stations."

Bai Liu thought for a moment. "Let's all reveal our remaining life value. I have 6."

"65," said Li Gou.

"80," Fang Ke added.

"85," Zhang Gui said.

Du Sanying, who had been chased to the ground, was eerily silent for a long time before swallowing. "100."

Even Bai Liu was speechless at this point.

Mu Sicheng and Du Sanying exchanged a glance. "You were chased that badly, and you didn't lose a single life point? The thief's brother has a movement speed of 1400, and you never got caught?"

Du Sanying scratched his face and side-eyed himself. "A few times, I was almost caught... but he tripped over the train seats many times."

Zhang Gui was completely speechless. While it wasn't the first time he'd seen Du Sanying's luck in action, this was outrageous!

Zhang Gui gritted his teeth. "How many times did he trip and fall to not catch you once?!"

"Well... just a few hundred times," Du Sanying replied weakly, staring off into the distance.

Bai Liu, Zhang Gui, and Mu Sicheng were all silent.

Hundreds of times... has the thief's brother ever stood up in front of

you, Du Sanying?

At the time of the train's movement at the next platform stop, Bai Liu once again deployed the battlefield.

He tilted his head to look at the countdown on the train's LED light sign and turned to the group of people sitting on the ground behind him, giving a calm and simple order: "Two minutes to the next station. Li Gou and Liu Huai will be the main attackers to steal the fragments. Zhang Gui and Fang Ke will assist and replace Mu Sicheng. Then, at the next station, Li Gou and Fang Ke will be the main attackers, the other two will support. At the following station, Zhang Gui and Fang Ke will take over, and so on in turn. Keep everyone's life value above 20. We still have a monster from the Book of Monsters that hasn't been painted yet, so prepare for the boss battle."

"Du Sanying, you're still in charge of attracting the attention of the thief's brother."

Mu Sicheng looked at Bai Liu, a little confused: "So, what am I supposed to do when I'm replaced?"

Bai Liu looked into Mu Sicheng's eyes calmly. "You are responsible for preparing for the boss battle. You are absolutely needed for the boss battle. You are the main force, so you cannot die easily. Take care to keep your life level from falling below thirty."

Mu Sicheng looked down at his bruised and battered self and raised his eyebrows. "You're going to make me go berserk again to fight a boss, aren't you, Bai Sir? I'll be delirious if my spirit level jumps repeatedly in such a short period of time. Please don't treat everyone like you're a monster who can have his spirit level broken, okay?"

He was right. After his spirit level dropped to single digits and then recovered, Mu Sicheng's eyes had clearly started to show signs of strain. Even though his spirit level was later restored by Bai Liu, the aftereffects of the violent drop and rapid recovery still lingered, affecting his concentration and mental state.

Mu Sicheng had nearly burned to death a few times when he was the main attacker against the Burst Passenger, but at least it took three supporters and a vigilant Bai Liu to bring him back.

Bai Liu's tone was calm. "From your performance just now, you're indeed in bad shape, so I've decided to replace you and let you rest to recover your energy. I need you to maintain high concentration during

the boss battle. Take some sleeping pills to get some rest. You can probably sleep for another 20 minutes."

Sleeping pills are available in the system shop, and they are always very effective. One pill, and you're down.

Mu Sicheng looked at Bai Liu with a smirk and a crooked smile. "If I sleep, who will protect me and make sure I'm safe? Everyone else has been arranged by you to rob the shard."

Bai Liu looked at him unperturbed. "Me."

Mu Sicheng was so shocked that he coughed. He wanted to sneer at Bai Liu. "How can you protect me when you only have 6 life points?" But when he met Bai Liu's flat and unwavering eyes, he couldn't say anything sarcastic. He just scratched his hair in annoyance. "You only have 6 life points, are you kidding, Bai Liu?"

Bai Liu explained, without skipping a beat. "Of all the people here, I'm the only one who can guarantee your survival 100%. Do you have any objections to that?"

Mu Sicheng's eyes swept over Zhang Gui's obscure expression, Du Sanying's sobbing eyes, Liu Huai's evasive eyes, and the rest of Zhang Gui's puppets, before finally settling on Bai Liu's unwavering gaze. This guy! The same look—"I know it's risky, but I won't change it"—he had when he forced his way through Zhang Gui's plan.

After a few seconds, Mu Sicheng gave a stifled tsk and finally threw up his hands in compromise and surrender. "Okay, I have no more objections."

"I told you, I won't let you die, Mu Sicheng." Bai Liu walked over and smiled at Mu Sicheng, a smile of soothing comfort, though it looked particularly false on Bai Liu's face. Mu Sicheng still felt somewhat relieved.

Bai Liu patted Mu Sicheng's shoulder and sat down next to him. "Go to sleep."

Mu Sicheng was tapped by Bai Liu. He couldn't help but close his eyes and relax. He had been highly tense, but Bai Liu's whisper of "sleep" was like a mantra. Mu Sicheng couldn't help but relax his muscles and nerves and leaned against the car door. I'll just close my eyes and rest. I'll never fall asleep. Falling asleep in a game is nonsense—definitely not for a person of my vigilance...

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu used a highly effective inhalant sleeping pill on player Mu Sicheng.]

Mu Sicheng frowned at the sound and moved his hand as if ready to struggle awake. But soon, Bai Liu placed his hand against the tip of Mu Sicheng's nose, and Mu Sicheng breathed twice, his body going limp as he fell uncontrollably into a deeper, darker, sweeter sleep.

Bai Liu glanced sideways at Mu Sicheng, whose head was tilted and breathing steadily, and raised his eyebrows at the white powder in his hand. "This inhaled sleeping pill is too good, isn't it?"

Du Sanying looked dumbfounded. "How did you suddenly put Mu Sicheng down?"

"He's too affected by the previous lowering of his spirit level. The best way to restore his state is to sleep deeply." Bai Liu held his breath and patted the sleeping powder on his hand, waiting for it to dissipate before turning to Du Sanying and speaking. "I need Mu Sicheng in good shape for the boss later, so let him fall asleep first."

Du Sanying was a bit confused as he approached Bai Liu, thinking he was whispering in his ear. "But Bai Liu, before you used Mu Sicheng because there were only three of us. Now that you have so many people, you don't have to rely on Mu Sicheng alone. You can fight monsters with the others too!"

Du Sanying said this while looking at Zhang Gui and the others, his eyes making it seem very villainous and gossipy, as if wondering why Bai Liu didn't just have the bad guys protect him.

"These people will experience a certain degree of combat power decrease as they look for the shattered lenses, dropping below 30 life points in the station that awaits them." Although Bai Liu knew full well that at this distance, Zhang Gui and the others could clearly hear them whispering, Bai Liu cooperated by lowering his voice and slightly sidling over to nibble on Du Sanying's ear.

Bai Liu lowered his eyes. "And in this copy of the game, Mu Sicheng is the only one most likely to fight the final boss."

"Only Mu Sicheng is the most likely?" Du Sanying repeated Bai Liu's words with some confusion, turning his head to Mu Sicheng, who had been put into a deep sleep by Bai Liu's sleeping pills. "Why is he the most useful?"

Bai Liu lowered his eyes, looking at Mu Sicheng's unconscious, peacefully sleeping face, and smiled. "Because he is the best thief I've ever seen, and the only one who could steal from me."

"Much better than the pair of brothers who stole the mirror."

Du Sanying didn't understand, and he was used to not understanding Bai Liu's words. He just looked at Bai Liu hesitantly. "Bai Liu, but even so, are you really going to protect the sleeping Mu Sicheng? Why don't you let the others protect you? You two are too dangerous! One is asleep and the other only has 6 life points!"

"No." Bai Liu rejected it. "There are only three people on the fragment capture side, one grabbing and two guarding to avoid life loss. One grabbing and one defending back. Later on, their status will still dip, and they will lose a lot of life due to mistakes. If the total life is below 400, then we'll all be stuck in the game."

Du Sanying wanted to say something else to persuade Bai Liu, but when he saw Bai Liu's emotionless face, he understood that Bai Liu had made up his mind.

Before he left, Du Sanying took a look at Mu Sicheng, who was sleeping heavily, and Bai Liu, who was standing next to him, and sighed with mixed feelings.

It was the first time he had seen a player risk his life to get another player a good night's sleep.

Of course, Bai Liu's intention was to make the best use of Mu Sicheng when he woke up.

I don't know if Mu Sicheng is lucky or unlucky.

Mu Sicheng woke up with a start from a deep sleep.

As the train sped through the dark tunnel, the wind poured in through the opening in the roof that had been opened by the thief's brother, bringing with it a whistling sound that woke him from his dreamless sleep. There were holes everywhere where the wind had come in.

The performance of the others confirmed Mu Sicheng's suspicions.

Zhang Gui and Liu Huai were cowering in the corner. Li Gou and Fang

Ke were bloodied and in a terrible state. Du Sanying was panting like a dog on a stool, his hair wet with sweat and clinging to his forehead like a parrot in water, his eyes glazed over and looking exhausted.

Bai Liu was no better, pale as death, leaning against the door to adjust his breathing, whip in hand, sweat dripping off his soaked shirt, head tilted back as he poured himself a stamina rejuvenator, a pile of bottles at his feet.

Seeing Mu Sicheng awake, Bai Liu slowly rolled his eyes. "Mu Sicheng, you're awake. The sleeping pills worked well. Just over twenty minutes ago. How's your recovery?"

Mu Sicheng rubbed his swollen temples and propped himself up against the door. Now that he knew Bai Liu couldn't even think of losing his temper over his drugging, Mu Sicheng frowned at Bai Liu. "How many stops are we at? How many broken lenses have you collected? How many life points do you have left?"

"Just passed the eighth station, two more to go before we're back at Antique City. We've collected 300 pieces of broken lenses." Bai Liu skimmed over the last question as if he hadn't heard it and said, "I feel your mental state returning. Let me explain what you'll be doing at the ninth station. You'll be working with me later..."

Mu Sicheng raised his eyes, his eyes holding a bit of hostility. He stomped on Bai Liu's whip and repeated his question word for word, interrupting Bai Liu. "I'm asking you, Bai Liu, how much life do you have left now?"

Bai Liu spat blood from the corner of his mouth and licked it away as he lifted his eyes. "Knowing this will only shake your sense of trust in me when you work with me later."

"I don't know that I would have faltered more." Mu Sicheng snorted. "Say, whether I trust you or not, haven't you always forced yourself to work well with me?"

Bai Liu was silent for a moment. "3."

Mu Sicheng couldn't resist. "Fuck!"

Mu Sicheng resisted his urge to swear as he stood up in annoyance. Bai Liu watched impassively as Mu Sicheng lifted a chair and forced himself to calm down.

Mu Sicheng turned around and looked at Bai Liu with gritted teeth. "You have three fucking life points, talk to me about cooperation? One burn and you're dead!"

"It was burned three times." Bai Liu corrected, calmly placating his opponent before Mu Sicheng could break into a tirade. "But Mu Sicheng, you've been missing too much with everyone else, and I had to come up and match you because no one can afford to drop the ball in the next match."

"As long as you don't miss, I won't die." Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng looked at each other. "So you mustn't miss, got it?"

Mu Sicheng took a deep breath and eventually could only grumpily yell at Bai Liu. "No faux pas! Tell me, madman, what do you want me to do for you? What do we have to do with each other? I've been under the fire for you all my fucking life!"

Bai Liu smiled. "It doesn't need to be that serious. I just need you to steal one thing for me."

"What's that?" Mu Sicheng asked suspiciously.

Bai Liu had just opened his mouth when the female voice of the train announcement came on. "Two more stops to go. The train is approaching its final destination. Next stop, Lu Family Lane entrance. Please line up by the door if you want to get off. First on, then off..."

Gradually, the car door was filled with a dense pile of charred corpses. Their twisted heads turned and cackled, the thief's brother standing at the forefront, covered in flames, his eyes crackling with burning fire. His bones were red with heat, and a pair of glowing red eyes burned reluctantly beneath the thief's eyes. The thief roared and pounded on the car door, his anger at the lost loot—the shards taken from the heart.

"These monsters are coming up later! Bai Liu, what exactly do you want me to steal?" Mu Sicheng asked Bai Liu as he pulled him back cautiously.

Bai Liu propped his chin up and braced himself. "I'm not sure what I want you to steal either."

Mu Sicheng sprayed. "????? Fuck, you're not sure! You have to give me a target sometime!"

Bai Liu gripped the fishbone in his hand, exhaled a long breath through the doorway of the car that opened with a snap, his gaze stoic but with a little smile at the corners of his mouth. "If I'm right, what I want you to steal back could be all we have: 300 broken lenses. Or it could just be 20 broken lenses, depending on whether Du Sanying can hold it steady."

"? ? 300 broken lenses, but isn't that Du Sanying's body?" Mu Sicheng turned his head to Du Sanying, a little puzzled.

This one is still at 100% life, which makes Mu Sicheng slightly speechless. "Steal it back? You mean the thief's brother will steal it from Du Sanying? That can't be right, that big idiot has been chasing Du Sanying for six stops and hasn't even touched Du Sanying's clothes. How could he steal the pieces from him?"

"Did you know that bosses in design horror games have a guarded secondary jump principle?" Bai Liu suddenly brought up the matter.

Mu Sicheng squinted over. "I don't know, what's this?"

Bai Liu smiled. "That is the boss that guards the level. Before the player passes the level, it will certainly go berserk—combat power berserk, hit rate berserk. This boss will certainly get a great performance boost, performance level two jump, and bring the player a great hindrance in passing the level. Usually speaking, before the level, there will be a point that leads to a large number of player deaths."

"But it's strange that—" Bai Liu slowly raised his eyes. "This thief brother has followed us for six stations. He is obviously the main boss of this game, but he hasn't shown any signs of going berserk. Even though we've slipped him through six stations, the later we get, the smoother it gets, and we're about to pass the level, but his combat power hasn't improved at all. This doesn't make sense."

Mu Sicheng raised an eyebrow. "And then what?"

"So I think he's a different kind of secondary jump." Bai Liu slowly raised his eyes. "If there's no mass value enhancement, then there's a new monster. Do you remember the name on the second page of the monster book? The Thief Brothers, but we only see one brother. What about his brother?"

Burst last train

Mu Sicheng's face sank after a moment of shock. "You mean there are two monsters on this page?"

Bai Liu nodded and continued his analysis. "If the younger brother is this dumb, silly, strong type, then the older brother—if I were designing it—would be a small monster with high stealing skills and very fast movement, waiting for the player to accumulate a certain number of pieces. Then, it would trigger before the level and steal the player's pieces to make the game more difficult before they can pass."

"But it's Du Sanying. Is it really possible for something to get stolen?" Mu Sicheng was skeptical. "This guy has never had anything stolen from him when his luck was 100%."

Bai Liu was light-hearted. "That's if he can keep his luck at 100% all the time."

"I've taken advantage of Du Sanying's luck too much by hanging six stops on the thief's brother. The balance of this game has been broken by me, and I think the system will adjust Du Sanying's luck downwards to maintain balance at a critical time like the pass."

Mu Sicheng was stunned as he remembered that at the end of Siren Town, the system had also said Bai Liu upset the balance of the game and forced his value down to limit him, increasing the value of monsters...

Not 100% lucky Du Sanying... Mu Sicheng watched in a bit of a trance as Du Sanying, who was clumsily making his way up his runabout kart to draw the thief's brother away from them, felt a slow coolness crawl up his spine.

The less fortunate Du Sanying, a C-rank player with a C-rank attribute panel, could withstand monster attacks about as well as Bai Liu. If his luck wasn't 100%, Du Sanying would be dead.

"Du Sanying can hang if he's forced." Bai Liu continued. "But even if his luck drops from 100 to 99, if he trips Du Sanying once—"

Mu Sicheng looked straight at Bai Liu.

Bai Liu's eyes were unmoving. "And he'll die. But even then, Du Sanying has to hang the thief brothers because the rest of us are

pressed to below 30 health. The thief brothers can punch a little kid at us. Du Sanying has no way of collecting the pieces on the passengers without tuning out."

The door jams several times before it finally opens, and all the passengers pour in.

While the others cleared the passenger of debris as Bai Liu had previously arranged, Du Sanying once again took out his scrapped go-kart and prepared to escape to distract the thief's brother. Everyone then saw the thief's brother's charred and blackened chest squirm twice.

The thief's brother's mind let out two sharp, dry giggles, and a pair of dark, sharp-nailed hands jerked out of his chest and struck at Du Sanying, who was just sitting down and lucky enough to escape, but...

Du Sanying froze and touched his face, which had been cut with a bruise that dripped a drop of blood.

He was injured.

This was the first time he had been injured in this game.

[System Alert: Player Du Sanying was attacked by his thief brother, -2 life, -2 spirit.]

[System Alert (for all): As all players have survived and no one has died, in order to maintain the game balance, the luck value of player Du Sanying will be adjusted downwards from now on. Player Du Sanying's luck value will gradually decrease. Please give up relying on him and pass the game on your own strength.]

[Player Du Sanying Current Lucky Value: 98]

The thief's brother's robust chest was peeled open from the inside. His cheek split down the middle, and eyes sprouted from his black cerebrum into a baby-like, pitch-black head, with a ring around the eyes burned and coal-painted. His white eyes still turned in his sockets as the thing's dental bed was burned and exposed, revealing a mouthful of large, white teeth with a triumphant grin.

Its two feet hooked onto the thief's brother's burned and exposed ribs, its body swinging outward. Its two hands, only black with bone, dry as coal, but incredibly long and nimble, darted like the long legs of a spider. They darted over Du Sanying's head again in a sideways hang,

so fast it was almost invisible to the naked eye.

Du Sanying was lucky enough to dodge on the back foot again but was hurt once more.

[System Alert: Player Du Sanying has been attacked by his thief brother, -2 Life, -2 Spirit, and -2 Luck for another coordinated drop in Luck.]

[Explosive Last Train Monster Book Refresh - Brotherhood of Thieves (2/3)]

[Monster Name: Brother Thief]

[Characteristics: The thief brother moves very fast (3400 points of movement speed, flame has a bonus effect), good at stealing.]

[Weakness: ????? (to be explored)]

[Attack: Scratching, Stealing]

Du Sanying gritted his teeth and ignored the blood dripping down his face as he rolled over in his car and tried to run as Bai Liu said. Even if he wasn't at 100% luck now, his 96 luck was enough to help hang his thief brother for a while. However, if he was unlucky and his luck failed, Du Sanying would face the consequences of facing off alone against a pair of powerful thief brothers and would most likely... die.

But Du Sanying also knew now, deep in his heart, that...

There was no one in the room, except for him, who had almost full life expectancy, who could have lasted a single round against the thieving brothers.

No one could help him. His luck had put him in this position, so he had to take responsibility for everyone. Even if he was not so lucky, Du Sanying could not just run away and watch Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng die.

Du Sanying stepped on the throttle of his little Ma Baoli's bumper car with a face of bitterness and great hatred, clearly in a death-defying task. But instead of being sad, he became... strangely resolute as he did it.

He had always been the player who was disliked and loathed by everyone as a last-minute scrounger. For the first time, he had taken

on such an important task of attracting the hatred of monsters. Bai Liu had never doubted that he would not be able to complete it since he had been entrusted with the task from the very beginning.

Even though Du Sanying was a very clumsy and awkward guy, he was known as a flamboyant player.

It was a strange feeling to be trusted wholeheartedly by Bai Liu, and although Du Sanying was reluctant at first, he developed a very unspoken sense of trust and obedience towards Bai Liu.

He had a hunch— even if his luck dropped to zero, Bai Liu had a way out and would not let him die so easily, because he had said he wouldn't let Du Sanying die, just as he had done with Mu Sicheng.

And Du Sanying had always trusted his instincts.

Du Sanying was slammed on the butt of the car by his brother, who was in hot pursuit behind him. Although the front of the car was thrown off and stuck in a chair, Du Sanying was lucky not to be thrown out, but he was hurt again by the thief's brother's coordinated attack. The fire from the thief's brother's fist spread all the way up from the back of the car and burned Du Sanying's eyes. He gritted his teeth and wiped away the blood that had just been spat out of his mouth by the thief's brother's punch.

[System Alert: Player Du Sanying was attacked by Thief Brothers, Life -20, Spirit -20.]

"Du Sanying, hold on. Just hold on and drag the thief brothers away to our side to collect the broken lenses. Can you hold on?" Bai Liu asked in a raised voice, seemingly noticing the situation.

Du Sanying choked and coughed twice, his face quiet, his hands on the steering wheel of the kart, his foot on the accelerator to the max, and replied loudly to Bai Liu: "I'll try!!!"

Bai Liu smiled. "I'll leave the rear to you then, Du Sanying."

Mu Sicheng, while helping to collect the broken lenses, looked at Bai Liu, who was calm and collected. "Du Sanying's panel attribute is only C. The only good thing about this guy is that he has 100% luck, but now you know that he doesn't have 100% luck. So, you're really going to let him hang a pair of thief brothers? Do you think he can hold up? If he drops the ball on his side, we'll have a hard time getting back on defense here!"

Bai Liu was honest. "I'm not sure he's going to make it."

"But surprisingly, he promised me, so I'll start with the assumption that he can do it." Bai Liu said very calmly. "Just like your original plan, you said you weren't sure if you could stay awake with a mental value of only 10, so I'll start by assuming you can."

Mu Sicheng paused for a moment. "What if Du Sanying doesn't hold up?"

Bai Liu's tone was calm. "Then there's you and me."

Du Sanying slumped over the steering wheel, dizzy and vomiting a mouthful of blood. He had just lost his luck and had to take a hard hit from the thief's brother to protect the broken lens after the thief's interference. Although Du Sanying blocked the blow with a prop, the damage was still fatal.

His bloodline and spirit both collapsed down to the safety line.

[System Alert: Player Du Sanying was attacked by the thief's brother, life -20, spirit -20]

Du Sanying tilted his head back and drank a can of Spiritual Bleach to restore his Spiritual Strength. He was still a little dizzy. The Spiritual Strength only stabilized his position in the Spiritual World, but the exhaustion caused by the drop in his Strength and Spirit couldn't be restored by Spiritual Bleach. Du Sanying was already at the end of his rope due to the various drains.

These thieving brothers were really too tough!

Du Sanying could still escape if he moved fast, but the thief's brother was faster—over 3,000 points!

Du Sanying used all his props but couldn't shake him off. And the two monsters were working together!

The thief's brother giggled and was thrown into the front of Du Sanying's car with a bang. He reached out with his black claws to steal the broken lenses. Du Sanying had no choice but to use a prop to bounce the thief's brother off the front of the car.

[System Alert: Player Du Sanying uses (Sunny Umbrella) to shock the

thief's brother]

A translucent umbrella with a sun on top suddenly opened on the front of Du Sanying's car, emitting blinding light. The thief's brother, with a sharp whistle, jumped back from the car, clawing at it wildly.

[System Alert: (Sunny Umbrella) has been scrapped by thieves and can no longer be used]

"Eeny!" Even Du Sanying, with all his props, exploded several times in heartache.

He had already scrapped seven or eight protective items, all of which had been scratched by the thief's brother. The problem was, he was running out of resistance items.

But—two... Du Sanying blushed. There wasn't enough time to drag this out!

As he was thinking, the thief's brother was thrown at him again and landed on Du Sanying's head like a bat across the carriage. He started to hang the broken lens around his neck but realized it was too dangerous and moved it...

—Du Sanying felt that, apart from being a bit of a pain, it was the safest place on his body.

The thief's brother hesitated, his eyes scanning Du Sanying's body suspiciously. He seemed to be sensing something was wrong for not finding the broken lens. He turned the hood of the car a few times and chirped, as if questioning Du Sanying about the missing lens.

Du Sanying braced himself to meet its gaze: "You won't find it, give up."

Du Sanying saw disgust and devastation in its eyes. The thief's two rows of straight teeth clenched shut, and with great determination, it reached out with a trembling hand to pull out Du Sanying's gear.

This move had a very Chinese name: [Monkey Steals Peach].

"Rascal you!!! Don't tug!!! Don't tug on my [beep beep beep]!"

Mu Sicheng and the group were eerily silent for a moment.

"Shit!!! Go away!!!" Du Sanying yelled, pulling at his trousers. He had never seen such a monster with no boundaries. "You don't mind

getting dirty! Get your hands out of my trousers! What are you, a trolley boy?!"

The thief's brother's eyes bulged, his teeth chattered. His long, thin wrists thrust into Du Sanying's trousers. His face fluttered and brushed down with the cinders of burning flesh, revealing the bloody remnants of burned skin. The corners of his mouth turned upwards in a vicious, frantic grin, as if cursing Du Sanying's shame for hiding the broken lens in his trousers.

Seeing the thief's brother about to reach the lens in Du Sanying's trousers, Du Sanying cursed under his breath and was forced to use another prop.

[System Alert: Player Du Sanying uses (Joker Spring) on Thief Brother]

The thief's brother was violently bounced off the head of a clown that emerged from the front of the car. A huge bouncy spring was attached underneath the clown, which swayed as the clown laughed. The spring helped Du Sanying hold off several scratching attacks from the thief's brother.

Before Du Sanying could breathe a sigh of relief, the thief's brother, coming up behind him, roared and raised his fist. His whole body erupted in flames with a bang, and the hot wind filled the carriage, shattering the glass. The thief's brother roared, raised his fiery fist, and jumped up to smash Du Sanying, who was trapped in the car.

Du Sanying suddenly felt a choking sensation. His instincts told him something dangerous was about to happen.

Flaming Blast plus Frenzied Hammer—two big moves and stamina—the thief's brother's punch would set the whole carriage on fire.

Du Sanying knew he would die for sure.

[System Alert: Player Du Sanying uses (Clown Spring) on Thief's brother]

[System Alert: Player Du Sanying has used (Golden Bell Ring) on his thief brother]

The thief's brother slammed down the punch mercilessly, shaking the whole car for a few seconds.

Mu Sicheng, who was on his way, looked at the wreckage of the car, torn apart by the thief's brother's fist, and shouted: "Du Sanying!!!"

There was no answer, only the smoke trail and the quiet burning of Du Sanying's little Ma Baoli kart, burnt to a crisp. The burnt head of a clown, still grinning comically, lay beside the tires, and a tattered golden bell lay next to it, all burnt beyond recognition.

"Du Sanying should have used a Joker Spring and a Golden Bell Shield to block, but the combined effects of these props weren't enough to block that punch from the thief's brother," Zhang Gui said, his face grim. "Du Sanying is most likely dead. The damage from that punch would have cleared an A-rank player with full health, nine times out of ten."

"Not to mention Du Sanying is not at 100% luck, and his panel is only C. He couldn't have survived that punch," Zhang Gui continued, his tone low.

"Du Sanying's luck may not be 100%, but it should be above 90%. I'm leaning toward him not dying." Bai Liu calmly retorted. "Mu Sicheng, I'll draw the thief's brother away. He has a one-minute cooldown after using his move. You draw the high-movement-speed thief brother away to give Du Sanying room to escape."

Zhang Gui couldn't resist speaking up: "You don't have to do this for Du Sanying. He's probably dead..."

Before Zhang Gui could say anything else, Bai Liu interrupted, whipping the back of the thief's brother without hesitation.

The thief's brother hissed at Bai Liu's whip and turned to face him. Mu Sicheng grabbed him with a monkey claw, ready to stab it into his heart. The thief's brother spotted it and dodged, but this enraged him. He swung his long, bone-like arms, trying to dig into Mu Sicheng's heart with his backhand.

With both the thief's brother and the thief brothers now lured away, Du Sanying, dying and covered in soot, crawled out from under the car. Choking and coughing, he rolled over and collapsed, his eyes half-open on the ground like a bald parrot, half-roasted to death. "...I thought I was going to die... Luckily, I have personal skills..."

[System Alert: Player Du Sanying uses his personal skill (Legal Apprentice) to mitigate 90% of damage for himself]

[System Alert: Player Du Sanying received an attack from the thief's brother, life -20, spirit -30, luck coordination -10]

As soon as Du Sanying crawled out, the thieves, sensing the location of the broken lens, immediately turned around to find Du Sanying. Barely catching his breath, Du Sanying scrambled back up, pissing his pants and crying out, "Bai Liu—! I can't hold on! I can't hold on!!!"

"That's enough." Bai Liu smiled. "I'll take care of the rest. Just give me the broken lenses."

Du Sanying ran frantically toward Bai Liu but fell halfway. The thief's brother behind him nearly crushed Du Sanying's spine with a kick.

Before the thief's brother could reach him again, Du Sanying panicked and threw the broken lens into the air, shouting, "Bai Liu! Catch it!"

As the broken lens flew, the thief brothers, heading toward Du Sanying, immediately changed direction to reach for it.

Du Sanying, in tears, crumpled to the floor, barely able to get up. He could only gasp for air, when Bai Liu patted him on the shoulder: "Well done."

Du Sanying slowed down and looked at Bai Liu with concern: "But you only have 3 life points. Why don't you just let me...?"

"Three points will be enough." Bai Liu flicked his whip as he faced the two monsters rushing toward him. "Mu Sicheng, let's start working together."

Mu Sicheng, who had fallen onto the hoop, swung diagonally and picked Bai Liu up by the back of his collar. Mu Sicheng snorted. "OK, sit tight and hold on, Bai Liu. I'm moving at full speed—10,000."

With those words, Mu Sicheng held Bai Liu in one hand while the other darted around his neck to put the headset on.

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng uses his personal skill (Thief Stalking) - Super Full Speed Stamina Slot is fully depleted]

[(Thief Stalking) Skill Upgrade - A+ to S - Movement Speed +9003. Please note! Player Mu Sicheng will only be able to use this skill for one minute due to a violent deficit in stamina slots after using Force Pull Full. Stamina can only be restored automatically and cannot be replenished with supplements. Does player Mu Sicheng confirm the

use?]

Mu Sicheng's eyes sank, and the corner of his mouth quirks up in a slightly gangly smile: [Acknowledged].

Burst last train

The moment Mu Sicheng turned back, Bai Liu felt a slight tug on the back of his collar, but Mu Sicheng moved so fast that his hand was barely visible.

Bai Liu hovered in the air for a moment before being yanked backward, bouncing across the ground as if he were bungee jumping in reverse. The wind whipped against his face, rubbing his skin raw, while Mu Sicheng held him by the collar. To an outsider, Bai Liu must have looked like a kite flailing in the wind.

“Coooooool.” Bai Liu couldn’t resist whistling, but Mu Sicheng was moving so fast that the sound came out in fragmented, shaky bursts. Only Mu Sicheng, matching his speed, could make out what he was trying to say.

Bai Liu was tossed around like a ragdoll, but even then, he managed to give Mu Sicheng a thumbs-up. “Mu Sicheng, your skills are like racing a car. No wonder everyone says you’re the fastest man in this game. The thief brothers don’t stand a chance.”

“…You’re not worried about wrecking your throat talking at this speed?” Mu Sicheng raised an eyebrow. “And why do I feel like you’re cursing me even when you’re complimenting me?”

“I move fast with this skill, but it’s exhausting. With you in tow, I can keep it up for a minute at most.” Mu Sicheng ignored Bai Liu’s smooth talk and cut straight to the point. “If we don’t win within that time, my speed will drop, and we’ll both be totally screwed. Got it?”

“Got it.” Bai Liu made an OK gesture, gripping his fishbone whip as he lowered his eyes with a sly smile. “Let’s begin, then.”

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng’s movement speed has dropped to 3400. He is about to be overtaken by his thief brother.]

Mu Sicheng braced himself against the car wall, his monkey paws gripping the metal as his feet slid down, carving deep claw marks with sparks flying against the stainless steel.

In a breath, the thief brother’s blackened hands and outstretched fingers appeared in their field of vision.

If Du Sanying were here, he would be stunned to see both Bai Liu and

Mu Sicheng's eyes—calm, mechanical, almost inhuman in their precision.

The thief brother leapt sideways along the car walls, shrieking and grimacing as he lunged for Bai Liu, claws outstretched.

"The rest—"

"—is up to me, right?" Mu Sicheng interrupted with a grunt. "No need to repeat it. I've heard it enough times."

Bai Liu's plan was simple but brutal. The thief brothers were a duo of speed and attack—one with high movement speed but weak attacks, the other slower but far more lethal. The fast-moving brother could catch up to players and interfere with their movements, making them easy targets for the stronger one.

For most players, this combination was impossible to counter.

But Bai Liu didn't care how impossible something seemed—it just had to be solved.

He estimated that the thief's brother was carrying 20 broken lenses. That many pieces were practically unattainable for their team under normal circumstances.

Unless they countered the thief brothers with an even faster and stronger combination.

Mu Sicheng had the speed, but he couldn't take them on alone. He'd have to steal the broken lenses mid-fight—an impossible task if he had to evade both brothers at once. The thief brothers would rip him apart before he even got close.

To make it work, someone had to hold off the attacking thief brother, creating an opening for Mu Sicheng to steal. And that person had to be perfect—one mistake, and they were both dead.

That person, Bai Liu realized, could only be himself.

Everyone else's health was too low to coordinate precisely with Mu Sicheng's movements. Bai Liu's health was at 3—one slip, and he was finished. Neither he nor Mu Sicheng could afford to miss.

Bai Liu had already forced the thief brother to burn his strongest move on Du Sanying earlier, putting it on cooldown. This made the theft

plan somewhat feasible, though still risky. And there was no guarantee Mu Sicheng's skills could even steal from a monster thief.

Mu Sicheng thought it was reckless.

But—whatever. Bai Liu said he could do anything Mu Sicheng couldn't, so they were going with it.

Mu Sicheng took a deep breath, then hurled Bai Liu straight into the path of the thief's brother. At the same time, he twisted in midair to intercept the other thief brother.

Two sets of black claws locked in a split-second clash. In a blur of movement, Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng swapped positions—Bai Liu launched toward one thief brother while Mu Sicheng faced the other.

Bai Liu cracked his whip without hesitation. Mu Sicheng, eyes locked onto his target, slashed out at the thief brother, intercepting the incoming attack meant for Bai Liu. The flames engulfing the thief brother still singed him, leaving a faint burn.

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng suffers Flame Burn damage. -1 Life, -1 Spirit.]

The thief brother fell back, landing on his slower counterpart before springboarding forward again.

Mu Sicheng immediately flung Bai Liu back into the fray.

Bai Liu flipped in the air like he was in slow motion. With a flick of his wrist, he lashed the thief brother viciously across the back.

Then he started to fall.

Right toward the blazing-hot thief's brother below him.

His eyes flickered, calculating. Then, in a steady voice, he called out, "Mu Sicheng."

Mu Sicheng reacted instantly, swinging sideways and hooking his tail around Bai Liu's waist. He yanked him up just in time to avoid the flames.

Hanging one-handed from the hoop, Mu Sicheng's gaze locked onto the thief brother Bai Liu had struck. He extended his monkey paw.

The thief brother screamed in fury, its black claws swiping at Mu

Sicheng in a flurry too fast to follow. The two thieves' hands met midair in a blur of stealing motions—clawing, snatching, deflecting.

Bai Liu, still dangling from Mu Sicheng's tail, gulped down a stamina restorer.

Before he could finish, the thief's brother lunged again. Bai Liu barely had time to react before Mu Sicheng's tail flicked, launching him skyward.

Drinking his stamina restorer mid-air to avoid wasting it, Bai Liu glanced down. Seeing the thief brothers refocus on Mu Sicheng, he flicked his whip, disrupting their movements and knocking them off balance.

The whip didn't deal any damage, but it was a powerful interference tool.

Mu Sicheng was stunned.

This guy really didn't miss. Not once. Not even with just three life points left. If Mu Sicheng failed to catch him, Bai Liu was dead. But Bai Liu wasn't scared—he was completely calm, even playful.

"One minute left," Bai Liu said lazily. "You still haven't stolen the broken lenses? We're about to be screwed."

He sounded so casual, like he didn't grasp the danger—or maybe he just didn't care.

"Wrong target." Mu Sicheng's voice was tense. "The other monsters had their broken lenses near the heart, but this thief brother doesn't. I checked."

Bai Liu's gaze sharpened. "Not in the heart…"

The broken lenses were weaknesses. All the other monsters had them in vital areas. But this thief brother was different. He was fast. He was skilled. He was—

Like Mu Sicheng.

"There are only a few seconds left before the thief brother's big move charges. I'm running out of stamina…" Mu Sicheng panted. "Bai Liu, if we can't find the lens in time, we're dead."

Bai Liu suddenly looked up. "Mu Sicheng, what's the most important

part of a thief's body? The weakest point?"

Mu Sicheng didn't have time to answer.

"Bai Liu! The thief's brother is behind you! Turn and use the whip!"

But Bai Liu didn't turn. He didn't react at all.

The thief's brother grinned wide, sharp fingers curling into claws—

Then, without hesitation, it plunged its hand straight through Bai Liu's chest.

Blood gushed from Bai Liu's mouth, staining his white shirt.

Mu Sicheng's pupils shrank.

"Bai Liu—!!!!"

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu is under attack by the thief's brother. Near-death state detected!]

Burst last train

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has been attacked by his thief brother, -2 life, -2 spirit. 1 life remaining. Warning! You are very close to the borderline of death!]

Bai Liu wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth carelessly and looked up at Mu Sicheng, whose face was white with fear. He said nonchalantly, "What are you yelling about? I'm not dead."

Mu Sicheng snapped back to reality and took in the sight of Bai Liu, covered in blood. He felt fucking dizzy—this was even more shocking than being stabbed through the heart himself.

With a diagonal dash, Mu Sicheng dodged the thief's brother behind him. When he turned back, he saw that Bai Liu had actually strangled the thief's brother with his whip, the thin cords digging into the creature’s hands, keeping it trapped. The thief’s brother screamed in impotent rage behind Bai Liu.

Bai Liu glanced up at Mu Sicheng, his tone weak from blood loss but still calm and clear. "The hand, in the hand."

Mu Sicheng was stunned before realization hit. "You think the broken lenses are hidden in the bones of the thief’s brother’s hands?"

"Yes. Come on, I can't hold him for much longer, and we don't have much time." Bai Liu smiled faintly. "For a thief, the most important part would be the hands. That’s why Liu Huaicai cut off your hands in the first place—because they were your strongest weapon."

"Then for this thief brother, I think the most important part would also be the hands."

Mu Sicheng froze for a second before laughing, harder than he ever had before. Tears welled in his eyes as he finally said, "Yeah, I had forgotten that the most important thing for a thief is their hands. Guess I’ve been cut too many times to remember."

"But you do have a point." Mu Sicheng lowered his gaze, his dark eyes narrowing as a sharp grin curled his lips. His beastialized form made his mouth appear unnervingly large. Slowly, he leaned in. His glowing red eyes flickered as he opened his mouth wide—too wide—and bit down viciously on the thief brother’s hands. He tore them away from Bai Liu’s body with a violent yank, ripping them apart.

The moment his hands were torn off, Bai Liu hissed and arched backward. Blood splattered across Mu Sicheng's face as he tore into the thief brother's hands with a feral, ruthless energy. His voice was muffled, almost distorted, as he spoke through clenched teeth. "The most important thing about a thief is, indeed, his hands."

The moment the withered hands were severed, the thief's brother let out a wretched scream, writhing frantically—only to freeze as Mu Sicheng's sharp gaze cut through him like a blade.

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng used the skill (Thief's Monkey Paw) to steal twenty broken lenses from the thief's brother.]

A second after losing its hands, the thief's brother withered further, shriveling into itself. Its bleeding eyes burned with hatred as it whistled long and viciously, glaring at the severed hands in Mu Sicheng's grasp. The thief's fingers—encased in dark lacquer—glinted under the dim train lights. Embedded in each fingertip were two broken lenses, ten fingers in total, twenty shattered lenses gleaming in the dim carriage.

Mu Sicheng and his brother, the thief, finally collapsed. Flames erupted around them, engulfing the train cars in an inferno. Mu Sicheng let out a grunt as the fire licked at him.

Bai Liu was thrown to the ground, rolling across the floor. He lay there, his chest heaving violently as he gasped for breath. He was so exhausted that he couldn't even lift a finger. Blood stained his white shirt, the crimson stark against pale fabric. And yet—he grinned. Just like Mu Sicheng.

For they were a pair of successful thieves.

For they had survived, even as their lives teetered on the edge of emptiness.

"Wow, it feels great to succeed in something bad." Bai Liu raised a trembling hand to wipe the blood from the corner of his mouth, smiling contentedly. "Especially when what you steal is valuable."

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng has been damaged by Thief Brother's Flame Burn. Life -20, Spirit -20. Current life: 16. Endangered!]

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu's life value is 1 and will soon be zero.]

Mu Sicheng sat back in his seat, breathing heavily, head lowered. After a long moment, he kicked Bai Liu lightly, a half-smile tugging at his lips. "Bai Liu, what the hell do you do in the real world? You're way too good at stealing from people, manipulating them, and using that damn whip. You're not in some kind of high-IQ criminal league, are you?"

"Just a laid-off worker who's short on cash," Bai Liu answered lazily.

Mu Sicheng snorted. "A laid-off worker? Yeah, right. Like hell I'd believe that."

The train's radio finally crackled back to life.

"The train is about to start. Passengers, please line up to disembark. Do not remain in the carriages—"

Having lost all their shattered lenses, the resentful thief brothers left the carriage along with the pile of charred corpse passengers. They stood outside the slowly closing doors, staring at Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng with venomous spite. Bai Liu, still lying motionless on the ground, his blood-soaked chest rising and falling weakly, was actually in the mood to turn his face sideways and grin at them.

"Bye-bye," he said cheerfully.

The thief brothers roared at him in rage.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu's progress in collecting broken lenses (360/400).]

[Explosive Last Train Monster Book Refresh - Brotherhood of Thieves (2/3).]

[Monster Name: Thief Brother.]

[Characteristics: Moves extremely fast (3400 points movement speed, flame bonus effect), skilled at stealing.]

[Weakness: Broken Lens (1/3).]

[Attack: Scratching, Stealing.]

Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu emerged from the game drenched to the bone, coughing and choking as they collapsed at the boarding gate. The stench of mermaid fish clung to them.

The two ordinary people, experiencing a horror game for the first time, were pale as death, their limbs shaking as they braced themselves on the ground. If it hadn't been for the guidance given to them by the young backwoodsman—and their burning determination to avenge Guoguo—they never would have made it to the end.

At Guoguo's tombstone, the young man had told them, "There are many things I can't tell you. And even if I did, you wouldn't remember them."

Bai Liu had smiled. "So when you go in, just listen."

Burst last train

Because of the [ban] mechanism, Bai Liu could not tell Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu directly about the existence of the game. He could only warn them that they would encounter unexpected situations but should not panic—he would help them and bring them back to life. However, they had to find a way to inform him about their situation and location by purchasing props through their panel.

So after entering the game, Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu followed Bai Liu's instructions. After completing their first task, they used their limited points to buy the four cheapest items—[Wooden Plug], [Blade], [Small Torch], and [Paperweight]—while Liu Fu purchased [Vibranium]. These props were combined to form the [Siren].

Despite their fear and uncertainty, they could only hope that Bai Liu would receive their message. The four cheap props, rarely purchased by others, had cost them almost all their points. Many viewers ridiculed them for wasting their resources, pushing themselves into an obscure division where hardly anyone paid attention.

Fortunately, their system soon began to lag, as if someone had taken control. Their panel occasionally acted on its own, automatically purchasing items for them. They used these props—torches, 3D projectors, alcohol—with trepidation, feeling as if another person was playing the game with them. Although Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu were not skilled gamers, their strong will to survive pushed them forward. Even when Bai Liu bought them props they didn’t understand, they gritted their teeth and persevered.

After the chase, their gameplay became smoother, and in the end, they successfully cleared the game.

Yes, Bai Liu himself had died in the second level, yet somehow, in between his own near-death experiences, he still found the time to help Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu survive. This was commonly known as the "three openings" strategy.

However, despite Bai Liu’s assistance, most of their struggle was their own.

Bai Liu was trapped in a dangerous game himself, and his unreliable system would occasionally disconnect. He had no way of tracking their progress exactly, so Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu had to rely on

themselves, crawling and stumbling their way forward. When they finally emerged from the game, they were trembling from the lingering fear, helping each other to stand with tears in their eyes.

It would be reasonable to expect that after experiencing something so bizarre and terrifying, a normal person would want to run away, refuse to believe it, and try to escape.

But Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu, two ordinary adults who had never truly believed in gods or the supernatural, did not react like normal people.

They did not scream, flee, or collapse in despair.

Instead, at the boarding exit, they broke down and held each other, sobbing in joy.

"What that young man said was true." Xiang Chunhua's hand trembled as she leaned against Liu Fu. It felt as though she had aged decades in the few short days since losing Guoguo. Tears spilled from the deep wrinkles on her face as she hunched over, her voice breaking with emotion. "Do you think Guoguo can be saved? That that beast will really be punished?"

Liu Fu wiped his tears with rough hands, his broad shoulders shaking as he wept. "Yes, it's possible. He said he would help us."

Before entering the game, Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu had sat in silence on a humid June evening, facing each other across the table.

On the table were three sets of chopsticks and a large bowl of roasted pork. Beside an empty seat was Liu Guoguo’s exam admission slip. In the photo, a girl in a school uniform looked at the camera with a restrained, expectant smile, nervous but hopeful for the important test ahead.

Outside, the voices of children who had finished their exams drifted through the streets—some cheerful, some frustrated as they discussed their answers.

Among the laughter and disappointment, there should have been the voice of a seventeen-year-old girl.

But that voice had been lost forever in a dark alley.

It had been reduced to a black-and-white image on a distant

gravestone.

Her hand, which should have been holding a pen and answering questions, had been chopped into pieces of meat—minced into pig's feet and scraps, sold off as cheap pork for a dozen dollars per pound by Li Gou.

Liu Fu had crawled through the sewers, desperate to find Guoguo's right hand, but he never did.

When they buried her, that hand—mangled beyond recognition—had already been swallowed up by the earth.

"Physics was hard this year," Xiang Chunhua murmured absently. "I heard from Zhang family's sister-in-law." Her voice was hollow. "But Guoguo was best at physics. This year's exam... might have been right up her alley."

"Yes... Maybe she would have made it into the teacher training college she liked..." Liu Fu trailed off. He clenched his fists, then suddenly covered his face and bent over, as if his world had shattered. His voice broke in a hoarse, slurred whisper before he slammed his fist into the table. "Bastard! She was only seventeen! It's my fault! I never should have let her go down there!"

"It's my fault too... If I hadn't made roast pork for Guoguo, she wouldn't have..." Xiang Chunhua's eyes were ringed with dried tears. More welled up and spilled over as she numbly patted Liu Fu's shoulder, her voice distant, as if she were soothing herself. "Go to sleep. It'll be fine once you sleep."

But when they woke up, they were in the game.

Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu clung to each other, eyes wary as they took in the strange world before them. They had the instincts of small, frightened creatures but the composure of adults hardened by life. The only person they trusted was Bai Liu—the young man who had supposedly bought their souls and helped them survive.

When they saw a passerby, Xiang Chunhua cautiously approached. "Young man, do you know someone named Bai Liu?"

The man gave them an odd look. "You're Bai Liu fans? He just had a surge of likes and charges, and the crowd is going crazy. Looks like he's about to hit the Nightmare Rising Star list. If you're looking for him, head to the central hall—people are gathering there."

Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu exchanged glances, thanked the man, and hurried toward the hall he had pointed out.

Central Hall Core Screen

Wang Shun stood at the front row of Bai Liu's small TV, his face grim. Despite the surge in likes and charges Bai Liu had just received for his performance, none of the audience looked pleased.

Bai Liu had only one life. A single attack would be enough to wipe him out.

"Hold on! Bai Liu absolutely cannot take another hit—not even for a second!"

"Help! I need oxygen again! The last Bai Liu video nearly suffocated me, and now it's happening again!"

Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu arrived to find the crowd watching the small TV screen with bated breath. Instinctively, they followed their gazes. The moment they saw Bai Liu's familiar face on the screen, a wave of relief washed over them—only to be shattered a second later.

A figure flashed across the corner of Bai Liu's small TV.

Their eyes widened in disbelief.

"Li Gou!!! You beast!!!"

Li Gou sat cowering on the ground, panting with exhaustion. Bai Liu, barely clinging to life, was protected at the center by Du Sanying and Mu Sicheng. His lips were pale, but his eyes remained sharp.

"I'll handle the arrangements for the next station," Bai Liu said. "We've collected 360 shards, but we're still 40 short. I don't think the game will let us gather them all at the next station."

Zhang Gui frowned. "Then what do we do? If we don't assemble at the next station, we'll have to go back to the departure station—Antique City. But the explosion is supposed to happen between Antique City and the penultimate station. If we don't gather the pieces before then, we'll have to face the explosion head-on! That means we'll all die!"

Bai Liu's tone was calm but laced with exhaustion. "The reason I say we won't be able to collect the shards at the next station is simple—there's still one monster left in The Book of Monsters. So far, every monster—the Burst Passenger, the Thief Brothers—has carried shards. That means this last one probably does too."

Zhang Gui quickly connected the dots and rubbed his chin. "That's true. But what if we fight this monster at the next station? Then we can still clear the game, right?"

Bai Liu tilted his head. "Do you remember the minimum death rate for this game?"

Silence fell.

Bai Liu lowered his gaze. "For Tier 2 games, the mortality rate is between fifty and eighty percent. That means that, even at the lowest rate, out of the seven of us, at least three and a half should be dead by now. But no one has died yet. That's why the system is adjusting things—like forcibly lowering Du Sanying's luck."

His tone sharpened as he turned to Du Sanying. "What's your current luck value?"

Caught off guard, Du Sanying pointed at himself before quickly opening his panel. He checked, then hesitantly reported, "80."

Bai Liu immediately analyzed the situation. "That means the system only dropped your luck by 20 points. That's far too little if its goal was to ensure three and a half deaths."

His voice remained steady as he continued, "Siren Town went to great lengths to balance the mortality rate. But in Burst Last Train, all the system did was reduce Du Sanying's luck and stop there. A small adjustment like that can only mean one thing—the system already considers the death rate balanced."

Zhang Gui felt a chill run down his spine as realization dawned. His face paled, and he turned to Bai Liu. "You mean this game has a mandatory death event to ensure the mortality rate? That no matter what we do, up to three and a half of us have to die?!"

In single-player games, such mechanics didn't exist. But in multiplayer horror games, it was a common way to maintain difficulty and tension. Simply put, it was the classic "teammates sacrifice to advance" trope.

But in this horror game, that design wasn't just for fun—it was cruel and brutal.

Bai Liu's voice was measured. "Think about it. What kind of mandatory death event would a game called Burst Last Train have?"

Zhang Gui leaned back in his chair, dazed, staring at the flickering fluorescent lights above. He muttered, "…An explosion. The game wants us to go through an explosion. That means we won't be able to collect all the shards before the countdown ends."

"We'll have to survive the explosion before we can reach the last station and assemble the pieces."

A hoarse voice suddenly interrupted. Li Gou, still slumped on the ground, crawled toward the group, his dirty hands clutching Bai Liu's ankle. Desperation shone in his eyes. "If three and a half of us must die, then three and a half can live, right? Bai Liu, you must have a plan! Let me be one of the survivors—I'll do anything!"

Mu Sicheng immediately stepped in, kicking Li Gou away and baring his teeth in warning. Li Gou reluctantly retreated to the corner, but his eyes never left Bai Liu.

"I do have a way to survive the explosion," Bai Liu admitted, his gaze lingering meaningfully on Li Gou. "But the plan requires two sacrifices."

Everyone tensed. Even Mu Sicheng held his breath as he stared at Bai Liu.

"This is why I made sure to keep everyone alive in the early stages," Bai Liu continued. "Because I knew there would come a point where sacrifices were inevitable."

He exhaled slowly. "I checked earlier—the system has banned all water-based items and explosive props. That means we can't even buy a bottle of mineral water. The reason is obvious: the Burst Corpses have a major weakness—water. High-temperature burst remains dissolve upon contact with water, which makes it an effective weapon against them."

Bai Liu sighed. "Unfortunately, there's no water on the train or in the system shop. And we can't use Du Sanying to lure the monsters again, or the system will continue lowering his luck value. That means we need a massive amount of water."

He continued, "The explosion itself can also be mitigated with water. The main causes of death in explosions are shock waves, extreme heat, and flying debris. If we flood the underground tunnel with water, it'll absorb some of the blast, increasing our survival chances."

Mu Sicheng frowned. "That's great, but where are we supposed to get that much water? Even if the system sold bottled water, we'd need thousands of bottles to flood an entire metro tunnel!"

Bai Liu smiled. "We don't need bottles. The next station has exactly what we need."

Mu Sicheng's breath caught.

"The reservoir!" Zhang Gui's eyes widened. "I memorized the train map before we boarded! The penultimate station is Reservoir! That means—"

Bai Liu nodded. "If it's a medium-sized reservoir, it'll hold enough water to flood the underground tracks."

Zhang Gui's excitement dimmed. "But how do we get the water into the tunnel? The system banned explosives—"

Bai Liu smirked and pulled out an oval mirror, its surface fractured but missing only one triangular shard. "We don't need system-bought explosives. We already have them."

Zhang Gui blinked. "…A mirror?"

Bai Liu's fingers brushed the surface. Ripples spread outward, turning the mirror into a shimmering mercury lake.

Everyone froze as Bai Liu reached inside and pulled out a bomb, letting it drop to the floor with a heavy thud. The scent of gunpowder filled the air.

Zhang Gui's jaw tightened. "You ripped the explosives out of the mirror? Then—does that mean we can prevent the train from exploding?"

Bai Liu reached into the mirror again, retrieving another bomb before shaking his head. "No. I suspect the explosives are infinite. That means the train and this mirror are destined to explode."

Zhang Gui's expression darkened.

"That's why two players must be sacrificed," Bai Liu continued. "One has to deliver the explosives to the reservoir—but they won't make it back in time." He lifted one finger. "That's the first sacrifice."

Zhang Gui clenched his jaw. "And the second?"

Bai Liu's lips curled. "The second player must use Du Sanying's item, False Fabric, to wrap the mirror and hold it in place. The fabric prevents the shards from scattering after the explosion, so we won't have to hunt them down again. But…" His smile turned sharp. "That person will be too close to the blast. They won't survive."

Bai Liu's eyes swept over them all.

"Now, the only question is… which of you is going to die?"

Bai Liu considered using the [Old Wallet] skill to trade and control the three men under Zhang Gui, but he felt the chances of success were slim. First, they were all highly wary of him and knew he had a control skill. The trade skill also required the active consent of both parties. Bai Liu doubted he could successfully persuade them to enter into a dirty money relationship with him within just a few minutes.

Second, even if he succeeded, he wouldn't be able to manipulate anyone in the extreme chaos underwater.

Because the soul note was a type of paper money, it shared Bai Liu's greatest weakness—it was afraid of water. Underwater, his skill would effectively be banned. If anyone discovered this flaw, his situation would become extremely dangerous.

And Bai Liu was certain that before clearing the level, he would secure the shattered lens for himself to ensure the highest possible reward. If the group realized he couldn't use the Soul Coin skill underwater, he would be at risk of being overpowered and robbed of the shard.

Unfortunately, Bai Liu suspected Zhang Gui had already figured out that he couldn't control others underwater.

After all, Zhang Gui had seen Bai Liu use the soul coin to save Mu Sicheng in an emergency, meaning he understood that Bai Liu's method of control relied on a paper prop—a key reason why Bai Liu wanted Zhang Gui dead.

If he let Zhang Gui go this time, he would lose the advantage of keeping his personal skills a secret.

Zhang Gui was backed by a major guild and had access to many resources Bai Liu didn't know about. If Zhang Gui managed to escape Bai Liu's control and later hunted him down the way he did Mu Sicheng, Bai Liu couldn't be certain he would survive.

Moreover, Zhang Gui might expose Bai Liu's personal skills. While Bai Liu's abilities were already widely known, they were also highly restrictive, requiring money for any transaction. If Zhang Gui made them public, Bai Liu's movements would become much harder.

Bai Liu's eyes twitched slightly as his calm gaze met Zhang Gui's obscure one.

Zhang Gui looked tense and aggressive, like a predator waiting for the right moment to strike—waiting for Bai Liu, who had only a sliver of health left, to drop his guard.

And Zhang Gui was waiting for the perfect opportunity.

"Zhang Gui holds the exploding mirror," Bai Liu ordered without hesitation.

Zhang Gui looked startled, as if he hadn't expected Bai Liu to choose him. He quickly composed himself and retorted sternly, "If I die, the other three puppets will be out of control! Bai Liu, you can't choose me!"

Bai Liu narrowed his eyes, locking onto Zhang Gui, his smile shallow and floating on the surface. "But I think that if I don't pick you, you'll try to kill me when I'm not prepared. After all, I barely have any health left, and you're the biggest threat to me."

Zhang Gui hesitated before speaking again. "Bai Liu, we've worked together until now. I really don't want to betray you. I even tried my best to protect you before, right?"

He inhaled deeply, then slowly raised his hands in a gesture of surrender, looking at Bai Liu with what seemed to be sincerity. "I know you still suspect me. I'll give you everything I have on me—I just want to clear the level. I'm a player ranked around two hundred in strength. You already have me under control. Keeping me alive is more valuable to you than killing me, isn't it?"

His throat bobbed slightly as he bent forward in a submissive bow, exposing the back of his neck and spine. His voice was low and muffled. "Bai Liu... master, I swear I won't kill you. You can even have

Mu Sicheng use [The Judge's Scales] to verify my honesty. You don't have to trust me, but you can trust the prop, right?"

It was a deeply submissive gesture.

Bai Liu chuckled, tilting his head as he bent down to look at Zhang Gui's expression. His smile was amused. "Zhang Gui, gestures and psychological tricks like that are useless against me. I've already played this game with you."

His eyes gleamed lazily. "Zhang Gui, do you know why I never tried to negotiate with you from the beginning? Why I just took control of you outright?"

Zhang Gui, lying on the ground, froze at Bai Liu's quiet, meaningful laugh.

Bai Liu's smile didn't waver, but for a moment, his gaze was so calm it could pierce through Zhang Gui. His tone was almost approving. "Because you're a lot like me. Or rather, people like us—people who want to maximize our interests—think the same way. We're both greedy. From the start, I wanted the most out of you, just like you wanted the most out of me."

"There are only two ways to get the most out of something: trading and looting. You weren't interested in trading with me, and what you wanted was inside me. No matter how much you pretend to want to work together, the only way you could truly get what you wanted was by killing me to take it, wasn't it?"

Bai Liu smiled. "So from the beginning, I never considered working with you. Cooperation is too weak a bond for people like you and me. It's something that can be broken at any moment. Didn't you betray me halfway through? And that's exactly what allowed me to take control of you. I've come this far in control, so what makes you think I'd let you go?"

Trusting another equally ambitious and intelligent person to be completely loyal would be foolish. Bai Liu fully understood this, which was why he always used people—then eliminated them.

Even back when he and Lu Yizhan played competitive games together, Bai Liu had never hesitated to kill Lu Yizhan at the critical moment before winning. He knew Lu Yizhan—who was just as sharp—would have done the same to him.

"And using [The Judge's Scales] to verify your honesty?" Bai Liu let out a quiet, amused tsk, lowering his eyes. "Let me correct a small mistake in your statement."

His lips curled slightly as he leaned down, whispering close to Zhang Gui's stunned face. "[The Judge's Scales] isn't Mu Sicheng's prop—it used to be yours, and Mu Sicheng stole it from you, didn't he? And you want me to trust a prop you've tampered with?" Bai Liu smirked. "I'm not that stupid, master."

Zhang Gui and Bai Liu locked eyes, and Zhang Gui's breath hitched. Instinctively, he glanced at Mu Sicheng, assuming Mu Sicheng had told Bai Liu. But then he realized—Mu Sicheng would never reveal the origins of his stolen goods. It was a professional habit. There was no way Mu Sicheng would have told Bai Liu.

Yet Mu Sicheng was equally shocked. "How do you know I stole that prop from Zhang Gui?" he asked incredulously.

"Because he's already pulled this trick once before," Bai Liu replied, leaning back against the wall. He closed his eyes, one arm draped lazily over the chair. "He did the same thing to Liu Huai."

"People only have a strong sense of trust in things they're familiar with. Zhang Gui, instead of thinking about using your own prop in a life-or-death situation, you instinctively tried to make me trust it—despite being enemies with Mu Sicheng. Doesn't that seem suspicious? Considering your skills, this was the most likely answer."

Zhang Gui's pulse pounded. Sweat dripped from his jaw as he looked at Bai Liu with fear.

Bai Liu... had planned this from the start. From the moment he took control, Zhang Gui's death had already been decided.

Was this guy really a newcomer?

How could someone in just their second dungeon have no hesitation about killing?

What the hell did Bai Liu do in real life?

"Good, then it's up to one of the three of you to deliver the bomb." Bai Liu rolled his eyes toward the three men huddled in the corner, silent and tense. The fatigue from blood loss made his mind foggy for a moment, and he swayed slightly before Mu Sicheng caught him.

Mu Sicheng gave Bai Liu a strange look. "Are you really choosing Zhang Gui to take the mirror? You've got him under control—he's useful to you, right? You're not keeping him alive?"

"The value is there, but since you're too exhausted to guard me, I have to get rid of him." Bai Liu shrugged as he wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, smearing crimson—probably blood again.

He flicked the beads of blood from his fingers and continued without much concern. "I chose Zhang Gui because once I fall into the water, my current half-dead state won't be enough to keep everyone in check. If Zhang Gui fights back, you won't be able to handle him, but you can deal with the others. So it's fine if I lose control."

"At the next station, I'll manipulate them to gather all the broken lenses as fast as possible. Then we take the shards and run. They aren't as fast as you, and we have Du Sanying's eighty luck points on our side—that's more than enough for the three of us to clear this level."

Burst last train

Mu Sicheng understood Bai Liu's point. He, Bai Liu, Du Sanying, and the others had a significant advantage and should be the first to get through. When the explosion started, everyone was too busy focusing on surviving to worry about anything else. Bai Liu's control skills didn't matter at that point; as long as they survived the explosion, it would be impossible to sneak up on him.

Mu Sicheng paused for a moment. "With three people left, who are you going to choose to deliver the bomb?"

"What?" Bai Liu shifted his eyes. "Do you have a recommendation?"

Mu Sicheng hesitated. "Liu Huai. I suggest you pick him."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow in slight surprise. "Reason?"

He didn’t think Mu Sicheng would suggest something out of personal spite.

"I'm not suggesting it out of animosity," Mu Sicheng said, avoiding Bai Liu's gaze. "Liu Huai has a personal skill called Assassin's Flash, which has a range far enough to exceed the length of this carriage." His tone grew more complicated as he continued, "You only have a little bit of life left. If Liu Huai dies after Zhang Gui is dead, he can break free from the puppet silk and flash to assassinate you. My strength is recovering slowly, and my personal skills are only at a very low level... Against Liu Huai's skills, I might not be able to protect you."

Liu Huai, who had been listening, laughed bitterly. He knew the moment Mu Sicheng opened his mouth that this would be the suggestion. It was the skill that nearly killed Mu Sicheng—lethal and defensive. Bai Liu, with only one life, wasn’t likely to let a player with such a skill out of his control.

"Oh, I see." Bai Liu fiddled with the coin on his chest for a brief moment before speaking abruptly, "You make a valid point, but I’ve traded with someone before."

When Bai Liu acquired the souls of Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu’s parents, he promised to help them execute Li Gou. Although there was no time limit on this deal, the energy required to kill Li Gou after this moment would be significantly higher.

If Bai Liu let Li Gou go this time and let him pass the game to get the points, Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu could be killed by Li Gou after he was released from prison and sought revenge. Bai Liu wasn't willing to take such a risk.

He always made choices that gave him the most gain and were cost-effective, with risk not being a consideration.

Without risk, there would be no reward.

Bai Liu looked up calmly and said, "So my choice is for Li Gou to deliver the bomb."

Everyone froze.

Liu Huai stared in disbelief, unable to believe he had been passed over yet again.

Li Gou struggled, his eyes wild with madness as he tried to grab Bai Liu with his sword, but he was soon restrained by Bai Liu and Zhang Gui's puppet silk.

Li Gou was losing control, his limbs bleeding from the puppet silk, yet he still writhed and screamed, "Bai Liu! Why the hell are you choosing me? Didn't you hear what Mu Sicheng said? Liu Huai is the one who can kill you! Who the hell are you to make me carry the bomb to my death?!"

"I'm getting out of prison!" Li Gou shouted hysterically, his veins popping with rage. "You can't let me die here!"

Li Gou stared at Bai Liu, whose expression remained unmoving, and slowly dropped to his knees, defeated. His gaze became empty, and he slumped to the ground like a heap of rotten flesh.

After a few seconds, Li Gou seemed to understand something, and suddenly began sobbing, kneeling and begging, "Bai Liu! Please, don't let me go! Brother Bai! I've done everything honestly from the beginning, just like you said. I didn't cut any corners. Don't choose me! Brother Bai, you're going to choose Liu Huai, the big threat, over me? Are you kidding me?"

Mu Sicheng also looked at Bai Liu with disapproval. "Why Li Gou? He's much less threatening than Liu Huai, and if Liu Huai attacks you later, you'll be in trouble!"

Wang Shun, watching from the small TV, frowned in confusion. "What's going on? Bai Liu isn't the kind of person to let someone off the hook at the last minute. Why would he choose Li Gou?"

The rest of the audience murmured in concern.

"Liu Huai can backstab even a high-speed attacker like Mu Sicheng! Bai Liu can't even block Liu Huai's attack, even with Mu Sicheng!"

"I don't get why Bai Liu chose Li Gou. It makes no sense!"

None of the audience understood Bai Liu's choice. They were confused, worried, and disappointed. Only a couple standing behind the crowd covered their mouths, struggling to hold back tears, barely keeping themselves from collapsing.

In their teary eyes, they saw Bai Liu's pale, quiet face on the small TV.

They knew why Bai Liu made this risky choice.

Xiang Chunhua's head hung low, her sobs hoarse as tears rolled down her fingers, which she had pressed over her mouth. Liu Fu wiped them away with his large, rough hands, though his own tears stained his hair, now turning white at the temples.

"Thank you, Bai Liu. Thank you."

They had lived each day as the walking dead, condemning themselves in silence, receiving hollow sympathy from strangers who would soon move on, offering empty words. They were left to carry their grief, no one willing to remember Guoguo.

Why had Guoguo been chosen? Why had Li Gou singled her out? And why not the others?

Li Gou knelt before Bai Liu, trembling in fear. Mu Sicheng kicked him away, sending him sprawling to the ground, blood spilling from the corner of his mouth.

Li Gou, terrified, looked up at Bai Liu, his lips trembling. "Brother Bai, why choose me? You could have chosen Fang Ke, why me?"

Bai Liu met his gaze calmly. "To put it bluntly, I chose you because you were unlucky."

Unlucky enough to follow Zhang Gui into the game. Unlucky enough to become Zhang Gui's puppet. Unlucky enough to be completely

under Bai Liu's control.

"But if you need a reason before you die, I can give you one." Bai Liu crouched down, looking at Li Gou, who seemed to have no idea why he was being chosen.

"Do you remember Liu Guoguo?" Bai Liu asked quietly.

At the mention of her name, Li Gou's body froze. He stared at Bai Liu in shock.

Bai Liu's tone was as calm as ever. "If you need a logical reason, it's simple—because you chose Liu Guoguo first, I've chosen you now."

Li Gou's mind went blank. He sat down hard, staring at Bai Liu with vacant eyes, muttering, "How could it be because of Liu Guoguo? She's dead."

Although Li Gou had been imprisoned because of Liu Guoguo, he had long forgotten about the girl who had made him feel good for a single night. To him, she had never been a person.

But when Bai Liu spoke her name so lightly, it brought back the memory of the night that landed him in jail—the horror, the pain, the desperation of the real girl he had tortured. The helplessness in her eyes, the begging for mercy.

The same questions Li Gou had asked Bai Liu now echoed from the past.

Li Gou's twisted smile faded as the memory of his crime crashed down on him.

The female voice of the train's announcement came on, "We are about to arrive at the next stop—Reservoir. Please hold on to your seats. Passengers wanting to board, please line up outside the door."

Bai Liu's eyes narrowed. "We're arriving at the station. Li Gou, take the bomb. Zhang Gui, get the mirror. Mu Sicheng, guard me. The rest, clear the broken lenses."

The announcement continued, "The train has arrived at the station. Reservoir, please prepare to board and alight."

Bai Liu spoke coldly, "Go."

The moment the passengers flooded into the train, Li Gou, his limbs

shaking uncontrollably, ran out of the carriage, a massive black bomb strapped to his back. His eyes flooded with tears, fear overwhelming him as he stumbled through the burning station, paper flames floating around him, scalding his face. But he was being driven toward the fire.

With the bomb on his back, Li Gou dodged the charred bodies stumbling across the platform, but soon, he couldn't avoid the flames any longer. His cheeks burned, and his screams echoed through the station. "Bai Liu! I know I was wrong! I don't dare do it again! I'm sorry, Liu Guoguo! Please let me go!"

He screamed, tears streaming down his face. "I shouldn't have done it to her! Please, Bai Liu! Let me go! I don't want to die! I swear, I won't hurt her again! I'll die a thousand deaths if I do!"

Burst last train

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[System Alert: Player Li Gou has been burned by flames, Life -15, Spirit -15, Spirit continues to decrease due to a violent shock to his Spirit... Spirit below 40.]

[System warning: Player Li Gou is about to see a lot of subliminal horror visions! Please restore your mental energy in time!]

Li Gou, who was screaming in the flames, could not hear the system warning, and even if he did, there was nothing he could do. All his points had been taken by Bai Liu, and Li Gou no longer had any points left to buy bleach.

But soon, Li Gou suddenly felt the bomb on his back become wet and fleshy. A drop of blood dripped down from his neck, hot against his skin. The flames around him were scorching, but Li Gou couldn't help but shiver.

His back was quickly stained with a warm, rusty liquid. A girl's long, wet black hair stained with blood slid down Li Gou's shoulders, bobbing and swaying. Drops of bright red blood hit the back of Li Gou's feet. A pair of white hands wrapped around his neck, gently encircling him. One of the hands had something written on it in black grease pencil: [Countdown to the (blurred) days of the entrance exams! Go Guoguo! Teacher training awaits you! Teacher training awaits you!]

The little girl hummed a song out of tune, her feet swaying on Li Gou's back. "Where is the world full of flowers? If it really existed, I would go there~"

The song was "Chasing Dreams, Red Son's Heart," the chorus of Liu Guoguo's senior pledge meeting. Every day, Li Gou saw this girl humming the song with her headphones as she passed by his alley—such an innocent, beautiful sight. He'd only peeked at her with greasy eyes, coveting the beauty that did not belong to him, and eventually destroyed it with a butcher's knife a thousand times.

Li Gou swallowed stiffly, not daring to turn around. He could only whisper repeatedly, "It's an illusion. It's an illusion..."

"I want to stand on the highest mountain there—" The girl's sweet voice interrupted, giggling and singing with an eerie air. Cold, icy hands slowly curled around Li Gou's neck. "Don't care if it's a cliffhanger—"

A face chopped to pieces with a machete and a sunken nose peeked over Li Gou's neck. Liu Guoguo smiled at him, her mutilated face twisted in a grin. "Uncle Li, long time no see."

He fought to shake off Liu Guoguo behind him and ran.

He was running through the flaming station, but it suddenly transformed into the alleyway where he used to work. No matter which way he ran, he saw Liu Guoguo's bloodied face smiling next to his bloody slaughterhouse, singing to him as she closed in.

Li Gou ran in a panic, but Liu Guoguo suddenly grew as big as him. Grinning, she grabbed his arms and legs, and with a sweet smile on her face, held him down on a slab of pork. As she looked down, she hummed the same song, plunging a sharp knife into his abdomen, one by one, picking out his bones and entrails.

Just like Li Gou had done to her.

"Ouch! STOP! Stop cutting!" Li Gou screamed, his eyes bulging. But with his next scream, Liu Guoguo seemed to find him annoying. She plunged the tip of a sharp knife into his throat, twisting it as she hummed her lilting song.

"That's the sign of a coward~" she sang pleasantly.

Blood gushed out, and Li Gou gagged a few times in excruciating pain. He couldn't hold on any longer. He had just been incontinent, his calves still trembling from the pain.

But even so, Li Gou was dragged along by the puppet strings, spitting blood as he was pulled closer to the reservoir.

Li Gou's limbs had been hacked to pieces by Liu Guoguo. Though it was all a hallucination, Li Gou was completely unconscious under the constant attack. His subconscious projections of pain left him crawling through the station, dragging his mangled limbs through the flaming ashes.

Liu Guoguo was on top of him, cutting his scalp with the knife, one by one. Li Gou couldn't utter a single word, but he could only open his

eyes helplessly, tears streaming down his face, blood gushing from his throat.

In the illusion, Li Gou's clothes and chin were wet with blood, but in reality, the man was twitching on the ground like a dead dog, his eyes rolling back.

Nothing really happened. Li Gou was tormented by a horrific hallucination of his own making.

Li Gou never thought of Liu Guoguo as a human being when he killed her. Killing her had been as easy as killing a pig, and he felt no guilt.

He knew he could easily decide the fate of this little girl, like deciding the fate of a helpless kitten.

But when Bai Liu turned Liu Guoguo from a defenseless cat into someone who could send him over the edge, his subconscious fears awakened, and he realized what he had really done.

He had killed a person.

Liu Guoguo had been alone, and it turned out she had been in so much pain.

Li Gou carried Liu Guoguo on his back, propping himself up with his elbows, and eventually crawled step by step, gasping for breath. Liu Guoguo was pressed against his back, blood mingling with his own. Her long black hair hung in folded curls at the nape of his neck. The bomb, Li Gou knew, was a bomb—but now, that bomb was Liu Guoguo, the girl he had killed, hacked to death by him. The raped Liu Guoguo.

Like a happy bird, she sang on Li Gou's shoulder, a song only he could hear: "I'm not going to be able to hear you."

"Maybe I don't have the talent, but I have the naivety to dream. I will prove it with my whole life. Maybe I'm clumsy on my hands and knees, but I'm willing to keep exploring..."

"Even if blood is spilled on my arms and I continue to run, I will do so with the pride of a red son."

Liu Guoguo was a beautiful, pretty, hard-working, understanding, pork-loving seventeen-year-old girl who was about to sit for her university entrance exams. She was going to be a teacher at a very

good teacher training school, and loved singing “Chasing Dreams with a Red Heart,” ruffling her long hair around her ears when she smiled. Even if she had been raped, she might have cried, cursed hysterically, or curled up in her house.

But she had a chance to start over. It wasn’t her fault, and she didn’t have to live her life for something like that.

She had a chance to turn this into a scar.

But only originally.

Li Gou closed his eyes, leaving muddy tears behind. Choking, he opened his mouth. He seemed to want to say something, but nothing came out. Blood gushed from his throat. Li Gou’s eyes widened reluctantly. Liu Guoguo hugged his neck from behind, singing softly and laughing as she took him down into the reservoir.

Countless bubbles tumbled over the water.

With a bang, the bomb exploded.

Li Gou was blown into countless tiny bones and fragments in the reservoir, just like Liu Guoguo.

The reservoir slowly collapsed, and water gushed out from the gap.

The girl’s clear, crisp laugh rang out, seemingly unnoticed at the edge of the reservoir. It sounded like cold mockery, but it soon disappeared, leaving no trace.

[System Alert (for all players): Player Li Gou has zero life, confirmed dead, exit the game.]

Inside the carriage.

Chased by the thieves, the group ran as hard as they could, Mu Sicheng leading with Bai Liu in tow, followed by Zhang Gui, who was collecting the pieces.

But soon, the group was about to collapse. Without Du Sanying to help distract the thief brothers, everyone’s props and values were drained to the last. But the thief brothers, a pair of monster siblings, were especially aggressive this time because their pieces had been stolen.

If they were chased for much longer, the thief brothers’ big move

would probably wipe them out!

Mu Sicheng ducked and dangled from the hoop, breathing unevenly, his face pale. “Bai Liu, I can’t hold on!”

Bai Liu looked out of the car, exhaling a foul breath and smiling. “No need to hold on, the water’s coming.”

Water rolled down the steps of the underground. The sound of flames being doused and the water clattering down intertwined. The rising vapor filled the entire station in seconds. The train was instantly enveloped in a translucent mist. The fires on the bursting passengers chasing them were extinguished as soon as the water soaked them.

The backs of the scorched corpses’ feet seemed to melt from the water, immobilized by the vapor as they threw their heads back and wailed, but they could not advance an inch.

The thief brother chasing Bai Liu was drenched and fell onto his feet. His massive body flopped into the water on the ground, instantly shrinking into a pile of black charred corpses, wailing and screaming. The other thief brother stopped chasing them and instead gibbered anxiously, turning to help his sibling, but his brother was too big for him, even when he shrank.

These two brothers shouted at each other pathetically, holding each other up as if cheering, shivering in a huddle, drenched in water.

Mu Sicheng dropped Bai Liu and rested beside him. With the two thief brothers' attacks and speed greatly reduced, it was almost impossible for them to catch up. He tsked with mixed feelings.

Who would have thought that the bandit brothers, who nearly wiped them out at first, would now be fixed like this by Bai Liu, a guy who was barely hanging on for dear life...?

“Put on the snorkel.” Bai Liu reminded Mu Sicheng. He’d put a diving mask on, breathing in the dense mist that sprayed over it, revealing only a pair of still, dark, pale eyes. “Wait for the drive. This section of track might collapse, and the water will follow it all in.”

“The train is about to start. Please get off the train in time for the next stop, the final stop – Antique City.”

Chapter End Notes

Li Gou finally got what he deserves

Burst last train

Mu Sicheng had equipped himself with a diving device, which he bought for three points—an item they had already purchased.

Mu Sicheng gave Bai Liu a glance. "Come on, go meet them."

Du Sanying and Zhang Gui were in the same compartment. He threw his head back, wiping the water off his face, panting heavily. Next to Zhang Gui were Liu Huai and Fang Ke, who were in a similar state. Bai Liu, without hesitation, placed his shattered 360 lenses in Du Sanying's hypocritical fabric. Ignoring Zhang Gui's resentful gaze, he shoved the lenses into Zhang Gui's arms. "There should be 20 shards on your side too. They'll explode in a few dozen seconds, so take them."

[System Alert: Player Zhang Gui has obtained 380 broken lenses, collection progress (380/400)]

"As for you two..." Bai Liu turned his head toward Liu Huai and Fang Ke. Both shivered under Bai Liu's unwavering gaze. "Now that the broken lenses are collected, you're useless and a danger. So, how about...?"

Liu Huai was the first to grit his teeth. "We won't attack you. It would be a waste of time for you to kill me now. We're almost out of life, and attacking you wouldn't benefit us. We'll hide."

"If you really don't believe me..." Liu Huai looked into Bai Liu's emotionless eyes, desperation creeping into his voice. "I just want to survive. I'll do anything to prove I won't sneak up on you."

Bai Liu was blunt. "Then cut off your own hands."

Liu Huai stared in astonishment. Mu Sicheng's expression faltered for a moment as they both exchanged synchronized looks.

Bai Liu didn't think his request was cold. His tone remained casual. "I'm not interested in killing anyone, but your presence is a risk. You use a dagger with your hands, right? If you cut off your hands, you'll fall to about the same life as me, which lowers your chances of attacking me."

"And with your hands gone..." Bai Liu turned to Mu Sicheng. "You can beat Liu Huai like that, right?"

Mu Sicheng stared at Bai Liu, confused for a few seconds. Then, he tsked and snorted. "If Liu Huai cuts off his hands, I'll take them."

Bai Liu turned to Liu Huai, who hesitated, then said quietly, "Okay, do it. We don't have much time."

Liu Huai's face twisted with mixed emotions as he gritted his teeth and turned to Fang Ke, asking for help to cut off his hands.

The moment Liu Huai's arm fell to the ground, Mu Sicheng blinked in stunned silence. After a beat, he returned to his usual expression, his eyes a little red. He turned away and stood beside Bai Liu, his hands hanging loosely by his sides.

"As for Fang Ke..." Bai Liu started, but before he could finish, Fang Ke screamed in desperation and broke off one of his hands. "I'll do it! Is that alright?"

Bai Liu blinked, slightly surprised. "I just wanted you and Liu Huai to hand over your props and points, not break your hands."

Fang Ke: "...!" He whimpered in distress.

Liu Huai and Fang Ke exchanged a long look before reluctantly handing over their points and props. Bai Liu's gaze shifted to Zhang Gui. "And you. Hand over your points and props too, or you'll die for nothing."

Zhang Gui, on the verge of exploding from Bai Liu's demands, was caught between a mix of resentment and helplessness. Bai Liu had casually robbed three high-ranking players, leaving him no room to resist.

Du Sanying and Mu Sicheng, who had witnessed the entire ordeal, exchanged glances, both speechless. As they watched Bai Liu—so skilled at robbing, killing, and gathering wealth—they couldn't help but wonder: which prison had released Bai Liu, this disaster of a man?

Bai Liu, like a laid-off employee, inspected his loot and waved cheerfully at Fang Ke and Liu Huai. "Bye! Next time we play together, you guys really made my gaming experience great!"

Liu Huai and Fang Ke: "..."

Still no. They had a horrible gaming experience.

Fang Ke and Liu Huai fled like dogs under Bai Liu's delighted gaze. Mu Sicheng, speechless, stammered, "Bai... Bai Liu, I really don't have any more props! I've used a lot! Don't rob me!"

Bai Liu feigned surprise. "How could I rob you? We're partners." Then, with a slight regretful pause, he added, "You don't have anything left? I thought with your luck value of 100, you'd have plenty of props."

Mu Sicheng: "... Please stop looking at me like I'm a fat sheep, Bai Liu."

Du Sanying nodded with tears in his eyes, pleading, "I really don't have anything left!"

Bai Liu had no intention of taking anything from Mu Sicheng—he was counting on him for help. As Bai Liu looted Fang Ke and Liu Huai, Mu Sicheng looked at him with disgust, as if regarding a trash collector.

But Bai Liu rubbed his nose. He was already a [poor bum].

As soon as the train began, tunnels on either side started to collapse, and furious streams of water flooded the train. Through the broken windows and gaps in the train, the water reached Bai Liu's waist in seconds.

Bai Liu, floating in the waves, was quickly grabbed by Mu Sicheng. Du Sanying, holding onto a chair, shouted over the roaring water, "Bai Liu! Zhang Gui exploded in this carriage! Stay on opposite sides of the carriage! Mu Sicheng and I have enough life left and some defensive items, we can hold it! Stay away from us!"

Bai Liu, signaling an OK with his diving mask, swam away clumsily. He still couldn't swim.

Du Sanying and Mu Sicheng stood on either side of the carriage, using protection, while Zhang Gui, caught in the middle of the carriage, wore a diving mask. His face was pale and his teeth clenched. The props Bai Liu had raided left him with only the diving mask, and he held onto a fabric with a mirror in it, waiting for the explosion.

The front and rear doors of the carriage were blocked. Zhang Gui, clever as he was, had no props, no time, and was helpless. There was nothing he could do.

It was impossible for him to escape this time.

Mu Sicheng and Du Sanying exchanged a moment of stillness—an eerie sense of déjà vu hung in the air.

Mu Sicheng had been trapped by Zhang Gui in this same way countless times. Each time, he'd crawled out battered and bruised, narrowly escaping death. He had been trapped in a carriage by Zhang Gui just a few stops earlier.

Thinking about it, Mu Sicheng suddenly wanted to laugh. Bai Liu might be a man with zero luck, but after meeting him, it didn't always seem like a bad thing?

It seemed like Bai Liu had returned all the suffering he had gone through in such a natural way, even though Mu Sicheng knew Bai Liu hadn't done it for him.

... But how could he say it? He couldn't help but feel a strange sense of pleasure.

Zhang Gui, holding the fabric with the mirror, felt it heating up. He trembled, his eyes darting in panic. He seemed to shout something underwater, gesturing desperately, but no one could hear him anymore.

Mu Sicheng squinted, trying to read Zhang Gui's lips through the diving mask. "The mirror... is... There's..."

Before Mu Sicheng could finish, the mirror in Zhang Gui's hand exploded in a violent burst of red light. Zhang Gui screamed, his grimace twisting as bubbles erupted from him, sending a shockwave through the water. Mu Sicheng instinctively shielded his eyes with his hand.

The mirror exploded.

The shockwave rocked the entire train, sending turbulent bubbles to the surface and causing waves to crash through the water. Bai Liu, cautious, had hidden behind a defensive prop he had looted, waiting until the explosion was over.

[System Alert (for all players): Player Zhang Gui has confirmed his alienation due to a zero spirit value and has exited the game.]

Mu Sicheng stood in front of a bag that had fallen to the floor. Inside was a mirror, polished as new, with only a triangle missing from the middle—the same as it was before the explosion.

It lay silently in the water. No trace of Zhang Gui's body could be found nearby. Most likely, it had been swept away by the current after the explosion.

Mu Sicheng stared at the mirror. His reflection looked strange, with the missing piece by his eye.

With only 20 pieces left, Mu Sicheng felt a strange sense of foreboding.

It was like the first time he'd met Bai Liu in this game—the feeling that bad luck was about to find him.

Burst last train

If Du Sanying had been here, he would have screamed at the top of his lungs and told everyone to run because he could feel very strongly that something was wrong with the mirror. Unfortunately, Du Sanying was still dizzy from the headbutt and hadn't arrived yet. It was probably lucky for him that he escaped unscathed.

"What was in the mirror...?" Mu Sicheng muttered. "What did Zhang Gui see in the mirror before it exploded?"

Bai Liu felt equally unlucky. He obviously didn’t know how to swim, yet every time he found himself in a water-based game, he was suddenly a water expert. He hated water and couldn’t swim, but here he was, paddling awkwardly on all fours like a dog and making his way to the carriage where Mu Sicheng was.

Mu Sicheng explained what he knew and then reminded him, "But whatever Zhang Gui wanted to say, our priority is to find the remaining twenty broken lenses. Where do you think they are?"

"It’s not likely to be on the passengers," Mu Sicheng reasoned. "Antique City is the terminal. Only passengers should be getting off, not getting on." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Could it be in the station? But we came up from Antique City, so it’s not likely to be there. I didn’t see any broken lenses when I searched around."

"We've searched the train several times. It's unlikely to be on board," Mu Sicheng continued analyzing. "Could it be that another group of passengers will be boarding at Antique City later?"

Bai Liu interrupted, looking sideways at Mu Sicheng. "Do you know what Zhang Gui wanted to say to you?"

Mu Sicheng was stunned for a moment. "What did he say? What did he say about what was in the mirror?"

Bai Liu turned his head toward the mirror, his eyes darkening slightly. "There's one last monster in the mirror."

"All the broken lenses we encountered were on the monsters—the bursting passengers and the thieving brothers. The lenses were on them. We’re still missing the last monster in our book, which means we’re short of the last monster. The 20 broken lenses we’re missing are most likely on the last monster."

Mu Sicheng frowned. "Then what is the last monster? Generally speaking, monsters in games are either dead people or animals. And I remember that the dead people in the news about the bombing were either the passengers or the thief brothers. So only those two are suitable to be monsters in the game, right? Could it be the ghost in the mirror? But before, the game didn't give any clues suggesting we triggered a story mission related to the ghost in the mirror."

"No, you're missing the point. There doesn't need to be a ghost in the mirror," Bai Liu's eyes twitched slightly. "There's something else that's dead in this case—the broken mirror itself."

Mu Sicheng was stunned and snapped his head back toward the mirror. "You mean the mirror was the last monster?!"

"Right," Bai Liu bent his body and tsked at the mirror. "What Zhang Gui should be trying to tell you is that the last monster is the mirror."

"I thought something was off because the system notice for Zhang Gui quitting the game said it was due to a spirit-level clearance, which was strange. He was at the center of the explosion and only had a dozen life points, yet died because of a spirit-level clearance. I thought at the time that you had tortured him with props."

Mu Sicheng was speechless. "I'm not that free."

"But now it seems you didn't," Bai Liu looked thoughtfully at the mirror. "Then what tortured Zhang Gui to the point where his spirit value cleared was something else... like this monster mirror."

"I always thought before that the mirror had an enhancing effect on those monsters, which is why they became weaker after we took the broken lenses," Bai Liu bobbed his body in the water, his head close to the mirror to observe it more closely. "But you reminded me of the Mirror City bombing, and now I realize that this is most likely not the case. The real-life Bombing brothers were afraid of the mirror, and if the blueprint of this game is a reference to the real-life case, the lenses shouldn't have had an effect on the thief brothers, as illogical as it sounds."

Mu Sicheng clutched the hoop to prevent himself from floating away in the water. He looked at Bai Liu, confused. "Then how do you explain the fact that every time we removed the lenses, these monsters weakened against us?"

"For us..." Bai Liu's eyes grew focused as he remained silent for a

minute before suddenly speaking. "Let's think of it another way. This mirror exploded into four hundred pieces inside the car, and all four hundred of those pieces happened to be in the passengers and thieves. It's strange that every single piece of the mirror ended up inside the passengers and thieves, and that it also happened to land in the key parts of their bodies that they were deliberately protecting."

"...It is indeed a bit strange," Mu Sicheng's brow furrowed further as he listened. "Why is that?"

Bai Liu lowered his eyes. "The only logical explanation is this: the debris distribution wasn't the result of an explosive ejection. These monsters are collecting broken lenses on their own—collecting them and hiding them in the most important parts of their bodies."

"Collecting them themselves?!" Mu Sicheng was a little surprised. "I thought you said they were afraid of the mirror?"

"Yes, that's why they're collecting," Bai Liu's gaze gradually sank. "There are two teams collecting broken lenses in this game: us and the passengers. We collect because we want to gather the mirror, and they collect to stop us. They are afraid of this mirror, so they don't want us to collect all the broken lenses. They try to stop us by hiding their collected broken lenses on different bodies, in the most important parts, and we're the ones who go to grab them."

"Their weakness after we took the broken lenses wasn't because the lenses gave them strength—it was because the lenses they were afraid of were now in our hands. They weakened because they were afraid of us."

Mu Sicheng was a bit shocked. "But why are these passengers and monsters doing this?"

"There's only one reason..." Bai Liu's gaze fell on the mirror. "I suspect the mirror is the reason they're in this state."

The moment he said this, the mirror under the water lit up, and a blazing flame flared up inside. Zhang Gui, who had disappeared, appeared within the mirror.

Where Zhang Gui's eyes should have been was the triangular shard gap in the mirror, making it seem like he couldn't see. He mumbled suspiciously, walking around and tapping on the mirror. "Where is this place?"

But soon, Zhang Gui had no more time to wonder, as a blaze suddenly appeared behind him and began to burn him. Zhang Gui screamed and fled, flapping at the mirror as if trying to escape, but the flames relentlessly pursued him.

— Exactly the same as the passengers.

"I was wondering before why there were so many violently burned bodies in the explosion. Explosions usually cause impact wounds, not direct burns, but all the monsters we saw—the burst passengers and the thief brothers—were in pretty typical charred corpse form," Bai Liu looked at Zhang Gui in the mirror, who was burned to a crisp, and raised an eyebrow. "Now I think I know why."

Eventually, the flames in the mirror slowly extinguished, and Zhang Gui's charred corpse disappeared. The mirror's clean, polished surface clearly reflected the contents of the train. The only difference was—a broken lens appeared on the train in the mirror.

"Looks like we've found the last broken lens," Bai Liu pondered. "Sure enough, it was on the last monster."

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Bai Liu for completing all the background settings of "The Last Train to Explosion" and entering the final prologue - Mirror Train.]

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Bai Liu for unlocking all monster books.]

[Bursting Last Train Monster Book Refresh - Bursting Passengers (1/3)]

[Monster Name: Burst Passenger]

[Features: Very fast movement speed (1000 points of movement speed, flame has a bonus effect).]

[Weaknesses: Broken lenses, water, ghost mirrors.]

[Attack: Burned by the fire from the bursting passenger's body, life and spirit value will be reduced.]

[Explosive Last Train Monster Book Refresh - Brotherhood of Thieves (2/3)]

[Monster Name: Thief Brother]

[Features: Thief brother moves extremely fast (3400 points of movement speed, flame has a bonus effect), good at stealing. Thief brother is extremely strong and tall, moves extremely fast, can use a wide range of attacks within a minute (1400 points of movement speed, flame has a bonus effect, when angry likes to use fists to make the opponent obey, attack power is extremely strong).]

[Weaknesses: Broken lenses, water, ghost mirrors.]

[Attack: Scratch, Steal Flame Blast, Wild Hammer.]

[Bursting Last Train Monster Book Refresh - Ghost Mirror (3/3)]

[Monster Name: Ghost Mirror]

[Features: ????? (unknown, system cannot be explored)]

[Weaknesses: None at this time (players are not required to explore the monster's weaknesses)]

[Mode of attack: ????? (Unknown, to be explored)]

[You have triggered the Wandering Gods NPC Ghost Mirror!!!]

[Burst Last Train game copy survival rate is dropping extremely fast and is being recalculated... The original game pass rate was 23%, currently down to ??%!]

[Warning! Warning. This NPC is extremely dangerous and currently has no clear weakness. Once the NPC wants to kill, the player cannot use the weakness to escape and will only die. Please speed up the game cracking progress and leave the game before the NPC kills!]

[God-level NPC awakens after collecting the broken lenses, please leave the game as soon as possible after collecting the broken lenses!]

"Wow." Bai Liu looked at his panel, a bit surprised. He didn't panic at all when he encountered this situation. "Isn't this god-level NPC supposed to be hard to encounter? How come I've met it again?"

But Mu Sicheng's mind had completely collapsed. After checking his panel, he turned blue and white. He looked at Bai Liu with an expression twisted into a grimace and gritted his teeth, feeling as if he could not wait to darken Bai Liu. "How worthy of you with a luck value of 0."

"God ordained me to be this lucky to meet him every time," Bai Liu

shrugged. "There's nothing I can do about it."

Burst last train

"Shit!" Mu Sicheng cursed as he looked at the broken lens lying on the floor, reflecting in the mirror. "How do we get this broken lens out of the mirror? Zhang Gui was burned to death in there! Do we have to go in?"

"Calm down, Mu Sicheng. Zhang Gui was burned because his alienation value was cleared by the mirror," Bai Liu responded calmly, his voice steady. "According to the rules of the game, he needs to be turned into a monster in this copy before the mirror burns him to a crisp. From this point of view, as long as we keep our spirit value from dropping to zero, we should be safe in the mirror."

As he spoke, Bai Liu removed his diving mask and took a swig of psycho-bleach. He motioned for Mu Sicheng to do the same, signaling that they should finish the drink and enter the mirror.

Bai Liu had no sense of self-preservation, but Mu Sicheng couldn't help but think, You've only got one life!

Mu Sicheng was devastated and speechless, but it was a death sentence if they didn’t pass the game. He gritted his teeth and reluctantly drank the psycho-bleach.

Bai Liu’s calmness was unshaken, but the audience in front of the small TV was falling apart.

"Holy shit, no?! Another god-level NPC and a freaking mirror to enter? This is Nightmare difficulty, right?!"

"I saw Bai Liu go into the mirror with his hands and feet cold... he only has one life left..."

"Damn, I'm not happy about this!!! Go, Willow!!! I'm charging you up! It’s the last prologue! Hold on, we can win!!!"

"Willow, hold on!!!"

Wang Shun’s face was tense, sweat dripping down. Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu had transferred all their points from the game to Bai Liu. They were so scared they closed their eyes, too afraid to look at the TV. Their expressions were filled with fear and helplessness as they whispered with their hands folded, "God bless, God bless Bai Liu! He’s fine! Nothing must happen! Good people live in peace!"

Meanwhile, Bai Liu, in the mirror, remained unaware of the anxious onlookers. He was calm, with a life progress bar that had bottomed out.

The train rumbled on, filled with chattering high school students who had just finished their evening studies and social workers swiping their phones, their heads lowered from the night shift, some snorting in tiredness.

The noise of people and the crowd getting on and off the train was familiar to Bai Liu, the mundane routine of social life. No scorched corpses, no fires, no strange symbols. If Bai Liu didn't know he was in the game, he might've thought he'd returned to reality.

He glanced at the time on the LED screen in the train carriage: Z, Y, 20XX, 10:57 PM—the last train. If this were the real scenario, the train would explode after the next stop.

The sweet voice of a female announcer came through the speakers: "Next stop, LuJiaZui, direction of the final stop—Antique City. Please sit firmly and hold on, line up by the door in turn, get off first and then get on..."

Bai Liu stood in the carriage, remembering that he and Lu Yizhan had gotten off at the LuJiaZui stop. If this was a projection of the actual scene from the train's explosion, then... Bai Liu turned his head and walked through a couple of carriages, scanning the people. Finally, he spotted himself in the middle of one of the carriages, sitting with Lu Yizhan.

Like the other social animals on the train, Bai Liu's eyes were squinting at his mobile phone, occasionally lazily yawning. He had been laid off around that time and often worked late. Bai Liu didn't quite understand why Lu Yizhan insisted on waiting for him. It seemed like a schoolboy gesture, holding hands in the toilet together —something Bai Liu had found subtly irritating back then.

Lu Yizhan and Bai Liu had grown up together, and Lu Yizhan had gotten used to taking care of him. Bai Liu, now leaning against the seat, had his head in his arms, slowly drifting to sleep.

Lu Yizhan shook his head, helpless, as he took off his trench coat and draped it over Bai Liu's shoulders. His instincts as a police officer kicked in, and after covering Bai Liu, he stood next to him, his eyes sweeping the carriage. He looked at Bai Liu, met his eyes, and then casually looked away, as though nothing had happened.

Bai Liu looked away too. His figure seemed almost projected in a ghostly, translucent form, as if he had become a non-existent copy of the real Bai Liu, who was being covered by Lu Yizhan's trench coat.

Lu Yizhan couldn’t see him.

The train soon arrived at LuJiaZui station, and the doors opened. Bai Liu remembered they had gotten off there because Lu Yizhan had received an emergency call, even though Bai Liu was supposed to transfer to the final stop, Antique City. Lu Yizhan had insisted on taking him off the train, and Bai Liu had ended up taking a detour.

But this time, "Bai Liu" didn’t get off.

Lu Yizhan received the phone call and needed to get off, but "Bai Liu" was pretending to sleep, so Lu Yizhan tried waking him, but couldn’t. Finally, Lu Yizhan left his trench coat with "Bai Liu," who pretended not to want to go with him.

"Bai Liu" stood quietly, eyes closed, while the crowd and Lu Yizhan exited. As the minutes ticked by, "Bai Liu" still hadn’t gotten off.

Erratic patches began to flicker on Bai Liu’s face, as though the data was loading incorrectly.

The sweet voice of the announcement sounded again: "The train is about to start and arrive at its final destination..."

[System player information data loading error... Checking that player Bai Liu has died... Died in an explosion, cannot enter the game... Starting player Bai Liu data deletion... Player Bai Liu game data being deleted...]

Flickering, erratic panels began to appear on Bai Liu’s body, glitching and pixelating. But Bai Liu didn’t feel any tension. Instead, he raised an eyebrow and muttered, "I can’t believe this is actually reality."

This game had generated a highly recreated scene from his memory. Bai Liu thought it was likely constructed from the player's memories, but this game was beyond anything the real world could offer. As he watched the train, exactly as he remembered it, he began to suspect another possibility.

What if this wasn’t his memory at all, but reality? The game had transported him to the scene of the original bombing, back to the train that was about to explode. There was a clear discrepancy between the

scene here and his memory—Bai Liu remembered being too sleepy that day to train because of the cold.

This wasn't a scene derived from his memory. This was the last train he had been on before the explosion, and only something real could deviate so sharply from his memory.

He had been waiting for the train to start. If it had started, "Bai Liu" should have died in the explosion, and there would have been no game afterward. His appearance here was a paradox. The system had flagged it as a data error.

"Bai Liu" leaned his head against the seat, half asleep. He was really tired, but he wasn't going to stand by and watch himself die in his sleep on the last train before it exploded, even if he was just a projected data form.

Bai Liu clicked on the system panel to purchase a phone. Even though he was now in a virtual data mode, data could still influence reality through transmission.

He entered his phone number and dialed it. The call was answered immediately, and Bai Liu saw himself on the other end picking up the phone. He smirked slightly and adjusted his voice. "Hello, is this Mr. Bai Liu?"

"Yes, this is," the "Bai Liu" on the other end answered lazily. "Who's this?"

"I found Mr. Lu Yizhan's mobile phone and wallet with his ID and driver's license at the LuJiaZui underground station exit," Bai Liu lied smoothly. "Can you come pick it up?"

Lu Yizhan had just changed his phone, and it was a bit expensive. He used it with great care, but, as always, people tend to be careless and drop things, even the most treasured possessions.

A wallet and a new phone were more than enough to prompt action from Bai Liu.

"Bai Liu" paused for a moment, then stood up and walked towards the car door, stepping out just before it closed. He said softly, "Okay, stay at the exit gate, I'll come get it."

The glitchy patches on Bai Liu's face smoothed out as "Bai Liu" stepped out the door. He looked at Bai Liu on the platform through the closed

door, smiling with his head down. "Thank you. I won’t move."

Burst last train

Shortly after "Bai Liu" gets off the bus, Bai Liu's body materializes from a translucent data virtualization. He squeezes his palm thoughtfully; he can now touch the passengers around him.

I don't know if the virtualization of his existence is due to the fact that two Bai Liu's are in the same time and space, or if the fact that Bai Liu is not getting off the train and is about to die has caused his body to virtualize, but none of this matters.

The next stop was Antique City, and he was still on the train, which was about to explode in three minutes at the most.

"Bai Liu--!" Mu Sicheng's voice came from the crowded other carriage as he struggled to squeeze in next to Bai Liu, his face hard as hell. "How can we find the broken lens when there are so many people here? We're almost at the station! This last train is going to explode before we get there!"

"And I just tried, I wanted to get off at that platform." Mu Sicheng's tone was strained. "But I couldn't get off, it was like I was stopped by something on this train."

Instead of closing the conversation with Mu Sicheng, Bai Liu said to him, "This is the reality, because the real [you] is not on this train, so you can't do the action of [getting off], and [the real me] has just gotten off, so there is no way for me to get off again on a train that [I] have already gotten off. I can't get off again on a train that [I] have already gotten off of, the causality is not valid, it would cause the game logic to go haywire."

"What reality?!" Mu Sicheng said alertly. "Bai Liu, this is not reality, this is in a game! You're not down, are you? Are you hallucinating? What's this nonsense about getting out of the car?"

"That's not what I meant." Bai Liu nudged Mu Sicheng's shoulder with his finger, then pointed to the underground route map on the carriage. "Look at this route map. The last stop on Antique City is LuJiaZui, not the reservoir. And pay attention, this underground route is not circular either, it's a linear underground route. This is the underground map in our real world."

Mu Sicheng followed Bai Liu's hand and noticed this too. He frowned. "But we can't go back to reality, we are indeed in a game."

Bai Liu continued, seemingly enlightened. "When I say this is [reality], I don't mean we're back in real reality, this is [reality] as opposed to the train full of charred corpses we were in before. That place isn't really a game world, that place is just a constant loop mirror world."

"And this train we're standing on now," Bai Liu nudged his toes under his feet, his eyes leveling, "is the real game relative to reality, or you could say the parallel time and space resulting from the possibilities derived from a reality that has already happened. The prototype for this game is [the Mirror City bombing], and generally, the reference prototype for our games is that we have done well enough by highly reverting the events in the game. And this game, it has the ability to do much more than recreate events."

"It recreates the event scenario." Bai Liu looked to Mu Sicheng. "It takes us back to that point in time when the explosion occurred, and then at that point, it's up to us, the players, to manipulate it. It plays out the possible scenarios based on our manipulation, which leads to different consequences."

For example, Bai Liu's first reaction to the train was to find himself and Lu Yizhan. When Bai Liu entered the Mirror World, the 380 shattered lenses automatically entered his system backpack.

Bai Liu is virtual, but the mirror is real, and Bai Liu's proximity allows the residual heat on this mirror to warm the tired "Bai Liu," thus causing him to get really sleepy and keeping him from following Lu Yizhan off the train, as Bai Liu remembers.

But Mu Sicheng wasn't concerned with any of that. He just needed to know that Bai Liu knew that this place was still in the game, and with three minutes to go before the train exploded, Mu Sicheng was so desperate that he was focused on getting through the level and grabbing the key information from Bai Liu's words.

"A world of mirrors in a constant loop?" Mu Sicheng asked eagerly but rhetorically. "What does constantly cycling mean?"

"Don't you think there's a big logical flaw in our previous mission to collect broken lenses?" Bai Liu said lazily. "We were to collect broken lenses on a last train that was about to explode, right?"

Mu Sicheng nodded. "Yes."

"But -" Bai Liu lifted his eyes and looked at Mu Sicheng with a smirk. "- if this last train hadn't exploded, where did the broken lenses from

the explosion come from?"

"Unless it has exploded, we have the shattered lenses to collect after the explosion."

Mu Sicheng stalled completely for a second or two before coming back to his senses, muttering in a trance, "It's a constantly cycling last train that explodes over and over again... There's no use us collecting good shattered lenses in there, and when we're done collecting, we'll probably trap ourselves completely in that constant cycle of exploding last trains, so those passengers are thinking of ways to stop us. Grass – they're saving us silly players."

"Yes, I noticed before I got to the underground station that the lifts in the station were running in the opposite direction. And then the order of the passengers was also reversed, and even our mission was somehow 'reversed.'" Bai Liu explained clearly. "Our task was to collect the broken lenses, but in fact, the broken lenses had already been collected by [the passengers], and what we did instead was to scatter and grab the collected broken lenses again. It looked like we were doing the villain's job, and the passengers were right, which I guess is one of the properties of mirrors -- [reversing the nature of the object itself]."

"So I think the main quest in the mirror and the real main quest in this reality we're in should be reversed." Bai Liu's eyes were calm and lazy, his hand picking at the coin on his chest with a single movement. "In this reality we are in, the train hasn't exploded yet, that means the mirror is not broken at all. And the task in the mirror is to collect and piece together the mirror, so the reverse would be--"

Mu Sicheng realized something with a jolt. "We have to break the mirror!"

Bai Liu hooked his lips in a smile and snapped his fingers. "Bingo."

[System Alert: Congratulations to Player Bai Liu and Player Mu Sicheng for triggering the ultimate main quest – Break the Sinister Ghost Mirror and end the ever-looping Mirror Burst Last Train.]

[System Alert: Bai Liu has 380 broken lenses on his body. Please find the real mirror quickly and break it to clear the level.]

Mu Sicheng let out a long, fearful breath as he looked at Bai Liu, unable to resist a tsk. "You guys, even with all this brain fog?"

Three-minute countdown to explosion, one point of life, and this guy is actually in the mood to think about real-world missions. Isn't he burnt?!

"But where's the mirror?" Bai Liu is not anxious, but Mu Sicheng is. "There are six carriages on this train, and with two minutes to go, there's no way we can find every single one."

"No need to look." Bai Liu leaned unhurriedly against the door as he pointed. "I've been on this train before, and before I got off, I remembered that the pair of thieves were in this section, so I came straight over. And sure enough, they were in this section, noooo, standing in the center."

Mu Sicheng's eyes moved over to see two small and large thieving passengers standing in the crowd, pushing a huge suitcase in their hands, just big enough to put down a mirror. It should be in there, and a few people in suits standing next to them, probably museum staff. Mu Sicheng immediately realized that they were the thieving brothers. Bai Liu, a bit bemused: "Why didn't you go over there when you saw it already? Why are you standing here?"

Bai Liu spread his hands and laughed. "It's not waiting for you to steal the mirror, big thief. How do I have the skills to snatch something from another pair of thieves, which of course you have to do."

Mu Sicheng was stunned for a moment, then slowly curled his lips and snorted. "You're saving yourself a lot of trouble."

With those words, Mu Sicheng's eyes changed to a cold, frozen look as he adjusted the position of his headphones, donned his hood hat down over his eyes, and threw his right hand diagonally backward into a sharp, drawn-together monkey's paw as his form ghostly swung past the surrounding passengers.

Bai Liu didn't even see what Mu Sicheng had done before he heard the thieving brothers scream, "The mirror is gone! There are thieves!!!"

The crowd in the carriage stirred, and Bai Liu turned his head, feeling himself being lifted from the back of his collar.

Mu Sicheng flashed his knife expressionlessly and said the word "get out," and immediately the crowd shrieked and panicked as they moved out of the way and ran to the other carriages.

"Cool, Mu Sicheng, you're really not bad at doing bad things." Looking

at the instantly empty carriage, Bai Liu praised sincerely.

Mu Sicheng raised an eyebrow. "Each to his own."

Bai Liu crouched down and opened the case. Inside was the mirror, and it was intact. The moment Bai Liu put it up, he heard the system's piercing warning.

[System Warning: The moment the mirror is broken, God-level NPC will break the mirror, and all players in front of the mirror will be attacked indiscriminately. Please be careful of the broken mirror!]

The smile on Mu Sicheng's lips soon dissipated, and the only sound in the empty carriage was the wind being poured into the train and the small whimpers of passengers who were scared and crying by Mu Sicheng coming from the other carriage.

The sweet, feminine radio voice duly rang out.

"Coming to the end of the line–"

Burst last train

"You have a mermaid amulet, Mu Sicheng." Bai Liu turned his head sideways, looking at Mu Sicheng with no change in expression. "Did you bind this prop?"

Mu Sicheng blushed. "..... I bound it the first time I got it." He took out the mermaid amulet.

The face of the little white mermaid sculpture no longer resembled its previous model, but instead had the features of Mu Sicheng.

At that moment, Mu Sicheng realized what Bai Liu was trying to do—Bai Liu wanted to use the [Mermaid Amulet] prop, which would allow the player to escape instantly after breaking the mirror. However, the prop had already been bound by Mu Sicheng, so the only outcome now was clear.

"I'll break the mirror," Mu Sicheng said, taking the sculpture and taking a deep breath.

But it wasn't exactly safe. No one knew how fast the gods could kill, what their attack skills were, or whether there would be enough time for Mu Sicheng to use his prop.

"Bai Liu, you didn’t let me steal the mermaid amulet from the start just for this moment, did you?" Mu Sicheng looked both confused and bitter. "When exactly did you know the world we were in on the train was fake?"

"Well, I had an inkling when I saw that lift at the underground station running in the opposite direction and the circular underground track," Bai Liu responded honestly. "If I were to design a track in the game, I’d make it circular, probably just to loop."

Fuck, that was from the very beginning of the game! It wasn’t even on the bus yet!

Mu Sicheng felt like his mind had just snapped. That was when he realized—Bai Liu was practically a godlike NPC, a bug in the game!

Mu Sicheng closed his eyes. No matter how high the risk of death, he had no choice but to break the mirror and use the mermaid amulet to escape.

It was impossible for Bai Liu, who had only one point of life, to break the mirror himself, right?

Bai Liu clapped his hands and stood up as if nothing had happened. "I'll use the whip to break the mirror later. If the god-level NPC breaks the mirror and goes berserk, you need to use the mermaid amulet to escape."

Mu Sicheng went silent for a few seconds, then shook Bai Liu by the shoulders incoherently. "Who did you just say is going to break the mirror?!"

"Me." Bai Liu looked at Mu Sicheng as if he were strange. "I still need to collect the last page of the monster book, just short of the Ghost Mirror attack. I'm waiting for him to attack me."

Mu Sicheng: "....."

Mu Sicheng: "?????????"

Mu Sicheng: "?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?"

"Shit!!!" Mu Sicheng was completely stunned. All his usual methods of reasoning seemed to fail with Bai Liu, the psychopath. He looked at Bai Liu, who was now drawing the whip. "Hey, you're not really going to break the mirror yourself, are you?!"

Bai Liu gave him a sidelong glance. "Or do you want to come too?"

"Of course I don't want to come!!! But at least I have the mermaid amulet!!! How dare you be so reckless with what you have!" Mu Sicheng was furious, shaking Bai Liu in frustration. "What's wrong with you?! You only have one point of life left!"

Mu Sicheng said this as he drew a small sculpture of a pure white mermaid and flashed his "monkey claws" straight at the mirror. He chided coldly, "Alright, I'll break the mirror. You can log out as soon as it explodes and the game is over. Get the hell out of my way and find a place to hide, don't die at the end."

"Mu Sicheng, actually, for you to break the mirror is a very low-cost approach," Bai Liu's calm voice came from behind Mu Sicheng. "It's obvious that a god-level NPC will use a group attack when the mirror is broken. If I were to break it, you could still use the props to escape. But if you break it, the group attack will sweep me, and I'd probably die immediately, wasting the prop."

"It’s not cost-effective." Bai Liu judged calmly.

Mu Sicheng was becoming more and more speechless. "What the fuck is the point of talking about a good deal or a bad deal—"

"And," Bai Liu continued in his usual calm, clear voice, "Mu Sicheng, I said you were my most valuable card right now. It’s too bad if you die here. It’s just too little value for me."

Mu Sicheng fell silent as he realized... Bai Liu was serious.

He really thought it would be a waste.

Mu Sicheng turned to look at Bai Liu, his eyes filled with disbelief. Bai Liu stared back with no emotion. "Do you really want to break the mirror yourself and watch me die? Are you really a psycho?"

Bai Liu, pale and weak, smirked. "Mu Sicheng, didn’t you reject being controlled by me? So now you’re willing to die for me? Which one of us is the psycho?"

Mu Sicheng stood eerily silent—shit! That’s right! Wasn’t he being controlled? How did things get to this point?!

Oh yes, it was Bai Liu, the crazy bastard, who didn’t follow any rules at all. What kind of person controls another person to die for them?

"For the money." Bai Liu snapped his fingers, and a one-point coin suddenly appeared in his hand. He smiled abruptly. "For your residual value to me, Mu Sicheng I’m surprised you’re willing to stand in my way and help me break the mirror. That’s basically like you’re willing to die for me. But it’s a waste for you to die here."

Bai Liu lifted his eyes. "How about selling your soul to me? At least I won’t let you die for me so worthlessly. It’s the first time I’ve spent so many points on a soul. A thousand a point, eh, you’re worth at least a hundred thousand..."

Bai Liu sighed, "A hundred thousand... Should I reconsider?"

Mu Sicheng: "....."

What’s with this tone of regret after buying a luxury item on impulse? I’m not even worth $100,000 to you!

"Bai Liu," Mu Sicheng threatened expressionlessly, "If you keep fucking around, I’ll break the mirror and kill myself in front of you, costing

you a hundred thousand points."

Bai Liu quickly shut his mouth.

Burst last train

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mu Sicheng took the Mermaid's Amulet and moved to the front compartment, the one furthest from the mirror, as Bai Liu had instructed. Bai Liu.

A player with one point of life left and a god-level NPC about to appear—if it had been anyone else, Mu Sicheng would have assumed they were doomed.

But if it was Bai Liu...

Mu Sicheng took a deep breath, shaking off the thought. He must have been overthinking it. He had been misled by Bai Liu's strange personality—he actually thought Bai Liu would survive.

The guy who hoards his props and keeps his life under wraps? He would definitely survive.

After all, Mu Sicheng had only spent 100,000 on himself, and if Bai Liu hadn't come back to use it on him, Mu Sicheng would never have made it, even if Bai Liu, being so stingy, had become a ghost.

Shaking his head in amusement, Mu Sicheng gripped the mermaid amulet tightly, took a deep breath, and turned away.

Once Mu Sicheng was out of sight, Bai Liu, who had sold his soul to Mu Sicheng without props and pretended to be his brother, didn't hesitate to open the system panel.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu is logged into Player Muke's system panel...]

Bai Liu's face remained calm as he brought up the prop (mermaid's amulet).

A white mermaid stone sculpture fell into his hands, and Muke's mermaid amulet was unbound—just in time for Bai Liu to use it.

Bai Liu held the white fish bone whip in one hand and the sculpture in the other. He took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and stared into the mirror, murmuring to himself, "Tawil, I hope you are as I suspect—a

self-aware, intelligent wandering NPC. I hope you have more than seven seconds of memory when you're a mirror and can remember what you promised me when you were a mermaid."

Yes, Bai Liu had already investigated this god-like NPC before—Siren King, the god-like NPC of Siren Town, had told him the NPC's name was Tawil. But the original Siren Banshee's name had been Mede. Siren King had given Bai Liu a completely unrelated name. Furthermore, the previous Siren Banshee had said nothing about granting wishes to players.

This data had overwritten the original, and after learning about Tawil's self-aware behaviors, Bai Liu had come to define him as a [wandering NPC with intelligence]—an NPC with its own name, ideas, and memory, like an alternative player, moving between different games.

Bai Liu believed Tawil had his own memories, which was why he dared risk breaking the mirror.

First, Bai Liu had the mermaid amulet himself, and in essence, Mu Sicheng's broken mirror wasn't much different from his own situation.

Second, Tawil, the god-level NPC, had promised to grant him a wish. Judging from the other party's repeated emphasis on this point last time, this [wish] clearly had some weight to it.

Provided, of course, that Tawil hadn't forgotten.

Bai Liu closed his eyes, slowly adjusted his breathing, then opened them again. Gripping the bone whip tightly, he looked straight into the mirror and brought the whip down with a sharp crack.

The moment it landed, the train exploded, flames rushing like a tidal wave from the back.

The reflection of Bai Liu in the mirror shattered into a million pieces as the train whistled past, emitting a long, vibrating sound. The lenses scattered and vibrated, piecing together into a broken mirror.

In the mirror appeared a naked male figure, pale and gloomy, with a flawless torso and defined muscles. His face was adorned with fine lenses, resembling broken diamonds dotted beneath his eyes and on his smooth, perfect body.

Long, curly hair cascaded to his waist, silver and shining like mercury.

It presented itself in the shattered mirror like an artistic masterpiece.

As if awakening, he slowly opened his eyes, long eyelashes brushing the air. His pupils reflected the flames from the explosion, like flowing mirrors, emotionless.

The moment his eyes fully opened, all the windows of the train shattered, and the crowd screamed in panic. The shards of glass sliced through their throats in seconds, and blood sprayed everywhere. Mu Sicheng, at the rear of the carriage, was struck by a pile of flying lenses. As his life level hit zero, he glanced ahead, crushed his amulet with his teeth, and left the game.

[System Alert: The mirror has been broken. Player Mu Sicheng has cleared the level. Reward calculation in progress…]

Du Sanying climbed up from the flooded carriage in a daze. He looked at the train, which had come to an abrupt halt. Before he could react, everything before him shattered into pieces, crackling and scattering like a broken mirror.

[System Alert: The ghost mirror has been broken. The train in the mirror has been aborted. Players Du Sanying, Fang Ke, and Liu Huai have cleared the level. Reward calculation in progress…]

Tawil reached out, pressing his cold, bony fingers against the mirror. He looked down, slightly bored, as if awakening from a deep sleep had made him uncomfortable. He muttered, “It’s so noisy.”

The explosion paused for a moment.

Iron splashes and panicked crowds froze in midair.

Behind Bai Liu, flames surged towards him. He was surrounded by hovering, trembling shards of glass, almost enveloping him entirely. Yet, the sharp edges of the shards pointed at him, trembling slightly but not attacking. They slipped from his fingers like white sand.

Bai Liu looked at Tawil in the mirror and released a long, steady breath. He smiled, genuine warmth in his expression, “It’s been a long time, Tawil.”

Since Tawil hadn’t attacked him yet, Bai Liu grinned, “So you remember me?”

Tawil in the mirror gazed at him, long hair flowing like silvery waves.

He spoke, faintly, “It hasn’t been that long, Bai Liu. You were the last person I saw when I woke up, and it’s hard to forget you after such a short time.”

“Really?” Bai Liu chuckled softly. “Do you remember the last time you promised to grant my wish?”

Tawil paused, then spoke calmly, “Have you thought about what you want to wish for?”

“Yes,” Bai Liu smiled. “Attack me. Attack me in a way that won’t kill me, Tawil. That’s what I want.”

Tawil fell silent for a moment, then said, “I rarely see a human like you. Do you… enjoy it when I attack you?”

If Bai Liu had known that his response here would deepen Tawil’s misunderstanding, he might have taken the questions more seriously. But now, on the verge of completing the game and facing Tawil—an NPC he admired—Bai Liu relaxed and, with a smirk, couldn’t resist teasing his opponent: “Maybe I like it because you play with me? Maybe we have a special bond, and that’s why I’m like this?”

A small, confused expression appeared on Tawil’s face, but it quickly faded. He scanned Bai Liu from head to toe with an emotionless gaze. “You only have one life left. You’ll die from any of my attacks.”

Bai Liu shrugged. “That’s what you think. But that’s what I wish for.”

Tawil stared at him for a long moment, then slowly, tentatively, poked his head out of the mirror. He lowered his long, light-colored eyelashes and, with surprising gentleness, gave Bai Liu a soft bite on the lips.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has been attacked by the God-level NPC Lord of the Ghost Mirror!]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has -0.5 life value. Only 0.5 life value left. Please exit the game as soon as possible!]

“Is this okay?” Tawil asked, his voice almost a whisper, his eyelashes fluttering gently.

Bai Liu, slightly uncomfortable, turned his head, wiping the spot where Tawil had left a tooth mark. Not sure what to say, he simply nodded. “... That’ll do. Thank you.”

Last time... Tawil seemed to have kissed him in the same spot. This NPC seemed to like his lips a bit? It must have been a mistake...

[Explosive Last Train Monster Book Refresh - Ghost Mirror]

[Monster Name: Ghost Mirror (God-level NPC)]

[Features: ????? (unknown, system cannot be explored)]

[Weaknesses: None (players are not required to explore the monster's weaknesses)]

[Attack: Fish Tail Strike, Face Bite (2/????) (Note: Since the maximum number of attacks cannot be determined, the player is judged to have set all of them when one is set)]

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Bai Liu for collecting the "Bursting Last Train Monster Book."]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has subdued the monster in the mirror. The game is cleared. Reward calculation in progress…]

Bai Liu vanished in front of Tawil like a shattered lens of light. He waved goodbye with a smile, “Thanks, Tawil. See you next time.”

Tawil lowered his eyes, caressing his lips where he had bitten Bai Liu. He whispered, “... It’s still hot.”

A warmth entirely different from the cold mirrors and frigid mermaids. Unlike the others, Bai Liu hadn’t turned into a lifeless corpse in fear and resentment, nor had he become a monster like Tawil. Instead, Bai Liu remained warm, smiling, and saying, “See you next time, Tawil!”

So strange.

So warm.

Next time they meet... what will Bai Liu think of him? Would he still speak so casually if he knew Tawil’s true nature?

“See you next time, Bai Liu,” Tawil murmured, closing his eyes where Bai Liu had disappeared.

In an instant, the mirror shattered completely. The train was engulfed in a violent explosion. The crowd screamed in panic, but Tawil remained unmoved, closing his eyes and sleeping in the shattered

lenses that had been lightly kissed, waiting for the next meeting.

A lingering warmth from the lips that did not belong to him.

Chapter End Notes

This is the end of the second arc!!!

Lobby

From the moment Bai Liu enters the mirror, pointing out that this is a game reality and that the mirror is meant to be broken, the audience in front of the small TV holds its breath in silence.

When Bai Liu proposes to break the mirror himself and God Mu refuses, the audience stirs with sadness and discomfort.

"Bai Liu is really nice to God Mu; these two should be good friends, but this is a game. I still want Bai Liu to let God Mu break the mirror..."

"...I'm a God Mu fan, eh, I was annoyed with people comparing Bai Liu to God Mu. Now I just have mixed feelings... I don't want Bai Liu to die at all, but I don't want God Mu to die either..."

"I can't look at them both. I love them both, I can't accept either of them dying. Bai Liu is so good, he must have a solution, right?"

"Bai Liu has only a little bit of life left, what else can you do? Do you think he's a god? I think Mu Sicheng should go!"

When Bai Liu finally persuades Mu Sicheng to go first, Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu, who are at the back, panic. Not knowing Mu Sicheng well at all, they hope that Bai Liu can make it through. They anxiously watch as Bai Liu volunteers to die.

Some members of the audience disapprove of Bai Liu's actions, but more admire his loyalty to his friends. Bai Liu said he would not let Mu Sicheng die, so he protected him from start to finish.

"Eh, I want to cry. It's a shame. If God Mu and Bai Liu had survived, they would have been no less than the fifth or sixth best players in the overall standings."

"In fact, Mu Sicheng is very strong, just short of a helper. Otherwise, he would have climbed higher than Zhang Gui. His personal skills are very promising. He is the only player in the Rising Stars list who survived stealing against Spades. If Mu Sicheng is willing to be the knife in Bai Liu's hand, the two of them would rise in the rankings quickly."

"Stop it, actually Bai Liu and Du Sanying have a good compatibility..."

As soon as the mirror shatters and the godly NPCs emerge, it causes the audience to lose mental value, just like what happened in Siren Small Town. By the time the group of audience members dizzily comes back to their senses after being overwhelmed with mental value bleach by the system, Bai Liu's small TV goes black.

There are only two things that can happen when the screen goes black —the player has either died or passed the level.

Wang Shun bows his head somberly, and the other players follow suit, offering a silent gesture of respect for the departure of the player they liked and respected the most.

Bai Liu is unlikely to be alive.

Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu stumble and push the other players forward. The Bai Liu who had helped them take revenge was like a child to them. Still in a daze, they try to grab Bai Liu's little TV, their eyes hazy with tears.

Liu Fu barely manages to stay calm as he helps Xiang Chunhua to her feet, his own face covered in grief. Yet, he keeps his wits about him. "If Bai Liu is really in trouble like Guoguo, let's go earn points in the game and bring them back!"

The next second, the small TV lights up and the emotionless mechanical voice of the system announces:

"Congratulations to Bai Liu for unlocking all the main quests and the monster book to clear 'Last Train to Explosion'."

Since the explosion, the dead passengers have been trapped here day after day by the horrible mirror, repeating the same pain they felt for an hour before they died, screaming, wailing, hiding, and secretly hiding pieces of the mirror. But unfortunately, one day, someone stopped the last train of the mirror, which had been burned by fire, and the passengers walked out of the train smiling. Even though they were dead, they could finally arrive at the station...

Wang Shun looks up in amazement as Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu fall to their knees in shock, then cover their mouths in tears of joy.

"Alive!!! He made it through!" Xiang Chunhua shouts, her voice hoarse, breaking the overly silent atmosphere.

After a few seconds of confused and unbelievable stagnation, the

audience bursts into tears and laughter.

"Shit, shit, shit!!! How did this guy survive? One point of life!!! That's a god-tier NPC! How did he pull it off?"

"Don't even think about it!!! He's alive!!! Give credit for the charge collection!!! Charge the last promotional spot!!! Hurry!!!"

"Yes, yes, yes!!! We're at the bottom of the promotion! Go Bai Liu! Comrades, we can't let this kind of player get buried! Let's go! Let's see if we can help him reach the Nightmare Rising Star promotion spot!"

"Du Sanying and Mu Sicheng are both third and fourth on the Nightmare Nova list. I looked at the other positions, and they are all filled. So, I guess it's a long shot. Bai Liu, this player's luck is really bad."

"So many Rising Star players are rushing for promotion spots now. Bai Liu is having a bit of trouble getting on Nightmare Rising Star. I don't think it's going to happen. The core audience is still too small to be noticed. It's too bad, it's clearly such a great gameplay video."

"So are we still rushing? It feels hopeless..."

The system beeped abruptly: [Player Du Sanying and player Mu Sicheng have highly recommended player Bai Liu's small TV!]

The audience is stunned, and many of them quickly react, immediately going onto the forum to see what's going on and exclaiming.

"Shit! Mu Sicheng put his recommendation screen on Bai Liu's little TV as soon as he got out of the game! Mu Sicheng went straight to the forums and said he'd give three people a free level 1 game to the player who liked Bai Liu!!!"

"Over here Du Sanying also hung up Bai Liu's little TV! Du Sanying also said in the forum that ten players who give Bai Liu a like and a favorite recommendation will get a free system prop worth 600 points!"

"Fuck!!! These two guys in the promotion are pushing hard to help Bai Liu get in position! They put Bai Liu's little TV right in the middle of the screen! They don't care if they get the promotion spot or not!"

"I'm tearing up! Is this what friendship between men is all about? Bai

Liu, give me a charge!!! I won't give up on you either!!!"

"Charge!!! Bai Liu!!! You are the nightmare and the rising star!!!"

A steady stream of viewers, curious or unaware of anything, perhaps only from Du Sanying and Mu Sicheng's little TVs, made the group cry and scream with excitement at what kind of player was on that small TV screen.

But they were all aware that without this man's presence in that terrible nightmare of a game, there would have been no player to pass.

In a way, Bai Liu is a worse nightmare than a nightmare for the players who died, but also a shining star for those who survived.

"Almost there! Ahhhhhh just a little more!"

[System Alert: Player Fang Ke and player Liu Huai have highly recommended player Bai Liu's TV!]

Wang Shun let out a long breath as he looked up at Bai Liu's tiny TV, which he had initially found from the edge of the central hall, and now had to look up at the small TV that had been placed among millions of people to be admired and watched.

No player has ever made it to the Nightmare Rising Star list in two games—except for that legendary player, the number one player in the overall standings in this game, [Spades].

But Wang Shun has a feeling that this record will soon be broken by Bai Liu.

[System Alert: All data for player Bai Liu's small TV goes into final accounting...]

The audience stops charging and tapping their hands, watching Bai Liu's small TV with some trepidation, whispering.

"Aaaahhhhhh, I'm so nervous, can I rush up there!"

"We all tried our best. If we can't rush up... ooooooooooooo I'll cry a big cry next time, then I'll rush for my 6 brothers!"

"I'm not asking for much, really, just 10th on the Nightmare Rising Stars list, although I know that's asking a lot already..."

[100,007 people liked Bai Liu's TV, 126,700 people favorited Bai Liu's TV, 41,190 people charged Bai Liu's TV, player Bai Liu got 67,100 points.]

[Player Bai Liu got over 100,000 likes in one minute and gained over 60,000 points for charging! You are loved by the audience!]

[Congratulations to player Bai Liu for gaining the final promotion spot and entering second position in the Central Screen Nightmare Rising Star Chart. The views are rising rapidly...]

There was a long, frozen silence in front of the small TV as all the audience slowly, as if they couldn't believe what they had done, grew their mouths wide and then exploded into a frenzy of laughter, cheers, and screams that would have tipped the small TV section of Bai Liu over.

"ohhhhhh-!!!"

"Bai Liu is just the dopest!!!!"

"Holy crap!!! Nightmare Nova II!!!!!!"

Lobby

Central Hall Nightmare Nova screen.

It was a black TV room, designed in an inky modern-industrial style. Black curtains covered the walls, dotted with small fragments of bright silver and gold, resembling a dreamy summer night sky. But upon closer inspection, the illusion shattered—bloody handprints stained the curtains, and those delicate silver and gold fragments were not decorative at all. They were pieces of metal dentures, glued onto the fabric like grim trophies.

In this world, a Rookie was defined as a player who had played less than 52 games. A player who played once a week for a year could still be called a Rookie, and those at the top of the Nightmare Rookie rankings were the best among them.

The Nightmare Nova hall had ten screens, reserved for the day's top ten newcomers based on overall points. The competition was always fierce—players would ascend to the rankings only to be quickly pushed out again. But today, something strange was happening.

On the second, third, and fourth screens, the same small TV was displayed.

Bai Liu's.

Wang Shun rushed over, eyes widening. Bai Liu was in second place. Yet, Du Sanying in third and Mu Sicheng in fourth had also placed Bai Liu's small TV at the center of their screens. It looked as though Bai Liu alone had taken up three of the Nightmare Rising Star promotion spots. More and more viewers, drawn by the anomaly, gathered around, murmuring in confusion.

"Who's this new guy?! Taking up three screens—insane."

"It's that Bai Liu! The one who was causing a stir on the forums. You don't follow drama? A whole group of people were saying that if you ran into Zhang Gui, you'd either end up dead or become his puppet."

"I remember people cursing him back then. His first solo game earned a ridiculous number of charge points, and a lot of low-ranked players were jealous, saying he was just showing off and would get struck by lightning sooner or later. Now he's on the Nightmare Rising Star list. If this guy really is ruthless, catches a few of those haters, and kills them

in-game… Well, we'll see who gets struck by lightning."

A list of Bai Liu's achievements flashed across the screens:

[Explosive Last Train – TRUE END LINE PASS] – 30,000 Bonus Points
[Attribute Points Reward] – 100 points (Upgradeable based on player's needs)
[Monster Book – Bursting Passenger Pages] – 20 shattered lenses (Quality Unknown) – Collect all to unlock the full item.
[Monster Book – Thieves' Brotherhood Page] – Reward for completing the set: One Black Thief's Finger (Good Quality), 60 shattered lenses (Quality Unknown).

The Black Thief's Finger acts as a third hand, allowing the user to steal from others without being noticed.

[Monster Book – Ghost Mirror Page] – Mirror Frame (Quality Unknown) – Core tool for assembling the shattered lenses. Requires 400 pieces to complete.

[Total Collection Reward – Passenger's Blessing (Excellent Quality)]

The passengers are grateful to you for saving them from their fate and grant you their blessing. As long as you sit on a mode of transport, their spirits will watch over you and prevent monsters from harming you.
(Note: The transport must be part of the game environment and cannot be carried by players.)

Then came the system's announcement:

[System: Player Bai Liu's Overall Rating for this Small TV]

Likes: 153,266
Favorites: 196,835
Total Points Earned: 94,802
Dislikes: 1,359
Bai Liu's gameplay video had clearly gained an extraordinary level of attention.

[Rating: Silver Badge Video]

However, due to the 1:112 like-dislike ratio, the rating is adjusted to Silver.
Player Bai Liu's gameplay video has been added to the VIP Library.

[VIP Library Access]

Players must become VIP members and pay 60 points to watch Bai Liu's video.
Revenue split: 50/50 between Bai Liu and the system.

[Bai Liu's Achievements for This Small TV]

First player to leave the Graveyard Bounce area recently
Nightmare Rising Star List #2
One of the first players to clear Explosive Last Train
First player since Spades to reach the Nightmare Rising Star list in his second game
—

When Bai Liu emerged from the boarding exit, he was greeted by a familiar sight—Mu Sicheng, arms crossed, leaning against the wall.

Mu Sicheng eyed him up and down, disbelief written all over his face. "I figured you had a backup plan, but seriously—how the hell did you get out of there? That was a god-tier NPC…"

Bai Liu smiled enigmatically. "Want to know?"

Mu Sicheng hesitated, then gave a small nod.

Bai Liu held out a hand. "Buy the information with points."

Mu Sicheng: "....."

"You just made over 100,000 charge points, and you're trying to scam me for money?" Mu Sicheng scowled. "You're obsessed with profit."

Bai Liu's smile grew warmer. "You only have one Black Thief's Finger, right? It's a rare thief item, very useful. Wouldn't you like to complete the set?"

"I have one, too." Bai Liu looked at him innocently.

Mu Sicheng: "....."

"How much do you want?" he asked, resigned.

Bai Liu's smile was all too pleasant. "The remaining 320 mirror pieces."

"...I only have 80 shattered lenses," Mu Sicheng pointed out. Then,

realization dawned. His eyes widened. “Wait. Shit, you’re planning to make me collect the rest for you?! Why the hell would I do that?!”

Bai Liu replied smoothly, “You were going to collect your Black Thief’s Fingers anyway. Why not pick up my pieces while you’re at it?”

Mu Sicheng let out a humorless laugh. “You do realize that Fang Ke and Liu Huai are guild players, right? They have to hand over rare items to the King’s Guild. Thief’s Black Finger is a strong personal item, so they might be allowed to keep it. But those shattered lenses? Those are different. They have god-tier NPC attributes. The system can’t even calculate their effects. The last item with similar properties —your whip—was ridiculously overpowered. And now you want the lenses, too?”

He crossed his arms. “The King’s Guild is definitely going to try to collect all the shattered lenses.”

Bai Liu mused, “And how exactly do they plan to take ours?”

Mu Sicheng raised three fingers.

“Three ways: 1. Buy them—like they did with Du Sanying. He sold his for 60,000 points.”

Bai Liu sighed. “Sounds about right. He avoids anything that brings bad luck.”

“2. Steal them—which, let’s be honest, only you have ever tried on me.”

“3.” Mu Sicheng’s smirk widened. “The simplest, most effective method—kill you in-game and take them.”

Bai Liu chuckled. “And yet, you didn’t sell yours to them. Seems like you’re ready to be hunted down with me.”

Mu Sicheng huffed, looking away before punching Bai Liu lightly in the arm.

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng gave Player Bai Liu 80 shattered lenses.]

“Alright,” Mu Sicheng muttered, a strange glint in his eye. “What should we name our group?”

Bai Liu tilted his head. “Rangers and Monkeys.”

Mu Sicheng sputtered. “What the hell?! Are you calling me a monkey?!”

Little did he know, that name would soon strike terror into countless players.

Reality

Not long after Bai Liu left the game, he was walking and talking with Mu Sicheng.

"What's this panel attribute point?" Bai Liu asked, pointing at the reward in his Bursting Last Train bonus. "Does this mean I can distribute it freely to boost my panel attributes?"

"Yes and no," Mu Sicheng replied simply. "A player's rating in this game is based on four attributes: Strength, Agility—also called Speed—Attack, and Resistance. The attribute points you gain can only be allocated to these four."

Bai Liu pondered this. "I didn't get any attribute points in my last game."

Mu Sicheng rolled his eyes. "That's because it's an extra reward from the system. Last time, you already got a [Personal Skill] as your extra reward for the newbie single-player game. Now you want an attribute point, too? You're really greedy. These points are rare—even a level two game only rewards 100 points. The system is stingy. And it's not like you can keep stacking them indefinitely. Once you reach your potential limit, your panel attributes won't increase no matter how many points you have."

"But," Mu Sicheng hesitated slightly before continuing, "most people don't live long enough to reach their potential limit. For players who aren't backed by a large guild or aren't extremely skilled, even surviving long enough to accumulate attribute points is difficult. There is a faster way to gain them, but very few people use it."

Bai Liu glanced at him. "What way?"

"Competing in the leagues," Mu Sicheng whispered. "That's how Spades became an S-rank and beyond. The leagues award high attribute points to winning players."

Before Mu Sicheng could say more, several colorful virtual fireworks suddenly exploded in the game lobby. They formed glowing words that immediately attracted the attention of passing players.

[Breaking news! Breaking news! The annual Horror Game League is here! Don't miss out—it's the biggest event of the year for all gamers!]

Players murmured among themselves at the sight.

"Wow, which guild is rich enough to start buying system fireworks for advertisements this early?"

"The support season officially starts this week. All the major guilds are going to start pushing their players like crazy. Last time, the King's Guild spent 10 million points on advertising and nearly bankrupted themselves..."

As the virtual fireworks landed on players, their system panels automatically popped up, displaying a grand promotional screen for the tournament.

[System Event – Horror Game League is about to begin!]

[Players can choose their participation status: League Player or Spectator.]

[As a League Player, you must battle against others in the field, regardless of life or death. As a Spectator, you can enjoy thrilling matches, support your favorite teams and players, and send in cheers.]

[This is a game of life and desire. Have you chosen your place? Will you be a reckless participant chasing victory, or a calm spectator watching from above?]

…

[Entry Requirements: Players must form a team of 5, with each member having played at least 52 games.]

[Format: Each matchup consists of a Team Match, a Pairs Match, and a Singles Match. The team with the highest combined score advances to the next round.]

(Note: If a player dies during the tournament, they can be replaced by a new member.)

…

There were also various other details, such as the system shop being disabled for tournament participants.

Fireworks fell on Bai Liu as well, triggering the same system notification on his screen. He skimmed through the information—it felt a lot like a real-life e-sports competition.

Bai Liu wasn't particularly interested. After all, this was a horror game, not a competitive fighting game.

What did surprise him was that such a league even existed. Mu Sicheng, however, seemed completely unsurprised. He clicked his tongue, closed the system notification, and grumbled, "Ugh, here we go again. The guilds and the system are going to start spamming ads everywhere. Support season is really starting."

"Support season?" Bai Liu turned to him. "What does that mean? Is this the league you were talking about, the one with high panel attribute point rewards?"

Mu Sicheng nodded impatiently. "Yeah. Just scroll down, and you'll see—it's all promotional spam. Viral marketing everywhere."

Bai Liu scrolled further down the system page and, as Mu Sicheng said, it was filled with various guild and player promotions. Team posters, individual player posters—each accompanied by a "like" and "charge" button. The rankings were determined by the total number of likes and charges received.

The top-ranking solo player's poster featured a man in profile, with long bangs covering his eyes.

His lips were pale, his jawline sharp. A long black whip coiled around his cold, slender wrist, its handle gripped lightly in his hand. His head was slightly tilted upward, his slanted eyes half-lidded, exuding a chilling arrogance.

Even though Bai Liu wasn't particularly perceptive about human beauty, he could tell that this man's features were striking—artistic, even.

If Tawil was like the ethereal glow of the moon, then Spades was an unsheathed blade—sharp, dangerous. Looking at him for too long would leave you cut.

Bai Liu clicked on his profile.

[Player: Spades]

[Current combined support value: 1.3 million – Ranked #1 among all participants. Unlocking reward: Death-Free Gold Medal.]

(Note: Players with high system popularity are granted a one-time

death exemption during matches. When in a near-death state, they will be forcibly removed from the game and placed under system protection.)

[Total Points Ranking: #1]
[Affiliated Guild: Killer Sequence]

Bai Liu scrolled down to the second-ranked player. Compared to Spades' casual street-shot poster, this one was highly stylized—clearly retouched by a professional team.

It featured a woman in a dazzling red cheongsam, with snow-white skin and cascading black curls. Her almond-shaped eyes and red lips exuded sultry charm. A small heart symbol was tattooed under her right eye. She sat with her legs crossed, wearing satin black high heels and sheer stockings, lazily shuffling a deck of cards.

Her expression was languid, seductive, radiating a magnetic allure. Even through the screen, she gave off an intoxicatingly decadent aura.

Bai Liu recognized the name beneath her image.

[Player: Hearts Queen]

[Current combined support value: 970,000 – Ranked #2 among all participants. Unlocking reward: Death-Free Gold Medal.]

[Total Points Ranking: #2]
[Affiliated Guild: King's Crown]

.....

As Bai Liu watched, Mu Sicheng explained, "In this game, every year after August, there's a gaming league. Players can form their own teams to participate. Of course, for ordinary players, it's just a death sentence. The league belongs to the big guilds. They have deep resources, and in order to promote their participating players, they set off fireworks in the game and pull all kinds of stunts. We call it the 'support season.'"

"The guilds also raid the game to stock up on props, preparing and boosting the attributes of their competing players."

"All this scavenging and promotion is annoying. For players like me, who don’t care about the league, it makes it harder to even get the props I actually need," Mu Sicheng complained. "This year, I heard the

Puppet Master was supposed to be a reserve for the King's Guild team. That's why they invested so much in training him. He himself was raiding like crazy for new puppets. I didn't expect him to die at your hands. Now they'll have to replace him."

"The King's Guild has big ambitions this year. They also recruited a newcomer called 'Little Witch'—her personal skill restores HP, which is extremely rare in the game. All the major guilds were fighting over her, but the King's Guild managed to snatch her up. She was even ranked first on the Rising Star list."

"I heard they were planning to use the Puppet Master's control skill alongside Little Witch's healing ability to form a rather strange tactic, and they were already practicing it. But now that Zhang Gui got eliminated by you, they'll have to change their strategy."

At this, Mu Sicheng let out a gloating snort.

Bai Liu glanced at the promotional panel showcasing different teams and players. After pondering for a moment, he asked, "I've always found it odd—why is the audience's bounty in a life-or-death game like this so insanely high? Just the first-tier charge alone adds up to 1.5 million. And there's even an esports-style competitive event?"

"The audience members are just regular players too. Isn't it strange for them to be so entertained by something where real lives are at stake?"

Mu Sicheng swiped at his system panel and handed it to Bai Liu. "Because what they're doing isn't just charging points—it's betting. The players only receive 10% of it, the system takes 5%, and the rest goes into the gambling pool."

[System Reminder: 85% of the charge points wagered on a player before a match will enter the gambling system. If that player wins, the spectators who bet on them will receive the loser's charge points.]

[A little gambling is good for the soul, but excessive gambling is harmful to the body. Please charge responsibly and bet in moderation.]

"1.5 million is nothing," Mu Sicheng said. "You didn't see last year's finals—both sides charged up to a hundred million in points. And this is just the start of the support season. The numbers will keep going up."

"Most of the time, spectators only throw pocket change at players like

us to train and develop newcomers."

"One hundred million charge points…" Bai Liu's mind veered off track. He did some quick calculations. Even if the winning player only got 10%, that was still ten million points…

Ten million points. Ten million points. Ten million points… Bai Liu's gaze deepened.

Mu Sicheng continued cluelessly, "The champion's prize is 100 million points—both for solo and team divisions. There's also an attribute point reward for first place in the group tournament, but it varies from year to year. Between the prize money and the charge draw profits, the total earnings are astronomical. That's why guilds fight tooth and nail to prepare for the season."

Bai Liu's fingers hovered over his system panel for five seconds. His eyes froze on the words [100 million points each] for a long moment before he took a deep, steady breath and swiftly flipped to the registration screen he had skimmed earlier.

Screw the story game experience. He wanted in. He had to get in.

At that moment, Bai Liu's mind was filled with nothing but that 100 million points. It was no exaggeration to say that his eyes had transformed into gleaming coins at the thought. He scrolled quickly to the registration screen:

[Registration Deadline: 2 months : 1 day : 7 hours : 34 minutes]

[Entry requirements not met: 50 game copies, 4 teammates]

Not even close.

Bai Liu cooled down slightly and thought rationally. He had only 61 days left and needed to clear 50 game copies. That meant completing at least one game per day—faster than real-world time. Even if time inside the game flowed differently, playing one game per day was a massive strain. Honestly, the game already took a significant toll on him; otherwise, he wouldn't need so much sleep after every session.

But then his eyes flicked back to the 100 million point reward.

Mu Sicheng was still rambling, "But this has nothing to do with us newcomers this year. You need to clear 52 copies to qualify. I usually finish one per week, and even now, I've only done 26. With just two

months left, there's no way to hit that number…"

As he spoke, Mu Sicheng met Bai Liu's gaze.

He shuddered and instinctively took two steps back. "Bai Liu… why are you looking at me like that?"

Bai Liu smiled. "Pulling all-nighters to grind games, my friend? Fifty games in two months?"

Mu Sicheng: "?????"

Mu Sicheng and Bai Liu logged out together—from Bai Liu's place.

Mu Sicheng had wanted to contact Bai Liu offline, but the game didn't allow direct conversations about personal real-world information, like addresses or phone numbers. Just as it blocked in-game discussions outside the game, any attempt to mention things like WeChat or QQ numbers would be censored. The fastest way to meet up was simply to log out from the same player's logout point.

Each player's logout was a 12-digit code, similar to a password. Entering it upon logout would transport the player to the corresponding location.

By default, the logout code was set to the player's initial login location. Since Bai Liu had first logged in from his rented apartment, the game generated a logout code linked to his home.

Mu Sicheng, still a university student, had logged in from his dormitory. If Bai Liu had logged out there, he'd have been arrested on the spot. So they chose Bai Liu's small, rented room instead.

As soon as they logged out, Mu Sicheng groaned, "Bai Liu, listen to me—don't do it. You don't have enough entries. How are we supposed to compete with just the two of us—"

He abruptly stopped mid-sentence, eyes widening in shock at the sight of the delicate boy sleeping on Bai Liu's bed.

Tear-streaked and exhausted, Muke lay curled up, his face marked by dried tears. Red welts were visible on his wrists and ankles, like he'd been bound or whipped.

Mu Sicheng stiffened. "...What the hell?"

Bai Liu didn't even spare Muke a second glance. He walked past the bed indifferently and casually remarked, "We have three. He's competing too."

"?????" Mu Sicheng's expression was full of question marks. "Wait, Bai Liu, are you serious? Who even is this guy?"

It wasn't that Mu Sicheng didn't recognize Muke. He just never expected the rookie from Bai Liu's last game to show up like this—in Bai Liu's bed.

Bai Liu turned his head and answered calmly, "Muke. The new player I brought out last time. I'll be taking him along to grind."

Mu Sicheng gaped at him. "Bai Liu, you're a lunatic! You might be able to grind 50 copies, but Muke's a newbie! Do you even know what it means for a player to exit a game with physical injuries? You and I came out unscathed."

Bai Liu adjusted his tie, his gaze shifting toward the marks on Muke's wrists before settling back on Mu Sicheng. "Under what conditions does a player retain injuries upon exiting?"

Mu Sicheng leaned back lazily in his chair. "Only when a player is under extreme fear—like when their mental value drops below 10. At that point, they can no longer distinguish the game from reality. They genuinely believe they're injured, so the game lets them carry the wounds out."

He gestured toward Muke and raised an eyebrow. "And you want to take him into the competition?"

Mu Sicheng looked at the fragile boy lying on the bed—Muke—with clear disapproval before turning his sharp gaze to Bai Liu, who, despite his composed demeanor, also appeared physically delicate.

"A player coming out of a game with injuries only means their mental state is weak and their panel potential is low," Mu Sicheng said, raising an eyebrow. "If I remember correctly, Muke doesn't even have a personal skill, right? Are you seriously taking him to the tournament? That's no different from feeding him to the competition."

Bai Liu didn't miss a beat. He looked up at Mu Sicheng and replied evenly, "In a way, I only got through Burst Last Train because of him."

In the end, Bai Liu had relied on Muke's [Mermaid's Amulet] as a

trump card to face the god-ranked NPCs. It was also because of that same amulet that Mu Sicheng had been drawn into the game.

By Mu Sicheng's own words, for Muke to leave the game with injuries, he must have reached a state of extreme fear and desperation in his own copy.

And yet, he hadn't used the Mermaid's Amulet to save himself.

Despite being so terrified that he could no longer distinguish reality from the game, Muke had held onto his most precious survival item and instead made the effort to escape with it intact—simply because Bai Liu had mentioned before entering the game that he might need it.

It was the same choice Mu Sicheng had made in Burst Last Train.

"You and he hold the same value in my heart, Mu Sicheng." Bai Liu's voice was calm, his gaze unwavering. "Because in your most desperate moments, you both kept your word to me. I respect that—and for that very reason, I cannot break my word to you either. I told him that if he could make it out on his own this time, I would train him and make sure he survives."

Bai Liu's eyes lowered briefly to Muke's bruised form on the bed. "Just as I wouldn't abandon you, I won't abandon him either."

His voice was quiet, but firm. "Because you've both proven your worth to me."

Reality

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bai Liu turned around and continued knotting his tie, but Mu Sicheng was stunned.

While the two men were talking, Muke woke up with a cry, sweating and twitching. His arms and legs jerked as he sat up, shaking uncontrollably, clutching Bai Liu's white shirt in his hands. His eyes were unfocused, his breath came in gasps, and tears streamed down his face—he had yet to fully escape the nightmare.

Bai Liu whispered his name. "Muke, you're alive. Calm down."

Muke's unfocused eyes slowly regained clarity as he stared at Bai Liu. Tears pooled in his reddened eyes before he finally released the white shirt he had been clutching.

"Bai Liu—oooh, Bai Liu!" Muke bawled, his voice raw with overwhelming fear. Only the sight of Bai Liu grounded him. His hand clutched at the corner of Bai Liu’s suit hem, his gaze filled with disbelief as fresh tears poured from his eyes.

His voice was hoarse. "I thought I was going to die in that school! They were going to strangle me!"

Bai Liu lowered his eyes and said quietly, "But you didn’t. You did well, and you survived. It’s all over now, Muke."

Muke couldn't stop crying. His chest heaved with sobs, hiccups breaking through as he lifted his tear-streaked face toward Bai Liu. His voice was small, cautious. "I passed the game on my own like you said. That means I’m qualified, right? You’ll let me survive as long as I can in the game, right?"

"I will do my best to train you so you can grow strong enough to survive on your own," Bai Liu replied readily. Then, his tone turned much colder. "But if you only think of relying on me and become more and more worthless, I will cut my losses very quickly. Do you understand, Muke? I don’t waste energy on things that don’t pay off."

Muke nodded frantically, still sniffling, his pretty eyes shimmering

with tears—like a child desperate for approval. "I will! I promise I will, Bai Liu!"

"I want to start the next game by having you follow me." Bai Liu stood up, handing Muke a piece of toilet paper as he squinted at him. "If you follow me, we'll have to clear fifty copies in sixty days. I want to take you to the league, but at the same time, I need you to grow up quickly."

Muke looked up in shock as he took the toilet paper.

Bai Liu gazed down at him, his expression unreadable. "Can you do that? If you can't, I'll arrange another route for your training. You don't have to follow me."

Before Bai Liu could finish his sentence, Muke bit his lower lip, gripping the toilet paper tightly. His voice wavered, his thin shoulders trembling. "You need me to do this, don't you? Then… I can do it."

"Are you sure?" Bai Liu's voice was flat. "Muke, I expect the person I'm speaking with to look at me. Keep your head up."

Slowly, shakily, Muke raised his head. Bai Liu saw the expression he had been trying to hide.

The young master with a heart condition sat on Bai Liu's bed, his eyes red-rimmed, his hands clenched into fists on his knees. His whole body trembled as he gazed up at Bai Liu with something pitiful in his posture.

To a casual observer, the crying boy would appear delicate and vulnerable—someone who could soften anyone's heart.

Bai Liu, however, remained unmoved. "Answer me once you've thought it through."

"Follow me to the league, or become a strong front-line player with my help. Either path will let you survive. Which do you choose?"

His gaze sharpened as he studied Muke. "You'll grow faster with me. From both my personal needs and your ability development, my advice is to follow me first—build up your stats and aim for the league. If you can't keep up, you can support me in other ways. The league is full of strong players, and you're just a backup option for me. Simply put, you're here to make up the numbers."

Bai Liu extended his hand toward Muke. He waited quietly for his answer.

Muke knew about the league—he had seen the fireworks and system notifications after leaving the game. But he had logged out immediately, too shaken to linger.

Any newcomer would want to escape as soon as possible. Only someone as insane as Bai Liu would stay behind to gather information.

Muke wasn't mentally strong enough to remain calm after a near-death experience. That overwhelming sense of helplessness reminded him of drowning in Siren Town—except this time, there had been no Bai Liu reaching out to save him.

The world without Bai Liu was terrifying.

Bai Liu had saved him before, crossing the system's barriers to do so. The impact of that moment was strong. Now, after another brush with death, Muke's subconscious sought safety—leading him to Bai Liu's house in a trance-like state.

The league was a nightmare waiting to happen. A new player like him would be in for a rough time.

Muke blinked, heart pounding, his breath quickening. His tear-streaked lashes lowered as he stared at Bai Liu's outstretched hand.

He knew Bai Liu wasn't a kind person.

The first time Bai Liu had saved him, it had been for the mermaid's amulet—an object Bai Liu had already used.

Bai Liu wasn't good, but he always kept his word.

Muke tilted his head, eyes wary, like a small animal testing its surroundings. "If I follow you, will you promise to try to keep me alive?"

Bai Liu's voice was steady. "I promise."

Muke exhaled shakily. That was enough.

No matter how desperate the situation, Bai Liu never broke a promise.

Even if joining the league sounded like a death sentence, he knew Bai Liu would not abandon him.

"Then… I'll go with you." Muke placed his hand in Bai Liu's. His voice was small, nasal, still thick with tears. "I don't want to play the game alone."

Bai Liu gave his hand a brief shake before letting go. His tone softened. "Okay. I understand."

But soon, the false gentleness—used to coax cooperation—disappeared. Bai Liu got straight to business.

"When will you be ready?" he asked. "The next time we go in, we likely won't be coming out for a while."

Muke hesitated.

"You look like you need a good rest," Bai Liu continued. "We'll probably be gone for two months or more. You should also talk to the people around you."

He paused, then added, "But we don't have much time. The most I can give you is a day to prepare. Can you manage that?"

Muke's lips trembled. The intensity of the schedule overwhelmed him. But under Bai Liu's calm gaze, he forced himself to respond.

"…Okay."

"Then go home, Muke." Bai Liu picked up his phone, calling Muke's supervisor. He glanced at Muke as he spoke. "I'll have him pick you up. You have my address and number. Call me tomorrow when you're ready. Will you come over yourself, or do you need me to pick you up?"

Muke hesitated, then asked carefully, "Can I… just come to you?"

"That's fine," Bai Liu said indifferently.

Bai Liu called his boss, who arrived soon afterward. This was the second time he had come to pick up Muke from Bai Liu's small rented house, so he was familiar with the place. But when he stepped inside and saw Muke sitting on the bed with red eyes, he couldn't help but twist his face a little.

The poor young master still had bruises on his hands and feet, as if he had been bound by something—scars from the game.

But that wasn't what stunned his boss the most. What shocked him

was the sight of a tired yet oddly superior-looking male student sleeping on Bai Liu's desk. Mu Sicheng had dozed off while waiting for Bai Liu to finish negotiating with Muke, still wearing a shirt with their university logo on it. To make matters even stranger, Mu Sicheng had Bai Liu's jacket draped over his shoulders. He was sleeping soundly, exhaustion evident in his posture, and had a black eye.

The supervisor's gaze darted to Bai Liu, whose face remained calm despite the faint bruise under his own eye. His expression twisted further—how many men had this bastard played with in one night?!

Bai Liu turned his head, meeting his boss's look of absolute information overload. But since Bai Liu had never been one to concern himself with reading his boss's mind, he simply led Muke away as if he hadn't noticed a thing.

Muke followed his boss three steps behind, his mind utterly distracted. What he had just witnessed was too overwhelming. He couldn't suppress his gossipy curiosity.

After leaving Bai Liu's small rented house, the supervisor coughed twice before casually asking, "Muke, that guy in Bai Liu's room just now—he looks like a university student. What's his relationship with Bai Liu?"

"Oh, that guy." Muke's tone turned a little mixed, a little sour.

Muke knew Mu Sicheng—he was ranked fourth in the Rising Star Rankings, a powerful player. More importantly, Mu Sicheng was obviously more useful than him. Bai Liu clearly regarded him differently, treating him with a familiarity and ease that Muke had never experienced.

Even earlier, after Mu Sicheng had fallen asleep, Bai Liu had carefully placed his jacket over him and even lowered his voice, as if afraid to disturb him.

…That was a consideration Bai Liu had never shown to Muke.

As a young master, Muke was always given special treatment by others. Bai Liu's initially indifferent and somewhat dismissive attitude had already been noticeable, but seeing the stark difference in how Bai Liu treated Mu Sicheng made Muke feel bitter.

He huffed indignantly. "Him? He's just a playmate of Bai Liu's, like me! One day, I'll surpass him as Bai Liu's sidekick! I'll make Bai Liu

enjoy playing games with me even more! Starting tomorrow, I'm going to play games with Bai Liu every single day! There's no way he can beat me!"

"……"

The supervisor listened in silence, his expression wooden. Internally, he was in shock.

Is it really this competitive between you M's? Even 'playing games' is a contest?!

And young master, you really don't have to work so hard! Can your body even handle 'playing games' with Bai Liu every day?!

"…Take care of your health too. Don't overdo it," the supervisor coughed awkwardly, his expression complicated. "Playing that… whatever… it hurts. You should rest more."

"No," Muke said sulkily, still a little dazed. "Bai Liu gave me a task for the next two months—I have to play with him fifty times in two months. And we have to play with five people. I don't think I can handle it physically, and I haven't even played with the others yet… Bai Liu only gave me half a day off before we start…"

The supervisor was completely stunned.

"……"

Bai Liu, this mission of yours is absolutely outrageous! Fifty 'games' in two months?! And it's a multiplayer sport, my ass!

He doesn't even let Muke take a proper break from work, but now he expects him to work overtime for multiplayer sessions?!

A sobering realization struck the supervisor—Bai Liu was running a full 996 system.

Chapter End Notes

> The 996 working hour system is a work schedule practiced illegally by some companies in China. It derives its name from its requirement that employees work from 9:00 am to 9:00 pm, 6 days per week; i.e. 72 hours per week, 12 hours per day.

Reality

Mu Sicheng was already awake by the time Muke's boss picked him up.

He leaned lazily against the back of Bai Liu's chair, the jacket Bai Liu had given him draped over his shoulder. He quickly realized that Bai Liu's determination to take part in the game was unwavering. Considering Bai Liu's style of play, Mu Sicheng knew his heart couldn't be easily shaken.

Mu Sicheng watched from the sidelines as Bai Liu lured Muke onto the boat of thieves, but he didn't bother sleeping. Once he understood that Bai Liu wouldn't be swayed, all Mu Sicheng could do was tell him—seriously—that he wasn't going to mess around and participate in this extremely dangerous league.

But the jacket Bai Liu had given him softened his tone. "What, did you get that little beauty to come aboard?"

"You're calling Muke 'little beauty.' Are you gay?" Bai Liu glanced at him. "Is Muke your type?"

Mu Sicheng choked instantly. "I'm straight!!! Can't you recognize a joke?!"

Bai Liu nodded casually. "Got it. Judging by your face, you have something to say to me?"

Before Mu Sicheng could open his mouth, Bai Liu found a bench and sat down opposite him.

Bai Liu's posture was relaxed, but he still managed to exude an oppressive presence that made Mu Sicheng go from slouching in Bai Liu's reclining chair to sitting up straight.

Bai Liu looked at him blandly. "Let me guess. You want to tell me that you're definitely not going to be part of this gaming thing with us."

He leaned back on his desk, tapping his fingers lightly. "Can you give me a reason that'll convince me? Why don't you want to join the league?"

"High death rate, high risk, not enough people, not enough copies," Bai Liu listed off effortlessly before looking up at him. "I can take care

of all that. You just have to participate. Do you have any other concerns?"

Mu Sicheng nearly laughed at Bai Liu's calm, relaxed demeanor.

If this had been before their last game, he might have been fooled by Bai Liu's illusion of having everything under control. But now, Mu Sicheng knew better. After one game, he had become more aware of Bai Liu's true nature—he was a gambler.

Even if the odds of success were low, Bai Liu was the kind of person who would still take the risk as long as the potential return was high enough.

"Those are my main concerns." Mu Sicheng's tone was uncharacteristically serious. "Bai Liu, the league is no joke. The mortality rate is insanely high. You don't have to throw away your real life for this game. Sure, it gives you a lot, but with your skill, you could totally earn points slowly. It's safer that way. Besides, in the real world, you need some kind of backup plan—"

"The real world?" Bai Liu repeated the phrase, as if savoring the words. He waited patiently for Mu Sicheng to finish his heartfelt persuasion before suddenly asking, "What did you think of Muke's last solo game clearance?"

Mu Sicheng was caught off guard. He hadn't expected Bai Liu to bring that up. But Bai Liu had just talked to Muke about it, and Mu Sicheng —too sleepy at the time—had overheard part of it.

Muke's last clearance was Day of Leaving School, a single-player horror game set in a Japanese high school.

The game itself wasn't what caught Mu Sicheng's attention—it was something else.

Muke had mentioned that the school in the game was based on the private high school he had attended in Japan, which was infamous for being haunted. A girl had jumped to her death there, and afterward, students kept dying under mysterious circumstances.

Everyone in Muke's dormitory had died in bizarre ways—except for him. That was why he had confused the game with reality and emerged injured. The game's high school was an exact replica of the one he had once attended.

It was eerily similar to something Bai Liu and his team had experienced—The Exploding Last Train was based on a real exploding last train that Bai Liu had mistakenly boarded.

Mu Sicheng was silent for two seconds. "...I don't think it's just a coincidence that two games in a row have real-life counterparts."

"That's right. I feel the same way."

"So, I think there are three possible explanations." Bai Liu pulled out a piece of paper.

He had always recorded his thoughts as they came to him—especially now, since he was certain their memories could be tampered with at will.

Since writing detailed information would result in [banned] text disappearing, Bai Liu simply wrote down a few key words. He turned the paper toward Mu Sicheng and explained in a smooth, unhurried tone.

"I believe many of the games in this system are based on real events. Some people recognize the references, while others don't. For example, you and I both know about the Mirror City bombing because we were there, but Zhang Gui doesn't. Similarly, Muke knows about his haunted Japanese high school, but you and I didn't."

"But the question is—how were these real-life events chosen as game prototypes?"

Bai Liu wrote [Scene Selection] on the paper.

"The first possibility is that the game randomly selects real-life events as horror game templates. But considering the Mirror City bombing and that haunted school, the game clearly has a tendency to pick tragic and terrifying cases. So, random selection is unlikely. Pass."

He wrote [Inspiration] and continued.

"The second possibility is that the game selects tragic and supernatural locations that the player has experienced. We already know that the game can erase people's memories. If it can read memories too, then it could take inspiration from a player's experiences and design games based on them."

"This would make it easier for players to immerse themselves in the

horror setting. For example, in The Exploding Last Train, the train's layout matched my memories exactly. That level of realism is difficult to achieve unless the game is pulling from actual memories."

Mu Sicheng, deep in thought, tapped his index finger against his arm. "That sounds plausible. I think I lean toward that explanation. What about the third one?"

"There's a huge flaw in that theory—the timeline doesn't match up." Bai Liu's gaze locked onto Mu Sicheng. "Do you remember when The Exploding Last Train existed?"

Mu Sicheng frowned, thinking back. "...A while ago, right? It was there when I first entered."

Bai Liu calmly reminded him, "But the Mirror City bombing happened this year. Meaning, The Exploding Last Train was released before the bombing even occurred. Mu Sicheng, do you understand what that means?"

Mu Sicheng's face slowly changed as he grasped the implication. He turned to Bai Liu, who continued in the same smooth tone.

"It means we got the reference backward. The Exploding Last Train didn't take inspiration from the Mirror City bombing. Instead—" Bai Liu tapped the paper. "—the Mirror City bombing took inspiration from The Exploding Last Train."

He wrote [Test Phase] on the page.

Mu Sicheng felt as if ice water had been poured over his head. Stiffly, he stared at the words Bai Liu had written, the chill creeping up his spine. He understood, but he still retorted in disbelief, "That's impossible—!"

To put it in in-game terms, Mu Sicheng's sanity level had dropped below the safety line.

Bai Liu remained unbothered. "At the end of a game's development, a public beta is released—a limited test phase before full release. Only when the test phase is deemed successful is the game made official and released to everyone."

"The third possibility is that our world and this game are in a public beta and full release stage, respectively."

Bai Liu looked at Mu Sicheng, his gaze devoid of emotion.

"If that's the case, then Mu Sicheng—the 'real life' you're clinging to is no different from surviving in the game."

"So tell me—why refuse to compete for a life that is, in the end, just another game?"

Reality

After Bai Liu finished his three guesses, he set his pen down and rolled it across the table. It spun twice before landing in Mu Sicheng's expressionless hands.

Bai Liu remained unbothered, as if he hadn't just said something extraordinary. Finally, he looked at Mu Sicheng's numb expression and added sincerely, "Of course, this is just my personal opinion. I could be wrong."

A long silence settled over the small rented room. The only movement was the occasional breeze slipping through Bai Liu's fingertips, rustling the paper where he had written the world's truth.

It was the height of summer. Sunlight poured through the window behind Bai Liu, drenching the room in midday brilliance. Outside, the sounds of cicadas and honking cars formed a chaotic symphony of life.

Yet, in an instant, all those vivid sights and sounds faded to black and white in Mu Sicheng's world. Just like Bai Liu, who sat at his desk, watching him intently against the light—his figure receding into curling, data-driven lines, vanishing between the gaps of Mu Sicheng's blinking eyes.

The moment Bai Liu put down his pen, Mu Sicheng's ears rang. For a few seconds, it felt as if he wasn't even breathing.

Reality... is a game?

The promised land he had struggled to protect from his own corrupt desires—was nothing more than a game?

Mu Sicheng slumped back in his chair, resting one hand over his eyes while the other hung limp at his side. He stayed like that for a long time, silent.

Bai Liu didn't interrupt him.

Eventually, Mu Sicheng let out a short, sarcastic snort. "Bai Liu, are you just making up this horrifying story to get me to join your league? It's a lie, right? It's not true, is it?"

"Most real things in this world are horrifying," Bai Liu replied, picking up the paper and folding it neatly before slipping it into a book. He

turned to Mu Sicheng. "Where else would we get material for our games?"

Mu Sicheng shot him a wary look.

Bai Liu only shrugged. "But since you don't seem ready to accept it, I should be considerate enough to give you an emotional buffer. So sure, let's say this isn't the case. Maybe it's the first or second scenario after all."

Mu Sicheng: "..."

Damn you. That's no different from just telling me it's the third case!

He sat there for a long time before finally looking up at Bai Liu, confusion flickering in his gaze. "...Bai Liu, if our reality is just a game, then where is the real world? Is there one? What actually matters? Why aren't you afraid of this game-like existence?"

Bai Liu wasn't thrown off by the barrage of questions. He took a moment to consider them.

"I've been asking myself what reality is and what holds the most meaning since I was a teenager," Bai Liu said, spreading his hands. "Most of my peers couldn't understand me—except for one close friend. Eventually, I realized they probably never would, and they'd still get by just fine in this false reality."

"Whether the world is a game or not doesn't really affect most people," Bai Liu continued. "From an objective idealist perspective, a person's perception of existence and the world forms the foundation of human values. As long as I am real and the things I desire are real, then my world is real to me."

He said calmly, "So to me, it doesn't matter if the world is a game or not."

"As long as human currency exists, my desire for money will never be extinguished. That is my truth and my meaning."

Bai Liu picked up the key hanging behind the door and looked back at Mu Sicheng, who still seemed dazed. "If you can't find your own meaning for now, why not try mine?" His lips curled slightly. "Try chasing something tangible—like the five hundred million points for winning the league competition?"

"With that much money, you might be able to buy as much reality as you want." Bai Liu pushed open the door. "For five hundred million points, you could probably buy an entire Earth to create whatever real world you desire."

Mu Sicheng was silent for a moment, his expression twisting.

"...Bai Liu, you're really an eloquent salesman, aren't you?"

Once again, he'd been swayed by this lunatic's insane logic!

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "So your answer?"

Mu Sicheng gritted his teeth. "...I'm in!" Then, as if realizing something, he quickly asked, "But don't we need at least five players? How else are we supposed to participate?"

"Don't worry about that. I'll handle it. Just wait for my notice," Bai Liu said, turning to leave. Then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, he added, "I'm going out for hotpot with some friends. Wanna come?"

Mu Sicheng: "..."

It's the middle of the night—why the hell are you in the mood for hotpot?

Maybe his expression gave away his thoughts, because Bai Liu casually pulled two discount coupons out of his pocket and waved them. "They expire today," he explained.

Mu Sicheng: "..."

He knew he couldn't win against Bai Liu's mental fortitude. So after declining the invitation, Mu Sicheng exchanged contact information and school addresses with Bai Liu before heading back to his dorm alone—to think about life.

Meanwhile, Bai Liu walked off with the discount coupons in his pocket, looking oddly content, as if he hadn't just come from a life-and-death game or casually revealed the world's twisted truth.

Mu Sicheng sighed, half disbelieving. "...You're actually in a good mood?"

"Of course." Bai Liu nodded, smiling as his eyes arched slightly. "This is my off time, after all."

Mu Sicheng: "..."

He was once again reminded of Bai Liu's absurd "horror game job" theory.

FUCK!!! This guy seriously thinks he's just off duty?!

What kind of environment do you have to grow up in to become this kind of monster?!

Bai Liu said goodbye to a dazed Mu Sicheng before heading to Lu Yizhan.

When Bai Liu woke up, he found that Lu Yizhan had called him twice. Since he hadn't answered either call in the game, Bai Liu sent him a text asking what was wrong. Lu Yizhan replied that they should talk in person.

Bai Liu figured that with his likely disappearance for the next two months, Lu Yizhan, being a police officer, would probably report him missing. He quickly texted Lu Yizhan to meet him at the hotpot restaurant and prepared for a face-to-face conversation.

When Bai Liu arrived at the restaurant, it was still early, and the place wasn't crowded. He ordered a pot base and some dishes, checked with the owner about the coupons, and waited patiently.

Before the owner left, he turned on the TV for Bai Liu, which was airing the noon news program.

A male presenter in a suit stood at a desk, crossing his arms and speaking in a serious, formal voice.

"Welcome to the Midday News. Recently, key evidence was found in the case of Li Gou, the major suspect in the brutal killing of a senior girl. If convicted, Li Gou could face the death penalty. However, just before the trial, Li Gou was suddenly killed in prison by a fellow inmate, Wang Mou, in a violent attack..."

The presenter paused briefly, flipping through his script before continuing.

"Meanwhile, a small-scale food poisoning incident has erupted in a privately run orphanage in our city. A number of children were rushed to the hospital, and the police are investigating. The orphanage, which was struggling financially, had been buying cheap, spoiled

ingredients, leading to severe cases of dehydration and shock among the children. The community is being called on to donate..."

Bai Liu was absorbed in the broadcast when Lu Yizhan walked in, looking tired and covered in dust.

Bai Liu's "social animal" expression indicated that this man had been working late for days.

Lu Yizhan sat down, poured himself a couple of sips of tea, and then began complaining. "I've had it! You have no idea how busy I've been! I'm dying here! I haven't even had time for a sip of tea this morning!"

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "Hasn't it only been a few days since we last had dinner together? Is getting ready for a wedding really that awful?"

Lu Yizhan waved his hand dismissively, glancing at the TV before asking the waiter, "Can we get a private room instead?"

The waiter quickly led them to a smaller room, as the restaurant wasn't busy.

The moment they entered, Lu Yizhan pulled out a cigarette and lit it, his face grim.

Bai Liu hadn't seen Lu Yizhan smoke in ages. Since getting a girlfriend—and now a fiancée—he had given up his bad habits, including smoking, playing games, and even drinking Coke, which his fiancée believed was harmful.

Bai Liu couldn't help but smile. "It's a good thing she doesn't know Coke is carbonated. Otherwise, you'd probably have to give up beer too."

Lu Yizhan chuckled bitterly as he took a drag from his cigarette. "I know you're going to tease me about it, but seriously, you should ask what's wrong with me instead of bringing up my middle-aged crisis."

Bai Liu poured him a cup of tea and pushed it toward him. "Go ahead. I've clocked out, so I've got a bit of time to listen to your life troubles."

Lu Yizhan stared at his tea for a few seconds before replying. "It's not just the wedding that's got me stressed. You saw the news about the orphanage, right?"

Bai Liu nodded. "I saw it. What about it?"

Lu Yizhan's expression grew more serious. "One of my colleagues is working on the case. He thinks it might not be a typical food poisoning incident. A lot of the kids are in critical condition, and they haven't found any concrete evidence yet. The thing is, we've both been in orphanages before. Mirror City isn't a mushroom-growing area, and mushrooms are expensive, which means it's rare for orphanages to buy them. But this one—on the verge of closing—could be in a bad situation..."

He paused, furrowing his brow. "I just don't think it adds up. Right now, the authorities are leaning towards keeping the orphanage open, but the children left there aren't safe until the investigation is complete."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "That sounds complicated, but why are you involved? You're a police officer, but this isn't your case, is it?"

Lu Yizhan sighed. "I volunteered to help with the investigation."

Bai Liu studied him quietly, waiting for him to continue.

Lu Yizhan finally spoke again, looking down. "You know I'm getting married soon. My fiancée's health isn't great—the doctor says she might not be able to conceive. We've been thinking about adoption for a while now. I was thinking about adopting a child from this orphanage. After all, one less child in that dangerous situation is better. I came from an orphanage too, so I think it's a way to give back."

Bai Liu paused, then asked calmly, "So, what's your point? You know I'm not likely to approve. What do you want from me?"

Lu Yizhan fiddled with the cigarette in his hand, silent for a moment.

The waiter came in with the hotpot, and the conversation paused as the dish began to bubble.

Then Lu Yizhan spoke again, almost as if to himself, "Bai Liu, I hate involving you in this, but your brain works like no one else's. If it's something criminal, you'll figure out the next move instantly. You're a genius at this."

Bai Liu took a sip of tea, unfazed. "I'll take that as a compliment. This isn't the first time you've come to me for help, so just say what you

need."

Lu Yizhan looked up, his voice pleading. "Can you help me with this? My colleague is stuck. Last time, you gave me great advice on how to crack a case. This time, I think you can help too."

Bai Liu raised his hand, breaking his chopsticks with a snap. "I can help you, but I won't do it for free."

Lu Yizhan nodded, already familiar with Bai Liu's terms.

"And I've only got one day to help," Bai Liu added. "I'm leaving for a business trip tomorrow and won't be back for two months."

Lu Yizhan's eyes widened. "Two months? That long? What exactly do you do for a living? If it's acting, like you said last time, that doesn't take two months, does it?"

Bai Liu thought for a moment before responding carefully. "This time, I'm going to be performing with a monkey and a young master in a stage show for two months."

Lu Yizhan looked perplexed for a moment, then slapped his thigh in realization. "Wait, you're in a circus? You're going on tour for two months?"

Bai Liu paused for a second, then nodded. "Yes."

Bai Liu went home and reviewed some of the information Lu Yizhan had given him about the private orphanage.

Most children's homes in their world are public orphanages run by the government, and both Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan had come from such institutions.

Lu Yizhan was raised to be a kind-hearted and grateful young man, who aspired to be a police officer and serve society from a young age.

If Lu Yizhan hadn't kept Bai Liu on a tight leash to ensure he stayed on the path of compliance, it's hard to say what Bai Liu, a psychopath, would have done for money.

But this orphanage was different—it wasn't a public one but a private institution set up by a large group of corporate philanthropists ten years ago.

Many of these entrepreneurs were terminally ill, and in line with the traditional practice of "doing good before death," they donated large sums of money to build this private orphanage. They claimed they wanted to do something good before they passed, which earned them much praise at the time. Even Lu Yizhan praised their efforts.

Coincidentally, shortly after the orphanage was built, the entrepreneurs' illnesses mysteriously improved, as if [good deeds were rewarded].

However, over time, the entrepreneurs became less interested in the orphanage, and it fell into disrepair within ten years.

After reading the information Lu Yizhan provided, Bai Liu understood why something felt off.

The poorly run private orphanage had been the site of numerous accidents, most of which involved various types of mushroom poisoning, with this most recent incident being the largest.

Lu Yizhan noted that these food poisoning accidents, when combined, didn’t seem like mere accidents at first glance. However, after investigation, no trace of foul play could be found—no deliberate poisoning or simple accidental food poisoning, just like in this latest case.

It was as if some higher power had erased all evidence of anything beyond "accidental food poisoning."

Lu Yizhan even speculated that someone within their ranks might have deliberately erased traces of a crime.

From Bai Liu's perspective as an inhumane game designer, this was the perfect material for a horror game: an endangered children’s home, a strange series of food poisoning incidents, and children dying horribly from it.

Bai Liu was more suspicious of the erasure than Lu Yizhan’s suspicion that someone inside had hidden the traces of a crime. If his earlier suspicions were correct, he felt that this orphanage was likely a [copy of a horror game] being dropped into the [real world].

The next morning, Bai Liu was woken by a life-threatening series of calls from Lu Yizhan. When he picked up the phone, Lu Yizhan’s tone

was more serious than ever.

"Bai Liu, come to the First People's Hospital in Mirror City. The child brought to the hospital last night... the child brought to the hospital last night—"

"A lot of dead people, huh?" Bai Liu calmly finished the sentence.

Lu Yizhan inhaled sharply, then exhaled slowly before asking, "Did you find out anything?"

"Not yet." Bai Liu replied frankly, "But from the information you've given me, if someone deliberately poisoned the mushrooms, and the other party repeated it so many times, the goal would have been to kill people. This time, the mushrooms consumed by those children would likely have been a lethal amount."

"... Yes, many of them died during resuscitation," Lu Yizhan's voice sounded dry and strained. "But one child is still alive."

"A living child?" Bai Liu immediately sensed something was wrong.

If this orphanage was a [copy of a horror game] that [the system] was dropping into the real world, the children in the background of the game should have been wiped out, just like the passengers in that carriage in Bursting Last Train.

Bai Liu asked softly, "Can I come over?"

Lu Yizhan replied, "Yes, you can. Come over here."

By the time Bai Liu had gotten dressed, the hospital doors were swarming with journalists from all over.

Lu Yizhan picked him up from the operating theater lift. As they passed through the operating theater, Bai Liu could see the corridors lined with tiny bodies, their heads covered in white cloths. So many bodies hadn't been taken away yet, piling up in twisted heaps in the operating theater corridor, turning it into a makeshift morgue.

Every now and then, a numb-faced nurse would push the dead children's bodies down the hall, occasionally bumping into a wall, causing a small, bruised hand with various corpse marks to emerge from beneath the white cloth.

These marks, along with the haematomas bulging on the surface of the

child's body, seemed like mushroom patterns spreading across the back of their hands. It looked as though mushrooms would sprout from the skin any moment.

The foul smell of fermented mushrooms filled the operating theater, as if the mushrooms the children had eaten had fermented overnight using their freshly dead bodies as a medium, decaying and teeming with fungal life.

Bai Liu quickly withdrew his gaze and looked sideways at Lu Yizhan, waiting until they passed the operating theater before speaking softly, "Are you sure these children died only last night? The decomposition doesn't look right."

"Yes," Lu Yizhan rubbed his forehead. "The corpse marks appeared too quickly, and the timing of the rigor mortis is all wrong."

Bai Liu narrowed his eyes. "What's wrong with it?"

Lu Yizhan paused, leaning against the wall and lighting a cigarette. He took several deep puffs, filling the corner of the staircase with smoke, indicating his very bad mood.

"The corpse marks appeared within minutes of death and spread rapidly, which is usually seen when death occurred more than 24 hours ago," Lu Yizhan explained, using his thumb to rub his brow in frustration, though it didn't seem to alleviate his stress. "The body also hardened quickly, and by early this morning, it was already in the decay stage—this usually happens more than 24 hours after death."

"It's almost as if..." Lu Yizhan paused, "the group of poisoned children died before they even got to the hospital."

As they continued walking, they reached the stairs of the children's emergency ward. Through the half-open emergency exit door, Bai Liu could see the bodies of children, covered with hoods, lying in the corridor. Nurses were busy placing the bodies into body bags.

The faces of the dead children weren't the usual greenish pallor of the deceased. Instead, they were dotted with colorful raised spots.

Bai Liu knew that some mushroom poisonings could cause a ringworm-like rash, but the spots on these children's faces were so dense that they looked like a colorblindness test, raised on the surface of their skin. Despite the mild discomfort, Bai Liu wasn't afraid to look at them.

It looked like human faces covered in mushrooms that hadn’t sprouted yet beneath the skin.

Reality

Bai Liu looked at Lu Yizhan. "Tell me the details of last night first."

Lu Yizhan closed his eyes, took a deep breath of smoke, and exhaled slowly. "Around 3 AM last night, all 37 children brought in were vomiting uncontrollably..."

"These children were vomiting whole mushrooms, one after another. But these children had been induced to vomit and had their stomachs lavaged when they were admitted to the hospital in an emergency the day before. They had been on a fasting regimen of fluids all day yesterday, so there was nothing in their stomachs. There should have been nothing for them to vomit."

Lu Yizhan paused here, shaking the ashes from his cigarette into a bin in the hallway. "It scared the nurses and doctors, so they immediately called the police and prepared to draw emergency blood from all the children..."

Lu Yizhan slowly exhaled a plume of smoke. "But except for the child who survived, the nurses could only draw a light green translucent fluid from the children who kept vomiting. They couldn't get any blood at all."

Bai Liu wasn't shocked. These events felt like an antique mirror hiding a giant bomb from security—like a [horror game] being loaded into [reality public test mode]. In a horror game, anything unusual was possible, and the extraction of mushroom juice was a common direction that Bai Liu found entirely normal and expected.

Bai Liu pondered for a moment and asked, "What about the living child? Her blood is normal, right? Have the results of her blood tests come back yet?"

"It came back mildly anemic, but generally normal," Lu Yizhan replied.

Bai Liu thought for a moment and then asked, "Did you manage to get any key information from the surviving child to solve the case?"

"No." Lu Yizhan let out a long, bitter laugh. "This little girl is blind. She doesn't recognize our voices and refuses to communicate with us. She only nods or shakes her head occasionally. Because she can't see, she most likely doesn't know anything. She doesn't even know that the

mushrooms were what she ate that day."

"This little girl's name is Liu Jiayi. She has a half-brother named Liu Huai. She won't talk until he arrives." Lu Yizhan sighed. "It's mostly because she's reluctant to talk. Otherwise, I would have taken you in to speak with her. You're quite good at tricking children."

Bai Liu's expression paused for a moment before he slowly looked up at Lu Yizhan. "What did you say her brother's name was?"

Lu Yizhan was stunned. "Liu Huai. He's a university student, and he's been working to support her. About six months ago, he suddenly placed her in the orphanage where this incident happened. He comes to see Liu Jiayi almost once a week, but he really has no obligation to support his half-sister. Do you know him?"

"I've met him once," Bai Liu smiled. "We've networked and played games together. He would probably remember me. Maybe he could help me talk to his sister."

Liu Huai sat stiffly in his hospital room, his eyes fixed on the skinny little girl, Liu Jiayi, curled up in a ball on the bed, clutching her knees.

But that wasn't the main reason for his stiffness. It was Bai Liu, who sat opposite him, smiling kindly.

Liu Huai couldn't understand why he was so unlucky to meet Bai Liu, the demon king, who casually hooked his shoulder in a very familiar way, bending his eyes to get closer and saying he wanted to talk to Liu Jiayi.

Liu Huai silently bemoaned his bad luck but brought Bai Liu in anyway.

However, Liu Jiayi couldn't tolerate too many people. She screamed as soon as she heard Bai Liu. Liu Huai wouldn't allow anyone else into the room, so the police were left outside while Liu Huai worked with Liu Jiayi before finally bringing Bai Liu in on behalf of his friend.

The ward now housed Liu Huai, Bai Liu, and Liu Jiayi.

Bai Liu and Liu Huai sat on opposite sides of the bed. Liu Jiayi sat in the middle, clutching her knees, her face buried in the space between them. She wore a hospital gown too large for her, hanging loosely on

her thin, fragile frame.

Liu Jiayi, as Lu Yizhan described, was underdeveloped, like a skeleton that hadn't grown properly—far from the over-nourished children Bai Liu was familiar with from fast food restaurants.

Unable to bear the heavy atmosphere, Liu Huai blocked Bai Liu's view of Liu Jiayi with the quilt and stepped in front of her.

Liu Huai stared at Bai Liu warily, like a beast protecting its cub. "Bai Liu, what do you want from me?"

Bai Liu got straight to the point. "I'm not here to see you. I'm here to see your sister."

"My sister?!" Liu Huai fiercely wrapped Liu Jiayi in the blanket and pulled her into his arms, glaring at Bai Liu. "What do you want with her?"

"Liu Huai, how old is the youngest player you've seen in the game?" Bai Liu suddenly changed the subject.

Although the ward was under surveillance, the presence of the system's [gag] mechanism meant there was a high chance anything Bai Liu said would be censored. He asked without fear.

"Why are you asking this?" Liu Huai wondered.

Bai Liu's gaze shifted to Liu Jiayi, who was trembling slightly in Liu Huai's arms. "I was wondering if your sister would turn out to be the youngest."

Liu Jiayi, the only child to survive the mushroom poisoning at the orphanage, reminded Bai Liu of himself, who survived the Mirror City bombing, and Muke, who survived the haunted dormitory at the Japanese school.

Bai Liu knew there were two conditions for someone to be a player in his world. The first was the [presence of players around the player]. The game spread like a virus, from one person to another. Liu Jiayi had Liu Huai, who fit the profile.

The second condition was that the person had to survive at least one copy of the [Horror Game Official]. Liu Jiayi clearly met both criteria.

Bai Liu guessed the young girl who survived death was likely the

chosen reserve player for the game.

Liu Huai froze, his gaze slowly moving toward Liu Jiayi in his arms. Shock and disbelief filled his eyes. He trembled uncontrollably as he stared at her, then turned to Bai Liu with shock and uncertainty. "But... she's only eight years old. How can she be a player? I've only seen her once a week; I've controlled how often I affect her. That shouldn't directly influence her access to the game..."

"Why not?" Bai Liu asked calmly. "Does the system ban minors from playing games like parents do?"

Liu Huai choked on his words and subconsciously tightened his hold on Liu Jiayi. Panic clouded his expression. "But she can't even see! If she enters the game, she won't survive in that harsh environment! There's no reason for the system to pick her!"

"So how did she survive this poisonous mushroom incident?" Bai Liu's tone was subdued.

The only child to survive a real-world horror game copy—Bai Liu didn't think Liu Jiayi was an easy target.

Liu Huai, left speechless, tried to defend her. "Jiajia survived the mushroom incident only because she was lucky! She's not like Du Sanying!"

But Liu Jiayi spoke up in a soft whisper, her voice faint. "Brother, that's not true."

Her small hand gently tugged at Liu Huai's jacket. From his outer set, a tiny, fidgety head peeked out. Her eyes were grayish-white, cloudy, but her voice was clear. "Brother, I wasn't poisoned because I was lucky. I secretly poured out the rice the teacher gave me."

Liu Huai was stunned. "Why did you pour out the rice your teacher gave you?"

Liu Jiayi's dry lips pursed as she spoke softly. "Brother, don't blame me for pouring out the food. I didn't think the teacher was right that day. She insisted on feeding me, but she used to just throw me the bowl and let me eat myself. So I poured it out and pretended to eat it while she was serving the others."

Bai Liu smiled, spreading his hands. "Looks like your sister is a lot smarter than you."

"I won't let her into the game, even if she's smart!!!" Liu Huai exploded in anger, his eyes glowing red as he glared at Bai Liu. "Bai Liu, whatever you want to do, my sister will not!"

Liu Jiayi, still tightly held by Liu Huai, wrapped her arms around his neck in confusion. "What are you talking about, brother? What am I going into?"

Liu Jiayi was obviously [blocked] from hearing the conversation between Bai Liu and Liu Huai about [the game], and couldn't understand their words.

"Liu Huao, I just want to work with you," Bai Liu said lightly. "If Liu Jiayi is really chosen by the game, there's nothing you can do to stop her from entering the game."

"And I can help you. I can help Liu Jiayi," Bai Liu added softly, raising his eyes to Liu Huai.

Liu Huai laughed coldly. "What you mean by 'helping' is controlling us, right? Bai Liu, you're just like Zhang Gui. I appreciate your help, but I won't let my sister fall into your hands!"

"I don't know what use she is to you now that you've come to the door, but get out!" Liu Huai growled, staring down Bai Liu like a fierce beast. His posture was threatening, as if ready to choke Bai Liu to death in the next second.

Bai Liu fell silent for a couple of seconds before standing up. He didn't argue much; he did want to save Liu Jiayi, but only because he saw that Lu Yizhan was tempted to adopt the little girl.

If Lu Yizhan wanted to choose her as his adopted daughter, Bai Liu would try to keep her alive.

Lu Yizhan had always been keen to help Liu Jiayi, and Bai Liu knew that Lu Yizhan had a tendency to meddle.

It was like when Lu Yizhan would sneak food to Bai Liu, even when Bai Liu didn't feel he was starving.

Bai Liu never understood Lu Yizhan's logic about helping others, but as a former beneficiary of Lu Yizhan's logic, Bai Liu mostly chose to indulge his self-righteous choices. After all, Lu Yizhan paid him, and Bai Liu didn't work for free. Lu Yizhan understood his logic well.

That's why Bai Liu would remain friends with Lu Yizhan.

Bai Liu tore a piece of paper and wrote his phone number on it, placing it on Liu Jiayi's bedside. "I can help Liu Jiayi survive her first game, but only if her soul is sold to me so I can help her through it."

Only when he had Liu Jiayi's soul could Bai Liu manipulate the panel to help her.

Liu Huai roared and tore the paper, ready to throw it in Bai Liu's face. "I won't allow it!"

"I think you gave up custody of her when you put her in the children's home. You are not her legal guardian, in name or otherwise," Bai Liu looked down at Liu Huai without a ripple of emotion. "So I don't think you have the right to decide for Liu Jiayi."

Liu Huai's eyes glowed red with rage, but he laughed instead of getting angry. "Bai Liu, do you know what I desire most in the game?"

"I want her to see the light," Liu Huai said, taking a deep breath and turning his head away to stop looking at Bai Liu. "Go away, I won't trust her to someone like you. Her future would be very dark with you."

His eyes were a little red as he turned away. "I've had enough of being controlled. Her life can never be controlled by you."

"I was controlled by Zhang Gui... when I lost fourth brother... that instant... I lost my best friend and my most tacit teammate." Liu Huai lowered his head, his voice dry. "Forced to take the blade and become hurt... your heart wouldn't feel any better... so I don't want her to fall into my path."

Bai Liu was silent for a moment. "Controlling a little girl doesn't give me any value. My best friend trying to save your sister is the only reason I'm doing this."

Liu Huai turned to Bai Liu in astonishment.

Liu Jiayi turns her head, a touch of confusion in her misty eyes, her thin, pointy face appearing strangely fragile. She is held by Liu Huai, almost like a pale, grey butterfly with tentacles, gently rubbing the top of her head against Liu Huai's chin, as if trying to soothe his violent mood swings.

Bai Liu, under Liu Huai's suspicious gaze, says nothing. He calmly turns and opens the door to the ward, then leaves.

Lu Yizhan stands waiting at the corner of the stairs, still smoking, a pile of cigarette butts in the bin next to him. It's unclear how many he's smoked by now.

When Bai Liu approaches, Lu Yizhan's eyes brighten. "Well, do you have an idea?" he asks.

But when Lu Yizhan notices Bai Liu's expression, he freezes for a moment.

Bai Liu is a man who typically wears a smile when in a good mood. His face rarely moves, but when his emotions fluctuate, there's no open expression—just a heavy, melancholic look floating in his eyes.

To put it simply, Bai Liu is not in a good mood.

"What's wrong?" Lu Yizhan asks, his voice softening. "Did someone scold you? I heard Liu Huai yelling at you in the ward. But you didn't react on the CCTV, and some victims' families can get very emotional. Don't take it personally."

"I sometimes can't understand human emotions," Bai Liu mutters, his gaze distant, a sign that he's still deep in thought. "It's strange," he continues. "I don't understand Liu Huai's logic. He's supposed to be selfish by nature, but he goes to this extent for his sister, even when the law doesn't require him to."

Bai Liu doesn't suspect that Liu Huai is lying. His subconscious reactions feel genuine.

But he quickly recovers from his thoughts.

He looks at Lu Yizhan. "But this kind of self-devotion is baffling. Let's head to the orphanage."

Bai Liu is admitted to the children's home with Muke.

Muke had come to Bai Liu's house early, but Bai Liu had been called away by Lu Yizhan early in the morning, and only when he returned briefly to gather his things did he find the young Muke waiting outside, crouched by the door, clutching his legs.

The young master hadn't knocked, likely thinking Bai Liu was still asleep, too polite to disturb him.

Muke's father waited respectfully outside the door, staying with his son, aware that Bai Liu was probably still asleep.

When Bai Liu returns home, he sees Muke and his father waiting at his doorstep, speaking in hushed voices so as not to disturb him.

Muke's father had expressed his gratitude profusely for Bai Liu's help in saving his son. Upon learning that Bai Liu was going to the children's home, the wealthy man offered a generous donation, promising to support Muke's medical journey by donating to the orphanage. He even drove them there in a flashy Maybach, worth over $10 million.

At the orphanage, Muke didn't follow his father, instead obediently staying close to Bai Liu. He occasionally peeked at him, fidgeting like a cat wanting to cling to its owner but not yet given permission.

Bai Liu could sense Muke's nervous energy, which wouldn't be helpful in their mission. He gave the young master some space to calm himself.

Bai Liu greeted Lu Yizhan, explaining that he was going to the orphanage with Muke to check on the situation.

Lu Yizhan entered with his colleagues to investigate.

Bai Liu and Muke were respectfully escorted by the orphanage director, a grandmother with a haggard appearance. Her eyes were cloudy, and she smelled faintly of decaying mushrooms, reminding Bai Liu of corpse spots.

Muke's father went off with the director to discuss the donation, and one of the teachers was assigned to show them around.

The orphanage was in poor condition, with crumbling buildings. The outer and inner walls were rotting, revealing moss-covered interiors. The equipment was old and sagging, swaying forlornly in the muddy yard. The seesaw moved in the wind, creaking as the empty seat dipped up and down.

The teacher who led them was pale, head down, walking quickly toward the outermost building. Bai Liu glanced at the award plaque on the wall—it was dated over a decade ago, right after the orphanage

was built.

As they passed, the teacher explained in a low voice, "This orphanage is old. It used to cover 25 acres, with nearly 10,000 square meters of space. There were professional classrooms, a nurse's room, and over 200 caregivers for 300 children."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow, "250,000 square feet? 200 caregivers?" He'd seen no sign of caregivers.

The teacher hesitated before continuing, "That was when it was first built. Later, part of the building was rented out, and the orphanage had to downsize due to funding issues. Most of the caregivers were let go."

"We had 46 children left, rehearsing a show for Children's Day. But our long-time sponsor decided not to continue funding us this year, and we haven't found a new sponsor yet."

Bai Liu asked calmly, "You had 46 children, 37 at the hospital, 9 more, but I haven't seen any of them? Can we meet the remaining children?"

The teacher turned pale, wringing her hands but not responding.

Something felt off. Bai Liu's eyes narrowed.

Muke, noticing the tension, cleared his throat theatrically. He stepped forward and lifted his chin. "We're planning to donate 10 million to your orphanage. Can we meet the children who are still here?"

The teacher seemed to hesitate, then spoke quietly. "There aren't nine children available to meet you—only five."

Bai Liu frowned. "What happened to the others?"

A hint of panic flashed in the teacher's eyes. She lowered her voice. "Four children disappeared last night. They snuck out to play on the swings and seesaw, but vanished while they were playing. The equipment kept moving all night..."

A gust of wind blew through the yard, making the playground equipment creak and sway. The temperature dropped sharply, and the swing and seesaw moved faster, the creaking becoming louder, as if someone were on them.

The swing and seesaw came to a sudden halt, hovering unnaturally.

Then, the seesaw tilted slowly to one side, and something rolled off the teeter-totter.

Bai Liu's eyes widened when he saw what had fallen—an eerie, headless doll, its limbs twisted and wearing a white shirt and black trousers. It had a creepy smile, and a cheap necklace hung from its chest.

The doll was dressed exactly like Bai Liu.

Reality

At the same time, Lu Yizhan and his colleagues were investigating the case of the missing children at the orphanage.

"You think this should be handled by Interpol or some special department?" Lu Yizhan's colleague looked grim. "Look at the CCTV footage of the missing child. This isn't something we can handle!"

"Four kids heard a siren in the early hours of the morning, then lined up to go play in the central children's park. The weirdest part? They weren't hypnotized or sleepwalking. They were avoiding surveillance, which means they were lucid—just swinging in that tiny, run-down park. And then, an hour later, they just vanished. Poof. Gone. One second, they were on camera; the next, nothing."

The colleague cursed under his breath. "Damn it. The kids disappeared, but the swings kept moving. I barely slept after watching that footage..." He rubbed his arms, goosebumps rising. "There are only five children left. They were supposed to be transferred to other orphanages, but with what happened at the hospital, everyone's stuck here for the investigation. This whole thing is beyond strange."

Lu Yizhan frowned. "We should talk to the dean first."

"The dean? You think she'll say anything?" His colleague scoffed. "The old woman didn't even report the missing kids! If it weren't for the mushroom poisoning case escalating this, we wouldn't have even realized four children were missing. She never said a word."

"That just means we have to ask her," Lu Yizhan replied evenly. "She knows something."

In the dean's office, Muke's father had finished discussing a donation with the old dean and left to speak with someone else, leaving the elderly woman alone.

She sat in her chair, her eyes drooping as she regarded Lu Yizhan. "You're asking why the children are missing and why I didn't report it?"

Lu Yizhan nodded.

The old dean let out a dry chuckle. She slowly opened a drawer, pulling out a stack of documents, and handed them over. "Young man, you're new, aren't you? I've reported every missing child. But tell me, have you ever brought a single one of them back?" Her voice was calm, almost indifferent. "So this time, I didn't bother. The orphanage is shutting down anyway."

Lu Yizhan frowned as he flipped through the reports.

The oldest documents dated back ten years. Each one recorded a missing child, but the conclusions were all the same—[Child ran away from home]. No further action. No follow-up.

"Every year, our private orphanage holds a June 1st performance for the investors," the old dean continued. "We put on a show to keep them happy, to show them how well the children they fund are doing. And every year, after the performance, some children go missing."

She tapped a wrinkled finger against the reports. "And every year, the police conclude the same thing: that the children ran away." Her voice turned cold. "At one point, your department even suspected us of child abuse. But after an investigation, they found nothing. No human trafficking. No abuse. Nothing illegal."

The old dean met his gaze. "Just ordinary, unremarkable cases of children running away."

"Finding missing children is difficult, isn't it?" she murmured. "They scatter like grains of rice into a sea of people. And when they don't want to be found, it's like searching for a needle in a haystack. So every year, the case gets dropped."

Lu Yizhan's colleague couldn't hold back. "But this time, the surveillance shows the kid disappearing while sitting on a swing! How do you explain that? They didn't run away—they vanished!"

The old dean barely reacted. "That's a strange thing to say. How could such a thing happen?" She sighed. "Our surveillance system is old. It's likely a malfunction."

Lu Yizhan's colleague clenched his jaw, about to snap back, but Lu Yizhan raised a hand to stop him.

Calmly, he asked, "Dean, I understand that we failed to recover the children. But you should have reported them anyway. And yet, I noticed gaps in the records. You claim children go missing every year,

but some years, there are no reports. Why?"

The old dean was silent for a long moment. Then, she turned and rummaged through a dusty bookcase, finally pulling out a thick file folder. She blew away the dust, untied the string, and pulled out an old photo album.

The first page displayed a [Group Photo of the 200x Children's Home Cultural Performance]. It was an archival record.

The photograph showed dozens of small children standing stiffly next to a crowd of well-dressed men in suits. The children wore garish red lipstick and a single dot of pigment on their foreheads, their smiles forced and unnatural.

"There were missing children every year," the old dean admitted, flipping through the pages. "But you're right. I didn't report them every time."

She exhaled, her voice growing weary. "This orphanage was barely surviving. If investors pulled out for even a year or two, we'd be forced to shut down. So I'll be honest with you, Officer Lu. Some of these children weren't exactly… well-behaved."

Her gaze turned sharp. "Some of them didn't just run away. They ran away after committing crimes."

She turned a page, revealing a yellowed disciplinary record.

[Orphan Bai Six, Xiao Ke, and five others assaulted an investor after the June 1st performance. They robbed him of his belongings and mobile phone. Punishment: Cleaning the orphanage and fasting for one day. Further punishment pending evaluation.]

The old dean tapped the paper meaningfully. "These children beat up an investor and fled that very night. I didn't report it. Because if I had… those kids wouldn't have survived here."

Lu Yizhan's expression darkened.

"Dean, can I see the group photo?"

The old woman handed him the file, and Lu Yizhan flipped back to the [200x Cultural Performance Group Photo].

His eyes locked onto a particular child.

Even with lipstick and a red dot on his forehead, the child wasn't funny-looking—just unsettlingly mature. His beauty was delicate, but his expression was cold, his gaze carrying a sharp, disdainful edge. While the other children smiled timidly, he looked at them all like they were beneath him.

Lu Yizhan recognized that face immediately.

His hands clenched around the file as he stared at the old dean. "Who is this child? What's his name?"

The old woman squinted at the photo, lost in thought. "Oh, that one? He was the ringleader of the fight. Led the others to attack the investors. I remember him well. When he arrived at the orphanage, he only gave his name as Bai. Bai Six."

Lu Yizhan's hands slammed against the desk. "No. His name is Bai Liu. He used to go by Bai Six, but he changed it when he was fourteen. He grew up in a public orphanage with me. There's no way he could have been in this private orphanage at the same time!"

The old dean blinked at him, confused. "Are you sure? Bai Six was found by an investor shortly after he escaped. He never made it out."

Her voice turned solemn.

"He died not long after."

Lu Yizhan's blood ran cold. "Died? How?"

"A strange death," the old woman said softly. "He swallowed a coin. It had a hole in the middle. It got lodged in his windpipe. He choked to death within minutes."

She sighed. "He… had been through terrible things here. Before and after he tried to escape. So… we all believed it was suicide."

Lu Yizhan's gaze dropped to the black-and-white photograph. Bai Six's expression was empty, his eyelids drooping as if half-asleep. His hair was damp, clinging to his forehead like he had just come offstage.

The weight of the revelation pressed down on Lu Yizhan's chest.

That was Bai Liu.

From ten years ago.

Bai Liu walked over and picked up the doll lying next to the seesaw. It was handmade, and the reference template was clearly him. Despite its age-worn texture, a small trace of ribbon thread remained on its leg, suggesting it had once been a gift doll—typically, such dolls carried a date or a dedication from the giver.

Turning the doll over, Bai Liu searched for any markings. Eventually, he found a handwritten inscription hidden inside the screwed-off head.

It was a ten-year-old doll.

Bai Liu had only been working for two or three years. It wasn’t until he entered the workforce that he adopted the "social animal" attire—the dress shirt and blazer now reflected in the doll's outfit. The coin hanging around his neck had been given to him recently, a tangible representation of the game system.

Yet, the attire on this doll had been left behind ten years ago, its head and limbs torn off.

Bai Liu narrowed his eyes.

Reality

While Bai Liu was contemplating the doll in his hands, the teacher had gone to call over the remaining five children.

The five stood in a line, their postures tense and wary. None of them dared to meet Muke's gaze, their eyes fixed downward as if they had grown on their toes. Some limped, others had crooked spines or bent backs—all were physically impaired in one way or another. Huddled together like cubs still confined to their nest, they pushed and shoved lightly among themselves.

They looked like objects on display, scrutinized and silent, their expressions numb with the knowledge that they weren't worth much.

As Bai Liu approached, his frown deepened. The scent of mushrooms clung to these children even more strongly than it had to the bodies in the hospital.

Muke waved a hand in front of his nose, grimacing. "Do you guys eat mushrooms all the time here? What's with the smell?"

The teacher awkwardly pulled the children closer. "It's not really something we eat that often."

Bai Liu's gaze flickered over the teacher and the children. "Did you eat a lot of mushrooms that day?"

The teacher hesitated for a moment before nodding. "Yes, all five of these children ate with us that day. We had quite a lot."

"And were there any poisoned children who had eaten less? Maybe just a mouthful of mushroom soup?" Bai Liu asked.

The teacher thought for a moment, then nodded. "Yes, some children liked the taste and ate a lot, while others didn't and only had a small amount—but they were still poisoned."

Bai Liu withdrew his gaze. Those who had eaten more were not poisoned, while those who had eaten less were. That meant the poisoning wasn't tied to dosage.

But why mushrooms...? Why did every incident at this orphanage seem to revolve around mushrooms?

And what exactly were the conditions for this bizarre poisoning?

Lu Yizhan had mentioned that the children who survived the orphanage showed no significant abnormalities in their bloodwork. Like Liu Jiayi, they only had slight anemia.

The five surviving children, along with Liu Jiayi from the hospital, shared one notable similarity—they all had congenital genetic defects. Liu Jiayi was blind, and these children had various disabilities.

Bai Liu fell into deep thought.

The teacher continued leading him around the orphanage, eventually stopping at a room filled with photos, trophies, and children's drawings.

"This is our orphanage's exhibition hall," the teacher said, sidling up to Bai Liu.

The room, long untouched, was coated in dust. The trophies and certificates inside the cabinets hinted at a past when this orphanage had thrived. Now, only five children remained, trailing behind their teacher with vacant expressions.

The space carried a somber weight—most of what was displayed here belonged to the dead.

Bai Liu glanced around before turning to Mr. Xiang. "Can I take down some of the photos and paintings?"

Originally, such things wouldn't have been disturbed, but given the orphanage's current state, the teacher no longer seemed to mind. He nodded.

Curious, Muke watched as Bai Liu carefully removed several children's drawings from the wall and spread them out on the floor for closer inspection. Leaning in, he whispered, "Bai Liu, did you find something?"

"Hmm." Bai Liu hummed softly, eyes still fixed on the drawings.

Muke followed his gaze. The artwork was surprisingly well-done, clearly the work of a child with skill.

The styles varied—some were sketches of people or still lifes, drawn in colored pencils, crayons, or stark black and white. Many were

overwhelmingly bright, colors clashing with almost unpleasant saturation. The compositions felt illogical.

A frail-looking girl sat on a hospital bed, her eyes covered with a white cloth. A beautiful, silvery-blue-scaled fish swam inside a jar. A charred, broken wooden mirror rested atop a melted toy train.

These images felt strangely familiar.

Muke stared at them for a moment before something clicked. His eyes widened slightly. “Wait… were all these done by the same person? They’re all signed with a ‘W.’”

Despite the vast differences in style, every piece bore the same signature—an elegant, swirling “W” that remained consistent across all the paintings.

Bai Liu finally spared Muke a glance. His voice was quiet, almost a whisper. “That’s my signature.”

Muke’s breath caught. “Yours? But why is your signature here?!”

He wanted to press further, but seeing Bai Liu’s unwillingness to explain, he wisely shut his mouth.

That “W” was Bai Liu’s personal signature, a mark he used for his artwork. Even though the techniques in these paintings were younger, rougher, he could tell at a glance that they were his.

The blindfolded girl was unmistakably Liu Jiayi—her hospital gown identical to the one he had seen earlier that morning. The silvery-blue fish in the jar was a direct reference to The Siren King, his first game. The shattered mirror on the melted train was a clear allusion to Bursting Last Train, his second game.

But these paintings were all dated ten years ago.

Bai Liu had not been in this orphanage ten years ago. And there was no way he could have known about these events a decade in advance.

That left only one possibility: a future version of himself had somehow traveled back ten years, left these drawings behind, and they had remained here ever since.

An ordinary person might have panicked at such a paradox. But for Bai Liu, this only confirmed his suspicions—this orphanage must be

part of an official game copy of the real world.

The only logical explanation for these timeline inconsistencies was that the game's official plot progression had originally taken place ten years ago. The presence of these paintings meant that Bai Liu himself had left traces within that version of the game.

That wasn't a good sign.

A player's mark remained permanently in a game copy when they failed to clear it—just like Zhang Gui, whose death in Bursting Last Train had left him eternally trapped as a scorched corpse monster. These traces of failure became part of the game's fabric, merging with reality when the game loaded into the real world.

But the inevitability of that outcome didn't faze Bai Liu. He remained calm.

Two things still puzzled him.

His gaze fell on a boy in the corner of an old group photo from 200X.

The boy's face was emotionless, his expression carrying an unmistakable hint of disdain—a silent, "You foolish mortals." His eyes held an air of arrogance, entirely out of place.

Bai Liu, fourteen years old, looked again at the paintings with their sharp, aggressively colorful strokes.

That expression in the photo, that distinct artistic style—both were habits he had abandoned long ago. He had once preferred gaudy, vibrant colors, but after entering the workforce, his boss had criticized his art as mentally polluting and unsuitable for the market.

These paintings and that boy—they belonged to his fourteen-year-old self.

And yet, the information conveyed within the paintings was something only a twenty-four-year-old Bai Liu could have known.

If it was his twenty-four-year-old self in the game, he wouldn't have painted in this style.

If the game forced his mind to regress to fourteen, then he shouldn't have knowledge from the future.

This version of Bai Liu had the memories of his twenty-four-year-old

self but the artistic style and mannerisms of his fourteen-year-old self. That shouldn't be possible. Memory was a key factor in shaping a person's style and personality. If he retained his memories from the last ten years, he shouldn't be the same as he was at fourteen.

His existence in the game seemed fragmented—split between his past and present selves.

That was his first point of confusion.

The second was the sketch of the blindfolded girl holding a doll.

Bai Liu had hated sketching at fourteen. He had been obsessed with colors, rejecting the documentary-style blandness of black-and-white sketches.

So why had his fourteen-year-old self drawn a sketch of Liu Jiayi—who hadn't even been born yet?

Did that mean Liu Jiayi would enter this game too?

If so, why was she here at all?

Bai Liu's gaze traveled across the painting, finally settling on the doll in Liu Jiayi's arms.

It wore a white shirt and black trousers, its head twisted unnaturally—turned a full 180 degrees.

His fingers brushed against the coin on his chest.

His eyes darkened slightly.

Lobby

Bai Liu didn’t stay at the orphanage for long. He had to enter the game with Mu Ke soon, and after a quick sweep of the orphanage, he was ready to go.

But before leaving, Bai Liu had a brief explanation to give to Lu Yizhan.

He told Mu Ke to go home and wait for him. The young master looked at Bai Liu with fondness as he left, asking when he would be back.

As soon as Bai Liu stepped outside, he spotted Lu Yizhan waiting for him at the orphanage entrance.

Lu Yizhan couldn’t resist teasing. "What about the young master? Since when did you have that kind of charm?"

Bai Liu, unfazed, teased back. "What’s the point of being charming? I didn’t turn him down for you and even let him go first."

Lu Yizhan smiled but quickly got down to business. "You looked around. What did you find?"

Bai Liu didn’t hesitate. "Besides poisoned children, there are also missing children. I already have a good idea about the poisoned ones, but as for the missing children—I’m guessing this isn’t the first time it's happened here, is it?"

Lu Yizhan was startled. "How do you know?"

"The attitude was off." Bai Liu analyzed calmly. "The teacher gave me the wrong impression. A normal person would avoid the place where a disappearance occurred, but when she showed us around, even though she was scared, she subconsciously led us straight to the site—the children’s amusement park."

"This kind of reaction means it's not the first time. If disappearances were rare, she’d be more alarmed, more hesitant. But instead, she was scared yet familiar with it. That suggests it’s happened multiple times before."

Lu Yizhan let out a frustrated sigh, gripping the cigarette he had put away. "Yeah. We spoke to the dean. It’s been happening almost every year for the past ten years."

Bai Liu frowned. "If there's a record of disappearances happening every year, how come you've never heard of it before?"

"Because they're not considered missing." Lu Yizhan ground his teeth against his cigarette, his expression dark. "Most of them are classified as runaways. Even if reports were filed, they were dismissed as kids running away. The cases were barely mentioned in the records—easy to overlook unless someone was paying close attention."

When a child disappears from a private orphanage, searching for them is an uphill battle. There are no parents or relatives to demand answers or pressure authorities to act.

"After I found out that group of entrepreneurs invested in this orphanage—and that the poisoned children mysteriously got better—I dug into the place." Lu Yizhan exhaled a thin stream of smoke. "But private orphanages aren't as strictly registered as public ones. They operate with more autonomy. There's no clear record of how many children are here at any given time, and even the records we do get might not be accurate."

"For example, if a child went missing and the dean didn't report it for a few years, there's a good chance we'd never even know."

After a brief silence, Lu Yizhan added, "I have my suspicions about those entrepreneurs, but they're powerful. Too much time has passed, and we don't have any solid evidence. We can't investigate further."

Bai Liu's voice was light but sharp. "If they were involved with the missing children, and no one knows the kids' real names or where they came from, then it would've been easy to make them disappear without a trace. There'd be nothing to investigate."

"Exactly." Lu Yizhan took a long drag from his cigarette, then coughed. His voice was rough when he spoke again. "But Bai Liu, these are human lives."

His eyes were red as he looked at Bai Liu. "I can't accept that these children's deaths are written off as accidents. And even if they were accidents, I need to rule out every other possibility."

Bai Liu met his gaze with calm indifference. "You have no evidence. You can't rule anything out. And it's not your job to do so. Even coming here is already overstepping your boundaries."

Lu Yizhan was quiet for a moment. Then, as if nothing had happened,

he continued discussing the case, tirelessly going over the details.

Lu Yizhan had a peculiar kind of resilience. Bai Liu wouldn't waste time on a task he knew was impossible, but Lu Yizhan—if he thought something could help people—would throw himself into it, no matter how difficult.

And he would drag Bai Liu along with him.

Lu Yizhan showed Bai Liu the records of the disappearances, using annual group photos from the orphanage's June 1st celebrations.

When the first photo appeared, Lu Yizhan fell eerily silent.

Because one of the missing children in the photo—was Bai Liu.

"You think he looks a lot like me at fourteen, don't you?" Bai Liu pointed at the boy's face and commented dryly, "I think he looks like me too."

"You're nothing alike," Lu Yizhan said, his voice rough. He looked at Bai Liu intently, then refuted his friend with rare stubbornness.

"Because he's dead. And you're still alive."

On his way home, Bai Liu called Mu Sicheng.

"Has this ever happened to you before?" Bai Liu asked. "The future me—as a player—is supposed to have died in a ten-year-old instance, but the present me, the one from ten years ago, is still alive."

Mu Sicheng's voice crackled through the speaker, filled with disbelief. "That sounds like the grandmother paradox. Bai Liu, your luck is ridiculously cursed. I've never even heard of this happening in the game before."

The grandmother paradox was a well-known time-travel paradox. If someone went back in time and killed their grandmother, they wouldn't exist in the future.

Bai Liu was facing a similar dilemma. If he was destined to die in an instance set ten years in the past, how was he still alive now?

"Parallel universe theory?" Mu Sicheng tried. "The usual explanation for the grandmother paradox is that different timelines exist. So

maybe the Bai Liu from an alternate timeline—let's call it B—died in that game, and what you saw was his fate playing out in our timeline, A."

"Then you'd better not enter that orphanage game," Mu Sicheng warned, his tone suddenly serious. "If you don't enter, you won't die there, and that might create a new branch of possibilities."

"I don't think it's the parallel universe theory." Bai Liu remained level-headed. "Our reality is already the finalized version of the game. It's the official version, meaning it's the sum of all possibilities, all calculated outcomes. There are no alternate timelines."

Mu Sicheng hesitated. "That makes sense. But—wait. If reality only has one outcome, doesn't that mean you're guaranteed to die in that game?"

"But the fact that I'm still alive proves that I didn't," Bai Liu countered smoothly. "Otherwise, the two statements—'I am alive' and 'I am dead'—would create an impossible paradox in a reality where no alternate versions exist."

"Then… what the hell is going on?" Mu Sicheng sounded thoroughly confused.

Bai Liu didn't bother answering. He had already arrived home and was pulling out his keys.

With his phone propped on his shoulder, he asked, "When are you getting into the game?"

"Why?" Mu Sicheng groaned. "I barely got any sleep last night after promising you I'd go in. What the hell are you planning? I have twenty-six instances left to clear in two months! You should at least help me find more people!"

"That's exactly what I wanted to talk about," Bai Liu said briskly. "Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu. They ranked highest among the last batch of new players. Both have personal skills and C+ panel quality. Take them through a level-one instance to train them. Teach them the basics, but don't protect them too much."

After returning from the hotpot yesterday, Bai Liu spoke with Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu, laying out the dangers of the league and asking if they were willing to join.

The two middle-aged people barely hesitated. They clasped their hands in silent, tearful agreement before they asked Bai Liu only two questions.

The first was, "If we win, we can resurrect Guoguo, right?"

"In theory, yes," Bai Liu replied. "But you could also achieve that gradually by playing normally and saving points. The league is riskier, but it allows you to earn points much faster. Think it over and give me an answer tomorrow."

Xiang Chunhua glanced at Liu Fu with a complicated expression, her hands tightening around her apron. The television behind her blared the news—an old broadcast about Li Gou's impending execution. The volume was turned up high, the male news anchor's voice echoing in the small room: Suspect in senior girl's body dismemberment case to be sentenced to death.

Xiang Chunhua turned back to Bai Liu, her gaze steady.

"This contest—whatever it is—it'll help you, won't it?" That was their second question.

Bai Liu hesitated for a moment before answering. "Yes. But the mortality rate is high. You should think it through—"

"There's nothing to think about." Xiang Chunhua cut him off with a smile, though her eyes were still wet with unshed tears. She wiped them away with the back of her hand. "We trust you, Bai Liu. Besides, how else are we going to save up points? It's just a game, right? And I was on my girls' volleyball team back in the day, wasn't I, Liu Fu?"

Lobby

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Liu Fu smiled nervously. "We used to also play basketball when we were young too—we're not worse than you youngsters."

Bai Liu was silent for a moment before speaking. "You don't have to force yourselves. You can always talk to me before officially signing up in two months. You can drop out if you change your mind. I'll try to find someone else in that time—you're just a backup option."

But despite his words, Bai Liu didn't have much of a choice. There were only two months left, and most of the veteran players who were both interested and qualified had already signed up. As for those who weren't interested, they had no reason to follow Bai Liu—a complete newcomer—into a high-risk competition where survival wasn't guaranteed.

Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu understood the dangers, but they also wanted to repay Bai Liu. He might seem distant, even ruthless at times—extracting souls and playing the role of the villain—but from beginning to end, everything he did was to help them.

It was just a competition. And even if they died for this young man, they had already lived long enough.

Much longer than Guoguo.

Compared to the two middle-aged players, who had experienced life and death, Mu Sicheng was far less composed.

The moment Bai Liu asked him to recruit new players, Mu Sicheng was completely furious.

He was silent for two seconds, then raised his voice in disbelief. "You want me to bring in new people? Are you serious? You're going into the tournament with a brand new team? Are you insane? That's your big solution?"

His voice cracked. "I'm starting to regret that you dragged me into this mess last night while I was out of it." He let out a sharp laugh. "And for the record—I never bring in new people!"

"So, do you want to quit?" Bai Liu asked softly. "I'll allow you to withdraw, but then you'll have to compete alone in this virtual world."

His voice was even, matter-of-fact. "Or would you rather play with me in a league where you can win something real?"

Mu Sicheng choked on his words, as if something had lodged in his throat. His breathing turned uneven.

"Shit," he muttered. "What kind of choice is that? Of course, I'm going with you."

Bai Liu slid his spare key into the lock but didn't turn it just yet. He calmly asked, "So, you're helping me bring in new people?"

Silence. The only sound on the other end of the call was Mu Sicheng's unsteady breathing. Bai Liu waited patiently, making no move to hang up.

"You're really good at this," Mu Sicheng finally burst out, frustration thick in his voice. Bai Liu could almost picture him ruffling his hair in irritation.

In the end, Mu Sicheng let out a resigned sigh. "Fine, I'll try. Just so we're clear—I've never led before, and I'm not some guild veteran who trains newbies. You bring me a recruit, and I don't promise to keep them alive."

Bai Liu smiled. "I always assume you can do it before it happens."

"You're ridiculous, Bai Liu," Mu Sicheng groaned. "You have to be running a pyramid scheme or something."

"I don't do illegal things," Bai Liu said smoothly, finally turning the key in the lock. His expression remained perfectly calm. "And when have I ever coaxed people into joining me?"

Inside the room, Muke turned around in surprise. Bai Liu had given him the spare key earlier, telling him to wait inside.

Muke clenched his fists, taking a deep breath. "When do we start playing? I'm ready to join the team."

Mu Sicheng, still on the phone, immediately scoffed. "Wait, that's Muke, isn't it? And you claim you don't sweet-talk people into joining you? Then how the hell did he end up on your bandwagon—"

Bai Liu crisply hung up.

"See you at the game, Mu Sicheng."

System: [Welcome player Bai Liu to the game, please take care of your safety.]

Bai Liu slowly opened his eyes. He was still dressed in his suit, trousers, and white shirt. Muke had logged in with him, but all players had random entry points. A bright red warning window popped up.

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu has received a kill order.]
[System Alert: A friendly reminder to change your appearance to avoid being followed by the killer.]

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow.
[A chase order? Change my face at random, I guess.]

[System: Entering random face modification program – height change (174 → 161), hair color change (short black → long brown curly), lip color (flesh tone → cherry red), pupil distance widening, eye width enlargement…]

His clothes shrank and adjusted to fit his new form. Bai Liu examined himself—an innocent, harmless-looking high school girl. He fell silent.

He couldn't agree with the system's aesthetic choices.

Still, this disguise greatly reduced his chances of being recognized. Unfortunately, Mu Sicheng had an uncanny ability to track him down. The man claimed Bai Liu "smelled like copper" and could be sniffed out from a few hundred meters away. True enough, it didn't take long for Mu Sicheng to find him.

Mu Sicheng, initially serious, ended up staring at Bai Liu's altered form—a petite, flat-chested high school girl with long wavy hair.

"...You actually have this kind of hobby?" he asked.

Bai Liu ignored him, tugging his skirt down to cover where Mu Sicheng's unsettling gaze lingered. "Look again, and I'll kill you," he said flatly. "I've received a chase order. What's going on?"

"Yeah, that's what I came to tell you." Mu Sicheng's expression turned grim. "A guild has issued a direct bounty on you."

A chase order functioned similarly to those flashy advertising fireworks Bai Liu had seen before—a public notice sent to all players. It required points to broadcast, much like the loudspeaker announcements in online games he'd played years ago. The moment it was triggered, every player could see it.

As Bai Liu spoke, another virtual firework exploded above his head. Golden embers rained down, and a system notification popped up.

[System-wide announcement: The Scavenging Zombies Guild has issued a kill order on player Bai Liu.]
[Hunt details: The Scavenging Zombies Guild promises to kill Bai Liu within three days and seize the (Siren's Fishbone) and (Ghost Mirror) from him to prepare for the season! All players are welcome to watch! Please support the Scavenging Zombies Guild in the league!]

"The Scavenging Zombies Guild?" Bai Liu stroked his chin. "Is that a small guild? Never heard of them."

"It's not a small guild," Mu Sicheng said, looking exasperated. "Bai Liu, you should pay attention to something other than points. You're going to the league. Learn about the major teams and guilds."

Bai Liu shrugged. "I didn't see them in the top 10 of the league's guild ranking. If they're not even in the top 10, they're a small guild, right?"

His voice and expression were neutral, a genuine inquiry with no hint of mockery—but Mu Sicheng felt like Bai Liu had just roasted the Scavenging Zombies Guild to death. He stifled a laugh.

Then he sobered up. "They're not small," he repeated, pulling up the system panel. Swiping through the league's rankings, he finally stopped and showed Bai Liu the screen.

"They might not be the most famous, but they have two very well-known players." Mu Sicheng pointed at two profiles. "These guys are the guild's founders and top players."

"They're also just a step away from reaching S-rank." Mu Sicheng met Bai Liu's gaze seriously. "They're on a completely different level than Zhang Gui's type. These two are pro-tier. Killing is second nature to them."

[Player: Miao Feichi]

Current support ranking: #67 (410,000 support points) – Unlocked the Death-Free Medal
Total Points Ranking: #134
Guild: Scavenging Zombies
[Player: Miao Gaofu]

Current support ranking: #107 (230,000 support points) – Unlocked the Death-Free Medal
Total Points Ranking: #179
Guild: Scavenging Zombies

Their player profiles included a video thumbnail labeled:

[Highly Popular Support Video] – [Mix: Best Duo of the Year ~ Scavenging Zombie Highlight – A Bloody Father-Son Duo Who Rip and Tear Without Mercy]

The video was free to watch. Bai Liu clicked in without hesitation.

Three minutes later, the video ended, pausing on its final frame. A man with a shackle over his mouth unlatched it with one hand and lunged, teeth sinking into another player's back. The victim screamed, blood splattering everywhere.

Beside the man stood a tall, Qing Dynasty zombie-like figure with greenish-purple skin. The monstrous player casually swatted an opponent away, appearing utterly unbothered by their attacks. His presence was imposing—steady, mature, and deeply unsettling.

"The crazy one biting people is Miao Feichi—he's their main damage dealer," Mu Sicheng explained. "The zombie-looking one is Miao Gaofu. He's the tank, ridiculously high defense in that form. Typical DPS and shield combo. And since they're father and son, their teamwork is insane."

Bai Liu rewound the video, rewatching the clip of Miao Feichi biting someone. Resting his chin on his hand, he asked, "So this Miao Feichi guy attacks by biting people?"

"No, he fights with dual blades. He eats people because—" Mu Sicheng hesitated, his tone complicated. "Miao Feichi has an… cannibal fetish. He enjoys eating corpses. Fresh corpses. He was imprisoned for attempted crimes in real life, but since it was only an attempt, he got out."

Bai Liu looked up. "To put it simply, he likes eating kids and got caught trying to abduct one?"

Mu Sicheng fell silent for a moment. "...Yeah."

But Bai Liu barely reacted. Instead, he tapped his chin in thought before looking at Mu Sicheng with great sincerity. "But I've been so low-profile. Why would they target me?"

Mu Sicheng stared at him blankly. "...Are you serious?"

Bai Liu, still in his short skirt, looked puzzled. "So it's just because I look tastier?"

Mu Sicheng: "……"

Don't actually believe that!!!

Chapter End Notes

Crossdressing!!!!

Lobby

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A three-day kill order on Bai Liu by the Scavenging Zombies Guild has caused an uproar among players, turning the forums upside down.

[Rational Discussion]: If the Scavenging Zombies get their hands on Bai Liu's weapons, could they break into the top 20 this year?

OP: I'm tempted to bet on them.

1L: Wake up, OP. You're overhyping a newbie weapon. This is the league! The best weapons and props that guilds have gathered all year are on display. Bai Liu's gear isn't on the same level.

2L: The Scavenging Zombies are clearly using this as a publicity stunt. Bai Liu's whip doesn't even have decent output against minions or monsters. How is it supposed to compare to top-tier weapons? Honestly, I think Miao Feichi's twin blades are stronger. At least they can deal real damage.

3L: If we're talking about the duo competition, I could see them making top 20. But in the team competition? No way.

OP: But isn't the data on Bai Liu's two godly NPC weapons still unknown? What if they're bugged? The Scavenging Zombies might have a real shot if they get their hands on them!

5L: OP, you've been completely brainwashed by guild marketing during the support season. Can't you see that the King's Guild is selling the broken Ghost Mirror to the Scavenging Zombies? If it were actually useful, the King's Guild would've kept it and completed the set themselves!

The King's Guild has top-tier appraisers and repair specialists. If they're getting rid of an item, it's because it's worthless.

6L: The Scavenging Zombies are just riding the hype wave. Bai Liu skyrocketed to second place on the New Star Rankings, and a lot of people started hyping him up as the next Spades. But let's be real—his panel stats are way too low. Against two experienced A-rank guild players, he'll be dead in no time.

7L: But isn't Bai Liu partnered with Mu Sicheng now? That makes things trickier. God Mu's movement speed is ridiculous.

8L: That depends on who's coming after them. If the Scavenging Zombies' ace duo is hunting them, Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng are doomed. Miao Gaojiang and Miao Feichi are both S-rank players. Miao Gaojiang has an S-rank defense stat, which makes him practically unkillable.

Meanwhile, Miao Feichi's "victory ritual"—eating his defeated opponents—sends his mini-TV viewers into a frenzy. The way his audience throws money at him after every kill? Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng can't compete on any front. Bai Liu just doesn't have the firepower, and while Mu Sicheng's speed might let him evade Miao Feichi, it won't be enough against Miao Gaojiang.

9L: Bai Liu isn't a damage dealer; he's a strategist. He even beat the Puppeteer. Don't underestimate him.

10L: Are you new here? First of all, the Puppeteer's panel was only A-rank, and he's never competed in the league. He's nothing compared to Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang.

Zhang Gui's intelligence-based gameplay had serious limitations. His fans kept hyping him up, saying he'd make waves in the league, but now that he's dead, I can finally say it: his playstyle wasn't even close to what you'd expect from someone with a 93 intelligence stat. It was basic.

Miao Gaojiang, on the other hand, is an intelligence-based player. [Link: Top 10 Smartest Counter-Kills in League History]—a video with over 2 million views. One of the featured moments? Miao Gaojiang taking down a King's Guild duo in a two-player match using pure strategy.

By the way, Miao Gaojiang and Bai Liu both have an 89 intelligence stat. The difference? Miao Gaojiang has actual league experience.

That being said, Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang are way out of Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng's league. It's unlikely they'd bother hunting down a newcomer. They're already in Level 3 instances.

This whole thing is probably just a publicity stunt. No need to worry. If you're a Scavenging Zombies fan, go ahead and place your bets—I watched a few of Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang's practice matches this year, and they're in top form.

...

36L: Well, looks like I get to say I told you so. The Scavenging Zombies just made an official announcement: they are hunting Bai Liu. And not just with any random members—Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang themselves are coming for him. Miao Feichi even said they're going to win and celebrate on his mini-TV stream.

37L: ?!?!! WHAT?! The ace duo is personally coming after him?! Aren't they supposed to be running training instances right now? Why are they in a normal player's game?!

The forum exploded.

Inside the King's Guild.

A solemn-looking man weaved through the bustling crowd, clutching a system panel. He hurried toward an office marked by a striking red heart, its color dripping downward like fresh blood, staining the poisonous symbol of a red skull below.

The sight of the emblem made the man hesitate, swallowing hard before he finally knocked.

"Queen, the results of Wang Shun's comprehensive analysis of Queen of Hearts' mini-TV charge data are in. Would you like to see them now?"

"Come in."

The man stepped inside, his movements cautious.

A woman lounged on a black bench, a long pipe resting in her fingers. She wore a black and red embroidered cheongsam with a one-sided open front, sheer black stockings, and high heels. Her hair was styled into a loose bun, held in place by a long wooden pin. Black tassel earrings brushed against her bare white shoulders, and a shawl had slipped down her back, pooling around her wrists.

Her gaze was slightly rounded in the middle, the corners of her eyes tilting upward. A hazy color filled her irises, and her full, bright red lips parted as she took a slow drag from her pipe. She exhaled, the white smoke curling around her like an intoxicating haze. Despite the air of languid sensuality, the slight downturn of her eyes lent her an

aloof, unapproachable presence.

The office was packed. Voices clashed in a chaotic symphony of debate.

"Queen's player charge support has dropped significantly this month..."

"We need to figure out a strategy. I think it's because the team play dynamic is overshadowing the Queen's individual charisma, splitting charge points across the team..."

"I told you we need to emphasize star players! Look at [Spades]! His strong personal style attracted a massive audience..."

"I disagree. The league focuses on team play! The season starts in two months—we can't lose sight of that. Even [Spades] is practicing team coordination now!"

"…Zhang Gui, our spare player, is dead. We're down one team member, and the new strategy still needs refining..."

"…There's also an important new member we need to integrate—[Forbidden Witch], currently number one on the Rising Stars list. Her personal skill allows her to both deal damage and restore HP, which is incredibly rare and valuable. But she hasn't trained with the rest of the team yet. She still needs thirteen more dungeon runs to qualify..."

Queen of Hearts rubbed her brow, then sat up, waving a hand lazily. Her voice carried the husky texture of a habitual smoker.

"Enough. Operations managers, stop talking and listen to the report."

The room fell silent in an instant. Everyone straightened, bowing their heads respectfully.

"Yes, Queen."

The man reporting took a cautious glance at the infamous team behind the Queen of Hearts' operations. He swallowed before speaking.

"This month, Queen's charge total is down 19% compared to last month. Peak viewership has dropped by 21%… Combined small TV figures are down 13.67%…"

"The gap between Queen and third place on the overall rankings,

[Reverse Cross Cultists], has shrunk significantly. If this trend continues, we may be overtaken in the second half of the year. However, we still maintain first place in the high-value player ranking..."

Queen of Hearts listened with her eyes lowered before raising a hand, cutting him off.

"Direct the report toward audience loss."

"Oh… alright." The reporter clicked through his system panel, flipping to another page.

"Regarding audience loss, Wang Shun's analysis shows that a third of it comes from high-level players who are in direct competition with you, primarily [Reverse Cross Cultists]. However, that's not the majority of the loss."

He hesitated before continuing with a bitter chuckle.

"The remaining two-thirds… have gone to lower-ranked players. This batch of newcomers is incredibly competent and distinct. Their viewership numbers have surged."

"Whether it's [Little Witch], who tops the Rising Stars list with both healing and high-damage output, [Bai Liu], the control player who recently rose to second place, [Parrot], sitting at third with a 100% luck stat, or [Monkey Thief], who stole from Spades and got away with it in fourth…"

"All of them are significantly outperforming the usual standard for new players on small TV."

"The Witch is one of us. It doesn't matter if her numbers rise," Queen murmured, exhaling smoke. Her gaze sharpened slightly.

"Bai Liu? The one the system dubbed 'Second to Spades'?"

The reporter hesitated before deliberately choosing his words.

"Yes. This newcomer killed Zhang Gui, and his personal skill appears to be control-based as well. However, since we've been preparing for the tournament, we haven't pursued him for Zhang Gui's death… especially since we confirmed Zhang Gui simply wasn't strong enough."

"The broken lens we obtained was appraised and deemed nearly useless before being sold off. As for why he's been labeled 'Second to Spades'…"

"It's because of his weapon, right?" Hearts interjected casually. "A whip, just like Spades'. His is a white siren fishbone whip, while Spades' is a solid black lizard bone whip."

She let out a slow, almost amused exhale.

"A matching pair of whips, almost."

The room collectively held its breath, wary of her reaction.

Everyone knew—Queen of Hearts adored Spades.

How much? Enough to found the King's Guild as a tribute to him. The guild's very name, [King's Crown], symbolized her ambition: to build a vast and wealthy empire worthy of placing atop Spades' head.

But Spades had rejected her.

And not just once—every time he had the chance, he nearly killed her in the league.

Every time the pro players gathered and she approached to greet him, he would only look at her with his usual indifference and ask,

"Who are you?"

It was as if he had never even remembered her.

The Queen of Hearts. The top-ranked beauty in the game's history. The woman who had essentially "married" him with an entire guild.

A heartbreak that shattered the fantasies of every male player who adored her.

Yet none dared to say anything to Spades.

Because Spades was the kind of man who didn't seem capable of falling for anyone.

And to make matters worse, he would continue to kill her in every match, without hesitation.

Queen's expression darkened. For the first time, she looked mildly

intrigued. Resting her cheek on one hand, she smiled languidly.

"That whip is interesting. It even carries a layer of god-ranked NPC attributes, with unknown stats."

The reporter hesitated. "The Scavenging Zombies Guild is issuing a hunt to take the whip. Queen, if you're interested—"

"I'm not interested," she said indifferently. Her tone was relaxed, almost dismissive. "A newcomer is just a newcomer. He’s not capable of standing in front of me yet this year."

She sighed, stretching back into her chair, her fingers lazily tracing the pipe. Her voice dropped to a whisper, half-lost in memory.

"I’ve seen Spades' whip up close. Do you think anyone else's could possibly compare?"

Her toes tapped lightly in the air, as if toying with the thought.

"Spades is the best," she murmured.

"Both the whip… and the man."

Game registration portal.

Mu Sicheng and Bai Liu are standing together. Bai Liu is looking around, searching for Muke. He asks Muke to wait for him at the entrance to the boarding area. Mu Sicheng’s appearance is also disguised, more elaborately than Bai Liu’s. He uses props to disguise himself as a bearded man and walks alone, clearly not being followed by anyone.

But soon, Mu Sicheng notices someone following Bai Liu, and he has no choice but to approach and warn him. However, something doesn’t feel right.

Mu Sicheng looks at Bai Liu suspiciously. "What level of appearance conditioning are you using?"

Bai Liu winks. "It’s free."

Mu Sicheng: "....."

Mu Sicheng’s entire body tenses up as he exclaims, "Bai Liu, could you

be a little more stingy?! You're being hunted!"

"There's no point in spending money on this." Bai Liu eyes the game wall. "There's a gap after I enter the game where the numbers aren't satisfied, but by the time my little TV prompts me to enter, it's easy for a guild with many eyes on them to find me in a hundred games on the game wall."

Mu Sicheng frowns, realizing Bai Liu has a point.

"And if they want to catch me, I might want to catch them too?" Bai Liu suddenly looks at Mu Sicheng with a playful smile. His innocent expression in female form leaves Mu Sicheng frozen.

But Mu Sicheng quickly regains his composure. "You arrested them? What are you going to do with them?"

Bai Liu's eyes narrow slightly. "They want the fish bones and broken lenses on me, and I want what's on them."

Mu Sicheng furrows his brow. "What do you want from them?"

Bai Liu looks up at Mu Sicheng. "The broken lenses and their guild."

"I found out that all the other players in the competition have guilds, but we don't have one yet." Bai Liu speaks calmly, as if discussing something as trivial as asking for an extra egg with noodles. "I want one too. I haven't figured out how to get a big guild, but this… what's it called? A scavenger guild? It's worth trying."

Mu Sicheng stares at him blankly. "....."

For a moment, he's at a loss for where to even begin.

"It's a scavenger guild, not a herbivore guild." Mu Sicheng rubs his forehead, looking at Bai Liu with a mix of concern and frustration. "Bai Liu, can you stop using that casual roadside-sales tone when talking about taking over a whole guild? How many times do I have to tell you, this scavenger guild is not a small one!"

Mu Sicheng sighs deeply. "It would be much better for us to join a guild with their support, sure. But it's too late for us to start one. We don't have enough resources or players. And the Scavenger Guild isn't something we can just mess with. Their boss is a league veteran who can take down the King's Guild team, father and son. You've seen the video, they're not someone we can easily handle."

"I thought you were ready for a scattered entry." Mu Sicheng rubs his temples. "But now you're talking about robbing a guild? Give it up, Bai Liu. It's just not possible."

"I didn't say I wanted to steal it." Bai Liu gives Mu Sicheng a deadpan look. "I just want to control their boss and call on their guild's resources."

Mu Sicheng hesitates, then quickly counters. "That won't work. Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang are already in the tournament. Even if you control them, they can't join our team again. Players who've already joined a team can't switch. It's the rule."

Mu Sicheng continues, "Unless they forfeit the tournament, they'll use their guild's resources for themselves. Guild support can even be life-saving in a game league. And with your trading model, I don't think you'll be able to cross over and call on their resources, even if you control them."

Bai Liu stops speaking to Mu Sicheng and keeps his focus on the game wall, but Mu Sicheng persists.

"And the broken lenses?" Mu Sicheng frowns. "What's the deal with them?"

Bai Liu explains without missing a beat. "In this game, I can place broken lenses on others, or I can buy imitation broken lenses and pass them off as real ones. There are so many ways to confuse the props. They're after me partly for the gimmick to use for publicity, and partly for the broken lenses and other props I have."

"But to verify that the props I have are real, the broken lenses on me need to be inspected."

Bai Liu looks at Mu Sicheng. "Mu Sicheng, as a professional thief, what's the best way to check the goods without ever being wrong?"

"..... Put them together." Mu Sicheng thinks for a moment. "If it were me, I'd piece together the broken lenses. If I can reassemble it into a prop, it's real. If not, it's fake."

"So, you think they were carrying broken lenses?" Mu Sicheng squints at Bai Liu, who is a head shorter than him. "They could have taken the broken lenses from you and put them back together."

"Yes, they could definitely take the shattered lenses from me and

reassemble them, but I don’t think that’s likely." Bai Liu continues scanning the game wall.

Mu Sicheng asks, "Why is that unlikely?"

"Because killing me in person to inspect the goods works best live." Bai Liu leans slightly toward Mu Sicheng, speaking lightly. "Aren’t they planning to use me for publicity? Killing someone to confirm the goods has the best effect, right?"

Mu Sicheng falls silent.

Chapter End Notes

> Because Spades was the kind of man who didn’t seem capable of falling for anyone.
> Hahahahahahahahahahahaha □

The Loving Welfare Home

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

From a live perspective, it's true that the rewarding impact of killing Bai Liu in front of his face and then setting up a ghost mirror is much more satisfying, and the audience buys it, just like Miao Feichi eating his opponent in front of them.

If it's for a support campaign, this is indeed the option that scavenging zombies would choose.

There have been guilds that like to kill promising newcomers to boost their momentum before the league starts, or, more refinedly, the "dark horse killed, guild invincible." This happens every year, often to newcomers with no guild power but a lot of hype. Bai Liu was one of these dark horses.

The first of these was Bai Liu, who was even more high-profile and arrogant than Mu Sicheng, taking out the top-ranked Zhang Gui and stealing Mu Sicheng's place in the pecking order.

Mu Sicheng recalled the guild announcement he'd read about the scavenging zombies.

Miao Feichi, with his mouth in chains, posted a video on the guild's bulletin board, talking about killing Bai Liu to become a broadcaster.

"It's just that I don't really like eating people who are taller; smaller is better," Miao Feichi said jokingly. "It's a regular thing, a dark horse offering. How much you eat depends on how hard you charge it. I can eat more for you."

Miao Feichi licked his lips and sniggered. "It's not a shame to throw his meat away, it's not worth much to sell it."

Bai Liu looked strangely at Mu Sicheng, who had just thought of something, his expression suddenly becoming so fierce it seemed like he wanted to eat someone. "What's wrong with you?"

"Not really, I just thought of something that didn't sit well with me," Mu Sicheng grinded his teeth, but he quickly controlled his facial expression and looked at Bai Liu. "I'll follow you this time. The two of

us together is better than you alone, at least, right?"

Mu Sicheng had already pestered Bai Liu for a while to join him in the game, but Bai Liu refused and asked him to handle newcomers.

Mu Sicheng was a bit annoyed. "If something happens to you, it's useless if I bring these two new people out, for fuck's sake."

"Until something happens, you can assume nothing will happen to me." Bai Liu patted Mu Sicheng on the shoulder and gave him a fake business smile to reassure him.

Mu Sicheng suddenly turned his head, his gaze over Bai Liu's shoulder to look behind him. He frowned and whispered to Bai Liu, "They're coming."

Bai Liu followed Mu Sicheng's gaze and saw two players approaching —one tall and one short. The lead player walked arrogantly, and the ordinary players around the boarding entrance quickly distanced themselves, forming a vacuum circle around him.

Players backed away not because these two were a flesh-eating zombie duo—no player in the hall could harm each other—but because of a system prompt:

[System alert for players who have logged in: Red player (Miao Feichi) is on the prowl. This player killed 12 players in a 50-player multiplayer copy yesterday. Please keep your distance from him and do not enter the same game with him easily to protect your personal safety].

Miao Feichi smiled wickedly at the hint, a smile that seemed to come naturally, with the smugness of being in control of someone's life and making them fear it.

Miao Feichi was a handsome young man with high shoulders and long legs, his appearance rather creamy. He looked good, and the feeling of him eating human flesh gave off a mysterious, elegant vibe—like a vampire. He had been in the top 20 of the small TV face area.

Bai Liu briefly scanned Miao Feichi's looks, objectively assessing him. His bone structure and facial proportions were far from Mu Sicheng's. Bai Liu felt that Miao Feichi had overdone his styling, intentionally making himself look oily and flamboyant.

Behind Miao Feichi was a silent middle-aged man—tall and strong,

with a dark face, a string of Buddhist beads around his neck, two tusks curving from his mouth like elephant tusks, and a steady gait that made him seem more stable than the more flamboyant Miao Feichi.

It seemed that this was Miao Feichi's father, Miao Gaojiang, who played alongside him.

Miao Feichi strutted up to the game wall at the entrance, followed by a few people looking around for someone, obviously the Scavenging Zombie Guild players helping to find Bai Liu. This group of players seemed to fear Miao Feichi—an uncontrollable, biological fear of higher creatures that came from the lower levels of the food chain.

No one liked the way Miao Feichi looked at people, even his own subordinates. He squinted at them with the same eyes as if they were looking at food, like a piece of human flesh that was delicious.

In Bai Liu's words, it felt like a herd of herbivores trembling behind a carnivore.

This group of herbivores was desperately trying to please Miao Feichi.

"Brother Miao, have you come to see Bai Liu to play and relax? You really don't have to do this, we can handle it."

"It's not because of those forum players' nonsense, they've pissed off Brother Miao. Didn't someone say Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng playing together is definitely one of the attractions of next year's double match? I think even if Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng were to enter this match together, Brother Miao and Father Miao would still beat them easily!"

"Eh." Miao Feichi's eyes narrowed at the praise, and he stopped his followers from going overboard. "You guys talk too much. But I still hope he's not with Mu Sicheng. After all, I can't eat one meal with two adults."

"Fuck." Hearing this, Mu Sicheng, who was hiding in the crowd, cursed under his breath and tried to roll up his sleeves and go forward, but Bai Liu quickly grabbed his wrist and gave him a look that told him to stay put.

"Fuck." Mu Sicheng couldn't help but mutter, "Miao Feichi is the most careful player I've ever seen in the league. Didn't someone say on the forum that we were good together and would have no problem beating them next year? I think that's why Miao Feichi is taking

advantage of you. He just can’t stand newcomers who play better than him."

But as hard as these herbivore followers talked, it was basically the main opinion of many players on the forum.

Apart from Bai Liu's fans and Mu Sicheng's fans who still believed in them, the rest of the players were rather pessimistic and felt that Mu Sicheng and Bai Liu would probably lose to Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang.

Zhang Gui was the only one considered a player of the right caliber, while Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang were professional players who were on a different level from Zhang Gui. Many gloomy players were already posting R.I.P for Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng, saying it was a pity the new pair wouldn’t play in next year’s league.

It was actually not surprising. Bai Liu had offended many people before—the support season was crazy with guild players and fans. He killed Zhang Gui, who was said to be a reserve battle player for the King's Guild, and topped a system review Spades second. The wind was in his favor, while arguably offending all the fans of the first and second most powerful guilds in the battle.

This wave of publicity for the Eating Rot Guild to kill Bai Liu wasn't a big deal for these players, but it was worthy of some praise.

Bai Liu lowered his voice. "Go bring in the newcomers. Don’t stay here and watch the fun."

Mu Sicheng gave him a resentful glare. "So you’re determined not to let me follow, are you?"

"Right." Bai Liu readily admitted. "You bring up the newcomers well and take Xiang Chunhua and the others to brush up on the multiplayer copies of the first-level game."

Mu Sicheng was still trying to struggle. "I can take them with you! That's bringing in new people, isn't it!"

"The only new game on this wall is a level 2 copy, and since I have Miao Feichi as a veteran player, I can't go to the old game. Only the new one." Bai Liu's tone was calm. "I don't think you and I are capable of taking three newcomers through a level 2 copy. Are you tired of being buried for me as a group?"

Mu Sicheng gritted his teeth and tried to calm himself. "But at least I'm here! At least I can beat that idiot Miao Feichi. My personal skills can beat him! I've found enough black fingers to at least fight Miao Feichi! You're playing with two S-rank players by yourself!"

"What about Liu Fu, Xiang Chunhua, and Muke?" Bai Liu looked straight at Mu Sicheng. "If you force new people to help me in this copy, do you care about their lives? If you don't bring Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu and leave them to practice on their own, how will you practice with them?"

Mu Sicheng pursed his lips grimly, not saying anything, but clearly acquiescing—he just didn't want to cooperate with these three people.

"I'm not only practicing Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu, I'm also practicing you," Bai Liu said lightly. He didn't lecture or retort harshly, just looking up at Mu Sicheng. "I won't die. I didn't die last time alone against the Ghost Mirror, I won't die easily this time either. You should have this basic trust in me."

"I'll come out, and we'll still be in the league together." Bai Liu's tone was calm. "I'll do what I say. I haven't lied to you yet, have I, Mu Sicheng?"

Mu Sicheng gritted his teeth and finally, his voice a little hoarse, he reluctantly replied. Yes, he was indeed more stubborn than Bai Liu.

Bai Liu let Mu Sicheng go.

Bai Liu, being short, searched the crowd quickly and eventually found Muke in a corner of the entrance. Muke was stunned at the sight of Bai Liu, but remembering that the game allowed him to change his appearance, and that Bai Liu's voice was unmistakably his, Muke couldn't mistake it.

For it was this voice that saved him.

Bai Liu briefly explained the current situation and asked, "We'll face a hunt after we get in. Are you sure you're with me? You have one last chance to backtrack. I just saw a guy who doesn't look as good as you make it to the front row of the face section by hunting and eating. With your looks, you should be able to make it better than him."

"... I'm with you." Muke looked at Bai Liu with certainty.

"OK. We can't go into the old games if we're being hunted, because

the old games have been played and we don't have an advantage." Bai Liu spoke quickly. "Actually, the safest thing is single-player, but the single-player games are all too low in terms of take-up, and the single-player games on the game wall are all full, so we'll have to pick some new multiplayer copies. I've looked around and only found one."

"We may have seen this copy before," Bai Liu said, looking up at Xiang Muke. "It's called 'The Loving Welfare Home.'"

Before entering the game, Mu Sicheng once asked Bai Liu how the [real world] could be explained if [parallel time] did not exist, and everything had a single and predetermined outcome. It was like Bai Liu's case with the orphanage—if he didn't choose the orphanage game, he wouldn't die there and leave a trace.

But now, it seemed that an invisible hand was at work. The chase, the robbery, the raid by the senior league players, and other events were all linked together, forcing Bai Liu to walk along the only predestined track he saw.

It felt like the only option before him now was the game with the orphanage.

Lu Yizhan was fond of saying that there was a heavenly will, and if the [heavenly] meaning of this game was for him to take part in it, then he couldn't escape in any way—or, rather, he didn't want to escape.

Bai Liu looked up at Xiang Muke. "Let's split up and enter the game separately."

On the wall of games, the icon of a deadly children's orphanage gate suddenly lights up.

[Game Copy Name: "Love Welfare Home"]

[Level: Level 2 (Games with a player mortality rate greater than fifty percent and less than eighty percent are Level 2 games.)]

[Mode: Multiplayer (0/6)]

[Comprehensive Description: This is a horror game that involves deciphering two lines of operation. In this game, the player has two identity lines, and each identity line is equivalent to a part of your

body. Protecting the child is protecting yourself, and killing the child is also protecting yourself. How will you choose in the end? Will you choose to be a child or remain a dirty adult?]

[The game "Love Orphanage" has collected two players. Four more players are needed to start.]

[System Alert: Your favorite player Bai Liu has logged in to the game! Please go and watch!]

The sound of the prompt made Miao Feichi's eyes glaze over. He grunted meaningfully, "Think I can't find you if you run away to the game? There are only so many games you can get into."

Miao Gaojiang said succinctly, "Bai Liu would choose a new game. He has no advantage over older games." His eyes scanned the wall before settling on a game icon in the corner that no one seemed to be interested in.

The game's icon was a dark and dreary gate of a children's home, with a few children faintly visible, jumping and playing in the doorway— a new game Miao Gaojiang had never seen before.

"A Loving Orphanage?" Miao Feichi looked at the children on the icon and licked the roots of his teeth, which were beginning to itch. His eyes turned salivating and bloodshot. "That's a name that's right up my alley."

"Brother Miao, make sure all the games on this wall are either logged in or old, except for this 'Love Orphanage' game. Only this one is logged in, and it only has two players."

"Two people?" Miao Feichi snorted. "Looks like Mu Sicheng is with him for a piece. Well, this is a secondary game. I don't want to bring anyone. If I bring you guys, I'll have to distract myself from looking after you. Just me and my dad will be fine; you guys can go back."

With that, Miao Feichi logged into the game, dragging Miao Gaojiang, who had only spoken a few words, along with him.

[The game "Love Home" has collected 4 players. Two more players are needed to start.]

[System Alert: Your favorite players Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang have logged in to the game! Please go and watch!]

Players at the entrance to the game watched as Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang, a father and son, followed Bai Liu into the game.

They were all a bit scared, looking at the "Love and Welfare" icon. Not many of these regular players would have had the guts to play a new game in the first place, and the fact that there was a pair of league players who were about to go on a killing spree made them stay away.

However, there were also players who had been staring at the orphanage icon since Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang logged into the game.

Liu Huai looked dead on at the gate on the icon of the "Caring Home."

This gate was identical to the gate of the orphanage where Liu Jiayi lived!

Liu Huai, who also survived the "Last Train to Explosion," knew about the Mirror City bombing, but he hadn't thought about it before. However, he had been verbally baited by Bai Liu, and now he had come across a game that seemed to be designed from reality. A game designed after his sister's orphanage...

Liu Jiayi doesn't know anything about what happened to her at the orphanage because she is blind, but she has some very strange spotted bruises— like mushroom dots— all over her snow-white, thin body. When Liu Jiayi was asked, she also seemed at a loss as to where these marks came from.

In the real world, the investigation turned out to be food poisoning, but Liu Huai wasn't so convinced and unfortunately had no other leads.

But there were no clues in the real world, so he wondered if there might be some in the game, which seemed to be based on his sister’s orphanage.

Liu Huai gritted his teeth, equipped himself with his skills, borrowed some points from other players, and took a deep breath to enter the game as well.

[The game "Love Home" has collected 5 players. One more player is needed to start.]

The next second, Liu Huai entered the game. A little girl in a hospital gown suddenly appeared in a small corner of the boarding entrance.

She seemed to be blind. Her eyes looked around vacantly, as if she had not yet reacted to where she had arrived. She touched her arm, a little puzzled, called out softly to her brother, and then was just sucked into the game in general, instantly disappearing at the game boarding entrance where people came and went.

[The game "Love Welfare Home" has collected all players, and the game has officially started.]

The moment the system's login prompt signaling the start of this six-player game fell, five small televisions in the multiplayer area lit up at the same time.

One of the spectators, who had been prompted by the system to come in quickly, spoke up in confusion: "Isn't this a six-player game? How come I only saw five screens light up, and some high roller turned off the small TV?"

The top 100 players in the game in terms of total points ranking have the opportunity to close the small TV broadcast once a month. The highest total points ranking in this broadcast was Miao Feichi, but also 107, and it wasn't a live-stream access issue. But Miao Feichi, with a ranking so close to 100, could pay a large price to the system to buy the right to turn off his own live stream.

But a player like Miao Feichi, who relied on live streams to promote himself and who had pulled off such a big stunt specifically for the sake of publicity, would never turn off his live stream.

Miao Feichi didn't turn off the live stream, so who did?

But none of the other players were ranked in the top 100, not even close to being qualified to close the live stream...

The answer was soon found on a small player TV. A Bai Liu fan recognized the person on the TV as Liu Huai, who had followed Bai Liu through the previous round.

Liu Huai's face was pale as he looked at Liu Jiayi, who had suddenly appeared in front of him. He almost fell to his knees in a fit of weakness.

Liu Huai looked at Liu Jiayi, who was sitting dazedly on the ground, with uncontrollable fear in his voice: "Jiayi, how did you get in this game?"

Liu Jiayi also seemed confused, clutching her knees in some fear, still wearing her hospital gown. She shook her head gently in bewilderment.

Liu Huai's reaction startled her. Her foggy eyes clouded with tears, and her voice began to tremble with a sobbing tone, "I don't know. It's like I just fell asleep, and before I went to sleep, I wanted to see you so badly, brother. Then a voice said it would satisfy my desire and let me see you."

"I said yes," Liu Jiayi's voice trembled a little. "And then I came in."

"Brother, did I do something wrong? Did I? Did I say yes to something I shouldn't have?"

Chapter End Notes

A new horror game!!!!

Sensing Liu Jiayi's uneasiness, Liu Huai controlled his tone as best as he could. He hugged her and gently patted her back, trying to calm himself down. "No, Jiajia, you did nothing wrong. It's just a game."

"Yes, just a game," Liu Huai muttered, his eyes closing as if trying to hypnotize both himself and Liu Jiayi. When he opened them again, his tone was calmer. "Brother will take you to play games, Jiajia."

Held in Liu Huai's arms, Liu Jiayi clutched his coat and asked softly, "What game is it, brother?"

Liu Huai paused, thinking of Bai Liu, who sought to control Liu Jiayi's soul, and Miao Feichi, who had a dark appetite for children. Finally, Liu Huai hugged her tightly and let out a bitter laugh. "A game where all the bad guys are bad... except for you and me, Jiajia. You must stay close to me and not go anywhere, okay? You need to follow your brother and not wander off, okay?"

"Good," Liu Jiayi nodded obediently, "I won't wander off."

The group watching from the multiplayer area whispered to each other, surprised to see a first-time player skip the newcomer section for single-player and head straight into multiplayer.

If the girl's desire to meet her brother was strong enough, the system could have pulled her directly into the game where Liu Huai's brother was. Her small TV, meant for the [Newcomer Zone], should have placed her there, but she was logged into the multiplayer area, which had never happened before.

Open Door was a second-tier game, and even with Liu Huai's protection, this little girl could still be in danger. Liu Huai was already in a tough position in the game, and the only strong players left were likely Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang, who had heard of Bai Liu's abilities and would likely be cautious of him, not easily manipulated.

There seemed to be no other powerful players for Bai Liu to control, leaving him with limited options. Some viewers who had some goodwill toward Bai Liu sighed, "I just hope Mu Sicheng plays well with him this time. Maybe there's still a chance."

Others, who were eager to see Bai Liu fail, scoffed: "Mu Sicheng's support is unreliable, Bai Liu's main output is terrible, and the one

doing all the damage is Miao Feichi, the S-tier player. You're comparing an elementary student to a grad student?"

But then, one viewer browsed through all the small TVs in disbelief and asked in confusion, "Wait, of the five small TVs in this game, where's Mu Sicheng?"

"Bai Liu is in the game alone?!"

After confirming that there was no sign of Mu Sicheng, both fans who had rushed to worry about Bai Liu and those merely watching the chaos, along with those impressed by Bai Liu's hacks, were stunned.

A few seconds later, the group of onlookers, regardless of their stance, simultaneously exclaimed, "Fuck!!!"

Bai Liu logged into a dimly lit room on the first floor of the orphanage, which was locked. He smashed the door open and began searching the map, one by one.

He found nothing but couldn't leave, or perhaps the game wanted him to go back to the original room before he could leave the floor.

Bai Liu entered the room he had just logged into.

A small bench sat in the dark, cold room, with the evening light casting long shadows across the floor. Small benches were stacked in a disorderly manner on either side of the room.

At the classroom podium, directly opposite, was an old-fashioned radio, the kind that looked like it had been around for ten years. A cassette tape spun inside, the soft hum of a little girl singing a nursery rhyme coming from the radio.

"Born on Monday, the day of the moon
Baptism on Fire Day (Tuesday)
Wednesdays (Wednesdays) Marriage
Obsidian (Thursday)
Golden Obsidian (Friday) aggravated by illness
Saturday (Saturday) Dead
Sunday (Sunday) buried in the earth
This is the life of Bai Liu—"

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. He had heard this rhyme before. It was a

nursery rhyme from the famous dark rhyme "The Rhymes of Mother Goose," called "Seven Days of Solomon." It tells the tragic story of a man's life, ending with the line: "This is the life of Solomon Grundy." But here, the rhyme seemed to have been altered, changing the name to his own.

As he listened to the rhyme, which repeated over and over, the shadow of a chair, refracted by the dull sunlight, slowly transformed. What appeared to be an empty chair in the corner gradually became a figure sitting in it. Bai Liu glanced at it, but from his perspective, there was nothing—just an empty chair.

Suddenly, the shadow leaped from the chair and darted toward Bai Liu. He didn't flinch, thinking it was just an introductory animation, like in the previous game. He watched as his own shadow seemed to dissolve into the fast-approaching one.

Bai Liu's shadow lengthened and stretched in the fading light, twisting and curling, extending into the doorway before abruptly breaking through it.

At that moment, the nursery rhyme cut off abruptly, and there was a knock at the door.

"Hello, are you an investor in this orphanage?" A boy's voice asked politely, though it still carried the rasp of a teenager's voice still changing. "I'm the child who came to report today."

But Bai Liu immediately noticed the coldness and impatience hidden beneath the politeness of the voice.

Bai Liu recognized the voice—not exactly, but it was strangely familiar. So familiar that, the moment the person spoke, he could detect all the emotions buried beneath the calm tone.

After all, ten years ago, Bai Liu spent every day listening to this voice.

Bai Liu stepped on the distorted shadow and slowly opened the door.

"Hello, I'm the new sponsored child." Outside the door stood a small teenager, barely above Bai Liu's chest, with dark, ancient eyes that looked at him with a hint of scrutiny, which he couldn't quite hide. The boy seemed to be sizing Bai Liu up and, after a moment, extended his hand with deliberate courtesy. "Hello, investor. My name is Bai Six, and I am the new child who has been told to come to this private orphanage."

Bai Liu rubbed his chin and scanned the shy teenager up and down. "Let's see... I'd say you're almost fourteen."

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has successfully met and interacted with the secondary identity line, triggering the child identity line. Player Bai Liu has entered dual identity operation mode.]

[System Tip: In "Love Welfare Home," players have two distinct identity lines. One is the adult version of you, and the other is your child version. The adult you is the main identity line, while the child version is the secondary identity line. The child is an NPC created by the game, with memories and traits that align with the game's background. It is a character that fully complies with the game's world-building and shares many similarities with the player's younger self. You are two halves of the same person—please explore and communicate with this character.]

[Player Bai Liu Secondary Identity Line Name: Bai Six]
[Age: 14]
[Status: Orphan sponsored by investors and admitted to a loving orphanage.]
[Features: Enjoys 50% of the player's life value, is the pure and innocent half of the player, with no memories or skills related to the future. Will enter the crisis-ridden orphanage. Please ensure the player protects them from monsters!]
[Main Quest: Escape from the orphanage (incomplete)]

[Player Bai Liu Main Identity Line: Player Bai Liu]

[Identity Name: Bai Liu]
[Age: 24]
[Identity: Terminally ill investor in a children's home]
[Characteristics: Enjoys fifty percent of the player's life value, but due to a terminal illness, life value will drop over time. After the illness, the investment in children, Bai Six, begins.]
[Main Quest: Find a way to renew your life and survive (incomplete)]

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow slightly as he looked at the system screen, where multiple panels had popped up.

His primary identity was that of an investor, and the child in front of him, Bai Six—Bai Liu glanced over slowly.

Fourteen-year-old Bai Liu seemed uncomfortable with being looked at

too directly, slightly turning to avoid Bai Liu's gaze.

Bai Liu withdrew his gaze with a faint smile, thinking how much of a nuisance he was at that age—smelly and difficult.

Bai Liu stood in the corridor outside the classroom and looked around at the layout. It was confirmed—this was indeed the same orphanage he'd visited before.

The children's park in the center of the three buildings had large equipment like a slide, and in the distance, there was a separate canteen—something the dilapidated children's home Bai Liu had seen no longer had.

He glanced at the dates of various children's awards hanging on the classroom walls and concluded this must be the orphanage from ten years ago. It seemed, as he had guessed, the main plot of this copy took place back then, when the orphanage had just been completed.

Bai Liu continued looking around, seemingly searching for something, when Bai Six gently reminded him, "It's Sunday, a regular inspection day, and the children and teachers aren't here."

"Sunday is inspection day?" Bai Liu turned to Bai Six. "Is this orphanage inspected every week? What do they check?"

Bai Six shook his head. "I'm not sure. I only just arrived and haven't been checked yet. My admissions code states that every Sunday, all children are to leave the orphanage for a full body check-up. Those who fail the check-up stay for treatment."

"But many children who go there every week just stay for treatment and don't return..." Little Bai Six looked up at Bai Liu. "The empty places are wasted, so every week, new children are brought in. I came this week."

Sunday was check-up day, and many children who failed the exam stayed for treatment and never returned...

Bai Liu narrowed his eyes, recalling the nursery rhyme: "Obsidian Day (Sunday) is buried in the earth."

It seemed that most of the children left there were "buried in the earth."

As Bai Liu continued to think, the system suddenly sent a reminder.

[System Delivery Props: Each investor and their child are equipped with a one-to-one, single-line walkie-talkie.]
[Code of conduct for walkie-talkies: Only one-way communication from the child to the investor is allowed. Players are prohibited from purchasing other communication tools to interact with the child, and dialing from the investor to the child is forbidden.]
[Intercom dialing time: 21:00–24:00, 6:00–9:00. Calls outside these times will be blocked. Each child can dial in these two time slots every day. Please moderate communication to give children space to grow.]

No sooner had the system announcement ended than Bai Liu looked down to find a large, unwieldy "Big Brother" walkie-talkie with an antenna in his hand.

Meanwhile, Bai Six's walkie-talkie was a small child's mobile phone, half the size of his hand, hanging from his neck on a thin pink Hello Kitty strap, looking like a toy.

Bai Liu smiled slightly. "It suits you." He shook the "Big Brother" walkie-talkie. "From nine to twelve every night, and six to nine in the morning—if you need anything, just call me. I'm always on."

"I'm not going to call you," Bai Six replied with a deadpan expression. "It's a waste of my time."

Bai Liu had expected this response. He sighed, forehead twitching, and quickly offered a solution. "I'll pay for it. I'll bill you by the minute if you call me."

Little Bai Six's normally expressionless face wavered visibly. He turned to Bai Liu and hesitated. "How much?"

"How about a hundred dollars a minute? By the minute," Bai Liu said without missing a beat.

Little Bai Six quickly agreed. "Deal."

As soon as Bai Liu spoke, the bell rang outside, and the closed metal doors of the orphanage opened. Children chattered excitedly and rushed in behind their teachers, who scrambled to settle the small, bird-like children back into their nests.

The two Bai Lius—one large, one small—stood in the corridor of the building, looking down at the innocent, carefree children running and jumping downstairs with the same indifference in their eyes.

Little Bai Six suddenly looked sideways at Big Bai Liu and asked, "You don't seem to like children. Why did you sponsor me into this well-maintained orphanage?"

"What kind of investor do I look like to you?" Bai Liu asked, amusement dancing in his eyes. "What makes you think I don't like children?"

Though he did dislike them.

"You look a lot like the Long Thin Ghost," Bai Six said calmly. "With your expensive suit and tie, pale face, and rumors about the Long Thin Ghost—he hates children so much that he kills them, rips out their organs, and eats them."

Little Bai Six calmly described his impression of Bai Liu.

Bai Liu was reminded by this description. He looked down at himself and saw that he'd somehow changed from his high school girl look to a very formal suit with a tall black hat.

He searched for a mirror in the classroom washroom and found that his face had indeed changed.

His face was thin and pale, with large bags under his eyes, and his fingers were long and thin, almost like skin wrapped around bones.

He did resemble the rumored child-killing maniac, the horror creature "Long, Thin Ghostly Shadow."

"All the investors here look exactly like you," Little Bai Six added faintly. "All suited and short-looking, not the type to do good deeds before they die."

"You've got a foul mouth, little friend," Bai Liu said, raising his eyebrows. "Why don't I look like someone who does good deeds before they die? Isn't investing in you one of the good deeds I've done?"

Little Bai Six gave him an unamused glance. "Are you sure that sending me to this orphanage, where children keep disappearing, is a good deed?"

[System Alert: The inspection day is coming to an end. The children and teachers have returned. Please bring your sponsored child to the registration office on the ground floor of the Pok Oi Building to register for admission.]

"Come on, little friend. I'll take you to the ground floor to register," Bai Liu said, preparing to head down from the third floor of the Pok Oi building.

As he did, he saw a [long, thin, ghostly figure] staring at him eerily from across the corridor on the first floor of the opposite building.

The man was holding a little boy with bangs in his hand. The boy seemed cute, though a bit gloomy and autistic, head down, resembling Muke when he grew up.

The investor was Muke.

And on the floor above Muke, an investor with twin knives in his hands also kept an eye on the child. The man dragged his long twin knives through the corridor like a homicidal maniac with a chainsaw, reminiscent of Texas Chainsaw Massacre.

Bai Liu stood in front of little Bai Six, watching the investor across the street with a smile on his face. The [long, thin ghostly figure] across the street observed for a moment and realized Bai Liu had been blocking his child.

The weapons were twin swords. If Bai Liu was correct, this was the infamous Miao Feichi.

This man was obviously looking for who Bai Liu was. After all, all the players logged in shared the same identity, and all had the same appearance as the long, thin, ghostly figure.

How could they determine who Bai Liu was in a pool of investors?

The most straightforward way was to look at the children they carried.

Bai Liu narrowed his eyes and glanced behind him at little Bai Six.

Miao Gaojiang was leading his teenage self down the stairs when he noticed an investor waiting at the exit of the building. This made Miao Gaojiang instinctively reach for his weapon, but the man's next words quickly made him lower his guard. The investor across the street was cursing under his breath, "Dad! I see a teenage me! What the hell is going on?"

"Feichi?" Miao Gaojiang looked at the man across the way with

uncertainty. He was cautious and suspicious. "Are you really Feichi?"

In a game like this, where everyone's original identity is the same, it's too easy to impersonate someone else. The only real way to confirm someone's identity is by looking at their child.

But Miao Feichi wasn't the type to care for children—he preferred to eat them. Yet, Miao Feichi wasn't a pervert who would consume himself.

As a teenager, Miao Feichi had just awakened to his cannibalistic tendencies. Starved and desperate, he would try to eat anyone he encountered.

"I was shocked when I opened the door and saw a teenage version of me guarding it," Miao Feichi grumbled. "He had to follow me around, and the little pervert kept eyeing me like he wanted to eat me. I told him to get lost."

Miao Gaojiang didn't trust anyone who came to his door too easily. But the details of what Miao Feichi said aligned with his experiences.

Miao Feichi had always been flamboyant and reckless, and with his high strength, he did whatever he pleased in this secondary game. When faced with a teenage version of himself, Miao Feichi's first instinct wouldn't have been to engage in a pleasant conversation to trigger the quest, but rather to chase the other away aggressively.

Miao Gaojiang understood this, yet, knowing that another player like Bai Liu had a high intelligence value, he couldn't dismiss the possibility that someone might try to impersonate others based on their identical appearances. So, Miao Gaojiang hesitated before introducing the game rules and probing for some key information.

After a few questions, Miao Gaojiang's doubts began to clear up, but he still wasn't fully convinced. "I need to be sure you're really Miao Feichi. Tell me something only you would know."

Miao Feichi was impatient. "Like what?"

"Like how we got into the game in the first place..." Miao Gaojiang said, his seemingly innocent expression betraying a deeper intent. "Like after you ate human flesh—who was the first person you ate?"

Miao Feichi licked his teeth, recalling the taste, then narrowed his eyes. "The first person I ate was my mother."

"She had a serious illness, and the family couldn't afford her medical bills. After she was discharged from the hospital, the money kept being spent on her, all the money that should have gone to me. One night, she asked me to bring her water. I gave her a glass of boiling water, and when she drank it, her lips and throat emitted that scalded aroma."

"She died the next day," Miao Feichi clicked his tongue. "Before the burial, I told you I wanted to eat her body, and it freaked you out. But I know you didn't mind her dying sooner, you always wanted her gone. She was just someone to sleep with, and I couldn't understand why you kept wasting money on her. After she died, I went on a hunger strike for a few days, and you cut up parts of her for me to eat."

"But honestly? It wasn't that good." Miao Feichi grimaced. "She was too old—the meat was dry, stringy, and smelled like medicine."

"As for getting into the game..." Miao Feichi continued irritably, "It's because of that kid. You took me to dig up a mass grave for a while, and I ate rotten, dead flesh. It was terrible. I wanted fresh meat, and that kid—he was just some homeless runaway, crying about bad things happening at his orphanage and begging me to call the police."

"I figured no one would know if I ate him, but you let him go. When you did, the police found him. Suddenly, I was under surveillance, and my hunger grew unbearable. So, I entered the game, and I ate a finger of that kid raw. He cried so much, and you... you..."

"Alright, you're definitely Feichi." Miao Gaojiang sighed deeply, cutting off Miao Feichi's unfinished sentence. "Everyone in this game looks the same, so we have a code word to identify each other."

"Just the finger," Miao Feichi emphasized, as if the detail wasn't as significant as the act of eating itself. "That was the last piece of human flesh I ate before entering the game."

Miao Gaojiang didn't like this code word, but in their partnership, he generally gave way to Miao Feichi—his son—on trivial matters. He didn't dominate him, and he was extremely indulgent, otherwise, Miao Feichi wouldn't be so impatient with him.

So, Miao Gaojiang shut his mouth, pausing for a moment before asking, "Where is the child you invested in? Where did you get rid of him?"

"The little brat kept following me after I chased him away," Miao Feichi said with a wicked glint in his eyes. "But there are too many kids in this place, all of them looking tender and fresh. I reckon he's hung up somewhere. He hasn't had a taste of meat yet, and all these kids are basically walking human flesh. It should have appealed to him."

Before Miao Gaojiang could respond, Miao Feichi waved his hand dismissively. "Enough. Can't I just eat the kids and the opponents in this game? I can't even touch the game data? I think you're trying to starve your son. You're my father, but you can't even control my food and drink—always getting in the way. It's too much."

Miao Gaojiang looked at the children, so alive that they almost seemed real, and for a moment, he questioned whether they were just NPCs in the game or if they were real people, indistinguishable from those in the outside world.

"Go find your child first, and then head down to the ground floor to register," Miao Gaojiang said.

Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang hadn't yet arrived when Bai Liu reached the location, which wasn't unusual. The two of them needed time to find each other and confirm their identities first.

Miao Feichi gauged the situation and figured the man probably hadn't even noticed the little cub that had suddenly appeared.

Upstairs, Bai Liu saw Miao Feichi's little cub wandering around the orphanage alone, following various children with green eyes, looking like a wolf starving for raw meat.

Bai Liu entered the registration room with Little Bai Six and found two people already registered ahead of him. One was Muke, and the other —Bai Liu's eyes darkened as he read the names on the form.

[Due to blood ties, Player Liu Huai and Player Liu Jiayi activate the (Brother-Sister Identity Line), registering as brother and sister, doppelgangers with another identity line, activating a special two-line operation mode.]

[Player Liu Huai (Brother Identity Line): terminally ill investor at a children's home.]

[Identity features: Enjoys 50% of life value, but due to terminal illness, life value decreases over time. Find a way to renew life quickly!]

[Player Liu Jiayi (Sisterhood Line): Child sponsored by the investor to enter a loving orphanage.]

[Identity features: Enjoys 50% of life value, a pure and innocent sister, will enter the crisis-ridden orphanage. Players must protect her!]

[Note: For each player in the Brother and Sister status line, 50% of the life value is cleared to zero, resulting in death.]

The last time Bai Liu met Liu Jiayi, he had said she would soon enter the game, but he hadn't expected to see her so soon.

But how could Liu Jiayi, a newcomer, jump straight into a multiplayer game? Shouldn't newcomers start with a single-player game?

Is there a special connection between Liu Jiayi and Liu Huai? Could the system have pulled Liu Jiayi, the newcomer, directly into a game with Liu Huai? Bai Liu pondered. The pattern for these two clearly differed from his own and the others', no longer involving a younger version of himself, but an older brother with a younger sister.

Bai Liu saw Liu Huai's entry marked [Blood Brother and Sister], while Muke's was labeled [Investor and Sponsored Child].

However, Bai Liu noticed that despite it being a two-player mode, the life bars above Liu Huai and Liu Jiayi were still at fifty percent, meaning that clearing that fifty percent would kill the player outright. Bai Liu's group was slashing life points, but their total life value was still one hundred.

Liu Huai and Liu Jiayi, however, had their life values directly halved, making them much more vulnerable.

Bai Liu didn't think this was fair enough for the game. The system has often created mind-numbing ways to nerf players for the sake of fairness, and having been systematically nerfed twice, Bai Liu didn't believe the system would present players with an excessively cruel game.

This suggests that halving Liu Huai and Liu Jiayi's life value was a balanced trade-off within the game, fair to all players involved.

But for Liu Huai and Liu Jiayi, the two unlucky siblings who triggered this special mode, the unfairness was obvious. Liu Jiayi was a blind child, a newcomer to the game, and having their life value halved seemed particularly harsh.

While Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang didn't trigger any father-son identity line, as Bai Liu observed Little Miao Feichi, their pairing didn't evoke this bloodline identity. This was presumably related to Liu Jiayi.

Liu Jiayi, a blind child, entered the game for the first time in a multiplayer game. Bai Liu wondered what desires this child might have. He felt that Liu Jiayi's wish to regain her sight wasn't as strong as Liu Huai's. Intuitively, Liu Jiayi seemed to accept her blindness, perhaps being more attached to her brother. Given that the game ties everything to the player's desires, this could be the case.

However, Liu Jiayi was such a special child in every way that Bai Liu didn't feel he could make any definitive conclusions.

Bai Liu took note of this odd feeling of unease.

After registering, Little Bai Six was led away by the director.

Before leaving, Little Bai Six looked back at Bai Liu, expressionless, and raised his thumb and forefinger, rubbing them together in a polite gesture. It made Bai Liu want to laugh—it was the "money gesture."

Since Bai Liu had told him to call and pay, the child had remembered it ever since.

The children were taken into the orphanage, and Bai Liu, the investor, was led by the director to a building near the orphanage that resembled a ward, with nurses and a nurse's office. But there was no registration desk, and no doctors' offices for patient visits, just endless floors of inpatient wards.

The director explained that most of the investors were in poor health and lived there, visiting the children only on open days at the orphanage.

Bai Liu surveyed the place and deduced it was a private hospital building, not open to the public.

It seemed like the type of rehabilitation building he had seen before, designed for wealthy retired people, with minimal staff and doctors

on-call.

But this wasn't a place for healthy retired people. It was a hospital full of terminally ill patients who were in desperate need of treatment. The lack of doctors seemed odd.

Who would treat these patients without doctors?

The private hospital was filled with patients who looked like ghostly, long, thin figures—some lying on beds, others shuffling slowly down the hallways, faces tightly bandaged. It was unclear how they could see through the bandages.

The air moved slightly as these patients breathed, causing the bandages to puff out, proving they were living people and not some urban legend of monsters.

In the intensive care unit, Bai Liu visually estimated that one patient must have been more than two meters tall, their feet dangling helplessly outside the bed. Their complexion was bruised, resembling the sickly, poisonous mushroom-like skin of the children Bai Liu had seen die before.

These stiff, sluggish, dying investors moved slowly through the corridors and wards. As Bai Liu crossed the hallway, their faces seemed to turn toward him, their long, thin arms and legs dangling like spiders. One of the patients grabbed his foot, then his neck, teasing him before quickly letting go with a weird, nervous cackle.

The Loving Welfare Home

The dean took them to the 9th floor, which was much less crowded than the floors below and seemed to have fewer severely ill patients. Bai Liu felt that the patients on this floor were about as sick as he was, intuitively because they were all roughly the same height.

From Bai Liu's observation, the sicker the patients in this hospital were, the more their bodies became elongated, resembling the "Long and Thin Ghost" phenomenon.

The little Bai Six's description of him was actually quite accurate. The boy's ability to perceive scary things made Bai Liu realize that he might have been consciously aware of this since he was fourteen.

There were twenty-one wards on the floor. The director gave Bai Liu a room, then said she had to go back to pick up the other investors.

Bai Liu was assigned room 906, located to the left side of the corridor. After observing the entire ward, Bai Liu found this private hospital quite strange.

The hospital was well-decorated and sophisticated, but the lighting was extremely poor. All the wards were hidden from natural light, so much so that Bai Liu had to turn on the lights during the day. Even with the lights on, the brightness was so low that nothing could be clearly seen. There were high-powered humidifiers scattered throughout the hospital, constantly spraying mist and making the whole place feel as humid as a southern summer day, filled with hazy water vapor.

A normal hospital would never have been built like this. It felt as though it were a place designed to prevent patients from dying.

The poor lighting and thick fog made visibility in the hospital very limited. If it weren't for the director, Bai Liu would have had trouble navigating the various passageways. The walls were slippery from the water vapor, and since Bai Liu was tall with long arms and legs, he could easily slip on the wet floors. This gave Bai Liu an uneasy feeling —if a chase occurred in the hospital, he would probably have trouble escaping.

Bai Liu scanned the entire ward and noticed three humidifiers, but only one dim light.

The more peculiar part was the hospital beds. Despite the hospital's upscale decorations, such as gilt lion-shaped bathroom taps, the beds were—strange.

Bai Liu lifted the white sheet on his bed and raised an eyebrow at the pile of straw beneath it.

It was a straw bed.

Bai Liu had only slept on such beds during his childhood in a relatively poor orphanage. They were uncomfortable and cumbersome, but cheaper than other types of beds. Straw needs to be dry to sleep comfortably, but when it's wet, it can rot and attract insects, leaving behind red bite marks. In very damp conditions, the straw can even grow mushrooms.

For example, in the corner of Bai Liu's bed, after lifting the sheet, he saw a dense cluster of gray mushrooms growing all the way to the wooden bookcase next to the bed.

A straw bed in a room with three humidifiers like this would be like a fungal petri dish. The straw would soon rot, become covered in worms, maggots, mushrooms, and all sorts of decomposers, crawling all over the bodies of those who slept on it.

In short, during Bai Liu's childhood, he would have rather slept on the ground than on a straw bed during the rainy season.

[System Alert: Please ask player Bai Liu (as investor) for the main quest—find a cure for his terminal illness.]

A remedy for renewed life...

Where would he find a cure? If this were a private hospital with a doctor, Bai Liu would have raided the doctor's office for prescriptions and medication by now.

But there were no doctors here, only a group of nurses pushing trolleys around the corridors. When Bai Liu entered the nurses' office, he glanced inside. There were no bottles, no pills, not even syringes or IV tubes. Just a few waist-high stainless steel trolleys that looked like the food trolleys in Bai Liu's company canteen, presumably used to deliver meals to the patients.

How could a hospital with no doctors, no drugs, and nothing but patients find a life-sustaining remedy for a terminally ill patient?

Wait, there's nothing but patients...

Bai Liu's eyes narrowed as he began searching the ward's bookcase.

There was a bookcase behind the door of the ward, behind the bed. Bai Liu hadn't paid it much attention at first because it was full of old books. There were so many that Bai Liu didn't initially think of them as clues.

If Bai Liu had designed the game himself, he wouldn't have hidden clues in such overwhelming, unorganized information. It would have been boring for the player to search through a two-meter-high bookcase full of books with no hints.

But there was one exception: there wasn't just one piece of information that the player needed to discover.

Rather, except for a small number, the majority of the information in the bookcase was something the player should discover.

[System Prompt: Congratulations to the player for triggering the side quest—Searching in Medical Books (Life-Sustaining Remedies).]

Sure enough.

Bai Liu categorized the books in the bookcase. Some of the books were clearly irrelevant, like yellow women's magazines, so he discarded them. The rest were medical magazines and books, which had piled up heavily on the floor.

There were medical books in both Chinese and Western medicine, covering internal and external practices, women and children's health, and even some all-English medical journals.

As Bai Liu squinted, he noticed a slight sense of dissonance in the pile of medical books that had never been touched before.

There were no doctors in this private hospital, and these books couldn't have been read by doctors. But it was clear that the people who had read these books were patients with some general medical knowledge.

And these books were for the patients, or rather, for the investors, who were the residents of this ward.

So it wasn't that there were no doctors in this private hospital—it was

that the patients living here were the doctors.

They were reading and healing themselves—strange sick people.

These investors were clearly worth a lot of money, so why didn't they trust doctors and instead self-medicate? Was it because doctors couldn't treat them? But if doctors couldn't cure them, what was the point of reading these books? After all, these were the same books that doctors would have read.

Bai Liu thought for a moment—it was clear that all the investors here had some form of terminal illness. So, aside from Bai Liu, someone must have started treating them—using the renewal formula. But the new patients, like him, couldn't get this formula for free. They had to find it themselves from this pile of books.

But for someone who wasn't particularly disciplined as a student and wasn't good at studying, Bai Liu's reading comprehension of these materials was inefficient. His grades in many subjects had been average. So, Bai Liu quickly and shamelessly decided to copy someone else's "homework" instead of reading through the books himself.

Now, the question was—whose "homework" could he copy?

Who in this hospital could solve the "answer" to the pile of books the fastest and most accurately?

Muke, who had also been brought to the private hospital by the director, had triggered the quest to find the cure by searching the bookcase and was now sitting on the bedside, staring at the pile of medical books.

He hadn't read a book since he graduated, and the books were so large that he couldn't even see if someone was walking a meter away from him, let alone read them.

The props could be sold to him, but they couldn't be used in the ward.

Muke was going to try taking the book outside, as it would be better than the dim light in this room.

But as soon as he stepped out of the ward with the book, he was startled when he opened it. A nurse patrolling the corridor with a stainless steel trolley noticed Muke about to leave with the book. The

nurse gave a warning, saying, “Please don’t walk around with the contents of the ward. On the first day of admission, patients are not allowed to leave the ward and should stay inside.”

It seemed impossible to take the book out, so Muke retreated with a frown.

He had no choice but to try reading the book under the dim light.

After a short while, Muke felt overwhelmed. He was a fast reader, but reading in this light was so inefficient and disorganized that it was hard to come up with an effective treatment, or, as the system described it, a "remedy for life."

Muke realized it would be difficult to find the right answer on his own, but he couldn’t think of any other ideas at the moment.

The game’s hints were so obvious that it was clear the player was meant to look at the pile of books in the bookcase for the answer, which was Muke’s specialty.

He sighed anxiously as he looked at the book he was holding. It had been a long time since he felt unable to find an answer while reading. Muke had been a schoolmaster since he was a child, skipping several levels since junior high school. His intelligence score was also quite high when he entered the game, with 85 points.

His reading and memory comprehension skills were excellent, and if he had a relatively bright environment, it wouldn’t be difficult for him to read through the books and consolidate the clues to come up with an answer in three days. He was desperate to find a quick remedy for Bai Liu, but the dim reality was making him more and more irritable.

It took him an hour to finish a book. This was far below his usual speed!

Muke was considering how to proceed when his system panel suddenly vibrated. He saw an item added to his prop bar.

Muke wasn’t buying props right now, and it was clear that Bai Liu had just bought this prop. Bai Liu could manipulate his panel to buy props from space, which was one of their ways of communicating.

Since they were both in the ward, using this method of buying props was discreet and out of sight.

Muke clicked on his system panel to check the prop warehouse. The audience could see the system shop, but the warehouse interface was hidden. The warehouse would be encrypted to protect the player's property, so Muke and Bai Liu's private communication would go unnoticed by the audience watching on the small TV. It was a secretive method.

The only way their communication could be exposed was if Muke was suddenly killed, and the prop used for communication was dropped by his body. If another player found the prop and noticed something unusual, it could be revealed. For instance, if Bai Liu and Muke used a notepad or phone recorder for communication, the prop would fall in front of the player who killed Muke.

If Muke was killed during the exchange, or before he could erase the communication, the prop left behind might expose the exchange to others.

Of course, it was possible to encrypt the communication with a password to prevent easy deciphering, but how could they be sure the password wouldn't be cracked by someone else? How could they ensure it could be understood quickly by Muke?

Bai Liu didn't want to expose himself to the opponent, so he chose a less conventional prop.

Bai Liu bought Muke a black keyboard.

The keyboard was a familiar tool to both Muke and Bai Liu. Compared to notebooks, paper, or recorders—props that would leave visible traces of communication—snapping off the keycaps and putting them back on the keyboard was relatively unmarked and left no traces afterward.

The "code" on the keyboard was one that Muke and Bai Liu could quickly understand.

Even if Muke dropped the keyboard, the enemy wouldn't immediately associate it with communication, let alone with the information it contained.

Of course, another reason Bai Liu chose the keyboard was that, while browsing the system's discount sale, he saw this keyboard for less than ten points. Bai Liu thought it would work and bought it.

Muke froze when he saw the keyboard.

The [ctrl] and [c] keycaps were missing, a common shortcut combination: [ctrl] + [c] meant "copy."

Copy? What were they supposed to copy now? Shouldn't the priority be finding the cure?

Wait a minute! Muke quickly understood Bai Liu's meaning—Bai Liu was trying to copy (and renew) the cure!

Was Bai Liu trying to copy it? Could it even be copied? Where would they copy it? There were so many wards here. Did Bai Liu know which one had the remedy for life?

Muke thought deeply about it, then hesitantly snapped off the [?] and [numlock] keycaps and placed them in his storage, hoping Bai Liu would understand. He was a little worried that the other might not get what he meant.

The [numlock] key was a number lock key on a keyboard, but its literal meaning could be interpreted as "lock numbers." Combined with the [?] keycap, Muke was trying to ask: "Bai Liu, what number are we locking?"

The ward room numbers were all numerical. All Bai Liu needed to do was tell him the number to lock, and Muke would know which ward Bai Liu was referring to.

Soon, the keyboard Muke had stored disappeared and reappeared a short while later. The [ctrl] + [c] keycaps were back on, but three more keycaps were missing.

"One, seven, zero."

Muke was confused. The number zero couldn't be the first digit of a ward number, so the number before it could only be one or seven.

There were only three permutations of these three numbers: [701], [710], and [107].

The seventh floor was the operating theater, so there were no wards there.

This was a "space ward," and there was no ward [107] in this building. It was likely vacated for storage or something, but there was no such ward. There were only wards [106] and [108].

Muke felt uneasy. He couldn't understand what Bai Liu meant. He scanned the three numbers and considered all six permutations in his mind, then slowly sat up straight.

It was true that this private hospital didn't have ward numbers with letters, but it did have special monitoring rooms without numbers—like the ICU wards.

The ICU ward on the ground floor wasn't marked with a number, and the rest of the ground floor was made up of wards, except for this one. This ICU ward was most likely the same "space ward" that took the [107] number!

Bai Liu didn't use "ICU" directly because there were multiple ICU wards in the hospital, and not specifying the ward number could cause confusion. Since Muke had directly asked what the number was, Bai Liu simply used a clearer reference—he hadn't realized that Muke might not be able to make the leap and equate ward 107 with the ICU ward on the ground floor.

But Muke, with his sharp memory and ability to gather information, managed to understand what Bai Liu was trying to convey.

Bai Liu was trying to get to the ICU to copy the life-sustaining remedy!

"Fuck," Muke couldn't hold back a curse. The ICU was occupied by the hospital's original investor, a patient over two meters tall who looked like a ghost! This could be the monster in their copy!

The nurses had said that the patients in the ICU didn't leave the room all day. How were they supposed to get in to copy the remedy for life?

And how could they even be sure that there was a so-called "cure" inside?

Bai Liu was quite certain that the ICU had what the system called a [life-sustaining remedy].

If all the patients in the hospital were doctors, the older, sicker doctors would likely be the ones whose treatments could be copied.

Bai Liu believed that the ICU most likely contained the [life-sustaining remedy].

But whether they could access it was another matter.

The patients in the ICU weren't very human and didn't leave the ward. Bai Liu didn't have access and wasn't sure if going in would trigger a rampage from the patients—or monsters—inside. After all, Bai Liu wasn't there for any good reason; he was there to take things, which was risky.

But the potential rewards were high. If it worked, Bai Liu would be the first to get a copy of the [Renewal Remedy], giving him considerable leverage to trade with other players. However, breaking into the ICU posed significant challenges.
Point 1: How do I break in?

There are roving nurses in the corridors of this hospital. Patients who do something slightly against the rules and regulations of the hospital will be caught and corrected, not to mention trying to force their way into the ICU. If the player attempts to break in, they will need to exploit the nurses' patrols. The nurses are very fast, and at least in Bai Liu's estimation, he couldn't outrun them on the slippery ground.

Point 2: How do you turn things over after breaking in?

The patient in this ward is very wrong, mostly a monster, so it would probably be difficult enough to break in and find something in front of the other person.

Before Bai Liu could come up with a concrete solution, nightfall arrived.

At 9 pm, the nurse informed the ward that there was a curfew, and all patients were forbidden to go out.

The only sound in the corridors is the sound of nurses pushing trolleys back and forth. These nurses patrol the halls during their shifts, and when they see the dim light coming from the doors of the wards, they knock to tell you to turn off the lights and get some rest, much like the hostesses at Bai Liu's high school.

But the nurses were far less friendly than the aunts. Bai Liu opened the door to take a look at them. The way they patrolled the corridors at night in their high heels, their faces frozen in the mist from the humidifiers, reminded Bai Liu for a moment of the nurse monsters in Silent Hill.

The nurses' eyes glowed with a cat-like fluorescent green in the night, watching Bai Liu from afar. Trolleys darted towards him, and high heels thumped closer. Bai Liu quickly shut the door and locked it as

fast as he could.

Soon, the trolley creaked to a stop in front of Bai Liu's door, and the nurse knocked twice, her tone low: "Patient in room 906, did you just open the door? Have you not read the hospital rules and regulations? It is strictly forbidden to go out after 9 pm, and the door to the ward can only be opened after 9 am."

The nurse questioned Bai Liu sternly while banging on the door, which was slammed against the frame in the dead of night.

Bai Liu, of course, would not open the door.

The nurse slammed the door once more and trailed off in a slightly creepy tone, "If you open the door at these times, the hospital is not responsible for your personal safety if something gets into your ward."

With that, the nurse moved away from Bai Liu's room.

Bai Liu furrowed his brow when he heard the nurse's words. It seemed like there was something out there at night.

This time period—9 pm to 9 am—seems like a restriction against opening the ward door, but it happens to coincide with the children's call times (6 am - 9 am and 9 pm - 12 am).

The child calls the investor exactly when the investor can't go out, and if the "something" the nurse mentioned earlier is a monster, then the monster roams around at the same time the child calls out.

It looks like Bai Liu took a big risk by calling him.

At 9:30, just as Bai Liu thought he wouldn't receive a call from little Bai Liu tonight, his walkie-talkie rang.

Bai Liu picked it up and heard a sound like bad contact, followed by the sound of someone running at breakneck speed, panting. It sounded like someone was running with the walkie-talkie, darting up and down.

Bai Liu remained silent, waiting until the panting subsided. On the other side, the voice said, "Hold on, something's chasing me."

After little Bai Liu said this, the system screen on Bai Liu's side popped up.

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Bai Liu for triggering the

Monster Book with his secondary identity line]

[The Monster Book of Love Orphanage Refresh - Deformed Children (1/3)]

[Monster Name: Deformed Child]
[Features: Faster movement speed (350-600)]
[Weakness: ????? (to be explored)]
[Attack: Likes to play with the player's secondary identity line, and will make the player's secondary identity line disappear into the orphanage while playing]

After about five minutes, the sound of clothes swishing came from across the room. Little Bai Liu, who seemed to be hiding, lowered his voice and said, "Alright, it's not catching up for now, so you can talk."

Little Bai Liu's voice was a little shaky, but there was no obvious fear. He wasn't afraid of whatever was chasing him.

Bai Liu asked, "What's chasing you?"

"A kid," little Bai Liu said, still breathing unevenly. "Crouched on the ground, coming after me on all fours like a monkey. Very skinny, drooling and smiling all the time. Strange looking, like one of those congenital idiots who can't think straight."

He had been in an orphanage before, where people with Down's syndrome had a distinctive look: squinting eyes, flat noses, long mouths, fat and bulging cheeks, short necks, wide eye spacing, and eyes that always ran upward. People used to call them "frogs" because they looked like them.

Such a frog-like child was on all fours on the ground, drooling and giggling, chasing little Bai Liu... Thanks to little Bai Liu's obsession with money, he was willing to make the call. Otherwise, a normal child would have been scared to tears and probably would have hung up.

"So, has he gone?" Bai Liu asked.

"No." As soon as little Bai Liu answered, Bai Liu heard the child's small voice on the other end of the line and the sound of fabric scraping against dirt and gravel. The child chasing little Bai Liu was moving very quickly.

Little Bai Liu's voice trailed off as he went silent again.

All Bai Liu could hear was the sound of his rapid breathing, footsteps, the innocent laughter of the child chasing him, and the swishing sound of the trousers scraping the ground.

The noise grew louder. It seemed like the kid chasing little Bai Liu was dragging their lower body and would soon catch up with him.

Bai Liu stayed quiet, not disturbing little Bai Liu as he fought for his life.

After waiting for almost five minutes, little Bai Liu panted and spoke, "It's ready."

"Did you avoid him?" Bai Liu asked.

"No, he went after the others." Little Bai Liu's tone lacked any sympathy. "Some other kid came out to call. As soon as he did, he got chased. Now he's running while crying, and the kid isn't chasing me."

Bai Liu understood that there was probably only one creepy kid wandering around the orphanage. Since it had shifted its focus, little Bai Liu was safe for now.

He asked, "What happened after you were taken in by the dean?"

"Once we were brought in, it was the usual process. The orphanage people assigned rooms. Me and three other new boys were in one room. A little blind girl was in another building opposite us. We all stayed on the ground floor," little Bai Liu explained in an organized manner, providing the details Bai Liu would care about.

Little Bai Liu continued, "That child's phone was supposed to be confiscated. The teachers at the orphanage had forbidden us from carrying communication devices. But then they said we were new and needed time to acclimate, so they allowed us to keep them for a week with a time limit on calls, just like you said, and also forbade us from making calls in the room so we wouldn't disturb others."

"As for all the teachers and carers I met at the orphanage, they warned me not to follow the sound of the flute at night and not to go out if I heard it, because the flute-player would abduct children." Little Bai Liu's tone was calm. "I ended up hearing someone whistling a strange nursery rhyme on a harp outside at 9:30 pm."

"I didn't really want to go out, but the piper guy was too eager to save his spot. It was just a little after nine, but I couldn't help it. You said

you'd pay me for every minute I called you, so I went out anyway."

Bai Liu thought of a fairy tale that fit this situation.

"Don't follow the sound of the flute..." Bai Liu said thoughtfully. "What comes to mind when you hear that?"

There was a moment of silence from little Bai Liu. "You mentioned this, so you should be thinking of the same thing I am, 'The Piper in Hamelin's Flower Cloth,' right?"

"That's the one." Bai Liu confirmed. "It's an English children's poem."

The story goes that in Hamelin, a town tormented by a plague, the townspeople were overrun by rats. They hired a piper to get rid of the rats. The piper played his flute, and the rats followed him into a river where they drowned.

The townspeople were grateful but refused to pay the piper. So, he played his flute again, this time to summon the children, who followed him, never to be seen again.

"Did you see who was playing the flute?" Bai Liu asked.

"I didn't see it," little Bai Liu replied. "The flute sounded in all directions. I felt like there was more than one person. But the flute player wasn't very skilled—he played wrong notes and kept repeating the same nursery rhymes for over half an hour. He sounded like a beginner."

"Did any children come out after hearing the flute?" Bai Liu asked.

"No," little Bai Liu answered quickly this time. "All the rooms have teachers or carers, except for us new ones. We're the only ones who could come out and call."

The cries of the child on the other end echoed with the eerie laughter of the child chasing him. Little Bai Liu seemed to remember something. "By the way, the one being chased is little Miao Feichi, another investor's child."

"Little Miao Feichi?" Bai Liu asked with amusement. "Why is he out on the phone? Oh, right, this kid has a bad habit. Stay away from him."

Little Bai Liu asked, "What's his problem?"

Bai Liu replied, "He likes to eat human flesh."

There was silence on the other end of the line. Then little Bai Liu spoke calmly, "I understand now. He didn't came out at night to make a phone call. He probably saw the child crawling on the floor and tried to come out. I thought he was coming out to call, but after you mentioned this, I think maybe he was using the phone call as a cover to feed."

Bai Liu chuckled. "He's a tough one to meet."

"I have a grudge against this kid's investor," Bai Liu said. "So, don't get too close to him."

Little Bai Liu asked in a somewhat odd tone, "You're going to save those two kids too? What's your relationship with them? Paying me to save them?"

"They're children a friend of mine wants to adopt." Bai Liu instantly picked up on little Bai Liu's implication and added, "I'm not as bad as you think I am, I'm not interested in kids."

Bai Liu then added, "But if you help them, remember your safety comes first. You're the most important to me."

There was a brief silence on the other end of the line before little Bai Liu emotionlessly stated, "Seventeen minutes and three seconds of talk time. That's $1,070. I'll send you the bill. Have a good night."

The call ended abruptly with a crisp "pop."

Bai Liu muttered to himself, "Was I this obnoxious when I was fourteen?"

The Loving Welfare Home

The following morning, Monday at 6:30 AM.

Bai Liu didn't want to sleep on the mushroom straw bed, so he spent the night on the floor with his books. The next day, he woke up and found that the pages on the floor were stuck together. The humidity in the room had been so high that the pages were soaked through and adhered to the floor, with a lot of dew on the walls. The humidifiers had been working non-stop, creating a humidity level worse than the rainy season.

But the three humidifiers in the ward had been ordered by the nurses to never be switched off, just as one of the rules of this hospital was not to use high-intensity lighting in the ward.

He sat quietly on the floor, waiting for a call from little Bai Six—the kid would surely call him in the morning for the money too, after all, it was charged by the minute.

By 6:45 AM, Bai Liu's walkie-talkie went off. This time, little Bai Six wasn't running, but breathing softly, his footsteps light, as if he had sneaked out on tiptoe.

"Good morning, Mr. Investor," little Bai Six whispered in an almost airy voice. "The kid who chased us yesterday is gone, and when I came out, I saw the teacher in the hallway talking about taking us to church today for a testimony to symbolize that we children, who have suffered, are officially in a place of refuge and that we are born again."

The children had been admitted to the orphanage yesterday, and today being Monday, little Bai Six's phrase immediately reminded Bai Liu of the nursery rhyme Born on Monday.

So, according to the nursery rhyme—Baptism on Tuesday—the procedure was that they should be baptized tomorrow.

"And then we're going to be baptized on Tuesday, tomorrow, to wash away all the suffering we've had out there." Little Bai Six said softly, "Parents have to be present when the children are baptized, but we don't have any parents except Liu Jiayi, so it's an open day for parents, so you can come in."

Bai Liu asked, "Did anything happen on your end last night?"

"The kids who went out to call last night, the room I was in had little Miao Feichi in it apart from me, but we both managed to get back to our rooms. Little Miao Feichi had been crying all night and looked like he should be okay. He ran quite fast. He was crying the whole time, but he didn't get caught," little Bai Six spoke in a flat tone. "But something rather strange happened in the early hours of the morning. I heard the footsteps of a child crossing the corridor and following the sound of a flute."

"These children were humming the nursery rhyme played by the flute. I got up to look at them, and felt that they should be awake, not sleepwalking. They were talking and laughing, and they were like the children described in that fairy tale, jumping in line and following the direction of the flute. But by the time it was almost dawn, I hadn't seen them return."

This was also consistent with what Bai Liu knew—that a group of children had followed the flute in the early hours of the morning and disappeared into a closed children's home, where they could not be found.

"Do you think the sound of that flute has a hypnotic or disorienting effect?" Bai Liu inquired thoughtfully. "Would you have wanted to follow it when you heard it?"

Little Bai Six didn't think twice: "No, it blew so badly that I wanted to go to the toilet."

"....." Considering that little Bai Six seemed to be very resistant to this kind of hypnotic suggestion, and Bai Liu was rarely guided during his real-world visits to the psychiatrist, he asked one more question: "Were any of the other children in your room affected by this flute?"

There was a moment of silence, as if remembering, and then little Bai Six spoke up. "I don't think so, except for little Miao Feichi, who cried all night. All the other children in the room were sound asleep."

Why did the children follow the flute of their own accord when it had no hypnotic or disorienting effect?

Bai Liu was lost in thought. Could it be that there was really a Piper set monster in this copy? But if it was such a set monster, why did it only lure away a few children each time? After all, the Piper's flute in the story was an indiscriminate attack that took all the children away at once, but this children's home version of the Piper only took a few children each time. How is this possible?

Little Bai Six's voice suddenly lowered. "The teacher is coming over to check us out. This time, the call time is 12 minutes and 37 seconds, rounded up to thirteen. That's a thousand and three, plus the thousand and seven from last night, making three thousand. Thanks for your patronage. See you next time, Mr. Investor."

When he finished, he hung up the phone very coldly.

Bai Liu was sure this time—little Bai Six had been timing the call with a stopwatch.

At 9:00 AM, announcements were made in the wards and corridors:

"Good morning, patients. After nine o'clock, you can open your doors and move around. For those who have searched for their medication, the nurses will bring it to your ward for administration in five minutes. For those who have not searched for their medication, please go to the hospital dining room on the ground floor for a meal. After that, speed up your search for your medication. You are already critically ill..."

Bai Liu opened the door and saw that other patients on this floor had also opened theirs.

After the night, it seemed that all the patients came out much more refreshed and less parched, as if they had been given enough moisture by the humidifiers.

In the corridor, there was a nurse pushing a trolley and running fast on her high heels to deliver medicine to some patients in the ward.

So, it looks like the medicine is a liquid, Bai Liu pondered and wrote it down.

Muke and Bai Liu had a code word before they moved in; these two were on the same floor, both on the ninth floor. Muke came out, the dark circles under his eyes heavier than before, like two students who had stayed up all night preparing for their final exams, both were playing hachems, and it looked like they had stayed up all night reading.

As soon as Bai Liu came out, Muke stared at him with such eagerness and concentration that it made people's skin tingle, like a cat still in high spirits after a long night's sleep, with the words "Come and fuck me" written all over its face.

This one looks like it’s time to wag its tail and ask for a reward.

Bai Liu obediently asked Muke: "Have you found anything?"

"This game wants us to look for prescriptions in medical books. I've read a lot of literature on the subject because I'm sick, and I know quite a bit about these. Last night, I wanted to split the work with you and read half of them each, but it turned out that the patient couldn't leave the room on the first day, so I just went ahead and read them. I read twenty-one last night."

Muke said, slapping his mouth again and snorting, his eyes watering from sleep. He couldn’t help but complain, "This game is set up so badly. The room is dark and wet, and no lights are allowed. I'm going blind. I'm lucky I have a pen to position my vision; otherwise, I’d be seeing astigmatism."

Bai Liu was eerily silent for a while when he heard the twenty-one books.

The books in this game were extraordinarily thick, so thick that Bai Liu didn't even bother to read them. Muke, the guy, actually managed to read 21 books in one night...

"Can you remember everything after you read it?" Bai Liu asked.

Muke gave Bai Liu a strange look. "You can remember it if you read it. Why can't you remember it?"

Bai Liu: "....." He just can't remember it.

Bai Liu felt the disdain of the academic bully for the academic slacker.

"How many books have you read?" Muke asked Bai Liu.

Bai Liu, the schoolboy, was silent for a moment and answered honestly, "0.01 book." He then turned the page twice and closed it.

Muke's reflexes were severely diminished by the late night and the overuse of his brain. He pondered Bai Liu's words for a moment before repeating with a wooden face, "0.01 book?"

This is about as good as not watching it!

Then Muke quickly reacted and approached Bai Liu with some urgency, looked around to make sure no one else was there, and asked Bai Liu in a lowered voice, "You're not really going to the ICU to steal

that life-sustaining prescription, are you? Bai Liu, if you don't want to read it, you can let me read it all. I can read books quickly. I can finish the bookcase in three days at most!"

"But even if you've read it, do you know what you're looking for in terms of a recipe for renewal?" Bai Liu turned to Muke and questioned him.

Muke was stunned.

Indeed, he did not know.

But even though Muke had read 21 books in one night and could remember every word in them, Muke really didn't know what they were looking for, because the definition of what the system was looking for was so vague. It was difficult to determine what they were looking for without a clear point of reference—whether it was a specific drug, a treatment plan, or something else.

"Without precise instructions, it's hard to know exactly what we're looking for in the cure for life," Bai Liu looked at Muke for a moment and prompted patiently, "And the system's task prompt is to find the cure for life renewal in the bookcase within the hospital, not necessarily specifically in our ward."

"But the bookcases in all the wards are the same." Muke looked at Bai Liu a little uneasily. "When I came up here, I deliberately peeked at the bookcases in the wards when the other patients were still closed. All the wards here have bookcases. I have a good memory. I can clearly remember the bookcases in the wards I've looked at all have the same kind of books. If the system wants us to look at books to find a cure for life, then breaking into the ICU and going in, we can see the same books. Not much point, Bai Liu."

"But what is the difference between other people's books and our books?" Bai Liu looked at Muke. "What's the difference between a book you read last night and a book you haven't read?"

Muke was stunned for a moment as he processed what Bai Liu was trying to convey.

"It's notes!" Muke murmured, sounding dazed. "Reading in the ward's light, the book must have notes in it. Without a pen to help orient your vision, it's impossible to quickly find where you left off."

Bai Liu explained without haste, "Imagine that in this hospital, where

there are no doctors, everyone must treat themselves. They come in, just like we did, and start reading books to find a cure. Since carrying any strong light source is prohibited and the lighting here is poor, they would have to read by the dim light available in the ward. That's why there are so many pens in the drawers."

Bai Liu continued, his voice calm, "In this low light, it's impossible to read without a pen. With a pen, the books leave marks—handwritten notes or circled information that makes it easier to find important details next time."

He glanced at Muke. "According to the rhyme, 'Sick on Thursday, seriously ill on Friday, dead on Saturday,' this illness worsens over time. The ICU patients are the most ill and have been here the longest. They've obviously been receiving treatment, so the handwriting in their books is most likely where we'll find the system's so-called [renewal remedy]."

Muke frowned. "But even so, we can't break into the ICU."

With so many nurses watching and Miao Feichi standing by, trying to enter the ICU would definitely draw attention, especially with that... thing in there, which was no longer human and most likely a monster.

Bai Liu glanced at Muke. "I was worried I wouldn't be able to finish reading and remembering all the notes, but I'm relieved you're here."

"I can help you remember!" Muke nodded, but hesitated. "But Bai Liu, how are we going to get into the ICU?"

Bai Liu stroked Muke's head, his eyes lowering as his tone softened. "You'd do anything for me, wouldn't you, Muke?"

Muke hesitated before meeting Bai Liu's gaze. There was something in those deep, dark eyes—a chilling, well-like depth—that unsettled him. But he bit his lower lip and said, "I would, Bai Liu."

"Then, will you kill me?" Bai Liu asked, his voice gentle as he pulled out a snow-white bone whip and placed it in Muke's trembling hand. "Would you use my fishbone whip to strangle me until I bleed, Muke?"

Muke froze.

Ten minutes later, the emergency bell rang throughout the private

hospital.

Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang were having dinner on the ground floor. They weren't in any hurry to find Bai Liu and kill him, but they were waiting for the first clue to the level. Liu Huai, who was eating out of concern for his sister, reflexively drew his sword or shadow dagger from his sleeve.

A bloodied patient stumbled down the emergency stairs, a snow-white bone whip in his hand. He rushed out of the room, and the distinctive prop immediately caught Miao Feichi's attention.

Miao Feichi quickly crossed several tables in the cafeteria, twin swords in hand, moving swiftly to intercept the player. The moment his swords were released, they smashed to the ground with a loud clang, startling the player.

The bloodied patient, crying and running, slipped on the wet floor and fell on his backside. "It was that monster that killed you! I just gave you a filler to pick up the slack!" he cried.

The player, drenched in blood, breathing heavily, seemed terrified by the scene he had just witnessed. His hands shook, and his pupils were wide with fear. He collapsed to his knees, holding his head and whimpering in shock.

"Wimp," Miao Feichi muttered, kicking the player and sending him flying onto a pillar. "Stand up and repeat what you said."

The player bounced off the pillar, letting out a loud cry of pain.

Muke's eyes filled with tears, his mind overwhelmed with fear, guilt, and the horror of hurting Bai Liu. The unease of having harmed his protector nearly caused him to lose control, and his mental state began to fluctuate.

Muke shook his head frantically as Bai Liu took his hand, wrapping the sharp bone whip around his slender neck. Almost begging Bai Liu to stop torturing him, Muke cried, "Please, Bai Liu… kill me. If you do, I'll be the injured one. I can go to the ICU then, right?"

Bai Liu smiled softly and shook his head. "It's not good, Muke. I have a bad memory and can't remember all the notes. I'm the one who got hurt, but you need to stay alert. You need to grow, Muke. The first step is to do things on your own without always relying on me."

Bai Liu tightened the bone whip around Muke's neck, the fish spikes sinking into his skin. Blood poured from the puncture wounds, soaking the straw bed and staining the white sheets.

Muke broke down, screaming as if he were a fledgling forced out of its nest. Bai Liu, indifferent, smiled softly. Blood spilled from the corners of his mouth, choking him as it bubbled in his windpipe. He coughed, still stroking Muke's head as if he were explaining his student's last wishes.

"Muke, whether in this game or the next, we must win. We must win to the end," Bai Liu said softly. "And it's all up to you."

"You have to fool Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang and win their trust. If you don't, we're all dead."

Muke gritted his teeth to suppress the bone-crushing pain from Miao Feichi's kick. His heart was tight with the violent emotional swings, and he felt nauseous, but he dutifully held his head down, pretending to be an ordinary player who knew nothing about scavenging.

All the nurses were rushing upstairs, pushing emergency beds and exchanging words as they went.

"Which patient is in trouble? What's their name?"

"The patient's name is Bai Liu! The nurse confirmed there's a laceration in his neck. He's lost a lot of blood and needs urgent resuscitation!"

"What's with the laceration? Didn't he open the door last night?"

"We checked with the nurse on that floor last night. He probably opened the door and put something in his ward..."

"Get him to the operating room for blood transfusion and suturing! Do we have any nurses or patients who can stitch him up?"

"Yes! ICU bed ready. He'll go straight there once he's out of the operating room!"

Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang exchanged glances, both incredulous. Miao Gaojiang frowned. "Bai Liu opened the door last night and was attacked? Is this really Bai Liu?"

"I think so. NPCs don't mistake players." Miao Feichi chuckled,

watching the nurses rush upstairs in a frenzy. "It looks like Bai Liu is going to give us a blood sample for free."

He sighed dramatically. "What should I do? I was planning on taking him alive. If he dies, it won't work." With that, Miao Feichi picked up Muke, who was trembling on the ground, by his toe and slapped Muke's bloodstained face with his twin swords.

"Get up. We're going to ask you some questions. Answer honestly," Miao Feichi sneered. "Or you'll regret it."

Miao Feichi pulled out a balance prop from nowhere.

This prop, Muke recognized from Bai Liu's VIP video for The Last Train. It was called [The Judge's Scales], a common tool for lie detection, used by Mu Sicheng on Liu Huai.

It was a well-known item among professional league players. Zhang Gui had one, too, before Mu Sicheng stole it. Many players carried it to counter opponents who liked to play tricks, like Bai Liu, an intelligence-based player.

Miao Feichi had brought this prop to counter Bai Liu.

Muke's pupils contracted at the sight of the scales, but he quickly slowed his breathing. Calm down, calm down. The prop only answered yes or no, and he remembered it could be manipulated through emotional responses, as Mu Sicheng had been tricked by Liu Huai's answer.

"Don't even think about lying. I'm not as stupid as Mu Sicheng to be fooled. But if you are Mu Sicheng, I apologize in advance." Miao Feichi smirked, crouching down and putting the scimitar around Muke's neck. "You'd better not play tricks. The scale might falter with complicated questions, but with simple ones, it'll never fail. Lie, and I'll kill you. It won't take me a second."

Miao Feichi's gaze hardened as the knife hovered near Muke's neck. "First question—did you really cut Bai Liu, as you said?"

"Yes, yes," Muke stammered, lifting his head as the knife drew closer. His voice trembled. "I cut his neck with my own hands, with the fishbone in his hand."

Muke held up the bloodstained fishbone for Miao Feichi to see.

The scales shifted slightly, favoring [Truth].

"Good. Even if you knifed him, Bai Liu likes to play dirty tricks. He's not the type to not have a self-strangulation counter-strategy. Next question—are you Bai Liu's accomplice?"

Muke's heart pounded in his chest. He could hardly breathe, his hand clutching the bone whip as his fingers trembled.

Then Miao Feichi coldly asked the next three words: "Mu Sicheng?"

The Loving Welfare Home

I don’t blame Miao Feichi for only thinking about Mu Sicheng. One reason is that Bai Liu is just two games into his journey, and he's not affiliated with any guilds. Even if he is a control player, he has no one to control.

Since the control skill is ineffective in the game lobby, Bai Liu can only recruit underlings, not true associates. But this man has only played two games in total—one as a solo player and another in multiplayer where Bai Liu controls Du Sanying and Mu Sicheng.

However, Du Sanying makes it clear that he's beyond Bai Liu’s control. He's too lucky, always managing to find a way out of his predicaments. It's no surprise that Bai Liu won’t be able to control him for long.

Liu Huai and Fang Ke were under Bai Liu’s control through Zhang Gui, but with Zhang Gui’s death, the two of them were free. That left only Mu Sicheng, who remains directly under Bai Liu’s control.

Mu Sicheng is the first person who comes to mind when Miao Feichi thinks about Bai Liu’s potential partner.

The other thing Miao Feichi cares about is Mu Sicheng's potential. Mu Sicheng is strong-willed, and while he won’t be able to beat Miao Feichi, he will be tough to defeat.

Mu Sicheng’s sharp judgment and speed make him a formidable opponent for high-speed attackers like Miao Feichi, as evidenced when he stole from Spades, the top attacker in the game. His sharp judgment allowed him to outmaneuver Spades, and this would cause problems for Miao Feichi if Mu Sicheng were to team up with Bai Liu.

No speedster would like Mu Sicheng, least of all Miao Feichi.

When they registered at the orphanage, Miao Feichi checked to see if Mu Sicheng's name was on the list, but it wasn’t.

However, Miao Feichi doesn’t fully trust written records from his own players and prefers to confirm things with his own eyes.

Liu Huai and Liu Jiayi’s identities were directly confirmed by Miao Feichi in the cafeteria. Liu Huai is a member of the King’s Guild, so Miao Feichi wouldn’t make things difficult for him unless there was a

clear conflict of interest. Liu Huai wouldn't defy a player of Miao Feichi's rank, which is even higher than Zhang Gui's.

The quickest way to confirm a player's identity is to check their system panel.

Liu Huai showed Miao Feichi his system panel, which listed his secondary identity, his sister Liu Jiayi. But this method isn't always reliable, especially for players like Bai Liu who have control skills. So, Miao Feichi and his team confirmed Liu Huai's identity further, having him use his personal skills and checking information from within the King's Guild.

There are six players in The Orphanage—Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang take up two spots, Liu Huai and his sister take two, and Bai Liu occupies one, leaving one more. Miao Feichi's eyes narrowed.

"Are you sure you're not Bai Liu's accomplice, Mu Sicheng?"

Muke, a little confused by this sudden question, shook his head. "I'm not. I'm just a regular player."

The scales tipped in favor of [Makoto].

Miao Feichi said, "Open your system panel for me."

Muke reluctantly showed Miao Feichi his panel, revealing his attributes and inventory.

His attributes weren't low—C+—but they paled in comparison to Miao Feichi's. His inventory was a mess, filled with odd items like a flaming torch with ten minutes left of use, school notes, tied ropes, a keyboard missing a keycap, and a mermaid sculpture.

"Seems like an average player," Miao Gaojiang, who had been watching, concluded after several checks.

Miao Feichi clicked his tongue. "I thought Mu Sicheng was under Bai Liu's control? Why isn't he here?"

"Mu Sicheng is a thief," Miao Gaojiang said. "He has plenty of ways to sell stolen goods, so it's not surprising that he might have found a way to break free from Bai Liu's control."

Muke listened to their conversation, his hands clenched in frustration. Mu Sicheng is far stronger than him—so much so that Miao Feichi and

Miao Gaojiang were cautious around him. If Mu Sicheng were here with Bai Liu, Bai Liu wouldn't have taken such a risk.

Muke knew deep down that he could never match Mu Sicheng. Without the personal skills Mu Sicheng had, he would always fall behind. Yet, he wasn't willing to accept it.

He was grateful that Bai Liu trusted him so much, but he couldn't grow to the point where he could help Bai Liu the way Mu Sicheng could.

No one had ever placed so much hope in him before. Being a patient, he could do nothing but burden others with expectations.

Yet Bai Liu would say, "You have to do it. I believe in you. I'm sure you can."

Miao Feichi was about to ask another question, but Miao Gaojiang stopped him. Kneeling down, Miao Gaojiang placed the balance in front of Muke, his smile kind but his gaze sharp. "One last question. Are you a player controlled by Bai Liu?"

Without hesitation, Miao Gaojiang hit the nail on the head—the veteran was wary of the possibility that Muke, a regular player, might be under Bai Liu's control.

Muke fought the urge to look away. His hand trembled as the sensation of cutting Bai Liu's flesh echoed in his mind, his breathing quick and labored.

He couldn't lie about this. The scales could tell simple truths, and if he lied, both he and Bai Liu would be exposed.

Taking a deep breath, Muke finally spoke, his voice shaking, "I am a player under his control."

The scales swayed twice and then settled on [Makoto].

Miao Feichi's eyes narrowed as he raised his twin swords, preparing to finish off the Bai Liu-controlled player.

Tears flashed in Muke's eyes. "But I broke free! I escaped when he was attacked by a monster. I came out to ask for help. After he lost consciousness from the monster, he couldn't control the other players anymore, and I was injured."

Muke then opened his personal panel, tearfully showing it to Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang. "You can see for yourselves. There's no control skill anymore. I'm free."

Normally, if a player were under someone else's control, their panel would show it—something like [Player X is under Player Y's control]. But Muke's panel was clear of such a status.

After inspecting Muke's panel, Miao Feichi hesitated before reluctantly sheathing his weapon, but Miao Gaojiang remained distrustful.

Miao Gaojiang, standing beside Muke, narrowed his eyes. "But how did an ordinary player like you defy Bai Liu and steal from him? He was the second new star in the last round."

Muke bit his lip, his eyes filling with tears again as he choked out, "Because I hate Bai Liu. I don't want to be controlled by him."

Miao Feichi's attention sharpened as he noticed Muke's reaction—there was something off, something performative in his words.

Bai Liu, a player who had climbed to second place in the Rising Stars in his second game, had a huge following. His fame and popularity rivaled even some of the smaller guild's star players, like Miao Feichi. This annoyed Miao Feichi; Bai Liu was pushing too hard, and if he made it to the league next year with Mu Sicheng, he would become a real problem.

One of the reasons Miao Feichi was interested in Muke was because of Bai Liu's cynicism, especially for a player on the fringes of the league.

Bai Liu's charging points last round were enough to make even seasoned pros like Miao Feichi feel self-conscious.

This sort of situation felt like the way professionals in real life resent the growing influence of internet celebrities—especially when they know these rising stars might soon challenge them.

Pro players like Hearts and Spades didn't bother competing with newcomers. They focused on group match practice. It was only players like Miao Feichi, with limited chances, who resorted to gimmicks to make a name.

Muke, a player with a history with Bai Liu, was now exposing the truth, threatening to affect Bai Liu's popularity. Miao Feichi could sense this would irritate the audience and damage Bai Liu's image.

"You hate him. Why?" Miao Feichi asked, curious about this personal vendetta.

The bitterness in Muke's eyes was hidden beneath his tears, but his voice trembled as he said, "He almost made me kill the most important person in my life with my own hands. That's why I hate him!"

His words, laced with sorrow and vulnerability, made even Miao Feichi pause.

"You and him... a real-world feud?" Miao Feichi raised an eyebrow.

After Muke answered, the balance tipped, and Miao Feichi moved to focus on the game, though his curiosity still lingered.

"Enough with the chatter," Miao Feichi muttered, uninterested. "It's just a tier 2 game. We've faced tougher opponents before."

Muke, realizing the situation was shifting, stood up, holding out Siren's bone whip in a gesture of submission. "I know you're going to kill Bai Liu. I'll give you everything I have if you take me with you."

Miao Feichi took the bone whip without much interest, swinging it casually. The whip snapped on the ground with a crisp thud, but no damage was done.

"This whip is hard to use," Miao Feichi noted, inspecting it. "The attack judgment is stronger than Mu Sicheng's, but it does no damage at all."

Miao Feichi threw a scouting prop to check it further, then tossed the whip aside dismissively. "It's pretty average. Let's see how the ghost mirror handles it."

Miao Gaojiang and Miao Feichi didn't take Muke seriously at all, even after accepting the whip.

Muke, knowing what was at stake, finally spoke up. "You can kill Bai Liu in the hospital, but there's still Bai Liu in the orphanage—Bai Liu Six."

"If that child doesn't die, Bai Liu will be fine," Muke continued. "But we investors can't just go into the orphanage. Do you know how to kill this child?"

Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang were silent, recognizing the gravity of the situation.

This was a real problem. They were strong, but their children were not.

But these children carry another fifty percent of their life value, yet they remain unaware of the fate of these little cubs who share half of their own life essence.

Miao Gaojiang didn't receive a call from his children last night, but Miao Feichi did hear from his young counterpart. However, little Miao Feichi was running around frantically like a chicken. No matter how much Miao Feichi insulted him, the little one on the other end of the line quickly hung up, wailing and crying, leaving no useful information behind.

Not only had they failed to get Bai Liu killed, but Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang hadn't even explained the main task to the children's pass, let alone managed to make these little brats follow their instructions.

"My children called me last night and this morning…" Muke said with careful deliberation, "I was bolder as a child, and he always listened to me."

In truth, it wasn't his own children—Muke had little courage as a child. It was Bai Liu's children who were much bolder.

The only player who had received two calls from his children, with each lasting up to 30 minutes, was Bai Liu. The rest of the players, based on what little Bai Liu had described the previous night, should have only received a call from Miao Feichi, though that conversation likely hadn't gone well either.

Not long after, little Miao Feichi returned crying from his phone call.

When the rest of the group hadn't received any calls, Muke lied without hesitation: "I have crucial information that could help us understand what's going on inside the orphanage. Even if it means taking down little Bai Liu under my instructions."

Miao Gaojiang stared at Muke for a few seconds, while Muke controlled his breathing and met his gaze unflinchingly.

"Fine, I'll take you," Miao Feichi finally relented, sheathing his twin

blades. "You stay in line and follow us—don't cause any trouble."

Miao Feichi licked his teeth and flashed a strange smile. "Any Bai Liu, we won't let slip through our fingers. That includes the little one in the orphanage. Of course, the good stuff should be saved for last."

"Now, let's deal with the older one in the hospital first." Miao Feichi's eyes narrowed with a smile. "My audience gave me tens of thousands of points before I entered, just to watch me take at least three pounds off him."

Muke's heart lurched as he saw Miao Feichi heading toward the ICU, clearly intending to find Bai Liu.

Recalling the plan Bai Liu had discussed with him earlier, Muke forced his mind to calm and followed Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang.

The hospital elevator dinged, descending from the seventh floor operating room to the ground floor. As the doors slowly opened, a nurse pushed an emergency bed out, a white cloth draped over it. The person underneath appeared deathly pale, eyes tightly shut, and hands folded in repose.

As soon as Muke saw the blood-soaked white cloth, his legs wobbled, and his face drained of color.

The cloth covering Bai Liu was drenched in blood. The nurses continued to hold down the areas where Bai Liu was bleeding, their faces tense with anxiety.

"Clear the way!" one nurse shouted. "Urgent bleeding! ICU ready!"

"The bleeding's stopped for now, but the patient has lost a lot of blood. Did anyone find his medication?" another nurse asked.

"No! He's a new patient admitted yesterday!"

Muke's panic surged, and instinctively, his eyes followed the emergency bed, only to see Bai Liu's long, spider-like fingers slipping out from under the cloth, subtly shifting. He was holding a strange object between them.

At the sight of the item, Muke's breath caught in his throat as he snapped back to his senses, halting in place.

He quickly accessed his system repository for confirmation.

Sure enough, his keyboard had been tampered with.

The missing [1], [0], and [7] keycaps from the previous time had reappeared, but now, it was the enter key that was missing. The [enter] key was being held between Bai Liu's fingers under the cloth, swaying gently.

This key signified the [execute command] function in computer language, literally meaning [enter]. It was Bai Liu's silent instruction to Muke: [Continue with my plan to enter room 107].

Miao Gaojiang, more observant than Miao Feichi, noticed Muke's intense focus on his system panel and followed his gaze, realizing Muke was taking stock of his props.

Muke's items were mostly useless—just a mermaid sculpture with some minor utility and a keyboard with a broken keycap.

Had this keyboard only been missing one key before? Miao Gaojiang wondered, before something else caught his attention.

Miao Feichi, frustrated after attempting to attack Bai Liu with his twin blades, was stopped by a nurse, and Bai Liu was swiftly taken to the ICU, where he lay next to another patient covered by a white cloth, both with impossibly long limbs.

Muke also noticed the old bookcases in the ICU, much like those in his own ward, though these were worn and torn, with visible handwriting —a sign that patients had been carefully recording information, just as Bai Liu had said.

Miao Feichi tried to enter the ICU twice but was blocked each time by the nurse. Annoyed, he clicked his tongue, glancing at Bai Liu, still on a ventilator in the ICU. "Nurses are blocking my way. I can't get in."

"Let's wait for the shift change," Miao Gaojiang suggested calmly. "I checked the nurses' duty roster while searching the map. The changeover is between 8:45 and 9:00 PM—this is when the guard will be lax."

"Wait until the evening, then." Miao Feichi sheathed his swords. "I was planning to take him down for lunch, but looks like it's going to be a late-night snack."

The two spoke of breaking into the ICU as if it were a regular ward, showing little concern for the monstrous patient inside. However, this

confidence was understandable—both Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang had incredibly high attributes.

Miao Gaojiang offered a word of caution to Miao Feichi: "We'll be fighting monsters at night. Make sure to top up your spirit and stamina. We're only at half our life now, so be careful."

After checking his personal panel, Miao Gaojiang took out his Advanced Mental Bleach and Stamina Restorer, drinking them quickly.

"Got it," Miao Feichi replied, not overly concerned. "It's just a level 2 dungeon. No need to overthink it. The monsters here are at best A+, and even at half life, we'll still be fine."

Miao Feichi absentmindedly checked his personal panel too, knowing that most high-tier players showed off their stats to the audience. Muke, a regular player, had no trouble catching a glimpse of their stats.

[Player name: Miao Feichi].

[Stamina Value: 780]

[Agility: 1793].

[Attack: 3900].

[Resistance: 1400].

[Player Miao Feichi has over 8,000 combined panel attributes and is rated as an S-rated player]

[Player name: Miao Gaojiang].

[Stamina Value: 1980]

[Agility: 1300].

[Attack: 2000].

[Resistance: 4300].

[Player Miao Feichi has over 8,000 combined panel attributes and is rated as an S-rated player]

Muke's heart was beating a little faster than usual, and he quickly

withdrew his gaze as though nothing had happened.

These two players were both S-ranked. No wonder they didn't take the patients in the ICU seriously at all. Even the thief brothers who had caused trouble for Bai Liu and the others last time were only A+ ranked monsters—already a top-tier challenge in a level 2 copy. But these two were S-ranked. Not only could they kill quickly, but they were also on a completely different level than the monsters in a level 2 copy.

It made sense now. These two had been relaxed ever since they entered the game. The monsters in this copy posed no real threat to S-rank players like them. Killing Bai Liu and reversing the quest would take time, but it wasn't life-threatening for them.

But the reverse wasn't true.

For Bai Liu, this meant that not only did he have life-threatening monsters to deal with in this level 2 copy, but he also had to contend with two S-rank players who were even more terrifying than the monsters hunting him. What made this even worse was how well these two complemented each other in terms of their panel attributes.

At least the monsters had weaknesses. But Muke knew that the combination of Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang was arguably free of weaknesses when it came to their panels and skills.

Miao Feichi's defense might be a little weaker, but his output was incredibly high. With his personal skill enchantment, he could deal nearly 3,000 damage with a single flat A. He was also fast. A-ranked monsters could barely keep up with his double slashes, which usually took only two or three attempts to finish them off.

Even if Miao Gaojiang was standing still with his defensive skills fully activated, it would take five to ten hits before his life value hit rock bottom. Meanwhile, Miao Feichi would keep dealing damage after his spirit level dropped. He was known as the league's number one "daddy Tank" for a reason.

In simple terms, either of them could easily kill Bai Liu. If this was a non-plot instance with an open map for confrontation, Bai Liu would be boxed in and it would be over for him as soon as he entered the game.

But The Caring Orphanage was clearly not that kind of copy.

The NPCs here were restrictive for players. And the presence of split-life [child versions of the player] made attacking players like Miao Feichi, who had spent months in confrontation-type copies, somewhat uncomfortable. They'd gotten used to the game's rhythm, but the pace here was different. Nevertheless, they were veteran players and quickly adapted to the various rule sets.

During the day, Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang had searched the entire hospital for the [Life-Saving Remedy]. As experienced players, their thought processes were similar to Bai Liu's. They, too, believed that the patients' wards should contain the "life-sustaining remedy" the system mentioned.

Unfortunately, after rummaging through almost an entire floor of wards, Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang were reported by other patients for disturbing their rest and were forcibly confined to their wards until dinner.

This was because disobeying NPCs created an attitude trend, and that attitude would result in these NPCs restricting the players' actions.

[System Alert: Nurse NPC is very angry with player Miao Feichi and player Miao Gaojiang for their repeated disruptive behavior and warns players that if they continue, they will be banned from leaving the ward tomorrow.]

So, Miao Feichi had to return to the ward. But this wasn't the first time he'd angered an NPC. What veteran player hadn't annoyed an NPC before? Instead of panicking, Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang used the spare time to chat on their way back.

Muke followed behind them. The two men raided the ward without concern for him—though they weren't exactly ignoring him either. It felt as though Miao Feichi treated Muke like a cat or dog following them around, so they didn't avoid him when speaking.

Miao Gaojiang paused, thinking for a moment. "21 wards on this floor. We searched them all before the nurses caught us. The books in the bookcases in the older patients' wards are much older than the ones in the new patients' wards. The sicker the patient, the older the books, and the more notes on them. I think the [Life-Saving Remedy] is more likely to be found there. But now the problem is the nurse NPCs."

"Right." Miao Feichi nodded, his voice tinged with annoyance. "But there's no way we can take the books out of these wards. We also can't stay long enough for the nurses to ignore us."

"A bookcase full of books, even if there were notes pointing to the [Life-Sustaining Remedy], we wouldn't be able to read through them fast enough before the nurse finds us..." Miao Gaojiang's brow furrowed as he reached the same dead end Bai Liu had before.

"A bookcase that big would take more than a day to go through, even if I skimmed it. And the nurse NPCs will be back in ten minutes..." Miao Gaojiang narrowed his eyes. "I need an empty ward where I can stay longer than a day, with those old bookcases, and not be kicked out for disturbing other patients."

For Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang, the answer was clear.

They exchanged a glance, and Miao Gaojiang made a quick decision. "Let's kill a patient monster to vacate the ward. New patients come in every afternoon. It's already afternoon now, so we'll have just enough time before the next round of patients arrives. That should give us enough time to go through the books."

Muke, trailing behind Miao Feichi, paused when he heard Miao Gaojiang's casual mention of killing a patient to clear a ward.

But soon, Muke regained his composure. His face, still pale, hid the turbulent emotions beneath. His hands trembled slightly as he tried to steady his breathing, but fear and unease gnawed at him.

The overwhelming power of Bai Liu and the monstrous patients he could not face were terrifying. He couldn't help but feel small in comparison to Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang, whose casual words made it seem like they could kill without consequence.

And yet, it made him resentful—not only of himself but of Bai Liu. For putting him in this situation, relying on an unreliable, powerful self who had yet to fully adapt to the game's pressure.

Muke had been close to killing Bai Liu, to breaking down under the pressure. He had reached a breaking point, his heart hollow as he sat amidst the bloodshed, unable to even shed a tear. But he hadn't lost control, not in the way he expected. He had stabilized—just as Bai Liu had hoped, after pushing him to the edge.

Now, with Bai Liu gone, Muke couldn't afford to lose control. His survival—and even Bai Liu's—depended on him staying calm, focused. He could not, under any circumstances, break down now.

Even with two S-rank players before him, he had to win, just like Bai

Liu had insisted.

Taking a deep breath, Muke finally spoke, his voice steady despite the strain. "The sicker a patient is in the ward, the more likely it is to find the [Life-Sustaining Remedy]. Then, killing the patient in the ICU seems like the most likely way to find it, right?"

Miao Feichi glanced at him with a smirk, dismissing his words with a snort. "Professional players tend to ignore the chatter of regular players. They don’t engage unless it's worth their time."

Miao Gaojiang, who appeared more courteous, explained with a touch of carelessness in his eyes. "We won’t kill the ICU patients. Bai Liu is there today, and there are more nurses than usual. We don’t know how killing a patient will affect the nurse NPCs. This is too risky."

"It's not just that," Miao Feichi added lazily, "The ICU is the most likely place for the [Life-Sustaining Remedy], but even if we killed the patient, we couldn’t stay there long enough to search through the books. The nurses will catch us after about fifteen minutes during their shift change."

"Fifteen minutes? Even with a camera, I couldn’t capture everything." Miao Feichi raised an eyebrow at Muke, sarcastically holding up the Big Brother device. "Do you think this thing can take pictures?"

Muke stepped forward, undeterred. "I can shorthand through the bookcase of books in fifteen minutes, if I have the notes."

He looked Miao Feichi in the eye, his voice calm but with an underlying conviction. "I have a photographic memory."

Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang paused, exchanging a look. Miao Gaojiang raised an eyebrow. "I remember, you don’t have any personal skills."

Muke smiled, unfazed. "That’s not a personal skill of mine. I was born with it. I remember things pretty solidly."

He took a step closer, his voice earnest, compelling. "If you take me with you, I can help you find the clues to the main quest in fifteen minutes."

The Loving Welfare Home

Muke's memory isn't quite as extraordinary as he wishes it were. Reading a bookshelf full of books in fifteen minutes and transcribing them flawlessly? Impossible. Even with his photographic memory, Muke can't read that quickly, let alone retain everything in such a short span.

To comb through the notes and clues in so many books, even with Muke's already impressive memory—at least by ordinary standards—he told Bai Liu it would take him at least a whole night.

But how could Muke stay safely in the ICU overnight?

Thinking of the plan Bai Liu had outlined, Muke turned to Miao Feichi with a look of sincere pleading. "I can't break into the ICU on my own, but I can memorize everything inside in no time. You guys could break in, and I'll be your eyes—how's that for a team? You bring the muscle, I bring the memory. Perfect combo, right?"

Miao Feichi glanced at him, humor flickering in his eyes, before grinning. "You didn't come to us just for this, did you?"

Muke lowered his head, silence falling between them. He fiddled with his fingers, scowling in reluctant acknowledgment.

"You expect us to believe you can really do this?" Miao Feichi's tone held a hint of mockery as he exchanged a glance with Miao Gaojiang. "An ordinary player like you thinking you can use us... Forget it, father, test his memory. If he can really remember all that, we'll take him with us when we break into the ICU at nine."

Miao Gaojiang looked Muke over and gave a slight nod. "Come with me."

Muke took a deep breath, nodded in agreement, and followed.

8:30 p.m., First floor of the hospital.

Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang had only been confined until 6 p.m. before the nurses allowed them to leave.

Muke passed Miao Gaojiang's memory test, impressing him by

recalling the page numbers and footnotes for every book he read. Miao Gaojiang, who had never encountered someone like Muke before, was genuinely stunned. After all, Miao Feichi, who hadn't even made it into high school without paying for his admission, had no idea there were people out there with Muke's kind of natural genius.

By 7:30, the two had sat down for dinner, discussing their plan for the ICU break-in. Their conversation was simple but effective.

Miao Feichi: "I'll go in first."

Miao Gaojiang: "You'll take the lead?"

Miao Feichi: "Same as usual. How many sections will you handle?"

Miao Gaojiang: "Same as you. With Bai Liu and that ICU monster, we should be out in under three minutes if all goes smoothly."

Their long history of working together meant they didn't need to spell everything out. They knew each other's roles perfectly. Neither of them knew how many monsters they'd encounter in this level-2 instance, so a few words were all they needed to plan their positions.

Muke tried his best to keep up, his frustration growing as he couldn't understand what they were saying. He grit his teeth, cursing them under his breath for speaking in a language that made no sense to him.

He thought about how Bai Liu had to keep his sanity intact, using keycaps to communicate instructions while injured. A pang of envy hit Muke—how he wished he and Bai Liu had that kind of understanding, the same father-son bond that Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang seemed to share.

8:55 p.m.

The nurses began filtering out of the wards and corridors, heading to the nurse's office for their fifteen-minute shift briefing. After taking the last round of temperatures, including Bai Liu's, the final nurse left the ICU, closing the door behind her.

8:57 p.m.

As the door to the nurse's office clicked shut, Miao Feichi sprang into action. With a quick flick, he unsheathed his twin blades and, in a low tone, said, "I'll unlock the door. You follow me."

Miao Feichi's twin blades were long and curved, shaped almost like crescent moons. They had an elegant name, but Bai Liu—who'd spent his childhood in an orphanage and had sometimes done farm work—had never associated them with anything other than a "hogweed knife." He hadn't had much contact with such weapons, after all.

When Muke heard Bai Liu casually mention the name, he assumed that was what the knife was really called. So, when he saw Miao Feichi using the blade to carefully pick the lock, he asked in confusion, "Why are you using a hogweed knife to pick the lock? Can't you just use a lockpick from the system?"

Miao Feichi was furious at the idea. "Who told you these are hogweed knives?!" he snapped. "These aren't just any knives!"

Muke blinked in surprise. "This knife can actually kill pigs?"

Miao Feichi was so enraged he could hardly speak. "What do you think this is? A pig-slaying tool? This is my 'Wind-Up Twin Blades'—my personal skill weapon. It's rated A+ and can hit S- level at full power! It's way faster than any lockpicking tool!"

Muke was taken aback by the fiery outburst, but Miao Feichi quickly composed himself, sneering, "Do you think you're the only one with useful skills? There aren't many who can resist this weapon, and even Mu Sicheng's skill is useless against it."

With a growl, Miao Feichi unlocked the ICU door, and as he opened it, he gave Muke a mocking middle finger. "If your brain isn't as useful as you say it is, I'll make sure you regret it later."

Muke wisely stayed silent, not wanting to provoke Miao Feichi further.

The ICU door creaked open, revealing a misty interior, shrouded in dense fog. The humidifiers were working overtime, filling the room with a thick mist, limiting visibility to barely a meter. The two beds were obscured by the fog, with only the slight rise and fall of the figures beneath the white cloths marking their presence. Their withered limbs hung limply beside the beds, barely noticeable.

Two identical men lay in the beds, their faces gaunt and drooping, lifeless, with pale skin marred by the dark marks of death. They looked eerily like corpses, their features twisted in silent agony.

The ICU was soundproof, and Miao Feichi closed the door to prevent

any sound from escaping. He kicked Muke lightly with his foot, ordering, “Go check the books on the shelf.”

Muke nodded, a bitter taste in his mouth. He walked toward the bookcase, flipping through the pages rapidly, his heart pounding with anticipation.

The plan was about to begin.

As Muke hurriedly skimmed through the books, his eyes flicked toward the hanging hands of the two patients. One of them appeared to be holding something.

Then it hit him—Bai Liu had been in this ICU bed when he’d been brought in. What had he done while left alone in here?

Miao Gaojiang moved cautiously to examine the two patients, frowning. “The monsters haven’t triggered. We don’t need to fight them.”

“Bai Liu still needs to be killed,” Miao Feichi muttered, his gaze wandering over the two patients. He frowned again. “Wait, who’s Bai Liu? They look identical. I remember Bai Liu was shorter than the one in the other bed when he was brought in.”

“And Bai Liu didn’t have those spots before,” Miao Gaojiang added after a moment. But soon, his veteran instincts kicked in. “Bai Liu must have been alienated—probably from spending too long with this seriously ill monster. His life value dropped, his mental resistance weakened... he was probably alienated by the patient monster.”

“Are you planning to eat Bai Liu’s flesh in this state?” Miao Gaojiang asked, pointing to the skeletal figures on the beds.

Miao Feichi shuddered in disgust. “Forget it. I’ll eat the smaller one. Bai Liu’s looks too much like my mother when she was sick... it’s awful.”

Miao Gaojiang was quiet for a moment before asking, “Which one do you want to kill?”

Miao Feichi’s expression darkened. “Kill them both,” he said, his eyes narrowing. “It won’t take much effort to kill one more. I’d rather make a mistake than let them live.”

[System Alert: Player Miao Feichi uses his personal skill weapon

(Wind-Up Twin Blades)]

[Rating: A+ rank potential, S rank skill weapon, flat attack 3100, one hit can kill players below B rank]

Miao Feichi's twin swords were held in his backhanded grip, their edges reflecting against the wall like the raised arms of a praying mantis preparing for an attack. He sneered twice, eyes fixed on the patient in the bed, and without hesitation, swung his sword at the player on the outer bed.

The sharp tip of his blade cut through the white mist, drawing a sleek, lethal arc, and in an instant, it hovered mere centimeters from Bai Liu's nose, who kept his eyes closed.

Muke nearly screamed, desperate to stop Miao Feichi at any cost.

Bai Liu's panel was at F rank, and his life was already dangerously low. A single strike from Miao Feichi's weapon would surely kill him!

And Bai Liu had nothing to defend himself with—Miao Feichi was armed with an S-rank potential weapon!

Muke's eyes burned with frustration and self-loathing. Why wasn't he Mu Sicheng? Mu Sicheng could have blocked this attack! But all Muke could do was watch helplessly.

Bai Liu's eyes finally fluttered open just as the tip of the blade neared him, plummeting at breakneck speed. The blade, now nothing but a shimmering dot in the darkness, was almost at the center of his forehead when the system alert finally rang in his head.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu uses Player Mu Sicheng's soul note to access his opponent's system panel... Access complete. Player Bai Liu can now manipulate Player Mu Sicheng's system panel.]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu activates Player Mu Sicheng's personal skill (Monkey Thief).]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu equips five (Thief's Black Fingers) props to enhance his personal skill, equipping in progress...]

[(Thief's Black Finger) equipped. (Monkey Thief) skill enhanced, from A rank to A+ rank. S- rank potential unlocked. Success rate for stealing from S- rank players is 50%. Attack-block success rate against A+ and lower attack skills is 100%.]

Bai Liu's hand fell beside the bed, now transformed into the strange

texture of a burnt monkey's paw. He swiped his fingers a few times to adjust before looking up at the tip of the knife, which had descended within inches of his face. It stopped just shy of piercing his forehead.

Without a moment's hesitation, Bai Liu tilted his head slightly to the side and, with swift precision, squeezed the tip of Miao Feichi's blade between his fingers.

"Damn it, this patient is blocking my knife!" Miao Feichi snapped, narrowing his eyes in disbelief. "He's not Bai Liu! Bai Liu doesn't have the A+ skill to block my blade. This is another patient! It's the monster patient!"

He whipped his head to the inner bed. "That's Bai Liu in that bed!"

Bai Liu's mouth slightly curved. Miao Feichi's hands moved upward in a diagonal manner and the sharp and cold blade swept across Bai Liu's cheek. It was obvious that even thought Miao Feichi thought this wasn't Bai Liu, it didn't prevent him from trying to harvest the patient's life. Bai Liu used the tip of the monkey hand to block it very quickly. The blade and nails made a sharp collision sound and even created small sparks in the dark ward.

Had the room been better lit, Miao Feichi might have noticed the unmistakable black monkey's paw, resembling Mu Sicheng's, sprouting from Bai Liu's hand. But in the obscurity of the ward, Miao Feichi had to squint to see clearly, and since Mu Sicheng's Monkey Claw skill was only subtly distinct from the dry, thin fingers of the patients, he remained deceived.

Miao Feichi's expression darkened when his attacks failed to land. "Something's wrong. This monster's rank is high. It can block me twice—at least A+."

He quickly drove his twin blades into the wall, spinning them twice before lunging toward the patient on the inner bed. "If I can't kill the one outside, I'll take care of the one inside first. Bai Liu!"

The monster patient inside might not be able to endure Miao Feichi's attacks. If the patient inside couldn't endure it the Bai Liu's plan would be completely destroyed!

Muke's heart raced as his eyes darted to the large bookcase behind Miao Feichi.

Without warning, the bookcase came crashing down.

Muke's foot hooked onto a high shelf, pulling the entire bookcase forward. It fell directly between Miao Feichi and the patient who had been motionless in bed.

From his hidden corner, Muke screamed, "This patient just attacked me!"

As the bookcase struck the inner bed, Bai Liu swiftly slid across the floor, swapping places with the other patient in the blink of an eye. With uncanny precision, he kicked the patient out of the bed and sent them to the outer one. The long-limbed, ghostly patient finally stirred, its sharp teeth dripping with mucus and its long, bulging tongue flicking out, letting out a shrill, high-pitched hiss and releasing the rancid stench of decay.

At that moment, everyone's system panels flickered with the Monster Book screen:

[System Alert: Congratulations, Player Muke, Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang, for triggering the Monster Book.]

[The Monster Book of Love and Welfare has been updated - Plant Patients (2/3)]

[Monster Name: Plant Patient]

[Characteristics: Moving speed 1500-2000, requires abundant water to grow, prefers humid environments.]

[Weakness: ??? (To be discovered)]

[Attacks: Sucking—once a player is bitten, they are drained of blood (A-rank attack skill). Poison Mist Contamination—players in the mist will have their life value drained and transformed into Plant Patients (A-rank skill).]

"What the hell, is that really the patient out there?" Miao Feichi muttered, confused by the extreme darkness. He soon realized something was off, unable to kill the patient in front of him.

"What the hell is going on?! Why can't I kill one of these two patients?!" Miao Feichi cursed, his frustration mounting.

Miao Gaojiang, who was facing the now-awakened patient, responded, "Bai Liu was probably pushed to the maximum by this patient. His spirit value dropped, and his skill escalated to block you. He's no

different than the monster patient in this ward now."

"The drastic decrease in life value, coupled with being surrounded by this spiritually tainted monster…" Miao Gaojiang's tone turned grim. "I suspect he's either dead or turned into a monster. We're now facing two A+ level monsters that we can't beat in fifteen minutes."

"Feichi, we have only a few minutes left. If both are this high-level, we can only kill one. Which one should we kill? I'm leaning towards the outer bed, which should be Bai Liu, but they're moving and swapping so fast that I'm not sure which is the real Bai Liu. Can you feel it when you attack?"

Miao Feichi fell silent, his face darkening.

The twin blades and monkey claws clashed in the dim ward, the sounds of metal against nail ringing through the air. Miao Feichi held back deliberately to avoid alarming the nurses, but his strikes still rang out in rapid succession.

After dodging another black hand reaching for his neck, Miao Feichi, now enraged, let go of his restraint. He swung both swords at full strength, slicing through the air with a silver flash aimed at Bai Liu, determined to finish him off.

Bai Liu's breath quickened as the twin blades sliced lazily through his hair, which fell damp to the ground.

"Damn it, Muke, what are you doing?!" Miao Feichi roared, spinning around to glare at Muke, who was crouched on the floor, wasting his stamina. His hair stood on end, ready to explode in anger.

Muke, head tilted back with a book in hand, stammered, "I was looking for a book to read, and the bookcase fell over... the books scattered under the bed!"

In a fit of rage, Miao Feichi kicked Muke in the chest. "Get out of the way!"

Muke's face flushed purple from the force of the kick. He instinctively closed his eyes, bracing for another painful hit, but instead, he felt himself lifted lightly and slid under the bed, unharmed. Blinking in confusion, Muke realized the hand that had lifted him was a dried monkey's paw.

It was Bai Liu's hand.

Muke gritted his teeth, hiding under the bed, counting the minutes in his mind—just eight more minutes.

Bai Liu had to deal with these two S-panel players, father and son, for eight long minutes while Muke could only watch helplessly, unable to do anything.

"Feichi." Miao Gaojiang's voice was slightly subdued, his upper body half-zombified. His teeth had curved into grotesque ivory tusks, making his face look disturbingly terrifying in the dim light of the night.

Miao Gaojiang sidestepped a monster's attempt to bite him, his face now a ghastly, purple-blue shade. "Time's half up. We can only kill one monster. You're the head-to-head player, can you tell who Bai Liu is?"

"Fuck!" Miao Feichi grumbled, "How am I supposed to tell if you can't? They all look the same—like they came from the same mold!"

With that, Miao Feichi slashed across the table with a powerful strike. This time, without Muke's interference, his twin blades cut off two of Bai Liu's fingers—Bai Liu's equipped Thief's Black Fingers fell to the ground.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu's item (Thief's Black Finger) has dropped two fingers. (Monkey Thief) personal skill enhancement reduced to three-fifths.]

"Hey, I feel like I don't have to choose. The monster on my side can't stand it. I should be able to kill it in five minutes," Miao Feichi said with a slight grin, his voice dripping with smug satisfaction.

"If you can finish your side quickly and come help me, I'll wrap up fast too," Miao Gaojiang replied, his tone slightly more relaxed.

Muke clenched his fists under the bed, his lips pale and trembling. The pain from the earlier kick from Miao Feichi still throbbed in his chest. He prayed fervently—five minutes to go, come on, come on!

Five more minutes to survive.

Miao Feichi's twin blades were like the arms of a mantis, derived from a personal skill that suited his playstyle far better than any prop weapons dropped by the game's dungeon.

After the initial confusion caused by the narrow, dimly lit space and multiple players, Miao Feichi quickly found his rhythm. He began attacking Bai Liu with frenzied precision, slashing, uppercutting, his movements so fast they left only a faint whistling sound in the air.

There was no noise when a quick strike severed something—only the sound of the severed object hitting the floor.

Muke watched, his heart sinking, as Bai Liu's black fingers dropped one after another in front of him. His teeth ground together so hard his palm started bleeding.

Three minutes to go.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu's item (Thief's Black Finger) has dropped once more. (Monkey Thief) personal skill enhancement reduced by two-fifths.]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu's item (Thief's Black Finger) has dropped once more. (Monkey Thief) personal skill enhancement reduced by one-fifth.]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu's item (Thief's Black Finger) has dropped again. All items have dropped. (Monkey Thief) loses personal skill enhancement, dropping from A+ to A skill. Blocking judgment on A+ skill reduced to 50%.]

Bai Liu dodged diagonally and tried to block with his monkey paws. Miao Feichi scoffed, twirling his blades with expert precision. He shifted the grip of his weapon from an upward slash to a horizontal cut, aiming for a decisive blow.

In the midst of his attack, Miao Feichi appeared to anticipate his victory. As he swung his blades, he glanced over at Miao Gaojiang with a smug smile. "My side's done..."

Before he could finish his sentence, the hospital bed behind him suddenly jolted forward, slamming into his waist. Miao Feichi staggered as the bed struck him from behind.

Muke, panting and wide-eyed, stood behind the bed, watching in disbelief as Bai Liu narrowly avoided a fatal blow from Miao Feichi.

One minute left.

Bai Liu smiled.

Miao Feichi's temper flared. Frustrated by Muke's interference, he shouted, "Are you fucking insane?"

He kicked the bed aside, pulling Muke out from under it, and slapped him backhandedly, his teeth grinding in anger. "Every time I'm about to finish off a monster, you come out and mess things up, you little..."

Miao Feichi's eyes glowed with rage, and his twin blades rose, ready to strike down Muke.

Muke wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth and shrank back into the corner, fear flashing across his face. "I-I was just looking for a book under the bed... and found something important! The system said I found the [Life-Sustaining Remedy]!"

Miao Feichi froze, his expression shifting from anger to a mix of suspicion and curiosity. "You found it that quickly?" He narrowed his eyes, a cut of impatience in his voice. "It better be the life-saving remedy, or I swear..."

Miao Gaojiang, momentarily distracted from the monster patient he was fighting, punched the creature away and moved closer to Miao Feichi. "Feichi, stop hitting him! Let's see what he's got!"

Miao Feichi, swallowing his curses, hesitated before pulling Muke up. But Muke, trembling from the earlier strikes, appeared too scared to move.

Just as Miao Feichi was about to help him, Muke scrambled away in panic, heading straight for Bai Liu.

"Stupid!" Miao Feichi snapped, infuriated. "That's a monster over there! Get your ass back here!"

Pretending to be terrified, Muke lowered his gaze, silently gripping Bai Liu's wrist. His voice trembled as he whispered to himself, "Stay awake, Muke. Stay awake, no matter how low your spirit level drops..."

He squeezed Bai Liu's hand tighter.

Bai Liu leaned in slightly, glancing down at Muke, whose hand was shaking from the nervous grip. "Got a good hold on me?" he whispered.

Muke nodded quickly, swallowing hard.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu is using Player Mu Sicheng's personal skill—(Thief Stalking). Due to Player Bai Liu's low stamina, the skill can only be used for one minute. Final speed calculation: +4900. Confirm usage?]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu confirms use. Movement speed +4900. Stamina in extreme decline...]

Miao Feichi watched, dumbfounded, as Bai Liu, now fully possessed by the speed-enhancing skill, dragged Muke across the floor at an unbelievable pace. The two glided between the hospital beds, moving faster than Miao Feichi could track.

Muke squealed in fear, but between Bai Liu's blinding speed and the dim light, Miao Feichi couldn't tell who was who.

Frustrated beyond measure, Miao Feichi growled, "Shut up! I can't even tell who's who with all this goddamn running!"

He threw his twin swords, trying to strike at anyone, but Miao Gaojiang shouted sharply, "Muke's in there too! He has the life-saving remedy! Don't just swing blindly! Look carefully!"

"Look carefully, my ass!" Miao Feichi barked, his brain fogged with rage. "They all look the same! And with them running around like that, I can't tell who's who!"

Miao Gaojiang's voice was calm but insistent. "Muke's less alienated. He's shorter than the monster and doesn't have spots on him. Look carefully, you'll spot the difference!"

No sooner had Miao Gaojiang spoken than two dark figures erupted from beneath the bed. One of them was Muke.

Miao Gaojiang, realizing one of the figures was Muke, quickly withdrew his fist from the monster's skull, stepping back to avoid accidental injury.

Bai Liu, holding Muke tightly, stepped in front of the real monster, the plant patient, who seemed to smell blood and immediately lunged with sharp teeth and saliva dripping from its mouth.

It could sense the players' blood, and it desperately needed to feed. It reached out with its long, sharp fingers to grab Bai Liu, its prey.

Without hesitation, Bai Liu thrust Muke's trembling body toward the

monster's waiting mouth.

The plant patient latched onto Muke's exposed neck with an agonizing grip, its sharp teeth sinking in with eerie satisfaction.

Muke shuddered from the pain, blood draining from his face as the monster feasted on him. He gasped, his hands clutching at the creature as his spirit level plummeted.

"The monster's biting me! It's sucking my blood! My spirit's dropping fast!" Muke cried out.

[System Alert: Player Muke's spirit value has dropped to 67, and his life value to 31. Please escape the monster's attack range immediately, or your life and spirit value will continue to drop.]

Muke's limbs began to stiffen, his breathing slowed, and his body twisted unnaturally, almost as if it were growing like a plant.

Miao Gaojiang's expression darkened as he saw Muke's condition. "Muke's been alienated too. Now, we can't tell who's who anymore—Bai Liu, the monster, or Muke."

Bai Liu, holding Muke and the real plant monster, moved around the ward. All three were of similar size, their bodies marked with spots, making it nearly impossible to tell them apart.

Miao Feichi, unable to distinguish between the three at such high speeds, grew more frustrated.

"Did these monsters eat Mu Sicheng? Running this fast!" Miao Feichi cursed, eyes flashing red with fury. "If we can't split them, let's just kill them all together. We'll figure out the life renewal later. First, we take down Bai Liu."

"Only a minute left, Feichi," Miao Gaojiang warned. "If we attack all three, we won't be able to kill them..."

Miao Feichi sneered, a bloodthirsty grin spreading across his face. "It won't be too late. I'll be on S-grade for ten seconds. Let's end this."

"S-grade used in this kind of place is a bit of a waste of your stamina slot..." Seeing Miao Feichi motionless in the room, looking straight at him, Miao Feichi was clearly so defeated it turned to anger. He couldn't bring himself to kill these three monsters but couldn't get rid of the rage either.

Miao Gaojiang paused and finally sighed helplessly, "... Well, it's a level-2 game only. Open it if you want."

[System Alert: Player Miao Feichi uses his personal S-skill (Resentment Double Knives). According to player Miao Feichi's current stamina slot level, he can use it for one minute. After one minute, the stamina slot will be empty, and he will not be able to use stamina restorers to restore it. The stamina will return to normal after one day. Is player Miao Feichi sure to use it?]

[System Alert: Player Miao Feichi has confirmed use. Double Blade is possessed by the grievious spirit it killed, attack +8001. Player Miao Feichi's stamina is dropping extremely fast...]

Miao Feichi nudged the ground with his twin swords, emotionless. The ground instantly cracked under his hand, and an eerie white mist slowly rose from the surface of his twin swords, bringing with it a strong blood smell. Long, human-like shapes began to appear, floating in mid-air like ghosts, their tails still haunting the twin swords. They opened their billowing lips and hissed soundlessly.

The spirits wrapped themselves reluctantly around the murderer who had sacrificed himself to the sword—resentful and fierce, but useless. The spite and fury made the blade's surface shinier and sharper.

Perhaps they still had some use. They could help their killers strike down more spirits that came to keep them company.

Miao Feichi swung his twin swords, and the spirits roared with rage.

In almost a second, Miao Feichi pierced through the white mist, one knife thrusting into the wall to hold his body in place. His foot was on the wall, the other knife slashing across the room, just grazing the tip of Bai Liu's nose.

Bai Liu could feel the wind from the slash rustling the white mist.

The previous strike had been fast but lacked aggression.

Miao Feichi's gaze darkened, and the knife seemed about to slice through Bai Liu's neck, sending his head to the ground.

Bai Liu dodged with high speed. The wind from the knife cut a mark on his face, and the blade grazed him for just a second. Miao Feichi's eyes were cold as he pulled back the curved knife. The tip of the blade was about to pierce the back of Bai Liu's neck. Bai Liu couldn't turn

around fast enough to dodge, so he directly turned his hand into a monkey claw to block it.

But the blade wasn't as easily blocked as before, and Bai Liu failed to stop the tip of the blade. The scimitar passed through his palm and stabbed him in the back of the neck.

Blood spilled from the corner of Bai Liu's mouth.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu uses the skill (Thief Monkey Claw) to reduce judgment by 50% and block 50% of damage.]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu's prop (Siren's Fish Scale) blocked 49.7% of the damage value. The prop is slightly broken (10% damage). Please repair it promptly.]

[System warning: Player Bai Liu's life value has dropped to 7!]

In theory, even if Miao Feichi's slash had been blocked by 99%, the remaining 1% of the damage would have been enough to kill Bai Liu. However, after the double slash pierced the back of Bai Liu's neck, the tip only penetrated a shallow millimeter and was blocked.

His fish-scale-covered coin had somehow turned on his back, just in time to block the tip of Miao Feichi's blade.

Bai Liu quickly glanced at Muke, who had been sucked to unconsciousness.

Muke's eyes opened slightly with difficulty, his hands dropping slowly and feebly.

Bai Liu's whole body lurched forward with the force of Miao Feichi's slash. The moment Miao Feichi picked him up with his scimitar, ready to kill him, Bai Liu suddenly said in a pitiful tone, "I am... ahem, Muke."

Miao Feichi froze, withdrawing his hand and abandoning his machete, cursing that he had made a mistake in opening the door.

Bai Liu was kicked into a corner by Miao Feichi, weakly leaning against the wall. He calmly watched as Miao Feichi attacked the delirious Muke with his twin swords. His hand, hidden in the shadows, drew a soul note and pressed it quickly against his panel.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu is using Player Muke's soul note to

intervene in the other player's system panel.]

Muke staggered and dodged, but he didn't quite make it. He was grazed by Miao Feichi's twin swords and fell to the ground.

[System Warning: Player Muke's Life Rating has dropped to 6! Mental value has dropped to 26!]

Miao Feichi seemed to sense that something was wrong. Instead of landing a deadly blow on Muke, he slammed his knife into Muke's back. Muke curled into a ball from the impact. Miao Feichi stepped on Muke's neck and looked down at Muke's face with narrowed eyes: "This reaction... the lack of strength to fight back... is completely different from the monster and Bai Liu I fought before. Why do I think you are Muke?"

Miao Feichi slapped Muke's face twice with his twin blades, his eyes darting dangerously between Bai Liu and Muke: "Hey, are you conscious? If you are, answer me—who are you?"

Muke suddenly opened his mouth wide and bit down on Miao Feichi's ankle, his eyes bloodshot. He mimicked the way he had just been drained by the monster, straining and madly sucking Miao Feichi's blood, a desperate whimper escaping his throat as his teeth sank deep into Miao Feichi's skin.

He was impersonating a monster. Muke didn't want to give away Bai Liu, who was pretending to be him, so he followed Bai Liu's instructions and played the role of a monster.

Bai Liu had told Muke to be whatever the monster in the ward was, so that Bai Liu would be safe and out of danger.

Muke bit into Miao Feichi's ankle like a mad dog, but he was too weak to do any real damage. Miao Feichi's S-rank defense was more than he could handle as a dying player.

Miao Feichi cursed and said, "You must be the monster that my father almost took care of," before raising his twin swords to kill Muke.

Muke didn't even duck, blood gushing from his mouth. His mind was focused only on the plan Bai Liu had given him—to bite this man and not let him go!

Bai Liu's life expectancy was already too low for Miao Feichi to reach him. This thought repeatedly planted itself in Muke's mind, as if

hypnotized by fear, watching Bai Liu fall in a pool of blood.

Muke's hands were glued to Miao Feichi's legs, his eyes glazed over as his jaws clamped around his opponent, despite the fact that he could no longer bite, oblivious to the twin blades cursing and slashing at him from above.

Bai Liu glanced at the clock—ten seconds left, almost.

[System Alert: Does player Bai Liu want to use the item (Mermaid's Sculpture) to enhance player Muke's resistance properties?]

Bai Liu, with cold eyes: [No, for plant patients (sculpture of a mermaid).]

[System Alert: Calculation in progress... As the plant patient has absorbed 35% of player Muke's blood, it is attached to player Muke's attributes and can use player Muke's props directly on him. Does player Bai Liu confirm to use this item on the monster plant patient instead of the endangered player Muke to increase defense?]

Miao Feichi's twin swords, with countless spirits attached, fell toward Muke's limp, hollow-eyed form.

Bai Liu lifted his eyes for a faint glance, then dropped them nonchalantly: [Confirmed]

A snow-white, heavy sculpture suddenly emerged from the monster standing nearby.

The weight of the sculpture was so excessive that it could have brought Bai Liu to his knees in The Last Train. Now, hanging on the overly thin and tall vegetative patient, it led to one inevitable outcome—the patient slipped on the ground as if crushed under the sudden burden. Staggering unsteadily, the patient collapsed forward, landing directly on top of Muke.

Everything seemed to move in slow motion as Miao Feichi's descending twin blades sliced into the snow-white armor of the plant patient. The tips trembled twice, accompanied by the fluttering sound of shifting iron, before the sculpture shattered into a million plastery shards that rained down on Muke's dying body.

Miao Feichi's knives, having cut through the standard-grade prop, continued their downward arc. They nearly cleaved through half of the monster patient's upper body before narrowly stopping in front of Muke's eyes, effectively redirecting Miao Feichi's powerful strike.

Bai Liu's pale gaze steadied as he let out a faint gasp—his plan had worked.

Even if Bai Liu had simply placed a sculpture prop on Muke, it wouldn't have been enough to stop Miao Feichi from cutting him in half.

So he played a small trick—using the sheer weight of the sculpture by attaching it to the body of a slender, tall plant patient, an A+ ranked monster.

The patient's collapse onto Muke created a [Sculpture + Patient] barrier, absorbing the force of Miao Feichi's staggering attack.

Pinned under the monster patient, Muke's dimming eyes suddenly lit up with understanding. With difficulty, he turned his head toward Bai Liu in the corner and mouthed his name in a hoarse, silent whisper.

For no logical reason, Muke was convinced—just as he had been from the start—that Bai Liu was someone who wouldn't let him die so easily.

And Bai Liu had proven him right.

Countdown: Eight seconds.

Miao Feichi's eyes widened, his bloody grin stretching as he finally found his prey. His twin swords slashed through the floating debris, slicing down without hesitation at the patient in sculpted armor, still pressed against Muke's body.

"Bai Liu! You couldn't resist using props! You've finally exposed yourself!"

Muke stumbled to his feet, knowing he had to play the monster for just a little longer. Gritting his teeth, he lunged at Miao Feichi's wrist in a mock attack. Bai Liu was faster—he kicked a hospital bed into the path of Miao Gaojiang's attack, blocking his assault on Muke while also preventing Muke from reaching Miao Feichi.

Miao Gaojiang's gaze flickered toward Bai Liu, an odd sense of familiarity settling over him.

This maneuver… it felt familiar.

Bai Liu smiled weakly, coughing twice in a way that was unmistakably deliberate. "I was just trying to stop him from sucking Miao Feichi's blood."

Countdown: Six seconds.

Miao Feichi hacked away at the wall, forcing the plant patient into a corner. He had already mistaken the creature for Bai Liu.

In truth, he didn't need to be on guard—getting bitten by a monster here wouldn't kill him outright. But the system would flag the attack, confirming that the creature was indeed a real monster, not Bai Liu in disguise.

Bai Liu got up, stepping onto the hospital bed he had knocked over earlier.

Muke, still playing the monster, pretended to lunge at Bai Liu. A wary Miao Gaojiang instinctively raised his fist to smash the 'monster.'

Bai Liu, calm to the core, hooked his foot under a fallen bookcase and flipped it onto the bed, blocking Muke's 'attack.' The bookcase landed in the perfect position to also stop Miao Gaojiang's advance.

Miao Gaojiang frowned.

Twice now, this supposed ‘monster’ had been conveniently interrupted.

…This feeling. This familiar, blocked attack pattern…

He had seen Muke do something like this before—pushing obstacles in the way of attacks.

But where was this strange sense of dissonance coming from?

Miao Gaojiang pushed the thought aside as Bai Liu—who, in his eyes, was still [Muke]—ran toward Miao Feichi.

At that moment, the real patient lunged for Miao Feichi’s exposed neck, mouth wide open.

Miao Feichi didn’t dodge, merely swinging his twin swords in a ruthless dance, slicing away at the monster’s life points as spirits wailed in the background.

Bai Liu’s gaze flickered slightly.

Now that he and Muke were nearly identical in terms of health, mental state, and physical appearance, only one difference remained.

His wound.

Bai Liu’s fingers brushed his neck.

His injury—cut by a whip—was different from Muke’s, which bore the bite marks of a monster.

The final step of the identity switch was simple: matching wounds.

Countdown: Four seconds.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has switched to Player Mu Sicheng’s system template and is using Mu Sicheng’s personal skill.]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu’s personal skill (Thief Stalking) will be unavailable soon due to stamina depletion. Ten seconds remaining to use the skill: 10, 9…]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has forced (Thief Stalking) to full speed. Stamina critically low—skill usable for one second. Speed +7000.]

As Miao Feichi hooked his knife back, the monster roared, about to sink its fangs into him.

In that brief gap between Miao Feichi and the creature, Bai Liu moved.

Taking a step forward at extreme speed, it looked as though he had vanished from his original position. In the blink of an eye, he was between Miao Feichi and the monster. Bai Liu adjusted his stance so that when the monster's jaws clamped down, they bit into the wound on his neck.

As the fangs sank into his flesh, both Bai Liu's throat and the monster's jaw twitched—one from drawing blood, the other from the numbing exhaustion flooding his system.

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu's stamina is empty! Replenish immediately!]

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu is being drained by a plant patient monster! Life and mental states dropping rapidly—evacuate immediately!]

"Miao… Feichi…" Bai Liu's voice was weak, his gaze unfocused, a thin layer of moisture gathering in his eyes. He lifted his head slightly, whispering, "Bai Liu… he pulled me over. He's controlling me. You have to kill him."

"Fuck, he's still messing with you at a time like this?" Miao Feichi snarled, his twin blades poised. His breath reeked of blood as he grinned. "Bai Liu, struggling for your life is pointless. You're still going to die by my hands."

Bai Liu's lips curled into a faint, weak smile. "Thank you, Miao Da Shen."

Countdown: Three seconds.

Miao Feichi's knives closed inward. The monster's fangs dug deeper. Bai Liu exhaled slightly as blood dripped down his neck, staining his hospital gown.

The moment Miao Feichi's twin knives pierced the monster's head, the creature's jaw clenched with double the force before finally releasing its grip.

The monster staggered back, teeth still stained with blood. Miao Feichi's final strike ended it for good, its head splitting open as it fell to the floor—dead.

Bai Liu collapsed, gasping for breath. Blood still seeped from the wound on his neck, but his eyes were once again calm as they landed on the monster's severed head.

[System Prompt: Does Player Bai Liu wish to empty all system storage and points, discarding them on the ground? Confirm?]

Bai Liu: [Yes.]

Countdown: Two seconds.

A large pile of props and points scattered beside the dead monster, mimicking the aftermath of a player's death.

And amid the debris, a few broken lenses glowed faintly in the dim ward.

"Is that a broken lens?" Miao Gaojiang crouched down to pick it up, inspecting it briefly before glancing at the other dropped props. His gaze then shifted to the severed head of the monster they had just killed, his expression complex. "Bai Liu's props and the total points he accumulated from these two replicas... they're all here."

"Because of the way this game splits lifespans, when fifty percent of the main identity dies, no death panel pops up. But this should be Bai Liu now."

"What do you mean 'should'?" Miao Feichi crouched down, licking his lips. "That's Bai Liu. Don't you think so, Muke? Oh, and by the way, you didn't have to block that one for me just now. The monsters here are A+ at best—they can't bite through me. But thanks anyway." He tossed him a bottle. "Here, have a stamina restorer."

Bai Liu lowered his eyes and let out a soft murmur as he took the bottle from Miao Feichi's hand.

After that, Miao Feichi sliced a piece of skin from the monster's face with his knife, lifted it to his tongue, and chewed twice before spitting it out in disgust. "Tsk. Rotten flesh. It tastes awful. So alienated... Bai Liu, this guy."

Miao Gaojiang collected the props and points. His ears twitched as he

pushed open the ICU door with a frown. The nurse's office outside was already open, and a group of nurses was heading toward the ICU.

It was 9 PM. The night shift nurses were about to start their patrol.

Miao Gaojiang turned to Miao Feichi, who was still toying with "Bai Liu's" corpse, and reminded him, "Feichi, stop playing. It's nine o'clock. The nurses are coming out. Let's go."

"Okay." Miao Feichi sheathed his twin swords and stood up, scanning the room. "What about that other monster? Let's kill it too. Might count toward the final overall rating and give us more points. Won't take more than a few seconds—it's weak, just a sweeper."

He didn't actually need the extra points. He was just addicted to the thrill of killing and still within his maximum skill time, so there was no reason not to.

Under the bed, Muke held his breath, biting his fist in sheer terror. His entire body was pressed against the cold floor, trying to suppress his breathing so he wouldn't be discovered.

One last step, just one last step! Muke prayed frantically. Let me be okay!

Bai Liu, meanwhile, let out a choked cough, clutching his neck. Blood smeared the sides of his mouth and neck, making him look like he was on the verge of death.

"No, it's too late." Miao Gaojiang glanced at [Muke]—actually Bai Liu—who was still sitting on the ground. His voice dropped. "We still have to run with Muke, and your strength is running out. Don't make more trouble. We've already achieved our two goals: [Renewing Life] and killing Bai Liu. Let's go first. The hospital is crawling with these monsters. You can start your killing spree again once you've recovered."

Miao Feichi paced around the ward, his eyes landing on [Muke]. He indeed looked like he was dying. Bai Liu clutched his neck, coughing faintly, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth and staining his pale lips.

The rhythmic click of high heels echoed outside the door. The nurses were approaching the ICU ward.

"Tsk." Miao Feichi finally withdrew his twin swords. "Fine. It's just an

ordinary monster, anyway—not worth many points."

Under the bed, Muke felt sick at the casual way they spoke about his life.

Miao Gaojiang, still retaining some strength, bent down and lifted [Muke] with one arm, slinging him over his shoulder like a sack.

Miao Feichi was the first to slip out of the ward, followed by Miao Gaojiang carrying Bai Liu. The two moved quickly, disappearing into the safe passage before the nurses arrived.

Miao Gaojiang's voice was steady. "The nurses will patrol from the ground floor, using the elevator. They won't take this passage. Miao Feichi and I are on the fifth floor, and Muke, you're on the ninth. There's still some time before they check our ward."

"It looks like we've got time to settle the total score," Miao Gaojiang continued, but his tone suddenly turned sharp, dropping steeply.

His eyes darkened as he abruptly threw Bai Liu off his shoulder, slamming him onto the ground. He crouched down, extending a large, rough hand to wrap around Bai Liu's slender neck. His fingers pressed in, effortlessly finding the dip of his throat.

"Muke? Or Bai Liu pretending to be Muke?"

Miao Feichi froze. "What are you talking about, Dad? Isn't he Muke?"

Bai Liu's voice was hoarse as he lowered his eyes. "…What are you talking about?"

"Bai Liu is a player with control skills. Before we entered the ICU, we confirmed that Muke was free of Bai Liu's control. But once inside, in all the chaos, Feichi and I were S-panel players—there was no way Bai Liu could have easily controlled us." Miao Gaojiang's eyes darkened further, an eerie glint forming. He tightened his grip around Bai Liu's throat, pressing down on his larynx. "But controlling Muke again? That would be easy for Bai Liu."

"I suspect that shortly after we entered the ICU, Bai Liu regained control over Muke. That's why Muke kept interfering with our attacks. And in the end, he was probably just a convenient scapegoat for Bai Liu to push forward and have us kill instead."

Miao Gaojiang sneered. "I pretended to believe you were Muke to get

you out of the ward. The nurses were coming, and if we lingered too long in the ICU, they would have caught me and Feichi. But did you really think you could backstab me?"

With that, Miao Gaojiang pinched Bai Liu's jaw with two fingers and pressed firmly.

Bai Liu felt the suffocating grip tightening. He struggled to breathe, but every attempt to cough was stifled by the crushing force on his throat. His limbs trembled from oxygen deprivation, his pale cheeks flushing with the telltale red of asphyxiation.

Miao Gaojiang's gaze sharpened. "That last monster we killed used a prop. Only a player can use props. But the prop that monster used was [Sculpture of a Mermaid]—a reward given for unlocking the 'Sculpture of a Mermaid' monster book pass in Siren Small Town."

"This prop is wrong," Miao Gaojiang said coldly. "Bai Liu did have this prop—but he already used it during 'Explosive Last Train.' He used it against Mu Sicheng. I've watched your little TV video many times. I remember it very well."

Miao Gaojiang's tone was calm, yet his gaze was ruthless. "Of course, we can't rule out the possibility that you yourself went to the market and bought another one of these," he said, referring to the mermaid sculpture. "But there's no need for a newcomer like you to buy such a low-level prop. It just so happens that Muke's warehouse, which we checked earlier, has the Sculpture of a Mermaid, and the monster we killed is very likely one that Muke subconsciously used to survive. The ones that exploded were the ones you deliberately threw on the ground."

"You wanted us to think you're Bai Liu, right? But unfortunately, the prop Muke used—the Sculpture of a Mermaid—is the only flaw in your entire plan. Bai Liu doesn't have that prop."

Bai Liu struggled to breathe, his windpipe constricted. He subconsciously tried to break free from Miao Gaojiang's grip, gasping out, "I'm really Muke... that prop was taken by Bai Liu after he took control of me in the ward…"

Miao Gaojiang sneered, not believing him. "You're still a bit young, little boy. Come back and fight us after a year in the league."

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu loading Player Muke's system panel. Fully loaded.]

Miao Gaojiang's eyes narrowed as he saw the panel. His hands loosened as Bai Liu rubbed his neck and breathed heavily, quivering from the near-death experience.

Miao Gaojiang eyed the system panel with suspicion. It was indeed Muke's, and the Sculpture of a Mermaid was missing from the warehouse items.

But Miao Gaojiang wasn't someone who trusted panels easily. He had been around the league long enough to know that visual representations could be misleading. He remembered that Bai Liu was a control player, and though Bai Liu was a newcomer with only two games under his belt, no one was sure how his skills worked.

Miao Gaojiang had speculated about the possibility of sharing skill panels, but that was a serious infringement on the system's rights. It would fall under the highest level of [Rule Skills], like Spades and Hearts, or the third-ranked player in the standings, the [Judges of the Reverse Cross]. These were skills of the highest authority, on par with the system itself.

Bai Liu was unlikely to possess such a skill. If he had one, he wouldn't need to play this trick of wits against Miao Gaojiang—he could just take control directly. [Rule Skills] were powerful enough to kill across levels.

It was possible that Bai Liu had such a skill, but it was severely restricted, which seemed highly unlikely. Miao Gaojiang had never seen such a strange personal skill in the game.

Bai Liu cleared his throat, lowering his head. "When I was in the ICU, I was indeed controlled by Bai Liu for a while, but he released his control over me when his mental value got too low. He took one of my props, and that's how I knew the monster was Bai Liu."

"Is that so?" Miao Gaojiang's eyes were unreadable. As an experienced player, he was far more cautious than his son, Miao Feichi, who was eager for excitement and bloodshed.

Despite seeing Muke's system panel, Miao Gaojiang wasn't convinced. He could feel his suspicions mounting.

This wasn't enough to determine whether Bai Liu was truly Muke. Miao Gaojiang preferred to eliminate potential threats rather than leave them alive. But before he made a final decision, he softened his tone slightly. "Muke, it's not that I don't believe you, but you need to

prove yourself. This system panel can confirm your identity, but it's not enough for us to trust you completely. You claimed you found the cure while in the ICU. Why don't you show us?"

Muke had been planning to restrict Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang's movements, disrupting their attack rhythm. But the veteran players were watching closely, their intentions clear.

If he could provide the [renewal formula], at least Bai Liu would be safe to return to the ward tonight as Muke. But if he couldn't provide it, they would likely kill him to eliminate any potential dangers.

Unless Bai Liu could prove his worth to them.

The room fell silent for a moment, only the sound of Bai Liu's breathing and Miao Feichi slowly rubbing his twin swords together breaking the stillness.

Miao Feichi hesitated. "Dad, are you really sure he's Bai Liu? He saved my life once…"

Miao Gaojiang glanced at his son. "Trust me on this."

Miao Feichi paused but quickly deferred to his father's experience, bringing his twin swords up and approaching Bai Liu. Even though Miao Feichi's strength tank was depleted and he couldn't use his personal skills, his panel attributes would still make it easy to kill Bai Liu without any special abilities.

Miao Gaojiang pressed his hands on Bai Liu's shoulders, an outwardly soothing gesture, but one that could easily strangle Bai Liu if he so desired. Bai Liu, with only six life points, was vulnerable.

"Sorry to offend you," Miao Feichi said with a smile. "My father is just being cautious. It's better for you to prove your innocence."

Miao Gaojiang crouched in front of Bai Liu, smiling kindly, though his eyes were cold. "Show me the [renewal formula] you found, Muke."

Bai Liu, too weak to use his skills or escape with Mu Sicheng's cooldown, could do nothing to avoid the situation.

Miao Gaojiang's tone remained gentle, but there was an underlying threat. "Can't remember, Muke? Do you want me to help you recall? When you were under the bed, you suddenly shouted that you'd found the [Life-Sustaining Remedy], interrupting our attack. Were you

already under Bai Liu's control at that point? If he manipulated you into lying, we'd be quite angry if we went to all this trouble only to come up empty-handed."

"You can't afford the consequences of our anger."

Miao Gaojiang, like an elder, suddenly snapped his hand around Bai Liu's neck. Just as he was about to tighten his grip, Bai Liu's phone rang. Both Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang exchanged a glance—none of them had expected the phone to ring.

Bai Liu picked up the phone, but before he could speak, Miao Gaojiang grabbed it, his gaze fixed on Bai Liu. Bai Liu immediately understood what Miao Gaojiang wanted.

A veteran player like Miao Gaojiang had an astute mind. Despite Bai Liu's control skill, Miao Gaojiang remained wary. His suspicion wasn't fully alleviated by the system panel alone.

The best way to confirm a player's identity in this game wasn't just through the system panel—it was through the child associated with the player.

The phone was a direct line between the player and their child, required to be carried at all times to ensure the child could call the player. The player couldn't discard or exchange the phone, and the call was strictly from the child.

The voice on the other end of the line would be unmistakable. A player could try to impersonate another, but they couldn't fool the child's voice.

Miao Gaojiang, an S-grade player, could easily distinguish between Muke's voice and Bai Liu's.

Bai Liu looked calmly at Miao Gaojiang, who had taken his phone. Miao Gaojiang didn't speak, though the nurses downstairs were starting to search upstairs.

After a few seconds, Miao Gaojiang tapped Bai Liu's shoulder, bringing the phone to his ear and tilting Bai Liu's chin with a cold gaze. Miao Gaojiang's message was clear: Bai Liu needed to speak, to maintain the illusion that he was still Muke's investor.

"Good evening," Bai Liu said smoothly, speaking obediently under Miao Gaojiang's watchful eyes.

On the other side, there was the sound of several children running, their breath ragged, accompanied by faint cries and eerie, ethereal laughter. It sounded like a group of children was running, but it was hard to tell how many there were.

“Evening, good evening, Mr. Investor,” came the soft voice of a young boy, sounding as if he were being dragged along. His voice was teary, “I… I… it’s Muke. I’ve come to call you.”

It was unmistakably the real voice of little Muke.

Bai Liu smiled faintly. Well done, little Bai Liu.

After hearing the child’s voice, Miao Gaojiang and Bai Liu stared at each other for a long moment before Miao Gaojiang slowly released his grip from Bai Liu’s neck.

The identity of the caller was confirmed, and Miao Gaojiang had no reason to suspect Bai Liu wasn’t Muke.

Miao Gaojiang finally relaxed, patting Bai Liu on the shoulder. “The nurse is coming up. Let’s return to the ward. Sorry for the earlier treatment—it’s just that Bai Liu is too clever. We had to confirm a few things first. Your child’s willingness to call you helped us a lot. We’ll handle things tomorrow. As for the [life-renewal remedy]…”

“I know what the [renewal formula] is,” Bai Liu interrupted. “But it’s too complicated. Let me give it to you in the morning, after I finish it.”

Muke would likely have finished the book in the ICU by then, just in time to pass it to Bai Liu.

Everything was working perfectly for Bai Liu. The news that Muke had found the [life-renewal remedy] had clearly softened Miao Gaojiang’s attitude. He nodded. “Then please. We’ll help you through this, but the nurse is coming, so let’s head back to the ward.”

After returning, Bai Liu entered Muke’s previous room, closing the door behind him. He picked up the handset, which was still on the line, and asked softly, “Bai Liu?”

“I’m in,” came the cold voice of the child, accompanied by the sounds of crying and running. It was unmistakably little Muke.

Little Bai Liu asked calmly, “Who else was on the phone just now?”

“How do you know there was someone else?” Bai Liu asked with a hint of amusement. “It was just my voice.”

Little Bai Liu’s tone was icy. “I heard three people breathing. Your voice was too far from the receiver to be the same as when you called me last night. The phone was probably not in your possession—you were coerced into taking my call.”

Little Bai Six paused before continuing, explaining, “And you didn’t say anything to me last night, like ‘good evening,’ which is normally what I’d say to the owner when I get paid. But you’re the owner, so you don’t have to say that to me. You didn’t say it last night, and it’s a bit odd to start the evening with a ‘good evening.’”

Bai Liu recalled that it was true; he only seemed polite and courteous to strangers when there was money to take. He could say anything strange, like to Zhang Gui’s master, without even noticing it himself.

“How did you come up with the idea of letting Muke talk to me on your phone?” Bai Liu asked, smiling. “And how did you end up with Muke tonight? How are you doing tonight?”

The player’s side of the phone is tied and cannot be exchanged, but the child’s side of the phone is not.

But with almost all children out on the phone with extreme difficulty, the idea of having one child take another child out and hand the phone to another to speak as soon as the call is answered was probably something Miao Gaojiang, who had never received a phone call from a child, had never thought about.

The execution and obedience of children is much lower than that of adults, especially when compared to the adults already in the game. Even Bai Liu himself, was a bit surprised by Little Bai Six's rare ability to execute.

Although Bai Liu knew he would probably do anything for money, he raised his eyebrows in surprise when he heard Little Muke’s voice on the phone.

Little Bai Six reported flatly, “Because of the christening tomorrow, the teacher asked that investors and parents be informed. So, many kids came out to call tonight, but so far, apart from the ones I haven’t managed, there are some who were drawn out by the sound of the flute. The deformed kids aren’t running after us, so things are okay.”

“As for why I’m with Muke tonight, I think you're asking the obvious question,” Little Bai Six’s tone grew cold and disgusted. “Didn’t you ask me to babysit two kids for you last night? One of the kids you said you paid me to look after was a blind girl, whose name is Liu Jiayi. The other one is Muke, the girl I can’t get in touch with at the

moment. But Muke and I sleep in the same room, and when I call you tonight for the money, Muke will be in the same room."

"I meant for you to hear his voice, to give you an inspection, to verify that the little kid was in pretty good condition and could run and cry. But I didn't expect a situation on your end, so I stopped talking and gave him the phone to pretend to be your investment child."

There was a subtle pause in Little Bai Six's voice before he questioned Bai Liu directly, "Actually, I think when you told me last night that you were paying me to help someone, you were doing it so Muke would call you now, weren't you?"

Bai Liu's voice had a subtle chuckle in it as he leaned lazily against the wall. "You could say that."

When he told Little Bai Six that he would pay him to look after Muke and Liu Jiayi, he knew that tonight, Little Bai Six would drag one of them out to call him.

His fourteen-year-old self's penchant for money had never been stronger, and there was no way he would pass up such an opportunity to get his hands on it. But Bai Liu had grown up as a relatively deal-abiding person, so he wouldn't easily cheat the person he was dealing with. The best way to verify the success of the deal was for young Muke to speak directly to Bai Liu and say that he was okay.

And Little Bai Six certainly did so.

"You can just ask me to drag Muke out and call you tonight, no need to beat around the bush with me," Little Bai Six's voice had the distinctive youthfulness of a teenager, but it was also very cold because it was too calm. "I'll do anything for you if you pay me."

"But then you would have known in advance the hostile plan I was going to make against the other two investors," Bai Liu said nonchalantly. "You would have guessed what I was going to do, what kind of terrible threat I would face, knowing what the call would mean to me, and you might have betrayed my plans to my enemies in exchange for more money from them. Which is something you would have done, wouldn't you?"

There was a long silence from Little Bai Six.

Bai Liu gave a soft laugh. "I can't let you guess what I'm going to do, because you're a very dangerous guy too."

“I even feel that you are more dangerous to me than anything else in this game. But fortunately, I know you, and I tell you the truth on the basis of what I know about you, Bai Six: I will certainly give you more money than any other person in the world, and I will even give you all the money I have.”

Bai Liu lowered his eyes slowly. “There will never be a more generous man than I am to you, Bai Six.”

Because I am you, and you are me, money circulates strangely between us across time and latitude. But the essence is all ascribed to the identity [I], and the money I have is owned by both you and me at the same time. But the money Bai Liu has is not diminished by a single cent.

“All that money?” Little Bai Six’s tone remained cold, but there was an inexplicable irony in his words. “Then you are a rare and not at all self-serving kind man, Mr. Investor.”

“I am indeed very selfish and self-interested and greedy, so I am definitely not like that to others.” Bai Liu was not offended by the sarcasm, and his face remained unmoved by the affectionate smile. “But anyways, you are the most special person to me in this world, so I must have no reservations about you.”

Little Bai Six did not reply to Bai Liu's remark but merely maintained a subtle, indifferent, skeptical silence.

Bai Liu went on. “But I can understand what you're thinking. You must be thinking that humans are instinctively selfish and self-serving creatures, so why should I, as an investor, go against my instincts and do this for a stranger like you? There must not be such a person in this world, and even if there is, it must be pretending to get more benefits — after all, there is no free lunch in the world, is there?”

Across the table, Little Bai Six lapsed into another eerie silence, and it was clear that Bai Liu knew exactly what the fourteen-year-old was thinking.

“I thought the same thing when I was your age.” Bai Liu leaned against the wall, his eyes slightly closed as he tilted his head back.

Because of his physical weakness and the existence of the orphanage — a copy of which has a special meaning for him — as well as the presence of Little Bai Six, an in-game NPC, Bai Liu rarely dwelled on his past.

What was he like when he was fourteen? Bai Liu thought he wouldn't remember much.

For man is indeed a very forgetful creature, and perhaps it is true that man's memory lasts only seven seconds, and that the rest is just something that man constructs from his own shallow sense memory to deceive, confuse, and comfort himself.

But the moment he hears Little Bai Six's cold, emotionless voice, the moment Bai Liu closes his eyes, he can remember what he was like at fourteen.

Aloof, detached, and at odds with everything around him, no one could understand this scrawny little boy who spent his days reading horror stories and always looking at every available horror game.

When Bai Liu was fourteen, he was less able to hide his face and disguise himself than he is now. He looked at people with a trace of repulsion and a cold aura that made him a stranger.

This, of course, had a lot to do with Bai Liu himself.

While the other children in the orphanage had trains or blocks donated by kind-hearted people, Bai Liu's favorite toys were scary dolls with missing arms and legs. While the other children were reading comic books and storybooks, Bai Liu was reading books like The Long and Thin Ghostly Murder Story, with no idea how it had been donated to the orphanage.

But in those days, before these human cubs were socialized and imbibed with adult rules, every child in the orphanage would fight to the death for good toys, good food, the chance to be adopted, and even a less-damp straw bed.

No one had taught them to do so. It was something akin to a biological instinct to stomp on others in order to live better for themselves, and Bai Liu realized this early on, so he stayed further and further away from these people.

There were two people in the orphanage who didn't fight about these things at all — Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan.

Bai Liu didn't need these things because he preferred money, which is not usually given to children in orphanages, and Lu Yizhan gave them up because he thought other people needed them more. So this fool gave them up.

Lu Yizhan had foolishly given up better food, better toys, and the chance to be adopted, looking at the happy smiling faces of others using the fruits of his exploitation. All they needed to do was give Lu Yizhan a simple and shallow thank you, which made the fool scratch the back of his head and smile even wider than the other person.

“I used to think that there were no humans in this world who gave all for others,” Bai Liu's voice was soft and calm. “Even if one gives for others, it is to get that sense of self-giving and self-satisfaction that has been brainwashed by the world’s moral code. It’s still essentially for one’s own pleasure.”

“There are no purely good people in the world, only purely bad people.”

The sound of little Bai Six's breathing rushes across the room as he pulls little Muke, still whimpering, into a late-night run through the children's home. Bai Liu knows he is listening.

The little guy hadn't hung up yet, as it was billed by the minute—a really hard-working chaperone, albeit a child worker.

Bai Liu's voice takes on a lazy, idle laugh as he seems to recall something funny. "And then, when I was firmly committed to these ideas, I met a douchebag who volunteered to be my friend."

"He kept asking me why I was alone, starving himself to save food for me, and just froze when he found me reading some really bloody, weird books. Then he snuck out to get some for me," Bai Liu says in a flat tone. "But I was cold to him from start to finish. He was giving without getting anything in return, and I thought he'd give up soon."

The little Bai Six over there finally spoke up and asked, "Has he given up?"

"He stayed away from me for a while halfway through, and I thought he'd given up." Bai Liu paused. "Then, one day at noon, I saw a long, skinny, ghostly figure doll in the back of the yard."

It was a very clumsy, long, thin ghostly figure with a doll costume made from unwanted sheets from the orphanage, and a tattered hat that looked like some schoolboy's failed craft project. The figure waved its scarf and ragged clothes in a silly "hi" to Bai Liu.

Bai Liu's regular reading at that time was the story of the long, thin ghostly figure, as the orphanage had not received any more books like

that.

But Lu Yizhan may have misunderstood Bai Liu's fondness for this strange legendary creature. As a teenager, Lu Yizhan secretly stayed up late to make such a doll, hiding it under his blanket, and then put it on his head and stood in front of Bai Liu, bouncing around in front of him, panting and sweating. His eyes were clear from the poor-quality cloth doll set, but red from staying up late.

Lu Yizhan saw Bai Liu as one of those children who love animated characters, and he simply wanted Bai Liu to be happy.

But he didn’t want Bai Liu to thank him, and Bai Liu didn’t appreciate him, because it was...

"...He's so stupid," little Bai Six spat, expressionless.

"Yeah, that's what I thought at the time," Bai Liu let out a low laugh. "I just looked at him like he was stupid, and then politely explained that I wasn’t a fan of long, skinny ghostly figures. I just liked reading horror stories and watching these strange, scary creatures eat stupid, errant humans. I liked stories like that."

Little Bai Six was silent for a moment before saying, "I like it too, but I don't think he... likes it."

No normal child would like it. At that time, Bai Liu was the odd one out in the orphanage because the books he read and the drawings he made were not normal and very gory.

Books, games, and even the Muppet toys Bai Liu looked at twice—they guarded him as if he were a potential prisoner of the law.

In fact, to some extent, this defense was correct.

Bai Liu had reined in his blatant hobby and was pretending to be a good boy who had lost his way.

Lu Yizhan was not a fan of such unconventional horror stories and games.

But just because he didn’t like it didn’t mean he couldn’t make Bai Liu like it. He knew Bai Liu liked it; Bai Liu just pretended not to.

"He really didn’t like it, but the guy was always well-liked. He scrounged up lots and lots of horror games and horror storybooks

from somewhere," Bai Liu recalled, his eyes still closed. "Lots of them, really. And then he sent them to me full of them without the teacher's knowledge, for me to play and read."

Little Bai Liu was silent again, and after a while, he asked, "Why did he do that?"

"That's what I asked him," Bai Liu's voice was soft, almost inaudible. "He said, 'Aren't we friends? This is something I can do for you, so I did.'"

Little Bai Six wondered from the bottom of his heart, "Since when have you been friends with him? I don't remember you agreeing to this, do you?"

"I don't know," Bai Liu said. "But Lu Yizhan just assumed it wishfully. And when I told him that the odds were I was a freak and might do something bad later, he told me very seriously that if I was going to be a bad person, he would be the police to catch me."

Bai Liu gave a soft laugh. "So he reassured me that he wouldn't let me be the bad guy, because a cop's friend can't be the bad guy."

"He played a lot of horror games with me for many, many years, and then he gradually recognized that I wasn't a normal person, but he stuck with me as a friend."

"Why?" little Bai Six asked again, confused. "You can't understand each other at all. Would it do him any good to be friends with you?"

"Nothing good came out of it. I'm a pretty troubled person in every way." Bai Liu quickly admitted. "I'm not good at being a person, but that friend of mine wasn't friends with me for any benefits."

Little Bai Six asked, "That's for what?"

Bai Liu responded, "He just wanted to have a friend, in order for me to have a friend."

Lu Yizhan's reason was simple: he wanted to be friends with Bai Liu. He wanted to make Bai Liu happy. He wanted Bai Liu to have a friend —no sympathy, no pity. He just thought that, so he went ahead and did it.

Lu Yizhan was the first strange human being to appear in Bai Liu's perception—a person whose existence almost overturned Bai Liu's

view of the world. In Bai Liu's world view, he was a textbook self-giving fool.

Bai Liu was the only friend he ever had in his life.

"There are still these purely good people in this world, who exist against evolution and human instinct, so they live a hard life," Bai Liu said softly. "But they just exist, and you will meet them soon."

Yes, Bai Six, you will meet this friend who will play games with you, make you laugh by pretending to be a long, skinny ghost, and keep you company for many years, Bai Liu whispered in his heart.

"Such people are rare, aren't they?" Little Bai Six's tone was as light as ever. "It's a miracle in the world that you've met one. I won't meet such wishful giving fools."

"You will." Bai Liu smiled up. "You still met me, didn't you?"

"I also knew you were a bad boy, Bai Six, and I knew there was a chance you would betray me, but I ended up telling you my plan." Bai Liu's tone was soft with a very odd bit of seduction. "You're really important to me, more important than the plan, even more important than me."

"You're the most important person in this place to me," Bai Liu smiled. "I promise I'll be your strange and reliable friend."

This time, little Bai Six was silent for a long, long time—so long that Bai Liu thought he was going to hang up. Then little Bai Six changed the subject in a very hard tone. "You like horror games too? Have you ever played any fun ones?"

Bai Liu's eyes drooped carelessly, the corners of his mouth curling unnoticeably as he slowly and leisurely chatted with Bai Six. "Yeah, I've played two really good games, one called Siren Town and one called Burst Last Train."

At fourteen, Bai Liu was still very gullible and mildly impressed by Lu Yizhan's self-sacrificing type of behavior.

If he had met a twenty-four-year-old Bai Liu, it would have been much more complicated.

Bai Liu didn't have much time to counsel his fourteen-year-old self, and he didn't think little Bai Six needed it either. He told this long list

of stories just to set the stage for convincing little Bai Six to cooperate with him wholeheartedly—because unfortunately, the best tool to compel little Bai Six—his points, or money—had already been thrown out to Miao Feichi and the others. Bai Liu had already thrown out all his points, or rather, his money, to Miao Feichi and the others.

This was also a dangerous point, as Bai Liu now had a lower point total, meaning a lower money total, than Miao Feichi, and this total of props that were very much in the hands of little Bai Six was less than his enemies'.

And soon after little Bai Six met them the next day, this very perceptive child would soon realize this—that Bai Liu was not as rich as Miao Feichi.

This is awkward, as little Bai Six knows they are hostile, and from what Bai Liu knows about himself, little Bai Six is bound to fall back on the side with more money. He will probably betray his information to Miao Feichi, the father and son. Bai Liu knows very well that at fourteen, he is not a very obedient child. Bai Liu knows that little Bai Six is only obedient to his money.

Even if this would lead to his own death, little Bai Six wouldn't care—his desire for money was much stronger when he was fourteen than it is now.

So Bai Liu needs a point other than money that can hold little Bai Six back from doing whatever he wants for money, and that point needs to be as good as the money. From Bai Liu’s known experience, a great tool to hold himself back is Lu Yizhan.

The reason Lu Yizhan was able to keep the money-hungry Bai Liu from committing crimes for so many years was not only because of the man’s unusual obstinacy and his determination to be Bai Liu’s friend, but also because Bai Liu was very curious about Lu Yizhan.

Bai Liu was a relatively inquisitive person, with an appetite for exploring all sorts of bizarre and inhuman behavior, and in Lu Yizhan's case, his curiosity had never waned over the years.

Bai Liu is curious about how long this Lu Yizhan, a geek like himself, can be a good person, about what drives this person's behavior. When this curiosity is strong enough, it can even offset Bai Liu’s desire for money to some extent.

Lu Yizhan does not exist in this copy, so Bai Liu tells little Bai Six that

such a person exists and takes on the role of Lu Yizhan himself. Bai Liu extracts the element of Lu Yizhan that holds the most power over him—that curiosity. It is this curiosity.

Little Bai Six became curious about him and wanted to explore the logic of his behavior, and that is where the story begins.

Just as he did with Lu Yizhan.

The Loving Welfare Home

"You said you kissed a silver-blue-tailed mermaid living in a jar, and a ghost in a mirror about to explode on a burning train?" Little Bai Liu tsked in a booming tone. "You sound like you have a slightly unusual emotional history."

Bai Liu remained unconcerned. "It's just a character in a game, but you haven't hung up after listening to me for so long today. So, what, you want to fight me for three hours?"

"If I may, I do want to play you for the full three hours," Little Bai Liu replied tersely. "After all, it's billed by the minute, and it's a rare day when everyone is scrambling to get the attention of that monstrous child. So far, only Muke and I have managed to call and inform his investors about what's going to happen tomorrow."

"But that little blind girl, Liu Jiayi, is fast too. She can't see, but she keeps walking against the wall. I just covered her a bit to lure away the deformed kid on her side. She should be back from her call soon."

"The two remaining children were quite fast runners—Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang, as I recall. Though they called, they kept crying and didn't give a clear explanation to the people across the street about inviting the investors over to watch the ceremony tomorrow."

Little Bai Liu explained the situation to Bai Liu quickly, wheezing a bit, but still well-organized. "And you can rest assured I was more alert. When I didn't know that you and the two kids' investors had a grudge, Muke and I avoided them when we ran, so they didn't know we were calling together. We've never been spotted together on the phone, and it's probably because they ran amok and attracted the monster's attention that it was so easy for the rest of us to call tonight."

"Oh, yes, I forgot to tell you. There was more than one deformed child tonight," Little Bai Liu added in a calm tone. "There were three, each with different deformities. Not even the one from last night. One was crouching and crawling on all fours with purple lips. One had deformed limbs folded inward, his feet would turn inwards and limp when he ran, his limbs were strangely disproportionate to his head. Another had abnormal white hair and skin. Just now, I hid on the slide and looked, and though I couldn’t see clearly, this child’s eyes should be purple."

Bai Liu, familiar with some common deformities from his time at the orphanage, pondered. "It sounds a bit like precordial, osteogenesis imperfecta, and albinism."

All are congenital genetic disorders and largely overlap with those of the five children who survived in the real world.

Bai Liu quickly spotted two peculiar points.

First: While it is true that there is a disproportionate number of disabled children in orphanages, it is already a very special point that those who die and those who survive are children with certain specific congenital genetic disorders. What does this special point mean?

Second: Why do deformed children in the real world survive, while those in this world have turned into ghosts?

The first point Bai Liu needs more information to reason with, but the second point, Bai Liu feels, he has already come up with an answer.

Bai Liu played with the tattered coin on his chest with his fingers, as if in a moment of understanding, lost in thought—

According to the information given so far in this copy, normal children—those without deformities—were attracted to the sound of the flute and disappeared, not to reappear. The way these deformed children currently die suggests they can indeed turn into monsters after death and roam and play.

But not without death.

From the rules that Bai Liu knows about this game copy of Love Welfare Home, these six children with congenital defects in reality, including Liu Jiayi, should exist as NPC-like "deformed children" projected into the reality copy of Love Welfare Home. And since all these deformed children NPCs in this Love Welfare Home have died, it stands to reason that the six real-life children who have not yet had an accident are the ones most likely to die in order to fit the pattern of this copy.

But these six children are currently under the close watch of Lu Yizhan in reality, and the likelihood of their death is very low. Instead, the only one who could die and be turned into a monster is the dangerous Liu Jiayi, who has entered the game.

But judging from the system's usual planning—in order to fit the game

logic of the copy—these real-life children will most likely still have to die.

The question then is, if they were to die, how would they die?

"So it's quite possible that the deformed kids who survived in reality will eventually die. But they were alive when I entered the game, and if they die, it will be because of what manner of death..." Bai Liu leaned against the wall, muttering to himself.

The game loading cannot be out of the ordinary, forcing the data of [NPC death] to be loaded. The [real world] will most likely become buggy, and NPCs like [Lu Yizhan], who are observing this case closely, will notice something is wrong. Of course, the system can use rogue methods to delete the memory data of all NPCs concerned with this matter, but the [player's] memory cannot be deleted. Bai Liu will know that there is a bug here, but if that happens, the official version of [the real world] would be lost to many [players].

So the question is: How should these six kids die in a way that is logical to the game and the world, and not considered a forced-loaded bug?

Bai Liu suddenly remembered the pile of corpses he had seen that day at the hospital and what Lu Yizhan had said to him with a gloomy expression.

"[The group of children entered the hospital with baseline normal signs, but suddenly started having seizures a day later... Both the necrotic spots and rigor mortis appeared too early. It felt like the deaths were delayed long before they appeared later...]"

Yes, that's the point: delayed death.

Bai Liu suddenly realized—the most logical, realistic, and conventional way to load a death without arousing suspicion from the NPCs.

It’s not that the six children were not poisoned by the mushrooms. It’s more likely that they were more resistant to the mushrooms than the other children, and that the signs of poisoning were delayed until later in the game. The children had not shown any signs until Bai Liu entered the game, but that doesn’t mean they wouldn’t have shown signs of poisoning.

Or rather, they are in the process of dying, but medical tests don't

work on them, so no one except Bai Liu in the game has noticed it yet.

The discovery of the six deformed children who came back from the dead was still shrouded in the shadow of death.

Bai Liu's eyes narrowed—if the real-world copy was a loading of the game copy, would these kids in and out of the game die the same way?

Little Bai Liu did not disturb Bai Liu's silence as he quietly waited for Bai Liu's next inquiry and did not hang up—after all, he was paid by the minute.

After a moment of silence, Bai Liu suddenly asked, "Have you had mushrooms at the orphanage lately?"

"No," Little Bai Liu replied succinctly. "I'm fairly sensitive to the taste of mushrooms, and I don't think I've eaten any food that didn't have a bit of mushroom in it."

"Did those deformed kids running after you smell like mushrooms?" Bai Liu asked again, changing the topic.

Little Bai Liu quickly answered, "I don't know. We've been so far away from them, not close enough to smell them. Do you need me to get close enough to confirm? Certainly not for free."

"No, not yet," Bai Liu quickly dismissed Little Bai Liu's bold suggestion. "These kids aren't slow, and if no one else diverts their attention, getting too close could get you caught."

Moreover, according to the monster book's description of these "deformed children," the player's children are completely missing when caught. Bai Liu's life expectancy is now only six, and what he said to Little Bai Liu earlier wasn't all a lie—he still has plenty of life expectancy compared to himself. Little Bai Liu is indeed more important than him, and Bai Liu will do everything to ensure this overly money-grubbing child's safety.

"But you do need me close, right?" Little Bai Liu spoke in a cool tone.

"Right." Bai Liu was honest. "Not only do I need you to get close, I need you to find the weaknesses of these deformed children."

He needed to unlock the weaknesses of these monsters in the monster book and rely on them to control the monstrous children who wander

out every night. This was much safer than letting them chase their own children every night. After all, Bai Liu believed the monstrous children's missing attacks were more dangerous and unpredictable than the plant patient's blood-sucking attack, which could be a one-hit kill.

No children had gone missing yet, most likely because these deformed children were so spread out that, once targeted, it would be easy to capture them.

What also struck Bai Liu as dangerous was that last night there was one, tonight there were three, and the number of these deformed children seemed to be increasing.

"I do need you to get close to these children to help me find out their weaknesses," Bai Liu said softly. "It is important to me, and of course, I will pay you for it. But not tonight, little friend. Tonight is too dangerous for me to sacrifice you for something like this. We'll do this tomorrow night after I find a way to protect you."

An eerie silence hung on the other side. After about a minute, Little Bai Liu quickly changed the subject as if he hadn't heard anything. "Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang are in the house, and the three kids are coming after me. Mr. Investor, the total call tonight is thirty-one minutes, so I'll give you zero thirty minutes. That's a total of three thousand. You already owe me six thousand."

Little Bai Liu's tone was polite yet aggressive. "It's not a good habit to owe underage escorts wages, so I hope you can pay me the six grand when we meet tomorrow. Thank you and good evening, Mr. Investor."

As usual, by this time Little Bai Liu would have simply hung up, but today he didn't hang up after finishing.

Bai Liu could hear his breathing as he ran across the open ground, the giggling of the children chasing him behind him, the gasps and cries that Little Muke was trying to suppress, the sound of running feet gradually slowing down, the texture of their footsteps changing from the feel of rustling sand to the hard stomp of concrete. The eerie laughter of the children behind them faded away—they should be heading back to their rooms.

Little Muke struggled to run after Little Bai Liu, a little boy who had been pulled along by Little Bai Liu all night. His face was purple from a bad heart, but he continued to run with good grace, clenching his teeth and not crying, as if he knew it was for his own good that Little

Bai Liu was pulling him along.

Because Little Muke knew he wouldn’t make it to the end of the night to call his investors if Little Bai Liu didn’t pull him along.

If he couldn’t inform the investor, he wouldn’t be able to attend the christening tomorrow, which was a very serious matter for the children entering the orphanage, and they might be punished for it.

And if it wasn’t for Little Bai Liu’s investor, who said he wanted Little Bai Liu to look after him tonight, a kid like Little Bai Liu, who is so aloof, would not have cared about Little Muke.

Little Muke stole a glance at the phone in Little Bai Liu’s hand. Why did this kind investor gentleman want Little Bai Liu to help him?

And why haven’t they hung up yet? They’re already running into the room where they’re sleeping, and the teacher will see them and scold them.

"Is there something else you want to say?" Bai Liu began sagely. "You're going back to your room, aren't you? Why haven’t you hung up yet? You want more of my money that badly?"

"..... These minutes don't count toward your money," Little Bai Liu said quickly, his breath uneven and his voice tinged with something unspoken, as if hiding something. He spoke quickly, "The two horror games you talked about tonight are great. You can get credit for them."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Being so nice to me tonight? Another zero wipe and offset..."

"Beep beep beep—"

The person on the other end hung up the phone without hesitation.

Bai Liu: "....."

This is clearly meant to compliment him on how well he plays the game. Was he such a twisted person when he was fourteen?

Wow, how disgusting.

Bai Liu put away the phone, and his eyes fell on the overly damp straw bed. They suddenly narrowed.

Tonight, he had been smelling a faint odor of decaying plants on the patient. He had been so focused on fighting Miao Feichi and the others that he hadn't tried to identify the smell. It was like humus, much like rotting straw, but there was something else beneath the strong scent of straw.

Bai Liu touched his neck, where he had been bitten. The mucus of the plant patient's mouth still lingered. Bai Liu scraped a bit of it off with his fingertips and carefully smelled it—the smell of his blood, the damp decaying straw, and underneath the straw, there was a very light...

Bai Liu calmly put his finger in his mouth.

—There's also a very light hint of mushroom flavor in the mucus.

You can't smell it, but you can taste it.

Here, the children aren't eating mushrooms—are the patients eating them?

The only thing the patients in the ICU ate was the [medication] that the nurse brought into each ward.

But [the drug] is clearly not a mushroom. It's a liquid, and though it can't be ruled out that this liquid contains mushrooms, Bai Liu feels that the other scenario is more likely than that possibility.

Bai Liu's gaze fixed on the straw bed in front of him.

He circled the straw bed, the more he observed it, the stronger the strange feeling of unease grew. The bed itself resembled a proper resting place, but the dim lighting, the constant humidity, and the thick, moldy straw created an atmosphere more reminiscent of a mushroom culture room than a place for sleep. The straw bed seemed more like the growing medium for mushrooms than a surface to lie on.

Bai Liu lifted the white sheet, revealing the yellowish straw beneath. A few flicks of his hand uncovered mushrooms sprouting from the rotting straw's roots. Bai Liu couldn't help but think back to a similar scene in his orphanage, where a child nearly perished after consuming such mushrooms.

Bai Liu's fingers sifted through the mushrooms growing from the straw. After confirming they were a common species, he pondered,

"The patients aren't eating these mushrooms... So what are they consuming?"

His gaze returned to the straw bed. Back in the ICU, the plant patient had been lying motionless, like a vegetable. With his own life expectancy running low, Bai Liu hadn't disturbed the patient, but he had noted the mushrooms growing beneath the straw—ordinary ones, at least in appearance.

Now, it seemed likely that each bed had its own distinct mushroom growth. But the question lingered: Why were they different? What kind of mushrooms were growing here?

Bai Liu felt that the answer lay in what the system had referred to as the "recipe for renewal."

"Muke," Bai Liu muttered to himself, almost sighing. "It's up to you to find out exactly what these patients are taking for their 'life-renewal remedy.'"

ICU Ward.

Muke crawled out from beneath the chaotic bed, standing up with a gasp, gripping the edge for support. His head still felt a little dizzy as he sat back down on the bed with another sharp intake of breath.

Muke lay on the bed where Bai Liu had been earlier, curling up under the blanket, inhaling the familiar scent that reminded him of Bai Liu—like a chick seeking security beneath its mother's wings. His body trembled from the aftereffects of his near-death experience. Though he had drunk several bottles of psycho-bleach to restore his mental clarity, his body was still weak from the blood loss, shaking uncontrollably as if in a convulsive state.

He clenched his teeth, curled up further, and shook his left hand, pushing his right down, trying to recover quickly. His eyes were red; he had truly believed he was going to die when the creature had sucked blood from him relentlessly. By the end, his eyes had glazed over, and the veins on his hand had begun to deflate.

But it had been necessary to push him to this extent so that he and Bai Liu could present themselves in a similar state. Bai Liu had managed to impersonate Muke and infiltrate Miao Feichi's team.

Muke closed his eyes, recalling the plan Bai Liu had explained to him earlier. It was the distraction he needed to regain composure.

Bai Liu's plan was simple yet bold: a game of paper cups and oranges.

The three paper cups represented the investors' identical shells, with Bai Liu hidden beneath one, like an orange being guessed by Miao Feichi.

However, there were many complications to address.

Muke's eyes fixed on the three paper cups of different sizes Bai Liu had placed on the table. He frowned, "You don't look exactly like the patient in the ward. He's more slender than you."

"Exactly," Bai Liu replied. "Miao Feichi and his son are S-rank players. They could easily break the cups open and check for the orange beneath them. Which, of course, would be me."

Bai Liu squeezed the paper cups, revealing the orange underneath, then tossed them into the bin casually.

Muke swallowed, "So, what do we do?"

Bai Liu spun the three paper cups in his hands at an alarming speed, his tone calm. "We need to make them believe that these cups aren't so easily crushed. Once they think that, they'll follow the rules of the game."

Bai Liu tapped a cup and marked it with an A+, "I'll disguise myself as a monster with A+ abilities, and pretend to be three different monsters at once. The nurses only have fifteen minutes to change shifts, and even if Miao Feichi and his son are S-rated players, they'll likely choose to kill one monster rather than face all three A+ monsters at once."

"But you only have one monster... how do you pretend to be three at the same time?" Muke trailed off, unsure.

Bai Liu continued rotating the cups in his hands. For a moment, they blurred, and all three cups seemed to have the A+ mark on them due to his speed. He smiled, "Shift speed."

"As for the appearance," Bai Liu continued, "the sicker the patient, the more slender they appear. For us players, there are two main indicators of sickness: life value and spirit value. We can lower both to

match this monster's condition."

Muke frowned, "But Miao Feichi and his son are experienced. They'll see through a trick like this. Even if I'm not a veteran player, I'll recognize it. What if they figure it out?"

Bai Liu remained calm. "If you can't pull it off, we'll die together. But if you do, we'll survive. The key is to keep you safe tonight, in the ICU, while you search for the cure hidden in the bookcase."

Muke's eyes widened with disbelief, "I can't do it! I really can't!"

Bai Liu fixed him with a shallow, indifferent gaze. "Then we'll die together. That's the reality if you fail."

Muke winced at the tone, lowering his head in shame. After a long pause, he looked up with tear-streaked eyes. "I'll try my best..."

Bai Liu's voice softened as he patted Muke on the shoulder. "But I'm dead? That's the worst-case scenario. We need to avoid that. So, no, this isn't just a simple orange cup game."

Muke blinked, confused. "Not just a simple game?"

Bai Liu nodded. "No. The double-paper cup game is more intricate than that."

He placed six more identical paper cups on the table, marking one with "Bai Liu," another with "Muke," and the last with "Monster." He then demonstrated the layers of the game, showing Muke how the identity of the "orange" could be hidden behind different cups.

Muke watched, bewildered.

"This is the first round," Bai Liu explained, "These three cups represent Bai Liu, Muke, and the monster. But they won't believe it easily. They'll suspect my identity, which is why we prepared the second round."

Bai Liu moved the cups in a blur, then stopped. "Now, guess where the orange representing me is?"

Muke, convinced of his memory, pointed to the cup with "Muke" written on it. "This one."

"Wrong," Bai Liu smiled and opened all the cups. "The orange was under the [Monster] cup."

"How?! I clearly saw you place the orange under the [Muke] cup!" Muke exclaimed.

"A Man is indeed a creature that can be deceived by the instant information he receives. You are not mistaken, but I cheated." Bai Liu lowered his eyes, a meaningful smile on his lips. His hand slowly opened [Bai Liu]'s paper cup. At Muke's stunned gaze, Bai Liu's little finger and index finger caught the edge of the paper cup and, with a gentle tug, split the two paper cups into three.

Bai Liu lifted his eyes and smiled lazily. "Just a crude little trick of the hand. You actually remembered and guessed correctly, but I cheated—I put three paper cups on the one belonging to [Bai Liu]. What you saw was only the second paper cup, but in fact, there were three cups. So, I was actually hiding under the third paper cup in relation to the orange."

Bai Liu picked up the orange. "In other words, at the end of this orange game, I will use other information to shield my identity under a third layer of paper cups. This is to protect myself and confuse the old players, Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang—a father and son."

"And they definitely don't doubt the information they're getting." Bai Liu peeled the orange in half under the paper cup and handed it to Muke.

Bai Liu smiled. "Because the other half of the orange called and told them, Muke, to eat the orange?"

Muke shook his head, a little dumbfounded, refusing the orange Bai Liu offered him. He was already stunned by Bai Liu's actions and was still a bit confused.

The moment he bit down, Bai Liu's face twisted slightly, and he slowly spat the orange into the paper cup with [Bai Liu] written in black marker. "Tsk, these hospital oranges are so sour."

The most successful paper cup identity swap in the scheme was when the monster patient died as [Bai Liu], and Muke spent the night safely in the ICU as [monster patient].

Meanwhile, Bai Liu, in the guise of the orange, stayed under the nose of the dangerous Miao Feichi father and son.

To achieve this, Bai Liu made more than two layers of [identity paper cups] for all three, or rather, for all three [monsters].

After Bai Liu's first round of [Swap Paper Cups], he gave Miao Gaojiang a simple answer to each monster's corresponding identity. The monster that was killed was [Bai Liu], the monster hiding under the hospital bed was the real monster, and the monster he took away was [Muke].

But Miao Gaojiang certainly did not believe the obvious answer Bai Liu had given him.

So, Bai Liu prepared for Miao Gaojiang and the second round of the [paper cup orange game] began.

In the second messy game, Bai Liu dared to give Miao Gaojiang the second round of the [paper cup swap]. He and Muke used various ways to suggest to the Miao family that their identities were abnormal. For instance, Muke obviously helped Bai Liu, and Bai Liu helped the patient—other abnormal behaviors. These actions altered the three monsters' identity cup labels in Miao Gaojiang's mind. Eventually, Miao Gaojiang trusted Muke as much as he did his own memory, making the same mistakes as Muke.

Believing too much in his own experience and the information he had received, Miao Gaojiang suspected Bai Liu of hiding the orange under the [Muke] paper cup, thus triggering a third layer of [identity paper cups] prepared by Bai Liu—one that Bai Liu had prepared long ago, from little Muke's self-incriminating phone call.

Muke looked up at the time with a gasp—it was half past nine, and all the nurses had started patrolling. Muke hadn't heard any news of dead patients or any sounds of fighting, so there was a good chance Bai Liu's [last layer of paper cups] protective information had come into play.

He lay on his back, his eyes lost from over-stimulation, and let out a long, unconscious breath.

Muke's part of the plan was to introduce the Miao family into the ICU, get psycho-altered, and reduced to a life level consistent with the appearance of the monster patient. He had to stay awake enough to work with Bai Liu's plan after the psycho-alteration. The final, most important part was to stay perfectly safe in the ICU with the dead monster. The ultimate goal was to spend the entire night in the dead monster's intensive care unit in perfect safety while following Bai Liu's instructions to find the cure for life hidden in the bookcase.

And all the rest of the dangerous parts of the plan—those were Bai

Liu’s responsibility.

Muke closed his eyes, his heart hadn't completely calmed down. He pressed his chest and could feel his fragile heart thumping unbearably fiercely—out of fear, out of backlash.

Because this plan nearly flipped several times during the process.

Miao Feichi didn’t follow Muke’s initial plan at all. He kept trying to kill all the monsters with his high panel attributes and force value, almost succeeding. If Bai Liu hadn’t held Miao Feichi up for 10 minutes with his skills and props, Miao Feichi might have been able to achieve a triple kill in the ICU, and Muke would be dead by now.

After calming his heartbeat, Muke breathed a sigh of relief and, after a brief moment on the bed to acclimate to his current physical state, he gritted his teeth, staggered to his feet, and began to tidy up the messy ward floor.

Time was running out. He needed to get on with the task.

The Loving Welfare Home

Central Hall – Core Screen – In Front of Bai Liu's Small TV
Wang Shun sighed as he looked at Bai Liu's small TV, now prominently displayed in the core promotion section. People really were different. Despite going up against league players like Miao Feichi and his father, Bai Liu was climbing the ranks at an astonishing speed. It was only the first day of the game, yet he had already made it onto the core promotion screen.

The surge of likes Bai Liu received came primarily from the moment he confronted the father-son duo. Meanwhile, on Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang's side, their audience was celebrating Bai Liu's supposed demise.

At that moment, the Scavengers Guild had also bought a promotional ad, and thanks to a mix of various factors—including the absence of many high-profile players from the current streams—Miao Feichi's viewers went wild, pouring in likes and favorites, nearly pushing him into the King promotion spot.

But just as Miao Feichi was on the brink of securing that position, he fell—because Bai Liu wasn't dead. Instead, he had used the opportunity to blend into Miao Feichi's group.

Miao Feichi's fans and the Scavengers Guild were dumbfounded. Their hard-earned savings had all gone to—Bai Liu.

Even those who were hostile or resentful toward Bai Liu couldn't help but flood into his stream. No one could stop them. Most simply wanted to figure out what was happening, but after understanding the situation, they stayed.

Bai Liu's rapidly growing viewership propelled him into the core of the promotion. Not only that, but Mu Ke's small TV also benefited from the Miao Feichi hype, moving him from the multiplayer section to the center screen.

Among the audience, discussions ranged from disbelief to reasonable analysis. Bai Liu had previously evaded Miao Feichi's men and even managed to eliminate the King's Guild backup player, Zhang Gui. No one underestimated the newcomer anymore. Still, the dominant opinion remained:

"He's good, no doubt. But he's too reckless. He's either brilliant or

setting himself up for a fall."

Someone in the crowd muttered:
"Even if he blends in for now, Bai Liu's control ability might have been enough to handle Zhang Gui, but with an F-rank panel, he doesn't stand a chance against Miao Gaojiang and Miao Feichi's S-rank skills. It's unlikely to work."

"Miao Gaojiang is extremely cautious. I heard that members of the Scavengers Guild watched Bai Liu's gameplay hundreds of times, analyzing his control technique. Their conclusion? Bai Liu's ability is likely limited—it requires a medium and the target's indirect consent. As long as they don't pick up anything from Bai Liu, they should be safe..."

"...But still, Bai Liu pulled off a beautiful sleight-of-hand here. Layer upon layer of deception, and Miao Gaojiang actually fell for it. Damn, this guy's got eyes everywhere."

"I mean, considering how Miao Gaojiang and his team specialize in control tactics, the fact that Bai Liu managed a counter-kill in a pairs match is insane. I really doubt he'll be able to control them again, though."

"Feels like Bai Liu's playing a runner strategy this time—grabbing any clues to the main quest and rushing to clear the instance first."

"But wouldn't it make more sense to pull that off with Mu Sicheng? What's going on with those two? They're splitting up? Both of them have new partners now—what, did they break up? I haven't seen God Mu take on a newcomer in years, and now he's mentoring two?!"

"Well, Mu Sicheng's picks are solid—one's a beast in combat, the other's a killer. They've got great synergy. If trained properly, they could be as strong as Miao Gaojiang's team in the future."

"Bai Liu's got a promising recruit, too. Lacks personal skills, but if trained for intelligence gathering, he'd be a solid asset. Isn't that exactly what the King's Guild is missing? A walking database? He'd be invaluable."

"Damn, these new guys actually look pretty good! I can't even find a single decent recruit. I've been chasing Mu Sicheng for three whole instances, and he just keeps vanishing into thin air!"

"Ha! You're dreaming if you think he'd join your team. You sure they

would even want you?"

"He's got skill, no doubt. But let's be real—he's still gonna die. Miao Feichi is a complete mad dog. That sword attack of his hits like a truck. Last time, his flat A damage was 3,147—almost took me out in a single hit. Bai Liu's bringing in a complete rookie. I don't see them surviving this..."

"Still, if Bai Liu actually makes it into the league and levels up his panel, he might become terrifying. With the right strategy, he could be unstoppable."

"...Kinda want to recruit him. His skill is interesting—seems like he can copy the abilities of people he's controlled. The only downside is the range. I don't know if it's a stamina issue or a skill limitation, but he couldn't use Mu Sicheng's ability against Miao Feichi for more than a few minutes..."

Wang Shun watched in amazement as the audience swarmed Bai Liu's small TV, filling it with comments.

Even among the general viewers, there was a sense of awe. No one dared to be too loud—after all, standing in front of Bai Liu's screen were familiar faces from last year's league. Some of them were top players from the highest-ranking guilds.

With such players present, the average viewer didn't dare to speak too freely, just like how Mu Sicheng had previously silenced the crowd in Bai Liu's stream.

Miao Feichi's aggressive promotion had attracted not only casual viewers but also league players on his level. They had a rough idea of what Miao Feichi was planning, but after his first loss to Bai Liu, their attention shifted.

In other words, Bai Liu had now caught the eye of a large number of league players.

Wang Shun glanced at Bai Liu's small TV and let out a long sigh.

A lone player, rising so quickly... and already drawing the interest of major guild teams?

To be honest, if the King's Guild hadn't developed a feud with Bai Liu early on, Wang Shun would've been tempted to recruit him himself. But now—he sighed again.

Still, something felt strange.

Mu Sicheng was mentoring two newcomers. Bai Liu was mentoring newcomers too. And when counting them all together—including Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng—there were exactly five of them.

The number needed for a league team.

A ridiculous thought crossed Wang Shun's mind, but he shook his head with a chuckle, dismissing it immediately.

There was no way. Bai Liu would have to be insane to enter the league with a team of complete rookies, especially with only two months left until the competition.

But looking at these newcomers, he knew one thing for sure—the major guilds would be scrambling to recruit them.

He could only wonder: What teams would they end up on next year?

A chill ran down his spine at the thought.

---------- ----

In-game.
Muke pushes the bed back into place, pressing it against the body of the monster patient in the corner, who smells strangely of plants. Within minutes of Bai Liu's departure, a strong scent of fungal decay fills the air—so thick and dense that Muke covers his nose.

The vegetative patient that Miao Feichi had hacked to death slumps in the corner, head hanging down. The dim light casts unsettling shadows, making the corpse appear even longer than before. Its arms and legs stretch unnaturally, like thin metal rods. Muke roughly estimates that if this patient were to stand, it would have to tilt its head just to fit in the ward.

Given the patient's A-rank rating, it should have been impossible for it to survive the full force of Miao Feichi's S-panel attacks.

Muke quickly averts his gaze. Staring too long at such a human-yet-inhuman form was very triggering. He has only just recovered mentally and refuses to subject himself to further psychological strain.

Books are scattered across the ward, their pages undamaged but stuck to the wet floor. That doesn't stop Muke from reading. He carefully

picks them up, organizes them, and places them back onto the fallen shelves in their original order. Then, he begins reading at a rapid pace, using a pen to guide his vision.

The contents align with Bai Liu's earlier speculation—filled with various notes. Since this is an ICU, multiple patients have likely been admitted, leading to different handwriting in the annotations. Muke's eyes flick rapidly over the pages, stopping for only a second or two on each one, much like an online reader skimming through Quantum Mechanics in Calligraphy.

After an unknown amount of time, Muke exhales deeply and sits up in bed. His eyes are bloodshot.

"The first skim is over," he mutters dizzily to himself.

From the notes, Muke deduces that the Life-Sustaining Remedy is exactly what its name suggests—a herbal treatment claimed to cure various diseases. However, since it has never been properly tested, it is considered an alternative medicine at best.

The terminally ill patients here had exhausted all traditional treatments. They had seen countless doctors, tried every possible cure, and, when finally told there was nothing left to be done, were advised to "go home and eat well"—a euphemism for preparing for death.

But these patients refused to give up. The wealthy among them established this secretive private hospital, a place free of doctors, whom they had come to distrust and even resent. Instead, the hospital was staffed only by nurses, while the patients themselves took on the role of doctors.

Many of them had accumulated extensive medical knowledge over their years of illness, reading medical texts in desperation. Their self-education led them to trust fellow patients over professionals.

Among them, one mysterious patient had discovered a particular herbal formula. Initial tests on several patients showed that it significantly alleviated their symptoms. This discovery ignited hope among the dying, who began referring to it as the Remedy to Renew Life.

However, for various reasons, the remedy could not be openly shared. Rules such as "The riddle must not be passed on", "Direct information invites disaster", and "It must not be directly transmitted to others" were strictly followed.

That said, the knowledge wasn't entirely lost.

The method of transmission was subtle and rigorous. Only patients who were truly dying, had significant financial means to contribute, and demonstrated patience were allowed into the circle. Each ward contained an extensive book collection, and only those who could finish reading through the texts would uncover the Life-Sustaining Remedy hidden between the lines.

Muke recognizes this as a form of coded communication. The patients were terrified that the formula's existence would bring disaster upon them, so they established a system of strict vetting, similar to the rigid membership-only structures of underground clubs frequented by the wealthy.

By piecing together scattered notes and using his quick-reading skills, Muke reconstructs a rough version of the formula. However, he soon realizes that while most of the ingredients are accounted for, the most crucial component is missing. No matter how much he searches, he finds only vague references to a one-to-one ingredient—something unique to each patient, highly specific, and not easy to obtain.

But nowhere in the notes is it explicitly stated what this key ingredient is.

Muke's expression darkens.

Night has deepened. At some point, the sky will begin to lighten, making him anxious. This missing ingredient is obviously the most critical part of the remedy—so why isn't there a single page describing it? How could none of the patients have taken notes on it?

In the dim light, repeatedly reviewing the information would have been difficult without marking the pages for reference. Muke even searches for folded corners but finds nothing.

"I don't think so..." he mutters. "Wait!"

—If there are no creases or annotations, there's another possibility. If something was too important, instead of marking it, a patient might have secretly torn out the page and hidden it.

Although destroying books is not allowed for new patients like Muke, this rule may not apply to the old patients—the monster patients. After all, these books have already served their purpose in passing on the Life-Sustaining Remedy.

Muke has already searched every possible hiding place: beds, cabinets, even the toilets.

If the missing pages weren't removed, then the only remaining place they could be hidden is...

His gaze slowly shifts toward the rotting corpse's hospital gown.

His eyes trail from the patient's hunched, shriveled head to its sunken face—skin dried out and withered in just a few hours.

Muke swallows hard.

Taking a deep breath, he tiptoes toward the patient slumped in the corner. The corpse's shriveled skin seems to ripple, as if something thin and long is wriggling beneath it. The greenish-purple face distorts, and a trickle of mucus drips from its sharp teeth, landing on its dangling index finger.

Then—the patient's fingers twitch.

It's a tiny movement, barely perceptible in the dim corner of the room. The ward's visibility is low, and Muke, standing close, notices nothing unusual. The only thing he registers is that the scent of decay has thickened, as though something is growing uncontrollably.

"What a strong mushroom smell…" Muke wrinkles his nose, waving a hand in disgust. The scent reminds him eerily of the fungal odor clinging to the disabled children back at the orphanage.

Steeling himself, Muke crouches and, suppressing his discomfort, reaches into the pocket of the corpse's hospital gown. His fingers brush against a stack of papers.

But before he can feel relief, a chilling realization sends a shiver down his spine—

The pocket... is pulsing.

As his hand digs deeper, the rhythmic pulsations beneath the fabric grow stronger.

The patient still has a heartbeat.

This vegetative patient is not dead yet.

Cold terror floods Muke's veins. From his head to his back, it feels as

if he's been plunged into an ice bath. This monster had been killed by Miao Feichi—slashed through the head with full force. How is it still… alive?

Muke forces himself to take a slow, deep breath. He can't afford to think about what this means.

What beats in the heart of something that no longer breathes?

No time to dwell on it. Muke rips his hand out of the pocket, gripping the stack of papers tightly.

As long as he gathers enough intel to pass to Bai Liu, even if he dies here, Little Muke will still have 50% of his life value.

Have faith that Bai Liu will complete the task and take Little Muke through!

Repeating this desperate mantra, Muke steadies himself and unfolds the pages. His eyes flicker across the text:

"Blood Lingzhi, a type of lingzhi that requires the blood of a pure-blooded virgin… A mutated species of the mushroom Taiyaki… An elixir rumored to 'give life to the dead and flesh to the bones'..."

Muke freezes.

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Muke for completing the main quest - Searching for (Life-Sustaining Remedy)]

[System Alert: New main quest triggered - Cultivate your own Blood Lingzhi using the hospital's fungal beds.]

Muke stares at the message in horror.

"...What the fuck is this?!"

During Muke's reading, the thin red lines writhing beneath the patient's shriveled face suddenly quickened. The bright crimson thread marks spread like living mycelium, creeping outward from the patient's heart to his limbs. Within moments, they surfaced as blood-red lines on the backs of his hands.

The capillary-like threads continued to pulse and spread, saturating the vegetative patient's body. His once pale, bluish skin swelled, distorting into something grotesquely slender. In the blink of an eye, he was transformed into a corpse draped in a tangled web of writhing

veins.

Only his eyes retained their stark black and white contrast—everything else was consumed by the dense, pulsating network of blood-vessel-like tubes. These writhing lines extended beyond the patient's skin, slithering across the floor between the bed and his body, spreading like creeping vines throughout the ward. Eventually, the mass of veins converged at the bed.

The crimson veins thickened, pulsating with an eerie vitality, as though they were pumping blood into the bed itself. A dark, unnatural red light bathed the entire ward.

Beneath the rotting straw on the bed, something began to stir. A rustling sound accompanied the emergence of a cluster of bright red mushrooms, which grew and expanded at an unnatural pace. They swelled until they reached the size of a millstone, their grotesque form resembling an underdeveloped embryo—head and tail indistinct but unmistakably present.

The fungal mass throbbed rhythmically, mimicking the beat of a heart. A pale red glow radiated from it, bizarre yet mesmerizing. It did not exude the nauseating scent of decay but rather an unsettlingly pleasant aroma—like fresh blood, rich and inviting, an irresistible scent of food.

The Loving Welfare Home

The vegetative patient's pale eyes rolled wildly in their sockets as he staggered to his feet, his hands trembling as he reached toward the blood-soaked hospital bed.

Muke warily edged away, moving slowly until his back pressed against the door.

The sharp clicks of nurses' heels echoed down the corridor, a reminder of the hospital's strict rule: no patient was allowed to leave their room at night. The reason was simple—monsters roamed the hospital after dark, preying on anyone who broke curfew. If Miao Feichi caught wind of the disturbance in the ICU, the nurses would likely discuss it the next day. If Miao Feichi found out, all of Bai Liu's carefully laid groundwork would be for nothing.

Muke shifted his gaze to the patient across the room and the blood lingzhi sprouting from the bed. Logically, he wasn't completely doomed—this monster had a glaring weakness. According to the information Muke had received, the blood lingzhi was the patient. If the lingzhi remained alive, the patient wouldn't die. If the lingzhi perished, so would the patient.

But that wasn't the only factor at play.

Beyond being the monster's fatal weakness, this Blood Reiki phenomenon also served as an enhancement—a buff for the vegetative patient.

[The Monster Book of Love and Welfare updated - Plant Patients (2/3)]

[Monster Name: Plant Patients (Blood Reiki-Activated Version)]

Characteristics: Movement speed 500, requires large amounts of water to grow, thrives in humid environments.
Weakness: ????? (To be explored)
Abilities:
- Siphoning Flesh, Liquid (Upgraded from A-rank to S-rank due to Blood Reiki bonus)
- Poison Mist Contamination (Upgraded from A-rank to S-rank due to Blood Reiki bonus)
Additional Effects:
- The monster (Plant Patient) receives Blood Ganoderma as an

enhancement, boosting its blood energy.
- Overall rank upgraded from A to S.
- Any player below B-rank will be instantly killed upon contact.

Muke clenched his fists. His C+ panel wasn't nearly enough to take on an S-rank monster. He had been prepared to rush straight for the blood lingzhi, but after seeing the overall rating, he hesitated. His grip tightened around the note in his hand. He hadn't delivered his message to Bai Liu yet.

Across the room, the patient remained hunched over the bed, ravenously devouring the blood lingzhi, red-stained saliva dripping from the corners of his mouth. He wasn't paying attention to Muke—for now. But Muke knew it wouldn't last. Once the creature had consumed enough to fully recover, he would be in imminent danger.

The problem was information transfer.

Certain items in this game—like notes and books—couldn't be stored in a player's inventory. Muke had gathered a massive amount of information, but he had no way to type it all out using the game's limited keyboard system.

If he tried a more direct approach, he'd expose himself immediately. If Miao Feichi or the others entered the ICU tomorrow and discovered his method of contact, Bai Liu's identity would be compromised.

What to do? What to do? Muke chewed at the skin around his fingernails in anxious frustration. How do I get this information across?

His eyes flickered toward the bookshelf. Then, down to the torn pages in his hands. Slowly, his mind cleared.

Bai Liu was in his room. And Bai Liu remembered everything—every book, every placement on his bookshelf.

That's enough.

Suddenly, Bai Liu's system panel chimed. He was still linked to Muke's panel, and though he hadn't been operating it, the keyboard had been moved.

Bai Liu, leaning against his door, snapped to attention. His eyes, which had been half-closed from fatigue, opened sharply as he accessed his system backpack.

Four keycaps had been removed from the keyboard.

"Y, F5."

Then another.

"X, 45."

And another.

"Z, 678."

The final key removed:

"Enter."

The message has been input. The task can begin.

Bai Liu narrowed his eyes. XYZ—a three-dimensional coordinate system. And F… Bai Liu's gaze shifted to his bookshelves.

Could it be…?

His lips curled into a faint, incredulous smirk.

Damn. Does Muke have a memory that strong?

It didn't take Bai Liu long to grasp what Muke was trying to communicate. But even understanding it, he remained astonished by the sheer precision of Muke's recollection.

F = Bookshelf level
X = First book on the shelf
Z = First page of that book

Muke had memorized the layout of his entire bookshelf—every book's placement, every crucial page number—without making a single mistake. He had then converted this information into a coordinate system to relay it to Bai Liu.

Anyone else, even if they had found key information in the ICU, would have struggled to send it using just the in-game keyboard. But Muke had done it.

It was no wonder his father had tried everything to save him. A mind like that—even if it only lived for another year—was invaluable.

Bai Liu quickly scanned the bookshelves, flipping to the designated pages. He didn't bother folding them or marking them—it would be too slow.

Although the hospital explicitly forbade book destruction, Muke's room was far enough away that catching him was unlikely. Without hesitation, Bai Liu tore the pages free.

He removed another keycap—Enter—to signal execution completion.

A new set of coordinates was sent immediately. Within five minutes, Muke removed the final keycap: End.

Bai Liu skimmed the contents of the torn pages. His frown deepened.

"If the lingzhi does not die, the body does not die…"

His pupils contracted.

Muke is in danger.

His eyes flicked to the system panel. Muke's Mental Value, which had remained stable, suddenly plummeted. A thin red warning line appeared.

[System Warning: Player Muke is being attacked by the (Poison Mist Contamination) S-Skill of the monster (Plant Patients). Mental Value will reach zero in 90 seconds! Leave the attack range immediately!]

Under Bai Liu's bed, Muke curled up, pressing his hands over his mouth to stifle his coughing as the poisonous fog thickened.

Across the room, the monster twitched. It opened its limbs wide, clinging to the bedrails like a grotesque spider, arching its body while gnawing hungrily at the blood lingzhi. Its abdomen swelled grotesquely, transparent skin revealing wriggling masses of mycelium within.

With each bite, a dense red mist billowed from its body, tainting the entire ward a sickly, unnatural pink. Muke, still hiding beneath the bed, was forced to inhale it.

His mind grew hazy. His Mental Value continued to drop.

For a brief moment, Muke considered buying a bottle of Mental Bleach to recover. But then… he hesitated.

His message had already been sent.

His main storyline was worthless now.

Dying here would only serve to confirm Bai Liu's identity, solidifying their strategy.

There was no point in wasting points on himself.

His breathing slowed, his grip on the torn pages loosening. His mind drifted, hypnotizing itself into acceptance. Bai Liu had said it himself: a useless main identity could be abandoned.

Then… he could do the same.

But as his consciousness dimmed, the monster patient across the room let out a guttural burp, finally having finished its feast. It crawled off the bed, its grotesque head twitching as it began to sniff—searching for him.

Tears pricked at Muke's eyes. His fingers trembled as he struggled to pluck three final keycaps from his keyboard.

[Delete] [M] [E]

"Delete me, abandon me, empty my inventory, and don't let my dead body drop anything that could expose you. Please… don't come to my rescue," Muke said to Bai Liu on the other end.

Bai Liu had exhausted Mu Sicheng's skills, the fishbone was on Miao Feichi's side, and there was nothing left to save him. If Bai Liu came, it would be a death sentence—not even a good one. Muke thought as calmly as he could: My role is over. The message has been delivered. Dead is dead. It's no big deal.

But Bai Liu still had a lot to live for. There was still so much left for him to do.

For as long as Muke could remember, death had been one of his greatest fears. But no matter how much he feared it, he could never escape it. He was born with an illness, and from the moment he became aware of the world, death had cast its shadow over him. He had always struggled, desperately, in an undignified way.

He never imagined he would ever face death with such ease. Perhaps because he knew it wouldn't truly come. Or perhaps it was the blind

trust—the fragile sense of security he found in another person—that let him escape his fear, if only for a moment.

Muke had been born with abilities and privileges most people could only dream of. His entire life had been spent at the pinnacle of luxury.

If there was a hierarchy, Muke stood at the very top—both in terms of ability and wealth. It was only natural that he should look down on the rest of the world.

He was supposed to be exactly what he presented himself as: an arrogant, condescending, hopelessly unpredictable young master.

And so, it was only fair that death had knocked him from the top of his gilded world in an instant. In the end, the young lord of the crystal palace had become just like the commoners he had once trampled underfoot—desperate, afraid, and willing to do anything humiliating just to survive.

He could have begged his father for more doctors. He could have dropped to his knees and pleaded with the audience for rewards. He could have sold his soul to Bai Liu.

But after all of that, he still couldn't avoid the moment of death.

Even if he had only lost fifty percent of his life, the pain of dying was still one hundred percent real.

Muke's breath became shallow. His heart clenched painfully, forcing him to curl in on himself.

His vision blurred. His trembling hands slipped away from his lips. His chest rose and fell in frantic, uneven motions. Silent tears streaked down his face.

His mind was supposed to be clear, yet as his mental value dropped, all he could see were memories—fragments of the past he had spent his whole life dreading.

He saw his father standing in the doorway, shaking his head with a hesitant, unreadable expression. And then, his father found other women, staying out late every night—because he needed a stronger heir.

His mother had silently accepted it.

Everyone had loved Muke, but it had been the love given to a pet—a fragile, short-lived thing. Something no one expected too much from. Something unfit for power.

He saw every doctor shake their head at him. He saw himself, a child curled under the blankets, hands clasped together as he whispered frantic prayers for time to slow down.

Would I wake up tomorrow?

He never knew the answer.

He had never been allowed to exert himself. Sometimes, even standing too long would leave him crouched on the ground, gasping for breath. His classmates mocked him for the pathetic display.

He always made sure his father punished them.

As a result, he never had any friends.

His father noticed.

And so, in an attempt to make the class understand Muke's condition, his father had bribed the teacher to show them a documentary called Bubble Boy.

It was about a boy with an immunodeficiency disorder who had to live inside a bubble his whole life. He had no immune system. If he ever left, he would die.

Afterward, the teacher had told the class, Muke has the same disease. Don't discriminate against him. Protect him.

One of his classmates had turned to him and asked, in an innocent, thoughtless voice, That's so pathetic. If I had to live like that, I'd rather just die.

Muke had been twelve at the time.

He had tilted his chin up proudly and said, "I just want to live. I don't care what you think."

And so, the high-and-mighty young master had grown up like a fragile, solitary little mole.

A ridiculous creature—like an ant tilting its head in stubborn defiance, pretending it had pride, even though any one of them could have

crushed him beneath their foot.

But because he lived in a crystal box made of money, he survived.

And every day, he wondered: Will I be buried in this crystal box tomorrow?

So he started to try strange, reckless things.

Like parachuting into a gaming company to make video games.

And that was where he met Bai Liu.

Muke had remembered him immediately—he was the staff member whose computer he had lost.

Muke had an impeccable memory, after all. Perhaps to make up for his short life.

But when he saw Bai Liu, Muke was afraid.

Afraid Bai Liu wouldn't save him.

So he played dumb. He feigned helplessness. He tried desperately to show his weakness.

Bai Liu had only looked at him. Calm. Unreadable.

He had seen through it all.

But he never called Muke out on it.

Instead, he reached out and whispered, "Then let this be our first meeting. My name is Bai Liu, and I am the owner of your soul."

"I will save you and let you live. But you will have to work for it yourself. I think you have what it takes to survive on your own."

And with that, Bai Liu had pulled him out of the bubble he had spent over twenty years trapped inside.

Bai Liu—someone willing to stake his life on Muke, despite knowing how fragile he was—had told him, "Until something happens, I assume you can do it. And if you can't—then we'll die together, Muke."

"You don't need to rely on anyone. Even I can rely on you. You'll keep us alive. I believe in you, Muke."

Muke's vacant eyes flickered as the patient yanked him from beneath the bed with long, bony arms. His mental value was too low. His mind was drowning in fragmented memories.

He lay there, lifeless, as the patient lowered its head and opened its jaws to sink its teeth into his neck.

Warm saliva dripped onto his collarbone. His body trembled.

Tears slipped soundlessly down his face.

His trembling hands clutched three keycaps: [Delete] [M] [E]

His lips parted weakly.

"Bai Liu..."

So this was what death felt like.

It wasn't so bad.

Maybe he had never feared death itself.

Maybe he had only ever feared dying without meaning. Dying alone. Dying without worth.

And now—

"If my death brings more value than my life, then it's not so bad," Bai Liu said, guiding Muke's trembling hands around the bone whip at his neck. "If dying lets you enter the ICU and find the main quest for the [Life-Saving Remedy]—if it keeps you alive—then I will die for us, Muke."

Muke took a deep, shuddering breath.

"Me too, Bai Liu."

At the last moment—just as the patient lunged for his shoulder—

The door to the ICU slammed open.

Bai Liu stood in the doorway, eyes cold.

A black shadow flickered behind him.

[System Alert: Player Liu Huai uses personal skill (Flash Strike). A+

skill blast causes monster (Plant Patient) to stiffen for one and a half minutes.]

Bai Liu picked Muke up from the ground and shoved a bottle of psychotropic bleach against his lips.

Muke blinked up at him in dazed confusion.

Bai Liu had come to save him again.

The Loving Welfare Home

Bai Liu was not moving too fast, and soon, the nurse behind him would catch up.

It was baffling how nurses in high heels could still run faster than Bai Liu and the others on the slippery ground, but they had no choice—those nurses were just fast. Liu Huai was forced to use his skills, dragging Bai Liu and Muke—two low-level players—through the dimly lit corridor at high speed.

[System Alert: Player Liu Huai has used his personal skill (Assassin Concealment), covering himself, Player Bai Liu, and Player Muke.]

[Skill Description: Concealment Cover is an A-rank personal skill that reduces the probability of being detected by humans or non-humans when fleeing or sneaking. It grants the player the ability to blend into their surroundings, much like a chameleon.]

Almost instantly, Liu Huai vanished into the shadowed corridor like a wisp of mist. Bai Liu and Muke disappeared as well, as though a barrier had suddenly cloaked them, causing the nurses to rush past without noticing their presence.

It was as if they were covered by an invisible film, making them undetectable at a glance. However, upon close inspection, faint outlines could still be seen.

Moving cautiously along the wall, Liu Huai led the way, with Bai Liu and Muke following closely behind. They advanced toward the security exit, brushing past nurses hurrying toward the elevator.

"There are patients wandering at night," one nurse murmured.

"There aren't any patient rooms on the ground floor. Which floor are they from?" another questioned.

"I don’t know. Let's take the elevator up to check. It’s night shift—tell the other nurses to gather at the elevator and stay away from the security exit. We’re not supposed to go there after 9 p.m.…."

These nurses avoided the security exits. When searching for wandering patients at night, they checked floor by floor, using the elevators instead of the stairs.

But upon reaching the exit, Liu Huai's face darkened as he finally understood why.

Because something else lurked in the stairwell.

Just outside the security staircase stood a child, holding an oversized mobile phone.

Unplugged syringes were embedded in the child's neck, dried blood staining the pale skin. It was evident that the child had been repeatedly drained of blood, leaving it emaciated—nothing more than skin and bones. Its face was eerily pallid with a sickly blue-white tint, resembling a walking skeleton. The child trembled as it clutched the phone, its oversized head bobbing before it slowly turned to reveal its front.

Its eyes were rolled back, leaving only whites visible. A vacant, demented expression contorted its face, drool dripping from the corners of its mouth. The child flailed its limbs erratically, giggling in an unsettling, high-pitched manner.

Then, in a jarring, distorted voice, it spoke into the phone.

"Mr. Investor, are you coming to see me?"

"You're taking me away, aren't you?"

Its voice suddenly twisted with a chilling realization, and two streaks of blood-red tears trickled down its face. It waved its arms frantically, shaking its head.

"So you're not taking me away. You're taking my blood away… One tube, two jars, three… I don't have any blood left, Mr. Investor. I—I'm empty. It hurts! Please don't take any more of my blood!"

The child let out a shrill, ear-piercing wail before collapsing onto the floor. With a grimace, it stomped violently on the phone, which emitted no sound despite the apparent call. The syringes embedded in its skin quivered with the motion. Then, tilting its head, the child reached for the syringe lodged in its neck, yanked it out, and grinned.

Its smile stretched unnaturally wide—so wide that the corners of its lips cracked past its ears.

"I need blood too, Mr. Investor."

[Monster Book of Love Orphanage Updated – Deformed Children (1/3)]

[Monster Name: Deformed Child (Berserk Version After Blood Draw)]

[Attributes: Movement speed 1500-2000, indiscriminate berserk attacks on any investor with blood.]

[Weakness: ????? (To be discovered.)]

[Attack: Injection and Blood Extraction (A+ Skill) – Inserts a syringe into the investor's neck and continues drawing blood until the target bleeds out and dies.]

[Attack: Phone Tracking (A+ Tracking Skill) – Late-night wandering investors beware! The children will call your phone to find you. If your phone rings, they will track the sound. If you pick up, they will locate you even faster and jump onto your back immediately~]

"Oh no," Liu Huai's expression changed. "My Assassin Concealment skill is only A-rank! This thing's phone tracking can break my concealment!"

The phone was forcibly bound to them—the system didn't allow players to discard it. This ensured that the [child] could call the investor anytime. Liu Huai had assumed the child was just one of the orphans from the orphanage. He hadn't expected there to be one here in this private hospital too.

Then, in an instant, the phones of Bai Liu, Muke, and Liu Huai all began ringing.

Liu Huai quickly hung up. But the moment he did, the phone rang again. His face turned grim, and he began backing away slowly, clutching the phone tightly.

There was no way a single deformed child could call all three of them simultaneously.

Which meant only one thing—

"There's more than one deformed child here," Bai Liu stated calmly.

From the pitch-black stairwell, more beeping ringtones echoed into the silence. More and more deformed children, drained to the point of resembling mummified husks, emerged from the shadows.

Some had withered limbs. Others dragged themselves forward limply, crouched on the floor clutching their chests. Each child held an oversized telephone in their hands. Their ping-pong-ball-sized eyes were wide open, pitch-black, the whites stained with bloody streaks.

They opened their mouths and screamed in shrill, childlike voices—voices that sent shivers down the spine.

"INVESTOR! I WANT BLOOD!!!"

Then, shrieking, they dropped onto all fours, hissing as they plowed toward Bai Liu and the others at an unnatural speed.

Bai Liu narrowed his eyes, hung up his phone once more, and quickly dialed a new number.

The system had a rule—these children could only call investors at specific times: [9 p.m. to 12 a.m.] and [6 a.m. to 9 a.m.]. At any other time, the calls would be met with a busy signal.

There were too many of them. Too many freakish, ghostly children dialing nonstop, clogging up the phone lines. That meant that by ensuring constant calls, he could potentially block their tracking.

"Liu Huai, I can't keep moving while dragging both of you. Only one of us has a chance of escaping this," Liu Huai panted.

Bai Liu met his gaze, unwavering.

"I know you won't abandon your teammates," Liu Huai gritted his teeth. "So what's the plan? You always have one!"

Muke struggled, trying to pull his hand from Bai Liu's grip.

"Leave me behind, Bai Liu," he choked out. "If I die and you save the others—"

"Shut up." Bai Liu shot Muke a chilling glare. "You already wasted my points by throwing yourself into danger. You're going to pay me back. I haven't even settled that debt with you yet."

Muke froze. Bai Liu was actually angry—furious that Muke had wasted his life points.

And Bai Liu hated wastefulness.

Muke bit his lip and fell silent, not daring to speak further. Even Liu

Huai, seeing Bai Liu's unyielding expression, didn't press the matter.

Bai Liu's face returned to its usual calm, and he swiftly issued orders.

"They track us by phone. It's an A+ skill, but not unbeatable." His gaze flickered toward Liu Huai. "You worked with Mu Sicheng before. What's the strategy when he steals something?"

Before Liu Huai could respond, Bai Liu suddenly reached out and snatched the phone from one of the charging children.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has used Player Mu Sicheng's personal skill (Thief Monkey Paw) to steal (Deformed Child)'s phone. The deformed child is furious and has targeted him!]

The child shrieked and lunged at Bai Liu.

Without hesitation, Bai Liu ducked behind Liu Huai.

"Liu Huai," he ordered, "lure the child away."

Liu Huai and Mu Sicheng had worked together so many times that he was instinctively familiar with the need to deflect attention after a theft to protect his partner. Before his brain could even register it, his body moved on its own—his dagger stabbing the child in front of him.

[System Alert: Player Liu Huai stabbed (Freak Child) with his personal skill weapon (Shadow Dagger). Freak Child is enraged and has decided to call him!]

The child let out a shrill scream and lunged at Liu Huai. At the same time, Liu Huai's phone started ringing—louder, more frequent, more insistent.

Liu Huai cursed under his breath, his gaze snapping to Bai Liu. What the hell was that bastard doing? More and more children, their hands clutching syringes, were converging on him, drawn by the sound of the ringing. Cold sweat trickled down Liu Huai's back.

And then, just as another call came through, Bai Liu's voice cut through the chaos.

"Liu Huai, pick up the phone."

Liu Huai nearly lost it. "Are you insane?! If I answer, they'll pinpoint my location instantly! That freakish kid on the other end will track me through their (Phone Location) skill! I'll be dead!"

"No," Bai Liu countered calmly. He lifted a large black phone, his expression eerily composed. "Because I'm the one calling you."

Liu Huai's mind spun. "That's impossible! Investors' phones can't call each other! The system is one-way—only the kids can call investors! I literally can't even answer your—"

"I told you to pick up," Bai Liu repeated, his tone indifferent, his eyes cold. There was a faint but unmistakable killing intent beneath the surface, though his voice remained almost coaxing. "You can answer this call. Don't make me say it a third time."

Liu Huai's breath hitched. The emotionless look in Bai Liu's eyes sent a chill down his spine. Without another word, he pressed the answer button.

The ringing stopped instantly.

On the other end, he could hear Bai Liu's calm, measured breathing.

The children who had been honing in on Liu Huai based on the sound of his phone suddenly hesitated, confused. They clutched their syringes tightly, glancing around in search of their target. Only one child, phone absent from his grasp, continued running after Liu Huai, his eyes gleaming with eerie determination.

Liu Huai's gaze snapped to Bai Liu's hand, where the phone should have been—but it wasn't Bai Liu's phone at all.

It was one of the deformed children's phones.

Bai Liu… stole a kid's phone?!

No, wait—how the hell did he even manage to steal from a monster?! Isn't he supposed to be a control-type player?!

Before Liu Huai could fully process this, Bai Liu moved again. Without hesitation, his fingers flickered in quick, precise movements, swiping another phone straight from a child's grasp. The act was almost casual, as if he weren't robbing a deformed, bloodthirsty child but rather some clueless toddler.

The robbed child stared at his empty hands in stunned silence for a moment. Then his lip trembled. His eyes welled up with tears.

"Waaaaah! The investor stole my phone! Give it back!"

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has used Player Mu Sicheng's personal skill (Thief Monkey Paw) to steal (Deformed Child)'s phone. Player Bai Liu is running out of stamina! Please rest to recover strength!]

Bai Liu staggered, nearly collapsing to one knee as his legs gave out beneath him. He braced himself against the wall, his breath shallow and ragged. Using Mu Sicheng's (Thief Sneak) skill earlier in the ICU had left him completely drained, forcing him to rely on natural rest for at least a day before he could receive stamina supplements again.

But he hadn't rested nearly enough—just a few hours in Muke's ward. He had barely recovered enough strength to use (Thief Monkey Paw) twice.

An A+ ranked skill was far too taxing for a player of Bai Liu's F-rank level.

"Liu Huai!" Bai Liu called weakly as another deformed child lunged at him, syringe raised high.

Liu Huai snapped out of his daze, reacting on instinct. His dagger slashed forward.

The child shrieked as the blade cut into his back. Bloody tears welled up in his eyes as he staggered toward Liu Huai, syringe trembling in his grasp.

[System Alert: Player Liu Huai used his personal skill (Shadow Stab) on (Deformed Child). The deformed child is enraged and has decided to attack the bad guy who hurt him first.]

Bai Liu, still leaning against the wall, dialed Mu Ke's number. After several busy tones, the call finally went through. Bai Liu turned to Mu Ke.

"Pick up."

Mu Ke fumbled with his phone before answering. The moment he did, his phone stopped ringing. The children who had been closing in on him hesitated, aimless. But as Bai Liu's phone rang again, their heads snapped in his direction.

Mu Ke looked at him, face pale. "Bai Liu, your phone is still ringing!"

"Right." Bai Liu exhaled, voice steady despite his obvious exhaustion. "But I don't have the stamina to steal a third phone."

Mu Ke panicked. He could tell—Bai Liu was running on fumes. He had taken a massive risk to save him, and now he was surrounded. Without thinking, Mu Ke moved toward Bai Liu, ready to shield him with his own body.

His voice wavered. "What about you?! You should've just called yourself! What was the point of calling me?!"

Bai Liu took a slow step back. His gaze was cold. "Stay away from me, Mu Ke. If you keep throwing your life away like this, I won't hesitate to get you killed myself."

Mu Ke froze. His heart clenched. Bai Liu… was still angry at him. And that hurt more than anything else.

Bai Liu sighed, rubbing his forehead. Then, with a flick of his wrist, he tossed the stolen phone to Mu Ke. "Run back to 501 and call me on this phone to mute my ringing. I'll be fine."

Mu Ke swallowed hard, nodding. Determination filled his eyes. He still had strength left—he could do this. Without another word, he turned and ran, dashing toward the stairwell and disappearing from sight.

Bai Liu watched him go, his breathing uneven. His terminally ill body had been pushed past its limits for two days straight, and he was rapidly approaching collapse.

Mu Ke… that guy was far too naïve. He idolized Bai Liu, placed him on a pedestal, while completely downplaying his own worth. That wasn't good.

Bai Liu knew the truth: in a game requiring meticulous information processing, Mu Ke was more valuable than he was. The only reason Bai Liu had a shot at clearing this level was because Mu Ke was here.

And with Liu Huai now in the mix, Mu Ke's survival chances had skyrocketed.

Bai Liu turned to Liu Huai. His phone still rang at his belt. A grotesque, crawling child edged closer, syringe poised to strike. Bai Liu knew he didn't have the strength to run anymore.

He sighed and spread his arms lazily. "Great Assassin, now that it's just the two of us, you should be able to move faster than these kids, right?"

Liu Huai answered simply. "Yes."

A dagger whizzed through the air, embedding itself into the wall above Bai Liu's head. With practiced ease, Liu Huai leapt up, kicked off the wall, and landed behind him.

In a blur of motion, one arm slashed through the deformed child approaching Bai Liu. The other grabbed Bai Liu by the collar and—just as the child's syringe was about to pierce Bai Liu's neck—lifted him clean out of harm's way.

Liu Huai swung his arm, throwing Bai Liu out of the encirclement.

The circle changed from Bai Liu to Liu Huai, but the phone on Liu Huai's body did not ring and could not be called in because he was talking to Bai Liu, and without the phone ringing to locate it, many of the children looked confused.

And soon, the phone rings on Bai Liu's side.

The children's black and red eyes fixed eerily on Bai Liu as he stood up, their contorted bodies moving toward him in unnatural poses. Meanwhile, Liu Huai drew his dagger, flung it, then stomped off the wall, covering the distance between them in a few lightning-fast horizontal jumps.

Liu Huai appeared behind Bai Liu in a flash, grabbed the collar of Bai Liu's oversized hospital gown, and darted across the wall. With Bai Liu in tow, he slid swiftly across the slick floor.

If being carried by Mu Sicheng was like riding a high-speed train, then being carried by Liu Huai was akin to sitting on a low-flying swallow—light, soundless, occasionally skimming the surface before soaring again.

The alternation between these two vastly different movement styles was one of the reasons Liu Huai and Mu Sicheng had once made such an effective team, effortlessly hoisting monsters around.

Behind them, the monstrous children pursued relentlessly. Whenever they drew too close, Liu Huai flung Bai Liu—whose phone continued to ring—out to draw their attention, before swiftly switching positions. It was the same tactic he'd used with Mu Sicheng before, shifting aggro between them. The seamless coordination brought a brief moment of déjà vu, momentarily pulling Liu Huai into memories of their past partnership.

But Bai Liu's soft voice quickly pulled him back to reality:

"The sound stopped. Muke must have made it back and called me—he ran pretty fast. Let's take the emergency stairwell; there's no nurse there."

Their goal was to buy time for Muke to return safely to his room and deactivate the [phone tracking] function linked to his deformed child. The private hospital only had two ways up—the elevator, which was guarded by a nurse, and the stairwell, which, while dangerous, was their only viable option. Getting caught now would mean missing the baptism tomorrow.

Since Bai Liu could only use his skill twice to stop two phones from ringing, he had chosen the most cost-effective option: ensuring Liu Huai—the fastest among them—and Muke, who needed to survive, were safe first.

That left Bai Liu in the riskiest position. He was the only one whose phone continued to ring.

But Bai Liu didn't mind. At this moment, he was, after all, the least valuable among them.

Even if Liu Huai had miscalculated and left him to die with only six life points remaining, Bai Liu wouldn't have regretted it. Yet, Liu Huai had been more protective than Bai Liu anticipated, managing to get him safely back to Ward 501 without losing a single life point—though he had been unceremoniously tossed around a few times in the process.

501—Liu Huai's ward.

Muke crouched on the floor, drenched in cold sweat, his hands clutching his chest. A heart patient shouldn't run that fast—let alone sprint up flights of stairs. But he had run for his life, racing back to the ward to call Bai Liu as quickly as possible. Now, he could barely breathe, his body curled in on itself as he gasped for air.

Liu Huai sat on the edge of the bed, panting heavily, gripping a dagger in each hand. His hospital gown was soaked through with sweat.

Dragging Bai Liu at high speeds was exhausting. Unlike Mu Sicheng, whose stamina was significantly higher due to his thief-like attributes, Liu Huai wasn't built for prolonged bursts of movement. The pursuit

had taken a toll on him.

Sweat dripped from his jaw. He wiped it away with a trembling hand before tilting his head back and downing a stamina potion.

Bai Liu, in comparison, appeared to be in the best condition. But that wasn't saying much.

His stamina was depleted, and with only six life points left, his physical condition had hit rock bottom.

He perched on the edge of the straw bed he had avoided until now, hands resting weakly on his knees, fingers trembling slightly. His head was bowed as he slowly regulated his breathing, his chest rising and falling in deep, deliberate movements. His face was pale—almost frighteningly so.

Muke, noticing Bai Liu's state, hesitated before stepping forward to check on him. But before he could get close, Bai Liu lifted his head, his elbows still resting on his knees.

His eyes, void of emotion, locked onto Muke.

The sheer indifference in Bai Liu's gaze made Muke's heart lurch. It wasn't anger or disappointment—it was something colder. A detached, clinical scrutiny, as if Bai Liu were assessing a malfunctioning tool.

Muke instinctively halted.

"Muke." Bai Liu's voice was soft, sickly sweet. "Who gave you the right to override my decision and risk your own life?"

Bai Liu's expression remained unreadable as he continued, "Your soul belongs to me. I have the right to allocate every single one of your life points. You may only die when I say so. Before I give that order—" His voice dipped lower. "I don't want to see you making independent decisions, like telling me to 'delete you' ever again. Our relationship is one-way. I give orders. You don't."

Muke, visibly shaken, nodded frantically. "I-I understand."

"As punishment for your insubordination," Bai Liu said lightly, "all your point rewards from this game will go to me. Any objections?"

Muke dropped his gaze, picking at his fingers. "……No."

A few moments passed. Then, suddenly, Muke started sobbing.

He tried to hold it in, but the overwhelming rush of emotions—surviving, being reprimanded, being punished—was too much. His body curled into itself as he cried, tears dripping onto his hands. He wiped his face roughly with his sleeve, trying to suppress the uncontrollable grief.

The helplessness of dragging Bai Liu into danger. The despair of knowing he wasn't strong enough to protect him. The bitter acknowledgment that, in the end, Bai Liu had saved him—and yet still viewed him as nothing more than a liability.

He couldn't stop the tears.

"What are you crying for?" Bai Liu sighed, exasperated. "Look at me, Muke. Do you have complaints about my decision?"

Muke, still hiccuping from his tears, lifted his head. His eyes and nose were red, tear tracks glistening down his cheeks. "No—hic—no complaints."

"Then why are you crying?" Bai Liu asked softly.

Muke didn't answer, his lips pressing together stubbornly.

Bai Liu's voice remained even. "I order you to tell me why you're crying."

"I—I don't understand!" Muke blurted between sobs. "Why did you save me? I'm useless! I'll just drag you down! What if you died because of me?! I wouldn't even survive alone! I'm going to die anyway, so why—why not let me—why couldn't I just—" He broke down completely, crying harder. "If only I were Mu Sicheng, I'd be able to help you more!"

Bai Liu interrupted. "Everything you did tonight—pretending to be a normal player, deceiving Miao Feichi's team, dodging the lie detector scale, reading through those books and effectively passing me the renewal formula—" He paused, his voice unhurried. "All of that was something neither Mu Sicheng nor I could have done. Only you could."

Muke stared at him, dazed.

"You may not see any value in yourself," Bai Liu continued, reaching out to ruffle Muke's hair. "But in my eyes, you're irreplaceable. That's why I saved you."

Muke's breath hitched. His wide, tear-filled eyes reflected Bai Liu's gentle smile. If Mu Sicheng had been here, he would have screamed at him to run—because Bai Liu's business-like, soothing smile was never a good sign.

And yet, Muke knew Bai Liu was telling the truth.

"I was so scared," Muke admitted, still crying. "I thought I was really going to die. I tried my best, but I couldn't do anything, the monster was too strong—"

"You didn't use everything at your disposal," Bai Liu corrected.

Muke hiccupped. "I did!"

"You haven't asked me for help yet."

Muke froze.

"Remember that next time." Bai Liu patted his head like a kindergarten teacher rewarding a child. "All in all—good job tonight, Muke."

Muke burst into fresh tears. "Oooooh! Yes, yes! I'll remember next time, I swear!"

The Loving Welfare Home

Bai Liu looked at Mu Ke, who was crying. He tried several times to get him to stop, but nothing worked. Even when Bai Liu used commanding words like, “I order you not to cry,” Mu Ke only covered his mouth to stifle his sobs. Tears still fell in steady drops, bata bata, down his cheeks. He hiccupped out in a particularly pitiful voice that he couldn’t stop and that it might take a few more minutes.

Mu Ke didn’t think of himself as someone who cried easily. But for some reason, whenever he saw Bai Liu, he felt like a wronged child finally seeing his parents—someone who would allow him to complain.

Even though he felt a little ashamed, he just couldn’t help it.

Lowering his head, Mu Ke’s face burned with embarrassment. At the same time… he felt a subtle sense of relief.

Bai Liu ignored Mu Ke’s sniffles and turned to Liu Huai, who looked somewhat puzzled.

Liu Huai’s expression practically screamed: Is this how you usually fool your teammates?

Bai Liu paid no mind to it and instead spoke in a calm, serious tone. “Let’s talk about the next plan.”

Liu Huai exhaled, his eyes complicated as he watched Bai Liu. After witnessing the entire process of him manipulating Mu Ke, Liu Huai sighed in frustration. “I still can’t believe I let you talk me into this. I’m going up against Miao Feichi as part of your team. Even if I make it through this game, I’ll have a lot of trouble waiting for me afterward.”

“But if you weren’t on my team, you and your sister wouldn’t even have a chance of making it through this game.” Bai Liu’s gaze was steady. “And your sister, Liu Jiayi, would most likely be sacrificed by Miao Feichi. Or eaten.”

Convincing Liu Huai was easy for Bai Liu. Finding him and bringing him in had also been a simple decision.

The monster in Mu Ke’s room would revive, and Bai Liu would have to break into the ICU again, navigating through a sea of nurses if he

wanted to get Mu Ke out once Mu Sicheng's speed ability was exhausted.

Bai Liu couldn't do it alone. And he definitely couldn't rely on Miao Feichi again. At best, he could trick Miao Gaojiang—a slow-moving but monster-resistant player—into handling it.

But Miao Gaojiang wasn't particularly useful to Bai Liu, who needed someone adept at escaping.

What Bai Liu needed was a player with high movement speed, someone skilled in concealment and evasion, and someone who had a firm grasp of their weaknesses. There was no better candidate than Liu Huai.

Liu Huai was on the fifth floor, along with Miao Feichi. Finding his ward had been easy—there were only three new patients on that floor: Miao Feichi, Miao Gaojiang, and Liu Huai.

New patients had differently marked rooms. By process of elimination, the room that wasn't Miao Feichi's or Miao Gaojiang's had to be Liu Huai's. And with Bai Liu holding two valuable bargaining chips—Liu Jiayi and the Life-Sustaining Remedy—it had taken him less than a minute to convince Liu Huai.

Liu Huai collapsed onto the hospital bed, head tilted back, staring up at the foggy ceiling. His voice was hoarse. "You're telling me Jiayi is a hunting target for the investors? That we need the blood of those kids to water the bed in order to survive?"

"Firstly, it's not exactly that we need her blood to water the bed," Bai Liu corrected. "Rather, you need to consume the blood lingzhi that grows from this bed after it absorbs her blood. She is the recipe for life for this terminally ill patient of yours." Bai Liu patted the bed Liu Huai was lying on.

Liu Huai raised a hand to cover his eyes, lips pressing into a thin line, as if he were running from the truth.

Bai Liu didn't stop. He calmly held up two fingers. "Secondly, as I told you, Liu Jiayi isn't just a target for the investors. Her blindness puts her at a disadvantage among the children as well."

His tone remained unhurried. "You should know, Liu Huai, that among the children, there's also a younger version of Miao Feichi. One who already enjoys eating human flesh. My little friend told me that

Miao Feichi is particularly fixated on Liu Jiayi. A blind little girl is at a complete disadvantage in every way—she's the perfect target for little Miao Feichi."

"In other words, your sister Liu Jiayi is a double-hunting target."

Liu Huai's hands clenched into fists. He lowered his arm from his eyes and turned to stare straight at Bai Liu.

Bai Liu remained impassive. "I promised my little friend that I'd protect your sister. The fact that she managed to call you tonight is already proof of my friend's protection. And I said I would protect Liu Jiayi because she's also the child my friend wants to adopt."

Liu Huai inhaled sharply, then sat up. He crossed his legs on the bed and met Bai Liu's gaze. "I believe you now. So what's next?"

"The logic of this game is mostly clear." Bai Liu leaned back, casually opening a drawer beside the bed. He pulled out a pen, then took a blank title page from somewhere and began sketching as he spoke.

Bai Liu was concise when analyzing a situation. He tapped the pen against the paper and wrote down key terms:

[Secondary game] [50-80]

"The Caring Home is a secondary game with a mortality rate of at least fifty percent. It splits our life values, dividing us into two separate identities: adults and children. Each of us has fifty percent of a shared lifebar."

Bai Liu wrote two [50] marks, then drew an arrow between them.

"But our two identity lines were never meant to be allies. Because this game only allows fifty percent of the players to survive, the logical conclusion is that we're adversaries to the children we share a lifebar with."

That was why Bai Liu had been wary of little Bai Liu. Because in a way...

"We're enemies." Bai Liu glanced up at Liu Huai, whose face had darkened. He continued, "And this renewal formula only confirms my hypothesis."

"For investors to survive, we have to drain the children's blood. Based

on the timeline of that Mother Goose rhyme—

Born on Monday, baptized on Tuesday, married on Wednesday, seriously ill on Thursday, critically ill on Friday, sick and dead on Saturday, and in the ground on Sunday—

We have to at least be seriously ill by Thursday. That means we need the children's blood before then. Otherwise, we'll be dead in a day."

Bai Liu jotted down [DDL: three days later].

"The same applies to the children. They have to escape Caring Home before Thursday, or they'll be drained and killed. Their main task is to run."

Bai Liu tapped his pen against the page, thinking aloud. "Actually, I suspect that little Bai Liu has already sensed the antagonistic nature of our roles. But when I handed him control over my own lifebar, he realized my intentions. I allowed him the opportunity to kill me, and because of that, he ultimately chose to trust me."

Liu Huai looked at Bai Liu in stunned silence. He shuddered when he met Bai Liu's steady gaze.

"You'd do anything for your sister, wouldn't you?" Bai Liu asked softly. "Mu Ke and I are nearly at the end of our lifebars. You can see where this is going."

Bai Liu's voice was unwavering. "We'll keep it small. Not big."

He had earned little Bai Liu's trust by making himself someone little Bai Liu could rely on. The kind of person Lu Yizhan had been for him.

Lu Yizhan had always chosen to sacrifice himself rather than let Bai Liu get hurt.

And now, in this game, little Bai Liu would trust him for the exact same reason.

Liu Huai's face darkened.

Bai Liu, as if unaware of Liu Huai's turmoil, simply looked down and continued writing in the paper in his hands.

Bai Liu remained unaffected by Liu Huai's turbulent emotions, continuing his analysis with impassive precision. "In my opinion, simply taking a child's blood to instill a blood lingzhi that could save

us is highly unlikely. This is a game with a minimum mortality rate of fifty percent. If obtaining just a child's blood could grant survival without any issues, it wouldn't reflect the typical mortality rate for a level two game."

As he spoke, Bai Liu wrote [6] → [3] on the paper.

"From that perspective," he continued, "there's more to this game than meets the eye. If we consider the mortality rate between eighty and fifty percent for a secondary game, it's a six-player death game. The number of players expected to die would be between three and 4.8."

With a few swift strokes, Bai Liu sketched a small girl on the paper. "What's also notable about this scenario is the presence of another player on the child's side—Liu Jiayi."

Upon hearing Liu Jiayi's name, Liu Huai's gaze fixed on Bai Liu's face.

Bai Liu proceeded as if nothing had changed. "There are only five children from whom we can take blood. Assuming a fifty percent mortality rate, only three players need to die. If Liu Jiayi is among those who die, one of the deaths is accounted for. Assuming the surviving players are all us 'investors,'"

Bai Liu, eyes still on the paper, wrote: [Maximum clearance efficiency for investors].

"With all conditions most favorable to the investors, a maximum of three would survive. With a fifty percent mortality rate, it would take about 1.6 children's worth of blood for an 'investor' to clear a bed."

He wrote [1.6] on his paper and drew a small circle around both the [1] and the [6] after the decimal point.

His gaze remained steady. "So who represents the [1] and who represents the [0.6]? The game has already hinted at the answer."

"The child we invest in is our primary blood donor, the [1], and by supplementing our bed with the blood of this invested child, and adding about 0.6 worth of another child's blood, we can sustain the blood lingzhi that provides maximum relief for the terminal illness." Bai Liu drew a cross over the [1.6], blotting it out. "But that option is ruled out for me because the return on the investment is too low."

"The probability that an investor's pass requires 1.6 children's blood for maximum cost-effectiveness is high. So sacrificing one investor by

not taking their blood will, in turn, preserve 1.6 children."

"We, the blood-sucking adults, are far less valuable than their survival. It's more cost-effective to sacrifice ourselves to survive." Bai Liu drew a protective shield over the sketch of Liu Jiayi he had made earlier, looking up at Liu Huai as he continued, "So I decided to prioritize the children's lives in this game. This remedy won't work for me or Muke. We're not going down this route. We're not going for the main quest."

Bai Liu paused, his gaze lingering on Liu Huai, who was pale. "But our situations are different. We've chosen to sacrifice ourselves to protect our younger selves, and if the plan succeeds, we won't die, and we'll pass."

"But you, Liu Huai, are not like us." Bai Liu's eyes narrowed slightly as he observed Liu Huai's silence. "You and Liu Jiayi are separate and hostile individuals. If you choose to prioritize Liu Jiayi's survival, you will most likely die, as you won't receive any blood."

"So, how will you choose?"

Bai Liu looked at Liu Huai with deep concentration, as though studying an entirely different species.

How far would Liu Huai go for his sister? Could a man's professed love for his sister really be like the strange Lu Yizhan's, where someone could give up everything for such an unprovoked emotion?

Liu Huai, a man with an intense desire to live, intrigued Bai Liu. His pen idly circled the protective shield he had drawn around Liu Jiayi's sketch, which now appeared covered in strange black dots, as if the shield itself had been overshadowed.

Liu Huai sat on the bed's edge like a silent plant, his hands hanging by his side with the dagger, motionless yet breathing heavily.

Bai Liu quickly turned his gaze away, sensing the twisted, fearful expression on Liu Huai's face—fear of the approaching unknown that he could not control.

Liu Huai's fear and hesitation were palpable, twisting his features. His retreat from death made his supposed love for Liu Jiayi seem self-serving, a signal of self-interest. Bai Liu grew bored, dismissing it as no different from other forms of 'love' he had encountered before.

To him, it was like the hollow declarations of love he'd seen countless

times, empty words chewed over and spat out with no real sweetness, only for one's own gratification.

People were always selfish, after all.

Bai Liu spoke again, his tone indifferent, "If you want to pass as an investor, I can have little Bai Six help you extract..." He trailed off, his words hanging in the air.

"Liu Jiayi's blood?" Liu Huai's voice trembled with dread, looking at Bai Liu with fear in his eyes. "Bai Liu, if I die, will your friends really adopt Jiajia?"

Liu Huai looked as though he were a foster parent forced to give up their child, anxiety clear on his face. "Jiajia can't see and clings to me. I'm afraid she'll be alone when I'm gone. I know your friend is very kind, please take good care of her. If you can help with her sight..."

It was odd, hearing a not-yet-graduated university student ramble about raising a child, his words betraying a maturity that made him sound more like a parent than a young man.

The fear on Liu Huai's face never faded, and his words were consumed by concern for Liu Jiayi, as if he feared his death would leave her struggling more than death itself.

"She doesn't like sleeping alone at night. She has a little bear I sewed for her. It's a bit old, but she loves it. If you take her from the orphanage, remember to bring it with you. She's quiet but kind. She's just scared when she can't hear anything. Just turn the TV on for her. She likes hamsters, but she's a bit careless with her hands. Don't buy her one; she'll cry if it dies. Very badly..."

Bai Liu paused, his gaze focused on Liu Huai. "Have you really thought about sacrificing yourself for your sister?"

Liu Huai hesitated for a moment before replying, "It doesn't require thinking."

"I entered this game to give her a brighter future, but it all depends on her being alive."

Liu Huai's thoughts were clear, and his bitter smile was full of resignation. "Bai Liu, I wish I were as good a player as you and Mu Sicheng. But I'm not. There's nothing I can do for her future, except fight to keep her alive. That's all I can do for her."

"Death isn't hard to accept," Liu Huai continued, his shoulders slumping as if he was reassuring himself. "I knew this day would come when I entered the game, but Jiajia hasn't fully trusted me yet. She hasn't even seen what I look like, and it's hard to let go of that..."

But there was no point in regret. This game was about Liu Jiayi's life or death, and it gave Liu Huai no chance to make peace with it.

"If I could live by sacrificing any of them, I would. I'd do anything to try..." Liu Huai trailed off, his body sagging in defeat. He fell silent for a long time.

Tears slid from Liu Huai's eyes, landing on the dagger he clutched—the same dagger he'd used to kill his best friend to survive.

But now, he had reached the one person he couldn't betray.

Bai Liu didn't stop him. Liu Huai sat on the bed, pale as a corpse ready for the coffin. His hand trembled as he gripped the dagger, but Bai Liu found it almost comical. Liu Huai was only now fearing his own death.

When faced with the reality of death, Liu Huai's first thoughts were for Liu Jiayi, then for himself—a subconscious emotional reaction that Bai Liu found unbelievable.

Liu Huai smiled bitterly, his head lowered. He clenched his fists, took a deep breath, and raised his head again.

"Bai Liu, I remember your personal skill is trading. If I die, I can leave you something useful." Liu Huai's exhaustion was evident, his face a mask of empty relief, only fear and tears lingering in his eyes. He grabbed Bai Liu's hand, his voice thick with emotion. "But only if you help me..."

"Let Liu Jiayi see again?" Bai Liu's voice was calm as he looked at Liu Huai's weary face and averted his eyes. "Wait until you're dead. I don't do short sales."

The Loving Welfare Home

It's night at the Children's Home.

Little Bai Six lay on his bed, his eyes quietly opening as he heard the faint sound of a flute. It was loud enough to wake him, but the other children in the room remained fast asleep, exhausted from the night's activities. All except Little Bai Six, who, always alert, was wide awake.

He gingerly slipped out of bed, quietly put on his shoes, and glanced at the clock hanging on the wall—2 a.m.

The only sounds in the dark dormitory were the soft snores of the children. They huddled in their beds, soft bodies hidden under blankets. Little Muke even had his head covered, as if trying to shield himself.

But really, anyone could easily break these children if they wanted to. Little Bai Six watched the door of their room slowly creak open, the sound in sync with the flute's steady rhythm. The wooden door, twisting and groaning, revealed the dim, empty corridor outside.

There was no one outside, and yet, the door had opened by itself.

The sound of the flute grew clearer, its melody drifting lazily and cheerfully into the room. The children began to stir, frowning in their sleep, their bodies squirming as if caught in a strange, magical dream. They murmured softly, twitching their arms and legs.

Little Bai Six calmly nudged Little Muke awake.

—It was no wonder the flute didn't affect him. The sound worked on the sleeping children, but Little Bai Six had only been in the orphanage for two days, and being a light sleeper in an unfamiliar place, he woke up the moment the flute played, unaffected by its hypnotic effect.

Little Muke woke with a start, rubbing his eyes, his forehead slick with cold sweat. He took a long, dazed breath before looking up at Little Bai Six, standing at the foot of his bed, still half-asleep as if not fully realizing someone was there.

Groggily, Little Muke smiled and stretched, then shuffled out of bed, putting on his shoes as he mumbled, "We need to leave this orphanage. It's going to draw our blood and kill us..."

"You're awake. It's just the flute's hypnosis," Little Bai Six said, taking Little Muke by the wrist and pulling him to face him. His eyes narrowed, sharp and calculating.

Little Muke's eyes were still glazed, his body trembling. Though he was sleepy, his eyes glistened with fear as tears welled up.

"It wasn't a dream," Little Muke shuddered, voice cracking. "I saw nurses strapping us down to beds, pushing syringes through our hands and feet, drawing our blood into tubes, then it dripped into a metal jar. We couldn't stop them... we couldn't get out..."

He clutched his shoulders, shivering in terror. "They used thick black needles on our scalps and faces, like the ones used to pierce livestock. They tied rubber tubes around our necks to crush the veins in our faces, draining us dry."

"We were suffocating, with purple and black faces, struggling helplessly against the hospital bed..." He began to cry, his face streaked with tears as he looked up at Little Bai Six, desperate. "I swear it wasn't a dream! I saw what's going to happen after the christening tomorrow! The investors are bad people. They're going to baptize us, but it's just a way to drain our blood. They're not helping us; they're just using us!"

"Of course, they're not helping us for free," Little Bai Six responded, his voice cold and detached. "Nothing is free in this world, especially for young humans like you and me, who don't have much value. The only thing we have is our bodies. They invest in us for what we have inside. Why be surprised? Isn't it just how the world works?"

Little Muke stared at him, dazed and afraid. "You knew all along, didn't you? You knew they were bad people?"

"They're not bad," Little Bai Six said, his voice emotionless. "They're just consumers, capable of buying our bodies. People like us, without purchasing power, are nothing but commodities. We can be bought and sold at will. It's a simple fact."

Little Muke, looking at the calm, emotionless face of Little Bai Six, took a step back, stunned by the cold truth. "You knew they would do this to us all along?"

Little Bai Six's gaze was sharp and unfeeling. "There's no such thing as good people out there. Do you think they're kind? That they won't take advantage of you? They might eat your flesh, do even worse

things to you. Do you have any power to stop them? Escape? Until you have the means to buy back your freedom, running away just means you've gone from one shelf to another."

Little Muke was struck speechless. He opened his mouth, but no words came out.

Little Bai Six tilted his head slightly, then asked, "How old are you?"

Little Muke, barely holding back tears, twisted his fingers together nervously. "I... I'm eleven."

"Oh, eleven," Little Bai Six said dismissively. "Don't be so naive, Muke. This orphanage exists to make children disappear every Sunday. The children who vanish are always carefully chosen. Our group... we're the ones they want."

Little Bai Six glanced at Little Muke, his eyes lingering on the boy's delicate, pale shoulders exposed by his pajamas.

Little Muke, still confused and frightened, asked quietly, "What do they want with us?"

Little Bai Six looked away, his expression unreadable. "Nothing... forget it."

For a moment, he thought this place was about child exploitation, a thought that crossed his mind when his "investor" first told him to protect Muke and Liu Jiayi. But soon, he realized the truth wasn't so simple.

The investors were after something else.

If it were about lust, they could have begun the moment the children arrived. But it had been a day, and none of the investors had made any moves yet, only contacting them via phone.

Little Bai Six suspected the investors weren't sure what they wanted from the children either. Were they interested in charity, psychological comfort, or some form of superstitious belief that helping would prolong their lives?

But those were indirect, subtle purposes. He had the feeling there was something more central at play—something that led the investors to watch them closely. And the hospital across the street only deepened his suspicions.

Maybe they were after a cure of some sort.

The ability to heal wasn't just physical. It could be psychological, like the church where they were supposed to be baptized the next day. It looked beautiful, but there was symbolism hidden behind its pristine façade. The investors might believe that by doing good deeds, praying for divine protection, they could heal something in themselves.

But there was a more direct way to heal.

And that's where the children came in.

Little Bai Six, his expression still neutral, turned back to Muke. "From the first day, I knew my role here. I just didn't know exactly what part I played. Now it's clear—it's our blood."

Little Muke's voice shook as he protested, "But if you knew, why didn't you run? You were talking to your investor last night for half an hour—are you crazy? He's not a good person! He's a monster who sucks people's blood!"

Little Bai Six's eyes darkened as he looked at Muke. "First of all, this place is completely closed off. We can't escape unless it's an open day. Secondly, if my investor hadn't paid to save you last night, I wouldn't have cared if you died. Even if he's a monster, he's the one who saved you. You need to understand that."

Little Muke opened his mouth to argue, but Little Bai Six's words silenced him. "Impossible. He didn't save you for your blood. If that was his intention, he could have paid me to drain it last night, and you would've been empty by now."

Little Muke staggered backward, his face pale with fear. "What do you mean... how could you—"

Little Bai Six grinned coldly, taking a step toward him. "How am I? By your standards, I'm much worse than my investor who saved you. Little Muke, you're ten years old. Shouldn't you be smarter than this?"

Muke recoiled in fear, almost falling over. His voice trembled as he screamed, "Aah! Don't come any closer!"

After a moment of frightening Muke with his icy demeanor, Little Bai Six stepped back, returning to his usual emotionless self. "Even if all the investors are bloodsuckers, mine is on our side. He could've killed you, but he didn't. He will help us. So, you'd better listen to him and

not act recklessly."

Muke nodded furiously, trembling. "Yes, yes, I understand."

Little Bai Six turned toward the open door to the corridor, peering through the crack. His expression darkened when he saw something.

The corridor was eerily silent, save for the sound of the flute. Several doors to rooms were ajar, with lamps swaying gently, their faint light illuminating cobwebs in the corners. In the distance, the sound of children's running feet echoed softly through the halls.

But that wasn't what made Little Bai Six frown.

"Something's coming," he muttered.

Little Muke, hiding behind him, peeked cautiously into the corridor. "I don't see anything... nothing's coming in..." he said, confused.

"Look up," Little Bai Six ordered, his tone calm and distant.

Muke hesitated but followed his gaze. Slowly, he craned his neck upward. The long, narrow hallway was adorned with old paintings of animals, their eyes eerily lifelike in the dim light. But Muke's gaze drifted past them, and his heart stopped when he saw what was truly terrifying.

Children hung from the ceiling like bats. They were covered in blood-dried IV bags and tubes, their faces gaunt and skeletal. Their limbs were thin and frail, their eyes wide and unnaturally large. The tubes that twisted around the children were plugged into the walls, pulling them forward like marionettes.

The scene was haunting—terrifyingly real, as if it had come straight from a nightmare.

And among them, the flute-playing children continued their eerie melody, not with a flute, but with a large, hollow needle.

Little Bai Six's voice was low and understanding. "The Piper in Colour." He paused, watching the children. "So this is why I couldn't find the flute players yesterday. They were on the ceiling all along."

Little Muke, shaking with fear, tugged at Little Bai Six's sleeve. "I... I want to go back to bed."

Little Bai Six didn't care about Little Muke. He looked up at the flute-

playing children for a while, watching them enter the different open doors of their bedrooms. Then, he gently followed them out. Little Muke, about to faint from fear, was too afraid to be left alone in his bedroom with the door wide open. Bai Six still trembled, like an ungrateful follower.

After entering the different sleeping rooms, the flute-playing children —whose eyeballs were so large they seemed to be about to fall out of their sockets—stood on the ceiling, twisted their heads with a click to an angle almost parallel to the floor, and cocked their heads to observe the sleeping children below.

Little Bai Six sidled up next to the half-open door, not entering, and leaned slightly to watch through the crack, trying to see what the group of flute-playing children was up to.

The child on the ceiling walked around the room, cocking its head at each sleeping child above them. It finally stopped at one child, as if selecting a target. Slowly, it dropped its tentacle-like IV tube and gently lifted the child's blanket.

Little Muke covered his mouth in fear, trying not to scream.

The boy soon woke up, apparently from the same horrible dream as Muke, triggered by the sound of the flute. Tears and panic filled his face. He almost screamed at the sight of the grotesque child, but his mouth was covered by an IV tube.

The child on the ceiling seemed to gesture something to the waking child with the IV tube. The child soon broke into tears, quickly jumped out of bed, put on his shoes, and followed the child on the ceiling. Little Bai Six quickly retreated into his room and closed the door, leaving only a small crack to watch the scene in the corridor.

Each flute-playing child who entered a different sleeping room came out with a beaming child. The child on the ceiling played a quirky tune on a flute made from a syringe. The children on the floor lined up, humming, following one by one, just like the scene Little Bai Six had witnessed yesterday.

But suddenly, the procession stopped. All the children on the ceiling craned their heads through the doorway, staring with dead eyes at Little Bai Six, who was peeping through the crack in the door. Little Muke, hiding behind Little Bai Six, tugged frantically at the corner of his coat, staring at him with a look of terror that made him almost cry.

Little Bai Six covered his mouth to prevent himself from crying out. He slowly raised his hand and pointed to the top of their heads.

Little Bai Six fell silent. He looked up slowly and saw a child above him, head cocked, a pair of ping-pong-ball-sized eyes on a wrinkled, blackened face, staring at him with unseeing eyes.

The child had come in through the ceiling, just as Little Bai Six had exited. The IV tube beneath it had a child's head wrapped around it—one who had been sleeping in the same room as Little Bai Six. That child was now staring at him and Muke with a strange smile, wrapped under the IV tube.

Little Bai Six slowly opened the door to let them out. The child bounced away. The child on the ceiling leaned over to observe Little Bai Six and Muke, who was shivering and tearful. It stroked them with its IV tube, as if confirming something, then finally retracted its tube and left with a grimace across the ceiling.

The sound of the flute rang out again in the corridor, whining through the bloodstained syringes, fading away in time with the humming voices of the children being taken. It echoed ethereally down the corridor and disappeared into the distance.

After confirming that no monsters were on the ceiling, Little Bai Six quickly unlocked the door of the sleeping room from the inside.

He covered his heart and exhaled with difficulty to calm his racing pulse. He had just been terrified. But when Little Muke recovered and turned around, Little Bai Six acted as if nothing had happened. He was already lying in bed with the covers up, ready for sleep.

It didn't look like he had just been nearly taken by a monster.

Little Muke was speechless and devastated. He walked over to Little Bai Six's bed and, in a low voice, scolded him, "We almost got caught just now! Can you think before you rush out next time?!"

Little Bai Six, eyes closed under the covers, didn't open them when Little Muke scolded him. Instead, he explained nonchalantly, "It wouldn't have taken us. I've observed before that the children taken by the flute are very specific."

He had noticed this when he observed it yesterday. The flute had an indiscriminate hypnotic effect on all the children, but only a select few ended up being taken. Before, Little Bai Six had wondered how it

worked. His door hadn’t been opened by the flute yesterday. He had been in his room, watching the corridor through the window with a restricted view, so he hadn’t seen the children on the ceiling.

Since no flute-playing children had entered his room yesterday, he didn’t know how the others had locked up and taken the children.

But Little Bai Six felt he needed to find out. After all, his [investor] would surely be interested in this information, which is why Little Bai Six had ventured out.

"But even if there is a pattern, how do you know we’re not the kind of kids who get taken?" Little Muke questioned. He had also sensed that the group of flute-playing children was clearly targeting children who fit a specific profile, but the problem was that they didn’t know the criteria the other party used to select them.

Little Muke raised an eyebrow. "Our door was open tonight too, meaning we also had children in our room who were eligible to be taken. How do you know we weren’t?"

"Because it’s Tuesday," Little Bai Six finally glanced at Little Muke. "It’s just our baptism day, so we won’t be taken."

Little Muke was a bit overwhelmed by the reaction: "..... Why won't we be taken away on Baptism Day?"

Little Bai Six: "According to my understanding of baptism, we shouldn't be eligible to have blood drawn before we are baptized. We are considered sinful before baptism, and only the blood of the Lord can cleanse us of our sins."

Little Bai Six said lazily with a snort, having stayed up for two days straight and feeling really sleepy: "And haven't you noticed? These [flute-playing kids] are saving the day."

Little Muke was stunned: "Saving people?"

"Yes, saving lives." Little Bai Six closed his eyes again, hands folded over his chest, lying peacefully as if he was about to fall asleep. "They're carrying IV tubes and bags. They must be coming from a private hospital, so I'm guessing they know which children those terminally ill investors are going to draw blood from next. They're taking away the ones selected for the upcoming blood draw."

"For example, the child taken from our room. I saw the dean register him during the day, saying that an [investor] wanted to adopt him." Little Bai Six said calmly. "I'm sure you saw it all in your dream, Muke."

Little Muke shuddered at the thought of the blood draws in his dream.

Little Bai Six continued without skipping a beat: "And because of this, if I'm not mistaken, the children were first hypnotized by the sound of the flute to see what might happen to them in the future. Then they met the children who looked exactly like the ones whose blood had been drawn in their dreams."

"The [flute-playing kids] must have expressed to them that they were victims of this blood draw, and that they would take them to a safe place where they'd never have to come back. That's why the kids voluntarily and soberly followed the weird-looking [flute-playing kids], walking away so happily."

Little Bai Six paused. "And our [investors] have given up on bleeding us, so even after the baptism, we're safe."

"Because we don’t need saving, they don’t take us away."

Little Muke, lying on his bed, turned sideways to look at Little Bai Six, who seemed to have fallen asleep. He couldn’t resist asking in a whisper, "..... Little Bai Six, what makes you so sure that your [investor] won’t secretly register behind your back to take you and bleed you?"

Little Bai Six breathed evenly and didn’t answer, as if he had fallen asleep. Little Muke sighed sadly, muttering under his breath, "Little Bai Six, you’re so gullible trusting your [investor], who is more naive." Then he fell asleep, his thoughts still filled with worry.

In the final moments of Little Muke’s sleep, he seemed to hear Little Bai Six answer calmly, "If he lies to me, I will kill him."

Two more pairs of eyes were rigidly open in the darkness of the children's sleeping room.

Little Miao Feichi and Little Miao Gaojiang were trembling under the covers, listening to Little Muke and Little Bai Six. They saw the horrible [flute-playing child] that had entered, seemingly because they were both awake. The flute-playing child hovered above them for a long time.

Now, these two children—who had not yet experienced the various horrors in the game and later achieved fame and fortune as S-rank players—were in a cold sweat, afraid to move. In the end, these two were just ordinary people in their childhood.

Perhaps it couldn’t be considered ordinary. After all, one of them grew up with the guts to kill his mother and condone his own children killing his wife and eating the corpse.

But how can killing your terminally ill mother (wife), a woman who was useless, be the same as being killed yourself?

Little Miao Gaojiang, her clothes drenched in cold sweat, could barely contain her composure and was terrified enough.

Little Miao Feichi, the man who had the audacity to scald his terminally ill mother to death with boiling water and who loved eating children's flesh, couldn’t accept being treated like this—the thought of being bled dry, reduced to a skin-and-bones state, was so terrifying that his feet twitched a few times.

Even though he covered his head with the blanket, he let out a whimper, trying to suppress it, but it was still audible in his shock.

Hearing two slightly heavier breaths and a little light crying from the sleeping room, a strange smile curled up on the face of Little Bai Six, who appeared to have been asleep for a long time.

At 6:15 AM on Tuesday morning, Bai Liu's phone rang on time.

"Good morning, Mr. Investor." Little Bai Six greeted politely. "I found out last night..."

"A child playing a flute?" Bai Liu asked rhetorically, his voice laced with sarcasm, as he crossed his system panel.

[The Monster Book of Love Orphanage Refresh - Deformed Children (1/3)]

[Monster Name: Deformed Child (Berserk version after blood draw)]
[Characteristics: Likes to go out late at night to take away children]
[Weakness: ????? (to be explored)]
[Mode of Attack: Blood Injection (A+), Phone Location (A+)]
[Trigger new attack: Flute Player, A rank skill, can lure away the player's secondary identity line with the sound of the flute]
[Congratulations to player Bai Liu for collecting all the Freak Child attacks]

There was a silence on Little Bai Six's side. He didn't ask why Bai Liu knew what was happening on their side but continued to report without any fluctuation. "Yes, the time of appearance was around two in the morning. It was in sleep hypnosis mode, and we could see the investors pumping their own blood in the future..."

Bai Liu listened quietly to Little Bai Six's report and thought: "It seems that the deformed children and you are on the same side. Yes, you're all victims, so the deformed children who chase you every night are probably the same as this child playing the flute. Even if they make you disappear, their main purpose is to take you away and hide you to protect you. In fact, it's to keep me from finding you."

But hidden somewhere—a group of ghost children could hide a group of real children so that the living couldn't find them at all. It was hard to say whether they were hidden in the underworld or the world above. Bai Liu felt that the children taken by this group might have died on a different level, only euthanized.

According to the scene in The Piper in the Flower, where the child is taken away, the child should also have been drowned, dying happily to the sound of the flute.

"I don't think it's protection," Bai Liu thought. "It should be death, too. If you take children away every night, with such a large number of children, I don't think these rich [investors] can't find them. One group of dead children can't hide another group."

"Yes, but it does have something to offer." Bai Liu's eyes narrowed. "These flute-playing kids should know how to escape from your fully enclosed orphanage."

Little Bai Six went silent for a moment before asking, "You need me to escape this [loving orphanage]?"

"Yes," Bai Liu replied. "But now the question is, if you run out of the orphanage after this group of flute-playing kids, how will you protect yourself from them? You can't just run; you need to take the others with you."

Bai Liu's fingers tapped twice on the edge of the bed, his eyes hiding a lot of obscure emotions. "All of them, including Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang. You need to take them and run out. Then—"

"Do them and get the blood for you, right?" Little Bai Six added without a ripple in his voice. "That's no problem. I can get them to follow me, but for an additional fee."

"One hundred thousand for one person."

Bai Liu gave an unnoticeable pause, then lazily curled his lips. "Deal."

"But there are two core points to note about this deal, and if you break one of them, the deal is null and void," Bai Liu added casually. "First, the core mission is to escape, but the first priority is your personal safety, followed by the safety of Muke and Liu Jiayi. If that's not guaranteed, don't take it lightly."

"The second point is that killing Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang is not a necessary task for you." Bai Liu's voice softened, his eyes downcast. "I'd like you to leave them to me if you can, Little Bai Six. After all, you're only fourteen, and I'm twenty-four. I might be more suited for this sort of thing than you. And of course, I'll pay you the two hundred thousand as usual."

This time, Little Bai Six was silent for a long time before asking, his voice tinged with genuine doubt, "Is there any difference between doing this at fourteen and at twenty-four?"

"The substance isn't that different," Bai Liu paused. "But I just don't want you to do it. Wait until you're an adult and can take responsibility for your actions before deciding if you want to be a bad person."

"Let the bad guy be me, the adult, little friend."

After Little Bai Six hung up, Bai Liu looked out the darkened window of his ward and exhaled. He thought about how he had truly been conditioned by Lu Yizhan.

Lu Yizhan was most afraid of Bai Liu doing this, after all, Bai Liu was really good at it.

So, Lu Yizhan recited eight hundred times a day to tell him not to engage in marketing with underage people, and even in the game, Bai Liu subconsciously avoided such situations.

But it was better that he was here. After all, Little Bai Six had enough problems with his tasks, and it wasn't easy for him to get rid of Miao Feichi. It was best to leave him with tasks that could easily go wrong.

9 a.m.

The announcements in the ward informed all patients that they were ready to come out and about, as well as informing new patients to go and watch their children's baptism.

[System Alert: A side quest has been triggered. Players who have been notified of the children's phone calls have been invited to go and watch their invested children being baptized at the orphanage.]

Bai Liu is now in Muke's hospital room. It's baptism day, but Bai Liu is dead, and one of the five investors attending the baptism is bound to be missing. It's obvious that Muke is giving up on the side quest.

Muke was in a poor state of mind. He had been up for two nights in a row, overwhelmed with memories. He had been hunted, chased, and cried all night. Now, his eyes were swollen like a goldfish, and he lay dazed and motionless on his back.

This young master didn't really like the wet and sticky straw bed

either, but he didn't have the energy to care right now.

It was clear that the young master, who had been overworking his brain and eyes, needed a break. Bai Liu decided to attend the baptism as an investor in [Muke].

But it's one thing for Muke to need a break; it's another for him to actually get one.

He couldn't sleep at all, even though he was too tired to speak. As soon as Muke closed his eyes, his mind filled with a jumble of images and messages. His headache was splitting from the overwhelming emotions that kept his cerebral cortex active, even though Bai Liu had given him the bed and slept on the floor.

Muke saw Bai Liu getting up from the floor, preparing to leave. Muke struggled to get up from the bed and looked at Bai Liu with concern. "Why don't I go? I'm the real Muke after all. If they have any more props or tricks for the lie detector, I can handle it."

"No need," Bai Liu said, straightening his hospital gown. He had slept on the floor last night, padded with books, and hadn't rested well. His face looked tired.

Bai Liu turned to Muke on the bed. "I have something for you to do in the hospital, something only you can do."

Muke was stunned. "What is it?"

"I need you to look up some human case information for me," Bai Liu said.

The timeline for this copy of the orphanage is ten years ago, exactly when those entrepreneurs in reality invested in that children's home to prepare for the first group of children to be enrolled.

These two orphanages are caught in two manifestations of the same copy. Referring to [Bursting Last Train] and [Mirror City Bombing], although the game copy and the real events manifest differently, the core events are generally the same. It's likely these seriously ill entrepreneurs did the same thing to these children—extracting blood to feed the blood lingzhi to cure the disease.

But Lu Yizhan's investigations have been so devastating that he hasn't been able to find any clues as to what these entrepreneurs did to the children. After all, it's been ten years, and many of the ideas that

could be traced back to them have long been broken.

Bai Liu also thinks that even if there were clues, they've probably been swept under the carpet by these powerful people. Otherwise, this group of people would not have given up funding the orphanage and allowed a place like this—where they've committed crimes—to slip from their control.

Even if Bai Liu gets out of the game and tells Lu Yizhan about the orphanage case, Lu Yizhan might believe Bai Liu's strange claims, but without concrete evidence or clues, there's nothing they can do against a bunch of reputable, well-established entrepreneurs.

But Bai Liu promised to look into the matter for Lu Yizhan, and he accepted Lu Yizhan's payment. He likes making deals with a clear finish line.

What can't be done outside the game may still be possible inside, and what clues aren't available outside may exist within.

Bai Liu looked at Xiang Muke. "Muke, I'll write down some names for you later. The nurses are very lax in watching the patients during the day. See if you can infiltrate the file room where they store the patients' data and find the medical records of these people. Remember them all for me."

"Especially the names of the children whose medicines they used, and the time of each blood extraction. It would be good if you could remember them and tell me when I return."

The case files are quite voluminous—several of them—and it would be difficult for anyone else to remember everything in the short time it takes to blend in unnoticed by the nurses in the file room.

But for Muke, it's a simple task. He nodded without thinking. "Yes, just give me the name of the patient."

Bai Liu said a few names and then asked, "Did you remember the names of these people?"

Muke nodded, but then his brow furrowed slightly in confusion as he asked, "These are real-life entrepreneurs, they're supposed to be normal people, right? How did their names end up in this game's archive?"

Bai Liu lowered his eyes. "They're probably no ordinary people.

They're supposed to be monsters in this game. Also, Muke, if you can, remember as many names as you can of all the investor patients registered in the sick bay."

Muke was stunned. "Does… does it have to be all of them? Why?"

"A large children's home that has been open for ten years and has only recently started to taper off investment…"

Here, Bai Liu paused subtly and then continued.

"The investment cost of a large private children's home is huge, and without a relatively large chain of interests behind it to support it, I think it's unlikely to sustain such a long period of unpaid investment from multiple groups, unless a commodity chain is formed."

Bai Liu calmly analyzed and elaborated. "It's clear that the commodity a children's home can provide is children—and the by-products of children. Conventionally, I would guess it's something like an erotic or exploitive chain, but here it would be blood."

Bai Liu's attitude had an almost impersonal indifference as he stated emotionlessly, "The amount of blood that can be provided by the number of children circulating in an orphanage that has been open for ten years and can house hundreds of children at a time... I think that more than the few people I've mentioned could be saved. I think that, at the time this orphanage was opened, there were more than just the few entrepreneurs in line for the terminally ill, too—on the bright side."

Bai Liu looked at Muke with a calm expression that made Muke uneasy. "If my suspicions are correct, the information in that archive, except for the players who have logged into this game before…"

"…should all be [investors] who have, in reality, sucked the blood of children to cure themselves."

[System warning: Player Bai Liu is talking about something that is at the heart of the game, and this conversation has been blocked and silenced by player Bai Liu's TV.]

Muke was completely confused. He was a bit overwhelmed, and he fumbled, feeling a spine-tingling sensation as he got out of bed. "Wait, Bai Liu, you mean—no, wait, if I have to remember all the patient case information, I probably can't remember that much in a short time now! I'm… I'm not thinking very clearly right now. And what the hell

did you mean by what you just said...?"

"I'll explain the details to you later." Bai Liu interrupted Muke's questioning. He glanced at the panicked Muke lightly. "If you can't remember everything, just focus on the ones I told you about. With this level of crime, there should be a relatively tight chain of connections between them. Once you catch a few, it will be easy to pull out the carrot and bring out the mud."

Bai Liu pushed the door open and turned his head to a dazed Muke sitting on the edge of the bed, nodding with a calm look. "Rest, I need you to maintain a high level of accuracy at all times. There's still a lot of information you need to remember."

"I don't need to rest. I can't sleep. I'll go and help you with the case… The information now... I can't remember it in a short time. I'll remember it in a little longer…" Muke slowly blinked twice, tossing his head, but his head hit the straw bed with a thud as if it suddenly sank. He looked up at Bai Liu, who was looking down at him from above, holding the door handle.

Bai Liu looked at Muke, who had collapsed on the bed with no expression on his face. "You need to rest now, Muke."

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu uses high-intensity inhalable sleeping pills on player Muke.]

Muke's eyes went black, and he felt the ward spinning. He struggled hard to lift his eyelids, only to see Bai Liu turn and close the door, disappearing from his view. He reached out to grab Bai Liu's departing back, but only moved his fingers twice before his eyes reluctantly closed.

"I don't want to rest... I want to do something..."

The last words Muke heard Bai Liu say before he faded into sleep were, "The sleeping pills will take effect around 11:30 p.m. when the nurses are eating and the file room is deserted. That will be a good time for you to wake up."

"Sleep well, Muke."

Muke curled up in a small ball on the straw bed, his eyes closed, and his breathing even, sleeping soundly.

Bai Liu glanced at him and then turned and locked the door behind

him. Muke was in a terrible state of mind, having been in a state of shock since last night, like a cat in a frenzy. His inability to sleep and rest would affect his memory.

There aren't many safe times in the game for Muke to rest, and it's understandable that Muke is in that over-vigilant state Bai Liu is in.

Only today, with Miao Feichi away and a high density of nurse patrols during the day, the odds of monsters appearing are low. There's no better time than now for Muke to rest and fully recover.

But Bai Liu's absence would greatly deprive Muke of his sense of security. Muke immediately sat up from the bed as soon as Bai Liu stood up, his eyes red and bloodshot, wanting to follow him.

At 9:30, all the investors who were going to observe the baptism gathered at the entrance of the hospital.

The Loving Welfare Home

Central Lobby of the Game, Core Screen Area.

Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang's minor TV rankings were slightly lower than Bai Liu's from earlier matchups, causing both of them to drop from their positions near the [King's Promotion] to the core promotion. Bai Liu's minor TV ranking rose slightly, though it wasn't high enough to reach the [Nightmare Rising Star Promotion].

The two sides are now meeting in the [Core Promotion], with Bai Liu holding a slight advantage, his promotion ranking directly above Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang.

There's a lot of circulation between players in the same promotion, as viewers can see each other's TV rankings. When a player performs well, the viewers of their mini-television cheer and get excited, and although viewers from different players' mini-televisions can't hear one another, the atmosphere can influence nearby viewers, causing one side to absorb viewers from the other. This leads to one player rising higher while the other falls. This stalemate is the situation Bai Liu and Miao Feichi are currently in.

However, this stalemate could easily result in a loss of viewers.

Fortunately for Bai Liu, he hasn't lost too many viewers, and none of the high-profile names standing in front of his small TV have left. Wang Shun exhaled in relief—mainly because Bai Liu's gameplay is so intense, the kind that keeps you on the edge of your seat. The game's curiosity factor is definitely in the air.

A senior player from the Kabbalah guild (the fourth-ranked guild) commented to Bai Liu with a tearful smile, "What a hang-up, this guy's style of play still suits the [Comedy of Death] section. No wonder he supposedly fell into it the first time."

The green charm in the form of a growing branch in the hair of a Kabbalah guild member is easy to recognize. Wang Shun immediately noticed it, as the darker the branch in the hair, the higher the rank. The charm on the long hair of the audience member commenting on Bai Liu was close to dark green, indicating he was likely a high-ranking member of the guild.

"Indeed, I rarely see such desperate players anymore," a spectator in a neat white uniform with a winged seven-stringed lyre embroidered in

gold thread on his right chest said, nodding.

The spectator had a handsome, elegant mixed-race face with brilliant blonde hair worn back. His expression was somewhat indifferent, and Wang Shun recognized the uniform as belonging to the Golden Dawn Guild (the third-ranked guild).

This player wasn't familiar to Wang Shun, likely a new addition to the team this year, similar to Zhang Gui before his untimely death.

"But Bai Liu will also have a tough time dealing with this situation," the spectator added lazily. "He's walking a tightrope. One wrong move, and Miao Gaojiang will kill him."

The lazy-eyed spectator, dressed in rags like a beggar, was from the Heavenly Masons (the seventh-ranked guild), a peculiar guild. The founder was a rich beggar who had died in the game, and under his spiritual influence, the entire guild wore rags. The most frequent mention of this guild's players came from the [Report Wall] within the game, where many players reported them for having exhibitionist fetishes and dressing inappropriately.

The Masonic spectator who had just spoken was on the verge of being reported, but he didn't care. Instead, he tapped his finger on Bai Liu's small TV and said with amusement, "So it's true that newcomers have an aura. The small TV in this game is designed to avoid situations where newcomers have no points to use, which would result in a high mortality rate. It lets newcomers earn bounty points to buy props in time."

"The small TV bounty points earned by veteran players are transferred to the system wallet and only reach the player after the game ends, with a tax ranging from five to twenty percent depending on how many points were earned."

"A newcomer in a live game can judge whether they're operating correctly based on how many points they've earned. Veteran players don't have that benefit and must rely on their experience," the spectator continued, raising an eyebrow. "But in this stalemate, this aura of a newcomer is ineffective, since Bai Liu doesn't earn too many bounties."

"And once a newcomer realizes they've made a mistake and their bounty points drop significantly, many will lose their focus and end up in a dead end." The viewer watched Bai Liu on the small TV with rapt attention. "What will you do, Bai Liu? How will you, a poor,

penniless fellow, take the next step?"

He pondered aloud, "Miao Gaojiang and Miao Feichi are waiting for you at the hospital door to explain [the cure]. They're saying they'll kill you if you don't. Miao Gaojiang isn't a player who tolerates instability around him. Will you honestly explain your hard-won quest clues?"

Bai Liu's eyes drooped in the small TV as he hurried down the hospital's long corridor toward the meeting with the investors.

Apart from Bai Liu and the other players, there were other [investors] observing the ceremony. However, all [investors] looked the same, and if you didn't take the initiative to say hello, you wouldn't recognize anyone standing at the hospital entrance.

Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang, however, were easy to recognize. Miao Feichi liked to play with his two hogweed knives, and Miao Gaojiang usually stood next to him.

Bai Liu, pretending to be Muke, approached and greeted them respectfully. Upon seeing him, Miao Gaojiang immediately brought up the matter of the [Life Extension Remedy].

This was something Bai Liu couldn't hide from Miao Gaojiang. There was no way to lie, as the system would only unlock the main quest if these two players received the correct [Life Extension Remedy]. Otherwise, the system wouldn't respond. Bai Liu and Miao Gaojiang locked eyes—Miao Gaojiang looked at him critically, and Bai Liu needed to prove his worth in front of him.

Bai Liu handed Miao Gaojiang the pages he had torn out, but there were a few confusing pieces of information mixed in.

After scanning through the ten lines quickly, Miao Gaojiang and Miao Feichi paused. The system panel unlocked the main quest, and Miao Gaojiang's face softened for a moment: "It is indeed a [Life Extension Remedy]."

However, even with the confusing information, Miao Gaojiang quickly pieced together the entire [Life-Sustaining Remedy]. His face darkened considerably. "But asking us to kill children to get blood? If we do that, we'll lose half of our life points."

"Old secondary gameplay," Miao Feichi said dismissively, pulling out his ears with his pinky. "It's just forced consumption of half of a

player's total life. I don't like that little brat of mine either—he's a pain and useless. He was staring at me earlier like he wanted to eat my flesh. It's disgusting, so let's get rid of him."

"And that little Bai Liu," Miao Feichi added, rubbing his fists and licking his lips, clearly salivating. "This game is designed to kill kids. I like killing kids and eating their flesh. After the blood's drawn, I can eat the skin. No waste. Just right."

"But it's best not to do it today." Miao Gaojiang warned Miao Feichi. "You still have at least a day before your stamina slots restore, and if you act today, you'll mess up the skill badly."

"Tch." Miao Feichi gave Miao Gaojiang a sidelong glance. "I know. But even if the monsters here are A+, there's no need to be this nervous. How many times have we played all three levels of the game?"

Miao Gaojiang gave a few words of gentle advice: "Better to be careful."

Miao Gaojiang was too cautious to act unless he was 80 or 90 percent sure. The items he received from Bai Liu included points. He had used the same cloth item that Du Sanying had used in the previous game: [Fabric of Disguise].

This fabric, according to the system, was explained as [False Reality]. It existed but was untouchable. The item wrapped in it wasn't considered to be directly owned by the player, which meant Bai Liu's trade skill wasn't valid because the other player didn't technically "own" the trade item.

Miao Gaojiang deliberately avoided Bai Liu speaking to him in imperative sentences. He was very cautious, nudging any questioning tone from Bai Liu back without a word.

Bai Liu now understood the meaning of Miao Gaojiang's popular poll logo: "A heart as fine as dust, a heart as deep as a city."

Miao Gaojiang was indeed a difficult opponent to deal with. His observations were so meticulous that even though Bai Liu had the upper hand now, he couldn't find any holes for Miao Gaojiang to exploit.

After a few failed attempts, Bai Liu had to pretend to keep quiet under Miao Gaojiang's increasingly suspicious gaze.

We'll just have to think of something else.

When it was nearly ten o'clock, the director of the orphanage, who had led the investors yesterday, appeared again. He guided them across the orphanage to witness the baptism.

They followed the same path they had taken the day before, passing the back of the classroom building where Bai Liu had logged in. From there, they could see a church of considerable size and fine construction—a building that, in reality, had not existed after several financial downsizings.

The church was a typical one, with a spire made of pure white marble and a base carved with runes that Bai Liu couldn't quite understand. After a few glances, he realized that the runes weren't from the New Testament or the Old Testament. They were strange, twisted hieroglyphics, belonging to no language Bai Liu knew.

The tallest part of the church was adorned with life-size angels in niches. Their faces were so lifelike it was as if they were sculpted from the features of real people. Their eyes were large, almost as if they might roll off their faces any moment, their faces marred by cracks from peeling paint.

But despite the eerie vibe, the rest of the church appeared so new that the sculptures hadn't yet aged to this extent.

Bai Liu shifted his gaze away, following the other investors into the church.

Inside, the church was spacious, its high, wide ceilings echoing with the sound of footsteps across the floor. Light streamed in through the high windows on either side, illuminating the pale faces of the terminally ill, who sat facing an altar with a one-meter-high cross. It was an ordinary church setup, but Bai Liu squinted, sensing something was wrong.

Although Bai Liu had seen countless depictions of the crucifixion of Jesus in horror games, this was clearly different. The cross was inverted, and instead of a statue of Jesus, there was the statue of a youth.

The boy on the inverted cross looked a little older than Bai Liu, his eyes closed, his hands and feet bound with thorns. The wooden cross had thorns twisting through his ankles, neck, and around his face. Bai Liu could almost see the shadows of his long eyelashes falling across

his thorn-scarred face. But this was just a plain white statue, not meticulously carved.

Despite the lack of fine detail, the sculpture still had an undeniable beauty. The boy's limbs were fluid and graceful, his face surprisingly proportionate as he lay among the thorny branches growing out from the cross. His face was slightly tilted, nestled into his bound arms, as light from the side window bathed his serene sleeping face with a holy glow in the dimly lit church.

He looked like a sleeping god.

The Mother Superior stood in front of the statue, blocking Bai Liu's view, and addressed the patients who had taken their seats. "We are here today to welcome the newborn. But baptism is only the beginning. Killing children is forbidden in the church. Please, investors, wait until you are truly sure that the child you choose can bring you new life. Only then can you take them."

"Not all children can bring you new life," the Mother Superior continued, gazing deeply at the seated investors. She raised her arms dramatically and shouted, "It takes a child of pure blood to bring you new life!"

The investors stirred, murmuring excitedly, "A brand new life!"

Bai Liu sat in the back row, next to Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang. When he heard this, Miao Feichi leaned toward Miao Gaojiang and complained, "Why does this game have a safe house for children? It's so inconvenient."

"Normal," Miao Gaojiang responded thoughtfully. "After all, it's a level 2 game. It can't always be that easy to get through."

"But I think the key to this game is still to catch that child of yours. The blood purity should mean something—like being of the same bloodline as us. Only one child who meets the conditions can serve as the main blood inducer, the one who will provide us with the blood we want."

Miao Gaojiang paused briefly, then added, "But based on the usual trends of secondary games, I think one child's blood won't be enough to save a player. To ensure safety, we'll need a few more. One player should get two children—it should be about right."

As Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang continued to discuss how to deal

with the children, they showed no hesitation in labeling them as enemies after learning about the [Life Extension Remedy]. They were now debating how to extract blood from the infants, with Miao Feichi joking about buying an oversized juicer in the system to squeeze their blood.

Bai Liu listened silently from the back.

He wasn't surprised that the investors couldn't take a child just yet. According to his understanding of baptisms, children before baptism were considered sinful and impure—most likely incapable of being used.

If it had been possible to attack the children directly today, with Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang—two high-risk players—attending the baptism, and the children being completely defenseless, Bai Liu would have tried to get little Bai Liu to escape with the others earlier this morning.

Soon, the Dean led all the investors in a few prayers before ushering a group of children dressed in wide white robes down to the room. Their bare feet and ankles were visible as they entered.

A ripple of excitement passed through the investors. Their faces lit up with avid greed as they surveyed the children—their potential new life.

This, Bai Liu realized, was their rebirth.

Even Miao Feichi, who had been slouched back in his chair, sat up straighter, his head stretched out to survey the children. His gaze was as if he were a juicer eyeing the fruit about to be processed, full of cruel excitement and greed. He twitched his nose twice, his expression slightly intoxicated.

"These little brats smell so delicious." Miao Feichi looked like an animal about to devour its prey. He kept licking his lips and stared deadpan at little Bai Liu, walking in line with the other children. "That little Bai Liu, so tender... I haven't eaten a baby in one go for a long time. He might be able to do."

Little Bai Liu, wearing a wide white robe that trailed to his ankles, stood at the end of the line of children, holding a flickering candle in his hands. The light from the candle danced across his calm face as he walked barefoot and took his place on the dais under the guidance of the dean.

The children stood in a row on the platform, all holding and pulling together under the dean's direction. Little Bai Liu slowly raised his eyes and saw many identical investor faces staring up at him from below. Their thin, pale faces twisted into eerie smiles, examining the children. As the candles flickered in their hands, the faces seemed to distort and stretch in the heat, their mouths wide open, ready to lunge at them.

Little Muke, standing next to little Bai Liu, peeked up briefly before lowering his head in fear. Meanwhile, little Bai Liu continued to look at everyone below him, his gaze finally landing on Bai Liu without wavering. It was clear he had been searching for Bai Liu among the investors.

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow in mild surprise. How did this child recognize him when all the investors looked the same?

Someone brought in a bathtub—or something that resembled one. The altar, as the dean explained, was used to baptize the children. It was filled with water that bobbed and swirled, surrounded by a ring of what looked like dried, residual blood.

This bath was placed in front of the children.

The dean stood in front of them and raised her hand in a gesture that made all the children look up at her.

With a kind smile, she spoke, "All right, children, let's sing the hymn once and then start baptizing you one by one. Remember to add your name at the end."

The children's voices, clear yet uneven, echoed as they sang. The flames on the candles they held danced brightly in their innocent eyes.

"Born on Monday of our moon,
We were baptized on Tuesday, Fire Day,
We get married on Wednesday,
We get sick on Thursday (Obsidian),
We are sicker on Golden Obsidian (Friday),
We die on Saturday,
We were buried in the earth on Sunday (Sunday),
This is our life—this is the life of Bai Liu (each child's name)."

"Very good." After the strange hymn, the dean opened the register she held and began reading the names. "Next, each investor will baptize their chosen child. It’s simple: just dip your child into this pool of

clear water. This water will wash away the germs they've brought from the outside world—sorry, not germs, I misspoke, it's sin. And water alone won't be enough to wash away their sins..."

The dean looked up, her eyes sweeping over all the children. The smile on her face turned grim and mean. "After washing them with water, you can take some of the children's blood to cleanse their sins. Then take the blood to the hospital for identification. If there are no other sins, you can come back on Wednesday to take—or rather, adopt—these children."

Bai Liu's eyes twitched slightly.

No wonder there was such a twisted ceremony of baptism here.

It turned out that the investors feared these children might carry some other virus, so they used this ritual to cleanse them both spiritually and physically. The blood would also be tested to ensure there were no infections or diseases present.

These investors were quite sophisticated. They despised the children from the outside world on both a spiritual and physical level, so they set up this gruesome baptism to screen the children's blood quality.

It was like a pre-match test. On Wednesday, they would be able to officially begin taking the children away.

The Loving Welfare Home

Wednesday's song represents [marriage], and marriage symbolizes another level of [one-to-one] matching.

The frenzied-looking investors approached one by one, dipping the trembling children into the water before fishing them out again. Afterward, someone would step forward to draw their blood, collecting it in transfusion bags. The investors would then step down, smiling in satisfaction as they cradled their blood-filled bags.

Soon, it was Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang's turn.

Little Miao Feichi, who had been crying, was shoved impatiently into the water by Miao Feichi and then forcibly held down as his blood was drawn. His face turned deathly pale. Beside him, little Miao Gaojiang trembled violently, but unlike Feichi, he seemed to understand that resistance was futile. His eyes, filled with desperate sorrow, darted toward the investors before he hesitantly stretched out his arm for the blood draw.

As Miao Feichi stepped down, he weighed the bag of blood in his hand. "Almost 100ml. Damn, if I didn't have to take this to the hospital for testing, I'd be tempted to take a sip."

Miao Gaojiang, after observing the surroundings, came to a conclusion. "Each of these children corresponds to an investor. If we touch anyone else's kid, their investor will be left empty-handed, and these sick freaks will eventually waste away—turning into those monsters locked up in the ICU ward. There's a high probability that if we interfere, we'll end up being targeted by those very same monsters."

Miao Feichi frowned. "So we shouldn't mess with the NPC kids, huh? Getting aggro-locked by monsters is a pain in the ass, especially if they come after us for revenge later."

He tossed the blood bag from one hand to the other, eyes fixed on the liquid swirling inside. "Then we'll go after the players' kids instead. I'll take little Bai Six. You want the little blind one? Or should we leave Muke's kid out of this?"

Turning his head, Miao Feichi cast a casual glance at Bai Liu, who sat silently behind them, before grinning. "Since Muke was nice enough to tell us the recipe, we'll leave your kid alone. But if you need more

than one child's blood to pass the level, that's on you. Little Bai Six and the blind kid are ours."

Miao Gaojiang, feigning kindness, patted Bai Liu on the shoulder. "There's another option. You could try sending Muke's kid out of the orphanage alone. As long as he doesn't get caught by any monsters and survives long enough to complete the main quest, you'll clear the level too."

Although Miao Gaojiang spoke as if offering a reassuring alternative, it was clear neither he nor Miao Feichi believed it was a viable plan.

They had never intended to rely on the children in the first place—the odds of them successfully escaping were laughably low. This was a Level 2 game. Even experienced A-rank players would struggle to flee from A+ ranked monsters, let alone a bunch of clueless, powerless children.

The probability of success was nearly zero.

Bai Liu bowed his head, his shoulders trembling as if in fear. "I'll try."

Miao Feichi scoffed at his reaction, snorting in disdain before turning his attention back to the blood bag in his hands.

The moment their backs were turned, Bai Liu's expression returned to normal—calm and composed.

Having children as the subject of the game was a highly risky approach. But after calculating his options, this was the most cost-effective and least dangerous way for him to clear the level.

The stakes were already high enough.

"Investors of Muke, please come forward to christen your child." The dean's voice rang out.

Bai Liu lifted his gaze. Across the flickering candlelight, little Bai Six—dressed in pure white—stared back at him, expressionless. Their eye contact was brief before Bai Six looked away, seemingly uncomfortable with being watched.

Bai Liu's lips curved into a lazy, knowing smile.

—At fourteen, one of the things he was best at was escaping from orphanages.

Now playing the role of Muke's investor, Bai Liu stepped forward as the dean guided him.

Little Muke swallowed nervously, glancing up at Bai Liu as he handed over his candle. He then opened his arms, body trembling slightly.

He was scared.

So terrified, in fact, that he couldn't even tell this wasn't his actual investor—after all, they all looked the same.

Following the dean's instructions, Bai Liu slid his hands under Muke's knees and lifted him into his arms.

Little Muke clung to Bai Liu's neck, his fear evident in the way he shivered and the tight grip of his tiny fingers. His feet dangled in the air, shaking violently, his face drained of color.

As Bai Liu lowered him into the water, Muke squeezed his eyes shut, fists clenched tight. Bubbles floated up from his face as he struggled to hold his breath, his warm tears blending into the icy liquid. It felt as if the warmth of his body was dissolving into the cold abyss.

Am I going to die? ...Muke thought, dazed.

It felt like... his heart was still beating...

After several long seconds, Bai Liu pulled him out.

Soaking wet, little Muke gasped for air, his lips tinged blue. He instinctively clung to Bai Liu's neck, his tiny body shuddering as he coughed up water.

The man in charge of drawing blood approached, rolling up his sleeve and revealing the sharp tip of a needle.

Muke's eyes widened in terror. He shook his head frantically, struggling to escape. Desperate, he nearly clambered up Bai Liu's shoulders, trying to get away as Bai Liu gripped his ankles to keep him in place.

Bai Liu looked down at the child, whose tear-filled eyes were begging him for mercy.

"Be still," Bai Liu ordered calmly. Then, without looking away, he addressed the man drawing blood. "Don't take any."

Both the man and little Muke froze in shock.

The dean tilted her head. “Investor, are you certain? If you choose not to take this child’s blood, we will not be responsible for any illness he may carry. If he infects you, that will be your own liability.”

Bai Liu’s expression remained unchanged. “Whatever’s in his blood doesn’t matter.” He glanced up at the dean, his tone indifferent. “There’s no need for screening—I’m sure this is the child I’m taking. If he has a disease, I’ll deal with the consequences myself.”

A wet little Muke curled up in Bai Liu's arms, staring blankly at him with water dripping from the ends of his hair.

Bai Liu looked down at little Muke for a moment, then put the child down, whispering in his ear, "Follow little Bai Six and get out of here. I won’t take your blood." He patted little Muke’s shoulder as if nothing had happened, then turned and walked back to his original position.

Little Muke numbly took his candle back from the dean and stood next to little Bai Six in the queue.

Quickly reacting, little Muke leaned in close to little Bai Six and whispered, his voice low and slightly agitated, "Little Bai Six, he's your investor, isn't he? He really didn’t want my blood, just like you said!"

"I told you," little Bai Six replied with a bemused look. "He’s a 'doesn't want to die to save us' kind of strange investor."

But soon, little Muke turned to little Bai Six in horror. "But he’s your investor—why is he baptizing me? What will you do if he baptizes me?"

"The next person to be baptized, little Bai Six. Will the investors of little Bai Six please come forward and baptize him?" The dean's voice echoed through the hall.

Little Bai Six obediently bowed his head and stepped out of line.

The dean called out two or three times, but no one answered from below. Suddenly, someone chuckled mockingly and stood up slowly. "Dean, the investor of little Bai Six has unfortunately passed away. Why don’t I baptize him instead?"

The speaker was Miao Feichi.

"No, Mr. Investor, you have already baptized a child," the dean said, shaking his head in refusal. Miao Feichi looked at little Bai Six for a moment, licked his lips, then sat down again with some regret.

The dean walked up to little Bai Six, eyeing him like an unsold commodity, though his words dripped with feigned compassion. "What a poor investor, what a poor child. You have been abandoned. Of course, the very fact that you came to this institution means that you were already abandoned by your parents. But now, even the only investor who could have given you a future—the one who was willing to take you away—has forsaken you on the eve of your baptism."

Little Bai Six stood silently with his head bowed as the dean scolded him. His dark eyes flickered toward the candle in his hands, the firelight reflecting sharply on his otherwise expressionless face.

"You are a child forsaken by the gods," the dean sighed, long and pretentious. "The sin within you is immeasurable, so the gods have chosen to let everyone abandon you. Do you know what you have done wrong, little Bai Six?"

"I don’t think I do, Dean," little Bai Six answered calmly.

The Mother Superior’s cold, grim gaze bore into him, her tone laced with righteous condemnation. "My son, your sin is that no one is willing to help you cleanse the stain of your birth. You must be baptized alone. You must be punished. You will remain in this water for a long time to wash away your sins."

Before little Bai Six could move, the dean had already taken the candle from his hands. Gripping his shoulders, she pressed him down onto the altar, gazing down at his expressionless face.

With one hand holding the candle aloft, she placed the other firmly on his head, fingers tightening in his hair before shoving him toward the water. "You need to be cleansed, my child."

The instinctive panic of choking and suffocation made him grab at the sides of the baptismal font, but soon, little Bai Six had no choice but to let go, sinking completely to the bottom.

The dean, still gripping his hair, smiled gently as she held up the burning candle. She lowered her gaze to look at little Bai Six beneath the water’s rippling surface. "You are not allowed to leave the baptismal font until this candle has burned out, little Bai Six."

The candle's flame flickered twice, casting eerie shadows. Hot wax dripped onto little Bai Six's hands as he gripped the edges of the pool. The sharp sting made him instinctively loosen his grip on the already slippery altar.

Through the distorted water, little Bai Six saw the dean's gentle, smiling face above him. But in his vision, warped by the liquid, her features twisted into something grotesque and monstrous.

The white wax droplets solidified instantly upon hitting the water, forming eerie floating masses that resembled peeled fingernails. His hair was still tightly held in the dean's grasp, forcing his head back as his chest rose and fell in a desperate attempt to breathe. He looked small, fragile—like a defenseless little creature.

Only his eyes remained eerily calm.

Calm, as if he had expected this all along.

When little Bai Six was running out of oxygen, he would seize the opportunity to push himself up to the surface of the wax with all his might, gasping for air—only to be forced back down again by the dean. He struggled desperately, over and over, each time barely managing a breath before being submerged again, as if he were about to drown in a baptismal pool. The suffocating sensation of drowning, the frantic struggle to stay afloat—it was overwhelming.

Miao Feichi watched with undisguised pleasure, craning his neck to get a better look at little Bai Six's pained expression beneath the water.

Miao Gaojiang, on the other hand, was visibly uncomfortable. He had never been fond of scenes involving child torture—it reminded him too much of the child Miao Feichi had once kidnapped. His expression darkened, and he turned his head slightly, avoiding the sight with a furrowed brow.

Bai Liu stood below, watching quietly. His gaze was distant, strangely calm, as if the scene before him had nothing to do with him.

As if the boy struggling to breathe wasn't his fourteen-year-old self. As if this wasn't his only bargaining chip for survival in this game.

Memories long buried surfaced—of a waxed seahorse, of a younger version of himself struggling beneath the water.

Bai Liu had always hated water.

Because once, when he was fourteen, he had been punished just like little Bai Six.

Or at least, he thought he had. Bai Liu didn't remember much—humans tend to forget memories that make them uncomfortable. But he knew he had done something wrong. He had taken money from an adult and promised to do something in return, just like little Bai Six.

The other children at the orphanage quickly reported him. The dean had looked at him with horror and disgust, as if he had done something truly unforgivable. At the time, Bai Liu—then still called Bai Six—was already whispered about among the teachers and staff for his "unseemly" and bloody hobbies.

The way they looked at him said everything.

Ah, I knew it. You finally did something like this.

To be honest, Bai Liu had enjoyed that look of fear.

But the punishment came soon after.

Bai Liu squinted, struggling to recall the details—it was as if his head had been pushed into something. A container full of water? He couldn't quite remember. There had been shouting, accusations, screaming voices telling him never to do it again. He had nodded along, choking, gasping, obediently agreeing.

Of course, they hadn't let him go so easily.

They drowned him a little longer, just to be sure.

When they finally tired themselves out, they left, satisfied, as if they had "saved" a wayward child from becoming a murderer.

Beside him, also soaking wet and gasping for breath, lay Lu Yizhan.

Unlike Bai Liu, Lu Yizhan hadn't actually done anything wrong. But when the teacher interrogated the children, asking who was responsible, Lu Yizhan—without even knowing what had happened—had stepped forward and claimed responsibility.

He had willingly taken the blame for Bai Liu.

But the truth always comes out. The real culprit—the child who had

reported Bai Liu—was actually the one who had committed the crime.

And so, in the end, Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan—the “accomplice” who had covered for him—were the ones who received the harshest punishment.

Lu Yizhan, of course, was a well-liked student, a “good boy.” If he had just walked away, he would have been spared the worst of it. But he refused to leave. He didn't resist, didn't protest, didn't even try to stop the teacher.

He just stayed.

Stayed and watched as Bai Liu was drowned again and again, coughing and choking on water.

Each time Bai Liu was forced under, Lu Yizhan buried his own head in the water alongside him, whispering anxiously, It’ll be over soon. Just hold on a little longer, Bai Liu. It’ll be over soon.

Bai Liu had looked up at him through the murky water, at the bubbles rising from Lu Yizhan’s mouth as he spoke. His expression was frantic, desperate.

And Bai Liu—laughed.

Even as he was drowning, he laughed.

He couldn’t hear a word Lu Yizhan was saying. He couldn’t understand where this idiot’s unfounded belief in him came from.

If he had the strength to speak, he would have told Lu Yizhan: You fool, I really did do something very, very bad.

But he had no strength left. He was drowning.

In the end, both of them survived.

Soaked and trembling, Lu Yizhan had stumbled to his feet and helped Bai Liu up.

Then, as if struck by sudden inspiration, Lu Yizhan had squatted down, looked Bai Liu straight in the eye, and asked, Do you want to change your name?

Tell them you’ve changed, that you won’t use the name Bai Six anymore, that you won’t do bad things again.

Maybe then, they won't punish you like this next time.

It was a ridiculous suggestion. Utterly useless.

But Lu Yizhan was always coming up with these strange ideas—like insisting on being Bai Liu's friend, too.

Bai Liu, half-dazed, had let himself be lifted by Lu Yizhan's arm. For a moment, he had simply stared at the soaked, wide-eyed idiot in front of him.

Then he had started laughing.

Loud, wet laughter, echoing through the damp room as he lay sprawled on the ground.

When he finally stopped coughing up water, Bai Liu had looked at Lu Yizhan's stunned face and said indifferently, Fine. If you want me to change it, I'll change my name.

And so, Bai Six became Bai Liu.

Back in the present, the baptism—no, the punishment—of little Bai Six finally ended.

The dean let him go.

Churches weren't allowed to kill children, after all. Bai Liu hadn't been worried. She was just punishing little Bai Six, a child no investor wanted—because baptism was part of the group's mission, and failure required consequences.

Little Bai Six lurched out of the water, coughing violently, clutching the pool's edge as he gasped for breath. He wiped his mouth with a trembling hand, staggered upright, and—just like that—he recovered.

The near-drowning left no trace on his face.

As if he was used to it.

Without hesitation, he took the melted candle from the yard's hand, bowed politely to the dean—the same woman who had just tried to drown him—and stepped back into line.

His soaked hair clung to his pale face, water dripping down his cheeks. His white robe, now heavy with moisture, clung to his thin frame.

He coughed quietly into his hand. His eyes were red.

He looked... almost pitiful.

Behind him, the statue of the inverted cross—previously serene—now bore a faint frown.

Its outstretched fingers twitched ever so slightly.

As if disturbed by little Bai Six's ragged, choking breaths, the thorns coiled around its body wound themselves tighter.

The Loving Welfare Home

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After the baptism of little Bai six, it was Liu Huai's turn to come forward and baptize Liu Jiayi.

Liu Huai was very gentle with Liu Jiayi's baptism, and Liu Huai didn't want to keep Liu Jiayi in the water for long, so she was soon out.

He finally dropped a cherished kiss on Liu Jiayi's forehead, declined the man's offer to take Liu Jiayi's blood, and silently returned to the investor's seat below amidst Liu Jiayi's somewhat confused expression.

Liu Huai was sitting far away from Bai Liu, at the back of the room. He didn't hear Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang talking about laying hands on Liu Jiayi, but he could probably guess what the two veteran players were doing, and Liu Huai looked at Bai Liu from a distance with a tense expression.

"That's all for today's baptism, please take a break and eat in the orphanage canteen." The director greeted them with a smile as if they were opening for business.

"In the afternoon our baptised children will offer you pure song - a choral performance to celebrate our encounter, to be performed in front of the church, from 3 pm to 7 pm, investors are invited to be there in time to hear the singing."

Bai Liu glanced down at the time, it was now eleven forty.

Muke's eyes snapped open as he lay on the straw bed. He quickly sat up and checked the time—it was 11:40. He had been asleep ever since Bai Liu left!

Grinding his teeth in frustration, Muke scolded himself. He felt like he was wasting precious time. Even with access to the file room, it wasn’t guaranteed that he’d remember everything in just half a day. There was no telling when Miao Feichi would return. The sooner he blended in and started memorizing files, the better.

Still, the effect of Bai Liu putting him to sleep was undeniable—his mental state had significantly improved.

After a morning of uninterrupted rest, Muke made his way down to the ground floor. Most of the patients and nurses were in the canteen now, eating their meals.

The ones who hadn't come out were the patients who had been given medication earlier in the morning. Their rooms were now locked. As Muke passed by, he could hear faint creaking noises and the soft, unsettling sound of chewing coming from inside.

It reminded him of the sound that monster patient had made that night, gorging himself on blood lingzhi.

Muke instinctively moved away from the doors, refocusing on his goal. He mentally mapped out the ground floor—he knew the case file room was located behind the nurses' duty room. He could only get inside when the duty room was empty, like now, or during shift changes.

After glancing around to ensure no one was watching, Muke took a deep breath and scurried into the file room—only to freeze the moment he stepped inside.

His breath caught.

"...Okay…" Muke stared at the dust-covered folders in dismay, his eyes widening. A sinking feeling settled in his stomach. "There's so much! Why are there even more than yesterday's books?!"

For the first time in a long while, he felt like a student cramming the night before an exam.

Slapping his cheeks to focus, Muke pulled out a file, flipped it open, and started memorizing.

"Name: Wang Guoqiang. Donated 1,700,000 to The Love Welfare Institute in 200X. The child he 'married' is…"

3:00 PM
At the front of the church, the children jostled in a messy pile while the investors sat on chairs arranged on the grass. The director handed each investor a program—every child in the orphanage was required

to perform in groups, all in choral arrangements. Some groups would sing multiple songs, and at the end, there would be a group photo. That was why the entire event lasted a grueling four hours.

Bai Liu was no stranger to this kind of spectacle meant to impress investors. His orphanage did the same whenever officials came to visit, parading the children out to perform. The teachers drilled them to behave, to smile, to act as if they adored the visiting dignitaries. They sang from beginning to end because, as the teachers said, singing was better than talking.

There was nothing inherently wrong with this—it was a strategy to secure funding for the orphanage. But Bai Liu had never personally benefited from such efforts. To him, it felt like being a circus monkey, performing tricks without even the promise of payment.

Yet, he had never imagined a day when the roles would be reversed, when the children would be singing for him. It was... a novel experience.

Bai Liu flipped through the program resting on his lap: "Happy Day," performed by the newly baptized children.

Among them, little Bai Six stood at the back of the group, dressed in a fresh outfit. His face was painted with garish makeup, a red dot centered on his forehead. His hair was still damp from a recent wash, and he hummed carelessly along with the song, his gaze half-lidded with disinterest.

"Happy day, happy day, God saved me and made me joyful.
The blood of atonement cleanses my sins, the living water of life quenches my thirst.
Happy day, happy day, God saved me and made me joyful."

The meaning was obvious—this was a "happy day" for the investors, not for the children.

Bai Liu quickly lost interest. In front of him, Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang were already dozing off, arms crossed. Miao Feichi still clutched his knife even in sleep, and Miao Gaojiang wasn't entirely unconscious—both veteran players maintained a basic level of alertness. But it was clear that the performance was long and tedious.

Only Liu Huai, sitting in the back row, remained completely focused. His eyes never left Liu Jiayi. He stared at her as if he was afraid to blink, as if each second was something he couldn't afford to lose.

Four hours.

To Miao Feichi, it was an unbearable eternity—he had already grumbled several times, asking if they could just start slaughtering kids already.

But for Liu Huai, four hours was too short. He gazed at Liu Jiayi, her small frame swaying gently as she sang, the red dot on her forehead standing out against her pale skin. His fingers clenched, and he suddenly lowered his head to wipe his eyes.

Then he looked up again. He didn't want to miss a single second.

But perhaps Liu Jiayi would never know how intently Liu Huai had watched her. She was still blind.

When little Bai Six's performance ended, there was a fifteen-minute break before the next act. Bai Liu got up and strolled toward the chapel behind the seating area. Miao Gaojiang, who had seemed asleep, opened his eyes instantly and narrowed them at Bai Liu.

"Where are you going? The show's barely started."

Bai Liu glanced at him lazily. "Just checking on my kid. See if I can teach him how to escape."

Miao Feichi snorted in amusement. "Hah. If you let him go, you're taking away someone's only chance of survival."

Miao Gaojiang hesitated for a few moments before ultimately letting Bai Liu pass. This was the front of the church—Bai Liu couldn't sneak off with any of the children they had marked. Not to mention, the church strictly forbade killing children within its premises. That was the only reason none of them had made a move yet.

Of course, the other reason was that Miao Feichi still hadn't fully recovered his stamina.

Bai Liu nodded at Miao Feichi and continued on his way. Miao Gaojiang watched his retreating figure with a heavy, unreadable gaze.

"I still feel like something's wrong with this Muke," he muttered.

Miao Feichi, slouching in his seat, groaned. "Dad, you're getting annoying. You checked his player panel, his system storage, even his damn phone. He's a low-ranked, average player. C-rank panel, only

two games played. A complete rookie. If Bai Liu did control him, we could just kill him to break the influence."

Miao Gaojiang's brow furrowed. "That's not what bothers me. It's his broken keyboard."

Miao Feichi's expression sharpened slightly. "What about it?"

"I checked his system inventory twice," Miao Gaojiang said slowly. "Each time, the missing keycaps on his keyboard were different."

At this, Miao Feichi finally sat up properly.

Miao Gaojiang was meticulous—he always caught details others overlooked. And when he got suspicious about something, he was rarely wrong.

Miao Feichi considered his words carefully. "Are you saying someone's been using the keyboard to communicate with Muke? Do you remember which keys were missing?"

Miao Gaojiang scowled. "That's the problem. I'm not familiar enough with keyboard layouts. I only noticed that the arrangement changed, but I didn't memorize exactly which keycaps were missing."

"Normally, system inventories are only accessible to the player who owns them. Muke has been with us the entire time—it's not like he could've handed the keyboard to someone else. And if he were, why take such a risky approach to communicate?"

His tone darkened. "I think someone is sharing a system backpack with him. If there's a skill that allows that, then this method of communication would be both feasible and extremely covert."

Silence stretched between them for a moment.

There was only one player whose personal skills they hadn't fully figured out.

"You mean Bai Liu isn't actually dead?" Miao Feichi's voice was low, dangerous. His eyes narrowed. "And his skill isn't just personal control—it includes shared inventory access?"

"Muke was his pawn to infiltrate our side?"

"And he's been communicating with Bai Liu through that damn keyboard?"

Miao Gaojiang's voice was calm. "It's just a theory."

Miao Feichi's fingers twitched against the handle of his knife, but Miao Gaojiang warned him: "He's a C-rank player. You can kill him whenever you want. But don't be reckless—this is the support season. Killing a normal player who has surrendered to you won't do your reputation any favors. It'll affect your sponsorships.

"And more importantly—" Miao Gaojiang's expression turned grim.

"A skill that allows shared system access would fall under Rule Skills. That would mean breaking the game's system rights."

There were very few players in the game who had Rule Skills.

"I don't think Bai Liu has a Rule Skill," Miao Gaojiang admitted. "If he did, he wouldn't be playing so passively. If he had something that broken, he could have just locked us down like Queen of Hearts."

"But we can't rule it out entirely," he added. "After all, Bai Liu is a newcomer. Maybe he just doesn't know how to use it properly.

"We'll watch him for now."

His gaze turned toward the church where Bai Liu had entered.

"If he reveals himself, we'll kill him then."

When Bai Liu came backstage, little Muke and little Bai Six were sitting face to face, wiping their faces with tissues dipped in water.

However, little Bai Six simply swept him a glance and said softly, “This isn't the place to talk. Let's go somewhere else.”

Little Muke instantly realized that this was little Bai Six—the [investor] who had christened him. He nodded slightly, a bit awkward in his greeting, before little Bai Six took Bai Liu's hand and led him away.

Bai Liu leaned against the wall, looking down at little Bai Six, who was still persistently rubbing at the blush on his face.

Without a word, Bai Liu naturally took the damp tissue from little Bai Six's hand and knelt down, carefully wiping his face.

“You can't wipe it off like that.” Bai Liu used a fresh tissue, pressing it lightly but repeatedly against little Bai Six's brow. “If you rub like

that, you'll just smear the lipstick all over your forehead."

Little Bai Six remained expressionless as Bai Liu held his shoulder and wiped his forehead. "You know how to use lipstick?" he asked dryly. "Do you use it often yourself?"

Bai Liu ignored the sarcasm in his tone. "I've been made up like this before—on an occasion similar to yours," he admitted. "Are you mad because I didn't christen you and you got punished by the Dean?"

"I'm not really mad." Little Bai Six pursed his lips, looking up at Bai Liu. "I just feel like I was played." He paused for a moment before raising his eyes fully. "But because of that, you'll have to give me—"

"—Okay, I know. Extra money, right? Whatever you want." Bai Liu leaned in, close enough to wipe the careless smudge of red lipstick at the corner of little Bai Six's eyes.

Bai Liu's breath fanned steadily over little Bai Six's skin, his lowered gaze giving the illusion of someone utterly absorbed in a moment of tenderness. "Don't move. There's still a bit here." His voice was light, teasing. "You're really not mad at the Dean for what he said? About you being abandoned by parents, by the gods... and by me, the investor?"

Little Bai Six held his breath for a few seconds.

Then, quickly, he looked away and answered in a calm tone, "I'm not angry. After all, the Dean wasn't wrong in a way."

"True." Bai Liu finished wiping and straightened up, looking down at little Bai Six from above. His investor's body was so slender that, from this angle, it almost felt like he was looking down from a great height. "The gods haven't favored you because you're a bad boy who never believed in them."

Little Bai Six met his gaze, his expression calm, but the words [So what?] were written plainly in his eyes.

Yes, he had been born a bad boy. He didn't believe in gods. So what?

"So do I," Bai Liu murmured, chuckling softly.

Casually, as if it meant nothing, he ruffled little Bai Six's hair, his tone light and almost joking. "Do you want to change your name? Maybe then the gods will finally favor you. I had slightly better luck after

changing mine—though, of course, it was still bad."

Little Bai Six scoffed, expressionless. "If gods decide human fate based on names, then they're stupid."

Bai Liu untied a pendant from around his neck—a coin wrapped in broken fish scales, cradled in a bandage. He leaned over and carefully hung the coin around little Bai Six's neck. "This is everything I own," Bai Liu said. "My skills, my money, everything I've gathered by selling my soul, so to speak. It's the most expensive and precious thing I could ever give."

"Now I'm giving it to you." Bai Liu's voice was light, almost casual. "From now on, you are me. You have my skills, my money. And—I'm sorry for leaving you alone to be baptized."

[System Warning: Is player Bai Liu handing over the system to his secondary identity line? After the transfer, the player will no longer be able to use any skill points from the panel. Furthermore, with no doubt from the NPC characters in the game, the game survival rate will significantly decrease.]

Bai Liu: [OK]

Bai Liu closed his eyes and bent down, pulling little Bai Six into an embrace. His tall, slender body folded awkwardly, almost eerily, as if he were an old man curling protectively around something precious.

And he smiled.

"But I think, from now on... the gods might have taken a liking to you, just a little."

It wasn't some distant god wrapped in a reversed cross who favored little Bai Six. It was this strange investor who had appeared out of nowhere.

And if a god truly existed—then perhaps Bai Liu himself was one.

Little Bai Six remained in Bai Liu's arms. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but in the end, he said nothing. He simply accepted the hug in silence.

Even though he found physical contact a little disgusting.

But his Mr. Investor had paid him, so little Bai Six decided to put up

with this somewhat disgusting Mr. Investor.

“This coin is important,” Bai Liu warned, pulling back. “You have to take good care of it.” His gaze sharpened slightly. “If you die, the coin will fall out, and someone else might pick it up. That would be a very scary thing.”

Bai Liu tapped the coin on little Bai Six’s chest with a long, thin finger. “Because my secrets—and my soul—are hidden inside.”

Little Bai Six’s grip tightened around the coin. Then, abruptly, he spoke. “Did you just ask me if I wanted to change my name?” His tone was casual. “I don’t accept drastic changes, but… in return for the money you so generously gave me, I’m willing to indulge your personal wickedness, Mr. Investor.”

[Lu Yizhan, I can change my name, but I don’t want it to be too different. Do you have any recommendations?]

Bai Liu’s eyes flickered, and he whispered, “How about Bai Liu?”

“Bai Liu?” Little Bai Six echoed, confused. “Which Bai? Which Liu? It sounds the same as if it hadn’t changed at all.”

Ten years ago, Lu Yizhan had looked at Bai Liu with a bright, unwavering gaze.

“How about Bai Liu?” he had asked.

Bai Liu had been bemused. “It sounds the same as before. What’s the point?”

Lu Yizhan had only smiled, as if he saw something Bai Liu couldn’t. “Because it’s Bai as in ‘daylight’ and Liu as in ‘willow.’ From now on, you will walk into the daylight. Bai Liu, you will have a better future.”

Bai Liu smiled.

Just like Lu Yizhan once had.

A smile full of inexplicable confidence, bright with something resembling innocence.

The sound of children singing floated in from the church, the summer breeze carrying the scent of wild grass. And in little Bai Six’s eyes, the strange, ghostly investor in front of him—tall, thin, eerie—was smiling.

And that smile was genuine. Almost like a prayer.

Softly, Bai Liu whispered, “Your name is Bai as in ‘daylight’ and Liu as in ‘willow.’”

Little Bai Six looked away after a brief silence. “Boring word games.”

“So, did you change it?” Bai Liu asked.

Little Bai Six nodded. “I changed it. You paid for it.”

“From now on, you are Bai Liu.” Bai Liu paused. “There’s a good chance my deception will be exposed, and I might die tonight at the hands of my opponents. You are my only hope. I’m entrusting everything to you.”

“You must survive, Bai Liu.”

Bai Liu knew well that he was up against two veteran players from the league.

Miao Feichi was impulsive, but Miao Gaojiang was cautious. That was why he had prepared the [triple paper cup].

But [paper cups] are only paper cups after all, and paper can't cover fire.

Muke can't remain in hiding given the large-scale player conflict that will arise in the future. However, once Muke appears, Bai Liu's previously prepared plan to swap identities with him will likely expose their collaboration and reveal a backroom connection.

Judging by the way Miao Gaojiang treated him today, it's clear he has already noticed something suspicious—like the keyboard in Muke's backpack.

Bai Liu had anticipated this when forming his plan. The exposure of Muke's panel was inevitable, meaning the communication props hidden in the system's backpack would eventually be discovered by Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang. That was precisely why Bai Liu chose to use the keyboard—a relatively unobtrusive and unintuitive method of communication.

By using a keycap to communicate with Muke, Bai Liu was already exploiting a gap in knowledge. Miao Gaojiang, despite being a highly intelligent middle-aged man, likely had limited familiarity with digital

tools. However, that didn’t mean Miao Gaojiang was completely unaware.

He had inspected Muke's panel twice—both times noticing different gaps in the keycaps. These gaps occurred when one side was waiting for the other to respond, an unavoidable sign of two people sharing a prop exchange through the system's backpack.

Miao Gaojiang had most likely realized the keycaps were changing, but due to his lack of understanding, even with access to the keyboard, he couldn't fully decipher what Bai Liu and Muke were communicating about. This was one of the key reasons Bai Liu had chosen the keyboard as their method of communication.

It was now clear that Bai Liu had become an unstable factor in the impending conflict between Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang—a dangerous position to be in, especially in a level 2 game where lives were at stake.

Before things escalated further, Bai Liu knew he needed to hand over the most valuable thing he possessed to little Bai Six.

That is, the hollowed-out, broken coin-shaped game manager at the center of it all.

Bai Liu taught little Bai Six about the specifics of the game manager and how to use his personal skills. The child was initially confused but quickly caught on. He accepted the fact that his reality was a multiplayer game with surprising ease, without requiring much elaboration from Bai Liu. Soon, he was navigating the system shop on his own.

Before Bai Liu left, little Bai Six looked at him and asked, "You told me the exact process of those two games before so that I could get used to this so-called game manager quickly, didn’t you?"

"It's not even a game shared between friends." Little Bai Six’s face remained emotionless. "You're a liar, full of lies. Everything you say and do to me has a purpose, which makes it even harder for me to understand why you gave up taking blood from me and died for me."

"It’s simply not something you would do. And I certainly wouldn’t do something that stupid."

"Say it." Little Bai Six clutched the coin hanging from his chest, staring straight at Bai Liu. "What else do you need me to do for you? You've given me enough money—I can do a lot of things for you."

"I just want you to live." Bai Liu turned his head and smiled at him. "Nothing more, really."

As he stepped out from behind the church, he spotted Liu Huai, who was also rambling on about something to Liu Jiayi.

Liu Huai wanted to give everything to Liu Jiayi, just like Bai Liu had done. But Liu Jiayi couldn't see it, and it wouldn't be good for her to have so much.

Although Liu Huai didn't trust Bai Liu, he trusted his integrity when it came to transactions. With no other choice, he told Bai Liu: "If I die, I'll leave everything to you. You'll pass it on to my sister."

Liu Huai then transferred his assets to Liu Jiayi, and in return, she gave Bai Liu 400 points.

Bai Liu agreed.

Soon, it was time for a group photo at the choral performance. Little Bai Six, who had quickly removed his makeup, was caught by the teacher and had a large dot of lipstick pressed onto the center of his forehead for the photo. With his hair still damp from washing up, he stood in the back row, glancing slightly at the investors gathered at the front.

Bai Liu and several new investors stood at the forefront.

The director positioned the camera. "A group photo for the 200X Love Children's Home cultural performance."

With a click, little Bai Six—his gaze unfocused—was captured in the colorful photograph.

Bai Liu had always wondered how little Bai Six had managed to pick him out from the group of investors. But he never asked. If he had, little Bai Six might have simply pointed at the photo of Bai Liu and told him—

—Only you look at us without the implication of deprivation or greed.

You look at us calmly, as if you were once one of us.

"At the end of the choral performance, investors will receive a thank-you gift from the children they've sponsored." The dean raised a hand. "This was your task yesterday. Have you completed it?"

A sparse chorus of small voices rang out. "We did, Dean!"

The children lined up to hand out their homemade gifts to the investors.

Little Bai Six walked in silence, passing by Bai Liu without giving him anything—because his investor was dead. He neither had to, nor could, give anyone a gift.

But later, after church, Bai Liu asked him for the gift he had prepared. Little Bai Six was reluctant to hand it over, but Bai Liu shamelessly reminded him that he had paid for it. Eventually, the boy caved to the charm of money and begrudgingly handed over the gift.

It was two drawings.

One depicted a small fish placed in a glass jar.

The other showed a broken mirror burning amidst the wreckage of an exploding train.

They were exact depictions of the two game scenarios Bai Liu had described to him last night, signed with a simple [W] in the corner.

As Bai Liu looked down at the paintings, understanding dawned on him. He finally realized where the paintings he had once seen in the real world had come from—and why they had felt slightly… off.

His gaze drifted to little Bai Six, standing before him.

Since little Bai Six had never actually experienced those games, he could only rely on what he knew to imagine and depict the scenes Bai Liu had told him about.

And this orphanage… was the only world he knew.

So, he had used things from the orphanage to illustrate the grand, chaotic events Bai Liu had described. That was why the scenes had felt strange when Bai Liu first saw them. They were too narrow, too hostile, unlike his usual style.

That oddity came from little Bai Six—and his cognitive dissonance.

Bai Liu's eyes lingered on the boy, who still had a smudge of lipstick at the corner of his eye.

Little Bai Six quickly looked away. He didn't like being stared at.

Oh, right. Bai Liu remembered now. At that age, he hated being looked at directly.

But now, Bai Liu had long since grown used to staring people straight in the eye. It was a habit he had picked up from his work.

Little Bai Six was so different from him.

He was no longer the child trapped in a narrow orphanage, seeking sharp, saturated colors to make himself seen.

But once upon a time, he had been.

The chorus ended at 7:30 PM.

After the director sent all the investors back to the hospital, Miao Gaojiang bid a long and meaningful farewell to Bai Liu, who simply returned to Muke's room with an unconcerned "good night."

Muke's room was empty.

That guy was still down in the file management room. Bai Liu glanced at the clock.

He had allocated Muke a total of nine hours and fifteen minutes, from 12:00 PM to 9:15 PM. At Muke's fastest memory speed, he could recall between three hundred and five hundred cases before the nurses changed shifts—this estimate was based on the number of orphaned children Bai Liu had encountered in the real world.

An hour and a half remained.

By now, Muke should have contacted him via the keyboard, but—Bai Liu rubbed his bare neck—he had given the game manager to little Bai Six. That meant he couldn't reach Muke, nor could he go down to check on him or give him any instructions.

File Management Room
Muke covered his mouth as he rummaged through the dusty piles of files. The room was dark, devoid of any clocks, leaving him with no

clear sense of time. The only way he could estimate it was by watching the nurses patrolling outside.

His nerves tensed when he saw a nurse heading towards the canteen—that meant it was dinner time.

By now, Miao Feichi and the others should have returned. Muke quickly opened his system backpack and was just about to type on the keyboard to ask Bai Liu when he saw it move.

[Enter]—this meant to proceed. They should already be back.

Muke hesitated before pressing [Backspace] and [?], forming a question: [Am I coming back now?]

Bai Liu's reply was quick: [End][?]

Muke reluctantly responded: [N][O].

There were more cases than he had expected. Even with his memory, the sheer number of irregular names was overwhelming—not to mention the detailed medical histories attached to each case.

He had to admit Bai Liu had planned well. Reviewing such complex information after a proper night's rest was far more efficient, yet even with that advantage, Muke still struggled to finish in one afternoon. The files were just too extensive.

Each patient had a detailed record of previous diagnoses and treatments at other hospitals. Their medical histories resembled small books, filled with reports from multiple doctors before they were deemed incurable.

Another message appeared from Bai Liu: [9][1][5].

Muke understood—he was to return at 9:15 PM, after the nurses' shift change.

But there was a problem: Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang had already returned. If Muke left now, he might run into them.

He typed: [V][P][?]

Muke had only one [P] key on the keyboard, so he used the second half of "PVP" to ask about Player vs. Player encounters—essentially, what to do if he ran into Miao Feichi. He figured Bai Liu, a gamer, would understand.

This time, Bai Liu took longer to reply. Muke waited, confused, before finally receiving a cold response: [L][F][G].

Muke sucked in a sharp breath. It took him a moment to recall what it meant—LFG, an old gaming term for "Looking for Group."

Bai Liu was telling him not to panic or act hostile if he encountered Miao Feichi but to calmly act as if he was looking to join their team.

In other words, Muke was supposed to pretend to be Muke.

A strange way to put it, but he got the idea.

Still, Bai Liu had warned him the night before—Miao Gaojiang was likely to be suspicious of them today. Muke was not absolutely safe. However, they wouldn't attack immediately; Miao Feichi's stamina pool wouldn't fully recover until 9:15 PM.

Without their main attacker at full strength, Miao Gaojiang wouldn't make a move just yet.

Last night, Miao Feichi had burned through his stamina using his S-rank skill to break into the ICU. Because of that, he couldn't recover using potions today and was forced into a passive regeneration state.

That meant as long as Muke slipped out at exactly 9:15 PM, he would be safe.

Everything fit together perfectly.

Muke let out a long breath. Under Bai Liu's arrangement, every detail was calculated, every opportunity maximized.

He couldn't even tell when Bai Liu had started planning this.

Looking back, it felt like even Miao Feichi's rampage last night—where he burned through his stamina—had been part of Bai Liu's design.

Though, at the time, it had nearly gotten them both killed.

Yet, because of it, today was eerily peaceful. The children were safe. Muke was safe.

It was as if Bai Liu had orchestrated everything.

And yet… it never felt like part of a plan while they were living

through it.

Everything was far too risky.

It was like watching a desperate gambler place one final, all-in bet.

If Miao Feichi had succeeded last night, both Bai Liu and Muke would have been instantly wiped out. An S-rank attack could erase half their life points in one hit.

But Bai Liu had won the bet.

And now, they had Christmas Eve.

At 9:10 PM, the keyboard moved again.

[G][O].

The signal to leave.

Muke took a deep breath, glancing over the case files one last time before peeking out into the hallway.

The nurse's duty room light was on, but the corridor was empty. The patients had already been locked in their rooms. Muke exhaled slowly, pushing the door open and stepping out cautiously.

The hallway was shrouded in a dense, damp mist from the humidifier, making the air feel sticky and eerie. The only light came from the dull yellow glow of the nurse's station.

In the silence, all Muke could hear was the faint scuff of his feet on the floor—and something else.

A soft, creeping sound.

Like time-lapse footage of a plant growing at thirty-two times speed.

Red fluorescence flickered beneath the doors of several wards. The same glow he had seen on the blood primrose mushrooms last night—mushrooms that released spores when they matured.

A strong, coppery scent filled the air.

Muke quickened his pace. He avoided the stairwell—last night, there had been too many deformed children there. The safer option was the elevator.

He pressed [7] and stepped inside.

The doors closed agonizingly slowly.

At the end of the corridor, the ICU door creaked open.

A figure crawled out.

No—not crawled. It was too long, its limbs grotesquely bent. It sniffed at the air, head tilted, searching for the scent of blood.

[System Warning: Player Muke, 6 life points remaining. Two monsters have detected you. Evacuate immediately.]

Muke’s breath hitched.

Two? But there was only one patient in sight. Where was the second—

A cold dread washed over him.

Someone was pressing the "Open" button from outside.

Slowly, he turned his head.

A child, covered in syringes, knelt at the side of the elevator. Its fingers were broken, neatly severed at the joints. It tilted its head back and grinned.

"Don't go up. Go down. Someone's waiting for you up there."

Muke nearly collapsed in terror.

But finally, at the last moment, the elevator doors shut, and the lift began to rise.

The time: 9:14 PM.

One more minute.

Then the elevator stopped.

The doors slid open on the fifth floor.

Miao Feichi crouched outside, twirling a knife between his fingers.

"Good evening, Muke. Out late, aren’t you? Were you visiting Bai Liu?"

The elevator clock flicked: 9:15:00.

Miao Feichi’s grin widened. "Oh? Looks like my stamina just came back."

With that, he drew his twin knives against Muke's chin, and with a twist of his wrist forcing Muke's head up, Miao Feichi leaned down to look at Muke, who had been gagging in fear, and spoke in a brisk tone, "I thought you said this was a straw hog knife? But this knife of mine hasn't fucked an animal as dirty as a pig, but if you don't tell us the truth."

"I'll fuck you with this knife through your rectum." Miao Feichi smirked as she pulled the twin knives from her sides and clicked them on the sides of Muke's body.

Muke shuddered at the reflection of the snow on the back of the knife and tried to stomp back towards the lift, but Miao Gaojiang was standing behind Muke at some point, looking down at him expressionlessly.

There was no way back for him.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was sooooo long. Why???

The Loving Welfare Home

Muke was dragged down from the lift on the fifth floor by Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang and pulled into Miao Feichi's room, where the door slammed shut with a swift kick from Miao Feichi.

Outside, the nurse began her rounds, the clattering of her high heels echoing clearly through the quiet of the late night.

Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang stood on either side of Muke, who was shivering in fear, guarding the door and preventing his escape.

Miao Feichi knelt down and looked at Muke, who was kneeling on the floor. He stuck out his long tongue and licked his dry lips. "Alright, it's interrogation time. Tell us where Bai Liu is."

Muke gritted his teeth, his shoulders shaking violently, but he kept his head down, refusing to speak.

Impatient, Miao Feichi grabbed Muke's jaw, squeezing hard to tilt his head up. "I'm asking again. Don't think I can't torture you just because you only have 6 life points. I have ways of pushing you to the brink of death, making you suffer, or you could just open your system panel and let's see what you're exchanging on that keyboard."

Muke's jaw creaked painfully as his TMJs dislocated. His mouth was sore and aching, tears brimming in his eyes as he stammered, his words slurred. "I don't know what you're talking about..."

Miao Gaojiang crouched beside him, his expression overly sympathetic, almost like a greasy middle-aged man trying to convince young people to drink more at a bar. "Muke, if you were a normal, honest player, we wouldn't even want to touch you. As long as you were cooperative, we'd leave you be. But if you keep this up, if you refuse to open your panel for us to look at, then we have no choice."

Muke's breathing was heavy, but he remained silent.

Miao Gaojiang sighed and stood up, nudging Miao Feichi with his index finger. "Forget it. He's probably under Bai Liu's control. We won't get anything from him."

Miao Feichi shrugged, his tone flat. "Kill him. His keyboard will fall out of his backpack. Even if we can't read it, at least Bai Liu will have one less character to use."

What should he do? Muke's heart raced. Bai Liu wanted him to cooperate with Miao Gaojiang, but doing so would mean betraying the keyboard Bai Liu used to communicate with him. The problem was, the others might not even be able to read the messages on it.

But resisting would only destroy the keyboard and drop it anyway.

"I'll show you." Muke lifted his head.

Struggling to control his trembling hands, he tapped on his system panel and selected the keyboard. He prayed mentally that Bai Liu wouldn't send him any new information at that moment, but as soon as the keyboard appeared, Muke shut his eyes.

Three keycaps were missing from the keyboard.

Miao Feichi leaned in, his interest piqued. "I can tell what this means. The missing keys are 9, 0, and 6—looks like a room number."

"This must be Bai Liu's ward number," Miao Gaojiang said, his smile shifting from fake to genuine. "Muke, is your master asking you to meet him?"

Miao Feichi tightened his grip on Muke's neck. "Reply to him that you're on your way."

Muke shook his hands, his mind in disarray, but he tried to keep his tone steady. "There's a nurse out there now. How are you going to get to the ninth floor?"

"We'll kill the children in the emergency staircase," Miao Feichi said with a grin, slapping Muke across the face with his twin knives. "Forgot? I've got my stamina back, and I move faster than the nurse."

Muke was forced to respond on the keyboard, and Bai Liu immediately replied.

Miao Feichi looked at Miao Gaojiang. "Do you want to kill him now?"

Miao Gaojiang thought for a moment before shaking his head. "Bai Liu's a highly intelligent player with fast reactions. If Muke keeps using the keyboard to communicate, Bai Liu might grow suspicious. We can afford to wait. Muke's desperate enough to comply."

They dragged Muke quickly out of the ward as the nurse went to patrol another floor, taking the safe passage to the ninth floor.

But the safe passage was filled with deformed children.

Muke watched in horror as Miao Feichi hacked down the children who had chased them around the hospital the previous night. His twin knives sliced through their bodies, their veins twisting with hunger and thirst, their cries echoing in the corridor.

Miao Feichi clicked his tongue in boredom as his knives flashed, severing a child's head with a sickening thud. The head rolled to Muke's feet, its wide, resentful eyes staring up at him, but no more cries escaped its gaping mouth.

It was a crushing force, and Muke's fear intensified. He recalled the terror he had felt the night before under Miao Feichi's ruthless assault, no longer certain if he had interpreted Bai Liu's instructions correctly.

Was Bai Liu really making himself obedient to Miao Feichi and the others? If this continued, Muke would be taken straight to the seventh floor.

Frantically, Muke prayed that Bai Liu wouldn't be in room 906.

Meanwhile, in the orphanage.

Little Bai Liu pressed his body down and hurried out to make the call, warily looking from side to side as he walked. "I pulled the keycap to 906 like you asked. Is this your ward number? Are you in 906 now?"

"Yes," Bai Liu replied. "Someone contacted you earlier with a keyboard. How did you reply?"

"Let him team up. In this situation, he's either going to drop his keyboard dead or alive to reveal his spy status. Might as well let him surrender first and linger." Little Bai Liu frowned. "But you and I both said those two were likely to come and attack you at night. I thought you had me dial in to 906 to make them run empty. Why are you in 906? Are they coming for you right away?"

"You don't need to worry about my side," Bai Liu said calmly. "I'm trolling them by making a game. You just make sure your side is fine."

"You did a good job earlier by having the opposite contact seek out the enemy and form a group. What about your side? Are you ready to escape the orphanage?"

Little Bai Liu glanced over at the deformed children wandering around

the playground. He quickly looked for a place to hide from detection. After two days of chasing, he had gotten good at finding places to conceal himself. Bai Liu had told him earlier to escape with the kids tonight, because tomorrow was the [Wednesday] pairing day.

"There are deformed children wandering the playground between nine and twelve, and the teacher isn't completely asleep. If it were any other time, I wouldn't recommend running away. It would be easy to get caught by the deformed children and the teacher." Little Bai Liu spoke calmly into the phone. "But it's open day for the christening, and the orphanage doors are still open."

"After twelve, the orphanage doors will close, and flute-playing kids will come in during the early hours to take the rest of the children, so we have to run before twelve."

"But if we choose to run before twelve, avoiding the teachers and deformed children will be a problem, right?" Bai Liu asked after a moment of contemplation.

"Right." Little Bai Liu said coldly, "But running away gets harder the later it gets. There were five deformed kids tonight, and their numbers are increasing by two each night. Tonight, we're up against exactly the same number of deformed kids we have to escape from."

"If there were only three or fewer, I'd consider letting Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang lure the others, and then I'd run with Muke and Liu Jiayi. But tonight, there are five. That means we'll each have a deformed child chasing us, and letting Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang lure away three of them wouldn't do much good."

Bai Liu seemed intrigued. "You managed to get Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang to go with you so quickly?"

Little Bai Liu responded lightly, "It was easy to convince them."

"How did you convince them?" Bai Liu asked.

"I made a deal with them," Little Bai Liu said, his tone unhurried. "I told them I could take them out, but they needed to make a deal with me."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "You used my personal skills to buy their souls? You're quick on the uptake."

"No," Little Bai Liu retorted. "It's not that I pay for their souls. They

pay me to look after them. They gave me twelve dollars and fifty cents and then entrusted me with their soul. I take them, and we escape."

"But for some reason, the Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang soul notes I got weren't quite what you said they would be." Little Bai Liu spoke with a mix of doubt and dissatisfaction, as though he had been cheated out of his money.

Clearly, this little friend had earned two souls and twelve dollars without even contributing a penny to the robbery.

Little Bai Liu frowned. "After trading with Miao Feichi, the coin's system indicated that I didn't have a full trade, just partial soul debt rights for the character. I couldn't use the other person's skills or system panel; I could only view their system panel."

"So, what can you do with the soul notes you get?" Bai Liu inquired.

"Nothing." Little Bai Liu said, a bit irritated. "The system states I need to collect all the souls and successfully trade with all of them at the same time, or part of the souls will die and return to the trading partner. Only then will this soul note have the effect of a full trade. But it's not all useless. I can use it to restrict Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang's movements, which will make my escape tonight more manageable."

Bai Liu thought for a moment. The reason he had given the coin to Little Bai Liu was to see if he could get him to trade for the souls of Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang to control each other indirectly from the children's side.

But what he ended up with was really just a half-finished product—this soul note with only partial debt rights was like a torn half of a soul note. It seemed like something, but you couldn't use it to buy anything from the person you were trading with.

To get the other person's complete soul, either you had to have the soul sold to him at the same time as Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang's original bodies—that's what the system calls a set of full souls. But that had zero possibility.

Miao Gaojiang wasn't a fool. Why would he do such a thing? The previous incident with Zhang Gui had made this guy wary. Though he hadn't figured out exactly how Bai Liu's skill worked, Miao Gaojiang had likely guessed that Bai Liu's ability was far more complex than it seemed.

Throughout the day, Miao Gaojiang hadn't taken anything from Bai Liu, nor had he agreed to any of Bai Liu's verbal traps. He had barely responded to Bai Liu's requests and only used active sentences to engage in conversation. This was a major flaw in Bai Liu's control skills, as it made it difficult for him to gain control or trade with his opponent when he was on the defensive.

There was, of course, a second possibility: to kill Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang's original bodies and allow the souls to revert to the secondary identity line.

That possibility was even less than zero.

But not entirely impossible.

"Little Bai Liu, when you use this skill, don't forget what I warned you about," Bai Liu reminded him. "This trading skill is restricted for both parties. You promised to take Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang and lead them to escape. You have to do it, or you'll also—"

"—end up with half a soul note in an old wallet, right?" Little Bai Liu said calmly.

Bai Liu was quiet. He hadn't mentioned his identity to him from the beginning, and the name they registered was just an investor. No one knew their real name. It seemed like the system intentionally kept the children from learning their true identity. They were more like a nebulous symbol for the child NPCs in the orphanages generated by the system.

It was probably hard for any child to think that these creepy, eerie-looking [investors] were their future selves.

But Bai Liu wasn't surprised that Little Bai Liu could guess who he was.

Little Bai Liu's voice had no ripple. "You should have guessed that when you gave me this coin, I would have figured it out based on the message in your coin. I'm a curious person, and when I see a message, I think. Now I finally understand why you're willing to die for me."

"I'm as much your secondary identity line as any other kid—half your soul, right? The future Bai Liu? Or the ever-anonymous Mr. Nice Investor?"

The loving Welfare Home

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I wonder what life has done to you to turn you this way," Little Bai Six said icily. "It makes me a bit disgusted."

"You've been lying to me from the beginning. You knew I liked money, you knew what type of person I would be curious about, you understood my motivations and psychological constructs, and you used that to constantly entice me to do things for you without question. And you deliberately let me know that I was your secondary identity, didn't you? To make sure I stayed in touch with you after my successful escape from the orphanage."

"You need to ensure that I don't betray you, that I continue to give you more money than you give me. And you know very well that money can't sustain a connection with me for long."

Little Bai Six's breathing came through the phone, which had a weak signal, sounding like a stuttering flow of water—ragged and hurried. "You're not talking now, you're waiting for me to calm down, aren't you?"

Bai Liu didn't respond. One hand held the phone while the other rested on his elbow. He leaned against the wall with a pale expression, silently waiting for Little Bai Six to calm down.

Little Bai Six, being a sensible child, took a couple of deep breaths. His breathing became more regular, and after a moment, he spoke again. "I have to admit, you really know yourself. It's true that I would never betray myself."

Having half the soul of a creepy investor who draws blood himself is an outrageous thing, and it only took fourteen-year-old Little Bai Six a few seconds to come to terms with it. He quickly moved on, focusing soberly.

"The two problems I escaped from tonight were the teacher and the deformed children, the sleeping quarters for the baptized children, the teacher who would do rounds, and the fact that we weren't allowed to stay out late. Also, Liu Jiayi, for some reason, knew the orphanage as if she had lived here before."

Bai Liu spoke in a slightly subtle tone, "She figured out the rules of the teacher's rounds and told me the teacher usually finishes her rounds of our bedroom at 9:15 and her bedroom at 9:30. After 9:30, we could leave the bedroom and escape. Liu Jiayi also gave us a rough escape route based on her familiarity with the orphanage."

Little Bai Six commented, "She was very resourceful in her planning. Although she was a little flustered when I first approached her about escaping, once she realized I was sent by her brother, Liu Jiayi started sending me useful information. It was more effective than both Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang combined, even though she's just a blind eight-year-old girl."

"If she wasn't blind and had a deformed child to worry about, I think she could have made her way out of the orphanage completely on her own tonight," Little Bai Six concluded.

Bai Liu remained silent, letting Little Bai Six continue. It was normal for Liu Jiayi to know the orphanage, as she had spent time there. Given the poisonous mushroom incident, it was clear Liu Jiayi was mentally and intellectually brilliant. Bai Liu wasn't worried that Liu Jiayi would hinder Little Bai Six's escape.

Little Bai Six continued, "But these wandering deformed children are indeed a big problem. However, after inspecting the props in the coin you gave me, I found one that could help."

Bai Liu and Little Bai Six spoke in unison, "[The Passenger's Blessing]."

This buff-type item was the main reason Bai Liu had given Little Bai Six the coin.

[Passenger's Blessing] - A bonus item obtained by collecting the Monster Book in the second scenario. The system explains the item: "The passengers are grateful for your efforts to save them from their painful fate. They have blessed you, and their spirits will watch over you, preventing any monsters from harming you as long as you sit in the transport seat."

However, the vehicle cannot be carried by the player themselves and must be inherent to the original scenario. It can only be used once in a game.

This item had not been dropped to Miao Feichi during Bai Liu's fake death. It had been left in the coin, the Game Manager, because it was a buff-type item. Its use wasn't attached to the entity but to the player,

and it couldn't be dropped, so Miao Gaojiang didn't suspect it.

"We had one of those toy cars in the children's playground," Little Bai Six continued. "I think it's considered a vehicle in this scenario, but it's locked up at 6 PM by the teacher."

Little Bai Six remained calm, as if what he was about to do was not some nefarious scheme but just playing with toys. "Liu Jiayi said she could trick the teacher who has the key into coming alone, and then we can knock the teacher out, steal the key, and drive the toy car."

"But this toy car only seats four people," Bai Liu rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Where else would one of you sit?"

Little Bai Six was eerily quiet for two seconds. "We're also going to steal a large walker for handicapped children and attach it to the toy car to let it run."

Bai Liu paused, delicately silent.

The toddler car was a small toy resembling a pair of crotch trousers on four wheels, propelled by two feet running underneath while the legs were crossed. The children were running around with abandon.

"Who are you going to put in this toddler car?" Bai Liu asked.

"Liu Jiayi is too dangerous to be in the back," Little Bai Six paused, mischief evident in his tone. "So... it would be more appropriate to put the shortest of us in it. And I'm not the shortest."

"Muke is the one."

Outside Bai Liu's ward, the sound of high heels clicking on the floor echoed. It was the nurse. But soon, new footsteps approached, signaling more than one person—Bai Liu's eyes darkened. The steady, fast-moving footsteps belonged to Miao Feichi and his team.

Miao Feichi had clearly caught up to the nurse's patrol timing to reach Bai Liu's door. This was the advantage of players moving faster than NPCs, allowing them to exploit gaps in NPC movement speeds without being chased to death, unlike Bai Liu last night.

"Ta-da-da." There was a knock on Bai Liu's door, followed by Muke's shaky voice. "I-I'm Muke. I'm here."

Bai Liu's eyes moved to the door, and he whispered into the phone,

"I'm hanging up."

"Wait," Little Bai Six paused before asking, "When do I call you again?"

Bai Liu replied carelessly, "After 9:30, I guess. You can call me anytime. Calls are still billed by the minute."

"If I'm still alive to take your call."

Little Bai Six was silent for a second. "From a monetary point of view, I want you alive, but considering the plan and who you are, I'd be in a lot of trouble with you alive. The most valuable thing you have is already in my possession, so from that perspective, I'd rather you be dead."

After saying this, Little Bai Six simply hung up the phone.

Bai Liu smiled indifferently as he put the phone behind his back. His hand holding the phone looked like a monkey's paw. Bai Liu's eyes dropped to the "monkey's paw" in his hand—he had manipulated it in the system interface when leaving the orphanage. This allowed him to use Mu Sicheng's skills even after giving the Game Manager to Little Bai Six.

But he could only use Mu Sicheng's skills.

He couldn't switch back to the other soul notes, and Little Bai Six couldn't manipulate Bai Liu's main identity panel. However, Bai Liu's Game Manager coin was bound to both his main and secondary identities, allowing Little Bai Six to see his survival status and receive alerts on Bai Liu's attributes panel to know if he was alive or dead.

Bai Liu had kept his Monkey Paw skill half-active since hearing the footsteps. His stamina slot had been depleted last night, so he couldn't use Mu Sicheng's skills before. He had to use Muke as bait to lure Miao Feichi to the ward and stall for time instead of confronting them head-on.

But—Bai Liu glanced at the clock on the wall—Miao Feichi wasn't the only player who had recovered their stamina slot by 9:15.

Miao Feichi wasn't the only player with a teammate to work with.

Bai Liu slowly raised his eyes and saw Liu Huai standing quietly behind the door, holding his breath.

Liu Huai, the assassin, was clutching his dagger in both hands, standing quietly in the shadows like a true killer, with the coldness and determination of a real assassin. After receiving a nod from Bai Liu, Liu Huai took a deep breath, leaped gently, and hung silently from the ceiling lamp.

Looking down at Bai Liu, Liu Huai's emotions were mixed. His gaze fell on the monkey's paw Bai Liu had already equipped. Liu Huai couldn't have imagined working with Mu Sicheng's skill like this after all this time.

This might be the last time [the thief and the assassin] worked together.

Liu Huai closed his eyes, his fingers brushing the doll Liu Jiayi had made for him, which looked like him but was crudely done. It was a gift from Liu Jiayi—her handmade doll.

Liu Jiayi loved dolls, even though she couldn't see them. She liked to touch and make them, perhaps to compensate for her inability to see the world. Despite how ugly the dolls were, Liu Jiayi cherished them.

Because of Liu Jiayi's love for dolls, Liu Huai had clumsily made a bear doll for her, though it turned out ugly—like the two siblings, they shared a similarity. The good part was that Liu Jiayi couldn't see how ugly the doll was, and she liked it.

Perhaps this was the last time Liu Huai would see Liu Jiayi's ugly brother dolls.

Liu Huai took a deep breath, gently pulling open the ward door with his hand.

The door creaked as it opened slowly. Before the figure standing outside could be fully seen, two twin swords suddenly cut through the air in an arc, followed by Muke's cry of alarm: "Bai Liu!"

Chapter End Notes

> Little Bai six : I'm very curious about what life has done to you to turn you into this image that makes me a bit disgusted.
> Bai Liu : Work
> Little Bai six : .....?

The Loving Welfare Home

The coin on his chest kept vibrating. Little Bai Six tapped the system panel on his chest and saw several prompts appear.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu's main identity line stamina slot is restored. You can use a stamina restorer to recover stamina. Would you like to restore it?]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu's main identity line stamina is fully restored.]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu, main identity line—Do you want to use your personal skill (Thief Monkey Claw)?]

Little Bai Six took a deep breath and closed the system panel. He watched the teacher approaching his bedroom in the darkness. After a phone call with Bai Liu, he moved to step on the escape point, then crept back inside, pretending nothing had happened. He lay in bed, breathing evenly as if asleep.

After ensuring the teacher had finished her rounds, Little Bai Six, still pretending to sleep, quickly jumped out of bed. Miao Feichi, Miao Gaojiang, and Muke also leapt from their beds.

They exchanged a knowing glance as Little Bai Six reached the bedroom door. Quietly, they followed him into the unlit corridor.

The floor opposite Bai Six's bedroom was Liu Jiayi’s, and between the two buildings lay a small square, like a children's playground, where deformed children roamed.

The window of the women's toilet, situated across from them, and the back of the building leading down to the ground floor, provided a good route to avoid detection by the deformed children—this was a path Liu Jiayi had shared with them.

Bai Six moved swiftly, entering the women’s room with precision. He looked left and right, then quickly passed through, tumbling out of the ventilation window by the last cubicle. He landed on the grass. Behind the building was covered with thick bushes and tall grasses. Bai Six touched the wall and followed its edge toward the other building.

As they moved, they could still hear the faint, eerie laughter of a child from the building.

The laughter grew closer, transforming into a shadow following them. It felt as if something had tumbled out of the building and was now tailing them, playing a game of chase.

Muke, trailing at the back, turned back often at the sound of approaching laughter. His face turned pale with fear, sensing something was following them.

"Don’t look back," Little Bai Six said calmly when Muke turned again, unable to resist. "Something is following us, but it probably thinks we're playing a game. Keep going—don’t let it catch up."

The faces of the deformed children emerged in the ghostly moonlight, their mutilated or less-mutilated faces grinning wide with innocent, eerie smiles. They raised their hands, smeared with crimson mud from crawling through it, and chanted, almost rhythmically.

"Play! Play with me! Stay and play!"

Muke's heart nearly stopped from the terror. The group ran as fast as they could, finally making it through the window of the women’s room in the other building, just as the monstrous children were nearly upon them.

Miao Gaojiang, clearly distressed, fell to the ground with a pale face. He was the last to climb in and had one of his shoes ripped off by the deformed children who were chasing him. Meanwhile, the ones unable to squeeze through the window crowded around the small air vent in the women’s room.

Several bizarre, almost-human faces pressed against the vent, their white forms lit by the moonlight. A few pairs of large, lifeless eyes stared at Bai Six and the others, still reaching and mumbling.

"I want to play! You’re going to play with me! Come out!"

Bai Six handed the shoes he had grabbed back to Miao Gaojiang with a cool glance at the deformed children. "They can’t get in for now. Put them on so you can run faster later."

Miao Gaojiang took the shoes with a complicated expression, muttering a thank you. Bai Six gave a dispassionate nod and turned to exit the women’s room. They had finally reached the building where Liu Jiayi's bedroom was located.

As they made their way down the corridor toward Liu Jiayi’s room,

they overheard her whispering to one of the teachers, pretending to be sick.

"Teacher, I don't feel well," Liu Jiayi's voice was weak and convincing, a slight cough making it sound realistic. Being a [commodity] to be collected tomorrow, being sick on the first night was not ideal for the teacher at this orphanage.

After asking Liu Jiayi repeatedly about her symptoms, the teacher was growing more impatient. But after hearing two cat-like cries outside from Bai Six, Liu Jiayi finally said, "Okay, let's go to the doctor." The teacher turned, exposing her back to the waiting Little Bai Six and the others.

Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang, two of the more physically capable children, overpowered the teacher, choking her until her eyes rolled back in unconsciousness.

Instantly, Liu Jiayi let go of the teacher's hand and stood up, her disoriented eyes searching anxiously for the little Bai Six. "I can't see. Find the key on her! Other teachers will patrol soon! We don't have much time!"

Liu Jiayi, unable to see, was struggling to keep up. Little Bai Six instructed Miao Gaojiang to carry her, and the group ran as quickly as they could, leaving the teacher's lifeless body behind.

None of the children, save for Muke, glanced back at the teacher they had just killed.

The others seemed to be born criminals, gifted in the art of murder, behaving like bad kids who felt no guilt about killing. Muke, however, the most normal of the group, followed them, occasionally glancing back at the teacher's body with fearful eyes, but quickly pulled away, chasing after them in nervous apprehension.

With no more time to waste, they pressed forward. Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang, both fast runners, reached the square and began luring the deformed children away. Meanwhile, Little Bai Six took the opportunity to unlock the child carriage at the edge of the playground.

Miao Gaojiang, with Liu Jiayi on his back, reached the carriage, and the two climbed in, panting. Little Muke...

Little Muke hissed, eyes brimming with tears as he ran with bent legs, crossing over the walker. "Bai Six, drive faster! Stop messing around!

The kid behind me is catching up!"

Little Bai Six, at the wheel, gritted his teeth. The toy car wasn't fast to begin with, and with all four children crammed inside—Liu Jiayi being the lightest and the others all teens—it was even slower.

The deformed children behind them, enjoying the chase, were closing in. They dragged their feet or crawled on all fours, almost catching up. But as the deformed children reached out to touch the toy car, black smoke suddenly erupted from the vehicle.

The smoke boiled, swirling upward, forming a myriad of hissing and clawing charred corpses that looked both real and illusory. These twisted figures roared as they spewed flames from their mouths, chasing the deformed children away.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu's secondary identity line uses a prop (Passenger's Blessing) to activate the vehicle's spirit-driven defense.]

The monstrous children, now frightened, chattered and scattered but still remained at a distance. They were wary but unwilling to let go of their game, watching from afar.

Little Muke, still screaming and teary-eyed, was stunned. Bai Six, one hand on the child's mobile phone and the other on the steering wheel, smiled quietly as he spoke into the receiver. "Hello, Bai Liu. How are you?"

There was no response.

Little Bai Six kept dialing. He hadn't heard Bai Liu's voice since their brief conversation at 9:15 AM.

Quickly, he checked the system panel. Bai Liu's health had plummeted from 6 to 3 during their escape, and it was still dropping at an alarming rate, values flashing across the screen.

The system coin vibrated again, flooding the panel with red warning boxes and prompts.

Across the street, the private hospital building loomed dark and foreboding. Bai Six's eyes reflected its dark silhouette as he glanced up, his lips pressed tightly together.

Suddenly, the orphanage behind him lit up, followed by a frantic scream from one of the teachers: "A child has knocked out the teacher

and run away!"

It was as if the lights in the orphanage were voice-activated, brightening with the scream. The teachers stood by the windows, their faces grim and fearful, their shadows stretching out like thin, ghostly specters watching the runaway children.

In that moment, the teachers shed their daytime veneer of kindness, becoming as monstrous as the hospital investors.

"Get them back!" The Dean's voice rang out over the radio, commanding and cold. "Get those kids who tried to escape and punish them severely! Drown the leader in the baptismal font!"

The Loving Welfare Home

The teachers and caregivers rushed out of the lit rooms one by one, transforming into shadows with unreadable faces in the night, writhing and hurrying toward little Bai Six.

This private orphanage, with over two hundred caregivers, was a place where even an adult could struggle to keep up with an overloaded car and a toddler. The caregivers emerged from the classrooms, their faces twisted with anger and grimaces, appearing far more frightening in the night than the giggling, deformed children.

The deformed children chasing Bai Liu seemed afraid of the teachers as well. Upon seeing them, they screamed and scattered from a distance, as though they had encountered a natural enemy.

The coin worn by little Bai Six vibrated.

[The Monster Book of Love Orphanage Refresh - Deformed Children (1/3)]

[Monster Name: Deformed Child (Non-Blood Pumping Naughty Version)]

[Characteristic: Enjoys playing with others late at night and abducting children who play with it.]

[Weakness: Teacher at the orphanage (1/3)]

[Mode of Attack: Blood Injection (A+), Phone Location (A+), Flute Player (A)]

The deformed children fled while the teachers closed in.

These teachers were clearly not monsters, so they couldn't be repelled by the "Passenger's Blessing" buff prop. With the orphanage's gate now within reach, little Bai Six looked up at the large metal door, half-hidden in the night.

Moonlight flickered outside, and the sound of wind rustling the grass could be heard, as if someone was walking outside, enticing them to run.

Little Bai Six made a quick decision. "Get out and run!"

Several children scrambled out of the car in panic. Muke barely managed to escape his walker with little Bai Six's help, but there was a downside to the group's frantic scattering — the faster runners ignored the slower ones.

Miao Gaojiang left Liu Jiayi behind the moment he got off the bus. Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang, being the oldest and strongest, were the quickest and soon left the others behind.

Liu Jiayi and Muke were slower. Liu Jiayi, precocious yet frail, and Muke, nearly invisible and young enough to be dragged along by little Bai Six, slowed the group. However, little Bai Six, not being very strong, found himself struggling to keep pace.

He gritted his teeth, panting. After a moment, he calmed down, pulled out his soul note, and ordered Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang, "Come and carry them both."

Despite their reluctance, Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang turned back, compelled by the task-like pressure of the soul note.

The two men soon had Liu Jiayi and Muke on their backs, and Bai Six, running alone, kept pace with them. However, the teachers, closing in behind, were gaining ground. Little Bai Six could hear them gnashing their teeth, cursing the "filthy little brats," while others screamed for the door to be shut.

Little Bai Six pressed on, his lungs burning as if he had swallowed a torch. He gasped for air, the moonlight casting a scattered sheen on his sweaty, pale face, and the wind whispered past his ears.

--Get out of here, get out of here.

"You bad child, you are not favored by the gods. You need to leave quickly, no one likes you here."

Bai Liu took a deep breath, pushing himself to run faster.

Suddenly, Miao Gaojiang screamed. Little Bai Six's sharp gaze darted to him, thinking the man might be up to something, but he saw Liu Jiayi, lying on Miao Gaojiang's back, covering her mouth and coughing up black blood, her fingers turning white and fragile. She weakened instantly, her face as pale as paper.

Liu Jiayi, fearing to disturb the others, curled up, coughing quietly, but blood spilled from her mouth, mixed with the tears she had been

holding back.

"It hurts so much..." Liu Jiayi whispered, her unfocused eyes streaming with tears as she choked on black blood.

She coughed, calling out in a daze, "- I'm in pain, brother, brother."

Warm blood soaked Miao Gaojiang's back. Fear flickered in his eyes as he turned to little Bai Six. "Bai Six, she's spitting blood!"

Little Bai Six realized that Liu Jiayi wasn't lying or acting when she had told her teacher she was unwell. The little blind girl was truly sick and had only held back for their sake.

He remembered what Bai Liu had told him earlier that day about Liu Jiayi.

"I suspect she may have been poisoned by some kind of delayed-onset mushroom toxin. It's just a guess, but keep an eye on her. She's special and could be very dangerous."

Soon, Liu Jiayi, having vomited until she was drained, began to slide off Miao Gaojiang's back. Her descent slowed him down.

Miao Gaojiang, panting, shouted with red eyes, "Bai Six! Let her go! She's useless! She won't survive if we keep going! Let her stay in the orphanage, maybe a doctor will see her!"

Miao Feichi, carrying Muke on his back, was now also struggling to run. Sweat covered his head, his teeth bared as he yelled, "Bai Six! Where's this fucking kindness coming from? Let them go! If we don't, we'll be overtaken!"

Had it been the old Bai Six, he would have abandoned the two of them without hesitation. His personal interests always came first — that was his code.

But now, things were different. There were now two versions of him.

And those who held him back were tied to his other interests.

Little Bai Six's gaze settled on Muke's fearful face, his voice barely a whisper, calling out his name. Then, it shifted to Liu Jiayi's nearly unconscious face, her body trembling in pain.

His emotionless gaze swept over them, calculating their value, weighing what he could sacrifice for his own benefit and the benefit of

the other version of himself.

By leaving Muke and Liu Jiayi behind, little Bai Six could escape unscathed and protect his interests.

But by not saving them, there was a chance they wouldn't survive, yet the other version of him would be safeguarded.

Liu Jiayi finally lost all strength and slipped off Miao Gaojiang's back, her bloodied face desperately reaching out for him. After they fell, Miao Feichi cursed and dragged little Bai Six away.

"What are you carrying useless people for?"

"Get out of here, Bai Six! They're not even one of us!"

The sound of Muke's frightened face, reaching out to him, the rustle of feet on sand, the scolding of the teachers drawing nearer, the frantic waving of something in their hands...

The frightened Muke, lying on the ground, reaching out in fear, and Liu Jiayi's bloodied face calling out for her brother, along with the distorted, grim faces of Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang, swirled before little Bai Six's eyes. The scene felt like a strange, flickering memory, like footage from an old movie.

If he stopped, little Bai Six would be a good boy. If he ran, he would be a bad boy.

This, it seemed, was the worldly definition of good and bad — little Bai Six thought, momentarily confused.

But he was supposed to be a bad boy.

Yet, the other version of him didn't seem to see it that way, oh, and had even given him a strange new name — "white as in daylight, willow as in willow."

[You don't have to be an adult to choose to be the bad guy.]

[For now, it's better to let me handle what bad guys should do. I'll take care of the rest.]

...I promised to help him save Liu Jiayi and Muke. He paid me — little Bai Six's right hand gripped the coin-shaped game manager on his chest. The coin, a reward from Bai Liu.

[My status is that of a wanderer, and as a wanderer, you just need to honor your agreements, even with me.]

Little Bai Six's consciousness drifted back, these thoughts unfolding in milliseconds, as he had just been tugged by Miao Feichi when he stopped.

Miao Feichi, surprised, looked back at him.

"Stop," little Bai Six said, his voice unnervingly calm. "Go back and carry Muke and Liu Jiayi."

Miao Feichi stared at little Bai Six in shock. "You're crazy, Bai Six, I'm fucking—"

"I said, go back and put them on your back," little Bai Six interrupted, his tone unwavering. "I'm giving orders, not talking to you. Understand?"

He raised his eyes. "Go back and carry them."

"Fuck!!!" Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang lost it, spinning around to carry Muke, bawling, and Liu Jiayi, barely hanging on, their movements frantic. They muttered insults as they went: "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"You're really sick, Bai Six! I thought you were level-headed like us! But you're a saint, always helping other people out! Let's see what happens if you can't get out of here!"

"Can't run out..." little Bai Six suddenly laughed, a mischievous, carefree sound. He darted through the wind and night like a child, laughing, panting, capricious. "Anyway, someone said they'd help me clean up my mess. That's his problem."

The Loving Welfare Home

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The three children were obviously not as strong as the adults, but little Bai six had started running as soon as the clock struck 9:30. This gave them a time advantage, and the teachers chasing after them couldn't catch up right away.

As they neared the gate, elation flickered across Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang's faces—only for it to freeze on Miao Feichi's like wax hardening in cold air.

He halted abruptly at the threshold of the open doorway, his body going rigid. Instead of stepping forward, he took two cautious steps back.

Beyond the door, lurking in the shadows, stood a multitude of long, thin, ghostly figures—investors with wide-brimmed hats and faces wrapped in bandages.

Their mouths chewed at the very bandages meant to conceal them, revealing sharp, unnervingly wide grins stretching to their ears. Their upturned noses twitched as they sniffed at the fresh scent of children, their jaws dripping with thick, viscous saliva.

They were shrouded in black, blending seamlessly with the night. Only as they loomed closer did Miao Feichi realize that the eerie white patches shifting outside the door weren't caused by the moonlight—it was the movement of their bandaged faces.

They were blocked by the orphanage's half-open, half-closed door, their long, spindly hands reaching through the iron bars, grasping at the children inside. Their jagged teeth clicked together in a grotesque imitation of chewing, strings of saliva pooling beneath them.

Frozen in terror, none of the children moved. Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang, still carrying Muke and Liu Jiayi on their backs, sank to their knees in disbelief.

Little Bai six also sat down, steadying his breathing as he cast a calm, sweeping glance at the door.

“...Failed,” he murmured. “It was never going to be that easy to escape.”

These monsters—these investors—were once people who had fallen victim to the orphanage’s twisted dealings. Those who had failed to receive the proper blood donations had succumbed to a gruesome fate. Now, they prowled outside, eternally lingering. Any child who had managed to flee the orphanage before had likely met their end at the hands of these creatures.

The teachers arrived behind them, spitting in contempt at the children who had dared to run. One of them struck little Bai six, sending him sprawling onto the ground.

Pinned down, he endured a series of sharp blows from a broom. He didn't flinch. His expression remained impassive, as if he had anticipated this all along.

The dean arrived shortly after, locking the door behind her. She stood over the children, gazing down at them with a grim, condescending air.

Her face was so tight with anger it seemed water might seep from her skin. She regarded them coldly and spoke in an eerie, deliberate tone:

“Now, tell me—whose idea was it to run away? Whoever confesses will be spared from the worst of the punishment. But if you refuse...”

Before she could finish her threat, Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang turned their hatred onto Bai Liu. Without hesitation, they pointed at him.

“It was him!” they accused.

The dean’s gaze shifted to little Bai six, who was still on the floor from his beating, slowly getting up. She paused before speaking, her voice heavy with disdain.

“It seems today’s baptism wasn’t enough to cleanse you of your sins, Bai Liu.”

Her lips curled into a smile, though her eyes remained devoid of warmth. “I suppose you need a more thorough cleansing.”

She turned to the rest of the children. “The others will be confined together and fast until tomorrow. Bai Liu, however... I’ll take you to

the church myself."

Little Bai six had barely gotten to his feet before the dean seized him roughly by the collar. Without any resistance, he was dragged toward the church, stumbling over his own feet, breath coming in shallow gasps.

He had spent all night running and had little strength left to fight back.

The church doors creaked open, and he was flung inside.

At least, he thought bleakly, she was punishing him the same way as before—forcing him into the baptismal font and making him choke on the water.

But this time, she seemed truly furious. She shoved his head under the surface with far more force, muttering words he couldn't make out.

"Filthy little beast."

"You owe your survival to the generosity of your investors, yet you dare pull a stunt like this?!"

Little Bai six's eyes remained half-open, droplets clinging to his eyelashes. He surfaced, gasping for breath, only to be forced down again.

Water flooded his nose and throat. He tried to cough but barely had a moment before she plunged him under once more.

"Do you realize what kind of trouble you're causing us?!" she shrieked. She yanked him up by the hair, her voice escalating into a hysterical scream. "You inhuman little monster! Your parents should have drowned you at birth for the good of society!"

Little Bai six's vision blurred.

He had lost interest in this game of drown and resurface.

He had also lost his strength.

On his next attempt to come up for air, he was too slow. He choked, his body convulsing involuntarily.

The dean's face was void of emotion as she held him beneath the water. Bubbles streamed from his mouth and nose. His expression,

however, remained eerily calm—not the twisted terror of a drowning man, but something far more resigned.

Although he truly felt like he was going to drown this time, he was getting used to it.

His fingers slipped from the edge of the baptismal pool. His body floated limply in the water, his consciousness fading. The small coin on his chest slipped from his shirt, glinting faintly as it bobbed in the ripples.

The dean sneered and yanked the coin from his neck.

“How dare you steal from an investor!” she screeched. “You wretched, cursed child!”

As she continued tormenting him, and as little Bai six genuinely began to believe he would drown out of sheer boredom, a deafening explosion shook the church.

A bright red warning flared before his half-conscious eyes.

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu’s main identity life value is dropping rapidly! Please evacuate the dangerous area immediately!]

[...Life value reduced to 2… reduced to 1… Warning! Player Bai Liu’s main identity line is about to die!]

The church trembled from the explosion, forcing the dean to finally stop. She turned toward the commotion outside, cursing.

“What now?!”

Little Bai six weakly lifted his head, his half-lidded eyes reflecting the glowing red system warnings. He exhaled shallowly, gaze flickering toward the unfamiliar idol beside the baptismal font.

It wasn’t long before the dean returned, her expression livid.

“There’s been an explosion at the private hospital,” she hissed. “Tomorrow’s matching ceremony is canceled. Did you do something with what you stole from the investors?!”

She grabbed him by the throat again and shoved him back into the water.

This time, Bai Liu didn’t struggle. He had no strength left to.

Through the distorted surface of the water, he could see the strange god on the reverse cross—its pure white, pupil-less eyes staring straight at him.

Then, a warm, holy glow radiated from its body.

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu's life level continues to drop… Player Bai Liu's life level has stopped dropping. Remaining life value: 0.5. Player Bai Liu's main identity line survives.]

[System Warning: Attempted strangulation of a child in church by NPC Dean has triggered divine taboo.]

[The gods send down their punishment.]

The dean was thrown backward as if struck by an invisible force, crashing hard against a church pillar with a scream.

But the punishment did not stop there. The thorns on the reverse cross grew wildly, multiplying at an alarming rate. From the ground, countless branches erupted, twisting and coiling around the abbess. Within moments, she was completely ensnared, her body wrapped in razor-sharp vines. Only her terrified eyes remained visible, peering through the dense jungle of thorns. She stared in horror at little Bai six, who was crawling out of the baptismal font—behind him, the god on the reverse cross had opened its eyes.

Trembling with fear, she fell to her knees and prayed for mercy.

In the next moment, the thorns tightened.

The dean's blood splattered across the marble floor of the church as she let out a piercing, ear-splitting scream. The thorns burrowed into her flesh, piercing through her wide-open mouth and tearing through her insides like a merciless meat grinder. Her body convulsed violently, her head tilting to the side as the thorns bound her in place.

Blood dripped from her mangled form like water, pooling on the ground beneath Bai Liu.

Within seconds, her body stilled—she had been reduced to nothing more than a lifeless husk. The thorny vines gently laid her corpse on the floor, where it remained for only a fleeting moment before dissolving into flickering data points of light, vanishing into the church.

[System Alert: Dean NPC has been attacked and terminated. Data recovery in progress...]

Chapter End Notes

Finally, the dean died. I hate people who hurts children

The Loving Welfare Home

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The bloodstained thorns gathered swiftly from the ground, a few brushing against the backs of little Bai Six's bare, wet feet. The touch was so light it didn't hurt at all—almost comforting, like a gentle caress.

Eventually, the thorns retracted to the cross, but they coiled even tighter around the god bound to it. Where before his face had been fully visible, now only half of it remained exposed.

The god beneath the thorns opened his eyes, gazing at little Bai Six in silence. Then, as if growing drowsy once more, he blinked slowly.

Little Bai Six watched as the last of the vines slid across his feet, curling softly around his ankle in a way that felt almost affectionate—like a playful tease.

He curled his toes, then lifted his gaze from his foot to the thorn-covered face of the god. His expression turned subtly contemplative as he studied the entity, who looked as though he were about to drift into sleep again.

…So this guy was probably the one Bai Liu said he kissed twice—some kind of god-tier NPC, right?

But this NPC looks only sixteen or seventeen… so in the future, Bai Liu just ends up with someone so much younger than him…?

The god's movements were sluggish, restrained by the thickening thorns. It was as if he were being forcefully pulled back into place as he descended from the cross. Little Bai Six took a few cautious steps backward.

According to Bai Liu, this god-level NPC wasn't particularly hostile and was both trustworthy and immensely powerful.

Still, the system's warning left little Bai Six on edge.

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu's secondary identity line has triggered a god-tier NPC!]

[The Monster Book of Love and Welfare is updating—Thorn God unlocked.]

[Monster Name: Thorn God (God-tier NPC)]
[Characteristics: Punishes those who strangle children in its presence.]
[Weaknesses: None at this time (Players are not required to discover this monster's weaknesses.)]
[Attacks: Fish Tail Strike, Bite Face (2/????)]
*(Note: Since the maximum number of attacks is undetermined, all attacks will be considered unlocked once one is set.)

The young face, shrouded in darkness and streaked with bloodied thorns, showed no sign of pain. If anything, the god appeared completely unfazed by the thorns pulling at his body. Instead, with quiet insistence, he moved toward little Bai Six, tilting his head with a look of pure curiosity.

"Bai Liu, you've become… a human cub."

He reached out, seemingly intent on touching Bai Six's face. Instinctively, little Bai Six dodged.

The god stilled, his expression dazed for a moment. Then, as if recalling something, he murmured, "Ah, right. You only have 0.5 life left—you can't afford to be touched by me."

His fingers twitched slightly as his gaze lingered on little Bai Six, filled with an unreadable emotion.

"But… even if you only have 0.5 life…" His eyes practically glowed with the words [Want to pinch] written all over them. "Bai Liu, your face is so much rounder as a cub than it was when you were an adult. I can…"

Little Bai Six knew he had a bit of a baby face—his body was lean, but his cheeks held a hint of softness.

Still, hearing this from this guy made his face feel strangely warm.

—This god-tier NPC really has an odd way of talking.

Expressionless, little Bai Six quickly shut it down. "…No pinching."

The god lowered his eyelids, visibly disappointed. "…You let me bite your face before, and now I can't even pinch it?"

Little Bai Six: "…"

For some reason, he felt like he was the one bullying him.

The system warning clearly marked this guy as a monster with an explosive attack stat, and yet… this personality…

What the hell did Bai Liu do to this god-tier NPC?

Little Bai Six's expression subtly shifted again.

He had 50 life points left, but he kept quiet, still assessing the danger of this entity. Bai Liu had told him to try collecting all the Monster Books, after all…

After a long moment of hesitation, little Bai Six took a deep breath, subtly tilting his head to the side. His fingers brushed against his slightly chubby cheek before he stiffly muttered, "…Fine. You can pinch me if you want. It counts as an attack, right? Just… don't make it hurt too much. I need you to attack me."

The god's gaze lifted, his eyes glowing faintly. He stared at the offered cheek, his expression almost studious. The concentration in his eyes made little Bai Six's back stiffen.

Then, slowly, the god extended a thorn-covered finger… and, incredibly gently, poked little Bai Six's cheek.

The thorns barely grazed his skin, the touch impossibly light—so light it was hard to believe it came from a finger wrapped in thorns. There was no pain at all. Just a faint, cool sensation lingering where the god had touched him.

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu's secondary identity line has been attacked by god-tier NPC "Thorn God." Life value has dropped… Calculation in progress… Calculation complete. Life value dropped by 0.3.]

[New attacks unlocked: Fish Tail Strike, Bite Face, Poke Face (3/????)]

*(Note: Since the maximum number of attacks is undetermined, all attacks will be considered unlocked once one is set.)

[Congratulations, Player Bai Liu has successfully collected the Monster Book entry for (Thorn God).]

"It's warm," Tawil whispered. "Bai Liu… when you were a child, were you always this warm? Your face… it's warmer than any of your lips I've touched before."

Little Bai Six's eyelashes fluttered. Almost unconsciously, he raised his hand to touch the spot where he'd been poked.

"I'm not warm," he murmured. He had just climbed out of the baptismal pool. His fingers brushed against Tawil's unnaturally cold ones. "You're the one who's freezing."

"I've always been this cold," Tawil replied simply. His gaze softened. "But you were the first person to come close enough to let me know I was."

A faint, tired smile tugged at his lips. His eyes gradually drooped. "Waking up… going against the system's restraints just to kill NPCs… it forces me back into slumber."

"But I felt your call. So I woke up to see you."

Tawil curled his palm around the finger that had absorbed little Bai Six's warmth. His voice grew fainter.

"Bai Liu… it's always nice to see you when I wake up. See you next time."

"I love your warmth. I hope that next time, you'll share even more of it with me."

Let me, a warmthless monster trapped in eternal cold, steal a little of the heat you grant me each time I wake… so I can sleep just a little warmer.

The thorns tightened, pulling Tawil back into the cross. They wrapped around him like shackles, growing denser as if punishing him for his defiance.

The young god curled his fingers, cradling the tiny warmth still lingering there. Bound in bloodstained thorns, he fell into deep slumber once more—breathless, unmoving, his expression inexplicably fatigued.

…And yet, despite the overwhelming attack stats, this guy had deliberately held back his strength…

Was Bai Liu playing with him? Forcing him into these "attacks" just to collect monster entries?

Little Bai Six thought about Bai Liu's dismissive tone whenever he mentioned Tawil. "It's just a game. He's just an NPC."

He looked at the god, now peacefully bound to the cross again, seemingly satisfied by nothing more than a simple poke to the cheek.

This NPC looked only sixteen or seventeen. The age gap between him and Bai Liu was big. He had been tricked into following Bai Liu's orders, forced to attack him, helping him collect items. Bai Liu had taken advantage of him—kissing him, clinging to him… And now he seemed to be looking forward to their next meeting.

Little Bai Six, who was also aware that he was an NPC, suddenly felt a complicated emotion.

—This felt uncomfortably like an underage kid being seduced by a seasoned scumbag.

"Wow," he deadpanned. "I'm disgusting."

Chapter End Notes

Tawil is back

The Loving Welfare Home

Little Bai Six, dizzy from climbing out of the baptismal font, banged his knee against the edge and stumbled forward, limping as he struggled to push open the heavy church door.

Outside, the teachers who had been chasing him just moments ago were now running and screaming, their faces pale with shock. They stared at the smoldering remains of the private hospital, where an explosion had erupted moments before. Embers and burning debris floated through the air like fireflies, glowing fiercely in the night.

“The seventh floor of the private hospital just exploded! All the investors on the ground floor were seriously injured!”

“…The hospital says this batch of children can’t be matched tomorrow. The investors need time to recover. They want us to wait another day, until Thursday…”

“There’s nothing we can do. The children won’t be sent to the hospital until Thursday…”

Little Bai Six clutched the church door and gazed at the burning hospital in the distance. Against the dark night, it glowed like a coal still pulsing with heat, its embers rising in the air, swirling in golden arcs like fireworks.

He stood in the cold orphanage church, freshly pulled from the baptismal font, but somehow, the warmth radiating from the fire made him shiver less.

That was his other self.

Giving his life to buy him one more day.

Little Bai Six pulled out his waterlogged phone and gave it a shake, hesitating. He wasn’t sure if it would still work.

The dean had been planning to take it away, along with the coin manager. But she hadn’t taken them yet.

He dialed Bai Liu’s number. Once. Twice. Three times. The call didn’t go through.

But he didn’t give up.

When the call finally connected, Little Bai Six wasted no time. “Still alive?”

On the other end, Bai Liu let out a choked laugh, coughing twice from the smoke before replying lazily, “Thought I was gonna get blown up, but turns out I’m still here… What, you didn’t run after all? Calling me this early?”

“No.” Little Bai Six’s voice was calm, devoid of defeat. “I gave up when I saw the dead investor monsters guarding the orphanage gate.”

Bai Liu wasn’t surprised. “It’s a Tier 2 game. If escaping was easy, the mortality rate wouldn’t be so high.”

He coughed a couple more times before adding, “But giving up at the sight of a monster isn’t like you. I thought you’d try to break through with the props from the game manager. It was a rare chance to escape. Something must’ve happened to make you change your mind.”

Little Bai Six hesitated, then admitted, “I considered using [Passenger’s Blessing] to break out.”

“My plan was to have Miao Feichi and the others rush out first, see if they could find a fast-moving vehicle outside—maybe a car. Since today was a big day for investors and the private hospital is so close, chances were good that some of them had parked outside and hadn’t left yet. With a vehicle, I could use [Passenger’s Blessing] to filter out the investor monsters and attempt an escape. Risky, but possible.”

Bai Liu chuckled. “And in the process, you could sacrifice Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang while scouting the area. That way, you’d kill two birds with one stone—you’d eliminate them for me and still hold up your end of the deal to ‘get them out of the orphanage.’ Meanwhile, you’d escape with the children I asked you to save.”

“A solid strategy,” Bai Liu admitted, a note of appreciation in his voice.

Little Bai Six’s lips curled slightly at the praise—but the smirk faded quickly.

“So?” Bai Liu’s tone was soft, almost coaxing. “Why didn’t you go through with it?”

Little Bai Six was silent for a long moment before he finally answered, “Liu Jiayi was in trouble. She started vomiting blood while we were

running. If we left, she wouldn't have gotten help in time. She would've died."

Bai Liu's voice held a hint of surprise. "Wow… I didn't think that was a choice you'd make. I expected you to drop her and keep running—after all, the alternative was a much higher personal gain for you."

Little Bai Six clenched his fists, his lips pressed together. For once, he pushed back against Bai Liu's words. "…Was staying the wrong choice?"

"No." Bai Liu's voice softened. "In terms of Pro values, your choice was the correct one."

There was something almost melancholic in his tone. "But neither you nor I benefited. The Pro values are strange that way."

"Because 'right' in universal values means giving something to others—it's them who receive, not us." Bai Liu let out a quiet chuckle. "Liu Jiayi got to live. Her brother still has his sister. Right now, he's thanking me… and thanking you."

"You did well, Little Bai Six."

Little Bai Six's lips parted slightly, an unusual flicker of confusion crossing his face before he schooled it back into impassiveness. "…Tell her brother I don't work for free. Make sure you charge him—enough to at least cover our vested interests. But overall, staying was a poor decision for me."

"I didn't escape the orphanage."

"It's fine." Bai Liu's tone was casual, as if he'd already expected this outcome. "I prepared a contingency in case you failed tonight."

"The hospital won't be able to take you in tomorrow. You've bought yourself one more day to escape."

Little Bai Six lifted his gaze to the still-burning hospital. "…You caused the explosion to make that happen, didn't you?"

"Correct." Bai Liu chuckled. "But I don't work for free either."

His voice took on a lazy lilt. "Now it's your turn to repay me, Little Bai Six."

Little Bai Six was silent again. This time, longer. As if thinking back,

weighing something.

Eventually, his lashes lowered slightly. Instead of answering, he changed the subject. “…I’m curious. How did you do it? The main identities of Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang don't seem easy, and the system shop is on my side—it forbids you from purchasing large explosive props. How did you take out two players stronger than you in under ten minutes? And where did you even get a bomb?”

Bai Liu lay on the scorched ground, his body covered in burns and puncture wounds, his clothes tattered from the blast. The hem of his hospital gown was still smoldering. One arm was missing, the stump raw and bleeding.

Yet his face bore a satisfied smile, as if everything had gone exactly as planned.

He clutched his phone—the system-issued prop had miraculously survived the explosion, remaining intact despite everything.

“…It was a complicated plan,” Bai Liu said slowly. A dismissal.

Little Bai Six, unimpressed, responded calmly, “I charge by the minute for two-way conversations. You can take your time.”

Bai Liu: “…”

The Loving Welfare Home

Seventeen minutes ago, in ward 906.

Liu Huai dropped down from above, gripping his dagger with both hands and gritting his teeth to block the strike. But the sheer force of Miao Feichi's twin swords slammed him straight into the wall. Meanwhile, Bai Liu darted past Miao Feichi, moving at full thief speed, slipping by him like a shadow.

Miao Feichi watched in disbelief as Bai Liu passed beneath him in a crouch, gliding like a swallow skimming the water, heading straight for Muke.

"Fuck!!!" Miao Feichi roared, swinging his knife down at Bai Liu, who had slipped past his feet. But his blade was intercepted—hooked by Liu Huai's dagger. Liu Huai, gritting his teeth, jammed his weapon against Miao Feichi's twin swords, sliding his dagger over the blades and slashing Miao Feichi hard.

At the same time, Miao Feichi's swords sliced into Liu Huai's hand.

[System Alert: Player Miao Feichi was attacked by player Liu Huai's Shadow Dagger at full force. Spirit value dropped by 43. Entering hallucination danger level!]

[System Alert: Player Liu Huai has been attacked by Miao Feichi's Twin Swords. Life expectancy dropped by 13.]

Liu Huai threw his head back, biting down a scream as a piece of flesh fell from his arm. But his attack had worked—Miao Feichi staggered back, dazed. The reason Miao Feichi had always looked down on Mu Sicheng was his low resistance stat.

But resistance wasn't a strong suit for players who relied on high judgment skills, like Mu Sicheng—or players with spirit-based attacks, like Liu Huai.

Thieves and assassins were meant to counter low-resistance opponents.

Yet, over time, everyone forgot about Liu Huai—the once-feared assassin lurking in the shadows—and only remembered the dazzling, arrogant thief.

“Feichi! Bai Liu has teamed up with Liu Huai! We’ve been ambushed! Drink the psycho-bleach!!!” Miao Gaojiang shouted.

Seeing Bai Liu charging toward Muke, Miao Gaojiang snapped to his senses. He twisted Muke’s neck, intending to snap it and eliminate him, but Bai Liu shot forward like a gust of wind. His bare feet barely touched the ground as he maneuvered with inhuman agility, closing the distance in mere seconds.

Miao Gaojiang instinctively raised his arm to block, but Bai Liu wasn’t aiming for him—his eyes locked onto Muke. With a sudden twist of his wrist, Bai Liu’s monkey claw skill hooked onto Muke’s collar and yanked him free at an impossible angle, sending him skidding across the slippery floor.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has successfully stolen Player Muke from Player Miao Gaojiang using his personal skill (Monkey Claw Thief).]

Muke tumbled out of the room, coughing and gasping for air, finally slamming into the elevator doors at the corridor’s end, where he woke up, alive.

Miao Gaojiang lunged forward to finish the job, but Bai Liu ran up the wall, moving too fast to catch, and landed right in front of him, blocking his path. His cold eyes remained locked onto Miao Gaojiang as he raised a hand to attack, issuing a command to Muke at the same time.

“Take the elevator down and call the patrolling nurses,” Bai Liu ordered, his voice ice-cold.

Though still disoriented, Muke quickly grasped the urgency of the situation. Scrambling to his feet, he fumbled with the elevator buttons, forcing himself inside. As the doors closed, he slumped against the smooth wall, breathless.

Then it hit him. His eyes widened in horror.

Bai Liu is insane! He actually teamed up with Liu Huai to take on Miao Feichi and his father!

Miao Gaojiang, still exchanging blows with Bai Liu, was thinking the exact same thing.

Letting Liu Huai, an A-rank assassin, hold off Miao Feichi, a high-damage attacker, with a sneak attack? And then having Bai Liu, a

near-dead thief, engage a tank?

What kind of suicidal battle plan was this?!

Miao Gaojiang's thoughts screeched to a halt as his gaze fell on the black monkey's paw Bai Liu held.

That's… Mu Sicheng's skill—[Thief Monkey Paw].

"How the hell can you use Mu Sicheng's skill?!" Miao Gaojiang's head snapped toward Bai Liu in disbelief. "Your personal skill—it's an actual rule-breaking ability?! Not only can you share inventories, but you can even share skills across time and dimensions?!"

Bai Liu didn't bother answering. He simply kept attacking, his strikes relentless and precise. Gritting his teeth, Miao Gaojiang barely managed to keep up, all while glancing sideways at Miao Feichi, who was still locked in combat with Liu Huai.

This battle strategy… Miao Gaojiang suddenly understood.

It was ridiculously simple. Bai Liu wasn't even trying to fight them—he was using an ancient trick.

A textbook [thief and assassin] setup.

Bai Liu wasn't here to kill them. He was here to rob them.

First, he used Liu Huai to ambush Miao Feichi, forcing him into a defensive fight. That way, the assassin kept the heavy hitter occupied, acting as a decoy. Meanwhile, Bai Liu, the thief, seized the chance to steal from the remaining player—Miao Gaojiang.

It was the same tactic Mu Sicheng and Liu Huai had once used in their early days to prey on guild groups.

Liu Huai, the assassin, would bait away the team's high-damage dealer, and Mu Sicheng, the thief, would loot the rest.

Miao Gaojiang dodged another swipe from Bai Liu's monkey claw. Gritting his teeth, he retaliated with a vicious punch, but Bai Liu slipped away like water, impossibly fast.

Damn it!

This is why no one wanted to deal with Mu Sicheng!

Thieves were slippery, impossible to pin down.

Bai Liu's skills weren't strong enough to take down two S-rank players like Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang—but at the same time, they couldn't catch him either. The fight dragged into a stalemate. But Bai Liu's relentless, almost fanatical attempts to steal from him put Miao Gaojiang on high alert.

What was he after?

Bai Liu was risking all their lives on this ambush. Whatever he wanted to steal had to be something critical.

Miao Gaojiang's mind raced.

There was no item in his inventory that could incapacitate two S-rank players instantly.

So what the hell was Bai Liu trying to take from him?

No. It didn't matter. Whatever it was, Bai Liu couldn't have it.

[Miao Gaojiang: Activate personal skill (Carrion Zombie)? Warning: Full activation will upgrade the skill to S-rank but cause extreme stamina drain. Stamina recovery items will be unusable for 24 hours.]

[Miao Gaojiang: Confirm.]

[System Alert: Player Miao Gaojiang has activated (Carrion Zombie). Defense +8037. Stamina entering extreme decline...]

Miao Gaojiang's body twisted and expanded grotesquely. His skin thickened and turned a sickly shade of blue. His teeth grew long, curling into sharp fangs, and his eyes gleamed with an eerie, greenish glow.

Bai Liu's clawed hand shot forward.

The sound of metal scraping rang out as Bai Liu's nails raked against Miao Gaojiang's hardened flesh—like trying to claw through iron.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu's (Monkey Claw Thief) attack was judged ineffective.]

Miao Gaojiang's palms grew larger, his nails darkening and lengthening as he wheeled toward Bai Liu. Bai Liu failed to land a blow but sidestepped lightly, pressing against the wall, using his speed

to evade Miao Gaojiang's attack. Yet, Gaojiang's sudden transformation did nothing to deter Bai Liu's assault.

His gaze remained cold, unfazed by his ineffective strike. With a swift tap of his foot against the wall, Bai Liu flipped midair and lunged again, his monkey claws slashing toward Miao Gaojiang in another lightning-fast attack.

But Miao Gaojiang had completely settled into place. He no longer bothered to chase Bai Liu, instead waiting—like a patient old hunter—knowing his prey would eventually tire itself out.

As long as he didn't make any reckless moves to slow Bai Liu down, it was only a matter of time. The moment Miao Feichi finished off Liu Huai, the two of them would easily kill Bai Liu together.

Bai Liu seemed well aware that this was an all-or-nothing gamble. If they couldn't end the fight quickly, they were dead for sure. That was why he had sent Muke downstairs to call the nurse—his safety net.

If their side couldn't finish the battle in the short term, they would inevitably fall into a disadvantage. The nurse, an NPC with some restraining power over players, was Bai Liu's last-ditch effort to halt Miao Gaojiang and Miao Feichi's counterattack.

But—

"I think by the time the nurse arrives to save you," Miao Gaojiang sneered contemptuously, "the battle will already be over. All she'll be able to do is collect the bodies."

Perched on the railing above, Bai Liu lifted his eyes and looked down at Miao Gaojiang, his voice light and unhurried.

"I agree with you."

Miao Gaojiang's expression darkened as he suddenly realized—Bai Liu wasn't talking about his own side.

He was talking about theirs.

With an ugly scowl, Miao Gaojiang spat out a curse. "Big words for a dead man!"

The Loving Welfare Home

It was true that Bai Liu's sneak attack had briefly thrown Miao Gaojiang off balance, causing him to panic for a moment. But once he calmed down, he quickly realized there was no way they could lose.

Miao Gaojiang patiently held his ground as Bai Liu darted around him like a monkey, relentlessly attacking. He occasionally glanced out of the corner of his eye at Miao Feichi and Liu Huai behind him.

Liu Huai was indeed an excellent assassin when it came to sneak attacks—but Bai Liu was not a good thief.

Bai Liu's side had failed to steal what they needed in time to retreat, and players like Liu Huai, who were not skilled in head-to-head combat, were quickly overwhelmed by Miao Feichi's relentless assault.

Miao Feichi ripped open a packet of psychic bleach with his teeth, the combined rush of the attack and the drop in his mental value making him manic. His twin swords blurred into a flurry of rapid, deadly slashes.

Liu Huai was struggling. Against Miao Feichi—a high-level player who had entered a berserker state—he barely held on. But Miao Feichi wasn't interested in toying with him. With a swift, brutal slash, he severed Liu Huai's hands, rendering him completely powerless.

[System Alert: Player Miao Feichi attacked Liu Huai with his Twin Swords. The attack was successful. Player Liu Huai's HP dropped by 17. Player Liu Huai has 20 HP remaining.]

Cutting off a player's hands was a crude but effective way to disarm them. It prevented them from retrieving their weapon—just as Liu Huai himself had once done to Mu Sicheng.

It was also the reason Bai Liu had previously targeted Liu Huai's hands. And now, Miao Feichi had done the same.

A torrent of blood erupted from Liu Huai's shoulders. His daggers clattered to the ground along with his severed hands, landing with a crisp metallic clang. He dropped to his knees, face as pale as a sheet, panting heavily—completely incapacitated.

He had done his best. He had only managed to stall Miao Feichi for this long.

[System Warning: Player Liu Huai's mental value has dropped to 57. Hallucinations imminent. Please recover your mental value immediately.]

Normally, Miao Feichi would have finished Liu Huai off. But time was running out. Killing an A-rank player would take too long, and right now, there was someone he wanted to kill even more.

Gritting his teeth, Miao Feichi swung his sword around and snarled, "Bai Liu—!"

He leaped forward, slashing across the wall as he aimed his twin blades at Bai Liu, who was attempting to sneak up on Miao Gaojiang. The sheer force of his attack sent wallpaper and plaster exploding into the air, debris flying across the room.

Bai Liu managed to block the strike momentarily using Mu Sicheng's Monkey Claw skill, absorbing most of the impact. But it wasn't enough. With a furious, tooth-clenched swing, Miao Feichi cut through—severing Bai Liu's arm in a spray of blood.

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu's HP has dropped from 6 to 3! HP is continuing to decline! Please leave the danger zone immediately!]

One more hit. That was all it would take. One more attack, and Bai Liu would be dead.

Lying in a pool of his own blood, Liu Huai coughed violently. His plummeting mental value warped his vision—everything around him slowed, distorted, like a broken camera stuck in slow motion. Sound faded into an eerie silence.

All he could see was Bai Liu, his severed arm suspended midair, blood spilling in slow, heavy droplets.

Bai Liu's eyes, eerily still, met Liu Huai's.

The moment their gazes locked, Liu Huai was wrenched out of the slow-motion haze. His body trembled as he forced himself to move, struggling to rise.

It wasn't over. Not yet.

Everything was still in place.

In Bai Liu's plan, this was only the beginning.

For Jiayi—

Bai Liu must not die.

Liu Huai's gaze darted to the ground, desperately searching. Then, he saw them—his severed hands, still clutching his daggers.

The blades lay face-up in his loose grip, their tips glinting faintly with fresh blood. Liu Huai's focus zeroed in on that single drop.

Bai Liu was locked in battle with Miao Gaojiang and Miao Feichi. No one was paying attention to this small, bloodstained corner of the room.

He collapsed.

[System Warning: Player Liu Huai was attacked by Shadow Dagger. Mental value drop in progress… Calculating impact of player's own skill weapon attacking its owner… Calculation complete. Player Liu Huai's mental value has dropped to 7!]

[System Warning: Player Liu Huai has activated Berserker Mode!!!!]

[Player Liu Huai – Personal Panel (Berserker Status)]

Mental Value: 57 → 7
Stamina: 39 → 319
Agility: 1140 → 1510
Attack: 731 → 2200
Resistance: 1003 → 2100
Overall Attack & Defense Power increased. Total panel attribute points exceed 5000. Player Liu Huai is now rated A++. Level increased from A to A++.

[System Prompt: Would Player Liu Huai like to activate (One Hit Kill) at full power? Note: If activated, the skill will upgrade to A++ level, but stamina will be severely overdrawn. Player will be unable to use stamina restorers for the next 24 hours.]

Liu Huai slowly rose, drenched in blood.

His arms hung limply at his sides. His only weapon was the dagger gripped between his teeth, and the one plunged into his own heart. His expression was blank, eyes hollow—an assassin with no future, forged purely for this one fatal strike.

Bai Liu was his handler.

And perhaps, his last handler.

Tears slipped unknowingly from Liu Huai's vacant eyes.

[OK.]

[System Alert: Player Liu Huai has confirmed use. Dagger attack +6037. Combined panel attack stat +2200. Total attack stat 8237. Player Liu Huai's stamina is in extreme decline…]

Miao Feichi was about to bring his swords down hard when he suddenly felt a gust of wind approaching his back—something dangerous, something alarming, closing in on him at breakneck speed. His battle-honed instincts kicked in, and he turned quickly.

With the dagger clenched between his teeth and no arms to wield it, Liu Huai lunged at Miao Feichi, his eyes burning with fierce determination. There was no time to dodge.

"Feichi, look out!!!" Miao Gaojiang yanked Miao Feichi toward him, but Liu Huai reacted instantly. Lowering his body, he adjusted his grip on the dagger and switched targets the moment Miao Gaojiang moved to shield Feichi. With tears in his eyes, Liu Huai drove the dagger deep into Miao Gaojiang's abdomen.

"How can you..." Miao Gaojiang stared in disbelief at the blade buried in his stomach. "...break through my defense...?"

[System Alert: Player Liu Huai used personal skill (Flash Strike). Skill blast penetrated player Miao Gaojiang's defense, causing stiffness for 30 seconds. Mental value drops to 51—hallucination imminent. Due to mental shock, player Miao Gaojiang's defense value is dropping...]

At the same time, Bai Liu sensed a shift in Miao Gaojiang's hardened skin—the brief moment when his body went rigid and dazed. Without hesitation, Bai Liu seized the opportunity, reaching out with his only intact hand to grab Miao Gaojiang.

Miao Feichi, having been pulled back by Miao Gaojiang, saw Bai Liu's move and let out a furious roar, his eyes red with rage. "Don't you fucking touch my father!"

He raised both swords—one slashing toward Bai Liu and the other

toward Liu Huai.

Liu Huai clenched the dagger between his teeth and yanked it out of Miao Gaojiang's waist, but his strength was nearly depleted. He no longer had the power to deliver another deadly blow.

But Bai Liu didn't care.

He ignored the incoming blade, utterly focused, indifferent to whether he lived or died. His monkey claws stretched toward Miao Gaojiang, his back left unguarded—entrusted completely to Liu Huai, who had no arms.

That was their plan from the start.

I don't think I can block Miao Feichi after stabbing Miao Gaojiang. This is too risky, Bai Liu—you'll die if you leave your back to me!

But you've worked with Mu Sicheng so many times, haven't you? He gave you complete control of his back, and you didn't let him die.

...I made him lose both arms.

You betrayed Mu Sicheng with the dagger in your hand. But by the time you betray me, Liu Huai, you'll have no hands left to do it. My way of doing things is simple—I assume my teammates can succeed before they prove it. And you can, can't you?

Liu Huai's dazed, unfocused gaze traced the arc of Bai Liu's reaching hand. The all-too-familiar rhythm of their synchronized attack sent a tremor through him, his mind spiraling into an eerie déjà vu.

For a split second, Bai Liu's face blurred, overlapping with another—a memory of a long-lost, never-to-be-reunited friend.

Fourth Brother.

Liu Huai's lips moved soundlessly.

Betrayal was like a dagger lodged in his own heart.

Tears streaked his bloodied face as he charged straight at Miao Feichi. He no longer knew if the person behind him was Bai Liu or Mu Sicheng. He was just doing what an assassin in a Thief & Assassin combo was meant to do.

—Hold the line. Clear the way for the capuchin thief who steals with

impunity.

Miao Feichi's twin swords slashed into Liu Huai's body at full force, even as Bai Liu finally hooked his monkey claws into Miao Gaojiang's flesh.

[System Warning: Player Liu Huai has been attacked by Miao Feichi's Twin Swords. Life points dropping: 17… 16… 13… 4 remaining! Please leave the dangerous area immediately! Life is continuously decreasing!]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu successfully stole Siren's Fish Bone, Ghost Mirror (Fully Assembled)... and other items from Player Miao Gaojiang's warehouse using personal skill (Thief Monkey Paw).]

Bai Liu pulled a white fluorescent whip from the motionless Miao Gaojiang, who was still paralyzed. Without hesitation, he swung the whip backward in a sharp crack aimed at Miao Feichi's descending blades.

Siren's Fishbone might not be particularly powerful in Bai Liu's hands —his F-rank stats left much to be desired—but this weapon had one major advantage: its attack priority was absurdly high.

With a loud snap, Bai Liu's whip sent Miao Feichi's swords flying from his hands. Liu Huai's knees buckled, and he collapsed onto the blood-soaked floor.

[System Warning: Player Liu Huai has only 2 life points remaining! Please evacuate immediately!]

Miao Gaojiang's 30-second paralysis was nearing its end, but a growing unease gnawed at him. His body remained frozen, but his mind reeled. Liu Huai was barely breathing. Bai Liu was critically injured.

Miao Feichi would finish them off soon.

They had stolen some items, but none that could turn the tables entirely. There were no props in the stolen pile that could ensure a full comeback.

So why—why was this suffocating sense of dread creeping up his spine?

Miao Gaojiang quickly recalled the items Bai Liu had taken—every

prop that Bai Liu had scattered himself when he played dead earlier.

Was this guy really making all this fuss just to retrieve the props he had thrown away while faking his own ghost tricks?!

No—wait!

Miao Gaojiang's gaze froze as he remembered something peculiar. Among the props, there was one that wasn't entirely Bai Liu's.

The ghost mirror.

They had pieced it together last night after obtaining the broken lens, but it had no apparent use. The system's instructions lacked a specific function—its attribute was listed as "Unknown," meaning its purpose had to be discovered through experimentation. Additionally, it could only be used once per copy.

But after assembling it, the mirror hadn't reacted to anything. It appeared to be nothing more than an ordinary mirror, capable of storing objects.

Miao Feichi had even complained about it for a long time. Is this all? A storage device that looks like a mirror? Isn't the system's backpack good enough? Who would use this thing to store anything? What if it disappears?

Yet, the ghost mirror could store things—like the bombs from The Last Train to Explosion.

Miao Gaojiang hadn't been concerned about the bomb before. With his skills at full power, it wouldn't be enough to kill him, and under his protection, Miao Feichi wouldn't die easily either. He had been right—Bai Liu didn't have a prop that could kill them in one blow.

But Miao Gaojiang hadn't considered the possibility that someone in this copy could hold him still for a full thirty seconds.

He wouldn't die if he was frozen in place with his skills activated—but Miao Feichi, a player with low resistance to damage, would definitely be killed by a close-range blast.

Until now, Miao Gaojiang had never considered that Bai Liu would actually use the bomb. The thing targeted Miao Feichi, sure, but it wouldn't guarantee a kill. However, Bai Liu and Liu Huai—players with very low life points—would die if they were caught in the

explosion.

These two lunatics weren't engaged in some covert, assassin-style sneak attack. This was a full-fledged suicidal assault.

Bai Liu was playing a two-for-two game.

From the very beginning, Bai Liu hadn't been trying to sneak up on them.

He had been trying to kill them.

"Feichi! Don't attack him! Get away from him!" Miao Gaojiang broke through all restraints, his eyes bloodshot as he roared, "Get behind me!!!"

Bai Liu had one foot on a bookcase and the other on the frame of the enormous ghost mirror he had stolen. Perched atop it, he crouched like a predator, his intact hand—no, his scarred monkey's paw—resting idly on his bent knee. Blood dripped from his wounds, smashing against the mirror's surface.

In his hand, he held a faintly glowing white fishbone, while more blood trailed from his forehead, staining his long eyelashes. Yet, his eyes remained open, unwavering, as he gazed down at Miao Feichi, who had yet to react, and Miao Gaojiang, who had screamed in fear. His bloodied face bore a serene, almost lazy smile as his hand reached deep into the mirror, pulling something out with effort.

"Too late, Papa Miao." Bai Liu smiled. "Isn't it nice to watch your son die? But don't worry—I don't like separating fathers and sons. You won't be apart. You'll die together. Oh, not exactly together..."* His smile widened. "You're more resistant than your son. So you'll get to watch him die first… and then you'll follow him."

Miao Feichi had already ducked behind Miao Gaojiang, still unaware of what was happening. But Miao Gaojiang's frantic warning had been serious enough that he instinctively obeyed.

Now staring up at Bai Liu, who stood barefoot on the mirror, Miao Gaojiang tried to steady himself. "This bomb won't kill me."

To be precise, it would normally take at least five large explosions to finish him off.

Bai Liu lifted his blood-streaked eyelids and looked down at them, his

gaze eerily indifferent—like a god passing judgment on mere mortals.

"You think this bomb can't kill a high-resistance player like you? But have you forgotten... you're not just a player anymore?" Bai Liu tilted his head slightly. "You're also a monster now."

"—A terminally ill monster that suck the blood of sick Children."

"And like any monster, you have a weakness."

Miao Gaojiang's breath hitched. His pupils shrank to tiny pinpricks.

Yes. He had almost forgotten. Players who took on monster status also inherited that monster's inherent weaknesses. Normally, these weaknesses weren't a major hindrance—but sometimes, they could be the final straw that tipped the scales.

The weaknesses of these patients—this damp, unseen room where mushrooms were cultivated—had been clear from the beginning. The system simply hadn't provided any countermeasures.

"You can't see the light." Bai Liu's hand disappeared into the mirror's rippling surface. "And you can't handle fire… or more precisely, dryness."

He yanked a massive, pitch-black bomb from the mirror and hurled it to the floor, flashing a ghostly smile.

The bomb detonated in a violent burst of heat and light.

Bai Liu, standing atop the mirror, and Liu Huai, lying motionless on the ground, were consumed by the crimson glow.

"STOP IT!!!" Miao Gaojiang bellowed.

The entire building shook with a deafening roar as fire and smoke engulfed everything.

[Monster Book of Love Welfare refreshed – Plant Patients (2/3)]

[Monster Name: Plant Patient]

[Traits: Movement speed 500, requires large amounts of water to grow, prefers humid environments.]

[Weaknesses: Blood Lingzhi, Dryness, Light (3/3)]

[Attack Abilities: Fluid Absorption, Poison Mist Contamination]

[Congratulations! Player Bai Liu has recorded this page in the Monster Book under the primary identity (Plant Patients).]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has used the ghost mirror once. The item is now on cooldown in this copy of Love Welfare Home and cannot be used again...]

"So what?" Little Bai Six asked, unusually intrigued. "You survived? I heard Liu Huai made it too. How?"

Bai Liu yawned lazily. "Right before the explosion, I used my whip to drag Liu Huai into the mirror. The ghost mirror blocked the blast. I actually thought I was going to die—our life values were too low. Even a glancing blow from the explosion should've killed us. But I got lucky and was only knocked unconscious. I just woke up."

"And Miao Gaojiang?" Little Bai Six pressed.

"Unfortunately, they didn't die either." Bai Liu didn't sound frustrated at all—just calm and analytical. "I miscalculated. Miao Gaojiang lowered his own sanity below 20, triggering Panel Berserk and resisting the explosion."

"But they still lost life points. The nurse rushed in right after and dragged them to the operating room. I doubt they'll be in any shape to come after you tomorrow. The orphanage won't allow it."

"The explosion injured a lot of investors too. The blood Lingzhi was caught in it as well. So the hospital canceled tomorrow's match. All in all, I achieved my goal."

Silence stretched between them. Bai Liu's breathing was weak.

Little Bai Six wanted to ask how he was—but the thought disgusted him. So he said nothing.

"Hello? If you don't answer, I'll report you for negative escort scamming," Bai Liu teased.

Little Bai Six clenched his jaw. "How are you?" The words slipped out before he could stop them. "Slightly nauseating, but I needed to ask. After all, you nearly died to make an opening for me."

Lying on the floor, battered and broken, Bai Liu stared at the starless

sky through the hole he had personally blown in the ceiling.

"It’s fine," he murmured with a tired smile. "We’re all still alive. We did well tonight."

The Loving Welfare Home

After hanging up the phone, Bai Liu turned to look at Liu Huai, who was struggling to drink the psycho-bleach. Both his hands had been cut off, and now he was curled up, trying to drink from the bottle like a begging mouth, choking as the liquid spilled everywhere.

Earlier, Bai Liu had intended to help him, but with only one hand and the interruption of a call from Little Bai Six, Liu Huai had insisted he answer the phone first. Now that the call was over, Bai Liu reached out, took the bottle, and fed Liu Huai. Liu Huai hesitated for a moment, looking at Bai Liu.

Bai Liu, expressionless, extended the bottle.

Liu Huai still leaned forward to drink.

He must have looked pitiful—his face covered in grime, drinking from someone else's hand like a stray dog. He knew there were countless spectators watching this disgraceful scene. As his mental state recovered, the humiliation set in, stirring emotions he couldn't suppress. Tears welled up and dripped down his face.

"Why are you crying?" Bai Liu asked flatly, holding up the bottle. "Didn't you survive?"

"...I don't know," Liu Huai muttered. His spirit value hadn't fully returned, and he turned his head away, covering his face like a self-conscious college student embarrassed by his own vulnerability.

His voice was hoarse as he curled his neck and bowed his head. "...I look like a homeless stray dog."

"A bit," Bai Liu remarked, unemotional as his gaze lingered on Liu Huai. Blood still seeped from the stump of his arm. "We both look like strays now. But at least we're strays who are alive—all of us. Including your sister."

Liu Huai bit down on the bottle, holding back for a moment before a sob escaped him.

Armless, he arched his back as he cried, lowering his head until it rested against Bai Liu's hand. He bent forward so deeply it was almost like he was kowtowing, his voice trembling as he choked out, "...Thank you. For saving me. And for the other you—thank you for

saving my sister."

Seconds before the explosion, Liu Huai had thought he was going to die. Without hands, a spent assassin like him had little value to someone like Bai Liu, a man who prioritized self-interest.

But Bai Liu had run through the fire and dragged him into the mirror with his whip.

"I didn't expect the other me to save your sister," Bai Liu admitted, lowering his gaze. "I don't know his reasons." He lifted his arm and straightened Liu Huai, who was still pressed against his wrist. Looking at Liu Huai's tear-streaked face, Bai Liu continued nonchalantly, "But I saved you for a reason. You saved me first. That was our deal—if you managed to stall Miao Feichi, I would do my best to save you."

"I'm a trustworthy stray," Bai Liu said calmly, looking into Liu Huai's teary eyes. "A stray dog, I guess."

Thirty-seven minutes ago, Ward 913.

Liu Huai paced back and forth restlessly, glancing at Bai Liu, who sat calmly on the edge of the bed. Taking a deep breath, he finally spoke:

"Are you really planning to ambush and kill Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang? Those two are S-rank players. If we don't succeed in one strike, we're all dead!"

"Which is why we have to finish it in one go," Bai Liu replied without hesitation. "They're already suspicious of Muke. By now, they've probably gone to his ward looking for me. But since I'm not there, they'll start searching elsewhere, trying to track me down as [Muke]."

"But they'd never guess that Muke is in the case management room. If they can't find him in the hospital, they'll assume he has to return to his ward by 9:15 when the nurses start their rounds. I expect they'll have someone waiting for him."

Liu Huai tensed. "Where will they be waiting?" he asked nervously. "In Muke's ward? Won't they catch him there?"

"It would be foolish to wait inside Muke's ward," Bai Liu explained. "If Muke doesn't return there but instead goes to [Bai Liu's] ward or another empty room, they'd be trapped. The nurses' rounds would force them out, but that would only cause more trouble. It's not an efficient approach."

Bai Liu locked eyes with Liu Huai. "If I were Miao Gaojiang, I'd take a more effective route—I'd guard the elevator."

"The elevator?"

"It's the most likely way for Muke to return. Only patients sneaking back to their wards would take it. In other words, Muke."

Bai Liu's voice remained steady. "Once Miao Gaojiang captures Muke, he'll want to figure out our plan. But Muke won't talk easily. So naturally, he'll focus on the keyboard Muke and I use to communicate. I'll ensure he sees something that seems like a clue—[9] [0] [6]. Given the circumstances, Miao Gaojiang won't doubt its authenticity."

"And since the adoption is happening tomorrow, he won't want to risk us interfering. He'll try to kill me tonight."

Bai Liu turned to Liu Huai, his expression unwavering. "Because they believe they have the upper hand, they won't be overly cautious about Room 906. That's our opportunity. Your role is the key to this plan, Liu Huai. On the surface, it looks like a standard [Thief and Assassin] routine—like the ones you used to run with Mu Sicheng. But this time, you, the assassin, are the core of the operation."

Liu Huai clenched his fists against his forehead. "I know," he murmured. He hesitated before admitting, "But Bai Liu, I've never been the lead attacker before. That was always... Fourth Brother. You're putting everything on me. The risk is too high."

Bai Liu's voice softened slightly. "There are three steps to this plan. First, Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang will attack. The moment they open the door, you sneak in and keep Miao Feichi occupied. I'll grab Muke from Miao Gaojiang and send him to the nurses. Once Muke is out of reach, Miao Feichi will abandon his fight with you and go after me instead."

Liu Huai's voice turned hoarse. "If Miao Feichi wants to cut the fight short… and he doesn't want to be distracted by my counterattacks… the best thing he can do is disarm me."

"In other words, he'll cut off your hands," Bai Liu stated, completely emotionless.

Liu Huai dropped his head lower. "……Yeah. It's the fastest way to neutralize a player whose greatest weapon is their hands."

"But there's an advantage to that," Bai Liu continued. "Once your hands are gone, Miao Feichi won't see you as a threat anymore. He'll lower his guard. That leads us to step two: I'll stall Miao Gaojiang and Miao Feichi, buying you time for your panel to explode."

He spoke as if holding off two S-rank players at once was nothing more than a trivial inconvenience. "Once your panel bursts, you can use your [Flashing Strike] to immobilize Miao Gaojiang."

"That brings us to step three. You block Miao Feichi's next attack. I only need a second or two to activate the bomb—"

Liu Huai snapped his head up, his face pale with fear. "Bai Liu… I won't be able to block Miao Feichi after striking Miao Gaojiang. It's too risky! If you put everything on me, you'll die! I'll die too!"

Bai Liu's gaze was calm, eerily unshaken. "But you worked with Mu Sicheng so many times. He trusted you to guard his back, and you never let him die."

Liu Huai was silent for a long moment before closing his eyes. "…… But I made him lose both arms."

"You did betray Mu Sicheng with the dagger in your hand," Bai Liu said flatly. "But now, you have no hands left to betray me with."

Bai Liu looked at him as if he were seeking confirmation. "Liu Huai, my approach has always been to assume my teammates can do it until proven otherwise. Can you?"

Liu Huai whispered, "I don't know."

Bai Liu withdrew his gaze without hesitation. "Then we'll try and find out."

Liu Huai's voice trembled. "What if… we die?"

"If you block Miao Feichi, I won't die easily. If you don't, I won't let you die. But if you fail completely…" Bai Liu's tone was completely indifferent. "Then I'll most likely die with you."

Liu Huai stared at him in disbelief. Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "What? Not satisfied with me giving you a funeral?"

Liu Huai couldn't believe he was still alive.

When Bai Liu dragged him out of the mirror, he was in a daze—

convinced he had already gone to hell. It wasn't until he saw his still-broken arms that he realized, with some confusion, that he had somehow survived. Bai Liu wasted no time forcing psycho-bleach into his mouth. Liu Huai coughed and choked on it, but as his mental value gradually stabilized, Little Bai Six's call came in.

After Bai Liu hung up, Liu Huai slowly pushed himself up, feeling weak but steady enough to stand. Only after Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang were carried away by the nurses did he and Bai Liu dare to step out of hiding. Since the nurses hadn't seen them earlier, they assumed no one had needed help.

Bai Liu, unbothered, lay down on the still-warm floor. "Muke will come up to us later."

The explosion had torn apart his straw bed, but Bai Liu, ever pragmatic, didn't seem to care. After a brief hesitation, Liu Huai murmured,

"If I sell you my soul now, do you want it?"

"Yes," Bai Liu answered without hesitation. "But Little Bai Six is holding my game manager right now. When he gives it back, how much do you charge for your soul?"

Liu Huai blinked in surprise, then let out a soft laugh. Bai Liu looked so serious, as if he had to seize this bargain while it was in front of him.

"I thought you wouldn't want it," Liu Huai said quietly. "After all… I'll probably die in this game. A dead man's soul isn't worth much."

"But if you really want to buy it… how much did you pay Fourth Brother?"

Bai Liu eyed him warily. "Don't set your price based on Mu Sicheng's. It was too high. I won't buy at that rate."

Liu Huai almost teared up laughing. Bai Liu had somehow turned a soul trade into a mundane business negotiation. The heaviness in his chest lifted slightly.

Dropping his gaze, Liu Huai spoke in a near whisper: "One point. I think… one point is enough."

The Loving Welfare Home

"I just want to find someone to entrust my soul to," Liu Huai murmured. "I heard someone in the guild say that the souls of players who die in the game are recycled by the system."

He fell silent for a moment. "I don't want that."

[System Alert: Player Liu Huai's content regarding soul trading is illegal and will be automatically blocked and silenced during the mini-television broadcast. Please limit mentions of this subject, or the system may consider blocking Player Liu Huai's mini-television entirely.]

Liu Huai remained quiet.

"Besides my soul, I have something else to give you, Bai Liu." Lifting her tear-streaked face, Liu Huai continued, "This is more useful than my soul. After all, I'm dying—my soul is just paper money to you. There's no real value in it. But if you sign this with me, after I die, you'll be able to use my personal skills as if they were your own."

A strange, yellowed parchment appeared before Liu Huai.

When Bai Liu reached out, the parchment drifted into his hand like unburned ash.

He glanced down.

[Twenty-four notices and various instructions regarding Party A and Party B in the transfer of personal skills before a player's death.]

[Player A voluntarily transfers their desire-derived personal skills to Player B before death. If Player B agrees to inherit Player A's skills, they will also inherit Player A's desires and become the bearer of those desires, fulfilling them on their behalf...]

[If Player B already possesses a strong desire-based personal skill, acquiring Player A's skill may result in diminished effectiveness. Additional skills acquired thereafter will continue to weaken in function...]

[Before signing, Player A is required to disclose the origin of their desire to Player B, allowing Player B to fully understand the implications before agreeing...]

[The agreement is bound by the souls of both parties. Once signed, neither party may renege until their souls are extinguished. As it involves both desire and soul, signing must be voluntary and from the heart—coercion is not permitted.]

[A copy of the agreement will be recorded in both players' systems upon signing, while the original will be held by the impartial public institution system.]

[Party A: --]
[Party B: --]

After a quick scan, Bai Liu looked up at Liu Huai. "I can't sign it now. The system isn't on my side, and I won't be able to access it later. Besides, this agreement is too restrictive for me—I'd have to inherit your desires, and any skill I gain from you would be weakened as my second skill."

His gaze flickered to Liu Huai's severed arms. The daggers, pure black with the engraving [Blood], lay at his feet.

Bai Liu paused. "You do have an interesting skill set. It's the most valuable thing you have. But it wouldn't work best for me."

"Your real goal is for me to inherit your desires, right?—to protect Liu Jiayi." Bai Liu's tone was indifferent.

Liu Huai looked at him anxiously. He had laid down all his chips, yet Bai Liu showed no eagerness to take them. It made him panic.

"Don't you want my skill?" Liu Huai asked, his voice trembling.

"It's not that I don't want them. Your skills are useful, just not for me. But there's someone better suited for them." Bai Liu lifted his eyes and looked directly at Liu Huai. "It depends on whether you're willing to change the recipient."

Liu Huai hesitated. "...Who?"

Bai Liu said, "Muke."

Muke climbed up the lower floors of the bombed-out ruins, his teeth clenched, his face twisted in pain. The still-hot concrete scalded his hands, but he pushed on.

He wasn't the athletic type—his illness had always held him back—but with all the nurses gone to rescue the half-dead patients, he had time. A lot of time.

When he finally reached the top and saw Bai Liu, his arm broken, speaking with Liu Huai, Muke's legs gave out. He collapsed to his knees, tears spilling down his face.

He had been terrified all night. When he ran downstairs to call a nurse and saw the explosion on the ninth floor, he thought he had lost his soul. He had scrambled back up, rolling and crawling, desperate.

But Bai Liu was okay.

Muke wiped his tears and lunged forward, pressing himself against Bai Liu. "You scared me to death!"

"Don't cry yet," Bai Liu said, his voice steady. He placed a hand on Muke's shoulder, turning him toward Liu Huai. "Let's get down to business."

Muke, still teary-eyed, looked at Liu Huai. The man met his gaze with a serious expression, and for some reason, that look made Muke's tears stop.

Bai Liu patted his shoulder. "Introduce yourself. Briefly. Age, family situation, future marriage plans, number of kids you intend to have, any bad habits, your education level, and how many girlfriends or boyfriends you've had."

"…?????"

What the hell?!

Am I on a blind date with Liu Huai?!

Muke blinked, completely lost. But Bai Liu's gaze remained calm, expectant.

Though still confused, Muke began to introduce himself hesitantly, almost formally. "Oh… uh, my family's pretty well off? A few tens of billions, I think? I'm not really sure, but I can go back and ask if you need me to. I'm almost 21, I don't smoke or drink, no bad habits. Future marriage… uh, haven't thought about it. Never had a boyfriend or girlfriend. Education—bachelor's degree, but I could go for a master's if I wanted."

When he finished, he turned to Bai Liu with pleading eyes, silently asking—what the hell is going on?

Bai Liu simply raised his chin. "Your turn, Liu Huai."

Liu Huai let out a long, deep breath, his eyes sweeping over Muke, almost critically. "You're not exactly my type. I'd rather have Bai Liu, but since he won't take me, I guess you'll do."

Muke stared at Bai Liu in horror.

You already went through a blind date round with this guy?! And now you're making me do it?!

Without addressing Muke's clear distress, Bai Liu handed him a parchment. "Look at this."

Muke glanced down at the document, then up at Liu Huai with a mix of emotions.

Was he… transferring his personal skills to him?

He had known Liu Huai's death was inevitable—the moment Bai Liu put his plan into motion, it had been decided. But still…

"I have a sister…" Liu Huai began, his voice distant. He spoke about Liu Jiayi, about their past, about things Muke had never known.

Bai Liu listened patiently, his gaze unreadable. Then, when Liu Huai finally stopped speaking, Bai Liu's voice cut through the air like a blade.

"What is the core of your desire?"

Liu Huai's breath hitched.

"If you want Muke to carry your life's burden—to take care of your sister—you have to be honest. Otherwise, I won't let him sign this agreement. It's engraved in his soul. And his soul belongs to me now."

Bai Liu's expression was impassive. "I need to know everything."

Liu Huai opened his mouth, then closed it again.

[System Alert: Does player Liu Huai wish to spend 200 points to purchase the sound-canceling service?]

[OK.]

[System Alert: Purchase successful. For the next ten minutes, all speech will be muted and hidden from the small TV audience. Please speak freely.]

Liu Huai turned his head, his eyes red. His voice, when he finally spoke, was hoarse. "…Jiayi and I are half-siblings."

He told his story.

About their home in a far, remote countryside, where you had to walk for an hour and a half in rubber boots just to reach the nearest road.

About his first sister—the one who drowned in the weir while their father stood by, waiting for her to catch fish, not lifting a finger to save her.

About his father, who had never cared about his education—until the village rewarded his cousin with a 20,000 yuan bonus for getting into a prestigious university. Suddenly, everything changed.

His father began beating him whenever he failed a test. Called him useless. Said he wasn't even as good as a woman.

The more he was beaten, the more afraid he became. The worse his grades got.

One day, his father brought his cousin—the brilliant university student—home to tutor him.

Liu Huai fell silent.

For so long that Bai Liu thought the story had ended.

Then Liu Huai suddenly doubled over, his entire body trembling. He gritted his teeth, took a deep breath, and let out a laugh—empty, miserable.

"Do you know why Jiayi was born blind?"

Bai Liu's eyes flickered. He looked up at the night sky, his voice light. "Many birth defects are caused by inbreeding."

Muke's breath hitched. Realization slammed into him like a punch.

"Holy shit… No way. That's illegal. Someone must've done something

—"

Liu Huai let his head fall.

His voice was barely above a whisper.

"No one cared. It was too dirty. Everyone who knew covered it up. My cousin tried to report it, tried to get an abortion, but my father refused. He said she was carrying another ‘college student’ for the family. And with my grandfather’s help, he got his way."

A few months after Jiayi was born, premature and blind, his cousin drowned in the weir. Just like his first sister.

And his father?

He stood by and watched.

Liu Huai clenched his fists. "I studied like crazy. I got into a prestigious university. Took the 20,000 yuan and ran away with Jiayi." His voice cracked. "But my father followed. He demanded money. Tortured us. I wanted to kill him—I spied on him a million times, thought about stabbing him in his sleep—but I never did it. I was a coward. I couldn’t risk losing the life I fought so hard for."

He fell to his knees, forehead pressed against the ground, crying without sound.

Beside him, the black dagger engraved with 【Blood】lay in the dirt. A symbol of his sins. His desires. His agony.

Bai Liu’s voice was soft but merciless. "You’re an assassin who wants to kill but is too afraid to do it."

Liu Huai exhaled shakily. "Yes."

[System Alert: Player Liu Huai’s personal skill—(Cowardly Assassin)—has been activated. Initiating skill transfer.]

Liu Huai looked up at Muke, eyes red. "Will you live bravely for me? Will you take my dagger and protect Liu Jiayi?"

Muke hesitated. Looked at Bai Liu.

Bai Liu simply smiled. "I suggest you accept. A skill will only help you. But in the end, the choice is yours."

Muke turned back to Liu Huai.

His hands trembled as he reached for the dagger.

The hilt pulsed beneath his fingers, warm, like living flesh.

For a moment, he felt everything—Liu Huai's fear, his desperation, his rage.

Muke looked at him—this broken man, drowning in his own past—and for the first time, he understood.

"I accept," he whispered. "I will inherit your skill as an assassin."

Liu Huai exhaled, eyelids fluttering shut. "…Thank you."

[System Alert: Skill transfer agreement has been signed. Effective upon Player Liu Huai's death.]

[Third-party witness: Bai Liu.]

The Loving Welfare Home

Bai Liu and Liu Huai were finally carried away by a nurse who arrived late.

It was bound to be a chaotic night—Muke running after them in a panic, the child monsters in the hospital frightened by the explosion and disappearing into the shadows.

After a rushed and unprofessional treatment, Bai Liu and Liu Huai—who had not suffered any blast injuries but had lost a significant amount of blood—were quickly taken out of the operating room and returned to their original wards.

The nurses had initially intended to place them in the intensive care unit, but the ward was already full of more critical patients. Since Bai Liu and Liu Huai were in relatively stable condition, they had no choice but to remain in the general ward.

Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang, on the other hand, had sustained severe injuries and were now in intensive care on the first floor, both in a coma and unlikely to wake up anytime soon.

At the moment, they had no major offensive force left.

Liu Huai had lost both arms, Bai Liu's strength and vitality were nearly depleted—he was hanging by a thread. If anyone so much as touched him, he might die. Muke, though in better shape, only had six life points remaining.

Even if Muke attacked with his dagger, Miao Gaojiang would remain motionless, his defenses too strong for Muke to break through within an hour.

And if they did wake those two up, they would likely be the first to die—so it was best to stay put for now. Their objective had largely been achieved.

With Bai Liu and Muke's wards destroyed in the explosion, returning to them was out of the question. The blast had rendered the available space even scarcer, making it impossible for them to share a room with other monster investors. They had no choice but to settle in Liu Huai's ward.

Liu Huai lay on the bed, while Muke and Bai Liu tore pages from

books and laid them on the floor to make makeshift bedding for the night.

After setting up his own sleeping area, Bai Liu did not lie down. Instead, he pulled a pen from the drawer, placed the torn paper on his lap, and began writing and drawing something at random.

Muke peered over curiously. “Bai Liu, what are you writing?”

Bai Liu replied, “I’m piecing together the clues we have so far, both in-game and out-of-game.”

“Oh! Right, that reminds me!” Muke suddenly perked up, speaking earnestly as he reported his findings. “When I was going through the medical records downstairs, I noticed something. The [renewal formula] suggests that selecting children with [pure blood] means prioritizing those with direct blood relations. But when I checked the files, most investor patients selected children who weren’t biologically related to them.”

“—And yet, they still achieved relatively good treatment results, correct?” Bai Liu continued writing, not lifting his gaze. “We’re a minority—players assigned NPC children who are system-designated as our blood relatives.”

“Logically speaking, most investors wouldn’t have biological children readily available to exploit. They wouldn’t go searching through orphanages for a child related to them either.”

Bai Liu casually sketched a small house resembling an orphanage and two or three long, thin, ghostly figures labeled as [investors]. Between the orphanage and the investors, he wrote: [Probability of no blood connection].

Tapping his pen thoughtfully against the paper, Bai Liu mused, “So, blood relation is only one interpretation of [blood purity] in the [renewal formula]. It’s likely a mechanic intended for players like us. For the real investors and businessmen outside the game, this [blood purity] clearly has another meaning.”

“In other words, the children who meet this definition aren’t necessarily biologically related to the investors—there must be another criterion for what qualifies as [pure blood].” Muke nodded in agreement, then frowned. “But I don’t really understand how the investors determine which children to select.”

“If [blood purity] referred simply to matching blood types, I’d expect the chosen children to have the same ABO or RH blood type as the investors. But when I checked the records, I found inconsistencies—some investors’ chosen children had entirely different blood types.”

Muke analyzed the data meticulously. “I even reviewed their biochemical markers, hemoglobin levels, and background information, including their geographical origins. No pattern emerged. I couldn’t pinpoint what criteria the investors used to define [blood purity].”

His brows furrowed in confusion. “And another strange thing—many of the selected children weren’t healthy at all.”

“—They had various congenital diseases or defects, didn’t they?” Bai Liu’s eyes remained fixed on a point on his paper. “Strange, isn’t it? Why would investors choose frail children with congenital disorders instead of healthy ones?”

Muke’s eyes widened in surprise. “How did you know that? I only noticed the pattern after combing through numerous case files.”

“I had my suspicions before, but I thought the idea was too far-fetched—even for someone like me. But Liu Jiayi’s birth confirmed it.” Bai Liu’s expression darkened as he sketched a small girl and shaded in her eyes with his pencil. His tone was unreadable.

“This [blood purity] has nothing to do with blood types, biochemical markers, or hemoglobin levels.”

Liu Huai, upon hearing Liu Jiayi’s name, struggled to sit up and looked at Bai Liu.

Bai Liu gazed down at the drawing of the little girl.

“This [blood purity] refers to children who are ethically ‘pure’ in blood.”

“They are all products of inbreeding—children born with congenital defects.”

[System Alert: Congratulations to Player Bai Liu for unlocking the hidden branch message of the main identity line—The True Meaning of Blood Purity.]

[System Tip: Among all the children, there is one special child whose blood alone is enough to save an investor. No additional blood

transfusions are required, nor is a blood relation necessary. Guess who it is?]

Silence fell over the ward.

A shiver ran down Muke's spine as he whispered, "…No way. Are these investors deliberately seeking out children with congenital disabilities?"

Bai Liu drew a simple diagram—two circles connected by a line—and labeled it with [Aa] and [Aa]. Muke instantly recognized it as a genetic inheritance chart.

"Normally, each of us carries recessive genetic traits," Bai Liu explained, his tone cold. "Inbreeding increases the probability of these recessive genes manifesting, leading to congenital disorders. This probability is known as the inbreeding coefficient."

"My medical knowledge is average, but I've read about it while designing games. Inbreeding also raises the risk of chromosomal abnormalities."

Muke's thoughts wandered. What kind of books does Bai Liu read for game development? …No wonder most of his games don't pass the review.

"Inbreeding doesn't directly equate to congenital disorders, but it does raise the likelihood. However, that still doesn't explain how the investors identify [pure blood] children when orphanage records lack parental history."

"There's a screening mechanism," Bai Liu said, his gaze sharpening. "And you've already seen it once."

Muke froze. "…I have?"

His eyes drifted to the paper in Bai Liu's hands, where Bai Liu had just drawn a large mushroom—a blood lingzhi.

Muke paled. "…The poisoned mushroom incidents in orphanages…?"

"Blood lingzhi thrives on the blood of [pure blood] children. It needs their blood to grow properly," Bai Liu murmured, tracing over the mushroom sketch.

"Children who consume it and survive with only mild anemia—rather

than full-blown poisoning—are the ones being screened. Those children meet the [pure blood] criteria.”

Muke’s body prickled with goosebumps.

“…Then, Liu Jiayi’s poisoning case doesn’t make sense…” he hesitated, his voice trailing off.

"Yes!!!" Liu Huai joined the discussion with a dark expression and fear in his eyes. "When Jiayi's accident happened, there were no investors left to screen them at the orphanage anymore! Why would there be such a massive poisoning?"

Bai Liu lifted his eyes and looked blandly at Liu Huai, sitting on the bed. "In reality, the orphanage is on the verge of closing down, and no one wants to take over these abandoned children, but the actual value of these children is very high, equal to the value of life. If you were the custodian of this pile of goods, what would you do?"

Liu Huai, sitting on the bed, stared at Bai Liu in shock and uncertainty, as if he feared the man who so coldly compared children to commodities.

Bai Liu indifferently continued, "If I were the director of this orphanage, in order to benefit further from these goods, I would start a screening process to select the most useful ones and destroy the useless ones that waste resources. The quality ones would be used as leverage to attract new investors."

Bai Liu glanced at Muke, who suddenly remembered that his father seemed to be investing in the orphanage. Muke frantically waved his hands. "Although my dad is not a great man, if the director of the orphanage offered him this... kind of advice, he would never accept such a heartless offer! He's a man with a moral compass!"

"Really?" Bai Liu suddenly lowered his tone, leaning forward and moving closer to Muke, who subconsciously took a few steps back at the look in Bai Liu's eyes.

Bai Liu's dark eyes appeared haunted and strangely focused in the dimly lit ward, staring at Muke as if trying to pull his most unseemly thoughts from the depths of his mind.

"If I tell your father that these five children are about to be drained of blood by the Blood Lingzhi in their bodies, and that if you don’t want them to die too, you go to the police now... I will kill them

immediately. You are wasting these children's lives by doing nothing..."

"You're so old, yet you haven't prepared for the inevitable, have you? Your child is also precocious, right? This Blood Lingzhi can cure all diseases, even for your child..."

"Let these children live their last days in peace. After all, they're deformed. When they grow up, they won't be able to enter society. Life will be hard, and they will only be able to live in this narrow orphanage..."

"Some of the children have severe depression and suicidal tendencies, and no methods have helped. They're congenital, inbred— they don't live very long. It's voluntary. How can you force them? We talk to the kids properly, promise them cakes, sweets, and toys, and they're all overjoyed..."

"Let them live a simple, happy life with plenty of supplies, even if they won't live long..."

"We are an orphanage. A place to do good..." Bai Liu lowered his eyes and whispered in a voice that sounded like a seductive degradation to Muke, who had cowered into a corner. "We love these children more than you do. How could we harm them? You're saving them by making their lives better and sending them to a better place."

Bai Liu slowly lifted his eyelids, calmly meeting Muke's eyes with a predicted look. "So, now what? What will your father choose?"

Muke's heart tingled at the look in Bai Liu's eyes, and he opened his mouth, but no words came out.

"Don't expect to restrain them with human morality just to stop them from gaining benefits," Bai Liu said faintly as he withdrew his gaze and returned to his original position. "Doing so would only turn the acquisition of profit into something moralistic."

Liu Huai sat paralyzed on the bed, stunned for a long time. He felt a lingering fear in his chest and finally spoke, "...Bai Liu, if Jiayi is now chosen by this mushroom to suck blood, is it possible that if we don't pass the level soon to find out the solution to this Blood Lingzhi, Jiayi will..."

Bai Liu was quiet, and instead of answering Liu Huai's words, he retreated to where he had been sitting, his eyes focused on the little

girl he had drawn on the paper in his hands.

Black and white lines outlined the little girl, curled up with her legs, and Bai Liu had written a blood count on her—50 (?).

This meant that Liu Jiayi's blood level was unknown, and she was in a constant state of depletion.

Caring Orphanage, Wednesday morning, 3:45 AM.
Craft classroom.

The other four children, apart from Bai Liu, were locked in a craft room at the back of the orphanage, where the teacher had confined them. The craft room was located deep inside the institution, with no windows on three walls. The only wall with windows faced the corridor, opposite the toilets. The caregivers and teachers came to use the toilets frequently, making the craft room a perfect small prison to lock up misbehaving children who might try to escape.

The room was filled with canvases, glue, cloth, and other craft materials scattered randomly on the floor. These had once been used to make gifts for the investors, but now they were scattered not because the children had made gifts yesterday, but because of the angry, agitated Miao Feichi.

He frantically swept everything to the floor, walking in circles around the room. Miao Gaojiang watched him silently when Miao Feichi suddenly turned to him and shouted, "Do something about it! Tomorrow I'm going to be taken for a blood draw! Then we're all finished! Dead!"

Just as Miao Gaojiang was about to respond, the classroom door burst open, and the teacher returned from the infirmary with two pale children, Liu Jiayi and Muke, in her arms.

Liu Jiayi and Muke had just been sent for check-ups because they were both having health issues. Liu Jiayi had been vomiting blood, and Muke had heartburn. After the check-up, they were sent to this mini-prison, the craft room, to prevent them from escaping.

The teacher turned to Muke and Liu Jiayi. "You two aren't in serious trouble. Stay here quietly, and when the investors come tomorrow, you'll be taken to a private hospital. I don't want to see anyone else trying to escape."

With that, she turned and left, closing the door behind her.

Muke crouched on the floor, clutching her heart, while Liu Jiayi leaned against the wall, frowning and breathing deeply. Her lips were pale, and neither child looked as though they were doing fine, contrary to what the teacher had said.

Miao Feichi, furious at the sight of the two struggling, raised his hand and charged forward, cursing, "Damn it, we wouldn't have gotten out without you!"

As his slap was about to land on him and Liu Jiayi, Muke subconsciously stood in front of Liu Jiayi and reached out to catch Miao Feichi's hand, arguing, "You can't get out without us! There are monsters out there!"

Liu Jiayi slowly slid down the wall to the floor, her face weak, her lips barely moving between her covered fingers as she struggled to breathe, looking worse than Muke.

Miao Feichi looked at the frail Liu Jiayi, swallowing a mouthful of saliva. He grabbed Muke, ripping her away, and then stepped toward Liu Jiayi in the corner. His eyes became unfocused, and he swallowed repeatedly. "Damn, tomorrow I'm going to be eaten. I haven't even had a bite of what I want to eat..."

Muke, who had been pushed away by Miao Feichi, tried to position himself in front of Liu Jiayi again. Having been taught to protect girls at that age, and recognizing that Miao Feichi was clearly wrong, he bravely shielded Liu Jiayi with his arms wide open. "Miao Feichi, I've told you! I told you! We have nothing to do with you not running away! If you dare lay a finger on Jiayi, I'll tell Bai Six!"

The experience of fleeing and being left behind together quickly shortened the psychological distance between young Muke and Liu Jiayi, whom he now saw as a little sister—just as vulnerable as he was, but someone he needed to protect.

Knowing he had no power to resist Miao Feichi, young Muke wasn't sure what the two men had agreed upon with Bai Six. However, it was clear that Bai Six could control Miao Feichi, so Muke, the child, had no choice but to threaten him.

Muke's eyes widened, but his tone remained calm and persuasive. "You wouldn't dare disobey Bai Six, would you? If Bai Six sees you doing this to us tomorrow, what do you think will happen to you?"

Miao Feichi stepped back from them, his expression turning fierce as he swatted Muke aside. "I'm no better off now! Get the hell out of my way! I'm going to do whatever I want with this little blind girl today, and if you try to stop me, I'll make sure you regret it!"

Muke shuddered at the sight of Miao Feichi's bloodshot eyes, while Liu Jiayi suddenly screamed, "Teacher! Teacher!"

A teacher, who had been passing by on her way to the restroom, heard Liu Jiayi's cry and hurriedly entered, clearly annoyed. "What's going on now?"

As Muke was about to point at Miao Feichi, Miao Feichi's eyes lit up, and he quickly spoke, standing up and smiling at the teacher. "Teacher, I had a little fight with Muke and Miao Gaojiang, but it's nothing serious."

Young Muke was stunned by his words but quickly scowled. He stood up and shouted, "Miao Gaojiang and I didn't have any trouble with Miao Feichi! He’s the one who tried to bully—"

"There's a conflict!" Miao Feichi interrupted, raising his voice. His eyes

narrowed, and the corners of his mouth curled into an evil smile as he turned his head slowly to look at Teacher Xiang. "Sensei, if I stay with them, we'll probably keep fighting, and it won't be good for anyone if someone gets hurt, right? I didn't hit them too hard, and Muke has a heart condition, right? What if I kick them twice and something happens?"

Muke's face turned red with anger, but the teacher frowned. "This is getting out of hand. Let's separate you."

Miao Feichi smiled in satisfaction. "Teacher, Miao Gaojiang also bullied Liu Jiayi when we were fighting, but I don't bully girls."

Muke's eyes bulged in fury, and in his haste, he sputtered, "Liar!!!" It was the worst curse word he could muster at his age.

"A couple of kids having an internal fight." The teacher glanced around the room and concluded, "Then you and Liu Jiayi will stay together. Don't cause any more trouble."

Muke finally saw his chance and interjected, "Teacher, he's the one bullying—"

Miao Feichi turned to Muke with a smile. "Think about it, Muke. I'm not staying with Miao Gaojiang. It's either with you or Liu Jiayi. Have you considered what will happen if you stay in a room with me?"

The look in his eyes was so menacing and bloodthirsty that it made Muke's skin crawl. He took two steps back but, upon glancing at Liu Jiayi, who was still panting from shouting at the teacher, he gritted his teeth and said, "I'll share with you."

At that moment, Liu Jiayi slowly stood up, fumbling with her hands before placing one in the teacher's outstretched palm. She bowed her head, an unreadable expression on her face. "Teacher, let's go over there."

Muke jumped up and down. "Jiayi! Don't go with him!"

Liu Jiayi turned her head and "looked" at Muke with a smile, her eyebrows arched. Her tone was light and seemingly pleasant. "Don't worry about me, I have a plan."

Muke froze for a second, then instinctively took a half-step back.

Liu Jiayi's smile had sent a strange chill down his spine. It felt as if

she had anticipated Miao Feichi's actions and had intentionally kept them together in the same room.

And she seemed to condone Miao Feichi's behavior.

Muke remembered that Liu Jiayi had once proposed killing the teacher when leaving the orphanage to delay their discovery, but Bai Six had vetoed it, arguing that the n-whatever c in the orphanage shouldn't be executed lightly, a reasoning Muke didn't quite understand. Still, Liu Jiayi had said that if something went wrong, they could always blame Miao Feichi and the others.

There was an almost naive cruelty in Liu Jiayi. She was intelligent, quick-witted, and extremely capable—except that she was invisible, a schemer on the same level as Bai Six.

The plan to escape from the orphanage had been devised by her and Bai Six together.

It took Liu Jiayi, a blind girl, only a minute to deceive the teacher, and she had even considered killing her on the way out to prevent the teacher from waking up and chasing after her. However, little Bai Six had paused and said, "I thought so too, but no, killing is too much of a waste of time for us."

As Muke watched Miao Feichi and Liu Jiayi being led away by the teacher, a sense of unease filled him.

Liu Jiayi, no matter how clever, was still a young girl. The physical disparity between her and Miao Feichi was something that intellect couldn't counter.

Ahhhhh! What should I do? Muke thought. If only Bai Six were here!

The teacher led Miao Feichi and Liu Jiayi to another craft room.

Liu Jiayi was crouched silently in a corner at the bottom right of the craft room, where she had made her dolls yesterday. The box in this corner still contained some scraps of fabric.

"Ah! It's bleeding." Liu Jiayi let out a soft cry as she put her finger in her mouth, dropping her eyelids to cover her cloudy eyes. She spoke vaguely, as if with some regret. "It's a bit of a waste... it's blood that could've saved my brother."

Miao Feichi, who had been gulping nervously since entering,

approached Liu Jiayi step by step, a fierce and frenzied look on his face, like a starving man seeing a feast for the first time.

After seeing Liu Jiayi stab herself, a drop of bright red blood oozed from her white fingertips. The sight stirred something dark in Miao Feichi's chest as he stepped closer to her.

"What are you looking at, sister Jiayi?" Miao Feichi, ready to start, glanced at Liu Jiayi's cloth case.

Yesterday, Liu Jiayi had spent the whole day hunched in the corner, her face a smile as she worked on the box. In the end, she had created an ugly doll with thick, awkward stitches that didn't resemble a normal sewn doll—it seemed like its limbs would fall off if pulled too hard...

But Miao Feichi remembered seeing Liu Jiayi ask Teacher Xiang for a needle the day before. The teacher had refused, saying it was too dangerous for a blind person, so where had she gotten the needle to sew the doll?

Miao Feichi peered inside the cloth box, his pupils dilating as Liu Jiayi, still smiling, tilted her head. "I'll have to sew my brother's doll with a needle."

The box was filled with various fabrics, and among them, a blood-stained needle was stuck in the head of a half-finished doll—almost penetrating it.

And that doll was dressed in the exact same clothes as Miao Feichi.

"Isn't it nice? I made it," Liu Jiayi said as she slowly stood up. Her pale face lit with an innocent smile. She hid the doll behind her back and approached Miao Feichi, syringe in hand. "According to the 50% mortality rate of Level 2, it takes at least 1.6 children's blood to save one player. I don't think I can save my brother with my own blood, so I'd like to ask Miao Feichi to donate some blood."

Miao Feichi took half a step back and landed on his buttocks, hysterically shouting, "Teacher! Teacher, help!!!"

[System Alert: Player Liu Jiayi has used the prop (Silence). No one can hear any sound in your space. Feel free to create your own!]

[Prop. duration: one hour.]

[System Alert: Player Liu Jiayi has used the prop (Magic Space). This is your exclusive space. Only those you allow to enter may enter, and only those you allow to leave may leave. You are the magician who controls this space!]

[Prop. time limit: one and a half hours.]

[System Alert: Player Liu Jiayi has used the Muscle Relaxation Magic Potion. Player Miao Feichi's sub-identity line has lost all body strength due to the Muscle Relaxation effect…]

Liu Jiayi idly used props from her system panel as new tabs and instructions kept popping up.

[System Alert: Player Liu Jiayi, due to your unique skills within the "Love Welfare Home," after entering the game, the following restrictions have been placed on you for game balance purposes -]

[1: Bind your life value to that of your Desire core player, Liu Huai.]

[2: You are under the poisonous mushroom poisoning buff, and your life value will continue to drop. Please restore it promptly.]

(Note: This buff is not imposed by the system but is a side effect of the player's own poisoning. The system slightly expands the buff for restricted use.)

[3: Your antidote's cooldown time has been extended from 1 hour to 6 hours.]

[4: Your blood is the most compatible blood for blood lingzhi breeding among all player children in the game. No blood relation is required to guarantee that your blood can breed blood lingzhi capable of curing any investor's terminal illness. Your blood is the (universal blood) in this game and can be used as the core blood for any investor's blood lingzhi.]

(Note: After another investor player decodes the background clues for that game, the system will provide them with proper information so they know your blood is the best for cultivation, though we will not fully reveal your identity to protect your privacy.)

[V: ……]

At the last moment, before Liu Jiayi could put away her panel, a shiny silver crown logo appeared at the end :

[King's Guild Senior Member: Player ranked No. 1 on the Rising Stars list.]

[Skill Identity Name: Cursed Forbidden Witch.]

After retracting her panel, Liu Jiayi dropped her eyes to look at Miao Feichi, who was struggling on the ground.

Miao Feichi lay like a puddle of mud, his neck craned back. He whimpered as tears streamed from his eyes.

"No one can hear your cries for help, Brother Feichi," Liu Jiayi crouched beside him, her head cocked and eyes blinking as she gazed at him, "I've heard your little TV videos before. I heard you like to eat the flesh of children, piece by piece?"

"I also like drawing blood from your veins one at a time." Liu Jiayi smiled sweetly, dimples forming at the corners of her mouth. "Have you ever seen a little rabbit having its blood drawn from its ears? They can end up executed by air injection from here. It's said to be a painful death, almost like semi-asphyxiation. I had a little hamster before, my brother gave it to me, and I was going to experiment on it."

"Unfortunately, it was too fragile, and I cried when it died shortly after I played with it." Liu Jiayi lovingly stroked Miao Feichi's head, but her tone remained light. "Do you want to be my little hamster?"

Miao Feichi, face streaked with tears, trembled at the sight of the large, glowing syringe in her hand. He shook his head vigorously, full of fear.

"The little hamster doesn't have the right to refuse," Liu Jiayi said with a smile. "I'm starting now."

The Loving Welfare Home

Wednesday, 4:17 am.

Liu Huai was anxious about Bai Liu's speculation. He had lost a lot of blood and was worried about his sister, so his health and mental state were deteriorating. Bai Liu took advantage of the situation and knocked Liu Huai out with a sleeping pill.

Liu Huai now lay sound asleep on the straw bed, while Bai Liu and Muke remained awake, sorting and analyzing the information they had gathered today—mainly from Muke's case files and from Bai Liu's observations of Little Bai Six.

Muke glanced at Liu Huai, who slept peacefully on the straw bed, his feelings mixed. He remembered his own behavior earlier that morning and realized that Bai Liu had a rather rogue way of dealing with people. When he couldn't get through to someone, he would just drug them, which was... not something a nice person would typically do.

Muke slowly shifted his gaze to Bai Liu, who was leaning against the wall, still analyzing the combined information.

Bai Liu leaned against the wall, one leg bent over the paper, the other stretched out casually. His face showed obvious fatigue, his eyes distinctly darkened with exhaustion, but his gaze remained clear and calm. He continued to write with a pen on the paper, speaking evenly, "Now that we have a general understanding of how the orphanage operates and most of the information in the copy, most of the points I was wondering about have been explained. But there are still two remaining points that are best not discussed in front of Liu Huai."

Muke blinked in surprise.

Bai Liu looked up at Liu Huai, still asleep on the hospital bed, then continued, "First, why are Liu Huai and Liu Jiayi bound together, with their life points reduced to fifty?"

"I had speculated earlier that it might be due to her being poisoned, but there were two issues with that theory. First, Liu Huai's lifesteal was also cut in half. But now, after combining the information you gave me, Muke, and what I got from Little Bai Six and Liu Huai last night, I've disproved that possibility. There's another point of doubt."

Bai Liu's eyes narrowed slightly, his gaze steady as he marked a big

question mark on a sketch of the skinny girl in his notes. "The second point—if Liu Jiayi was infected in reality by the blood lingzhi due to her inbreeding, or if she was parasitized by this blood-sucking mushroom, it doesn't make sense for her to have vomited blood during her escape. The blood lingzhi wouldn't waste her blood like that."

"Another oddity was the timing of her blood vomiting. It wasn't early, but late—just as she was about to escape and touch the gate," Bai Liu continued, his eyes narrowing further. "Little Bai Six was right to hesitate and be cautious. If it were me, I would have suspected that she didn't want to escape and was deliberately delaying things."

Muke's scalp tingled as he listened. He lowered his voice and asked, "Bai Liu, what are you implying...?"

"But now, after piecing together enough information, it's clear that she was acting and lying to me, or rather, to Little Bai Six," Bai Liu said, his eyes glazing over in conclusion.

A chill ran up Muke's spine. "But why would Liu Jiayi do that? She's not doing herself any favors by staying in the orphanage!"

Bai Liu turned his gaze to Liu Huai's sleeping face. "I think she wanted to save her brother, and she planned to stay in the orphanage until her brother came to draw her blood."

"But she'll die herself, won't she?" Muke asked, confused. "How old is she? Isn't she afraid to die?"

Bai Liu paused for a moment. "She doesn't have to die."

Muke became even more confused. "Why? If she gets her blood drawn, she'll die when her life runs out. With only fifty life points, she's more likely to die."

Bai Liu slowly raised his eyes. "What if she has a personal skill that restores her lifesteal?"

Muke stared at Bai Liu in stunned disbelief. "Holy shit! No way! You mean she..."

At that moment, Liu Huai, half-asleep, was nudged awake. As soon as he opened his eyes, he saw Bai Liu's calm, unnerving gaze, which sent a slight shiver down his spine.

"Jiayi—" Liu Huai shook his head, remembering the argument he had with Bai Liu before he went to bed. His sleepiness faded instantly, replaced by anxiety. "Bai Liu! You promised me you'd save Jiayi! I've done everything for you! You promised!"

Bai Liu responded nonchalantly, "Perhaps your sister doesn't need saving from either of us."

Bai Liu then shared his suspicions.

Liu Huai was stunned, his mind sluggish from blood loss. He stared at Bai Liu's emotionless face, confusion clouding his thoughts. "What do you mean, Jiayi is acting and lying?"

Bai Liu lifted his eyes. "You still don't understand. I told you a long time ago that your sister is not as innocent as you think. She's very clever—cleverer than you and I expected."

"The system nerfed your group for game balance, mainly to nerf your sister. Without nerfing her, the game would have been unfair to the rest of us, because her personal skills are too strong. In a game where more life points are an advantage, without nerfing her and your life, the game would be unplayable. She's essentially a cheat."

"Liu Jiayi has always played the good sister to you. Even Little Bai Six was fooled by her. But eventually, it came out—because of you."

Bai Liu looked straight at Liu Huai. "She guessed the mechanics of this game. She wanted to save you, so she didn't want to run. She pretended to vomit blood to stay in the orphanage, waiting for you to pick her up for a blood draw tomorrow. She didn't want you to discover her true nature, so she was careful from the start. But in the end, she made a mistake—because of you."

Liu Huai shook his head in disbelief, muttering that this was impossible. His body, unbalanced due to the loss of an arm, wobbled as he tried to get out of bed, nearly falling. Muke scrambled to help him.

Muke couldn't bear to watch Liu Huai's expression. What Bai Liu had revealed to Liu Huai so far was only a fraction of the cruel truth.

Liu Huai staggered out of bed and approached Bai Liu, his gaze vacant and tearful, as if unable to comprehend Bai Liu's words.

"How could... identity? She's just a little kid. What identity could she

possibly have? I'm going to protect her..." Liu Huai whispered.

Bai Liu tilted his head, his gaze piercing. "Liu Huai, from the beginning, we've had the wrong logical assumption. It wasn't you who influenced Liu Jiayi to enter the game."

Liu Huai stood frozen, head bowed, waiting for Bai Liu to tell him the painful truth.

Bai Liu spoke slowly, each word clear and deliberate, "Rather, Liu Jiayi's desires influenced you to enter the game. She was a player who entered before you, someone who forced the system to weaken her lifesteal and then bound you, her brother, to limit her. She's a player with very specific personal skills."

Liu Huai was silent for a long time, before he slowly lowered his head, his expression dull and dazed.

Bai Liu's eyes were ancient, his tone calm. "Liu Jiayi is the little witch. She's the one who will team up with Zhang Gui in the league. She's the new star player launched by the King's Guild—the rookie ranked number one on the Rising Star list. Her personal skill can actively restore life value."

Game Hall, Inside the King's Guild, Queen Hearts' Office.

Hearts lazily crossed her heels, letting them wobble as she gave a large, bored yawn, resting her cheeks in her hands and rolling her eyes. She watched as the people on stage gave her a long and tedious briefing.

The debriefer read the report aloud, "Next is a small TV data analysis of each member of the King's Guild for this quarter..."

"Among our team members this season, the fastest rising overall stats for small TV is the newcomer [Little Witch], who has been firmly locked in first place on the Nightmare Rising Star list since she entered the game seven weeks ago. She has a high popularity and support rate, and after a few large group battles, she has become a core support player within the guild. Her output and support have been exceptional since joining..."

With that, the debriefer tapped on his system panel, and a large video panel floated in front of the Queen of Hearts, like a PowerPoint presentation. The debriefer slid across the top of the panel, eventually stopping on a video.

The video above was titled [Forbidden Witch's Collection of High Energy Cuts - Tonight I Have a Bottle of Poison, I Have an Antidote, but It's Not Christmas Eve. Guess Who I'm Going to Kill?]

The Queen of Hearts barely showed any interest at first, but the title caught her attention, and she sat up a little straighter. She raised her hand and tapped the video screen, signaling the reporter to play it. "You've got the [Little Witch] support video ready? Show it to me."

The video began as Hearts gestured.

The pitch-black video slowly began to reveal itself in white smoke. In the swirling haze, a player draped in a black floor-length lace dress appeared. She was no taller than half the height of an adult, glancing briefly at the camera before looking away without a care. A veil covered her face, making it impossible to see who was underneath, adding to her mystery.

She walked barefoot through the misty jungle of early morning. Her pale skin showed through the openwork patterns of the lace embroidery, and her footsteps were light and graceful, though that mystery was soon broken.

Hordes of monsters appeared in the jungle, writhing from the rotting ground along vines. Players ran and shouted, but they were soon overtaken and devoured by the monsters.

Two glass vials with liquids protruded from beneath her black veil as she darted through the jungle, black smoke rising from her veil. With swift, clean movements, she dispersed the liquid from the vials, causing the monsters to rot away.

Players who begged for mercy rotted alongside the monsters, while the witch saved the players in her party with great precision. She didn't even spare a glance at the others, even though her magic potions could have easily saved them too.

The video rapidly cut between different game scenes, with the witch hidden beneath her black veil bringing death with poison and then delivering the antidote to save those on the brink of decay.

Her steps were light and agile, moving between monsters and players with ease. Her black veil, soaked with the blood of the dead monsters and fallen players, grew heavier and stickier. It was impossible to tell whether it was a person or a ghost beneath it.

Blood dripped from the veil onto her pale feet, and she shook it off without care, along with the hand of a player still gripping her ankle in a death grip. The hand left a hideous bloody print on her ankle, which was soon covered by the veil as she leapt away.

"[Little Witch]'s gameplay is precise. Her standards are extremely high, and her attacks are simple yet efficient and ruthless. Her psychological strength rivals that of many seasoned players in the league. It's hard to believe this is... is a..."

The debriefer paused, looking at the system panel with a complicated expression.

The Queen of Hearts smiled knowingly and continued unhurriedly, "You can't imagine this is a girl who's only eight years old and still blind, can you?"

The debriefer sighed tersely, "Yes, Empress. The Little Witch was only seven when she first entered the game. She quickly outplayed a group of newcomers and took first place. She's very intelligent and adapted to her skills quickly."

"The Little Witch's skills are so unique and rare that many guilds tried to control her, threatening her into joining their ranks. Instead of succumbing to their tactics, she realized her own value and started a charge bid, saying she would join whichever guild gave her the most points."

"Yes, she's quite clever," Hearts recalled with amusement. "All the guilds in the top ten got involved in the charge bids. It was a very crazy time."

"And she surged to the top of the Rising Star list in just seven games, moving between guilds and working with different teams. It made all the guilds realize her value. Rather than trying to control her, they all decided to charge points to recruit her, which only made the bidding more frantic. I remember when her charge for a game went up to 300,000 points."

"Yes," the debriefer patted his chest, "That's an astronomical amount for a newcomer. Our guild combined to charge at least half a million to seven hundred thousand points just to win the bid for Little Witch's small TV."

Hearts casually flipped through the profile on the reporting system, and Liu Huai's face appeared on the screen.

Looking at Liu Huai's confused expression, Hearts laughed softly, her smile widening as she tilted her head, letting her long hair fall off her shoulders. "And even with all those points, if our guild player Wang Shun hadn't discovered her weakness—her brother, Liu Huai, who happened to enter the game at that time and was known to us—Little Witch might not have joined our King's Guild in the end."

"But, Empress, this is something I'm wondering as well," the debriefer said, confused as he rummaged through the system panel. "After the Little Witch joined the King's Guild, why didn't she simply bring her brother into our guild? Why did she go through such a convoluted method of Zhang Gui controlling him? And after Liu Huai joined, why didn't Little Witch let him know she was our ace rookie? Why did she let Zhang Gui torture him like that?"

The debriefer furrowed his brow, looking at the profiles of Little Witch and Liu Huai with mixed feelings. "It seems like her weakness is her brother, yet there's something almost cruel about the way she treats him..."

"And now, as the season approaches, why is Little Witch still refusing our offer to fully restore her sight with a prop eye? Why does she continue to use some intermittent prop to restore her sight during the game, staying in a semi-blind state? And why have you, Empress, allowed this? A Little Witch who could see on the field would be far more helpful to us."

The debriefer looked at the Queen of Hearts, full of questions.

Hearts' feet buckled, her heels slipping off her feet as she ignored them, instead sweeping a smirking glance across the desk at her reporter. "You didn't seriously read the information Wang Shun found about the little witch, did you? Go look at the core of her desire to enter the game."

The debriefer was stunned, quickly moving to click on the profile of [Little Witch] that Wang Shun had synthesized and analyzed.

Wang Shun's report on the core of [Little Witch's] desire to enter the game: [to be loved by her brother, to be with her brother forever, to be loved by her brother forever].

Such childlike desires were exactly the kind an innocent eight-year-old girl might wish for.

But the reporters knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that the little

witch, who danced on the palms of everyone's hands begging for help, and bounced from guild to guild with ease, was no child. She was bloody, cruel, indifferent, with the wisdom of an adult and the innate recklessness of a minor.

Her [core desires] seemed like she was throwing them out at random to fool people.

The debriefer furrowed his brow as he looked at the [Core of Desire]. "Empress, I don't understand..."

"You really don't know anything about women," the Queen of Hearts said, her bare foot nudging the floor. Leaning forward, her smooth hair slid down her collarbone to her snow-white chest, making the reporters avert their gazes, some of them blushing.

But the Queen of Hearts only smiled, leaning forward without a care in the world. "Don't you wonder why the little witch's desire is to be loved by her brother? That's certainly because she feels she hasn't gotten it yet."

The debriefer was stunned.

The Queen of Hearts lazily rested her head on her hand, smiling flirtatiously. "That's how it is with wise women. The little witch's upbringing made her completely distrustful of men. She had a purely natural aversion to them, especially to Liu Huai, who triggered her bad upbringing. But she couldn't bring herself to care about Liu Huai. I don't trust men either, but that doesn't contradict my desire to be loved by them—and most of the time, I do."

"Of course, we both knew that Liu Huai's desires centered around saving his sister. But to recruit this suspicious, still slightly youthful, intelligent young girl, I chose to withhold from her what we had researched about Liu Huai." The Queen of Hearts shrugged, exposing her snowy white shoulder as she leaned back in her chair like she had no bones. The smile on her lips remained undiminished. "I taught her a more reliable way to get the love she wanted."

The reporter blinked in disbelief. "It's true that you personally recruited the little witch at first. We're not sure of the exact process, but I remember that at the time, you took a confidential level transcendent god-grade prop from the guild warehouse to the little witch, and she agreed to join. But what exactly is this prop? It was always kept secret from us."

"Hearts," the Queen of Hearts whispered with a lazy smile, "It's about to start the game, so I'll tell you. The prop I took to her from the warehouse is called [Psyche's Tears], a consciousness-level prop in a beautiful glass vial. And it was perfect for the little witch. The instructions for that prop said that when you drank it, you could be with the person you wanted to be with, forever. But the drug would guide her into some pretty interesting actions... I drank it too."

Her smile was like that of an older sister giving advice, her voice a compelling murmur. "The little witch was very hostile and wary of men, but she had a natural trust and affection for women, especially grown women like me who had similar experiences to hers and expected a lot from her. Eventually, at my urging, she drank the potion."

Hearts dropped her long eyelashes carelessly, casting a light shadow on her pupils. "Then she began to control the brother who kept her on edge, step by step, under the influence of the drug, eliminating the possibility of the man being in any danger and dividing his attention between others, eventually turning him into Zhang Gui's puppet."

The debriefer shivered.

Hearts laughed softly. "But soon, the little witch regretted not wanting a puppet, a soulless brother. She would doubt whether the love she received through the prop was real, and feel guilty for hurting Liu Huai in the process."

"She was more and more afraid to leave Liu Huai, unsatisfied and unable to be fully convinced. She was bewildered, terrified of the possibility of not being together forever. Eventually, at my suggestion, she kept asking for more and more [Psyche's Tears] to secure this possibility of being together. After all, the effect of the prop wasn't deceptive."

As the reporter looked at Hearts' still gentle smile, a chill ran down her spine—she was such a clever little witch, but at this point, she was being played by the Queen of Hearts.

No wonder so many men whose hearts had been broken by the Queen would say that Hearts was irresistible to anyone. Even after being used to that extent, these men had never said a bad word about Hearts and cried for a return.

The little witch was getting caught up in Hearts' game.

"The end result is that she begins to constantly validate the possibility that the other person loves her by torturing both them and herself." Hearts lowered her eyes to the image of Liu Huai on the panel, then reached out a finger to tap the side of his face, whispering, "What a poor sister and a poor brother. A brother who has clearly made the conscious decision to give up his life for his sister, and a sister who still doubts him."

"And the sister eventually has to join the league to earn huge amounts of points to ensure her brother's safety and love for herself."

"We women usually call this process that Liu Huai goes through a 'test of sincerity,'" Queen Hearts said, looking at the debriefer. She winked and wiggled her fingers, smiling with girlish playfulness. "And of course, the vast majority of men in this world wouldn't pass the sincerity test that the little witch and I have."

Thinking of Liu Huai, who had been forced to lose his best friend after being controlled by Zhang Gui, the debriefer quickly snapped out of Hearts' beauty. He shivered again, looking at her luscious face. "But what does this have to do with the little witch's reluctance to completely restore her sight?"

The Queen of Hearts laughed. "Would you love a woman who tested you like this?"

The debriefer shook his head frantically.

Hearts raised her eyes, whispering, "But what if she's blind? What if you didn't know she had tested you, and you thought she was a helpless, miserable little girl of eight who couldn't live without you? Wouldn't you have been unable to resist pitying her and loving her forever because she had been tortured after all?"

The debriefer remained silent for a long time. Finally, he spoke with mixed feelings. "Liu Huai... a bit poor... being tricked into loving such a sister."

"I don't think he's pitiful," Hearts said, her eyes clear. "It's the little witch who's pitiful. Because if Liu Huai ever finds out that he's been tricked into loving and protecting her as a sister, she'll go crazy."

"So this support video for the little witch signing up for the league after clearing enough copies..." The debriefer tentatively asked, "Empress, do you think it went through?"

Hearts nodded casually, then reminded the debriefer as he sighed in relief, "Take care to protect her real information and don't let the other teams or Liu Huai herself find out, or you and I will both suffer."

The debriefer, already scared from earlier, let out a bitter laugh. "That's for sure."

"Oh yeah, the little witch should be clearing a copy right now. Which one did she go to?" Hearts asked, suddenly remembering. "When she's out of the game, we'll let her know it's time to start team training. We gave her a control player late in the game, hoping to mitigate the system's lifesteal nerf by using multiplayer control. But Zhang Gui died before it could have any noticeable effect, and we need her to adapt to the new team and strategy."

The debriefer began to have a headache. "But Empress, we don't know which Ben the little witch is in now. We checked all the little TVs that are opening, but none of them showed the little witch's TV."

Hearts' eyes suddenly narrowed as she reacted quickly. "Tell Wang Shun to check if anyone has turned off the mini-TV in any of the copies. She's one of the top 100 players and is allowed to turn off the TV."

After a brief pause, she quickly sat up straight again, her eyes calm as she gave the order, "Forget it. Just check Liu Huai's little TV and see if there are any strange players disguised in his copy."

"Liu Jiayi is a very well-planned person. She wouldn't do anything outside of her plan unless it had something to do with Liu Huai."

There was a knock on her office door. After she nodded, a sweaty Wang Shun rushed in, looking at Hearts. "Empress! Liu Huai knows that Liu Jiayi is the little witch!"

"Who told him that!" Hearts sat up from her chair, her tone darkening.

Wang Shun, panting, hurriedly said, "Bai Liu! He's relying on the game mechanics to figure it out! The little witch managed to fool everyone else, but she couldn't fool Bai Liu. Now, all the players are flocking to his TV! He's reached over 200,000 viewers and is number one on the Rising Stars list. Fans of the Little Witch are going crazy since he deduced that Liu Jiayi is the Little Witch! What do we do?"

Hearts narrowed her eyes slightly. "Bai Liu? The new guy again?"

The Loving Welfare Home

Game lobby centre screen, Nightmare Nova Room.

Bai Liu's small TV was bustling with people, with regular players looking up incredulously at the small TV screen of the first Nightmare Nova.

"Bai Liu is rushing too fast! What is he eating that is making him rush so fast?!"

"He is eating the Little Witch. That child is already stunned. Who did he just call Little Witch?"

" Liu Jiayi ."

"What Jiayi ?"

"Liu Jia what?"

"…You Little Witch fans, don't deceive yourself. Liu Jiayi, Lui Huai's little sister. I think Bai Liu reasoning is 80-90% correct. "

"I won't listen. I won't listen! The forbidden witch is so cold, elegant, and mature. She must be a beautiful girl in her twenties under that black veil!"

"Wake up, the forbidden witch is so short, she's more like an eight-year-old girl."

"... Didn't the character formula book from the King Dogby guild say the Forbidden Witch was an underdeveloped person? Damn it! I always thought the Forbidden Witch was a dwarf! So that's what underdeveloped means!"

"The forum threads have exploded with flying melons, and countless Little Witch's boyfriend fans are wailing about how their wives have suddenly become their daughters. They're not ready to be dads..."

"Hearts seem to be dealing with it, but it's in the game that the real problem lies. I don't think Liu Huai is in a good position. Honestly, the league support season is strong this year, and such a big scandal involving a hot newcomer..."

"I think Bai Liu's the one who's not doing well. The little witch has

always been hard on non-team members. I feel like Bai Liu's going to get cold feet."

"A clash between old and new Nightmare Nova No. 1—who will become whose nightmare? The forum has opened a post about it...."

Liu Huai threw himself to his knees in front of Bai Liu, his mouth hanging open for a long time, as if he wanted to speak but nothing came out. His eyes were clouded with tears, dark and murky, like a piece of sky that had lost its light.

Kneeling in front of Bai Liu with his head hanging low, Liu Huai resembled a puppet whose soul had been drained. His upper limbs had been torn off by a mischievous child, leaving a limp torso curled in discomfort as though the puppet strings had been yanked free.

Tears no longer flowed, and Liu Huai's eyes stared vacantly, his face streaked with the remnants of them. Everything seemed far away.

The damp ward and the dark little countryside gradually appeared before him, with Liu Jiayi's dirty, good-natured smile the only thing he could see, unlike anything else.

She ran barefoot through the hills, inhaling the wildflowers and grasses near the weir. Then Liu Jiayi turned to him, smiling at his nervous scolding.

Liu Jiayi tilted her head, eyes crinkling as she called him loudly to come, darting towards him with open arms, a little bird, a butterfly, a sun unaware of its own shine.

What a reckless and naive little girl. She fell into Liu Huai's arms, her body bruised, covered in marks from the beatings she had endured. Hold on a little longer for your brother!

And Liu Jiayi meekly leaned against his chest, her voice soft, "Jiayi will stick around for her brother."

That night, Liu Huai carried Liu Jiayi down the mountain in the pouring rain. From that day on, Liu Huai vowed to make sure she would never see the darkness of the world again, to give her the brightest future and to be worthy of what she had given him.

They both carried the blood of the man they hated most, stumbling

and clinging to each other out of fear and disgust.

Liu Huai told Liu Jiayi, “We’ve been through the worst together, so we will never let go of each other’s hands, no matter what.”

Liu Jiayi was the most important person to him. Liu Huai was willing to endure this horrible game to give her a bright future, to be Zhang Gui’s lapdog, to take up a dagger and betray his best friend, even to die for her.

But she still lied to him.

Just as he had lied to Liu Jiayi, so too had Liu Jiayi lied to him.

Liu Huai drifted back to that dirty, hidden face of Liu Jiayi under the bed... Is this retribution?

Is this the punishment for what he had done to Jiayi, for his cowardice and inaction? Is this Jiayi’s revenge against him?

"... Do you know why I followed Zhang Gui and betrayed Fourth Brother?" Liu Huai’s head seemed to drop to the ground as he spoke softly, "... Because at that time, Zhang Gui used Jiayi's real-life information to threaten me. He made me join the King's Guild and become his puppet to besiege Fourth Brother..."

Liu Huai’s eyes were dull, as if all the light had left them. "He promised me good treatment and safety, and I was indeed the best treated of all his puppets... but I always wondered why, when I had never told anyone in the game about Jiayi, Zhang Gui knew about her. How did he know Jiayi was my sister, why did he know so many details about her and me, as if I had told him myself?"

Bai Liu listened quietly without speaking.

Liu Huai laughed softly, tears rolling down his face. "So, Jiayi and him... they were a pair. These should be Jiayi's words to him. Why would Jiayi say this to him? Bai Liu, you say Jiayi is so smart... is she? Is she..."

He finally managed to choke out, "... Did she do it on purpose? She knew everything from the beginning... She's punishing me... punishing me for the things I've done. I’m not a good brother..."

"If you ask me," Bai Liu replied calmly, "I think she probably thought it would be safest for you. Joining the King's Guild as a puppet under

Zhang Gui would keep you safe in this game. As for Zhang Gui manipulating you into betraying Mu Sicheng on her cue, it's true that following Mu Sicheng wasn't safe for you."

"So if her goal was to ensure your survival, then what she did was perfectly reasonable—letting senior players mentor you, giving you shelter, helping you hone your abilities, choosing the best guilds and teammates she could control, and stepping in to save you when you entered more dangerous games. Everything she did was with the plan to protect you."

After Liu Huai entered the game, fearing for his life, he had sent Liu Jiayi to the orphanage on the day when the little girl curled up in his arms and worriedly asked, "Brother, am I a burden? Are you going to send me away?"

He smiled and shook his head. "No, Jiayi is my future. I'm sorry I have to send you here for now, but one day, if I survive, I'll take you with me."

"I'll give you the brightest future."

Liu Huai lowered his head in silence for a long time before looking up vacantly. "... So from that time on, was it such a trouble for her that I had to live?"

"It's a different story if she's not in trouble, but she definitely doesn't need you to save her. And there's a good chance she'll go after the other kids to save you. As a veteran player with experience, Liu Jiayi must understand the mechanics of this secondary game." Bai Liu's eyes moved evenly to Liu Huai. "That means her own blood alone isn't enough. She needs at least one more child's blood to save you."

"So now comes the question: which child will she seek to draw blood from?" Bai Liu paused. "And as for Liu Huai, because I controlled you in the last game, and given her protective nature, I think it's likely she'll see me as a threat to you. To eliminate me, she'll probably go after my children—Little Bai Six."

"I suspected she would target my children, but thankfully they're in church now." Bai Liu said calmly. "And unfortunately, due to my mobility, Little Bai Six will soon catch up to their confinement and have to flee today—but I've managed to learn this information."

Bai Liu shook the Big Brother in his hand and frowned. "But since this call is one-way, I can't contact Little Bai Six to inform him. I'll have to

wait until he calls after 6 a.m. to tell him what I know."

Bai Liu was quiet for two seconds. "But I seriously doubt if he'll survive long enough to fight."

"So now it's our ragtag group of league players facing off against Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang..." Muke looked at Bai Liu and Liu Huai with a smile that was worse than crying. "And over there, our children have to deal with your sister—the little witch —without knowing anything about it."

"Probably so." Bai Liu said nonchalantly. "Most likely, we're going to die, Muke."

---------- ------

5:37 a.m., craft classroom at the back of the orphanage.

The chaos from the private hospital explosion had only settled down by nearly 3 a.m. When little Bai Six made sure there were no teachers patrolling near the church, he quickly darted from behind, circling the orphanage in search of where Muke and the others might be confined. There were usually two locations where the teachers kept them: one was the canteen storehouse, and the other was the two-room craft room, which had only one side with windows facing the corridor toilets.

Bai Six first checked the canteen and found no children there, so it was likely that Muke and the others were being held in the craft room. He carefully climbed through the window of the orphanage's ladies' room and waited silently behind the door.

When a teacher entered, the sound of keys clinking on his waist gave Bai Six the signal. He swiftly attacked the teacher, knocking him unconscious with a candlestick he had taken from the church. Taking the teacher's keys from his belt, Bai Six hid behind the ladies' room door, carefully controlling his heavy, rapid breathing. Once he was sure no teachers or caretakers were nearby, he moved quickly, making almost no sound, to the two craft rooms across the corridor.

At the door, Bai Six scanned left and right for any approaching figures before quickly opening the craft room outside.

Muke, shocked, saw little Bai Six dart into the room, his face lighting up with joy. "Bai Six! What are you doing here?"

"I came to take you on a run," Bai Six replied briefly, outlining the situation. "I stepped outside last night and noticed the group of flute-playing children with IV bags wrapped around their bodies came from a tunnel behind the church idol. They used this tunnel to get out, and I followed them for a while. The tunnel reeks of disinfectant."

"We can escape through this tunnel while it's still light, and while the teachers are asleep. From the strong antiseptic smell, I believe it leads to the private hospital, where the investors usually leave the wards active after 9 a.m. We need to escape before that to avoid running into them and getting caught."

"There should be a car near the hospital. Once we get there, we'll be safe," Bai Six added. "This is a backup plan my investor and I discussed earlier. If we couldn't escape the orphanage last night, this plan could still work—we follow the group of children and figure out how they got out."

"I scouted the escape route last night. After analyzing it, I think this plan can work. Get ready and pack. We need to move fast."

Bai Six quickly glanced around the classroom, eventually focusing on Miao Gaojiang and Muke, who had not spoken a word. "Where are the others? Miao Feichi and Liu Jiayi?"

Bai Six's sharp gaze fixed on Muke, his expression suddenly more serious. "What happened? Why were they put in another classroom?"

Muke swallowed hard, stepping forward to explain. Bai Six's expression darkened.

Bai Liu had mentioned that Miao Feichi had a habit of eating people. It wasn't surprising that Miao Feichi, unsure if he'd be saved, might act on that impulse before his death. But Liu Jiayi wasn't so simple either—she had followed Miao Feichi without resistance. Considering the information Bai Liu had given him, Bai Six had his suspicions, but he didn't have time to deal with them now.

His investor, his future self, was waiting for him to escape with the others. Bai Liu needed him to save Liu Jiayi, no matter the doubts surrounding her.

After all, Bai Liu had paid the price.

"I'm going to check it out. Stay here," Bai Six said, turning to leave the room. As he opened the door, a thought made him pause. He turned to

Muke, who was watching him groggily. "If I'm not back in ten minutes, you'll need to jump out of the window of the ladies' room and take the detour through the jungle to the church."

"The exit is below the thorny tangle of the Reverse Cross idol, under the baptismal pool. Once I'm done here, I'll bring Liu Jiayi and the others to you," Bai Six continued, his eyes narrowing slightly as he addressed Miao Gaojiang. "Muke has a heart condition. You'd better go with him and take care of him. You know what you promised me."

"Yes!" Miao Gaojiang replied quickly, a faint excitement in his voice.

Muke, still uneasy, spoke up. "Just going to another classroom—what can happen? Miao Feichi won't do anything to you! Come back and run with us!"

Bai Six's voice was heavy with irony as he propped himself up against the door. "I don't know what will happen. I've just always had bad luck. Nothing good happens to me." He turned to look at Muke, the faint morning light casting long shadows behind him.

His pale, bloodstained face caught the light as the golden rays slowly gilded his features. Even the tiny hairs on his face seemed to glow, and his lips curled into an inexplicable, enigmatic smile.

He chuckled softly, his eyes sparkling with something unsettling. "But I seemed to have had some good luck last night. Maybe it was because I changed my name. Something strange seems to have blessed me, and for once, something good happened."

He pushed the door open, turned his back to Muke, and casually waved as he left the craft room, the place where he had once painted two gift paintings for Bai Liu.

The Loving Welfare Home

Looking at Bai Six's retreating figure as he disappeared into the morning light, Muke's heart stopped for a few seconds. The image of Liu Jiayi's strange smile flashed through his mind, and he suddenly felt the urge to grab Bai Six's hand and tell him not to go to that classroom. But little Bai Six was running so fast that Muke didn't have the time to stop him. Bai Liu quickly unlocked the door to the other classroom and entered.

Muke's breath came in two quick gasps. He suddenly remembered—he hadn't heard a sound from that classroom in nearly an hour.

"Bai Six! Come back!" Muke rushed out, calling Bai Six back, and pounded on the classroom door. "Something's wrong with this classroom! Come out! We don't care about Liu Jiayi, okay? Bai Six, let's just run with the two of us!"

But no matter how much Muke shouted, stomped, and yelled, the only sound in the empty corridor was his own labored breathing, which no longer carried to the other craft room where the [silent] prop had been placed.

Soon, Muke's strength was spent from his emotional slamming against the door. He crouched in front of the classroom Bai Six had entered, clutching his chest and panting heavily, his lips bruised. The sound of footsteps soon echoed down the corridor as a teacher heard the commotion and approached.

Miao Gaojiang followed him out, glancing at Muke with a mixed expression. He then gently pulled Muke's fingers from the door handle, one by one.

He dragged the exhausted Muke back to the classroom and whispered, "Stop shouting, you'll draw the teacher here, and Bai Six will get hurt too. Just wait ten minutes like Bai Six said. He's better than us. You have to trust him."

Muke's chest rose and fell violently. He glanced at Miao Gaojiang and opened his mouth to say something, but because he was breathing so heavily, no words came out. He just looked at the quartz watch in the classroom, biting his lip in silence as he mentally counted down the ten minutes.

---------- ------

Another craft classroom.

As soon as Bai Six entered, he was hit with a strong smell of blood. His gaze fell on Liu Jiayi, huddled in a corner, holding her shoulders, trembling and sobbing. Her body was covered in blood, with cuts and marks that looked like someone had bitten her hard.

The teeth marks were unmistakably those of a child, the kind Miao Feichi could have left.

Little Bai Six furrowed his brow, and the scales of suspicion slowly tipped back toward the idea that Miao Feichi might have been involved in cannibalism.

But Bai Six didn't move closer right away. He kept his distance and asked softly, "Liu Jiayi, where is Miao Feichi? He attacked you, didn't he?"

Liu Jiayi nodded with a small sob as she huddled in her own cloth box. "Yes."

With a shaking hand, she pointed to another corner, where the shadows were thick.

Miao Feichi, the second tallest of the children, was hiding behind a pile of discarded handicrafts. He was holding something in his hand, ready to attack.

Miao Feichi must have seen Bai Six enter and was preparing to hide.

"Miao Feichi?" Bai Six gripped the candlestick and cautiously examined Miao Feichi's soul note, taking one tentative step at a time.

With the soul note in his hand, Bai Six wasn't worried about Miao Feichi attacking him. He cleared away the tangled mess of cobwebs and dust, revealing Miao Feichi hiding behind it, his eyes wide with terror.

Miao Feichi was suspended from the ceiling by his limbs, like a puppet. His face, hands, and neck were covered with syringes, needles embedded in every vein of his body, feeding blood into an IV bag.

He had been drained by these blood-sucking bags to the point where his lips were dry, his skin paper-thin, and his arms and legs trembled constantly. Even his tongue was full of needles, leaving him unable to make a sound. He could only breathe weakly, writhing in pain.

Miao Feichi hung limply, his eyes glazed. The moment he saw Bai Six, he burst into tears and screamed twice in a weak, airy voice. His eyes reflected a desperate wish to die.

Liu Jiayi's sobs turned into a wry laugh as she slowly stood, hands behind her back. She turned to look at Bai Six, who was standing in front of Miao Feichi, and smiled with a dimpled grin. "I can't be hurt by a big idiot like Miao Feichi."

"I probably gave him a bad first impression when I bit him and cried while begging him to leave me alone." Liu Jiayi casually traced the bite marks on her body and smiled. "But I couldn't have fooled you into coming here without doing that, could I, smart, cold little brother Bai Six, who doesn't look like a normal, good boy at all?"

Bai Six shot a sidelong glance at Miao Feichi, who was still whimpering behind him. He raised the candlestick in a defensive posture, his voice low. "I don't think you're in a position to say anything about me right now. Did you deliberately leave Miao Feichi alive so I wouldn't notice something was wrong and wouldn't enter this classroom?"

Bai Six wouldn't have come over if he'd known Miao Feichi was dead, as he could have seen from the soul note in his hand.

"With your skill, you can probably see the death status of those you control, right?" Liu Jiayi's voice was light as she took a step forward, casually walking towards him.

Bai Six kept his distance, still holding the candlestick warily.

But Liu Jiayi didn't seem bothered. Her smile never wavered. "Soul control skill? Your investor, or future you, talked about it in front of me. It's a perfect skill for exchanging souls, requiring only the other person's consent. It's a rule skill with a bit of restriction, but it's quite impressive, for a newbie like Bai Liu."

"It's like becoming another system that lives and dies with those under its control." Liu Jiayi's smile faltered slightly, her eyes dulling with condescension and boredom. "The desire to control and acquire souls is a disgusting personal skill derived from the twisted desires of a dirty adult man."

[System Alert: Player Liu Jiayi's comments about (soul trading) and other related content have been blocked by the system.]

Liu Jiayi continued to move toward Bai Six, her steps increasing in speed. Bai Six backed up, moving quickly to avoid her approach.

Liu Jiayi bounced through the clutter of handicrafts like a wind-up doll, skipping over boxes with ease, her voice light. “So, at your age, you’re already addicted to the thrill of controlling others? It’s just like the man who gave birth to me. No wonder he did what he did to my brother in the last game. It all stems from something.”

Little Bai Six backed away cautiously, using objects to shield himself. His mind raced. “You want to save your brother Liu Huai, don’t you? But you’ve already taken Miao Feichi’s blood. You could probably save him yourself. So there’s no need to go after me, is there? Liu Huai and the future me are still working together.”

“Cooperation?” Liu Jiayi’s laughter filled the room, echoing from all sides as she circled Bai Six. “The kind of cooperation that uses restrictions to force my brother into choosing between me and him? How disgusting.”

Bai Six kept his eyes scanning the center of the classroom, watching every potential escape route. His tone remained calm. “But you didn’t stop it, did you?”

“You could have called your brother and told him you didn’t need him to save you, so he wouldn’t be coerced into cooperating by the other me. But instead, you let Liu Huai make this painful choice between you and him. Maybe you were waiting for this answer, for him to choose between you and his life.”

“If anything, that’s a disgusting collaboration,” Bai Six’s eyes remained steady. “And you’re a participant and facilitator of it, Liu Jiayi.”

“It’s clear you want to see Liu Huai sacrifice his life for you to further this ‘cooperation.’ You want to watch your brother suffer and die to save you and protect you. You wouldn’t have revealed yourself unless you knew Liu Huai was certain he’d die for you, right? When it comes to being disgusting, we’re nowhere near as bad as you.”

Liu Jiayi’s laughter suddenly stopped.

The faint light in the corridor flickered suddenly, and when it illuminated again, Bai Six saw Liu Jiayi standing very close to him, holding a doll with its head and limbs torn off. Her face was expressionless, her eyes fixed on Bai Liu, and her breathing was soft and close.

The doll in Liu Jiayi's hands wore a white shirt and suit trousers, with a strange coin—having a hole in the middle—around its neck. Its head was twisted almost 180 degrees, and it wore a strange, dull smile, looking up at Bai Six with Liu Jiayi.

Although Bai Six had never seen his future self, he instantly recognized the crude doll in Liu Jiayi's arms as his future self, based on Bai Liu's description of him.

Bai Six's eyes rested on the doll, and his breath caught in a slight pause. His throat tightened as his heart raced. For a moment, he wondered what it felt like to be so close to death. The fear wasn't as terrible as he had imagined; it wasn't as scary as he thought.

Liu Jiayi's voice was low as she looked down, stroking the doll in her arms. She spoke almost to herself, "Do you know why medieval witches made voodoo dolls? When they cursed someone or when they loved someone, they would create dolls of that person, hoping the doll would capture their soul. The person they hated would die in a cursed way, and the person they loved would remain close, cherished in a loving way."

Bai Six had retreated to the edge of the wall, his expression calm. "Is there any difference between your approach and Bai Liu's?"

Liu Jiayi was silent for a long time before tilting her head, giving a delighted laugh and a wink. "Essentially, no. So I deserve to be a disgusting presence and not treated well by my brother."

"But Liu Huai gave everything for you. You got exactly what you wanted." Bai Six breathed softly, pressing his toes against the wall. His eyes were fixed on Liu Jiayi, who was now close enough for their faces to almost touch. "You got what you wanted. What is there to be unsatisfied with?"

Liu Jiayi finally looked up, her expression pale and indifferent. Her foggy, grey eyes were set in her childish, emotionless face, creating an eerie, sad dissonance.

She curled her mouth and spoke like a well-behaved but untutored child, though her words floated in the air, heavy with mist. "Because I was never afraid to truly believe in my brother. And because I refused to believe, I never got what I wanted."

Liu Jiayi's eyes reflected Bai Six in a foggy, almost otherworldly quality, as though her soul had left an imprint in her eyes.

"My brother is a very cowardly man who wouldn't, and wouldn't dare, give everything for me."

"Betrayal is a bad habit of his," she continued, "he is a cowardly repeat offender."

Bai Six looked at Liu Jiayi, remembering what Bai Liu had told him about Liu Huai—a man who seemed to have a habit of betraying others, from Mu Sicheng to Zhang Gui. If betrayal and cowardice were bad habits, the people who suffered most from this must be the ones closest to him. If betrayal and cowardice were a bad habit, then those most affected by it must be those who spent time with him.

Bai Six suddenly understood something. He looked at Liu Jiayi and asked, "What did Liu Huai betray you?"

The smile on Liu Jiayi's face finally disappeared, and she looked directly at Bai Six.

"He has betrayed me... what?" She whispered softly, smiling again. "You might as well ask, when did he stop betraying me?"

Everyone had spoken to her in a tone of disgusted lust.

"Inbred children. Not very intelligent, are they?"

"Surely you are blind, and it's a female child. Why didn't you get rid of it?"

"My mother said you inbred children simply can't go on, won't amount to anything. You can't even go to school. Your brother also said he'd send you to study, to let you go to university. Ha, funny!"

The man would punch and kick her when drunk, slapping her face, forcing her to go down to the weir to catch fish, cruelly telling her that she wouldn't be allowed back up until she caught a few pounds.

The weir was freezing cold, the water rising to her throat when she stepped in it as a young child. It was all mud and water, and the fish were slippery, darting around her like dead limbs, impossible to catch.

She was trapped like her dead mother in this weir, one she would never be allowed to escape from. Liu Jiayi could never catch enough fish to satisfy the man, who she understood was trying to drown her there as a useless, little cub who only wasted food.

It was like drowning her sister and her mother.

In Liu Huai's absence, during school hours, Liu Jiayi hid in the chicken coop, the pig pen, among the animals, or under the wardrobe or bed, fearing the man would come looking for her to beat her if he couldn't find what was bothering him.

Most of the time, she was fine as long as she hid well. But she had to stay on constant alert or risk being grabbed by her hair and thrown to the ground, whipped with a water-soaked bamboo strip, or dragged to the weir to catch fish.

For as long as Liu Jiayi could remember, she hid in the unseen parts of the house, hugging her knees in silence, counting the hours, waiting for Liu Huai to return from school. She felt the coldness of the countryside seep in as the night fell, soaking into her skin and heart.

Sometimes, she would cry out or scream, beating the animals she was locked in with as if they were retarded, insane, or psychotic. As though it might vent the resentment and pain she could never rid herself of.

She never dared let Liu Huai see this side of her. In front of him, Liu Jiayi was always the meek, well-behaved, innocent sister who knew nothing and would always smile sweetly when he came home from school, calling him "brother."

Even if she had just risen from struggling in a weir full of mud and silt, even if she had nearly strangled a goose ten minutes earlier in a fit of madness.

Since she was a little girl, Liu Jiayi had known that all the affection Liu Huai gave her was in exchange for her disguised appearance. She had always been vigilant, like hiding under her bed or in a dark closet, not wanting her true face to be exposed by Liu Huai in the same crude manner as the man had, only to be whipped, disappointed, and questioned, "How could you be such a son of a bitch?"

Or maybe not. Even if she stood in front of Liu Huai with her true face, he would cower and look away from her.

Because her brother was a man too afraid to face his true self. He was cowardly.

Liu Jiayi stood in front of little Bai Six, gazing into his dark eyes with questioning expression.

She had learned to hide under the bed or in the closet to escape the man's drunken beatings. She would sneak out after Liu Huai returned or after the man had fallen asleep, snoring.

One day, the man, not knowing where she had gone, searched for her for half a day, but couldn't find her.

The sound of chopsticks cracking on the floor. Liu Jiayi covered her mouth with her hands, not daring to breathe loudly, holding her breath as she listened to the man's insults.

"Damn, this little fucker is getting better at hiding! I can't even find anything to pass the fucking time. Liu Huai! Liu Huai, get your ass over here!"

Then, there was a sharp slap, and the boy's muffled cries echoed fearfully. The man cursed, took a big gulp of wine, and the sound of him drinking seemed to echo in Liu Jiayi's ears. Her breath caught, and a bitter taste that made her dizzy rose in her mouth.

The process began—a drunken, heavy-handed beating of Liu Huai's back, the sound ventilating through the room until it stopped at Liu Huai's shuddering cries.

"Shit," the man cursed drunkenly. "Fuck, you're the Liu family's only hope, and I don't want to hit you, but my hands itch when I'm drunk. And the little bitch is hiding, only coming out when you're around. I trick her with your voice, make her come out… burp… and she still won't."

"Go!" the man slurred, kicking Liu Huai. "You trick that little bitch out, and I won't beat you up."

Liu Jiayi waited for what felt like forever, until she thought it was dawn. Then, she heard Liu Huai's voice, trembling with sobs.

"Jiayi, brother is back. Will you… come out for a bit?"

"Will you come out for a minute? Outside… outside, Dad is gone! Come out! No one's going to hit you!"

"Come on out! It's really… only brother out here! Brother wants to see you!"

Liu Jiayi stayed silent for a long time, the sounds ringing in her ears, muddled and incomprehensible, before she burst out from under Liu

Huai's bed, where she had been hiding all day, shivering.

The man pulled her by the hair and wrestled her to the ground. He slapped her, his breath a mix of pleasure and alcohol, and lashed her body with a thumb-thick whip, kicking her soft belly. Liu Huai stood beside him, shuddering with each strike, eyes shut tight, unable to look.

But Liu Huai didn't dare step forward. He cowardly leaned against the wall, silently waiting for the torture to end.

Afterward, Liu Huai held the nearly lifeless Liu Jiayi in his arms, crying, saying he would get her out, that he'd get into a good university and get her out!

"You'll bear it for your brother just a little longer, and he'll get you out! Soon! Very soon!"

Liu Jiayi's fingers curled slowly as she listened to Liu Huai's voice, which now sounded like the man's in her ears.

"Yes, Jiayi will help brother bear it." She said weakly, meekly, knowing Liu Huai needed her to soothe his guilty heart with this "good sister" facade.

Liu Huai, her ever-cowardly brother, too afraid to defy the man who betrayed her, stood by the dimly lit hall where she had crawled out, only to be beaten for him, eyes closed, too afraid to look at the horror of it all.

Her brother was a cowardly assassin, incapable of hurting anyone, even with a weapon.

But the best thing she ever had in her life was such a cowardly brother.

Betrayal and suspicion were born to be brother and sister.

She looked at Little Bai Six quietly. "Have you ever had those moments when a cowardly liar, full of deceit, suddenly starts treating you well, and you wonder over and over again what he's really up to?"

"...They give you this unexplained kindness, like the beautiful, poisoned tail of a scorpion, the honey-laden needle of a bee, and you swallow it, always wondering when the poison, the sting, will pierce your heart. What is he really doing? Will he betray you?"

"Isn't that exactly what you did to Bai Liu, the lying liar? Little Bai Six, did you ever truly believe the kindness he showed you before he was willing to die for you last night? Before you knew he was someone else?"

"Haven't you been tempted along the way?"

Little Bai Six pursed his lips but didn't answer Liu Jiayi's question.

Liu Jiayi snorted. "You're just like me, born to trust no one, always caught in the cycle of doubt and temptation. But unlike you, I'm not as lucky—he's not the other version of myself."

She paused, her breathing shallow, her voice tinged with confusion. "I could never truly understand what my brother was thinking because I'm not him. He's a man of that bloodline, with the same voice as the man who gave birth to me. I could never stop doubting him. Every time I hear his voice, I can't help but feel that hatred. But when he smiled and called me Jiayi, when he was kind to me, I couldn't help but think—if only he could live a little longer, stay with me a little longer. When he calls me Jiayi, when he's kind to me, I can't help but wish he could stay... just a little longer."

"...Even if he had betrayed me and sold me out to that man, I would have liked it if he could have been my brother with that smile forever." Liu Jiayi's voice trailed off, as if lost in a memory.

"He's the only person in the world who's different. The only one who ever pulled me away from everything." Liu Jiayi whispered dreamily, "...But despite trying thousands of times to trust him, no matter how many promises he made, I couldn't stop doubting him, just as he couldn't help but betray me."

"...Even if he cried bitterly the day before, swearing he would never

deceive me again, saying it would be the last time, the next day, as soon as the man who had me started beating him, my brother would search for me everywhere, crying and begging me to come out. And when I finally did, he would tremble, take my hand, and lead me back to the man's abuse... no matter how many times it happened."

Liu Jiayi smiled, the smile of a soft little girl who had been trained into submission. "We can't be sure that someone important to us won't betray us. So, controlling each other is the best option. And looking at what you're doing now, you and I are making the same choice, aren't we? Little Bai Six?"

"No," Little Bai Six retorted plaintively. "I chose to be controlled by him."

Liu Jiayi was stunned.

"Bai Liu, the other me, gave me two guesses about the oddity of having only fifty percent of your life before we fled. He told me to choose for myself." Little Bai Six had moved so close to Liu Jiayi that he had to look down at her, who was nearly standing on his foot.

Little Bai Six lowered his eyes, his voice calm. "The first guess is that you were poisoned by a mushroom-type poison from outside, which weakened your vitality. He has more evidence and information to support this theory. But the problem with this guess is... it doesn't explain why Liu Huai's vitality was also weakened."

Liu Jiayi's face froze, as if realizing something. Her grip on the doll tightened, but she kept her tone mostly calm as she looked at Little Bai Six and asked, "So what? What about the second guess?"

"The second guess is that..." Little Bai Six said faintly, "he thought you might be a player who had already entered, and your personal skills might be linked to mortality and lifesteal, which forced the system to intervene and weaken your presence. He even gave me the name of a suspected player."

Little Bai Six looked directly at Liu Jiayi and whispered softly, "I think it's called... Little Witch, isn't it?"

Liu Jiayi's breath caught for a few seconds.

"Then why did you stop to save me?" Liu Jiayi's mask of a good girl cracked, revealing a fierce, almost panicked expression. "You knew I was a little witch, so why did you stop? Why did you come into this

classroom tonight? Aren't you afraid I'll kill you?"

"Because the other me told me to try to keep you alive." Bai Six looked calmly at Liu Jiayi. "It was a gamble. If you weren't a witch and were poisoned, vomiting blood, I would have had to save you, or you would've died. The other me paid for your life so you couldn't die by my hand—that's my ethics as a wanderer in this trade."

Liu Jiayi's hands trembled slightly, her eyes welling with tears as she stared at the calm Little Bai Six, bewildered and shocked. "You knew... you knew... you came here tonight to die, didn't you? You guessed it, didn't you? Why did you come?"

Little Bai Six spoke softly, "If I die by your hand tonight, it only means I made an error in judgment from the beginning. I was doomed when I chose to save you, so tonight was always doomed, whether I came or not."

"But if you're not a little witch, then I could come in tonight and save your life." Little Bai Six said matter-of-factly, "In terms of a trade-off, whether you're a little witch or not, the possibility that you're not means I was required to come tonight."

Liu Jiayi suddenly arched her back, choking and coughing as green, mushroom-smelling juice seeped from between her fingers.

She coughed so violently that the blood drained from her face, and her eyes filled with physical tears from the violent choking, but she still glared at Little Bai Six like a small, angry animal, holding up a doll whose limbs and head had been torn off, threatening him.

Bai Six ignored it, stepping forward to help her. "It seems Bai Liu was right on both guesses. You are faking vomiting blood, but you were poisoned at the orphanage, and you are indeed a little witch. You used a prop to fake the vomiting blood at that time, didn't you?"

"I'll really kill you, Little Bai Six!" Liu Jiayi fiercely swatted away his hand, but her eyes were clouded with tears, her cheeks streaked with them. "Ahem, I was just stalling for time, waiting for my skill to run out. But now that the cooldown's over, you can't escape! Little Bai Six!"

[System Alert: Liu Jiayi's personal skill (Poison and Antidote) cooldown is over and can be reused.]

[System Alert: Witch, you have a bottle of poison and a bottle of

antidote tonight. Do you want to use the poison or the antidote?]

Little Bai Six looked quietly at Liu Jiayi.

Liu Jiayi's eyes welled up, and she looked away from him, biting her lips tightly, gritting her teeth. "...I won't believe you're going to save me! You're all liars! There's no such thing as someone being suddenly kind to me for no reason! Even my brother was nice to me because I got beaten up in exchange for it!"

She had always understood that much of Liu Huai's kindness to her came from guilt, and that guilt was the least valuable emotion before betrayal.

Liu Jiayi closed her eyes, tears trailing from the corners: [Tonight I will use poison.]

A twisted black miasma rose from Liu Jiayi's body, and a black lace veil seemed to envelop her. In her hands was a slender glass bottle, filled with bubbling black liquid, from which dark gas erupted.

The thick, smoky gas wrapped around Liu Jiayi like the tentacles of an octopus.

Her grey eyes, veiled by the translucent lace, seemed to weep as forbidden black blood dripped from the corner of her mouth. "You saved me... the worst choice you ever made, Little Bai Six."

"I was never a good boy who knew how to repay you. I was an uncompromising bastard." She hissed. "I will never be grateful to you for saving me!"

[System Alert: Player Liu Jiayi uses Personal Skill (Witch's Attack Arms).]

[System Alert: Player Liu Jiayi enters Personal Skill Identity Form Change - "Monster Book: Cursed Forbidden Witch" status.]

"Neither am I." Bai Six looked up at Liu Jiayi, who had seemingly accepted her fate. "You and I have similar skills. I'm a wanderer, and you're a witch. We both look like godforsaken people."

Liu Jiayi bit her lower lip, retorting sternly, "I don't believe in the existence of God!"

"The people at the orphanage always said that children who didn't

believe in God would be punished and go to hell. So, Liu Jiayi, after you kill me, I'll see you in hell. But Liu Jiayi," Little Bai Six said softly, "Muke is completely unaware of your situation. You can kill him without hesitation."

Liu Jiayi looked at him for a long time, her fists clenched. Little Bai Six thought she might not let Muke, who had sensed something wrong, go.

Finally, Liu Jiayi spoke in a dry voice, "...Fine. You'll stay for ten minutes. You can escape afterwards. Open the classroom door and leave."

Little Bai Six closed his eyes, inhaling the black mist deeply, then slowly exhaling. His head began to spin. When he opened his eyes, he saw Liu Jiayi walking toward him with the poison in her hand.

"I still don't understand why you... wanted to save me." Liu Jiayi crouched down slowly, resting her head on Little Bai Six's shoulder as he sat on the ground, his body disjointed from the poisonous mist. She asked softly, her voice hushed with hoarseness.

If Liu Jiayi hadn't been holding the bottle of poison, still smoking with black mist, she might have thought she was about to be poisoned.

Black blood slowly slipped from the corner of Little Bai Six's mouth, which he swallowed with great effort.

"Probably—being the bad boy for so long that someone finally wants me to be the good boy," Little Bai Six sighed, rare bitterness in his tone. "There must be some universal truth I can't grasp. When it's clear that you get nothing for being good, and you pay the price yourself."

Liu Jiayi's forehead rested against Little Bai Six's shoulder. Her eyes were slightly red, her teeth clenched, her breath breaking. She tried to hold back her tears. "Obviously, you're a total bad guy. Don't do things like this... to save me to this point. I still won't thank you. I won't. I'm worse than you..."

Little Bai Six leaned back, looking at the ceiling.

His consciousness was fading, but he could still feel the warmth of Liu Jiayi's head resting on his chest.

Little Bai Six, weakly and slowly, asked, "Liu Jiayi, are you tricking me? Didn't you win... didn't you kill me as you wished? Shouldn't you

be happy? Why are you crying?"

Liu Jiayi was silent for a long time, then sneered. But the voice that came out was tinged with tears. "Because you made me cry... stupid Bai Six."

[System Alert: Player Liu Jiayi has used a bottle of poison on Player Bai Liu's secondary identity line.]

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu's secondary identity line is now under a poison buff! Vitality is rapidly dropping! Warning!]

When the ten minutes were up, Muke jumped up like a cat who had just been jabbed in the butt with a needle his grandmother had carelessly left lying around. He opened the door, poked his head outside to check if the teacher was coming, then immediately started knocking furiously on the door of the other craft room.

"Bai Six!" Muke's eyes were filled with tears of anxiety. "Bai Six! I've been waiting for ten minutes, just like you said, and now it's ten minutes! Come out! I don't want to run away alone!"

Miao Gaojiang picked up little Muke, who was still pounding on him, from the center. "The teacher will be here soon! We'll go first, and Bai Six will follow! You're still running slower than him!"

"No!" Little Muke cried, his voice rising. "I won't run away without him! We'll run together! He never leaves me alone either!"

Miao Gaojiang was stunned, and little Muke seized the opportunity to slip over his shoulder.

Muke stifled his sobs, wiping his face with his elbows as he watched the corridor for any sign of the teacher, continuing to knock desperately on the door. "Bai Six! Open up! Please, I'm begging you! Please open it!"

The door opened abruptly, revealing Bai Six standing in the doorway, looking mostly intact, though a little pale.

He gave the crying Muke a blank look. "Didn't I tell you to go alone?"

Little Muke sobbed and shook his head, teary-eyed, like an abandoned kitten about to leap at Bai Six. He accused him in a frightened voice, "You scared me to death! Why didn't you open the door?"

"Liu Jiayi is not going," Bai Six dodged the lunging Muke, his face pale. He wavered for a moment but managed to keep his composure, though blood trickled from the corners of his mouth. He looked down at Muke, who was clinging to his hand, crying, with a slightly confused and helpless expression.

He had never encountered such strange, passionate tears before, and he wasn't sure how to handle them, feeling both a little tired and overwhelmed.

Finally, Bai Six patted Muke's shoulder, gently pushed him away, and withdrew his hand. "She wanted to stay here and asked me to draw a picture for her to give to her brother, so I drew it for her. Maybe I was too focused and didn't hear you calling out. But now I'm done, and the teacher is coming. Let's go."

Bai Six suppressed the nauseating feeling in his stomach as he followed Muke, casting a bemused glance back at Liu Jiayi sitting on the windowsill before he left.

Liu Jiayi leaned back, her head bowed, eyes bathed in the rising daylight. Her disheveled, yellowing hair caught the sunlight, appearing like golden threads wrapped around her cheeks and head, almost like a holy halo. She sat serenely against the window, her eyelashes shimmering in the brilliant light.

In the golden, hopeful morning light, Liu Jiayi slowly opened her eyes and looked back at Bai Six.

Liu Jiayi, sitting against the light, had hazy white eyes, her fragile figure as pure as an angel. In her hands was a sketch that Bai Six had just drawn of her—a picture of Liu Jiayi sitting on a hospital bed, in stark contrast to her current open form. She was curled up, holding her head like a scared chick, wearing an oversized hospital gown and clutching a ragdoll with a head twisted at a ninety-degree angle, in Bai Liu's style.

[Why did you save me in the future?]

[I don't know.]

[So why did you save me now?]

[I don't know.]

[So… what do I look like to you?]

[Well… is probably like this, can you see?]

[Well, my visualization props are out of time and now I can't see them.]

[Then wait and see when you can see it again, one day, Liu Jiayi.]

A poisoned man and a poisoned man talk with unparalleled calmness, doing bad things as though they were second nature. They are born

with darkness in them, without the awareness to recognize it. They are born in it, suffer from it, numb to it, and accustomed to it.

But because someone is willing to do good for them, unconditionally —someone willing to suffer enough to give them unseen sunlight, warmth, and rain—they, like plants, will eventually grow toward the light.

Bai Six turned to leave, following young Muke. His eyelids grew heavier, and no matter how hard he tried to hold it in, blood began to spill from the corners of his mouth, slowly soaking his shirt. He frowned and covered his mouth, but soon Muke noticed his abnormality. He screamed in panic, "Bai Six! You're spitting blood!"

[System warning: Player Bai Liu's secondary identity line is in a poison buff. Life value is dropping rapidly. Currently at 27…]

Bai Six finally covered his mouth, dropping to his knees, his brows furrowed and his teeth clenched as he fought the pain.

"Miao Gaojiang, come carry me. Run to the church in ten minutes, hide under a dead end in the pew to the right. The church can't kill children, but if Liu Jiayi catches up with us, we'll all die." Bai Six calmly, but weakly, gave his orders. "Run!"

Miao Gaojiang, who had been carrying Bai Six on his back, began running toward the church.

Bai Six leaned against Miao Gaojiang's back, eyelids drooping, his limbs feeling like they'd lost all strength. His breathing was shallow, and blood oozed from his mouth, nose, and the corners of his lips, dripping onto his jaw and hands as they brushed against the grass and leaves of the jungle. Only Muke's pushing kept Bai Six in place on Miao Gaojiang's back.

Muke was running after them, his heart aching from both the physical exertion and emotional panic. His eyes were locked on the figure of Bai Six, barely alive on Miao Gaojiang's back. Tears streamed down his face as he whispered, "How could this happen…?"

Miao Gaojiang, drenched in sweat, finally reached the church, where he laid Bai Six down on the ground.

Bai Six shifted weakly, leaning against the wall. His eyes were half-closed, completely devoid of light. His hands rested on the floor, lifeless. With great effort, he managed to speak in a voice barely

above a whisper, "Muke…"

Little Muke leaned over, his panic evident as he tried to hear Bai Six's words, but they were too faint.

"I'm in," Muke fought back a sob, taking a deep breath. "I'm in, Bai Six."

"In the church, you're relatively safe. No one will hurt you... next… I have three things to explain to you. I don't think I'll last till 6am to call him." Bai Six's voice cracked, strained from the poison. "First, I brought a transfusion tube out to store my blood. The game isn't over, and you must take my blood to my investors. Make sure you save him, okay?"

Muke nodded frantically, tears streaming down his face. "Yes, I know!"

Now Muke understood why Bai Six had been covering his mouth on the road—to keep the blood from running down his face, to preserve it for his investors.

"The second… hoo..." Bai Six's face grew paler, his chest rising and falling violently, as if wracked with pain, yet his expression remained eerily calm. "There's a coin in my chest. It's very precious. Miao Gaojiang's soul note is also inside it. It must never fall out because of my death. If it does, you'll be in danger, Muke."

"Wait…" Bai Six swallowed a mouthful of blood, the pause in his breathing growing longer. He struggled to speak, his voice weakening. "I'll stuff it in myself. Don't tell anyone but my investors where this coin is, understood?"

Muke knelt in front of him, nodding furiously, his eyes brimming with tears.

Bai Six couldn't help but chuckle softly at Muke's frantic nodding. He choked on his laughter, then coughed painfully. "Ahem, there's one last thing, and that's to tell my investors—"

"He's a liar," little Bai Six said, looking out the window at the rising sun. His smile was gentle, but his eyes seemed full of water. "He said my luck would change when I changed my name. But after I was called Bai Liu, my luck still seems just as bad. Maybe one day, you can tell him… to change again."

Bai Six coughed hard, swallowing the coin with great effort, pushing it

down his throat.

His breath faded, and little Bai Six, or rather Bai Liu, slowly closed his eyes. He died with a smile, the first light of morning illuminating his face. He still held the child's mobile phone in his hand, but never had the chance to call and scold the hated investor—the one who manipulated him endlessly, knowing everything.

This absolute liar, this bad guy who had never told him a single truth, this jerk who owed him an uncountable debt. Yet, despite it all, he still chose to do everything for him, without hesitation.

Because this person, this other Bai Liu, was his only friend in his short, virtual life. And though he had lied about everything, Bai Six knew that, whatever the choices were, they were made for their mutual benefit.

So he trusted him unconditionally and chose to do everything that was good for him.

Bai Six's eyes closed completely as his hand slipped to the ground beside him, his strength finally gone.

[System warning: Player Bai Liu's secondary identity line is rapidly declining in life value - life value is zero.]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu died in the secondary identity line.]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu's Game Manager will be returned to the main identity line.]

[System Alert: Player Miao Feichi's secondary identity line and Player Bai Liu's secondary identity line are confirmed dead. The transaction between the two is invalid. The transaction money is refunded. Player Miao Feichi's secondary identity line's soul notes are invalid. Player Bai Liu's secondary identity line is now soul notes in the old wallet as punishment for failing to complete the transaction.]

[System Alert: Player Miao Gaojiang's secondary identity line transaction is on hold and will be transferred to Player Bai Liu's primary identity line for processing.]

The Loving Welfare Home

Little Muke clutched Bai Six's head and cried out, but his tears quickly dried as he stood up, his eyes filled with an almost fierce, murderous glare directed at Miao Gaojiang, who was trying to slip away alone. "Where do you think you're going? Bai Six is dead, and I'm still alive. He gave me the prop that can control you, so you'd better behave yourself!"

Miao Gaojiang froze in place, his back tense. He slowly turned to face Little Muke, who was looking at him with tear-streaked cheeks. The sight sent a shiver down his spine.

Little Muke gritted his teeth. "If you disobey me, I'll kill you. I'm not as kind as Bai Six to leave you alive. Now, get your ass over here and pick up Bai Six. Do it, or I'll make you regret it."

Muke looked down at Little Bai Six's pale, lifeless face, lying so still on the ground. His eyes reddened, but he fought to hold back his tears, continuing in a strained voice, "Pick him up. Don't leave him behind, not until I say so. And if you do, I swear I'll kill you."

Taking a deep breath, Little Muke glanced up at the baptismal font beneath the statue of God Xiang—the passage Bai Six had told him about, the one they could escape through.

With tears still in his eyes but his resolve unwavering, Young Muke said, "We drained his blood. We need to take it to save his investors."

"Move faster." Muke's voice trembled with emotion, but he fought to remain calm and firm. "Put Bai Six's body in the baptismal pool. I'll find something to heat the water. Don't let the blood from his body get cold. If it does, it won't pump properly."

---------- --

Wednesday, Ward 501, 6:15 AM

Bai Liu stared at his silent phone for a moment before putting it away, his expression calm. "My child should be dead if he hasn't called me by now."

Muke's face went pale as he glanced at Bai Liu, whose health was hanging by a thread with only 0.5 life left. "What about you?"

"There is a way," Bai Liu said, his voice composed. "I expected this to happen. It's a dire situation, but I have a backup plan. It's just a little more dangerous." He shifted his gaze to Liu Huai, who was sitting on the edge of the hospital bed, still disoriented. "The key to breaking this situation lies with you, Liu Huai."

Liu Huai looked up, his eyes unfocused. "With me?"

Liu Huai's mental state was fragile after a night of turmoil, the dramatic drop in vitality, the after-effects of his life dipping below ten, and the overwhelming amount of information Bai Liu had flooded him with.

The sweet sound of Liu Jiayi's laughter echoed in his ears, and as the world around him blurred, he seemed to see the air turning to mud, fish that couldn't be caught, and a dirty girl hiding in the muck. She stood behind Bai Liu, her hands on his shoulders, looking at him with a wide, unsettling smile.

Liu Huai understood that his low mental state was making it hard for him to grasp Bai Liu's words.

"The key to breaking the game... why is it on me?" Liu Huai mumbled, his eyes drifting down to his blood-soaked body, his hands missing. He gave a bewildered, disoriented expression. "I'm supposed to be dying, right?"

Bai Liu spoke lightly, almost casually, "Yes, you do look like you're about to die. But Liu Jiayi won't let you die that easily. You are, in fact, the key to our escape."

At the mention of Liu Jiayi's name, Liu Huai's expression tightened.

Bai Liu continued, indifferent to Liu Huai's strained face. "From what I can see, the game is just as dangerous for Liu Jiayi. With Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang, the two league players, she'll have to drain her own blood to save you."

"Although she can return her own lifespan, her healing skill is weakened by the system. In the gap between draining blood to heal you and her cooldown to heal herself, she remains vulnerable—more so than us. We need to use that window to hold her hostage and force her to return blood to us."

"But she will be no less wary than I am," Bai Liu added slowly, his gaze dropping to Liu Huai's stunned face. "Except when it comes to

you, Liu Huai. I need you to control Liu Jiayi while she draws blood to heal you. When she's at her weakest, I won't harm her—we'll take her with us, just... use her a little."

Bai Liu's gaze dropped to the phone in his hand, which had been silent all morning. "After all, she also took advantage of one of the few rare things I've seen—she was supposed to have killed my children."

Liu Huai stayed silent for a long time, his head bowed. Eventually, he let out a deep sigh. "I'll cooperate, as long as you don't hurt her."

Before Bai Liu could respond, Muke's phone rang. He answered in confusion, hearing Little Muke's sobbing, frantic gasps through the receiver. "Is Bai Six's investor around? Can you put him on the phone?!"

Bai Liu and Muke exchanged a look, and Bai Liu quickly took the call.

Little Muke was still crying, gasping for air. "Bai Six... he... Bai Six... he—"

"Dead, right?" Bai Liu interrupted calmly.

Muke's sobs seemed to trigger the floodgates, and he broke down. "Yes! Liu Jiayi killed him somehow!"

Muke, whose heart condition had worsened, cried, unable to breathe as he desperately explained what had happened.

When he mentioned that he had asked Miao Gaojiang to carry Bai Six's body on his back, Bai Liu's voice dropped sharply. "What about you? Muke, as I recall, you have a heart condition, and you can't do strenuous exercise. You let Miao Gaojiang carry Bai Six's corpse, but you'll be in trouble before you can even catch up with him."

Little Muke was now gasping for air as he ran. He had followed Bai Six from the craft room to the church, helped draw Bai Six's blood, and was now running through the hospital corridors.

Little Muke was running through the tunnels beneath the idol's shrine, clutching a small amount of warm blood from Bai Six's body. His face and lips were turning blue and purple, but he gritted his teeth, holding the phone up as he stumbled forward.

"Drop Bai Six's body and let Miao Gaojiang carry you instead," Bai Liu instructed calmly. "Bai Six's body is useless now. Carrying it around

will only slow you down. Throw it away."

Little Muke took a sharp breath, his voice trembling with disbelief and anger. His chest heaved as he cried, "Bai Six gave his life to save you! And you want me to leave his body in a tunnel, where it can be devoured by monsters and drained of its blood?!"

"Yes," Bai Liu replied indifferently. "Because he's worthless."

Muke's breath quickened as he tried to hold back his tears, but eventually, he screamed in hysteria, "I'm not leaving him behind!"

The boy cried, his voice shaking with rage as he yelled at Bai Liu. "You're an animal! You used Bai Six from the beginning to the end! You lied to him! You made him think you were a good person! But you're not! He died for you!"

His voice broke, and he sobbed bitterly, "But he died willingly for you, knowing you were using him! Every drop of blood was for you! I drew it with my own hands!"

Little Muke shouted through his sobs, tears and snot running down his face. "You don't deserve him! You can't do this to him, even if he's dead!"

After a long, strained silence, Muke seemed to force himself to calm down, taking deep breaths as his sobs gradually slowed.

There was a long silence on the other end of the line before Bai Liu heard Muke's choked sobs, his voice muffled as he wiped his tears away, crying desperately.

But eventually, Muke started to speak, his voice low and resigned, as if pulling the words from deep within. "Bai Six is worth something, even in death. There's a coin inside his body that controls Miao Gaojiang. It's the coin he was going to give you. He couldn't tell anyone where it's hidden, and I can't leave him behind."

Little Muke seemed to be trying to convince Bai Liu—and perhaps himself.

Bai Liu's voice remained calm, impassive. "You leave him in the tunnel, and I'll go get him. I know where he's hidden. I'm sure his intention was for you to tell me where it is so I can retrieve it. If you keep carrying his body, you're only wasting your energy."

Bai Liu spoke calmly, analyzing the situation logically, without a hint of emotion, which calmed Muke down just a little.

Bai Six had indeed told Muke to leave the body in the tunnel and to tell the investors to retrieve it when they passed by. That was the safest option, after all—the tunnel was known only to Muke and Miao Gaojiang, and since Miao Gaojiang had already gone with him, Bai Six's body wouldn't be easily found.

But—Muke bit his lip. He didn't want to leave Bai Six behind.

"You don't need that coin to control Miao Gaojiang," Bai Liu continued. "He's on the run and is on your side. I know you don't want to leave Bai Six behind, but he's become a liability. I would have died for Bai Six too, but he didn't just die to save me—he died to save you, Muke. He died to save us all."

Bai Liu's voice was steady. "Taking his body with you will only waste everything he did for you. It'll waste the path he sacrificed to pave for you. If you collapse from exhaustion, all of Bai Six's efforts to save us will be for nothing."

"Do you want to waste his heart and soul?" Bai Liu asked gently.

There was only heavy breathing on the other end of the line. After half a minute of silence, Muke spoke again, his voice choked with sobs but determined. "Miao Gaojiang, put Bai Six down... and carry me."

"You don't even deserve to have Bai Six save you," Muke added, gasping through clenched teeth. "You deserve to be sick, you piece of shit! I hate you!"

Bai Liu said nothing, simply waiting quietly for Muke to cry it out, letting him calm down.

After a while, Muke spoke again, his voice filled with frustration and resignation. "You stay in the hospital, junk investor. I'm coming to save you with his blood."

He hung up with a sharp "pop," as if he couldn't bear to speak another word to Bai Liu.

Bai Liu: "..."

The Loving Welfare Home

Bai Liu was lost in thought for a moment after Muke hung up the phone.

It seems like these little kids don't like him very much... He hasn't been very appealing to children since he was a kid himself.

The sound of nurses' heels clicking on the floor outside suddenly interrupted his thoughts. The nurses were heading for the elevators, indicating that something had happened requiring their attention.

Bai Liu's expression darkened slightly. "A patient is awake."

Muke's face stiffened as he turned toward Bai Liu. "It can't be... Miao Feichi and his father, can it?"

7:30 AM, 2nd Floor, Intensive Care Unit.

Miao Gaojiang's body was covered in red and black burns. He choked and coughed as a nurse helped him sit up. He turned to look at the still unconscious Miao Feichi in the bed next to him and gritted his teeth. Even though he had taken most of the attacks to protect Miao Feichi, his son's health had deteriorated far more than his own.

In addition, his loss of life wasn't low.

Miao Gaojiang shifted uncomfortably against his pillow, his eyes narrowing as he checked his life points.

[System Alert: Player Miao Gaojiang has 23 life points.]

Even in league matches, Miao Gaojiang, with his high defense, had rarely suffered such a heavy hit all at once.

He swallowed down a headache from his stamina rejuvenator and mental bleach, his face contorting slightly. His life points were down to 23, and Miao Feichi's were probably even lower.

This realization made Miao Gaojiang's expression turn cold and serious.

Bai Liu, that madman... He's completely desperate to drain every bit of blood from them, isn't he?

It was clear that Bai Liu had given up on the investor pass and was

betting everything on the kids.

Once his thoughts cleared, Miao Gaojiang used his remaining credits to buy some protective straps to bind his own wounds, which were still oozing blood. He then moved to wrap Miao Feichi's wounds, gently shaking him awake. Miao Gaojiang grimaced as he helped his son sit up.

Miao Feichi had been given both psycho-bleach and stamina restorer while unconscious, and when he woke, the large intake of fluids made him vomit several times before he wiped his mouth and became fully conscious.

"Feichi, how much life do you have?" Miao Gaojiang asked with a frown as soon as he saw his son had regained full awareness.

Miao Feichi opened his attribute panel and cursed under his breath, his face darkening. "Shit, only eleven points left."

"... That's a bit too low," Miao Gaojiang said, his brows knitting. "I was thinking that if you had enough life to kill Bai Liu, we'd go through the orphanage. But if you drop two life points in a confrontation, you'll be down to ten, and that's already [Death Foretold] territory."

[Death Foretelling] was a term used by spectators in the league, also known as the [Death Threshold]. It referred to a level of life points that dropped below a certain value, causing the system to issue a [Death Threshold] warning. This signified that the player was in imminent danger of being eliminated, as their life could be taken away in a single wave during group battles or sieges.

Miao Feichi's [Death Threshold] was typically 9, and Miao Gaojiang's was usually 1, thanks to his higher defense, which made him less vulnerable to a one-hit elimination.

Miao Feichi touched the bloody wound on his face and winced, angry and in pain. "Forget about this 'Death Foretold' shit. Bai Liu's just a non-league F-rank player. The real 'Death Threshold' is for high-level players in the league—he doesn't deserve to be mentioned in the same breath as me..."

"He hasn't even made it to the league yet, and his panel is F-ranked. Yet, he can push your life down near the threshold in a single attack, and mine by half." Miao Gaojiang interrupted Miao Feichi's rant, his voice calm. "Don't you think that makes him scarier?"

Miao Feichi bared his teeth, his expression cold.

Miao Gaojiang sighed deeply. “We made the wrong choice, trying to sacrifice ourselves to pass the game. Look at your system panel. We need to give up on sacrificing Bai Liu if we want to survive this. Otherwise, we’ll both die.”

Miao Feichi furrowed his brow and clicked on his system panel. A bright red system notification appeared.

[System Reminder: Tomorrow, Thursday, is the day of sickness. Investors who have not yet acquired the blood lingzhi to cure their terminal illness will receive the (sickness) debuff once 00:00 passes. This debuff causes players’ life bars to drop slowly. Please speed up your clearance to avoid this.]

Miao Gaojiang’s expression turned grave. “This [Sickness] debuff is a forced weakening effect that will drain our life points. From what the song says, by Friday, we’ll be severely affected by the sickness, and this debuff will likely consume all our life points. Life is precious to us now, but for Bai Liu and his group, they’ve already given up on the investor pass, so life points don’t matter to them anymore. They can afford to waste them.”

Miao Gaojiang leaned forward, half-crouching to look at Miao Feichi, whose confusion was evident. “They’re not expecting to go through the investor route. Understand, Feichi? All of them, including Liu Huai, have chosen to sacrifice themselves to protect the kids.”

“We, on the other hand, are focused on ourselves. Killing them won’t matter because their hopes and desires lie with their other selves.”

Miao Gaojiang’s eyes darkened. “Killing those kids and draining their blood to survive is the only way for us to clear the level. Do you understand, Feichi? Stop wasting time on Bai Liu and get serious.”

Miao Feichi clenched his teeth, reluctantly nodding.

Miao Gaojiang breathed a sigh of relief. Though Miao Feichi was impulsive and irritable, he would listen when it came to their survival. Perhaps that was why Miao Gaojiang couldn’t help but indulge him sometimes, even in his mistakes—because he was, after all, a good son who listened to his father.

Just not to his mother.

But when it came to his father, he listened.

Miao Gaojiang had seen his son suffer for his sick mother, thinking of ending her life to free his father from the burden. The guilt weighed heavily on him, but Miao Feichi had stepped up, eager to be the hero, even if it meant ending his mother's suffering.

"We have to survive this, okay, Feichi?" Miao Gaojiang whispered, his voice soft as he caressed Miao Feichi's face. His son leaned weakly against him, his spiritual level dropping below 20 before forcefully recovering. The aftermath left Miao Gaojiang in an unnaturally unstable state, his mind wavering.

Miao Gaojiang exhaled deeply, regulating his breathing, though fear and madness lurked beneath his calm façade. "We can defeat even something like your mother. There's nothing we can't defeat."

Miao Feichi, pale and bandaged, looked up at Miao Gaojiang, his weakness making him appear softer than usual.

For a moment, Miao Gaojiang's gaze flickered to the snowy dots on the TV. The image of Miao Feichi, lying in the hospital bed, overlapped with that of a woman—dead, dying, and twisted. Her eyes, wide open, stared at a glass of water on the counter, her jaw hanging unnaturally, revealing her blackened throat. Her tongue had been cut off and eaten by Miao Feichi.

The same son who had listened to his father.

Little Miao Feichi stood by his mother's bedside, subtly gazing at her with longing eyes as her tongue stuck out of the glass, gently stirring the boiling water, creating delicious ripples in the glass. The boy's eyes wavered with the ripples, his throat constricting as he swallowed. His eyes gradually overlapped with the image of Miao Feichi now lying in the hospital bed.

Miao Gaojiang's heart skipped a beat. He suddenly shoved Miao Feichi away from him. Miao Feichi looked at him in confusion and impatience.

"Father, what are you doing?"

Miao Gaojiang forced a smile. "It's nothing. I'm just not in a good state of mind."

Turning away, Miao Gaojiang tilted his head back and drank an entire

bottle of mental bleach, feeling the aftereffects surge through him, making his mental state extremely unstable.

He now fully realized that the aftershocks of his mental value dropping below 20 were taking hold, but he didn't want to admit it—or even acknowledge it. Reality and illusion were beginning to blur, and subconscious fear was slowly gnawing at his mind, the precursor to insanity.

Miao Gaojiang gritted his teeth, sweat beading on his forehead. He wiped his face, trying to force himself to calm down.

Turning to the nurse, he asked, "When do we go through the orphanage for adoption today?"

The nurse hesitated. "Because the explosion at the private hospital injured many investors, today's pairing with the orphanage was supposed to be canceled."

Miao Gaojiang's expression darkened. "But we're supposed to be very sick tomorrow. Can we get a separate pairing?"

"…It can be arranged, but if it's just the two of you, the orphanage won't be open due to the risk of children escaping. If you must go, you'll have to use one of the tunnels from this side of the hospital that leads directly to the orphanage's church," the nurse explained, her eyes darting away.

"Previously, children who were baptized in the church were brought directly through this tunnel, but recently, there have been more seriously ill investors before the matching process. Since you've already been paired with your own children, you can use the tunnel to collect them directly."

Miao Gaojiang sighed in relief. "Where is the entrance to this tunnel?"

The nurse was eerily silent for a moment. "The safe passage is directly below."

"Bai Liu, how are you so sure the tunnel exit is directly below the safe passage?" Muke asked, his voice a mix of confusion and fear. He swallowed hard, glancing nervously at the wall clock. "It's after eight in the morning. Those monstrous child creatures in the safe passage don't disappear until after nine. They're probably still around the exit. Should we really go now?"

Muke shifted uncomfortably, his gaze flicking between Liu Huai's broken arms and the bloodstained sleeve of Bai Liu. As much as he hated to admit it, he spoke honestly, "I'm not in any condition to fight, and you're in bad shape too. If we go in like this, we could easily be killed by those kid monsters. And if your guess is wrong about the tunnel exit, we'd be walking straight into danger."

Muke's tone became serious as he leaned forward, hands gripping the edges of his shirt. "Little Bai Six is dead. You can't gamble now, Bai Liu. We can't afford to make risky decisions. If we mess up, you'll be the first to die. You have only 0.5 life left."

"I can't be 100 percent sure," Bai Liu replied, his expression calm. "But I'm about 90 percent certain it's the same place."

He turned to Muke. "I came to this conclusion for a couple of reasons. First, if there are tunnels between private hospitals and orphanages, their main function is probably to transport children. You mentioned that the people using this tunnel are child monsters who have been drained of blood. And the place with the most hospital child monsters is the safe passage."

He raised a second finger. "Second, Muke, do you remember the orphanage we visited in reality?"

Muke nodded, still processing.

Bai Liu continued, "Didn't that teacher mention that the orphanage had downsized a lot? After I got back, I checked the 3D comparison between the original map of the orphanage and the current one. The orphanage used to have a church, but when it downsized, the church was carved out and converted into a… Guess where the security exit on the ground floor of this converted hospital was built?"

Muke held his breath as Bai Liu answered, his calm voice unwavering: "The location of the idol built in the original church of the orphanage is exactly the same as the entrance and exit of this tunnel in the game."

"Couldn't we go after nine?" Muke asked, frowning. "It'll be much safer after nine."

"For me, yes," Bai Liu said as he stood up, picking up his long bone whip and warming it around his wrist. "But not for you. Miao Gaojiang and Miao Feichi should have woken up by now. They shouldn't be after us, though—[investors] who don't pass the level are

only a waste of their time. If I were Miao Gaojiang, I'd head straight to the orphanage to draw the children's blood."

He glanced at Muke, his eyes narrowing. "And little Muke just told us the orphanage gate isn't open, which means Miao Gaojiang and the hospital staff must know about the tunnel. If the nurse told him about it, then he'll likely use it to reach the orphanage."

Bai Liu's eyes dropped to Muke's clenched hand. "That means if we don't move fast, little Muke will be ambushed, and you'll be in just as much danger as I am. You know that, right?"

Muke bit his lip and lowered his head, replying softly, "It's okay. I think it's better to make sure you're alive first. You only have 0.5 life, and I have six."

"Look me in the eye and speak, Muke." Bai Liu's voice was almost inaudible, but there was a coldness to it. "Your hands are shaking. You're scared. If you don't want to speak anymore, then stop talking. Get up. Let's go. We are at a disadvantage now—"

Bai Liu lowered his head and pressed the handle of his whip to Muke's forehead. Muke stared at him, and Bai Liu's expression remained serene, his eyes filled with determination. "But Muke, that doesn't mean we're going to lose. Losing would cost me too much. I will do whatever it takes to win this game."

Before Muke could react, Bai Liu grabbed the back of Muke's collar with one hand, pulling him to his feet. Then, with a swift movement, he slung the fishbone whip over his shoulder and half across Liu Huai, who had lost his arms. Bai Liu exhaled a shallow breath, his gaze quiet, before inhaling again. "Open the door, Muke. The game isn't over yet."

Liu Huai, whose face had turned as white as paper, suddenly interrupted Bai Liu. His wavering gaze lingered on Bai Liu's face for a moment, before he spoke. "Wait. You promise that if you live, you'll save Jiayi?"

Bai Liu nodded, his expression calm. "I promise."

Liu Huai closed his eyes, and a wrist guard appeared before him.

[System Alert: (Cynic Wristguard): After a debauched poor dog is damaged, the damage can be delayed for 14 hours by his optimism. However, if the player hasn't cleared the level within those 14 hours, the damage will stack onto the player.]

"This prop was originally meant for Jiayi, for when she escaped. But now..." Liu Huai let out a bitter laugh. "She won't be able to use it."

A little witch with healing skills doesn't need such lowly props to protect herself from delayed damage.

Liu Huai turned to Bai Liu, a smile spreading across his face that was increasingly bitter and resigned. "I can't use it either, so here, Bai Liu."

Bai Liu didn't speak further; he simply took the wrist guard and glanced at Muke by the door.

Muke looked back at Bai Liu, and after ensuring Bai Liu hadn't wavered, he took a deep breath and pushed the door open with a trembling hand.

It was now 8:40 AM on Wednesday.

On the ground floor, near the security access.

The nurse stood at a distance, cowering in fear. She didn't approach but swallowed hard before extending her hand to point toward the

dark entrance. "It's over there. The tunnel entrance is around the corner on the ground floor. From there, you can go straight down to the orphanage church. I won't go any further."

After speaking, the nurse saw Miao Gaojiang and Miao Feichi leaning over, and unable to stop herself, she called out, "No one is allowed to leave the ward until nine o'clock! I'm just showing you out, you can't —"

Miao Gaojiang turned, his expression blank, and with a few swift steps, was in front of her. The taller Miao Gaojiang grabbed her by the neck and spun her around. The sound of her neck bones locking together was sharp and chilling.

Her eyes widened in shock, pupils dilated. Slowly, she collapsed, helpless.

"Dad!?" Miao Feichi, not only shocked but also horrified, exclaimed, "What are you doing killing NPCs?! This could cause a backlash!"

Miao Gaojiang's chest heaved violently. His eyes reddened, but his face remained unreadable, sweat dripping down his jaw as he casually killed the nurse. His shoulders tensed, his muscles rippling with suppressed aggression. He took a deep breath, his back to Miao Feichi, looking oddly calm for a moment.

But then, Miao Gaojiang steadied himself, cleared his throat, and spoke, his voice sharp. "We can't waste any more time. This nurse NPC wouldn't have let us leave until nine, but those kids are probably plotting their escape already. We need to get to the orphanage fast."

Miao Feichi, reluctantly persuaded by this logic, drew his twin swords and stepped forward, but just as he was about to enter the passage, Miao Gaojiang spoke softly, "Don't you think this nurse looks like your mother?"

Miao Feichi paused, glancing at the nurse's lifeless face—green, pale, nothing like the woman who had given birth to him. He withdrew his gaze, confused and slightly concerned, and looked at his father. "What's wrong, Dad? This NPC doesn't look anything like that dead woman, okay?"

"Is that so?" Miao Gaojiang muttered to himself as he glanced back at the nurse's face. "Maybe I was mistaken."

But in his mind's eye, the nurse's face distorted. Her youthful features

were now replaced with an old, sickly, aged smile that reminded Miao Gaojiang of his wife—the woman who had slept beside him on countless nights. The woman whose face he saw first thing in the morning.

In his memory, she had always greeted him with a twisted, grotesque smile, her mouth so wide it almost seemed to stretch beyond human limits. Her jaw made eerie cracking sounds as she smiled, revealing the unsettling absence of a tongue.

Miao Gaojiang shook off the image, wiping the sweat from his temples and refocusing on the exit. “Feichi, you take the lead. I’ll follow behind.”

8:45 AM.

Due to last night’s bombing, the nurses no longer had the energy to patrol each floor and manage the patients. Bai Liu found an opportunity to use the lift and rushed to the ground floor, only to discover that the safe passage had been cleared, leaving behind only a chaotic mess.

This was both good and bad news.

Muke exhaled a sigh of relief. "No more going head to head with these monsters."

Bai Liu’s gaze lingered on the shredded children and syringes scattered everywhere, his eyes twitching as he muttered, "Miao Gaojiang... they’re in the tunnel."

He motioned for Liu Huai, who was slumping from his exhaustion, to climb down from him. Bai Liu quickly moved forward, followed by Muke. Around the corner on the ground floor, there was a yellow bin filled with medical waste, overflowing with blood transfusion bags and syringes. There was also a simple, child-sized bed with fixed bandages, presumably to prevent the children from moving during blood draws.

It looked like this was where the early children were brought to have their blood drawn, only to have their bodies discarded in the medical waste bin along with the used equipment.

The investors, who fed off the children’s blood, didn’t want to witness the brutal process. They had the nurses quickly process the “raw herbs” in a small, filthy corner, all for the benefit of the

"compassionate" investors.

The bin had been roughly kicked open, revealing a small, square cellar-like entrance beneath it. Bai Liu estimated the entrance to be about 40 cm by 40 cm, just big enough for a child to fit through. Fortunately for Bai Liu, they were thin and long enough to make it through.

There were some messy footprints near the entrance, likely left by Miao Feichi. Bai Liu asked Muke to hold Liu Huai for a moment, then stepped forward to grab the door handle by its loop, pulling it upwards to open the cellar door.

As the door creaked open, a cloud of dust, earthy debris, the strong scent of blood, and the warm, damp smell of fungal decay and fermentation poured out. The scabs of dried blood from who knows how many victims puffed off the door, revealing the thick, moldy wooden boards beneath.

The dust floated in the air, swirling in the darkness like tiny particles, only visible to those who had nearly drowned in it.

Bai Liu held his breath, his eyes meeting Muke’s nervous gaze, before jumping down without hesitation, not giving Muke a chance to stop him.

"I’ll go down first. You guys can follow when I say it’s safe."

Muke looked back and forth in panic.

It didn’t take long for Bai Liu’s voice to echo from below. "No problem, Muke. You can bring Liu Huai down first and then come down yourself."

Muke carefully moved Liu Huai, who was now armless, down into the tunnel, then braced himself against the edge of the narrow opening before following.

Closing his eyes, Muke took a deep breath and let go, sliding through the wet, sticky passage. When he finally landed, the texture of the ground felt strange—soft and puffy, as though he had stepped on a field of mushrooms. The air was thick with the smell of blood and fungi.

Muke opened his eyes and gasped at the sight before him.

The tunnel's walls were completely covered with a variety of mushrooms—colorful, of different sizes, and glowing faintly, like the mucous membranes of an infected stomach, covered in moist patches that seemed ready to burst, leaking corrosive juice with every touch.

The entire tunnel smelled of fermented matter and secretions, like mushrooms soaked in poor-quality wine with dirt and sand for twenty years—intoxicating and nauseating.

Both Liu Huai and Muke had a slight gag reflex, while only Bai Liu seemed somewhat unaffected.

Muke covered his mouth, stifling a gag. "Why are there so many mushrooms here?"

"The dampness and darkness, combined with the fact that this is where the bodies were dumped, created the perfect environment for mushrooms to grow," Bai Liu replied, his feet sinking deep into the moist mushrooms with every step. "And if I'm not mistaken, these are low-quality blood lingzhi mushrooms that the investors cultivated and discarded."

Muke was stunned. "Blood lingzhi? Isn't that supposed to be rare and valuable?!"

"It's the blood of a 'pure' child that produces the rare blood lingzhi," Bai Liu's eyes scanned the tunnel, landing on a pulsating, heart-sized blood lingzhi on the wall. "We're in a timeline from ten years ago, before these investors perfected their child screening process. Back then, their experiments weren't fully refined, so some of their crops failed, were toxic, or were otherwise useless. And that's why they were discarded here."

Bai Liu's gaze shifted to the other end of the tunnel. "If I'm not mistaken, this is where the song about 'being buried in the earth on Sunday' comes from."

The tunnel stretched like a living canal, pulsing with strange life forces as Bai Liu breathed in and out. But upon closer inspection, the walls were lined with slowly pulsing blood primroses, and the bodies of deformed children lay motionless, their eyes wide open, with phones scattered around their hands.

Bai Liu picked up one of the phones and checked it—it was dead, the battery drained, and its owner had long since passed.

Most of the deformed children had been mutilated into incomplete pieces by Miao Feichi's twin knives, their remains scattered among the mushrooms.

Some of the mushrooms had been crushed or trampled. Bai Liu looked down and followed the trampling marks. "Come on, they're heading further in. We need to hurry."

At the far end of the tunnel, young Miao Gaojiang, carrying Muke on his back, panted heavily. Sweat soaked his body, and he struggled against the slippery, soft ground, which made each step harder and more exhausting.

Muke, with Bai Liu's blood bag on his back, anxiously checked the time. Bai Liu had told him they had to be there by nine o'clock, or else the investors would be out by then, and they'd be caught—everything would be over.

What they didn't know was that two investors, Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang, had already left before nine o'clock and were now coming down the tunnel.

Muke's anxiety grew as the time ticked away. "Miao Gaojiang, hurry! We won't be able to escape when the investors come out to arrest us after nine!"

"I don't think we'll have to wait that long." Miao Gaojiang wiped the sweat from his brow, his face pale with fear and embarrassment. He glanced at Muke, who was lying against his shoulder. "I hear someone coming closer in the mushrooms. They're moving fast."

Muke's expression darkened after a moment of pause. "How fast? Do you think we can make it back to the church in time?"

The church was a safe zone, and although it wasn't guaranteed how long they'd last there, it was better than being caught. Muke gritted his teeth and clutched the blood bag tightly.

He hoped that the investors wouldn't finish their business too quickly and that their plans wouldn't collapse.

The approaching sound of footsteps grew louder and faster, like snakes slithering through a mushroom thicket.

Miao Gaojiang took a couple of steps back, fear flooding his senses. "I don't think it's going to take until after nine. They're moving too fast. We won't make it to the church in time."

"We can't let them catch us." Muke's voice lowered, his tone steady despite the danger. "Miao Gaojiang, get those extra infusion bags Bai Liu gave us. We'll wear them and pretend to be those monster kids who play flutes. The lighting in this tunnel is bad, and with all the dead kids around, no one will be able to tell the difference between us and the monsters unless they get too close."

Muke quickly darted off Miao Gaojiang's back and began hanging IV bags around their necks.

Miao Gaojiang stared at him in disbelief, his face a mixture of blue and white. "Do you really think this disguise will fool the investors? We look nothing like those deformed children!"

"I'll make it work, even if I have to," Muke said, breathing heavily. His face was grim, but there was determination in his eyes. "I've been thinking about it for a while. If we try to run back to the church now, we'll just be caught. The teachers are up, and if we encounter them near the church, they'll lock us up for the Thursday pairings. If we don't escape today, we'll never get out."

"We have no choice but to gamble," Muke finished.

Miao Gaojiang locked eyes with him for a moment before he nodded in agreement.

The sound of footsteps grew louder, and the squelching noise of mushrooms being crushed underfoot echoed eerily through the tunnel.

The stench of decay and blood intensified as Muke took a deep breath and lowered his voice. "Don't make a sound. Lie down under the mushroom bushes and play dead. Got it?"

Muke quickly found a spot to hide the blood bag, covering it with mushrooms. He took a deep breath and lay face down in the damp ground, trying to remain as still as possible.

When Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang reached this part of the tunnel, Miao Feichi frowned as she wiped the blood from her knife. "What was that noise? Did someone just talk? It didn't sound like the kids we killed earlier—it sounded like two living people."

Miao Feichi's sharp ears caught every sound, but after a quick scan of the surroundings, she saw nothing unusual. She was about to move on when Miao Gaojiang urged her forward. "Stop looking. Let's go. This place is clearly a nest for those monstrous kids."

As they ventured deeper into the passage, Miao Gaojiang's suspicions grew. The narrow, dimly lit tunnel, filled with mushrooms, seemed to stretch endlessly. One entrance led to the church, and the other to a safe passage used to discard dead children and medical waste. The nurse had told them that this passage was abandoned after the investors increased in number and began selecting children based on matching criteria.

However, when Miao Gaojiang entered the abandoned section, he noticed signs of activity, indicating that the monstrous children had been surviving here.

His expression darkened. "The monstrous children are out between nine PM and nine AM, but during the rest of the time, they stay here in this passage. We'll be stuck with them when they return to their nest."

Miao Feichi glanced at his watch, seeing that it was 8:51—almost nine o'clock. They couldn't afford to waste any more time.

There were two reasons why Miao Feichi felt uneasy. First, Miao Gaojiang had been acting anxious since the explosion, which was unusual for him. Miao Feichi could sense something was off.

Second, his gaze fell on the bodies of two children lying beneath the mushrooms, a sight he had grown used to. But this time, the bodies felt different—too fresh, too strange.

Miao Feichi instinctively felt something was wrong. The investors never allowed such "unlucky" things to remain. The incinerator and mortuary would have dealt with the bodies, and the fungus in the passage was the perfect means to decompose them.

Miao Feichi trusted his instincts, but now, with Miao Gaojiang's unusual behavior and the growing sense of danger, he knew time was running out.

As Miao Gaojiang urged him to move, Miao Feichi hesitated for a moment before continuing forward.

A wave of relief washed over Muke when he heard the investors move

on. However, before his relief was complete, Miao Feichi suddenly stopped.

He turned his head slightly, his neck creaking as he twisted it to gaze at the "corpses" hidden under the mushrooms. His eyes gleamed with a terrifying excitement.

There was a small water stain on the back of one "corpse," and Miao Feichi leaned in, licking his lips.

Miao Gaojiang saw the look in Miao Feichi's eyes and knew what was coming. He was about to interrupt when Miao Feichi, with a soft voice tinged with surprise, said, "Father, these children… their clothes are wet. They're sweating. I can smell fresh sweat."

"They were alive," Miao Feichi whispered.

Miao Gaojiang froze. His eyes widened as he quickly realized who they were. "It's Bai Liu's group! Those kids are alive!"

Muke's heart sank, and after a moment of hesitation, he grabbed the blood bag and without a word, sprang to his feet, running as fast as he could toward the exit. Miao Gaojiang, his face drained of color, followed closely behind.

Miao Feichi let out a low, mocking laugh as he unsheathed his twin swords. "Damn it, I almost blew up last night. If I don't bleed you kids dry and feast on your flesh today, I'll lose face, even if I get out of here."

He paused for a moment, then whistled, his eyes narrowing. "No problem. This was easy. Today, I've got a fresh delivery of blood. Dad, your kids are in there too."

Miao Gaojiang, ever calm, nodded. "Just make sure to avoid the aorta when you kill them. Don't waste any blood."

"Got it." Miao Feichi casually wiped the blood and mushroom goo from his blade, a wild hunger in his eyes. "Kill you, and the game will be over."

Muke ran with everything he had. His heart felt like it was about to explode. Blood pounded in his chest, a sharp pain shooting through his limbs. His body felt like it was about to give out, but he pushed on, his legs moving mechanically.

He clutched the blood bag desperately, feeling like he might vomit blood into it at any second.

Tears filled his eyes, not from crying, but from the physical strain. He felt like a fragile, defective creature suddenly awakening to survival instinct. His body was weak, his mind foggy from the lack of oxygen, but he didn’t stop.

Don’t stop. Live, Muke. Bai Liu said weakly, lying in his arms, as if praying or begging him. You must save me, you must live.

It's not that he's crying. It'S that he's getting a bit dizzy from the speedy movement.

Muke's nose began to bleed, dripping onto the backs of his hands as he clutched the blood bag to his chest. But he was no longer aware of it. Muke just kept running with blank eyes, completely unaware that Miao Feichi had caught up to him from behind.

Miao Feichi gripped his twin swords and looked at the small Muke, still running wild. "Damn, you're a fast runner. I almost didn't catch you."

He raised his twin glowing knives, their thin, shifting shadows reflecting off the tunnel walls like a scythe of death. With a swift motion, Miao Feichi slashed at the shoulder of the unconscious, yet still running, young Muke.

Little Muke’s vision darkened, and he felt himself being swept up into the arms of a wind, lifting him lightly through another exit.

Someone had saved him, and now he was resting against the spot where his rescuer's heart had been. The other man's heartbeat was nothing like his own—slow and steady, like drops of water falling regularly from a remote cliff, undisturbed by the world around them.

Even if the man now held a scimitar strong enough to kill him, it would not be enough to disrupt the calm rhythm of his breathing or heartbeat.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu uses Mu Sicheng's personal skill (Thief Stalking), movement speed +3700, stamina rapidly depleting...]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu uses Mu Sicheng's personal skill (Thief Monkey Claw) to block Player Miao Feichi's attack.]

"Damn, it's you again, Bai Liu!" Miao Feichi snarled, gritting his teeth as he pressed his blade down. "Liu Huai, your hand's gone too? You've come for me? I'll see who else will help you today!"

Miao Feichi shouted, swinging his blades furiously, the silver light flashing across the tunnel. He was trying the same thing again—trying to disarm Bai Liu without knowing how much longer he had to live.

Bai Liu used his high agility to dodge Miao Feichi's powerful slash, then countered with his monkey claws, attacking several times. But Bai Liu was starting to lose his grip.

Little Muke took two steps back, his heart still racing, unsettled. As he ran, he suddenly turned his head to look at the investor who had saved him and was still fighting.

This was an investor who would save children—[he won't kill you because he's a strangely nice guy, and he'll save you.]

Little Muke burst into tears and laughter, stumbling and running on all fours, tears streaming down his tiny face. He saved me. Little Bai Liu, your investor is really strange—he's obviously not a nice guy, but... he did save me.

He got you killed and saved me, and I can't figure out what he was trying to do, just like I can't figure out what you were trying to do.

It was clear that neither you nor he were good people, but in the end, both fought tooth and nail to save me. We met on Sunday, and by Wednesday, it seemed like both you and your investor were ready to die for me.

I don't want that.

Little Muke's running stopped, and he tried to turn around, only to be yanked by someone hiding in the mushroom bushes. He nearly screamed in fear, but his mouth was quickly covered.

The other man lowered his voice and scanned him oddly. "What are you doing, running backwards?! Are you trying to give away our position? Don't make a mess for him!"

Little Muke, his face streaked with sticky tears, clutched the blood bag to his chest, choking on his words as he looked at the man. "But I don't want to see him die for me. I promised Bai Liu I would save him."

Muke took a shallow breath, then spoke softly. "I don't want to see him die either, but he promised me he wouldn't. So let's trust him... and just wait."

Muke and Liu Huai were hiding around a corner in the tunnel, both of them exhausted and lacking combat power. Bai Liu had asked them to stay hidden while he confronted the enemy alone. Muke had vehemently objected at first, arguing that Bai Liu's 0.5 combat ability was no better than his own. This was probably the first time Muke had responded to Bai Liu with sarcasm, but he soon stopped under Bai Liu's steady gaze, blushing without apologizing.

But Bai Liu had soon come up with a plan to briefly contain Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang, and this plan barely convinced Muke.

"This tunnel is the daytime habitat of the monstrous child creatures," Bai Liu explained. "They return from the outside as soon as nine o'clock rolls around, and the little monsters would certainly attack if they found us—intruders like us. They locate people using phones, but we—"

Muke's eyes lit up in realization. "We have two phones from the deformed children! As long as our phones stay connected, they won't be able to find us, and they'll attack Miao Feichi and the others instead!"

Bai Liu nodded. "Although the attack might not last long, it will allow us to escape with little Muke. The hospital side is out of the question —after nine o'clock, the investors and nurses there get active. It's not safe. We'll have to go through the church side. It's a safe area for children."

Muke took a deep breath and faced Bai Liu, leaning forward and meeting his gaze with a hint of aggression. "Okay, Bai Liu. Your plan seems solid, but I have a question. We only have two phones from the deformed children, and there are three of us. One person's phone won't work, and that person will be attacked, just like Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang. Who will it be?"

Bai Liu's eyes met Muke's briefly, and he lowered his gaze. "When we have little Muke, we'll have a third phone. I can use my own phone, or we can pick up a phone from one of the dead deformed children, or I can steal one. There's always a way."

"Don't try to fool me," Muke replied sharply, his chest heaving slightly. "Children's phones won't work after nine o'clock. Dead deformed

children's phones are useless. And as for stealing—"

Muke's eyes fell on Bai Liu's broken arm, his voice turning urgent. "You only have one arm to use. If you steal, you won't be able to defend yourself, and we have no one left to help you. Liu Huai is delirious, I have no offensive power, and these options won't work. In the end, we only have two working phones."

"That means one of us is bound to have their phone ring." Muke stared at Bai Liu. "Bai Liu, who is that person?"

Bai Liu looked up at Muke quietly, his eyes calm like a clear lake.

"Haven't you already guessed, Muke? It's me."

Muke exhaled a slow, clouded breath, wringing his hands as he tried to keep his voice steady. "I disagree, Bai Liu. You only have 0.5 life left. Liu Huai and I don't have the ability to fight. We simply don't have the means to protect you in the chaos of a ringing phone."

"There's no one to protect you. You'll really die," Muke said firmly, his voice desperate. "Please, Bai Liu... don't do this."

Bai Liu paused for a moment and then let out a soft laugh. "Who says there's no one to protect me?"

Muke was stunned. "Who else can protect you?"

Bai Liu shrugged nonchalantly, a faint smile on his lips. "I can protect myself."

But in the end, Bai Liu convinced Muke with a very, very risky solution.

Muke closed his eyes to shut off the memory, then looked down at his wrist, where a watch he had picked up from the rubble of last night's explosion lay. The second hand ticked slowly, finally aligning with zero.

It's nine o'clock.

Muke's breathing slowed, then quickly became more rapid as he took out his phone and dialed Liu Huai's number, making sure the phone was on hold and wouldn't be traced by a call from a deformed child returning to the nest.

Muke glanced up at Bai Liu, who was still struggling with Miao Feichi.

Clutching his phone in his hand, he hesitated several times before finally pressing his own number. His fingers shook slightly as he leaned against the wall, taking a deep breath.

Muke's phone was picked up before it had a chance to ring. Now that both phones were useless, he leaned against the wall, gritting his teeth and closing his eyes, not daring to look behind him.

--If things don’t go as Bai Liu expects, then Bai Liu is dead for sure.

There was a rustling in the passageway, like rats scurrying across the ground. The sound came from all sides, as if a horde of rats were burrowing out of the ground, sniffing for food. A stronger scent of blood and decay filled Muke's nostrils, growing closer and closer. Yet, strangely, he didn’t see anything approaching, though the scurrying sound crossed over to him and kept moving forward.

The small Muke in his arms tugged at his sleeve and pointed upward with a wry expression.

Muke looked up into the tunnel, and his breath caught at the sight of the strange, misshapen children. Square-headed with tiny, deformed limbs, bulging bones, and abnormally white skin, they had large mouths and eyes in their temples. Crippled and crouching, they were all covered in various infusion bags, waddling along like bats in the night—hanging from the ceiling of the tunnel, their eyes glowing with a dazzling green light, like some variant of a blood-sucking bat.

The tunnel was dimly lit, and with the children buried in mushroom bushes and covered in infusion bags the same color as the mushrooms, Muke didn’t realize at first that the children had "walked" from above.

"Feichi, it’s nine o’clock. I hear voices coming this way. The deformed kids are back!" Miao Gaojiang whispered urgently. "Leave Bai Liu alone! Killing him is useless! Grab the kids! Be careful not to alert the kid monsters—they sound like there are a lot of them and they’ll drain our blood…"

Before Miao Gaojiang could say anything more, Bai Liu pulled a long, fluorescent, snow-white whip from his body without hesitation and lashed it with force directly above him.

His fishbone whip wasn’t strong enough to harm these child monsters, but it was enough to attract their attention and hate. Sure enough, all the deformed children who had been pattering and scurrying forward suddenly stopped. Their green eyes fixed on the group below.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has angered the deformed children in the tunnel. They have decided to punish the bad guy severely!]

"Shit! Bai Liu, are you crazy?! These monstrous children will attack you too!" Miao Feichi looked up, her face going pale as she saw so many child monsters. "How can there be so many? How many children have been killed in this hospital?!"

The children tilted their heads, letting out sharp cries as they crawled down the walls like wriggling, disturbed bats with sharp claws. They descended in a dense mass toward Miao Feichi and Bai Liu.

In such dimly lit tunnels, it was impossible to pinpoint a target by sight alone. Just as bats use ultrasound to locate their prey, these monstrous children, whose eyes had degenerated, relied on sound to track their targets.

At the same moment, Miao Feichi, Miao Gaojiang, and Bai Liu's phones rang simultaneously. The children, like bats detecting something suspicious, raised their syringes in response. With overly innocent expressions, they giggled and attacked with the syringes, which were as large as a human head.

Bai Liu held the phone between his shoulder and chin, pressing the connect button without hesitation. A sharp, thin voice greeted him from the other side: "Mr. Investor, I've found you!"

From the pile of deformed children, one emerged with a grim, innocent, and hideous smile. It lunged at Bai Liu with a huge syringe in hand, but Bai Liu whipped it away. However, the child clung to him, circling around like a child coveting candy, ready to sink the syringe into Bai Liu's neck and draw blood.

At that moment, Bai Liu's phone rang again. He picked it up without changing his expression. A sharp, monstrous child's sardonic laugh sounded from the other end: "Found you! Blood! I want Mr. Blood Investor!"

A child, covered in slime, emerged from the wall, ready to bite Bai Liu's shoulder, but Bai Liu caught it with his monkey paw and shook it off with another whip.

"BLOOD!!!"

"Give me blood!!!"

"Kill you!!!"

The monstrous child grinned hideously, roaring and snarling, tilting its head back and whistling as it moved closer to Bai Liu. His face was white and bloodless, though uninjured. Clearly, he was struggling, and it seemed only a matter of time before the inevitable happened.

Even Miao Feichi was shocked by Bai Liu's self-destructive behavior: "Is Bai Liu crazy? Why does he keep answering the phone when the deformed kids are going to trap him?!"

Miao Gaojiang found it strange that Bai Liu, overwhelmed by the children he had attracted, was still answering his phone.

Although this tactic reduced the efficiency of the swarming, it also had the obvious drawback of being constantly pestered by the children. Miao Gaojiang and his team would never use such a method —multiple playthroughs had taught them that it was a pain to be continually harassed by monsters.

Miao Gaojiang's defense was high enough to withstand it, but Miao Feichi's blood was already being drained by the swarm of attacking kids. He really didn't want to waste time dealing with Bai Liu.

"I've got my children; the one who got away is Muke…" Miao Gaojiang gritted his teeth, grabbing Miao Feichi's hand with a firm grip. "Feichi, let's break out first and leave the kid and Bai Liu alone! Let's go!"

Miao Feichi looked back reluctantly but sneered when he saw Bai Liu's defiant posture. "Never mind. You're going to die in this tunnel anyway. The only difference is whether I get to kill you or not." With that, he lifted his twin swords and hacked at the children surrounding him, following Miao Gaojiang.

Behind them, Bai Liu was overshadowed by the growing influx of children. Just as Miao Feichi thought they were about to walk out of the tunnel, Bai Liu suddenly burst into laughter.

He picked up his phone with an expectant, relieved smile. "Finally, I've been waiting for you to call."

The voice on the other end was a little hoarse, but still calm. "It's me."

From the far end of the church, something began to move at speed, stepping over the bodies of all the deformed children piled up like

small mountains, stomping over them as if on flat ground.

Like a gust of wind from the entrance of the church, this thing swept through the pile of children with a steady kick, landing lightly and steadily, the wind whipping up blood-stained clothes before dropping them again.

Someone—or rather, a little monster—had fallen from the sky.

It landed like a falling willow leaf in front of Bai Liu, standing unmoved like an unformed protector.

Bai Liu's phone calls stopped, and the deformed children lost their quarry. They began to retreat, confused and shocked by the sudden appearance of this man.

Little Muke, hiding in the shadows, watched motionlessly, forgetting to breathe or blink, his expression earnest and intense, as if on the verge of tears.

Bai Liu, who seemed to know this man well, casually tossed him his fishbone whip and stood back to back with him, extending his monkey paw.

Bai Liu's hands and feet were covered in bruised pinholes from blood draws. His lips were dry and cracked, and his clothes were stained with black blood. The ends of his hair, damp from the baptismal pool, clung to his thin shoulders.

Little Bai Liu held up the phone. Through the air, the plaintive voice of Little Bai Liu fell, creating a strange, haunting melody.

He said, "Good morning, Mr. Investor. I don't think I'm late."

Little Bai Liu shook the bone whip in his hand, his voice a strange, hoarse whisper. "I'll double my fee, Mr. Investor—two hundred a minute for a job after I'm dead."

Bai Liu smiled lazily. "Fine, add whatever you want. All my money is yours."

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu's secondary identity line died due to blood loss and alienation in the tunnels. Final alienation completed.]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu's secondary identity becomes a deformed child in the Monster Book.]

The Loving Welfare Home

Little Bai Six stared down, one of his hands slipping something back into Bai Liu's pocket, while his other hand drew the whip and then swiftly and unceremoniously flung it away.

The wind from the whip sent ripples through the air like waves, pushing through the circle of deformed children like a raging sea.

Amidst the shrill cries and growls of the deformed children, Little Bai Six, standing atop the pile of bodies from which the child's form had emerged, lowered his eyes expressionlessly.

"So noisy."

He flicked his wrist at his side and lashed out again, scattering the children in an instant, their cries growing increasingly desperate.

[System Alert: Abnormal behavior detected. Core data being analyzed...]
[Analysis complete—Player Bai Liu's secondary identity line has undergone complete spirit-value clearing and alienation. He should have transformed into a monster that attacks players. Detected anomalous protective behavior... Data summary is being reported...]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu's secondary identity line (deceased, monsterized) has acted against the Monster Book guidelines… Initiating mandatory mental calibration for the monster—Mental Value at 0, complete monsterization confirmed, no calibration needed.]

[System Warning: Unexplained monster behavior detected—despite Mental Value 0, the entity remains capable of rational actions. Attack and defense stats unknown. Due to Mental Value 0, the monster is at risk of going berserk!]

[System Warning: Players, proceed with caution. Stay away from the abnormal monster and clear the game as soon as possible! The system will forcibly reset the game to eliminate the anomalous data!]

In the span of a breath, they were already behind Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang, who were running for their lives. Little Bai Six leaped onto the wall with his bare feet, spun in midair, and with a flick of his wrist, snapped the whip with a crisp, decisive strike.

In the reflection of Miao Feichi's widened eyes—turned back at the sound—a pale, eerie monster-child stood gripping Bai Liu's whip. The whip, an instrument of pure judgment, slashed through the air toward him.

If it had been Bai Liu wielding it, Miao Feichi wouldn't have been too concerned. He was familiar with Bai Liu's fishbone whip—it judged, but inflicted no direct damage. At worst, it would have left him staggering.

But as Bai Six's whip descended upon him, an instinctual warning exploded in Miao Feichi's mind. Whether it was his Life Value teetering on the edge of [Death Foreknowledge], or the battle-honed sixth sense that had saved him countless times, he knew—

—If he took that hit, he would die.

Miao Feichi ducked at the last second. The fishbone knuckles whirled past, barely grazing his cheek, leaving behind a thin, bloody scratch.

The whip slammed into the ground with terrifying force. Fragments of stone burst outward, scattering along the whip's path. The tunnel trembled for two long seconds. Amidst the rising shrieks of the deformed children, Little Bai Six retracted the fishbone whip, leaving a deep gouge in the floor. His expression remained utterly blank.

Miao Feichi slowly raised a trembling hand to his face, touching the fresh wound. His fingers came away stained with blood—the mark left behind by his brush with death.

In Bai Liu's hands, the fishbone whip had always been a strange, blunt weapon. But in Little Bai Six's grasp, it was something entirely different. It was an executioner's blade in the hands of the one most suited to wield it.

Miao Feichi couldn't help but recall another player—someone who had once given him this exact sense of suffocating oppression with a whip.

Spades. The lizard bone whip.

Miao Feichi's Scavenger Zombies had faced Spades' Killer Sequence team in a team battle once. Their best result? Spades had gone one versus five and ended the match in under a minute. Miao Feichi had stumbled out of the arena in a daze, saved only by his Death-Exemption Medal—and he hadn't even had time to draw his twin

swords.

That same look was now reflected in Little Bai Six's eyes. The same look Spades had given him when he pressed his boot to Miao Feichi's head at the end of the match, whip still dripping with blood—

—As if he were nothing more than a statistic. A mere insect, not worth a second glance.

"Father!!!" Miao Feichi screamed as he turned and bolted. "DEFENSE! RUN! Don't look back! Get outside and dodge that whip! It does extra damage!"

Miao Feichi ran at full speed, Miao Gaojiang gritting his teeth as he defended. But Little Bai Six remained unfazed, reeling back before swinging his entire upper arm again.

The whip came down. Miao Feichi was buried under the falling rubble, while Miao Gaojiang barely managed to roll away, escaping direct impact—but the end of the whip lashed across his ankle.

[System Warning: Player Miao Gaojiang's Life Value has dropped by 7. Remaining Life Value: 16. Leave the danger zone immediately!]
[System Warning: Player Miao Feichi's Life Value has dropped by 1. Remaining Life Value: 9. Leave the danger zone immediately!]

The light from the exit cast a sharp glow on Miao Gaojiang's face as he limped forward, his injured ankle slowing him down.

Little Bai Six's intent was clear. His aim with the whip was mediocre, and Miao Feichi was too fast to be easily hit. So, he had focused on Miao Gaojiang instead.

Take down the slower one first. Reduce the burden on Bai Liu and the others.

Miao Feichi coughed as he struggled to his feet, drawing his twin swords. Before he could properly stand, he caught sight of Bai Six preparing to strike Miao Gaojiang again.

[System Alert: Player Miao Feichi uses Long-Range Attack Personal Skill (Locking Slash)]

Bai Six ducked low to dodge the incoming blade, his gaze sharp. The whip in his hand was still poised to lash at Miao Gaojiang—

Miao Feichi shouted, "LOOK BACK! It's the investor behind you I'm going to kill!"

The spinning blade passed Bai Six, hurtling toward Bai Liu.

Without hesitation, Bai Six whipped out a hand, catching one knife midair, while the other continued toward Bai Liu.

Bai Liu reached out calmly, activating [Thief's Monkey Claw], but the skill had only a 50% success rate against attacks. If he failed, he would die.

Bai Six couldn't take that risk.

With gritted teeth, he abandoned his pursuit of Miao Gaojiang and lunged toward Bai Liu instead. The moment the blade was about to pierce Bai Liu's chest, Bai Liu caught the tip—

—and Bai Six, running at full speed, snatched the handle.

His chest rose and fell slightly—an unconscious mimicry of life.

If he had a heartbeat, it would have been racing.

Miao Feichi took the chance to flee, dragging Miao Gaojiang with him. Bai Six let out a sharp, dry "breath," watching as the stolen blade in his hand gradually faded—recalled by Miao Feichi.

Bai Six clicked his tongue in mild irritation.

"Not a single kill." He wiped at his mouth, smearing away the black, viscous fluid dripping from his lips. "And you were offering me 100,000 for Miao Feichi and 200,000 for Miao Gaojiang."

Bai Liu knelt beside him, wiping away the dark sludge with his sleeve.

"You did well," Bai Liu murmured, half sigh, half praise. "I'll still give you the money."

Bai Six, still coughing up black liquid, stared at him.

Little Bai Six's white, porcelain-like fingers dripped with a strange, black, viscous fluid—something that looked like rotting internal organs, interspersed with bits of torn flesh.

Bai Liu knelt down and patted Little Bai Six on the shoulder. "Even if Miao Feichi hadn't tried to sneak up on me in the end, your body—or

corpse—wouldn't have lasted much longer."

Using the cuff of his hospital gown, Bai Liu wiped away the thick, tar-like substance that kept flowing from Little Bai Six's mouth. It was like blood, except Little Bai Six had none left to bleed—he had long since been drained.

Bai Liu exhaled, his voice carrying a tone that was both a sigh and a quiet acknowledgment. "A forced outburst at Mental Value 0, complete alienation… it took too much out of your body. The last time you swung the whip, I could already tell—you were slipping fast. Even so, you were brave. You did well. I'll still give you the money."

Little Bai Six looked up at Bai Liu with dark, hollow eyes. His mouth still oozed that black "blood," and his voice came out broken, choked with coughs."…I might be dead, but I want real money, not the false paper money burned as an offering to the dead!"

Bai Liu: "……"

What an odd thing to focus on.

Muke, who had been trailing behind, finally caught up, dragging the unconscious Liu Huai.

The moment Little Muke saw Bai Six pushing Bai Liu away—the irritating investor—he threw himself to his knees in front of him. His tears flowed faster than Bai Six's "blood." He reached out as if to touch Bai Six, but the moment his fingers brushed against the boy's cold skin, he flinched, jerking his hand back as if burned by the chill.

The tears only fell harder. His nose was running now, and he was crying so hard he could barely speak.

"Oooh, Bai Six, how are you?"

"Ahem." Bai Six let out a weak cough, his expression pale. "Thankfully, it wasn't a painful death. Liu Jiayi gave me a worse one."

At the mention of Liu Jiayi's name, the dazed Liu Huai stirred for a moment, his lips moving as he mumbled something unintelligible about her. But his focus quickly drifted again, his head lolling forward as he lost consciousness once more.

Bai Six averted his gaze. "So this is the brother Liu Jiayi was trying to save, huh? And you've already done this to him? With her sense of

vengeance, she'll definitely kill you all."

"It's not like we did this to him on purpose," Muke explained, his voice tinged with helplessness. "It's the aftermath of his Life Value dropping too low, combined with the plummeting Mental Value. We've been keeping him stable by feeding him mental bleach, but…" Muke forced a bitter smile. "There's nothing else we can do."

Bai Liu's gaze flickered toward Bai Six. "I don't think we're the only ones responsible for this, though."

Bai Six met his eyes.

"Isn't this what Liu Jiayi wanted?" Bai Liu continued nonchalantly. "Her brother, finally giving her everything she wanted. She'll be more focused on keeping Liu Huai alive than trying to kill us first, don't you think?"

Bai Six stared at him for a long moment, then suddenly let out a soft, amused snort.

"So that's why you gave me the coin in the first place?" His voice was hoarse, but steady. "To make Liu Jiayi believe you were giving up the most important game piece—the game manager—to her. To make her think you had really abandoned the [investor's] side of the pass. And to make her believe she had finally gotten what she wanted—that Liu Huai loved her as much as she had sacrificed for him."

Bai Six's dark eyes sharpened. "So that when she tries to escape, she'll reveal herself?"

Bai Liu reached into his pocket and pulled out the coin—something Bai Six had returned to him just before going after Miao Gaojiang. He turned it over leisurely in his fingers before slipping it back around his neck.

Bai Six's gaze lifted from the coin to Bai Liu's face.

"Since the moment I met you, Bai Liu," he said calmly, "have you ever spoken a single word that didn't have a purpose?"

Bai Liu smiled slightly. "'You're important to me.' That one, maybe."

The Loving Welfare Home

On Tuesday, Baptism Day, during the afternoon of carol singing, in the jungle behind the church, Bai Liu and Bai Six were planning their escape for Wednesday.

Little Bai Six touched the coin Bai Liu had given him. Bai Liu, half-crouched, was teaching him how to use some of its functions when he suddenly spoke.

"Oh, by the way, do you remember that little girl, Liu Jiayi, the one I asked you to protect?"

"Her?" Little Bai Six frowned. "She seems strange to me. She's way too comfortable in this weird orphanage and figuring out its rules way too fast. I don't think she needs my protection at all."

"Is that so?" Bai Liu pondered. "That girl only has 50 life points. I had two guesses about that earlier."

Bai Six looked at him. "What are your guesses?"

"First, that she's poisoned—which is very likely. The information I've gathered so far supports that theory. But there's something strange about it—" Bai Liu paused. "That explanation alone doesn't account for why Liu Huai is bound to her. And it certainly doesn't explain why his lifesteal has been reduced by 50%."

As he spoke, Bai Liu adjusted the coin's interface, showing it to Bai Six. "But this kind of forced nerfing—now that I think about it—it feels familiar. I've encountered it twice before. It usually happens when a player's attributes exceed the game's balance. The system regulates everything to maintain order, nerfing the player in the process."

Little Bai Six quickly caught onto Bai Liu's meaning. "Are you saying Liu Jiayi is so strong in a certain attribute that the system had to weaken her life value?"

"Not only that," Bai Liu replied. "She was also bound to Liu Huai to restrict her from clearing the game." He glanced at Bai Six. "The first time I was nerfed was at the end of a game, because I was using strategies that broke the game's structure. But Liu Jiayi? She was nerfed the moment she entered."

Little Bai Six, despite never having played a single game, was quick to follow Bai Liu's logic. "You mean Liu Jiayi is probably an experienced player?"

Bai Liu rubbed his chin. "That's my guess. And based on the way this game nerfs players—targeting their strongest attributes—I suspect Liu Jiayi has a unique skill related to lifesteal. Something like restoring lifesteal or an advanced version of it."

Little Bai Six frowned. "Didn't you say lifesteal skills are extremely rare?"

"Exactly. Which narrows down the possibilities even further." Bai Liu's eyes darkened thoughtfully. "From what I know, there's a player called 'Little Witch' who fits this description. But she doesn't just have a healing skill—she also has a powerful offensive ability."

Little Bai Six rated it simply: "Sounds like a tough opponent."

"But I want her soul." Bai Liu looked down at Bai Six, his voice firm. "I need a player like her."

"The problem is—" his gaze sharpened—"she already knows I can manipulate people by controlling their souls."

Bai Liu rubbed his knuckles in thought. "We can start with Liu Huai. Test her. Figure out what she really wants."

"By analyzing all the information and maximizing our advantages, I came up with a plan." Bai Liu tapped the coin resting over Bai Six's heart. "You take Muke and Liu Jiayi and escape. But she probably won't let you succeed so easily. A lot could happen in the middle of your escape."

"But that's fine—I've accounted for that. I'll stage an ambush at the private hospital to delay your capture, which means you'll have one more chance to run."

"Then the plan splits into two possible outcomes." Bai Liu met Bai Six's gaze. "The first: I die in tomorrow's raid."

"If that happens, you leave the next day without Liu Jiayi. Just take Muke and focus on escaping the hospital. Forget acquiring Liu Jiayi's soul. Steal a car, use the [Passenger's Blessing] item, and take Muke out. That'll help you bypass most of the monsters."

Bai Six didn't blink. "What if investor players are waiting at the hospital to catch me?"

"I'll have my body thrown into the monster patient wards. Those creatures will attack me with poisonous mist until my mental value drops to zero and my body mutates into one of them. But—" Bai Liu's voice was calm, matter-of-fact, "—as a monster, I'll be stronger. And while you're running, I'll try to stay conscious long enough to fight off the players hunting you, buying you time."

Little Bai Six was silent for two seconds before he spoke, his voice laced with confusion. "You'd turn yourself into a monster just to protect me? You'd be stuck that way forever in this… game you call a copy?" His expression twisted. "Why would you go that far for me?"

"Because," Bai Liu said softly, leaning in so their eyes met, "that's what I want you to do for me, little Bai Six." His voice was almost a whisper. "If I survive tomorrow, I'll want you to die a monster for me."

"And that would be a different kind of plan."

Bai Liu continued, his tone light but firm. "I'll take full control of Liu Huai. Then, I need you to lower Liu Jiayi's guard. Make her believe you and your investors—that is, me—genuinely want to save her. That way, I can gain her trust." He smiled slightly. "And once I have her trust, I'll have her soul."

His voice softened, almost teasing. "Do you know how to do that?"

Little Bai Six met Bai Liu's gaze steadily.

Bai Liu answered for him. "Let her kill you herself. Then have Muke dump your body somewhere it can mutate into a monster and serve me."

Little Bai Six's breath hitched for a moment. Then, with an expressionless face, he scoffed, "My dear Mr. Investor, you may be overestimating yourself. Not everyone is as self-sacrificing as you. I wouldn't do something that stupid for you."

Bai Liu smiled as he reached out to touch Bai Six's face, though Bai Six avoided him indifferently. Bai Liu didn't seem to mind. "I know you, Bai Six. Maybe even better than you know yourself."

"You wouldn't do something so stupid for someone else," Bai Liu murmured.

His gaze dropped to the coin resting on Bai Six's chest. He placed his hands on Bai Six's thin shoulders, leaning in until his forehead touched the coin. Bai Liu closed his eyes against the warmth of Bai Six's heart. His voice was reverent, almost a whisper.

"But you would do it for yourself."

"Just as I was willing to die for you… so too must you be willing to die for me, now that you know—" Bai Liu's voice dropped to a whisper. "—that I am you."

"The coin is important. You should take the time to explore it properly." Bai Liu curled his lips into a smirk. "Pay attention to the player's name when the system prompts, and to the small details. You might find a surprise—like the answer to the question you've been wondering about: who I really am."

Little Bai Six, holding the coin, furrowed his brows slightly.

Little Bai Six, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth, looked at Bai Liu with a pale expression. "Now that everything has gone exactly as you planned... Liu Jiayi, despite thinking you're a scheming and despicable man, probably believes that you genuinely wanted to save her." His tone was flat. "The way you sacrificed yourself to protect Muke and me—even Miao Feichi and the others—made her think you have some kind of special compassion for children as a group.

"But unfortunately, that's not the case, is it?"

"You're a complete and utter liar." Bai Six stated emotionlessly. "Her first impression of you was absolutely right."

Bai Liu simply shrugged, utterly unbothered by the assessment. "So? Are you okay? Can you still move later?"

Little Bai Six coughed, wiping the blood from the corner of his mouth. His head was bowed, brows furrowing slightly. "……We can't leave the tunnel during the day. Even at night, our movement will be limited."

"This tunnel only opens after the monstrous child-creatures return to their nests. That won't happen until after nine o'clock tonight. You should get out of here quickly—and I wouldn't recommend taking me with you."

Slowly, Little Bai Six lifted his head. His pupils, already beginning to dull with death, held an eerily calm expression. "That was the best I

could do. My insides are starting to liquefy in this body-consuming state of alienation. By the end of the night, I might turn into a real corpse, or rot into the puddle of slime that was once used to cultivate these mushrooms."

As he spoke, visible corpse spots began appearing on his face and hands—spreading at an unnatural speed, decaying before their eyes.

Little Muke choked back a sob when he heard this. His eyes were red as he turned away, unwilling to look at the ruined state of Bai Six.

Bai Liu, however, was unaffected—his reaction eerily in sync with the fourteen-year-old corpse of himself. A calm, detached stillness.

After a moment of thought, Bai Liu simply nodded and said, "Well then, if you're that useless, there's no point in taking you. You can stay here and rot."

Muke, tears streaming down his face, turned to Bai Liu in disbelief. His voice trembled with anger. "You're just leaving him here? Are you a beast?!"

At that, Bai Six let out a faint, gurgling laugh, a fishy liquid dripping from the corner of his lips. He struggled to lift his heavy eyelids, his gaze dim but amused. His lips curled into a weak smile.

"Mr. Investor," he rasped, "personally, I like you best when you act like a brute. That's the kind of person I expect to become, so please—keep it up."

"I'm just an animal in this game," Bai Liu replied with a lazy smirk, mirroring Bai Six's. "When I'm not playing, I'm just an ordinary, law-abiding laid-off worker."

Little Bai Six gave him a look of pure disdain. "Disgusting disguise."

Suddenly, Bai Liu leaned forward and embraced him. His jaw rested lightly against Bai Six's forehead, his lips pressing against the boy's bloodstained, dirt-matted hair. His voice dropped into a whisper, meant only for the two of them.

"Your body will rot here."

"But even if you turn into a corpse, into a monster, into a puddle of mud, you will never be trapped by this disgusting orphanage, by this disgusting game."

Little Bai Six tilted his head back, meeting Bai Liu's gaze. That ever-present, faint, unreadable smile lingered on Bai Liu's lips. His dark eyes reflected Bai Six's fading form—empty, rippleless.

Then, Bai Liu lowered his gaze and pressed a light kiss to Bai Six's forehead, almost like a prayer.

"—For I will take your soul, little friend."

Little Bai Six closed his eyes, dazed.

Little Muke glanced back at Little Bai Six as they exited the tunnel, his eyes red from crying, his voice thick with sobs. "Do we really have to leave him there?"

Bai Liu responded casually as he dragged Liu Huai out. "He can't leave, and the tunnel is closing."

Once Bai Liu had gotten everyone out, he turned to see Little Muke staring at him with a hostile glare, like a cat about to scratch. "You could have saved him."

"But he agreed to die for me." Bai Liu shrugged, faking a smile as he flicked his tongue against his teeth. "Are you going to attack the investor he fought so hard to keep?"

Little Muke's heart clenched at Bai Liu's words. He glared at him twice as hard before finally lowering his head with a choked sob.

Now standing beneath the idol, Bai Liu looked down at Liu Huai, who was barely holding on to life, then at the new soul note in his soul wallet—Liu Huai's.

This had happened just after Bai Liu obtained the coin, it's when Liu Huai made his trade in the tunnel.

Even in his delirium, Liu Huai remembered their agreement. The deal for his soul went through without a hitch.

Bai Liu could sense Liu Huai's willingness to hand over his soul. It wasn't just because of their deal—it was because, after learning the truth about Liu Jiayi, the college student who once had such a strong will to live now harbored a death wish.

Bai Liu stared down into Liu Huai's dead, lusterless eyes. The man had

barely spoken on the way here.

Liu Huai had always feared dying in the game because it meant his soul would be recycled. The uncertainty of what the game would do with it—never being able to escape, even in death—was more terrifying than dying itself.

So he had chosen to sell his soul to Bai Liu—a last act of control, a kind of twisted reassurance. At least this way, he could die with some peace of mind.

But if Liu Huai truly wanted to die, now was not the time.

Bai Liu turned to Little Muke. "Do you know where Liu Jiayi is?"

Little Muke nodded. "She's in the second-to-last craft classroom on the ground floor of the back building."

Bai Liu adjusted Liu Huai's weight, steadying him.

Liu Huai's head lolled against Bai Liu's shoulder, his breath ragged. He stirred at the movement, his voice faint. "Are we… at the orphanage?"

Bai Liu regarded him indifferently. "We're here. Wake up, Liu Huai. Go see your sister—you'll feel better."

"Feel better?" Liu Huai let out a weak, bitter laugh and shook his head. "No. Seeing her will only make me feel worse. I've lost everything—the ability to protect her, the right to protect her. I'm not a good brother."

"Players who lose their will don't survive in this game."

Little Muke anxiously watched Liu Huai slipping away. He had seen Liu Huai's strong desire to live, and even if he could gain a skill from Liu Huai's death, he couldn't help but try to encourage him. "Don't give up yet! We'll do everything we can to keep you alive! And isn't your sister a healer? She can save you!"

Liu Huai lowered his gaze, looking at the dagger on his belt. It was turning translucent as his will faded. He let out a sudden, broken laugh. Tears slipped down his face as he whispered,

"I… have fought so hard to survive. The things that are simple for you—eating fried chicken, going to a good university, having a future—Jiayi and I had to struggle for every single one. The only bright thing

in our future was each other."

"But even that… even that has lost its meaning. Living has become… exhausting."

Liu Huai clenched his teeth, tears trailing down the bridge of his nose. He looked at Bai Liu, crying in ugly, silent sobs.

"Bai Liu, if only you were Jiayi's brother, you would understand her thoughts. You would know how to protect her. You could balance her resentment and her suspicions. But I can't. I'm too weak. I'll never be able to protect her from anything…"

His voice dropped to a whisper. "You promised me, Bai Liu. If I die, you'll give her a bright future. You won't let her soul be swallowed by darkness. You won't let the game take her—not even in death."

Bai Liu met Liu Huai's tear-streaked gaze. "Yeah."

He adjusted Liu Huai's weight against his shoulder, shifting him into a steadier position. His voice was calm, almost peaceful. "But that's after you die. Right now, Liu Huai, you've sold your soul to me. At least do something to make it worth the price I paid before you go to hell."

"I spent a lot of points on you," Bai Liu added, indifferent.

Liu Huai let out a tired chuckle, his head drooping.

His gaze, once empty, flickered back to life. The dagger at his waist gradually solidified as he exhaled. "Yeah… I'll make sure you get your money's worth, buyer."

Back building of the orphanage. Ground floor. Penultimate craft classroom.

Little Miao Gaojiang stood stiffly at the front, shivering.

Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang followed behind, both looking worse for wear. Miao Gaojiang's ankle was still bleeding, slowing his steps and leaving a trail of blood behind. But stopping wasn't an option—the monster child's attacks were too strong.

Miao Feichi panted heavily. He couldn't believe they had barely escaped, almost wiped out by a newcomer who had only been through two games.

A duel with Bai Liu—no, a one-sided hunt—had nearly ended them.

He remembered what Miao Gaojiang had said earlier.

"Don't you think he's scarier than those League players?"

At the time, Miao Feichi thought he was exaggerating. But now, when he recalled Bai Liu's bloodstained face smiling in the darkness of the tunnels, a cold shiver ran down his spine.

The monster child chasing them had clearly been Bai Liu's. Somehow, he had manipulated himself into becoming one of them.

It was impossible to say what skill Bai Liu had used, but given that his child had already died, there was only one path left for him—the [Investor] path.

With just a sliver of health left, missing a hand, and on the brink of death, Bai Liu had still chased them down alone—had come within a hair's breadth of wiping out a two-man team renowned in the League.

If Miao Feichi got out of this game alive, he swore he would never cross paths with this lunatic again.

He glanced impatiently at Little Miao Gaojiang, who was leading them. "Where the hell is Miao Feichi—the little brat? He's in the same craft classroom as that blind kid, right?"

Little Miao Gaojiang had his head bowed, nodding hesitantly. His grip tightened, sweat slipping down his temple.

He knew something was off about Liu Jiayi. That clever, blind girl should have been able to kill Bai Liu and Miao Feichi. Her abilities were dangerous enough to even make the [Investors] wary.

But he hadn't warned them.

Because this was his chance—his only chance—to escape.

If Liu Jiayi went up against the two Investors, he could find a way out in the chaos.

He didn't want to die at their hands.

Little Miao Gaojiang warily stopped in front of a craft classroom door, across from the bathrooms. "Last night… Miao Feichi and Liu Jiayi slept here."

Miao Feichi kicked open the door. The room was empty except for the

lingering scent of dust and blood. Two rag dolls lay inside—one torn apart, its limbs and head ripped off, resembling one of Bai Liu's dolls; the other covered in needles, its stitched face twisted in a grimace of fear, streaked with painted tears—an eerie replica of little Miao Feichi's doll.

A strange, chilling sensation crawled up Miao Feichi's spine as he hesitantly brushed aside the soft, tattered plush fabric. Beneath it, a horrifying sight emerged—little Miao Feichi's face, studded with needles, frozen in terror.

He had been dead for who knew how long. His skin had begun to bloat, mushroom-like corpse spots blooming across his face. His body had been twisted into an unnatural angle, stuffed inside this cloth box like a discarded rag doll—his mouth crammed full of fabric.

Miao Feichi stood frozen before the gruesome sight. Miao Gaojiang approached, took one look, and fell just as silent.

For a long moment, neither spoke. Then, exchanging grim expressions, Miao Feichi gritted his teeth and broke the silence.

"Who drained this little brat's blood?!"

Irritated, he waved a hand. "Father, go ahead and draw your children's blood. Get back to the hospital and grow your blood lingzhi first. Just focus on getting one through."

They had come prepared with blood-drawing equipment, anticipating the possibility that the hospital might stop supplying them after they attacked the nurse NPCs. Before heading into the tunnel, Miao Feichi had made a stop at the ICU, swiping syringes and tubes—just in case.

Now, faced with the needle poised against his skin, little Miao Gaojiang finally panicked. He stumbled backward, desperate to escape. But the classroom door was unlocked. As Miao Feichi closed in with the syringe, little Miao Gaojiang took another step back. Then, the moment his back hit the wall, he broke down, screaming—

"I know who took Miao Feichi's blood! It was Liu Jiayi!"

Miao Gaojiang and Miao Feichi exchanged sharp glances.

"Liu Jiayi?" Miao Gaojiang frowned. "Why would she take the blood of other children?"

Little Miao Gaojiang pressed himself against the wall, swallowing hard.

"She… she said she was trying to save her brother. She was waiting for him to come and give her his blood, but in case there wasn't enough, she seemed to have drained Miao Feichi too. Bai Six was also killed by her."

Freed from the hallucinations of the hospital, which had left him mentally vulnerable, Miao Gaojiang was finally thinking more clearly. He narrowed his eyes.

"Taking extra blood as a precaution…? How would Liu Jiayi, a child, even know there wouldn't be enough from one person? That sounds like something only an experienced player—someone familiar with the secondary game's rules—would do."

"But didn't Liu Huai say this was Liu Jiayi's first game?" Miao Feichi muttered, rubbing his temples. He wasn't good at thinking through these twists and turns, and it was giving him a headache. "Even if Liu Huai and Bai Liu are working together now, Liu Huai didn't seem like he was lying back then."

"That's true," Miao Gaojiang admitted, his gaze shifting to the grotesque rag doll. "And if Liu Jiayi were one of them, she wouldn't have killed Bai Six's children… This method of killing—it feels familiar. But I can't quite place where I've seen it before…"

In the league, Miao Gaojiang had meticulously studied his opponents' mini-TV videos. The unusual way this victim had been killed, the doll-like attack—it should have been unforgettable.

But he had never bothered to remember the insignificant ones. And he had certainly never noticed a blind… player.

He was sure he had seen this doll before. It hadn't been a crucial item, but something about it stuck with him. Yet, his mind—hazy from exhaustion—refused to recall it.

Miao Gaojiang frowned, lost in thought, but Miao Feichi cut him off impatiently.

"An old player is an old player—doesn't matter. I don't remember any doll-playing little girl, so she's probably not that tough. What matters now is—where the hell did that little blind brat run off with my blood?"

"We need to find her," he said, his expression dark. "We need that blood back. And we need to drain her too—so we can clear the level with certainty."

His gaze snapped back to little Miao Gaojiang. A wicked grin spread across his face as he stepped forward, twin knives glinting as he pressed them against the child's neck.

"Speak. Where is Liu Jiayi hiding in this orphanage?"

"I—I don't know!" Little Miao Gaojiang wailed, voice cracking with terror. "Even though she can't see, she memorized our escape routes and the teachers' patrols. She knows this orphanage way better than we do! And she has the teacher's key we stole when we escaped before—she can get into any room! If she wants to hide, she could be anywhere!"

"The only way you'll find her is by contacting the teachers and searching every room."

"Fuck!" Miao Feichi exploded. "That'll take forever!"

Miao Gaojiang's expression darkened. "We don't have a choice. Your blood is with that blind brat. Muke is in their hands. They have the monster child—we can't just steal it from them. We don't have enough blood. We have to go one by one. Let's go to the teachers, tell them we're investors—they should help us find that little blind girl."

Neither father nor son realized that after 9 AM, the passage linking the orphanage to the hospital would be sealed.

Neither realized how Bai Six's brutal struggle had made Miao Gaojiang—who had taken a whipping—more cautious than ever.

Miao Gaojiang had exhausted his S-Explosion defense skill in last night's blast, draining his stamina. He wouldn't be able to regain his 10,000 defense points until his stamina recovered at 9 PM. Until then, he would be wary of enemies with high attack power.

Even if they suspected the passage might close, who knew if the monsters inside could come out during the day?

The church was obviously a shelter for children. Did it have the same protective effect on those deformed child-monsters? Miao Gaojiang wasn't willing to test that theory. And Miao Feichi was too shaken by Bai Six's fate to risk turning back.

That left only one option—finding Liu Jiayi and reclaiming Miao Feichi's blood.

It was the safest move in every way.

So why… did it feel wrong?

Miao Gaojiang couldn't shake the sense that he was missing something. Something vital.

Like standing before a fogged-up window, knowing that just one small scratch could reveal the truth.

But the needle that could pierce the veil was trapped—clutched tightly by his fear.

Bai Liu followed after Miao Gaojiang into the craft room, which had already been opened. Like Miao Feichi before him, he sniffed the air and quickly dug through the fabric box, uncovering the stiffened body of little Miao Feichi.

Crouching down thoughtfully, Bai Liu examined the child's face, needles embedded under his pale skin. After a moment, he looked up at Liu Huai, who was leaning on Muke for support. "From the way she killed, Liu Huai, your sister holds a deep grudge. She's quite vindictive, isn't she?"

Liu Huai shook his head with a bitter smile.

If little Miao Feichi wanted to devour her flesh, then Liu Jiayi had drained him of his blood.

Had Miao Feichi not intervened, Liu Jiayi's original target would have been little Bai Six—but in the end, the little witch let him go. It would have been far more practical to drain little Bai Six's blood, ensuring Bai Liu's death.

But she didn't do it.

Liu Jiayi let little Bai Six leave the craft room with his blood still in his veins, granting Bai Liu one last chance to survive. Of course, it was also possible that little Muke knocking outside had disrupted her. If she had drawn too much attention and risked attracting a teacher, she might not have had time to finish the blood draw and leave the

classroom. That, too, was a possibility.

Bai Liu never underestimated a child's ability to play the game. He couldn't be entirely certain of Liu Jiayi's motivations at every turn, but one thing was clear: Liu Huai was important to her.

Bai Liu stood up and scanned the room. "Liu Jiayi isn't here. Muke, do you know where she might be hiding?"

Little Muke shook his head slowly, deep in thought. "There are too many places she could hide. It won't be easy to find her."

If they ran into her on the road and found that they had lost little Bai Six, it would be uncertain who would live and who would die.

After piecing everything together, Bai Liu no longer thought searching the orphanage for Liu Jiayi was the best choice. His gaze landed on the frail Liu Huai.

—There was no need to go looking for Liu Jiayi. As long as Liu Huai was with them, she would come to them on her own.

"Let's go back to the church. It's a safe zone for children, and Miao Gaojiang and Miao Feichi won't want to return to that idol passage exit. That's where the monster children emerge—it's relatively safe for us." Bai Liu's voice was calm as he made his decision. "We'll wait for Liu Jiayi to come to us."

Twilight fell, and the night crept into the orphanage like an ominous black mist, swallowing the edges of the horizon.

It was already 8:30 PM—ten hours since Miao Feichi and his father had left the entrance, with only Miao Gaojiang taking an hour and a half break at noon to recover his strength.

And yet, despite all their efforts, they still hadn't found the little brat.

As if by magic, she had vanished entirely within the orphanage, leaving no trace behind.

They searched every classroom, every bedroom, every floor, every toilet cubicle—everywhere—almost to the point of digging.

Miao Feichi leaned against the wall to catch his breath. He raised his hand to wipe the sweat from his forehead and cursed, "Where the hell is this little blind girl hiding? I've used up all my reconnaissance tools and there's no trace of her. If I didn't know she couldn't possibly get out of this orphanage, I'd swear she made it out somehow!"

If Liu Jiayi had run out of the orphanage to clear the level, the system would send out a clearance alert. But Miao Feichi and the others hadn't received any alerts, which meant Liu Jiayi was still inside the orphanage.

"There's only the church left to search," Miao Gaojiang gasped, clearly exhausted, his face showing fatigue. "But we've been hanging around the road to the church. There's no way we could have missed her if she'd passed by."

"Bai Liu is guarding the church, and Liu Jiayi killed Bai Liu's child," Miao Feichi said. "She would be crazy to go over to Bai Liu's side and give him her head."

But Liu Jiayi had to go to the church. Because after midnight on Thursday, Liu Huai would fall into a state of [Sickness], and his life expectancy would start to drop. He only had two points of life left, so if Liu Jiayi didn't treat him in time, he would die tonight.

After all, Liu Huai's hands had been chopped off by Miao Feichi, so there was no reason for Bai Liu to bring him along. He was a burden.

Before midnight, it would be Bai Liu—who had 0.5 life—who would die first.

So Miao Gaojiang waited, spending his time anticipating the moment when Bai Liu's life would be claimed.

"I told you not to rush. Don't worry about Bai Liu," Miao Gaojiang said, looking at Miao Feichi with weary eyes. "Once Thursday arrives, we'll have more life and resistance. We can wear down Bai Liu and his team."

Miao Gaojiang was about to say something more, but when he met

Miao Feichi's gaze, his pupils flinched. The hand he had been about to place on Miao Feichi's shoulder froze in mid-air.

Miao Feichi turned his head, and his handsome face was gone, replaced by the face of a senile, sickly woman who smiled eerily. Her mouth opened to speak, and boiling water dripped from the corner of her lips, still bubbling and steaming.

[System Alert: Player Miao Gaojiang's spirit value is unstable and has dropped significantly! Please restore your spirit value quickly!]

Miao Gaojiang's breath caught as he shook his hand and quickly drank some mental bleach, telling himself it was all just a hallucination from the drop in his mental values.

Miao Feichi, standing next to him, gave him a strange look. "Father, what's wrong with you? You've been acting strange since the beginning. What are you doing all of a sudden?"

Miao Gaojiang barely calmed down enough to squeeze out a smile at Miao Feichi. "…What did you just ask me?"

"Oh, it's nothing," Miao Feichi waved his hand dismissively. "I just don't get why Liu Huai and Liu Jiayi would die for each other. It's so stupid. I'm wondering if they're up to something else."

"Aren't they siblings? No matter how bad things get, there's still blood between them," Miao Gaojiang murmured.

"Blood kinship? I couldn't do something that stupid," Miao Feichi scoffed. "If I were Liu Jiayi, I'd have escaped on my own, regardless of Liu Huai's death."

Miao Gaojiang's breath caught again, and his eyes reddened. He looked down and took another swig of mental bleach. "…Let's keep looking for Liu Jiayi."

Church, 8:47 PM

Liu Huai, resting against the wall, glanced at the time, his eyes betraying some concern. "…You don't think they'll find Jiayi, do you?"

"I don't think so," Little Muke shook his head. "Liu Jiayi knows this orphanage better than the teachers. She won't be so easy to find if she doesn't want to be. She can kill Bai Liu and Miao Feichi without a sound. Don't underestimate her. She can be ruthless. If she runs into

someone, it’s unclear who will die."

Liu Huai’s anxious expression faded like a retreating tide. "…Right."

The famous Little Witch, brought back by the King's Guild at great cost, wasn’t without her own means and tricks to save her life.

Bai Liu agreed with Little Muke. "Wait. This orphanage is like an amusement park for Liu Jiayi. It’s a map she knows. She has healing skills. Miao Gaojiang’s condition is clearly deteriorating, and she was actually whipped by little Bai Liu, a novice, in the tunnel. I think Liu Jiayi should have been more cautious. She wouldn’t have been found so easily."

Muke glanced desperately at Bai Liu. "So we just sit here and do nothing? Liu Jiayi doesn’t even know we’re in the church, and by the time zero hour comes, you’ll be in a terrible state! Your life expectancy will be wiped out instantly!"

Liu Jiayi would definitely treat Liu Huai, Muke, and Little Muke as life preservers.

Everyone else had a chance to survive, but Bai Liu, with only 0.5 life left, had no way out.

If Liu Jiayi didn’t treat Bai Liu by midnight on Wednesday, this orphanage would be his last game.

Bai Liu’s gaze fell lazily on the statue in the church. "Isn’t 0.5 enough?"

Muke was stunned.

Bai Liu looked back at Muke, who seemed speechless, and smiled nonchalantly. "Is 0.5 too little? It’s the difference between life and death. 0.5 keeps me alive. The game’s not over. What’s the rush?"

He shook his wrist. "I still have a prop to resist damage and survive until at least midnight tonight. But I think Liu Jiayi will make a move at nine o'clock."

"But even so, Liu Jiayi won’t treat you voluntarily, will she?" Muke frowned. He pushed Little Muke, who was confused, toward Bai Liu, locking eyes with him. "At nine o'clock, the underground will open again. You have little Bai Liu’s blood. You can take his blood and mine to the hospital, and use their blood to heal your injuries. Your life

value is too dangerous!"

Liu Huai sat up slightly, nodding in agreement. "That would indeed be a safer way for you to go."

"And then leave you unprotected here?" Bai Liu's gaze swept over Muke's face and Liu Huai's broken arms. "Miao Feichi could wipe both of you out with a single shot."

Muke tried to speak, but Bai Liu calmly interrupted him. "And you want Little Muke to come with me? My previous statement about needing 1.6 children's blood was just a theoretical calculation based on the minimum mortality rate for an investor. It was an investor's blood Lingzhi that needed at least 1.6 children's blood, not that 1.6 children's blood would necessarily save me."

"What if the game has a 75 percent mortality rate? Does that mean Little Muke has to bleed me out to save me? Would you let him do that?"

Muke pursed his lips and looked down without answering—clearly, he had considered the situation but was hoping for a gamble where both Little Muke and Bai Liu survived.

When Bai Liu saw Muke like this, he sighed inwardly, realizing that Muke had learned nothing from him except how to gamble first.

The young Muke's face was already pale, his hands trembling as he pushed forward, sneaking glances at Bai Liu.

"Liu Jiayi is the key to this game," Bai Liu continued calmly. "That's why the system is trying to limit her. Her healing skill allows the kids to hang on to their life points while they bleed out. As long as she's on our side, we can all make it through the game alive."

Third floor, orphanage director's office, by the window.

Liu Jiayi, dressed in a black veil, expressionlessly "watched" Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang search below. The door to the office behind her pulsed with a strange, barrier-like energy, flickering as if it might vanish at any moment.

[System Alert: Player Liu Jiayi uses a special level prop (Magic Space)]

The two men came to the dean's office once but couldn't find her

because they were blocked by Liu Jiayi's props.

Liu Jiayi had learned from Bai Liu that the director, an NPC, had died last night. This made the director's office a place that no one would set foot in for a long time. It was the perfect spot to hide, as there was no better place in the entire orphanage.

She had stayed here specifically to deceive the father and son.

"The props Hearts gave me really work well," Liu Jiayi murmured to herself, her face blank. "Not bad for a top-tier item from the warehouse of a big guild like the King's Guild. Why did you have to follow Mu Sicheng instead of joining this guild? Why didn't you come in when I asked Hearts to recruit you... you'd rather follow someone dangerous like Mu Sicheng."

"You'll only end up as an assassin, helping deflect swords and harm. You're going to get yourself killed."

Jiayi, I have a friend!

He knows I'm not great at growing up, and I've told him everything... But he doesn't mind where I come from! He's really nice. He has a few pet peeves, but I can accept those! We get along pretty well, haha. We play games together, it's fun!

"Silly brother, how can there be good people in this world? We've never met a good man." Liu Jiayi lowered her lashes, her voice soft and indistinct. "Mu Sicheng isn't worth this much importance... has he ever given anything for you? Why do you suffer so much for betraying him?"

You've betrayed me a million times, haven't you?

Have you ever felt any pain for betraying me, brother?

Liu Huai's tears welled up as he hugged Liu Jiayi, wailing until he was emotionally spent, his tears falling involuntarily.

"I have no more friends, Jiayi. I did the wrong thing... I did it to protect you."

Liu Jiayi clenched her fists slowly, collecting herself. She touched the quartz watch on her wrist, the case removed, and her fingers gently rested on her folded hands. "It's nine o'clock."

Liu Jiayi pulled out her mobile phone. Her voice, once cold, now had a subtle sweetness to it. Absently, she wrapped her index finger around the lasso on the phone, ready to end the call. "Brother, are you there? We couldn’t run out today either. Can you pick me up tomorrow?"

The Loving Welfare Home

Liu Huai's voice came over the phone, strained with emotion: "... Jiayi, can I come and get you now? I want to see you."

Liu Jiayi's expression, which had been indifferent, softened noticeably, and her tone shifted, suddenly filled with warmth: "But the orphanage won't be open until tomorrow. Can you wait until then? We'll see each other tomorrow!"

"... Someone told me about a tunnel that leads to the orphanage. I followed it here," Liu Huai said, his voice faltering, as if struggling to speak. "... I only have one life left. I might not make it until tomorrow, Jiayi. I want to see you before I die."

Liu Jiayi's breath caught in her throat, and her expression instantly froze, her face turning cold as ice.

She gripped the phone tightly, not even noticing Liu Huai's subtle reference to his "one life" in his words. Instead, she quickly asked, "How did it drop so low? Where are you now?!"

Shouldn't Liu Huai be in the hospital? Even if he had given up hunting her blood and struck a deal with Bai Liu to protect the child, Liu Huai's personal skills shouldn't have dropped to this point—not even when dealing with monsters or Miao Feichi! He still should have been able to use his skills to run and hide.

With Liu Huai's character, he despised being controlled, and with her hints, he would understand that Bai Liu controlled people with items, requiring their consent. With the multiple limitations of Bai Liu's skills, Liu Huai shouldn't and couldn't be so easily controlled to the point of having only a little life left!

What happened last night? How did Liu Huai's life drop to 1?

A Liu Huai with only 1 life... It almost felt like an opponent who knew her well was deliberately saving him as bait.

The thought flashed through Liu Jiayi's mind, but it was quickly interrupted by Liu Huai's faint voice.

"I'm in the church."

If she didn't restore Liu Huai's life tonight, he would surely die. Liu

Jiayi realized this in an instant.

“Okay, brother, you stay in the church and don’t move,” Liu Jiayi said, taking a deep breath. She paced anxiously from side to side, forcing herself to calm down, though her hand shook violently as she gripped the phone. “Will you wait for Jiayi to come over? Jiayi will be there soon!”

Liu Huai’s voice grew quieter, almost a whisper. “Can I really wait for you, Jiayi?”

Liu Jiayi’s eyes reddened, and she gritted her teeth. “You can wait, brother. Trust Jiayi. I won’t let anything happen to you. I’ll be right there!!!”

There was a long silence from Liu Huai before he spoke again, his voice so soft it was barely audible.

“I believe in you, Jiayi.”

Liu Jiayi exhaled in relief.

As she hung up, Muke approached Liu Huai anxiously and asked, “Does Liu Jiayi suspect you? Is she coming?”

Liu Huai slowly shook his head, his movements stiff. “... She didn’t suspect me.” He paused, then added, “She seemed... flustered.”

“Panic means she cares about you,” Bai Liu observed, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “She’ll likely come, but she won’t be unprepared. The church is a safe place for her; she might be less wary since it’s here.” Bai Liu continued, “But I think Liu Jiayi’s vigilance, even if she panics, might shift when it comes to the location.”

Liu Jiayi rushed through the orphanage in the dead of night, her expression grim.

Gone were the black witch’s robes—symbols of status and poison—and in their place were the hand-me-down clothes of the orphanage children.

Liu Jiayi tapped her system panel, which was projected directly into her consciousness, easily visible to her. After clearing one section of her system storage and personal panel, her delicate eyebrows furrowed tighter and tighter.

[System Warehouse: Player Liu Jiayi, your visualization category props are about to be emptied. Your demand for this prop is high, and it belongs to the daily necessities category. Please replenish it in time.]

[System Alert: Player Liu Jiayi, because your personal skills are unique within “Love Welfare Home,” after entering the game, the following restrictions have been applied for game balance:]

[... The cooldown time for your personal skill, Antidote, has been extended from 1 hour to 6 hours ...]

[... You have the universal blood ...]

This long list of restrictions wasn’t new to Liu Jiayi. She had encountered these limits often in the game, given her unique personal skills. The system had a tendency to restrict her in various ways.

The system needed to manage mortality rates to adjust difficulty. If the game contained someone like Liu Jiayi, with healing skills, mortality rates became hard to manage. So, the system found ways to limit her as a witch.

The King’s Guild had put a great deal of effort into making the most of Liu Jiayi’s skills, pairing her with various control players to mitigate the limitations by sharing the mortality rate.

But it wasn’t always effective, as evidenced by Zhang Gui's death after just a few trials.

Normally, Liu Jiayi would swipe past these restrictions with a blank expression, used to being stuck in games this way.

But today, she couldn’t stay calm. Her gaze lingered on the first and third articles, and she couldn’t help but curse, “The system, fuck you!”

[System Alert: Underage players are prohibited from using profanity. The word “fuck” has been replaced with *System I Your Dad.]

Liu Jiayi took a deep breath, trying to stop herself from looking at the system panel that irritated her. She had used the antidote—her healing skill—on herself earlier at 5:30 pm, due to that poisonous mushroom buff. Normally, the skill's cooldown would be an hour.

But in this game, since life was a core stat, the system extended the cooldown for her antidote to six hours.

That meant her next use would be after 11:30 pm, dangerously close to the early hours of Thursday.

Distracted and worried, Liu Jiayi quickened her pace.

After nine o'clock, the orphanage's wandering deformed children—corpses and cold things—would be roaming. Liu Jiayi didn't have many visualization props left, so she decided to go without them for now. But even without being able to see, she had excellent hearing, and she knew the orphanage layout well.

The sounds of the deformed children moving around were unmistakable, and Liu Jiayi was able to position herself based on these sounds, dodging them calmly by turning her head sideways—unlike the time before when she had been swept away by them.

When she was just a hundred meters from the church, Liu Jiayi ducked into a corner to avoid a deformed child behind her.

Gasping, she leaned against the wall, closing her eyes to steady her breathing. Her mind raced, thinking again about the information she'd received from Liu Huai during this brief rest before she reached her destination.

— Was Liu Huai really down to one life? How had he found this tunnel in the orphanage that even she hadn't known about?

Liu Jiayi's sharp instincts told her she was being lured into a trap, the same way Hearts had lured her into using props to enter the guild.

She knew something wasn't right, but it was her brother she was putting in danger.

The architect of this trap knew her well enough to realize that even if it was a trap, she would fall for it.

But what Liu Jiayi feared the most was that Liu Huai wasn't just the bait in this trap—he might also be a participant, even a leader in it, not just a victim.

She didn't want to doubt Liu Huai, but she couldn't help it. This suspicion, deeply ingrained from a harsh upbringing, had saved Liu Jiayi's life countless times in critical situations. She was naturally suited to this game of mistrust, where nobody could be relied upon fully.

Liu Jiayi was undoubtedly the person who wanted Liu Huai to live the most. For his sake, she would risk her life, even trade her own death for his survival. But Liu Huai could never come forward to hurt her.

In the cold night air, Liu Jiayi took two deep breaths, her brow furrowing, her serious expression a stark contrast to her youthful face. She hesitated for a long time before finally digging her slender fingers deep into her dress pocket and pulling out a teardrop-shaped glass bottle containing a clear, flowing liquid. The label read [Psyche].

[System prompt: Does player Liu Jiayi wish to use the prop "Tears of Psyche"? Using it will guide your indecisive choices and lead you to the ending that God Xiang Ming has prepared for you.]

[Prop Rating: Transcendental Prop, possessing the power of fate comparable to that of the gods.]

[The system has detected that player Liu Jiayi has already used this item. Further use will enhance its effect. Do you wish to continue?]

Liu Jiayi's grip tightened around the bottle. She looked down at the tear-like liquid spilling from it, her breath heavy. Her mind replayed the tear-streaked face of Mu Sicheng, wounded by Liu Huai after being controlled by Zhang Gui. She recalled what Hearts, the woman who had given her the prop, had said:

Hearts had leaned back on the couch, her limbs stretched lazily as she looked at Liu Jiayi: "Ah, you said this prop guided you to do something that hurt Liu Huai. Do you doubt that it can achieve your goal? Little witch, this is an extraordinary item given by the system. The effect can't be wrong. Have you ever heard the story of Psyche?"

Hearts smiled, wiping her cheeks. "Psyche, a woman full of doubts, was so beautiful that she made Venus, the goddess of beauty and love, jealous. To torment Psyche, Venus sent her son, Cupid, to make Psyche fall in love with the ugliest beast in the world. Terrible parents, right? To make their own child do such a thing."

With a playful smirk, Hearts continued, "With parents like that, one has to wonder if Cupid was a bad guy too. Seems like he often turns a blind eye to Venus's evil deeds and even helps her out."

"But then Cupid changed. He no longer wanted to hurt Psyche. He saved her, hid her, and treated her very well, but he made her blindfold herself, never seeing his true form."

Hearts leaned in closer, her voice softening. "Psyche wondered: was the man who loved her a god come to save her, or was he the ugly beast? She was tormented by this doubt, not wanting to remove the cloth and risk hurting the one who saved her, yet always questioning: what if he was just pretending to be human to trick me?"

Hearts stepped down from her seat, a light, elegant smile on her face. She reached out and touched Liu Jiayi's cloudy eyes. "Eventually, doubt won, and Psyche removed the cloth. She saw Cupid for who he truly was. But it was too late. Cupid, hurt by her doubts, flew back to heaven. Psyche was tormented by guilt, weeping for days."

"But do you know how it ends?" Hearts whispered, her voice full of a strange, compelled laughter. She placed the glass bottle of teardrops in Liu Jiayi's hands. "Psyche brought Cupid back from heaven through her trials, and they lived happily ever after."

Hearts lowered her gaze, wrapped her white arms around Liu Jiayi's neck, and whispered in her ear, "Sweetheart, doubt isn't a great sin. Psyche and Cupid lived together because of it. Doubt reveals the true nature of each person, making it possible for you to live without fear. Don't worry—when your doubts falter, just drink your tears. Psyche, who achieved happiness through doubt, will guide you."

Liu Jiayi had accepted the "Tears of Psyche" with caution, as it had hurt Liu Huai in the past. Every time this hurt seemed to bring her and Liu Huai closer together, much like Hearts had said.

But Liu Jiayi didn't want to see Liu Huai in pain. She had seen his heart shattered once before, when he was forced to strike Mu Sicheng.

The emptiness in his eyes, when he logged out of the game that nearly killed Mu Sicheng, had shaken Liu Jiayi to her core. It was as though something crucial had been stripped away from him—something that could never be restored.

Since then, she had been careful with her suspicions and the use of the prop. She hoped one day she'd never need it again.

But tonight, her lips pressed into a tight line, her face a mask of struggle. She was torn by doubt and fear, like Psyche with her blindfold, unsure whether Liu Huai, waiting for her in the church, was the god who had saved her or a beast in human skin bent on destroying her.

Hearts' laughter echoed in her ears: "Doubt is your antidote, Jiayi.

Drink it."

Her hands trembled as she gripped the glass bottle, the tears chilling against her palm, sending a shiver down her spine.

Liu Jiayi didn't have much time to hesitate. She took a deep breath, wrapped her hands tightly around the teardrop-shaped bottle, and lowered her head, whispering, "I'm going to use the prop."

Her thin back arched as she placed her lips to her thumbs, her posture reverent like a girl praying for divine favor.

[System Alert: Player Liu Jiayi confirms use of prop (Psyche's Tears). Prop is loading…]

The liquid in the bottle began to disappear, and Liu Jiayi involuntarily closed her eyes as a tear slipped from the corner of her eye—the Tear of Psyche.

When she opened her eyes again, a strange sense of foreboding washed over her. She quickly accessed her system repository and used a visualization prop she had been saving for her final escape: [Swimming Snake Night Vision Pupil], driven by a powerful instinct.

[System Alert: Player Liu Jiayi uses prop (Night Vision Pupil), which grants the ability to see creatures around her through thermal imaging. Duration: 12 hours, single-use.]

Liu Jiayi's eyes were covered by a special contact lens, the kind used by snakes when they peer through the darkness.

With this prop activated, she turned toward the church looming ahead in the night. As she moved closer, her eyes shot upward, as though a needle had pricked them.

Psyche removed the blindfold to see the handsome Cupid.

Liu Jiayi put on her glasses and saw Liu Huai—the one who had deceived her.

She could clearly see the thermal images of four people inside the church, a few dozen meters away. This meant that Liu Huai wasn't alone—there were at least three others with him. However, their actions showed no signs of coercion; instead, they seemed to be working together in a cooperative manner.

Several players were guarding a spot, waiting for her, and her brother had not said anything about the situation.

The cold night breeze brushed against Liu Jiayi's face, numbing both her breath and her expression. The feverish state of her mind was cooled by the breeze, and she noticed many discrepancies she hadn't before.

Liu Jiayi slowly took out her phone, blinking her hollow, dark gray eyes as she held back the tears threatening to spill. With no emotion on her face, she dialed Liu Huai's number. Her tone was calm, completely different from the fearful, trembling expression she had earlier. "Hello, brother, I'm about to approach the church, but it's too dark for me to see. Can you come out and pick me up alone?"

There was a long pause, and Liu Jiayi saw a man stand up crookedly—someone without arms, supported by another person. Her nails dug into her hands.

Liu Huai... had no more hands.

Liu Jiayi's gaze locked on the figure holding Liu Huai. It was Bai Liu, without a doubt.

"Brother, can you come out?" Liu Jiayi's mind spun as she stood still in front of the church, her voice barely above a whisper.

The breathing from the other side became a little faster, then slower. "I can, Jiayi. Where are you? I'm coming to meet you outside."

Liu Jiayi gave her location, adding that a child was crying and asking Liu Huai to hurry. Then she hung up. Bai Liu had been the one holding the phone for Liu Huai. After he placed it down, Liu Huai turned to Bai Liu, who gazed at him thoughtfully. "Liu Jiayi suspected something was wrong in the church. After calming down, she still has doubts about you, Liu Huai."

"I know," Liu Huai replied, lowering his head to look at the stumps of his arms, moving them slightly. He smiled bitterly. "I wonder if she'll trust me when she sees what I've become because of her."

Bai Liu didn't answer, as he found that unlikely.

"I'll go out alone," Liu Huai said, just as Bai Liu pulled him back.

"We'll follow you out," Bai Liu said, his tone nonchalant.

Liu Huai was startled and about to object when Bai Liu explained, "It's nine o'clock now. Soon, monsters resembling children playing flutes will emerge from the exit under the idol. These monsters won't harm children, but they will take them."

Bai Liu's gaze shifted to little Muke, who was peeking out from behind the seat. "The church is no longer safe for little Muke. Before, other investors would attract these children's attention, but now that our phones can be occupied, and there's no phone ringing to distract them, little Muke is at risk of becoming their target."

Little Muke bit his lower lip and protested, "But Bai Liu is just like those deformed children now, right? Kids crawl out of tunnels, which means Bai Liu will come out of them! I can stay with him!"

"But he's already a little monster." Bai Liu lowered his eyes and stared at little Muke, who stubbornly gazed up at him. "If you stay with him for too long, you'll risk being alienated as a human. I don't know how long Liu Huai's fourteen-year-old self will last before turning into a mindless monster, so it's safer for you to stay with us."

Reluctantly, little Muke was dragged out of the church by Big Muke, who wanted to stay but was forced to leave when Bai Liu wouldn't allow him to. Bai Liu didn't hesitate to use force when necessary.

Bai Liu and Muke slipped out through the back of the church, while Liu Huai exited through the front alone. Bai Liu and his group hid behind the side door, watching Liu Huai walk into the night.

The loss of his arms made Liu Huai's balance difficult to maintain. He staggered out slowly, the eerie sounds of children's laughter and shuffling footsteps closing in on him.

Muke covered little Muke's hand and whispered fearfully into Bai Liu's ear, "Bai Liu, I remember there were monsters like the wandering deformed children at the orphanage at night. Liu Huai... he won't be killed by them, will he, before he can reach Liu Jiayi?"

"No," Bai Liu replied softly but with certainty. "Liu Jiayi won't let Liu Huai die."

As Liu Huai walked in a trance, seemingly oblivious to the dangers around him, Muke was tempted to call out. But someone else beat him to it.

A faint, tearful voice called out, "Brother? Is that you?"

"Jiayi! It's me!" Even though he knew Liu Jiayi had lied, Liu Huai instinctively turned at the sound of her voice, calling out urgently, "I'm here, Jiayi! I'm here!"

Liu Jiayi, pressed against the wall, cautiously lifted her head to look at Liu Huai. As soon as Liu Huai turned his head to respond, a deformed child lunged toward him from behind!

Muke couldn't resist the urge to shout a warning, but Bai Liu calmly stopped him. "Watch."

As the deformed child pounced on Liu Huai, Liu Jiayi cried out and stumbled toward him. The moment she jumped onto his back, holding him tightly, her fragile, panicked expression vanished.

Her chin pressed against Liu Huai's shoulder, as if clinging to him. In a soft, obedient tone, she called to her brother, her face expressionless. At some point, a black conical potion bottle appeared in her hand.

Liu Jiayi tilted her wrist and poured the potion over the monstrous child that was about to attack Liu Huai.

The creature, its mouth wide open, melted into a puddle of black liquid, vanishing silently into the earth before it could even scream.

Muke, hiding in the back, was stunned. "This kid is an A-rank monster! Liu Jiayi killed it so easily! Is she an S-rank?"

"No," Bai Liu responded faintly, smiling. "I heard from Mu Sicheng that her attribute panel is only A, not even A+. She's a rising star, with huge potential. No wonder the major guilds were after her."

Liu Jiayi's eyes twitched after killing the child, and Bai Liu noticed her gaze shift toward him.

She tilted her head and wrapped her arms around Liu Huai's neck, shaking the bottle of poison in her hand as she stared at Bai Liu without emotion.

It was a threatening gaze—clear in its message: This is what will happen to you.

"Can she see us?!" Muke was amazed. "Didn't Liu Huai say Liu Jiayi was blind? That's usually a problem when moving around."

"It's probably a visualization prop," Bai Liu explained calmly. "But to

see us hiding so clearly in the dark, it shouldn't be a regular sight-restoring prop." He paused, then added, "Now it's clear why she called Liu Huai out. She must have seen more than one person in the church."

Muke quickly caught on, looking at Bai Liu with anxiety. "What now? She knows Liu Huai is lying to her. How do we get her to come and help you?"

Bai Liu's eyes narrowed. "I'm afraid that's difficult."

He smirked faintly. "This little witch would probably prefer to kill me with poison than save me with an antidote."

Liu Jiayi held Liu Huai close, her grip possessive and controlling, as if he were a doll. Her gaze swept over the red patch in the distance, marking the living, before finally landing on Liu Huai's empty shoulders. Her hands brushed against his severed arms, and Liu Huai hissed in pain at the touch.

The sound of his pain caused Liu Jiayi's expression to twist slightly, a flicker of emotion passing through her.

She buried her head in Liu Huai's shoulder, taking a deep breath, doing her best to suppress the emotions threatening to spill out in her voice. "Brother… how did your arm become like this?"

"Brother is trying to save you," Liu Huai whispered, his voice as warm as ever, trying to comfort her.

Neither could see the other's face—the vacant expression on Liu Huai's face, nor the struggling one on Liu Jiayi's. They were so close, their heartbeats quickening in the proximity, but then, they turned away at the same time, speaking words that pierced through the veil of pretense.

"Brother, you tried to ambush me in the church, didn't you? Did you want to draw my blood?" Liu Jiayi asked, her voice shaky.

"Jiayi, are you a little witch?" Liu Huai asked, his tone cold and accusing.

Liu Jiayi's pupils tightened. For a moment, Liu Huai fell into an eerie silence, and Liu Jiayi's breath caught, her chest tightening as if she couldn't breathe. She backed away, her steps frantic, her eyes filled with disbelief as she looked at Liu Huai.

Liu Huai, half-kneeling, gazed at her with a silent, sad look, as if he had accepted everything.

"Jiayi," he whispered, his voice low, "since when did you stop being my sister and become a witch?"

"I underestimated you, Jiayi," he added, his words like a knife to her heart.

Liu Jiayi shook her head frantically, tears slipping from her eyes as she staggered backward, panic consuming her. Liu Huai's disappointed, disheveled tone made her feel like she might lose her mind.

At that moment, Liu Huai seemed like a beast—despite her having just nestled in his arms for warmth.

"I'm not, brother," Liu Jiayi retorted, her voice trembling. "I don't know anything about witches! Who told you that?"

"Don’t call me brother anymore, Jiayi. I don’t deserve to be your brother," Liu Huai said, rising unsteadily to his feet. He shook his head lightly, a smile on his lips that seemed almost detached. "You've been smarter than me since we were kids. Everyone said you were born to be a student, you'd have been great if you weren't blind. I've always thought that."

"You’re brilliant, Jiayi," he continued, his voice bitter. "You played me like a fool, and I didn’t even notice." He looked at her, his gaze distant, almost as if looking through her. "If only you weren't my sister."

"If only you were someone else's sister."

Liu Jiayi froze, the words echoing in her mind. Her ears rang, and the pain in her chest almost knocked her off balance.

The cold night wind brushed against Liu Huai's face, his expression growing colder, his eyes and posture sinking into despair. But in Liu Jiayi's dazed state, his image began to glow red.

The red hue soon faded to blue in her vision as Liu Huai’s body temperature dropped, a sign that he was dying.

Liu Jiayi forced a smile as she reached out for Liu Huai’s coat, but halfway there, she turned sharply and called out, "Who's there? Come

out!"

Two looming red shadows walked toward them, dragging the red shadow of a child. One of the figures seemed to be dragging something, a sound of metal scraping against concrete.

Bai Liu's eyes followed the direction Liu Jiayi was looking, his gaze sharpening. "It's Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang."

"How did they get here?" Muke asked, his voice tinged with panic. "We haven't tricked Liu Jiayi into joining us! We can't defend ourselves against them—our lives are down to single digits!"

"I figured that with Bai Liu's deterrent, they wouldn't dare come near the church," Bai Liu said, watching Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang approach. "They avoided this place during the day because of it, but I don't know why they've changed their minds."

Bai Liu's eyes narrowed as he observed Miao Gaojiang's approaching form. Something was wrong. "Miao Gaojiang isn't in the right state. He's too far from Miao Feichi."

As they got closer, it became more apparent that Miao Gaojiang was in distress. It had been past nine o'clock yesterday, and his stamina had restored, but now, he walked with his highest level of defense activated, eyes glazed over. He trembled slightly, as if still afraid of Miao Feichi, his son, with whom he had been working as a team.

Bai Liu recognized the signs. He had seen this before when Liu Huai had gone through a similar breakdown.

"The aftermath of a mental collapse can leave a person trapped in subconscious fear," Bai Liu said flatly. "Liu Huai was controlled by that fear, and when it happens, the person either kills themselves or others."

Liu Huai was clearly the first. But Miao Gaojiang... Bai Liu's eyes flicked to the man's clenched fist. It seemed Miao Gaojiang was on the verge of the second outcome.

Bai Liu remembered something Zhang Gui had told him before his death: Players who hurt others due to abnormal mental values are known as Junction Monsters, far more dangerous and powerful than typical monsters due to their emotional instability.

Miao Gaojiang's eyes were vacant, tinged with red, his focus unsteady.

Miao Feichi had noticed that something was off with his father, but Miao Gaojiang didn't share what was wrong. Miao Feichi had been knocked unconscious in the explosion of Miao Gaojiang's mental collapse the previous night and hadn't known that his father had become a Junction Monster.

Miao Feichi clenched his teeth, trying to reason with his father. "Father, didn't you say we should wait until after midnight to deal with Bai Liu and then come back here?"

"Why are we at the church now? What if Bai Liu's still here?"

Miao Gaojiang glared at Miao Feichi, his eyes burning with desperation. "We'll fight him if we have to! Feichi, I can't wait any longer!"

He couldn't hold back anymore. The aftermath of his mental collapse was getting worse. His mind was slipping, and his mental values were teetering dangerously.

They had searched everywhere else in the orphanage but couldn't find Liu Jiayi. She was likely in the church, the children's safe zone. Miao Gaojiang needed to find the blood Liu Jiayi was carrying and escape with Miao Feichi, then head to the Guild's warehouse for supplies.

Miao Feichi hesitated, but Miao Gaojiang's terrifying gaze left him no choice.

Miao Feichi fell silent, a sharp, tingling sensation coursing through his head.

Miao Gaojiang was usually very submissive, but when it came to doing something, even if Miao Feichi thought it unreasonable, he had no choice but to obey.

Watching Miao Gaojiang move mechanically closer, increasing his pace with every step, Bai Liu quickly gave an order to Muke: "Take little Muke back to the church and look for little Bai Six in the tunnel. If he's still in good condition, bring him out. If he's not, head straight back to the church and hide."

But Bai Liu had yet to hear from little Bai Six. The boy was usually punctual, yet it was already past nine, and the channel had been open for quite a while. Little Bai Six hadn't called him, which could only mean something was wrong with the boy...

Bai Liu's eyes darkened, but there was little he could do at the moment.

He needed a core team to break through a fully-defended Miao Gaojiang—someone they could hardly handle, not even with Liu Jiayi. With Miao Feichi's top-tier attacking power, they would have been wiped out entirely.

Grimly, Muke took little Muke's hand and started toward the church, leaning in to whisper near Bai Liu's shoulder, "Don't go up there rashly. Wait until we find little Bai Six before you try to convince Liu Jiayi to help you."

Bai Liu nodded, noncommittally.

Muke had just rounded the side door and was heading toward the main entrance when Miao Gaojiang, who had been following Miao Feichi, suddenly panicked. Breaking free from Miao Feichi's grip, he ran toward the church in a frantic sprint.

Miao Gaojiang's burst of speed left no time for anyone to react. He slammed the door shut behind him, locking it from the inside, just as Muke was about to peek in.

His hands trembled as he fell to his knees after securing the lock. The situation had become nightmarish.

When Miao Gaojiang saw the safety of the church just within reach, he couldn't help but run inside, driven by an instinct to survive. He locked the door behind him, unsure how long he would last.

Muke stared at the locked church door, his eyes wide with disbelief. The passage was locked in the church by Miao Gaojiang!

Miao Feichi, chasing after the panicked Miao Gaojiang, cursed when he saw the door slam shut. He pulled out his twin knives, ready to break it down, but found Liu Huai, Muke, and Liu Jiayi standing in front of the church door.

Warily, Miao Feichi raised his swords, scanning the area. He furrowed his brows, then whispered incredulously to Miao Gaojiang, "Father, that little monster isn't there!"

Muke, standing protectively in front of little Muke, kept his eyes on Miao Feichi and the others. His heart raced, his breath shallow. He couldn't afford to let his attention stray to where Bai Liu was hiding.

Bai Liu should never come out without a core team for support! A single mistake could cost him everything.

Miao Gaojiang's eyes narrowed as he took in the sight of the group before him. He looked at the shuttered church with a twisted expression and muttered, "We've been deceived. That little monster may not have made it out of the church at all. But it looks like we came at just the right time. Everyone's here—just in time for us to take it all."

Miao Gaojiang's gaze swept aggressively over little Muke, who was hiding behind him, and Liu Jiayi, who stood in front of Liu Huai, her expression stone-cold. He smiled, his face a chilling mask of normalcy, like a friendly middle-aged man—only it was a smile that made one's skin crawl.

"Everyone's here," he said, his voice smooth.

"Feichi, open the S-Grade." Miao Gaojiang ordered flatly. "Make it quick. Catch the kid."

The Loving Welfare Home

Liu Jiayi heard the voices of Miao Gaojiang and Miao Feichi. She wasn't a main attacker and was stuck with a healing skill. Against league players like Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang, who had activated the S-grade, she was at a severe disadvantage.

Normally, Liu Jiayi would have already fled with her items by now.

But now... she glanced behind her at Liu Huai, who had lost both arms.

It was too much. She didn't know who had told Liu Huai that she was a little witch, but the look he gave her made it impossible to leave. She had no choice but to stand her ground.

Cursing her father under her breath, Liu Jiayi took a deep breath and stepped in front of Liu Huai.

"Stay behind me and don't move!" Liu Jiayi ordered, her voice firm as she raised her arm in front of Liu Huai.

With a quick shake of her hand, a black potion appeared, releasing a pungent mist. A pure black gauze robe wrapped around her slender, snow-white ankles, transforming her from the soft, gentle Liu Jiayi into the little witch who had once been the subject of a 370,000-point bid for a small TV charge, highly sought after by all the major guilds.

Upon seeing Liu Jiayi's new appearance, Miao Feichi was taken aback for a moment. She hesitated in her attack, her twin swords slashing down slightly sluggishly. "A little witch?"

Miao Gaojiang narrowed his eyes as well. He remembered the Scavenging Guild's brief involvement in a small TV bid for this number one Nova player. The bid had been swiftly outbid by other guilds who were willing to go to extreme lengths.

As Miao Gaojiang recalled the familiarity of the ragdoll hanging from Liu Jiayi's black veil, he realized what was happening. It was an item the little witch always carried into any game.

Liu Huai stood there quietly, taking it all in.

Realizing she had no way out, Liu Jiayi's back stiffened, but she quickly regained her composure and turned to Liu Huai.

"When the fight starts, find a chance to run," she instructed. She was about to add, "Brother, you run, don't worry about me," but the words caught in her throat. Instead, she turned and attacked Miao Feichi without hesitation.

Her face was calm beneath the veil. Her fingers gripped the poison bottle so tightly that they turned white, and as the mist from the potion began to rise, it twisted like a boa constrictor, swallowing Liu Jiayi from top to bottom. It spread into a sticky black cloud on the ground, effectively hiding her from sight.

[System warning: Does player Liu Jiayi want to use the personal skill (Poison Fountain)? This skill deals undifferentiated slow damage to all players within range. After using this skill, player Liu Jiayi's stamina will be depleted, which may lead to severe effects like immobility. Is player Liu Jiayi sure to use it?]

[OK]

Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang both instinctively covered their mouths and noses as the poisonous fumes began to spread, sending chills down their spines and forcing them to retreat.

“Little witch, we’re giving you face and not touching you,” Miao Feichi growled through clenched teeth. “But Liu Huai’s actions are unforgivable, and we can't let his side go unpunished. So be considerate.”

“To move him is to move me,” Liu Jiayi's voice came coldly, her words encircling them from all directions. “Child-eating bastard, stop pushing and take your father on if you can.”

“I hate it when people bring their fathers into a fight. Let’s see if your father dies first or if you touch a hair on my brother’s head,” Liu Jiayi sneered.

Liu Huai, standing outside the smoke, stared in awe at the boiling, choking mass of mist. He heard a soft voice from Liu Jiayi, who, with no emotion, pushed something into his arms.

“Take the props and blood I gave you and head for the hospital! Don’t look back!”

Inside Liu Huai’s heart were two warm blood bags and a spinning magic cube labeled [Transcendental Class Prop: Magic Space]. To ensure Liu Huai understood, Liu Jiayi had written her name on the

blood bags, one marked for Miao Feichi and the other for herself.

Inside the black fog, Liu Jiayi's right arm, covered in needle marks and wounds, trembled as she looked around, pale and weak but coldly determined.

Earlier that afternoon, Liu Jiayi had been poisoned by mushrooms and had forcibly drawn blood to save Liu Huai after hearing he only had one life left. Though she had used a healing skill to stabilize herself, the combination of the poison and her exertion had left her on the brink of collapse. Despite this, she had no choice but to face off against Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang.

Liu Jiayi had long been accustomed to Liu Huai's cowardice, his betrayal, and his stupidity. Yet, in the face of danger, her instinct had always been to protect him, even when it seemed like she was the one who needed protection.

She had grown up protecting him, forced to mature prematurely, and now, in her weakness, she stood between him and danger once more.

Liu Jiayi's chest heaved as she took a step toward the center of the black mist, pushing it further inwards with each step.

Miao Gaojiang, standing in the middle of the fog, was visibly affected by the fumes, his face flushed from the poisoning. He clenched his fist and shouted, "Little witch, I didn't expect you to come to your death so recklessly. Feichi, go!"

Miao Feichi made a sweeping circle around the mist, his twin swords searching for Liu Jiayi's figure. As he found her, he smiled and raised his blades high. "I found you, little witch."

Liu Jiayi's face was pale as she lifted the glass bottle of poison to defend against Miao Feichi's strike. She gritted her teeth and splashed poison in his direction, sensing Miao Gaojiang preparing to break through the mist. She aimed to stop him with the poison.

"Stay here, all of you!" Liu Jiayi shouted, her voice harsh. "Don't step foot outside this place to go after him!"

The poison seeped out of the bottle, forming a hideous black snake on the ground. Liu Jiayi's chest heaved with each breath, blood faintly trickling from the corners of her mouth, soaking into her veil.

Muke rushed to Liu Huai, who seemed dazed, and shouted, "What are

you waiting for? Liu Jiayi is holding them off! Open the church door and get to the tunnel!"

Bai Liu joined him to help, but the little Miao Gaojiang inside had locked the door and barricaded it with furniture. The church was completely blocked.

"I can't move it!" Muke exclaimed in despair. "The side door's blocked too."

Several times, Miao Feichi or Miao Gaojiang had stepped out of the fog, only to be forced back by Liu Jiayi's poison.

But it was clear that Liu Jiayi was struggling, and she wouldn't last much longer. The door needed to be opened quickly.

"What about Bai Liu?" Muke's voice tightened.

"Liu Jiayi gave you this, didn't she?" Bai Liu said, his gaze on the spinning Rubik's Cube on Liu Huai's chest and the blood bags. "With her protective nature toward you, she must have arranged an escape route. Try this and see if it opens the door."

Liu Huai nodded silently, his gaze vacant.

Bai Liu took the Rubik's Cube and approached the door, just as a swinging machete flew out of the mist, aiming for his neck.

The black mist cleared, revealing Liu Jiayi, covered in blood, with Miao Feichi's foot on her head. The empty poison bottle slipped from her grasp as her breathing became shallow.

Miao Feichi's grin twisted in triumph as he raised his blade. "I haven't killed anyone yet in this copy. Let's see if any of you get away with it!"

Without hesitation, Bai Liu used the Rubik's Cube to open the door. The church door creaked open slowly.

The two men took a step forward, ready to pursue Bai Liu, but as they did, Liu Jiayi, her lifeless eyes dull and grey, bit down on Miao Feichi's trouser leg with all her remaining strength. Her hand reached out for the poison bottle, and once more, the black mist poured into the bottle, enveloping Miao Gaojiang and Miao Feichi.

[System Warning: Player Liu Jiayi has used a prop to drop her Spirit

Level below 20 and has entered Panel Burst status. (Poison Fountain) skill duration extended!]

“Damn!” Miao Feichi shouted in anger, swinging his blade down viciously as Liu Jiayi’s grip on his pants leg faltered.

“I’ll kill you now, you little bitch!” Miao Feichi roared.

Liu Jiayi blinked slowly, a bead of blood dripping from her lashes onto her dirty face. She had always been the one left behind in the mud, from birth to now, facing death in the same undignified way.

But as she watched Liu Huai, who had run into the church—her brother, gone once again—she felt an unexpected sense of stability.

He had escaped, leaving her once more, but this time, she felt no sadness. She had already accepted him for who he was. All she feared was that she had lost him too soon, that she had done too many things wrong.

A tear slipped down Liu Jiayi’s cheek.

I want so much to continue to be your sister, brother.

[System Alert: Player Liu Jiayi’s divine item (Psyche’s Tears) is in effect. The gods have guided destiny to this moment. Devout faith will lead the believer to the desired happiness. Psyche’s Tears will quench the flames of doubt.]

The Loving Welfare Home

The moment Liu Huai walked into the church, he suddenly stopped.

Muke pushed him urgently. "Get into the tunnel!"

Liu Huai turned to look at Liu Jiayi, who was pinned to the ground. He took a deep breath, turned sideways, and discarded the dagger strapped to his waist. In an instant, he lowered his body to bite down on a dagger that had fallen in the air, while letting the other one sink into his body.

Muke was shocked. "What are you doing, Liu Huai?"

[System Alert: Player Liu Huai was attacked by the Shadow Dagger. Mental Value drop in progress... Due to violent shock to Player Liu Huai's Mental Value, the calculation is in progress... Mental Value dropped to 9, Berserk Mode activated, stamina depleting violently...]

Like a swallow skimming the ground, Liu Huai moved so quickly that only streaks of movement could be seen as he darted past Miao Feichi.

Just as Miao Feichi’s knives were about to strike, Liu Huai, like an assassin emerging from the shadows, spun around with his foot planted on the ground. Using the daggers in his mouth, he faced Miao Feichi's blades coming down on Liu Jiayi.

Miao Feichi stared in amazement at Liu Huai, who was holding the daggers in his mouth, resisting his twin blades. This was the first time he had seen an assassin who could withstand such an attack even after being disarmed and having his hands cut off.

Liu Huai's eyes held a desperate intensity. One eye was half-closed in pain, the corner of his mouth cracked from the force of Miao Feichi’s double slashes. Blood dripped from the wounds, his face as pale as a ghost, drool dripping from the corners of his mouth.

Liu Huai stood before Liu Jiayi, not stepping back, his chest heaving violently.

"Fuck," Miao Feichi muttered in disbelief. He could feel Liu Huai's determination—a madman desperate to resist. But Miao Feichi gritted his teeth, drawing his knife again, slashing viciously. "Bai Liu’s men are all fucking insane! Father! Liu Jiayi’s all yours!"

[System Warning: Player Liu Huai's life expectancy has dropped to 1! Please flee to safety!]

Liu Huai dropped to his knees but staggered back to his feet, still biting his dagger and glaring at Miao Feichi—his eyes clearly saying, I will fight you again, and I won't go down easily.

Sweat dripped down Miao Feichi's jaw as he wiped it off and snarled through clenched teeth, "What the hell did Bai Liu put in your head? Is it really worth it to give him this?!"

Liu Huai glanced in disbelief at Liu Jiayi, wrapped in black mist and thrown by Miao Feichi into a fight with Miao Gaojiang.

If Liu Huai hadn't had the dagger in his mouth, he might have told Miao Feichi that Bai Liu hadn't given him anything. They had simply made a deal.

[Bai Liu, are you really sure Liu Jiayi can leave this game safely? I don't mean just this game—can you really take her out of it?]

[I'm not sure, but I promise I'll do my best to take Liu Jiayi, as long as I live.]

[...I believe in your word of trade. Sometimes I think it would have been better if Jiayi weren't my sister. She's too smart, I... I've never been able to keep up with her. I'm not worthy of someone so smart. Bai Liu, if only you were her brother, she wouldn't have to work so hard to protect me.]

[If only Jiayi wasn't my sister. She's good, she's smart, she knows what she's doing. She deserves a better birth, a better brother.]

Miao Feichi's twin swords came down once more without mercy. Muke ran frantically, his heart racing, while Liu Jiayi, holding a magic potion bottle, ran toward him. The black mist around her began to fade little by little, but Miao Gaojiang knocked her down, and she looked at Liu Huai with hysterical eyes, screaming in a broken voice, "Brother! No!!"

Liu Huai took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and clenched the dagger in his mouth. He whispered Bai Liu's name as if praying to an unknown god.

Bai Liu, please.

I'm using my last life to pave the way for you. Please, do what you promised.

[Bai Liu, there's one more thing I regret. Can you help me... apologize to the Fourth Brother?]

[You can speak to him yourself.]

[How can I tell him if I die?]

[Wait for Mu Sicheng to die, and you can talk to him face-to-face.]

[...Does Fourth Brother know you curse him like that behind his back?]

[I've said it to his face too.]

Liu Huai finally smiled with relief, tears slipping from his eyes.

Living had been hard for him, but he had now found a strange peace for his soul.

Though there was a cost, it was a reassuring place to return to.

Before Miao Feichi could strike again, Bai Liu leapt out from the side and calmly swung his whip to intercept Miao Feichi's twin blades. He placed himself in front of Liu Huai, facing the successive slashes of an enraged Miao Feichi.

Bai Liu blocked the strikes with his whip and turned back to Liu Huai. "Liu Huai, watch out for Miao Gaojiang. He's about to turn into a junction monster and could kill Liu Jiayi."

At these words, both Miao Feichi and Liu Huai turned to look at Miao Gaojiang, who was controlling Liu Jiayi.

Miao Gaojiang had become a grotesque zombie, his skin a greenish-black, with bulging eyes covered in black blood. His fangs nearly touched his chin, and his skin looked like crumpled, moldy leather. He held Liu Jiayi by the neck, tightening his grip.

Liu Jiayi's magic potion bottle fell to the ground, empty. The poison she had poured on Miao Gaojiang had no effect at all.

[System Warning: Player Miao Gaojiang's Mental Value is in shock, status unstable... it has dropped to 0.]

[System Warning: The alienation of the monster attached to the personal skill is complete, transforming into the "Carrion Zombie," an S-rank monster in a Level 3 dungeon game. It has over 10,000 defense and will attack all players indiscriminately. All players, please escape immediately!]

Miao Feichi stared in stunned silence as he lowered his swords, looking at the zombie, his mouth agape. "Dad...?"

The zombie, its fanged mouth exhaling the stench of rotting flesh, stared fiercely at Miao Feichi.

Miao Feichi took two stumbling steps back, his heart pounding. This monster was a creation of his own father, and its defenses were beyond anything they could handle. Even at full strength, Miao Feichi's twin swords had barely left a mark on Miao Gaojiang's arm.

There was no way they could beat this thing.

Liu Jiayi and Liu Huai exchanged teary glances.

Liu Jiayi seemed to realize what Liu Huai was about to do. Her fingers dug into the sand, trying desperately to stop him. Her voice, strained and hoarse, came out as she struggled to speak through Miao Gaojiang's suppression.

"Brother... don't come any closer!"

The fading image of Liu Huai leaped in Liu Jiayi's tear-filled eyes, like a flame about to extinguish.

The fire she had once doubted, the one that had carried her and warmed her, now burned brightly in her eyes—a flashback in the darkness, nearly blinding her with its warmth.

The fire descended on the witch held down in the dirt, weeping and cold.

[System Alert: Does player Liu Huai wish to use the Burst Personal Skill (Flash Strike)?]

[Yes.]

Liu Huai bit down on the dagger, leaping from mid-air, grimacing in pain as he landed on Miao Gaojiang's back.

Miao Gaojiang let go of Liu Jiayi, hissing as he turned and punched

Liu Huai.

Liu Huai didn't dodge. He wrapped his legs around Miao Gaojiang's neck, throwing his body around with all his strength. With a fierce face, he bit down on the dagger, roaring like a wounded beast protecting its young. He sank the blade into Miao Gaojiang's neck.

[System Alert: Player Liu Huai uses the personal skill (Flash Strike)... The skill's core desire has changed... Skill effect modified...]

[System Alert: Player Liu Huai's intense killing intent and desire to protect have been detected. The Shadow Dagger's stiffening effect remains unchanged. Additional damage is being applied... Damage calculation in progress...]

[System Alert: Player Liu Huai uses (Flash Strike), causing the monster Carrion Zombie to be frozen for 1 minute and 15 seconds, taking 6 points of damage. The monster has 10 life points remaining.]

[System Alert: Due to skill change, Player Liu Huai's skill status has updated—(Cowardly Assassin) to (Bright and Brave Assassin).]

Miao Gaojiang roared in agony as the dagger pierced his neck. He backhanded Liu Huai, throwing him to the ground.

Liu Huai fell, rolling helplessly, unable to get up. He coughed, his face twisted into an inexplicable smile, blood pouring from his mouth and nose.

[System Warning: Player Liu Huai's skill body is overdrawn, and his life value is rapidly declining from excessive blood loss... 2... 1... Warning! Player Liu Huai's life value will soon reach 0.]

Liu Jiayi crawled to Liu Huai, shakily picking up his head and placing it on her lap. She tapped her system panel frantically, struggling to stay calm.

[System Alert: Player Liu Jiayi's personal skills (Antidote) and (Poison) are on cooldown and cannot be used to restore anyone's life value...]

[System Alert: Your system backpack doesn't contain any items or magic potions that can instantly heal serious injuries.]

[System Alert: Your only Transcendent item (Psyche's Tears) is a consciousness-level item with no healing effect.]

"Fuck your father! Fuck your grandfather, Quan family's father!" Liu Jiayi blurted out, her face flushing with blood, the calmness she had been holding back shattered by Liu Huai's weakening breaths.

Liu Jiayi shook her hand and touched Liu Huai's mouth and nose, gasping for breath, trying to calm her emotions. Her mouth trembled as she held back her sobs and said softly, "Brother, just hold on a little longer. My healing skill is almost ready! I'll be able to save you!"

"… Jiayi, I can't hold on any longer." Liu Huai choked, coughing up a large mouthful of blood. He managed a weak smile, his eyebrows arched. "Why are you still cursing…"

"I won't curse anymore, I'll listen to you, I won't curse anymore." The warmth that once radiated from Liu Huai's body began to fade as Liu Jiayi held him. His warmth turned cold, and she could feel him slipping away. She finally couldn't hold back, hugging his head like a little girl would, sobbing uncontrollably. Tears poured out in torrents. "Brother, I beg you! It's all my fault! It's my fault! Please hold on! Don't leave me alone!"

"Don't... don't want me!" Liu Huai's voice was weak, barely audible.

"… Jiayi, it's not your fault." Liu Huai's eyes grew dull, matching the sadness in Liu Jiayi's. "It's brother's fault…"

He spoke slowly, with great effort, each word coming out with difficulty. "I don't deserve a sister as good as you, Jiayi…"

Liu Jiayi was crying so hard that she couldn't breathe. She shook her head desperately, not knowing what to say, just bowing her head and crying, tears streaming down her face.

"You know, Jiayi, before you were born, I thought I would be stuck like this for the rest of my life—living in this mud pit, forever." Liu Huai's voice weakened, but he smiled faintly. "But after you were born, when I looked into your unseeing eyes, and you reached out to me for a hug, I knew I couldn't go on like this. I was determined to take you out of this."

"Because I'm a brother now."

Liu Jiayi tried to cover Liu Huai's bleeding mouth, her voice choking. "Please, don't say anything, don't say anything!"

"You're the one who gave me a future." Liu Huai managed a hazy,

heartfelt smile. "You're the best sister in the world, Jiayi."

His eyelids fluttered as exhaustion overtook him. "But... I'm not the best brother in the world. It's because I'm too stupid... I've entrusted you to Bai Liu. He's smart, too, he'll understand you. You won't have to... You won't have to protect anyone anymore..."

"It's been hard for you to protect me, Jiayi."

[System Alert (for all players): Player Liu Huai has 0 life points, confirmed dead. Exit the game.]

Liu Jiayi stared in shock at the red mass that had faded from her arms. She reached out to touch Liu Huai's face, and a tear slid unconsciously from the corner of her eye. "Brother?"

[System Alert: Player Liu Jiayi's use of the prop (Psyche's Tears) is in effect for a period of time.]

[Psyche's Tears will guide you to the path she once took. You will lose him completely before you have him again. This comes from Psyche's jealousy. She does not want the woman with a doubting heart to be happy before her, but she is also merciful and will allow you to be happy at last. You will be so painfully happy that you will cherish happiness.]

A soft, compelling voice suddenly rang in Liu Jiayi's ears, shaking her from her trance: "Cupid has flown away, back to heaven only."

Liu Jiayi clutched Liu Huai's head tightly, lowering her head completely against his cold chest. Then, she cried out, heartbroken and in pain. Big tears slipped from Liu Jiayi's exhausted eyes and onto Liu Huai's lifeless face.

She couldn't speak, only crying hoarsely with her mouth wide open. "Ah-!!!"

[Psyche finally tasted the bitter fruit of doubt. She wept night and day but could never get back Cupid who had flown away.]

[Doubt is like a poison that corrupts Psyche.]

[System Warning: Player Liu Jiayi's Spirituality is in shock and dropping dramatically...]

The Loving Welfare Home

Liu Huai is dead, but he managed to hold Miao Gaojiang, the rampaging monster, in check—if only for a minute.

Bai Liu glanced at Liu Huai's body, briefly dazed, but quickly composed himself. He moved to grab the motionless Liu Jiayi and dragged her into the church.

Miao Feichi wanted to flee as well, but to add insult to injury, his child's blood was still on Liu Jiayi's body. Liu Jiayi lay next to the zombie monster that Miao Gaojiang had become. He moved toward the child, Miao Gaojiang, who was still alive.

That child was his, too. The blood would work. But he was one child short of blood. Miao Feichi glanced behind the baptismal font at the size of Muke and his murderous, scarlet eyes shifted slightly.

Bai Liu dragged Liu Jiayi without any resistance. The little girl just clutched Liu Huai's lifeless body in her arms and knelt, unmoving. The zombie next to her stared at Liu Jiayi with bulging eyes, its movements starting to shift. Liu Jiayi, lost in her trance, held Liu Huai's head, muttering to herself, "Yes, I can resurrect my brother. I can... with enough points, I can..."

"You can't resurrect Liu Huai," Bai Liu interrupted softly, "His soul is with me."

Liu Jiayi paused, then sprang to her feet, snapping Bai Liu's neck with a speed almost too fast to see. She wrapped her arms and legs around his neck, flipping him to the ground with raw strength.

The number one Nova player revealed her true danger. Tear-streaked and wild-eyed, Liu Jiayi wrapped her thin limbs tightly around Bai Liu's neck and screamed at him, "Give me Liu Huai's soul! Or I will kill you!!!"

Bai Liu coughed as he was strangled, yet remained calm. His voice was hoarse as he slowly rose to his feet, "Even if you resurrect him now, would he really want to live? He wanted to die for you. Keeping him alive was part of my plan."

Liu Jiayi's breath hitched as she remembered Liu Huai's exhausted words before he died. She reluctantly loosened her grip on Bai Liu, who seized the opportunity to take her wrist and drag her toward the

church without looking back.

Liu Jiayi was stunned as Bai Liu pulled her along. She was completely drained from using her abilities and had no strength left to resist.

Bai Liu coughed as he continued running, casting a sideways glance at Liu Jiayi. She was slowly processing his words, and he said faintly, "Liu Huai asked me to save you from this game, no matter what."

"It's not just this orphanage. It's the whole game. So maybe when the time comes, he'll be willing to be resurrected by you."

Liu Jiayi's eyes burned with exhaustion, but she quickly refuted Bai Liu's words, "There's no way I can survive. Miao Gaojiang's mutated monster is a level 3 S-class with over 10,000 defenses. When I tried to handle it with healing support in the King's Guild, it took a dozen A+ players with high coordination to defeat it while I controlled the bloodline. How can I fight it?"

Bai Liu's tone remained calm. "I have a solution."

With Bai Liu's words, the zombie that had been frozen for a minute by Liu Huai's suicidal attack finally began to move again.

The zombie opened its black lips, revealing long fangs, and leaped toward Liu Jiayi.

It didn't move quickly, but its range was incredible. In just a few jumps, it reached the church door. Instead of attacking Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi, it jumped right over their heads and made for the side door.

Miao Feichi, who was at the side door preparing to sneak around and attack Muke and the others, swore loudly when he saw the zombie coming toward him. He swung his sword to avoid it.

The zombie, which had been Miao Gaojiang, seemed to know Miao Feichi's combat style and escape habits all too well. Miao Feichi failed to avoid it several times, and soon found himself trapped by the zombie at the front of the church.

Sweat beaded on Miao Feichi's forehead as he swung his twin swords frantically. Forced into using his [Double Slash of Discontent], a burst skill he could only maintain for a minute due to his stamina, the spirits of his swords filled the air.

Blood sprayed across the church as Miao Feichi's swords sliced

through the space, their snowy-white light cutting through the night. Miao Feichi's face grew paler as Miao Gaojiang's zombie form managed to land some hits on him.

[System Alert: Carrion Zombie has bitten player Miao Feichi on the shoulder, player Miao Feichi -2 life.]

[System Alert: Player Miao Feichi uses his personal skill (Grudge Double Blade) to strike, dealing 3 life points of damage to the carrion zombie.]

[System Alert: ...]

Miao Feichi gritted his teeth and tried to break free. Soon, his burst skill was running out, but he managed one last attack. However, just as he raised his sword, a monstrous child suddenly jumped onto his back.

The little creature appeared from nowhere and clung to Miao Feichi's neck, babbling as it did.

He recognized the face—this was the child he had kidnapped before entering the game, the same child whose fingers he had cut off and eaten. If Muke had been there, he would have recognized this as the deformed child who had warned him at the elevator not to go up.

The little monster giggled and clapped its hands around Miao Feichi's neck. "Fingers! Fingers! Uncle likes to eat my fingers!"

It had no fingers on its hands.

The word "Fingers" caused Miao Gaojiang's zombie form to freeze for a moment. It was a codeword Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang had used in their game to identify each other, and the zombie's cloudy eyes focused on Miao Feichi. Its voice was hoarse as it rasped, "… Feichi loves to eat… fingers."

For a moment, Miao Feichi thought Miao Gaojiang had regained some semblance of sanity. Just as he sighed in relief, the zombie wrapped its hand around his neck, eyes locked on him as it hoarsely whispered, "… One day, you will eat my fingers too."

Miao Feichi was strangled, his body hanging in mid-air, his legs twitching like a toad. He desperately tried to slash at Miao Gaojiang with the twin swords in his hands, but Miao Gaojiang remained unphased. The pressure from his thumbs around Miao Feichi's throat

increased. His eyes soon turned red as he gasped for breath. Miao Feichi looked at Miao Gaojiang and finally understood why Miao Gaojiang had been the first to attack him, and what his father's subconscious fear had been:

— Miao Gaojiang feared that he would consume him, rendering his skilled identity nothing more than the rotting flesh of a zombie.

Miao Gaojiang's grip tightened, and Miao Feichi's body jolted. His twin swords slowly fell to the ground, dissolving into specks of light. His pupils dilated as his mouth slackened, leaning into Miao Gaojiang's grip like a child clinging to a father.

[System Alert (for all players): Player Miao Feichi's life has reached zero. Confirmed dead. Exiting the game.]

"Shit!" Muke cursed as he watched Miao Feichi, who had been recklessly slashing in the dungeon, killed within moments by Miao Gaojiang. Sweating, Muke, who was still struggling with the tunnel entrance, couldn't contain his frustration. "Why won't the tunnel open?!"

Bai Liu glanced at the doorway. "It's being blocked from the inside."

Little Miao Gaojiang was sweating heavily, desperately pushing against the tunnels. He used wooden blocks from the church to barricade the tunnel's entrance, doing everything he could to prevent anyone from entering. His breath hitched as he realized—the investor had truly turned into a monster.

Previously, he had used the baptismal font and some chairs to block the exit of the passage beneath the idol, but Muke had just pushed the baptismal font aside. He hadn't expected another layer of resistance inside.

Having killed Miao Feichi, Miao Gaojiang turned his head and fixed his gaze on Muke and Bai Liu. Muke stepped in front of Bai Liu, a nervous Liu Jiayi and little Muke flanking them. Glancing at his system panel, Muke took a deep breath as he faced the S-rank monster —the Carrion Zombie.

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Muke for gaining the skill status (Brave Assassin of Light). You have acquired a skill-derived weapon (Dagger of Light and Darkness).]

[System Alert: Does player Muke wish to equip the skill-derived

weapon?]

Muke exhaled. [Yes.]

Liu Jiayi, tears streaking down her face, looked coldly at Bai Liu, still struggling: “Give up. There’s no way out. We’re all going to die…”

Before she could finish, Muke suddenly stepped forward, blocking her. He flung his hands down, revealing a pair of daggers.

The gesture was all too familiar to Liu Jiayi. Her breath caught, and her words died in her throat.

“Liu Huai didn’t give away his skills to protect you. He didn’t ask you to die, Liu Jiayi,” Bai Liu said, still struggling with the door, his voice out of breath. “Is this how you repay your brother’s feelings?”

[System Alert: Does Muke have the Blitz skill (Flash Attack) enabled? Note: Using this skill will severely drain your stamina, and you will be unable to escape after use.]

Muke glanced back at Bai Liu, at the bewildered Liu Jiayi and little Muke. Gripping the daggers tightly, an unfamiliar emotion surged in his chest, making his heart race and his eyes fill with tears. Clenching his teeth in fear, a stronger feeling pushed him forward.

[Use.]

Muke leaped forward with the speed of a lightning strike, the daggers in his hands glowing with blinding light. He knelt before Liu Jiayi and Bai Liu, his body covered in cuts from his own clumsy dagger attacks. His eyes, clouded by his first mental drop, remained determined.

He gripped the daggers tightly, using his body as a shield to block the zombie's claws.

He was like an immovable umbrella, shaking but unyielding. The young master who had once trembled at the thought of S-rank players now stood firm before an S-rank monster.

Muke’s heart pounded wildly, the pain in his chest almost unbearable, but he refused to collapse. His legs trembled, and his hands shook, but he held his ground, driven by an overwhelming urge to protect.

Glancing back at Liu Jiayi and Bai Liu, something unprecedented squeezed the tears from his eyes. His knees nearly gave out from the

strain, but he refused to fall.

The young master, once golden and fearful of pain, now stood in a frenzy, tears streaming down his face as his heart nearly burst from the agony.

“Get out of here!!! You’re not allowed to touch them!!!!”

The glittering dagger was driven viciously into the zombie’s tough hide by the grim-faced Muke.

The zombie threw back its head and let out a furious whine, pressing its claws harder and harder against Muke’s body.

[System Alert: Player Muke uses (Flash Strike), causing a one-minute stiffness in the carrion zombie and reducing its life to 5!]

Muke was slammed to the ground by the zombie’s heavy claw. He collapsed to his knees, his face pale. The ground beneath him shattered and cracked from the force of the zombie’s blow.

The downward pressure from the zombie finally stopped. Muke blinked slowly, letting out a soft giggle once he confirmed the zombie had stopped moving. He murmured a quiet success.

Then, blood began to seep from Muke’s mouth, eyes, and nose.

He released the dagger, his body slowly going limp as he collapsed to the ground, vomiting blood. His vacant eyes lingered on Liu Jiayi and Bai Liu—those he had protected. It was a look Bai Liu was familiar with.

It resembled the proud gaze of a child receiving praise from their family, but Muke’s expression was weak, fading, as if his energy was slowly dissipating. His eyelids drooped, but there was still a flicker of happiness in his eyes.

Like Liu Huai and Mu Sicheng before him, he had completed the task Bai Liu had set for him to perfection.

“...You did well, Muke,” Bai Liu said softly.

Muke’s bloodied mouth curved into a faint, genuine smile at Bai Liu’s praise. His lips pulled into a small, proud grin, but his eyelids drooped lower, barely able to hold his gaze.

With great effort, he spoke, his voice weak and uncertain, “...I think

I'm failing... I... I really tried my best this time. I did everything I could... Ahem, I didn't... disrupt your plans, right... Bai Liu?"

"I know, Muke." Bai Liu's gaze lifted. "You did well. And now, I'm giving you permission to die."

Muke exhaled slowly, coughing up blood and foam. He slowly released the dagger that had been clutched so tightly in his hand, the pattern on the dagger having shifted from [blood] to [heart] from his excessive grip. The letters engraved on his palm showed the strain of his strength.

The glow on the dagger dimmed and faded to the ground, transforming into a data point.

[System Alert: Player Muke's main identity line has zero life, confirmed dead.]

In the split second that Muke's death was confirmed, Bai Liu didn't hesitate. He immediately scooped Liu Jiayi up and sprinted toward the tunnel entrance, carrying her on his shoulders. Liu Jiayi's expression was one of confusion and incomprehension.

She stared ahead, lost in thought, looking at the flame that had flung itself before her and died on the ground. It was Muke, the new player who had inherited Liu Huai's skills.

He was like a cloud of weapons and fire, just like her brother, falling to the ground once more for her sake.

Liu Jiayi's thin fingers tightened around Bai Liu's shoulders as tears slowly filled her eyes. "Why...?"

She had been nothing but a forgotten child, unwanted by anyone. It seemed as if God had allowed her to be born only to repeatedly remind her of her insignificance, stuck in a long, dreary existence.

Her life seemed meaningless—just a small fish struggling to survive in the mud. She had fought to survive, but she was destined to drown in the same weir that had claimed her mother and sister. The only place she could breathe was in the palm of Liu Huai's hand.

Liu Jiayi didn't deserve saving. No one would save her.

Muke, who had protected Liu Jiayi, lay silently on the ground. His eyes were barely closed as Bai Liu carried her away. Her eyes fluttered

open briefly, holding onto Bai Liu's shoulder, feeling as though she might fly.

Time felt distorted as she gazed up at the monstrous zombie that had leapt toward them, its stiff body now in mid-air. As the hideous creature's face morphed into that of a real person in slow motion, Liu Jiayi could see through her thermographic vision.

The zombie's face twisted into the angry, drunken visage of the man who had fathered her. He screamed at Liu Jiayi, "Little bastard! Who let you be born?"

But then Liu Huai's face appeared, tear-streaked and sorrowful. He broke down, crying, "I'm sorry, Jiayi. I didn't mean it. For brother's sake, just one last time, okay?"

Bai Liu pressed Liu Jiayi's face into his chest, and the twisted faces vanished.

Liu Jiayi, small and fragile, curled up against Bai Liu like an immature kitten, gripping the corners of his collar. Bai Liu, breathing heavily, spoke in a calm, steady voice.

"If you're asking why I saved you..."

"Because I made a deal with a man who sold me his soul. He promised that as long as I lived, he would take you out of here."

"I'm still alive," Bai Liu said, "so I save you."

Liu Jiayi's eyes were open but unseeing, tears flowing in a steady stream, soaking into Bai Liu's collar.

Two children, who had never believed in God, stumbled toward what they now saw as the safety of divine shelter.

A monstrous attack came from behind with a wide-open mouth. Bai Liu tore the hinges off the tunnel's entrance and threw little Miao Gaojiang toward the oncoming zombie. Bai Liu coughed and choked, then dropped Liu Jiayi from his shoulders.

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu's protective item (Cynic Wristguard) will expire in 15 minutes! Damage taken during this time will stack on top of player Bai Liu's body! Player Bai Liu's main status line life is about to hit zero!]

Liu Jiayi, panicked, watched the fire before her flicker and fade. Tears poured from her eyes. “Bai Liu! Bai Liu! Bai Liu!”

Bai Liu slowly collapsed to the ground.

He loosened his grip on the whip, and more blood poured from his mouth, as though all his previous injuries had caught up with him. Struggling to turn his head, he spoke to Liu Jiayi, his words labored and slow. “Run... channel...”

“Don’t die!” Liu Jiayi cried out, touching Bai Liu’s face with frantic desperation. She pressed her face against his head, feeling his weakening breaths. “Please don’t die! Didn’t you want to save me? Didn’t you promise to take me out of this game? Don’t just die like this!”

“Don’t lie to me,” she sobbed. “Don’t leave me alone, will you...?”

Her dull, grey eyes glistened with anguish as she cried out, kneeling before a statue of a pure god. “Don’t leave me alone to hide anymore!”

She had been forever hiding in the dark, like a deep-sea fish that couldn’t see the light. A strange, cursed existence, growing in betrayal and doubt, living through games she couldn’t share with anyone.

Who would stay with her, the little fish whispered? “I can save you... and poison you... but if you come near me with love, I’ll give you my warmest belly.”

“Just stay with me forever, and don’t fish me up only to fear my monster-like appearance and cowardly leave me in a muddy pond.”

Little Miao Gaojiang screamed in terror as the monster grabbed him. In the moment before the zombie bit down on his neck, the eyelids of the god on the cross twitched.

[System Warning: Monster attack on children in the safe zone detected!]

[System Warning: The gods have sent down punishment!]

Dense thorns spread out from the feet of the idol, wrapping tightly around the carrion zombie that had stepped into the church. The zombie, trapped by the black thorns, attacked frantically in every direction, but the barbed spikes easily sank into its thick, leathery,

greenish-purple skin. The thorns coiled around its neck in a tight circle, and the zombie let out a roar of fury as it struggled to break free from its thorny prison.

More and more thorns twisted around, wrapping in layers, until the zombie was completely encased in a cocoon made of sharp, black thorns.

As the thorns burrowed deeper, the zombie's growls grew louder before gradually fading, its voice becoming weaker with each passing moment as the thorns tightened, as if slowly swallowing the monster whole.

Little Miao Gaojiang, watching in fear, stepped back, realizing that the entire church floor was now covered in thick strands of thorns, which continued to spread, weaving toward the central cocoon.

The thorns slowly settled, and the air grew heavy with the foul stench of decay. Black, blood-tinged liquid dripped from the spikes, adding to the grim scene.

[System warning: God-level NPC attacking carrion zombie (player alienation) — carrion zombie life value confirmed as zero.]

[System Alert: Player Miao Gaojiang's main identity line life value is zero, confirmed dead.]

Liu Jiayi smelled the stench of death and heard the soft hiss of thorns retracting from the ground, followed by the dull sound of falling debris. Her breathing quickened, but none of these noises were as significant to her as the fading colors on Bai Liu's body.

She barely registered the death of Miao Gaojiang, whose system panel now flashed in front of her.

[System Alert: Regret to inform you that your personal skill (Antidote) has one and a half hours remaining on its cooldown and cannot be used at this time.]

Liu Jiayi closed her eyes and exhaled slowly. Calm down, she thought. There must be something she could do to save Bai Liu.

Her healing skills were unavailable, but there was one other thing she could use — her blood. Her blood could nurture the Blood Lingzhi, capable of saving anyone, even Bai Liu, the investor. However, she needed a bed of straw to cultivate the Blood Lingzhi.

Bai Liu couldn't wait for her to find a bed of straw, especially with other investors' monsters closing in. Even if she had the strength to fight, Bai Liu didn't have the time.

Liu Jiayi's gaze moved toward the idol, where thorns were still coiling. The god's cold eyes stared at her, a dead mass that emitted a chilling aura.

Before Tawil could react, he saw the blind girl stumbling toward the idol, pulling the thorns from its body with a determination that was almost violent.

Tawil, newly awakened and confused, watched in silence.

"I didn't expect her to be so calm," he mused. But when he saw Liu Jiayi's face, it all made sense. She was blind.

As soon as Liu Jiayi touched Tawil, she was overcome by an inexplicable compulsion to pull the thorns from his body, almost as if they were wool.

Tawil, still silent, watched her work.

After a moment, he glanced at Bai Liu, who lay motionless on the ground, and then gently wrapped his thorns around him, carefully placing him in the baptismal pool without causing any damage to his fragile body.

Liu Jiayi, stunned by the sound, was about to snatch someone from the thorn bundle when Tawil silently placed his own thorns in her hand.

Liu Jiayi froze.

"Are you planning to use my thorns to create a place for the Blood Lingzhi?" Tawil asked calmly. "I'll pile them up for you."

The thorns obediently weaved together at the bottom of the baptismal pool, forming a sturdy black cane bed. Bai Liu, pale and bloodless, lay on it, his eyes tightly closed.

Liu Jiayi stood in front of the baptismal font, gazing down at Bai Liu, the player who had been saving her since the beginning of the game — a player she had once hated.

"How did you know you could raise the Blood Lingzhi with my

thorns?" Tawil asked, looking down at her. "Or is the Blood Lingzhi a product of my thorns?"

Liu Jiayi bowed her head, her eyes fixed on Bai Liu. Without hesitation, she slashed her wrist with a knife, blood spilling from her arm and dripping into the baptismal pool. The blood mixed with the water, swirling in patterns like a flower, haloed in a forbidden, foul light.

The submerged thorns began to stretch and grow, glowing red like fireflies rising from their tips.

Liu Jiayi's pale wrists dripped brightly colored blood, and she spoke without emotion in her voice. "All monsters in this copy suck blood, and you're a monster too. So, why wouldn't you?"

She looked up at Tawil, her grey eyes cold. "From the way this safe zone is set up, you seem to be a god who protects children. But if you were truly so benevolent, why would the investors worship you so fervently, obsessed with baptizing us in your presence? Every copy has its core evil, formed by the disgusting desires of humans. The core evil in this copy is the Blood Lingzhi, and it all begins with the Blood Lingzhi's appearance."

"You are the most important figure in this copy's monster book. Your presence must be tied to the core evil."

Liu Jiayi's gaze hardened as blood dripped from her hands. "You're not a good god. You're an evil god. The investors worship you because the secret recipe and creation of the Blood Lingzhi started with you. It was you who gave them these things, which is why they worship you."

Tawil blinked slowly, his eyes focused on Liu Jiayi as she spoke. "You're not entirely wrong. The Blood Lingzhi did start with me," he admitted.

"But I am no longer a god," Tawil continued, the thorns crawling rapidly over his body as he spoke softly. "I am just a fallen, undead evil creature — no longer considered a god. I am merely the first sustenance for the Blood Lingzhi."

"I was the first child discovered by the investors. They learned that blood could feed the Blood Lingzhi. After realizing that I wouldn't die, they bound me to this cross with thorns, hoping that every child they baptized would be like me, feeding the Blood Lingzhi. If that makes me a god, then I suppose I am indeed an evil god."

Liu Jiayi's breath caught, her eyes narrowing as she looked at Tawil. The once-still thorns in her vision turned red and hot, twisting around the idol's form like veins, burrowing into Tawil's veins and greedily draining the blood and nutrients from his body. The thorns twisted inside the statue's heart, feeding and secreting spores at the intersections of the vines.

These blood-red canes were blood-sucking mycelium, with spores still waiting to grow at their tips.

Tawil lowered his eyelashes. "I am the eternal sustenance of the blood primordial mother, and every sub-colony in the straw beds of the investor's hospital grows from the thorns that suck my blood and thrive on me."

"I am a symbiont of the blood primordial."

After driving the vines that strangled the monster, the vines—mycelium—swelled and sucked blood from Tawil's body, wrapping tighter and tighter. The thorny ropes scurried and pulled through Tawil's veins and heart, and Tawil's face grew visibly tired. This was the reason he became sleepy every time he used the vines to save Bai Liu.

It drove its mycelium to save Bai Liu, but in doing so, intensified its efforts to extract blood and nutrients from Tawil's body.

Tawil slowly dropped his eyelids, focusing intently on Bai Liu, still unconscious, lying in the baptismal pool before him.

The first time Tawil met Bai Liu, it was as a rotting mermaid fished from the water by humans, placed in a window as an exhibit to attract tourists to its slaughter, eventually transforming an entire town into ghostly fish-man monsters.

The second time Tawil saw Bai Liu, it was in the form of a ghostly mirror, stolen from a collector's house by thieves. The mirror hid a fear that all humans dared not face. The thieves, fearing it would break or be stolen, placed a bomb inside it, ultimately burying an entire carriage of passengers in flames.

It lowered three times to meet Bai Liu—Tawil lowered his eyes.

Bai Liu was a child fit for the blood lucifer mother's supply. He would not die or stop blood production, only sleep. His special blood drove all the terminally ill investors mad, eventually turning hospitals and

orphanages—places meant for good—into hellish farms.

And so, Tawil was banished and exiled by the gods.

[Tawil, you were born evil. You can only sleep at the bottom of the sea, in the heart of the earth, in the shattered lenses of untouchable fear, in the darkness of the universe, 13.7 billion light years away.]

"You are a god. You enjoy the faith of mankind, and you must take responsibility for the human tragedies born of your evil."

Thus spoke the gods from on high: Tawil, no human being can remain sane after seeing your true face. You are so wicked, so full of compulsion to the abyss and extreme evil, that you can corrupt the purest and most innocent child in all of time and space.

If a human can keep their senses upon seeing you, they will become—

—the next demon.

The next demon, sleeping on the snow-white baptismal pool tainted by the blood of a forbidden witch, was awakened by the gods from a dream filled with bloody fireflies. Bai Liu's eyes slowly opened.

Bai Liu was pale, his neck and head tilted, the smallest parts of his arms and legs twisted and pulled tight by crimson vines, moving upwards inch by inch as the plant branches that redeemed the terminally ill man shook and stretched across his body, presenting a fragile, sacrificial pose.

The face of the sacrificial victim, the demon, the sick and dying patient concealed beneath the vines, hidden under the flower of evil watered by human desire, looked calmly at the fallen evil god bound by the same derivatives of human desire, while the awakened evil god silently looked back at him.

"Will you go mad seeing me?" Its voice buzzed and echoed in all directions in the vine-engulfed church, as if a thousand voices were judging the self-sacrificing congregation at once.

"Never," the devilishly religious answered with a smile.

The spikes on all the vines spreading from the statue burst open. Blood-red spores floated through the church like shattered pieces of glowing planets. The red candlelight hovered in the air, dancing wildly. The spikes burst from the top like a four-petaled, exploding

flower of red clematis, wrapping tightly around Tawil's cheeks, revealing only a pair of sculptural eyes devoid of emotion.

Liu Jiayi collapsed in a daze on the edge of the baptismal pool as the spores bloomed. She fell unconscious from a drop in mental energy and blood loss.

Her wrist rested upwards on the edge of the pool, snaking toward it, bleeding steadily from several new cuts and an old one that had clotted a little.

"Her blood won't be enough to raise a blood primrose." Tawil, whose face was hidden under thorns, whispered. "The blood lucifer mother needs more blood."

That's why the investors don't use the mother to raise the blood lingzhi directly. The mother requires more and more blood to raise a mature blood lingzhi, and Tawil's blood regenerates at a rate sufficient only to maintain the supply of daughter strains. So they harvest the daughter strains from Tawil and cultivate them more efficiently on their own.

"How much more do you need?" A thin voice came from the doorway of the church. Little Muke propped one hand against the door, clutching the hand that fell at his side as he glared at the idol. "With the blood of little Bai Liu and me, and the blood packets of Miao Feichi and Liu Jiayi that I just pulled from Liu Huai, will it be enough to raise a blood lingzhi to save him?"

"Maybe still not enough." Tawil calmly looked at little Miao Gaojiang, unconscious on the floor. "But with this child and all the blood I have left, it will be enough."

Kneeling at the edge of the pool, Little Muke rolled up his sleeve and used the knife Liu Jiayi had dropped to make several vicious cuts on his thin arm. Then, he took out Little Bai Liu's blood bag—already somewhat clotted, layered, and thoroughly cold, which made Little Muke's eyes redden—and tore open three blood bags. He soaked them in the baptismal pool beneath Bai Liu, who was too weak to move, and then cut his other arm, soaking both hands in the water.

Little Miao Gaojiang was dragged over by Tawil's cane and was cut and bled dry by Little Muke, gnashing his teeth—if it weren't for this bastard, they wouldn't have lost so many people!

"Ahem," Bai Liu coughed twice, glancing sideways at Muke, who had

his hands in the water. Bai suddenly smiled, not really caring about his life-threatening situation, and casually teased Little Muke. "Don't you hate me? Why are you saving me?"

Little Muke bowed his head, his voice low. "…Little Bai Liu wanted to save you, and you saved me, so I want to save you too."

Liu Jiayi dipped one hand through a gap in the vines into the cold water of the baptismal pool, her drowsy face resting against the edge, while her other hand gently tugged at the corner of Bai Liu's coat.

Her fragile upper body was covered in tear marks, and on her thin arms, there was a shocking slash—she had cut herself with a deadly hand, seemingly knowing she wouldn't last long in terms of her mental stability. Afraid she might pass out, she cut deep to prevent her blood from clotting.

Bai Liu turned his head back and looked at the ceiling of the church, as though replying to Little Muke's question, though his tone was light: "What childish logic."

The logic of a child is simple, easy, and deceptive: You saved me, so I will save you. You paid for me, so I will pay you back.

Liu Jiayi is like this. Muke is like this.

So is little Bai Liu, though he doesn't like to admit it. Bai Liu must concede that he hasn't grown much since he was a child, still holding onto that same logic—a logic that is purely transactional.

"And what did you save me for, Tawil?" Bai Liu asked softly. "I don't remember making a deal with you that would have made you pay for me with all your blood."

Tawil's face was completely engulfed in thorns, but his voice remained calm: "Your very existence is worth everything I have to give."

"Bai Liu." Tawil's voice was cold and solemn, as if he were proclaiming some sacred vow in a church. "You are my only believer."

[Tawil, if such a human being exists, then you have believers once again.]

[A devilish, evil god's devotee.]

"The gods are meant to fulfill all the requests of the faithful

unconditionally," Tawil said.

Little Muke, who had lost a lot of blood, looked at the face of the statue and fainted, overwhelmed by an unspeakable fear and dizziness.

The vines on the statue flew up and wriggled, weaving through its body at a speed that made one's flesh ache just to watch. They quickly crawled all over the church, like some kind of blood that had been stained away in a pool.

The holy church was instantly transformed into a habitat of dark red, leaping vines, with little red spores, resembling flower pistils, thumping regularly as if they had a heartbeat. They grew rapidly, as if devouring extraordinary sustenance, instantly blossoming into heart-like mushrooms.

Tawil's heart also thumped, the same heartbeat as theirs.

Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump. Tawil's heartbeat seemed amplified a hundredfold through these vines, echoing throughout the church.

Bai Liu gazed at the sky of vines and the leaping "hearts," finally letting his eyes fall on the idol that was so entangled it could no longer be seen, the dark red vines circling it in a ring.

"If I am indeed your only believer," Bai Liu said in a scattered tone, joking, "Then save me, Tawil, my god."

The millions of beating "hearts" stopped for a moment.

Then they began to throb more intensely, frantically.

The vines began to wither, and rose-like, red, heart-sized blood lingzhi started growing from each vine's tip. Millions of shimmering, leaping red blood lingzhi blossomed from the withered black vines like fields of roses in full bloom during their flowering season, decadent and unrestrained before wilting.

The vines on the statue withered and blackened, slipping away, and Tawil descended from the statue. He propped himself up on either side of the baptismal font, the ever-cold god lowering his eyes. His lips, now nearly the temperature of blood, kissed Bai Liu's forehead as he whispered.

"Divine baptism for your new birth, my only believer."

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has acquired a hidden identity (the only follower of the evil god).]

[System Prompt: Congratulations to player Bai Liu for obtaining the pass prop (Blood Lingzhi), completing the main quest, and successfully curing the terminal disease. You can now exit the game.]

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu has been cured of a terminal illness and has recovered to life level 3. As his life level is low, does he choose to stay in the game after passing?]

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu chooses to stay in the game. All actions taken by player Bai Liu during his stay will be at his own risk, and no further warnings will be given.]

(Note: During the stay, the mini-TV can be turned off. The mini-TV data has been entered into the settlement. The stay data is not counted. The player can choose to exit the game at any time.)

The Loving Welfare Home

The god who had shed the last drop of blood for his followers closed his eyes wearily, and he slept peacefully beside the rejuvenated and healed believer.

The withered vines turned into a black sleeping quilt over it, and the young god, who had gained his first followers, had a very faint and imperceptible smile on his lips, like a child dreaming after having acquired his favourite toy.

It all seemed like fairy godmother magic, because the clock had just struck midnight.

Liu Jiayi woke up choking and coughing from the smell of psycho-bleach. Her face was almost transparent from the blood loss, and though she had just woken up, the little girl immediately regained her guard. She drew out her poison and aimed it at the direction of the sound she had heard.

Liu Jiayi couldn't see anything now because the visualization effect had expired.

"It's me, Bai Liu." Bai Liu remained calm, even as Liu Jiayi threatened him with the poison. He spread his arms to show he was unarmed. "Your blood is still flowing, so I wanted to take care of you."

Liu Jiayi lowered her weapon in a daze, still processing the fact that Bai Liu had survived.

In that moment, she had already prepared to sacrifice herself—just to put up a fight—but she hadn't actually believed she could save him. Now, however, she could feel the bandaged wound on her arm and tightened her grip slightly, her cuts still stinging.

"You're probably low on life. Don't you want to give yourself a little boost?" Bai Liu asked.

Liu Jiayi pursed her lips, silent. Her healing skill had already run out, and Bai Liu was right—she had bled to save him, leaving her life very low, only 5 points. Sitting on the ground, an unbearable chill crept through her, making her want to shiver.

She didn't answer him, so Bai Liu turned his attention to treating the wound of the still-sleeping Muke. Liu Jiayi's eyes were closed, her eyelashes trembling with water, her face covered in blood. Suddenly, a holy white glow emanated from her body, spreading like water to Bai Liu and Muke.

The glow was warm, pure white, making it impossible not to relax, as the little girl at the center of it all held a shimmering bottle of mercury-like liquid. The bottle was long and thin, about the length of Bai Liu's hand.

Liu Jiayi placed the bottle of liquid into Bai Liu's hand, her voice hoarse. "Antidote. You and Muke drink it. Don't save it for me. Top up your blood."

As Bai Liu was about to ask why she was giving it to them, Liu Jiayi seemed to feel the cold and curled up, hugging her knees, burying her head in them.

Her voice was muffled. "Neither you nor Muke have a higher panel than I do. The healing skill works better when the personal panel level is lower. You're better off drinking it than I am. You two are about to run out of life. I still have some, and I have skills. I'm more durable than you in this game."

"Why give it to us?" Bai Liu asked anyway.

"Give it back to you." Liu Jiayi's head was still buried in her lap, and she spoke without looking up, without thinking.

Bai Liu understood.

Little Bai Liu saved her, Muke saved her, and he saved her. She remembered them all—probably in disbelief, maybe in doubt, maybe in denial.

But she remembered them all.

"I thought you'd hate me. You guessed I was using Liu Huai to catch you when you were outside the church, didn't you?" Bai Liu asked thoughtfully.

Liu Jiayi still didn't look up, but she made a nasal sound, acknowledging his words.

Bai Liu looked down at the swirls in Liu Jiayi's yellow hair. "Then

why did you bleed to save me when you knew I lied to you and was using you?"

Liu Jiayi asked him in return, "What about you? Why did you risk your life to save me?"

Bai Liu simply said, "The deal."

Liu Jiayi finally lifted her head, her eyes red. "Because you just saved me."

Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi exchanged a long, silent gaze, whispering and sobbing.

The little girl's gray eyes, blind to the world, held a stubbornness, loneliness, and vulnerability. It was like a fish watching birds on the shore from the muddy water, unnoticed by anyone. But when you truly looked at the fish through the mud, you would see that her eyes could speak. [Whoever saved me, I'll return it all to you. I don't owe anyone anything.]

I'll settle the score with the world, with everyone in it, and figure out where I went wrong.

Let's see how long I can survive as a little cunt.

Bai Liu handed the antidote bottle back, his expression and tone calm. "I've got the Blood Lingzhi. I've cleared the level. I don't need to restore any life points. You don't need to return anything to me just because someone else did it for you. Just leave some of the antidote for Muke."

"The rest, I think you need more." Bai Liu extended the antidote bottle to Liu Jiayi. "You're also low on life. Drink it, and rest easy. I promised Liu Huai I'd take care of you."

Liu Jiayi's dry, cracked lips parted slightly. Her chin rested on her knees as she curled into a tiny ball. She raised her head with wary, suspicious unease, blinking to contain her emotions. She pursed her lips and reached for the bottle, but her hands trembled, almost dropping it.

"You have a wound on your hand." Bai Liu caught the falling bottle and held it to Liu Jiayi's mouth. "I'll feed it to you like this."

Liu Jiayi inhaled softly, then opened her mouth. Before she could

drink, a drop of liquid dripped from the bottle.

One drop, two drops, her tears falling into the antidote. Liu Jiayi wondered if tears—emotions venting through the poison of human sorrow—would render the antidote ineffective.

She held the bottle in her mouth, her tears flowing freely as she choked on the antidote that healed her, whimpering. “It’s so humiliating to drink like this... like a...”

“Stray dog, right?” Bai Liu smiled slightly. “Your mantra is the same as your brother’s—stray dogs are nice. Why do you all hate stray dogs so much?”

Thinking of Liu Huai, Liu Jiayi cried harder, tears and snot streaming together. Her body shuddered with sobs. “What’s so great about stray dogs? They’re dirty, disliked by everyone! Everyone shouts at them! Everyone hates stray dogs!”

Bai Liu gently stroked Liu Jiayi’s head, finding it somewhat amusing that she was crying so hard.

He said, “A homeless person wouldn’t hate stray dogs.”

Liu Jiayi lifted her tear-streaked face.

“When the game is over, take your brother away from me, a vagrant.” Bai Liu lowered his eyes, his voice soft. “When the game ends for good, neither you nor he will have to wander anymore.”

Liu Jiayi didn't drink much, but the little girl had a stubborn streak and had to leave it to Bai Liu, who wasn't too safe with only three life points. So, he went along with Liu Jiayi and drank it. Liu Jiayi didn't know how much blood she had left, but she wouldn't tell Bai Liu, saying that she wasn't dying easily at this level, so he shouldn't worry about her.

Taking advantage of the night, Bai Liu moved the baptismal font to reveal the tunnel below. He clapped his hands and exhaled. "At this point, the deformed children can't exit through this tunnel. They'll have to go out through the hospital exit. The number of deformed children in the tunnel should be low now..."

"It doesn't matter if there are more," Liu Jiayi said, standing in front of

Bai Liu while holding the bottle of poison. Her voice was still hoarse. "I'll clear the way."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow slightly. "Okay, I'll take Little Miao Gaojiang with me."

After Big Miao Gaojiang's death, Bai Liu only had to fulfill this agreement to get Little Miao Gaojiang's soul note. To do that, Bai Liu saved Little Miao Gaojiang's life and fed him some antidote to keep his blood flow steady.

Liu Jiayi could have guessed this as she watched Bai Liu carry Miao Gaojiang without any reaction.

Muke wasn't as calm as Liu Jiayi. Her eyes were red with anger, and she pointed at Bai Liu with shaking hands. "How could you save him? You're an idiot! He's the one who closed the church door and let everyone else die!"

"He'd die even if he didn't," Bai Liu said, glancing faintly at Little Muke. "The church has no shelter for us adults. We'd be killed too if we stayed."

Little Muke was still fuming, but Liu Jiayi had already jumped through the opening of the passage. Little Muke was startled when Bai Liu said, "Follow her in."

The passage was still dark, stuffy, and damp. Occasionally, something would rustle and crawl, but before it could get close to Bai Liu and the others, it was eliminated by Liu Jiayi, who was one step ahead of them. Jiayi's natural blindness gave her an advantage in the dark, making her faster than the monsters in finding her target by sound.

When they reached a spot, as if hearing the sound of fingers snapping in the dirt, Liu Jiayi prepared to attack again, but Little Muke suddenly screamed, "Wait!"

Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi both looked over.

Little Muke stared at Bai Liu's face, breathing quickly. "Little Bai Liu... Little Bai Liu was here before sending us up. You promised to take him out."

They had pulled the limp Little Bai Liu from beneath the mushroom bushes. The morning's battle had been so exhausting that the child had lost all ability to move. He was decaying quickly, with Bai Liu

pressing down on him, his body sinking into the mud-like texture.

The fourteen-year-old Bai Liu, like any other deformed child turned monster, was decaying rapidly, turning into a puddle of mud in the hidden tunnels beneath the orphanage.

Little Muke looked nervously at Bai Liu, who was carrying Miao Gaojiang on his back. Taking Little Bai Liu's body with him would be a burden, and keeping with the man's philosophy that "useless things" should be abandoned, Little Muke was apprehensive that Bai Liu would leave Little Bai Liu there again, as he had done in the morning. He asked warily, "You promised to take him out, you can't leave him here."

Bai Liu tilted his head slightly, his face expressionless as he stared down at Muke.

Muke's back was tense. "I know he's just a corpse, but still, you can't leave him here. You promised him!"

Bai Liu suddenly smiled softly, wrapped Miao Gaojiang's limbs around himself with bandages, and then knelt down to look at Little Bai Liu.

Little Bai Liu's face was already covered with corpse spots. He looked like a child who had slept restlessly, still wrinkling his brow the moment before he died, but with a little smile at the corner of his mouth, a somewhat peculiar expression.

"You see, you have a friend too, Little Bai Liu," Bai Liu's tone was light, almost to himself. "Not a liar like me, but a real friend."

"Your luck will change."

Little Bai Liu didn't open his eyes. His chest was calm and unruffled, but corpse spots grew from the place where his heart had once been.

Little Muke looked at Bai Liu strangely and muttered to himself. Then, Bai Liu bent down, picked up Little Bai Liu's body, and, with two children in front and behind him, he shakily stood up, but did so. Little Bai Liu rolled unconsciously in his arms. His head rolled out from Bai Liu's shoulder, and was wrapped in one arm, held back, sleeping like a baby.

Bai Liu walked out of the orphanage with his fourteen-year-old body in his arms, one step at a time.

The Loving Welfare Home

After exiting the hospital, Bai Liu, relying on Liu Jiayi to deal with the monsters, reached the car parked outside. He opened the "Passenger's Blessing" and took the three children with him.

Bai Liu drove through the night, surrounded by twisted, eerie ghostly faces swaying towards him, reactivated by the [Passenger's Blessing] prop. He kept driving in one direction until the first light of dawn broke the sky, and the number of investor monsters roaming around began to dwindle. At that point, Liu Jiayi spoke up, "We've finished escaping the orphanage."

Little Muke was still confused, holding the game manager to his chest. "This thing just told me I completed a mission... what mission?"

Little Miao Gaojiang cowered in the back seat, unconscious, still not waking up, but Bai Liu was reminded of the completion of his soul deal with Miao Gaojiang.

Bai Liu leaned back lazily in the driver's seat. "Tap out. We'll talk outside. I have a little business to take care of."

"What's the point of quitting...?" Little Muke mumbled, looking confused. Before he could finish his sentence, Bai Liu disappeared.

Liu Jiayi glanced at Little Miao Gaojiang in the back seat and realized Bai Liu wanted to speak to Miao Gaojiang alone. She pursed her lips and nodded, getting out of the car too.

Now, the only ones left in the car were Little Miao Gaojiang, lying unconscious in the back seat, and Little Bai Liu, casually holding the steering wheel in the passenger seat. A lanyard hung from his wrist, with the game manager he had taken from Miao Gaojiang's corpse dangling from it.

"Wake up, Miao Gaojiang. Are you still pretending to be asleep?" Bai Liu spoke slowly. "Are you wondering why they can all disappear and quit the game, but you can't? It's because I have your game manager."

"Your soul is also with me."

Little Miao Gaojiang's trembling eyes finally opened. He stared at Bai Liu, sitting idly in the driver's seat, covered in blood, looking like a demon. His shoulders shuddered uncontrollably. "What are you going

to do to me?!"

It was hard to reconcile this terrified child, who was scared by just Bai Liu pretending to sleep, with the Miao Gaojiang who had waged a battle of wits with Bai Liu and killed everyone, including his own son.

It's remarkable how people grow up. It’s difficult to imagine that Bai Liu, ten years ago, would have turned into the law-abiding man he is now.

Now, Miao Gaojiang, already tearful before Bai Liu even spoke, would probably find it hard to believe that he had once been a villain in this horror game, someone who could easily sacrifice Bai Liu's life for his own gain.

"I don’t want to do anything to you. I can get you out of this place," Bai Liu said. "But I want one thing from you."

Little Miao Gaojiang cried out in fear, "What, what is it? My blood?!"

Bai Liu smirked. "No, your guild."

Before entering the game, Bai Liu had asked Mu Sicheng what he needed to do to take Miao Gaojiang's guild. Although Mu Sicheng had thought Bai Liu was joking, he had told Bai Liu exactly what to do.

First, Bai Liu had to kill Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang, the two most powerful members of the guild, who had risen to power through sheer violence and strength.

Second, Bai Liu needed the assignment agreement signed by both Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang.

But both of these tasks were extremely difficult. The guild was as important to Miao Gaojiang and Miao Feichi as their own lives.

According to Mu Sicheng, even if Bai Liu had manipulated Miao Gaojiang and Miao Feichi’s souls, the two would never have allowed Bai Liu to seize the guild’s power, as it would directly affect their resources and their lives.

Even if Miao Gaojiang died, other, larger guilds would probably take over the Scavengers Guild.

Bai Liu had planned to sign the agreement by manipulating Miao Gaojiang’s soul and using his panel, but when he tried to do so

directly, a warning popped up from the system:

[System warning: Guild management transfer authority belongs to senior authority. Player Bai Liu's authority exceeds the level. Player Bai Liu only enjoys part of the soul debt authority of player Miao Gaojiang and has no right to call higher authority. This authority belongs to the system. Please exit quickly!]

Miao Gaojiang, who knew how important the guild was, would not easily sign the agreement, but a Miao Gaojiang who didn't understand the full importance of it might.

At Bai Liu's direction, the terrified Miao Gaojiang pulled out the transfer agreement from the panel. After signing it in a shaky manner, he glanced nervously at Bai Liu, who smiled with increasing satisfaction. "That's it, right?"

Bai Liu casually signed the agreement as well. "That's fine. You're out of the game."

[System Alert: Player Miao Gaojiang and Player Bai Liu have signed the "Thirty-five Explanatory Regulations on the Transfer of the Scavengers Guild."]

[There is no third-party witness. The only guarantee of utility is the game system. Effective immediately upon signing.]

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Bai Liu, who has become the new president of the Scavengers Guild. All members of the Scavengers Guild have been notified of the change of their guild president.]

Miao Gaojiang felt as though he had lost something very important, but at the moment, he only felt relief from Bai Liu's presence.

Now, Bai Liu was alone in the car. For some reason, he hadn't quit the game yet. He continued driving in one direction, watching the landscape shift from barren to lush as the sky brightened.

Bai Liu took Little Bai Six out of the car, bought a shovel and a tombstone from the system, and dug a hole in the area. He placed Little Bai Six inside, then casually put the tombstone on the hole and wrote [Bai Liu's Grave] on it with a marker, which he had taken from the hospital.

Then, he wrote the epitaph: [The future buries you, but your future is not buried. Be happy, little friend. You'll get lucky.]

With the same marker, Bai Liu drew a sketch of Little Bai Six on the tombstone—a slim boy with bright eyes and a hollowed-out coin around his neck. On top of his head, Bai Liu drew a cartoon mushroom.

It was an unconventional and humble grave.

But Bai Liu didn't think Little Bai Six would mind. After all, they didn't like wasting money on useless things.

"I brought you out of the place you hated most and buried you in a place I don't even know what it is," Bai Liu stood before the tombstone as daylight slowly crept up his legs, lighting his cheeks. He smiled. "But I kind of like this place, and I think you will too."

"Goodbye, Little Bai Liu, aged 14."

Buried with Little Bai Six was a quarter of a million dollars, which Bai Liu had redeemed with points owed to the boy. He spread it evenly around Little Bai Six's grave, thinking that Little Bai Six wouldn't hate this.

He always kept his promises, even to the dead.

Bai Liu turned away, the sunrise at his back, waving his hand, unsure of what he was saying goodbye to, with only the tombstone left behind.

The breeze carried faint children's songs, resonating in Bai Liu's departing back.

"Born on Monday
Baptism on Tuesday
Marriage on Wednesday
Get sick on Thursday
Aggravated on Friday
Dead on Saturday
Buried in the earth on Sunday
This is the life of Bai Liu."

The daylight illuminated the tombstone so brightly that Bai Liu's back was a halo of light in the diamond-like daylight, which soon dissipated.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has quit the game.]

Lobby

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bai Liu walked out of the game's boarding exit.

Muke, who had been waiting through customs, breathed a sigh of relief upon seeing Bai Liu: "You're finally out."

Bai Liu nodded before asking, "Mu Sicheng, did he make it through?"

Muke replied, "I just checked, and his little TV is settling in. He should be coming out of the boarding gate soon."

It wasn't long before Mu Sicheng was helped out, supported by Liu Fu and Xiang Chunhua, who looked so drained it seemed like he had a hangover.

In contrast, Liu Fu and Xiang Chunhua, the two newcomers, appeared fine.

As soon as Mu Sicheng saw Bai Liu waiting at the door, he couldn't help but push himself up, cursing at Bai Liu: "I'm really impressed, Bai Liu. You know I can't use my skills if you use them, right? I was about to make a big move, and you use it on me—now I'm empty! Why don't you use someone else's skill? You can't be a good guy if you're always catching me like this!"

Despite his rude words, Mu Sicheng didn't seem particularly angry. Instead, he added in a low, slightly bitter tone, "...If it wasn't for Liu Fu and Xiang Chunhua coming to my rescue, you would've killed me sooner or later. Even if you want to train me, you don't have to be so aggressive, right?"

Liu Fu and Xiang Chunhua, a little tired but also excited to have made it through, smiled and waved. "It's okay, it's okay. It was hard for Little Mu to take us."

Mu Sicheng now had a clearer understanding of Bai Liu's style.

Bai Liu was a highly efficient and cost-effective player who liked to get things done quickly and decisively. The shadow of cooperation left by Liu Huai had become a problem for Mu Sicheng, who, like Liu

Huai, was a quick attacker. Moments of hesitation in a team battle could be fatal for both his teammates and himself.

Bai Liu had been using his skills to force Mu Sicheng to adapt quickly to his new teammates, training him relentlessly without fear since Mu Sicheng wouldn't die easily in the first level of the game.

Another reason for this was that Mu Sicheng's skills were exceptionally good.

"Even if I have a little shadow of cooperation because of... you, Bai Liu, you hit too hard..." Mu Sicheng, who was leaning against the boarding exit to catch his breath, stretched his back, his neck and shoulders aching. His eyes lazily swept over a pair of daggers in Muke's hands.

His words and his gaze froze instantly.

It was a pair of daggers—familiar to Mu Sicheng, so familiar that he recognized them immediately upon seeing them.

These daggers had saved him countless times, deflecting numerous demon attacks, and they had nearly killed him twice.

Muke, in his hurry to leave, hadn't remembered that he had been logged out for so long and still had those daggers clutched in his hands.

But with Mu Sicheng's gaze fixed on him, Muke looked down at the daggers.

The daggers disappeared from Muke's hand, but Mu Sicheng didn't move, still staring at the empty space where they had been, his voice low and measured as he asked, "Where did this dagger come from?"

"Liu Huai's," Bai Liu replied.

A strange smile appeared on Mu Sicheng's face. His eyes remained fixed on Muke's hand, but the corners of his mouth curled up in an unsettling way, as if he had heard something funny and completely unbelievable. "How can it be Liu Huai's? The skill requires a voluntary agreement to be signed before the person dies in order to pass it on. You don't have to be such an ass to me. You said it was Liu Huai's dagger, which means he had..."

At this point, Mu Sicheng stopped. Muke looked at Bai Liu with a

bewildered expression.

Bai Liu lifted his eyes nonchalantly. “He’s dead, Mu Sicheng.”

Mu Sicheng dashed down the campus path, running as fast as he could, Bai Liu’s words echoing in his ears just before he logged out of the game.

“Liu Huai wanted me to apologize to you, but I think it would’ve been better if he said it to you in person.”

[If you run fast enough, you might still be able to see Liu Huai before he dies. You do know where he is, don’t you?]

Mu Sicheng heard himself huffing and puffing, his lungs burning with each breath. He could indeed guess where Liu Huai was. If Liu Huai was going to die, he would’ve chosen to log out at the same place he first logged into the game—at a bus stop near the school.

Liu Huai had said goodbye to his sister at that bus stop, asking others to help send her home as she cried, clinging to him.

It was also there that Mu Sicheng had first met Liu Huai.

Liu Huai had no suitcase—just a large, sewn cloth bag and a bucket—and he seemed out of place, at odds with everything around him.

Mu Sicheng hadn’t expected to see this man in the same dormitory as himself, nor had he expected to find Liu Huai, hugging a bucket and crying, as soon as he entered the dorm. His father had just left, cursing Liu Huai away with foul language.

There was an unseen pressure that weighed down on Liu Huai, who had just started university, but Mu Sicheng didn’t feel it at the time—he only felt embarrassed.

To avoid the awkwardness, Mu Sicheng kindly treated the sobbing Liu Huai to a KFC meal. Liu Huai, with wet eyes, thanked him, calling him “Fourth Brother,” saying it was the first time he’d ever had such a thing, and then began to help Mu Sicheng with everything he could: signing in, cleaning, and even attempting to wash Mu Sicheng’s socks and sheets. Mu Sicheng had refused, speechless and helpless.

After being turned down, Liu Huai stood there with his head down,

looking like a child who had done something wrong.

Liu Huai was a very introverted and shy person, and if not for what happened later, Mu Sicheng might never have gotten that close to him in his life.

Liu Huai wasn't the kind of friend who fit Mu Sicheng's usual criteria —not because of his family background, but because Liu Huai had so many things he didn't want to say. He was like a fish, wanting to speak but keeping it all inside. When you asked him what was wrong, he would only smile helplessly and say, "It's nothing."

"It's my own thing."

Mu Sicheng always wanted to tell Liu Huai that between friends, sometimes your problems are my problems too.

"If you don't talk about it, it will still affect me. Because human relationships don't just keep things to themselves—whether good or bad, they transmit things to one another. Not talking about it doesn't stop it, Liu Huai."

Mu Sicheng finally reached the bus stop, propping himself up on his knees, gasping for breath as he looked across the road at Liu Huai, sitting at the platform.

Liu Huai looked down at something he was holding in his arms—a yellow bag, which seemed to contain something to eat.

Mu Sicheng couldn't help but call out, "Liu Huai!"

Liu Huai looked up sharply. The moment he saw Mu Sicheng, his eyes lit up, and he smiled with tears in his eyes. He no longer seemed uncomfortable or withdrawn. It was just a peaceful smile, as if he had dropped everything. He took a step forward and waved at Mu Sicheng, who was still running. His voice rang out from a distance, still tinged with happiness.

"I didn't think I'd see you, Fourth Brother."

"I'm sorry!" Liu Huai shouted loudly from across the street, his voice cracking. "I'm really sorry, Fourth Brother! It's my fault!"

Mu Sicheng's pupils contracted as the piercing siren of the bus rang out long and loud, and the out-of-control bus suddenly crashed into the platform.

The fried chicken fell to the ground as Liu Huai collapsed, blood spreading across the pavement, still clutching the KFC bag.

Game Hall, Nightmare Nova Room.

Bai Liu's mini-TV was settling, and the newcomer who had made it to the Core on his first try and unbelievably finished second to Nightmare Rising Star on his second attempt, had, through a series of unfortunate coincidences—being chased by the Scavengers' Guild, meeting a vest-approved little witch, and other dramatic factors—managed to reach No. 1 in the Rising Stars before his third mini-TV had even fully settled. The new star had already claimed the top spot.

This was already an impressive achievement.

However, the crowd, who now waited with bated breath in front of Bai Liu's mini-TV, clearly had even greater expectations of the result.

In front of Bai Liu's mini-TV stood all the senior guild executives except for the Killer Sequence, all eagerly waiting for Bai Liu's score to settle.

Bai Liu's mini-TV was flickering with static snowflakes—an image that typically appeared during the settlement process when the data was too large to process quickly. Wang Shun couldn't help but swallow nervously at the sight of the static.

The mini-TV had already been calculating for over a minute, indicating that the amount of data being processed was significant.

The snowflakes slowly faded, and the mini-TV began to display the settlement results.

Wang Shun held his breath, and the senior guild members in front of the mini-TV remained silent.

The spectators watched in awe as Bai Liu's achievement unfolded on the screen, seeing the golden, crowned logo appear on the mini-TV, accompanied by 3D fireworks that continued to bloom around it.

[1600673 people liked Bai Liu's TV, 166700 people favorited it, 45371 people charged Bai Liu's TV, player Bai Liu gained 578010 points.]

[Player Bai Liu received over half a million likes and charged over half

a million points in just one minute! You are loved by the audience!]

[Congratulations to Bai Liu, who has won the final promotion spot and entered the 10th position in the King's promotion on the central screen. The number of views is skyrocketing...]

[Congratulations to Bai Liu for unlocking all the main quests to complete "Love Home."]

[System: Player has reached the true ending—"The Orphanage You Escaped From Forever." The child you once were will always live inside you. Will you hate, help, or avoid them when you see them again? Will you sacrifice your old self to give them a new future as they suffer and grow? Or will you continue to grow in your current form, feeding off them like a parasite, an investor from on high?]

[What percentage of you remains the same as the original you if there is no love in the Home?]

[Love Welfare Home] true end line pass—30,000 bonus points.

[True end line pass of "Love Welfare Home"—Attribute points: 100 (can be upgraded according to the player's needs).]

[Reward for collecting "The Monster Book of Love and Welfare - Plant Patients Page"—Item: Blood Lingzhi (can be used to cure negative buffs from all diseases).]

[The Love Orphanage Monster Book - Gods Page Collection Reward—Item: Reverse Cross Pendant (Quality Unknown, with Identity Attribute; Specific Identity Attributes Unknown).]

[System: Player Bai Liu's overall rating for this mini-TV.]

The video of Bai Liu's "Love Orphanage" is rated as a Crown badge-level video, and with a ratio of 1:1702, the video is not downgraded. [Player Bai Liu's gameplay video has been entered into the VIP library.]

After entering the VIP library, players wishing to watch Bai Liu's "Love Orphanage" must become VIP members and pay 1000 points to the system. The points paid by viewers to watch Bai Liu's video will be split 50/50 between the player and the system.

[Bai Liu won the following achievements for this mini-TV:]

[King's List #10.]

[First player since Spades to reach the King's Table in his third game.]

...

The largest, most central section of the hall suddenly displayed Bai Liu's mini-TV, marked with a shiny, bright gold crown. Passing spectators stopped in their tracks, staring in disbelief at a face they had recently started to recognize.

"Isn’t this the new guy, Bai Liu, who’s been gaining momentum lately? How did he get to the King's promotion?!"

"Aren’t the people from the Scavengers' Guild after him?!"

"Look at the forums, they’ve blown up! Miao Feichi is dead, Miao Gaojiang is mentally unstable, and everyone in the Scavenger Guild has been notified that the president has changed..."

"Dark horse... This guy is too fierce. If we play league next year, there’s going to be something to see..."

Chapter End Notes

> SPOILERS .....
> I can't get over how heartbreaking it is that both of Mu Sicheng's friends, Liu Huai and Yuan Qingqing, died right in front of him—by reckless bus driving, no less. It’s devastating to think that every person he’s ever loved has been taken from him in the same tragic way, all while he was helplessly watching. It’s like he's trapped in an endless cycle of loss and trauma, forced to witness the people closest to him being ripped away, and he can't stop it. My heart is completely shattered for him.

Reality

Many guilds are seeking information about Bai Liu, a phenomenal newcomer, and many have even made offers in their posts, saying they want Bai Liu to join them and that they'll train him under any terms they choose!

At this point, the players of the Scavengers Guild, who hadn't yet figured out their direction, jumped on the bandwagon and boycotted the high-level guilds trying to recruit Bai Liu. They accused them of poaching and called them out! Look closely! That's our new president! He won't just follow you!

Although the players of the Scavengers Guild were rattled by the loss of Miao Gaojiang as their leader, it was clear that Bai Liu was also a promising prospect. Before the players of the Scavengers Guild had time to lament the leadership change, they eagerly rushed to secure Bai Liu, fearing he might be snatched away by other guilds.

A guild needs senior players who can compete in the league, but with Miao Feichi dead and Miao Gaojiang completely unhinged, the guild had no choice but to hand it over to Bai Liu.

The Scavengers Guild is a relatively low-level guild; aside from Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang, most members are ordinary players. If they were any better, they wouldn't have gone so many years without winning a match in the tournament. Once word got out that Miao Gaojiang and his son were in trouble, all the capable players fled the Scavengers Guild.

Although there's a substantial fine for resigning, to these capable players, leaving the guild is better than staying in one with no future. The Scavengers Guild has no prospects!

A new guild leader with only three games under his belt? That's laughable in the eyes of veteran players!

Without the resources to network with other guilds, without league-level players to lead the way, and without senior players to help build up the guild's assets, the guild is doomed. The annual league is vital to all guilds, and for a medium-sized guild like the Scavengers, if the Miao family can't even get league players for a year, the guild will collapse into smaller groups, and many will scatter.

Those still in the guild are mostly average players, stuck on the first

level of the game.

They can't afford the fines, and other guilds won't take them seriously, so they have no choice but to hold on to Bai Liu as their lifeline.

The players of the Scavengers Guild comfort themselves, thinking, even if they don't make it to the league this year, Bai Liu has high potential, and there's always next year!

But no matter how much they try to reassure themselves, they're still in a state of panic, each one scrambling for their new president like a chick separated from its mother.

What's peculiar is that the new president, who just inherited the guild, isn't rushing to show himself. In other guilds, when a new president takes over, they immediately make a speech or offer promises to the players to calm them down and prevent mass departures. It's a standard move: the new leader paints a rosy picture for everyone.

But not Bai Liu.

He's lazily leaning against the edge of the central hall. The small TV in the center of the room shows the King's Leaderboard, constantly repeating clips of Bai Liu's games. Bai Liu can see some people looking for him in a hurry, but he remains relaxed in his corner, not approaching.

"Are you going to say something to them?" Muke asked, turning to Bai Liu.

"No, let them be for a while," Bai Liu said, lowering his gaze. "When they've finished with the ones they want to leave and panicked enough, I'll make a deal with them. I'm not going to be president for free. It's essentially a job, no different from going to work."

Muke kept quiet, chuckling to himself.

Other new leaders make promises to the players, but Bai Liu? He'll probably make the guild promise him certain conditions and pay him a certain amount before agreeing to stay on as their president.

Muke felt a pang of sympathy for the guild members when he remembered how arrogant they had been towards Bai Liu at the start.

...How did it get to this point? And now we have to pay him to lead us?

Isn’t it usually the leader who pays those of us who work here? Why is it the other way around for Bai Liu?

What exactly is going on?

Bai Liu ignored Muke’s mixed expression and opened his system panel to check the points and items he had acquired.

In addition to the two items from the Monster Book, Bai Liu received items and points from Miao Feichi and Miao Gaojiang, which amounted to quite a sum.

[System Alert: You have obtained a completed (Murphy's Theorem Ghost Mirror).]

The only thing they knew about the prop was that staring into the mirror for a long time would cause something terrifying to appear in the reflection. The less you wanted to see something, the more likely you were to see it.

Bai Liu examined the prop description and then glanced at his points for a while. Satisfied, he closed the system panel and turned to Muke.

“Let’s quit the game for now.”

“You don’t need to follow me. I have some things to handle,” Bai Liu said, waving his hand. “You’ve worked hard. Go home and rest.”

“Oh, and Muke, remember to compile the information on those investors and send it to me.”

Muke was stunned but quickly responded, “You’re looking into your friend’s case, right? I’ll get a professional to send it anonymously and directly to the relevant authorities so it won’t be traced.”

Bai Liu turned back and smiled at him. “Thank you for helping my friend, Muke.”

Before Muke could respond, Bai Liu disappeared in a flash of data chains.

Bai Liu opened his eyes in his rented room. He got up, felt under his pillow for his phone. It was an old, cracked phone, but it still worked. He checked the time—almost 10 am. He’d entered the game nearly yesterday morning, and it seemed that the flow of time in the game matches that of the real world, about a day each time.

However, in the game lobby, each small TV has its own time and spatial latitude.

The flow of time inside each viewing area is synchronized with the game world's time for that area, and viewers can't spill over into other spaces.

This, combined with the magical inability to attack others in the game lobby, made Bai Liu realize something—he had attacked Mu Sicheng with his Siren fishbone whip, which could cut through time and space.

Bai Liu deduced that the game lobby was a distorted area where multiple temporal and spatial latitudes overlapped.

It's unreasonable for people to exist in this area in their normal forms, but somehow, they do. The fact that so many players can exist at the same time in such an overlapping space—one that is surprisingly vast—indicates an energy beyond human comprehension.

With that in mind, Bai Liu glanced down at the cross hanging around his neck.

As expected, the godly NPC's Monster Book prop always follows him out, and it claimed to be a god.

It would make sense if it were the elusive power of gods, which humans can never truly understand, only deceive or exploit.

[You are my only believer]—that's what the creature whispered to him.

The unemployed devotee fiddled with the reverse cross on his pendant, feeling the chipped fish scales, now gray and white, that had been damaged by Miao Feichi's twin swords, hanging absently from his neck.

"I don't know if I can fix this fish scale..." Bai Liu muttered as he touched the surface of it.

He dressed and headed straight out the door to the hospital where the children were being treated.

On the television in the hospital corridor, the morning news played.

This morning, a horrific stabbing incident occurred in a civic building in our city. The perpetrator, Miao, aged 49, used a kitchen knife to

sever the ten fingers of his 28-year-old son, Little Miao, forcing him to eat...

“When the police arrived, Little Miao had unfortunately died from blood loss, and Miao also committed suicide after a confrontation with the police, slitting his throat while shouting a male name. The male had no known connection to Miao, and considering Miao’s mental state, it’s believed that the name was randomly shouted…”

“...The police have confirmed that this was a tragedy caused by Miao’s deteriorating mental condition. In recent years, the number of suicides and crimes committed by mentally ill individuals has risen. Not long ago, a girl from a high school was murdered by a mentally ill inmate in prison…”

“Has the increasing number of crimes related to mental disorders become a major social problem? Are the free community counseling services effective in addressing these issues, and should stronger measures be taken to control individuals with criminal tendencies due to mental illness?”

Reality

Bai Liu watched the TV for a while, and Lu Yizhan followed him. When he saw that the program was talking about community psychologists, he casually asked, "I recommended you see that community psychologist before. Have you been going regularly?"

Lu Yizhan was probably the most concerned person about Bai Liu's mental health, fearing that Bai Liu might have a sudden lapse of judgment and make a rash decision to chase after fortune.

"After two visits, I think I've almost driven that shrink crazy, so I'm doing a good deed and not going anymore," Bai Liu replied, withdrawing his gaze from the TV to look at Lu Yizhan. Lu Yizhan raised an eyebrow. "I think you should see a psychiatrist too, with the way you look right now."

Lu Yizhan, with his hair pulled back, frowned. His eyes were bruised and bloodshot, his body reeked of cigarettes, his clothes were crumpled and covered in soot. He hadn't been home all night and was here, his eyes red and agitated, clearly overwhelmed.

Lu Yizhan let out a bitter laugh at Bai Liu's jibe. "What are you doing here?"

Bai Liu wasn't the type to get involved in others' business, and his visit to the hospital was only because Lu Yizhan had a habit of being so short-spoken.

But it was far from Bai Liu's usual style to visit someone so proactively.

"I came to see when you're ready to smoke yourself to death," Bai Liu remarked, glancing at the mountain of cigarette butts in the top lid of the trash can Lu Yizhan was holding. "What, you're not saving up to marry your sister anymore, spending all that money on cigarettes?"

Lu Yizhan raised the cigarette butt and shook it before exhaling slowly. "Cheap smokes. Don't tell Sister Dian. I'm really on edge. Some kids had another accident last night."

Bai Liu casually asked, "Oh, what happened?"

Lu Yizhan fell silent for a moment and took a sharp drag from his cigarette. "The five kids who had managed to survive in the orphanage

started fainting one by one last night for some reason and had to be rushed to the hospital."

"They checked all their indicators, and it's severe anemia. They had just been checked two days ago, and their anemia wasn't serious at all. But early this morning, these kids started going into a sort of coma, with shock and even spasms. The doctors think it might be due to excessive blood loss, but the kids are stable in the hospital now, and the doctors can't figure out where the blood loss is coming from."

"What about Liu Jiayi?" Bai Liu asked casually, his tone indifferent.

Lu Yizhan's frown deepened. "This child is strange too. She suddenly slipped out yesterday morning after her brother, and we only found her this morning. We had the doctor give her some blood and are sending her for tests now."

"She looks even paler than yesterday, much like the kids who had the accident last night. She probably has very severe anemia too."

"Some police officers wanted to question her because the timing of her escape was suspicious, but she's in really bad shape, so it's better to have a doctor look at her first."

Once Lu Yizhan started talking, he couldn't stop, as if he had been holding everything in all night but didn't have anyone to talk to. With Bai Liu there, he vented his frustrations.

He sighed deeply. "It's not just that. This whole orphanage situation doesn't feel right. I still think there's a connection with those investors."

Lu Yizhan rubbed his forehead in frustration, as though he could poke a hole in his own head to solve the case. "I asked around, and the colleagues investigating the case seem to think the same. They've sent the whole department to investigate, but it's still too hard to find any clues. The missing children from the orphanage all ran off on their own, and no one knows where they went. Plus, the investors have a special status, so it's unlikely we'll be able to investigate without solid evidence."

Bai Liu nodded, signaling he had heard, but then asked, "Can I see these children?"

Lu Yizhan paused, thinking for a moment, then nodded. "Yes, I can vouch for you. A lot of good-hearted people interested in adopting

have been coming to see the children, so you should be able to look at them."

"The other kids are fine, but Liu Jiayi's situation is more complicated. After we held her down and forced the doctor to draw blood, she kept hiding under the bed and wouldn't come out. She started screaming and overreacting when we went in."

Lu Yizhan led Bai Liu to see the children.

These pale, blood-deprived children lay weakly in their beds. Their body temperatures were low, their hearts beat slowly, and it seemed like the line between life and death blurred in their fragile bodies.

The blood-hungry desires of the adults greedily sucked the fresh blood from these children, who were at the peak of their blood production but still couldn't keep up with the adults' ravenous consumption.

"They still haven't figured out what's wrong with them," Lu Yizhan said, unable to bear looking at the children. His eyes welled up as he glanced at them. "They've suffered so much... they're so young."

Bai Liu gently traced his fingers over the dry skin of one child's mouth, his voice soft and distant. "Don't be sad. It'll get better."

[System prompt: Does player Bai Liu want to use the prop (Blood Lingzhi) to heal the subject in the hospital bed?]

[Warm tip: There is only one Blood Lingzhi plant. Adults can use it three times, children six times. This prop has specific doses and usage limits. Player Bai Liu, are you sure you want to use this prop?]

Bai Liu: [OK]

[System warning: This prop is not a core desire prop for player Bai Liu and cannot be used directly in reality... zzz... zzz... Abnormal data intrusion...]

Bai Liu felt a burning sensation in his chest, and his coin seemed to overheat.

[...Unable to clear abnormal data... Prop (Blood Lingzhi) activated...]

The child's throat rumbled oddly, as if something had been swallowed subconsciously, his face flushed and he slowly regained consciousness, opening his eyes with difficulty.

Bai Liu's emotionless face appeared before him.

The boy's breathing was weak, his chest rising and falling gently as he stared at Bai Liu, his vision blurred. A warm, inexplicable feeling rose in his stomach as he licked his lips, tasting a rich, mushroom-like flavor, one that was both sweet and evil, not at all like human blood.

It was the smell of salvation.

"Let's go, next," Bai Liu said as he pulled Lu Yizhan, who had yet to notice the child's strange awakening, out of the room, shutting the door behind him.

The child, now alone, felt a strange sense of regret and sadness as he reached out his thin fingers toward the departing figure.

Just as Bai Liu was about to leave, his head poked back through the door. "O little one, I remember your name. And remember, it was Uncle who saved you."

"Uncle Bai Liu. Remember to pay me back for your medical bills when you grow up. For now, you're too young to pay, but I've got a note on your bedside."

The boy stared in awe as Bai Liu closed the door. Then, unexpectedly, he felt a light urge to laugh.

So he laughed—weakly, but happily.

Lu Yizhan's voice came from outside, questioning, "What did you just poke your head back in to see?"

"...Nothing. I thought I'd forgotten my phone..." Bai Liu replied nonchalantly.

After visiting five wards, Bai Liu finally reached Liu Jiayi's room.

Lu Yizhan, looking confused, asked, "Why are you suddenly so kind today, visiting sick children?"

"Looking for clues. Didn't you ask me to investigate for you?" Bai Liu responded casually, not missing a beat.

Lu Yizhan was deeply puzzled. He'd seen these children many times before—was there a clue he had missed?

Before Lu Yizhan could contemplate further, Bai Liu had already

opened the door to Liu Jiayi's room.

The girl's shrill screams were so loud they could have toppled the roof, and the police officer guarding the room grimaced, covering his ears and gesturing for Bai Liu to close the door quickly.

But Bai Liu was unfazed. "Liu Jiayi, I'm Bai Liu. Let's talk."

The girl's screams stopped abruptly.

Both the officer and Lu Yizhan looked at Bai Liu in disbelief.

Bai Liu had managed to enter Liu Jiayi's room, thanks to the suspicious gaze of the guards and Lu Yizhan's vigorous vouching, along with the condition that surveillance was on and Bai Liu had a tape recorder with him.

In less than a minute after Bai Liu entered, a police officer came over holding a phone, his expression grim. "Liu Jiayi's brother, Liu Huai, is dead. We were just informed by the traffic department that there was an accident this morning. It seems like it was an accident. What should we do now?"

Lu Yizhan, with a complicated expression, turned on the loudspeaker connected to the recorder, and Bai Liu's voice came through clearly: "Liu Jiayi, can we talk?"

After a long pause, a hoarse, dry voice came from the speaker, "What do you want to talk about?"

The policeman holding the phone looked at the recorder in confusion. "Who's that? Why is Liu Jiayi suddenly willing to talk?"

"My one... no, he should be considered one of Liu Huai's... webmasters," Lu Yizhan said, his expression growing even more complicated.

Though he had no idea how Bai Liu had become acquainted with Liu Huai, he was clearly involved in this situation.

Inside the ward, Liu Jiayi crawled out from under the bed and curled up in a corner. Her head was still buried in her knees, a defensive posture indicating insecurity. Her bare skin and fingers were disturbingly pale, with no visible signs of bruising or veins.

It was clear Liu Jiayi had also suffered blood loss, something Bai Liu

had already guessed. The antidote [Blood Lingzhi] could only be obtained by collecting the page "Love Welfare Institution - Plant Patients," but Liu Jiayi had spent most of her time at the welfare institution, so she never had the chance to collect this page.

"What do you want to talk to me about?" Liu Jiayi asked hoarsely, her head still lowered.

Bai Liu, always direct, replied, "You know Liu Huai is dead, right?"

Liu Jiayi's whole body trembled as she shrank into herself, almost disappearing into a small, unnoticed shape on the quilt. Her breath hitched in her throat.

She had run out this morning to find Liu Huai, but she hadn't been able to prevent his death in time.

"I have his soul," Bai Liu continued calmly, "or rather, part of it is with me, and part of it is with the system. If you want to resurrect him, you need his soul. But I won't give it to you for free. You'll need to exchange something for it."

Liu Jiayi was silent for a moment before asking, "What do you want?"

Bai Liu eyed her carefully. "You should know what I want. I want your soul. I need you to accompany me to the league this year. If you win, you can use the points, your brother's, to make a wish and get out of the game. I also promised Liu Huai I would take you out of the game. This is how I will do it."

Liu Jiayi slowly lifted her head. Her gray eyes, swollen and red from crying, locked onto Bai Liu.

"You're ambitious," she said, her voice filled with bitterness. "If I want to win the league, why not just join the King's Guild? They have a much better chance of winning. Even if you take my brother's soul, as long as I win, I can use my wish to take his soul from you, and the system will do whatever I ask."

"Does that include being siblings with Liu Huai forever, without any hard feelings?" Bai Liu asked in a calm tone. "I thought you'd had enough of the system—a thing full of lies."

Liu Jiayi clenched her fists, remembering Hearts' flirtatious smile and the [Psyche's Tears] prop from the system.

The god-level prop was the highest in the game, yet it hadn't granted her wish.

"You can make a deal with me," Bai Liu said, meeting her gaze. "I can tell you everything about my abilities. I can't break a deal, and my soul would be imprisoned if I did. At least you can trust me to keep my word."

Liu Jiayi pursed her lips and asked softly, "If I agree to trade my soul, what will happen to me? Will I have to stay in the orphanage? Will I need to disappear one day a week to enter the game? Or maybe you'll send me back to the countryside—that might be easier."

"I don't think this orphanage will last much longer," Bai Liu said, though he didn't mention that Muke was already gathering evidence to report it anonymously. "I can't let you return to your real father's village either, but I do have a friend who wants to adopt you."

Liu Jiayi, as though she had already expected this, asked, "Was it the policeman who's been guarding me?"

Bai Liu nodded. "Yes."

Liu Jiayi hugged her knees again, turning her head to look out the window. It faced the street, where the sounds of vendors filled the air, the warm morning breeze blowing in. The sight of the vendors hawking their goods made her seem so out of place.

"Red bean cakes, sweet and savory, three for ten dollars!"

"Bean curd brains, five dollars a bowl!"

"Beef noodles..."

"This morning, that policeman bought me red bean cakes," Liu Jiayi said abruptly. "Because I had my blood drawn, and he saw from the CCTV that I kept looking out the window. I guess he thought I wanted something sweet, so he went out and bought them for me."

Bai Liu noticed a paper bag of red bean cakes on the bedside table, cold but unopened.

"He's the first nice person I've met," Liu Jiayi said slowly, her tone oddly calm. "So, a person like me—don't go ruining him."

"I'm a gamer," she continued softly, "and being around me could pull

him into the game. So forget it, Bai Liu."

She looked away from the window again.

The sweet scent of red bean cakes and the warm breeze brushed Liu Jiayi's cold forehead. The sunlight bathed her pale face in a dull yellow outline as she closed her eyes, lost in thought.

She didn't deserve kindness, let alone something as pure as Lu Yizhan's.

There were so few people in this world willing to spend ten dollars just to be nice to her. Even if she was cheap, there was no reason to ruin the one good thing left.

"It's a possibility," Bai Liu said objectively, "but considering my friend's particular nature, it's unlikely that your influence has pulled him into the game."

"After all, even I can't do that. For him, adopting a child is a subjective choice. He likes you so much that he was already preparing for your arrival before you even asked. I think he was prepared for whatever would come after."

"Are you sure you want to say no to him, Liu Jiayi?"

"Lu Yizhan will be the best dad in the world," Bai Liu said confidently. "If you want, he'll run five kilometers every day just to buy you red bean cakes, send you to the best school for the disabled, stay up late making rag dolls—he'll do anything for you."

Liu Jiayi opened her mouth, about to scoff at the idea that someone could be so foolish, but the words caught in her throat. She choked out, "No more."

"Bai Liu!" Lu Yizhan burst into the room, his face flushed with anger. "What are you saying to that little girl?!"

He stormed in, his voice rising with frustration as he interrupted Bai Liu, whose statement about Lu Yizhan being the best father had clearly shaken him.

Lu Yizhan scratched his cheek in embarrassment and moved toward Bai Liu, trying to drag him out. "What's wrong with you? Talking about her brother, then trying to lobby for me? Are you human? Look at what you've done—you've made her cry! I came here to check

something, and now you're causing this mess! I'll send you away if you don't stop!"

Lu Yizhan glared at Bai Liu in exasperation.

But Liu Jiayi spoke softly, "Bai Liu? Are you leaving?"

Lu Yizhan's scalp tingled at the question. Liu Jiayi's hands reached out, grasping the air in a fragile gesture, her face showing no tears.

Bai Liu turned his head and shrugged at Lu Yizhan, mouthing, Seems like I can't leave yet.

Under Lu Yizhan's tense gaze, Bai Liu walked back and sat beside Liu Jiayi's bedside. She gently pulled at the corner of his coat, as though she was attached to him.

"Lu Yizhan, can you buy me three red bean cakes and bring them up?" Bai Liu said naturally. "I haven't had breakfast either."

Lu Yizhan, defeated, just sighed. "..."

Lu Yizhan held his breath and raised his hand to wave at Bai Liu twice, verbally scolding him for being so shameless. "You'll see, Bai Liu!"

"Bai Liu never liked children when he was younger, so why is this little girl giving him such a good look...?" Lu Yizhan muttered as he closed the door and walked downstairs, seemingly ready to go buy red bean cakes for Bai Liu. "...The old man still eats red bean cakes."

When Lu Yizhan closed the door, Bai Liu looked at Liu Jiayi. "Are you sure you don't want to be adopted by Lu Yizhan?"

Liu Jiayi pursed her lips and gently shook her head. "No, I can follow you in the game, but there's no need to be adopted in reality. I can just pretend to go back to my real father's village as a cover. No one there will notice if I'm dead or alive. Then I can stay in the game. I can afford to pay the points for staying in the game indefinitely."

"That's a waste of points. Are you sure you want to stay in the game with me?" Bai Liu asked again. "Lu Yizhan is a rare good guy among seven billion people. You won't meet someone like him again if you miss out. I'm genuinely trying to sell you on my friend because he really likes you. Otherwise, I wouldn't have saved you in the game."

Liu Jiayi was silent for a moment, then slowly shook her head with a soft, self-deprecating smile. "I'll just thank him for the three red bean cakes. I won't harm him anymore."

Bai Liu leaned forward as he sat on the stool next to Liu Jiayi's bed. "Lu Yizhan and I are completely different types. He's the kind of person who gives you something without expecting anything in return, but I'll remember even if I buy you a red bean cake until you give it back to me."

"If you agree to trade your soul with me, I will drain you of your value to the last moment. Of course, I'll pay you accordingly. Do you want to, Liu Jiayi?"

Liu Jiayi met Bai Liu's gaze for a moment before suddenly pointing to the door. "Now go downstairs and buy me red bean cakes."

Lu Yizhan came back upstairs with three red bean cakes, but he had been delayed by a phone call from his sister downstairs, so the cakes were already a bit cold by the time he arrived.

He subconsciously swept his gaze over the red bean cake he had bought earlier, still sitting unopened on the bedside table.

"Jiayi, who bought this for you?" Lu Yizhan asked, stepping forward. "Other police officers?"

Liu Jiayi took a small bite from the edge of the red bean cake, the sweet, sticky bite sliding down her throat and warming her whole body.

There was a small piece of mushroom in the red bean cake with a hint of blood—it was a blood reishi.

It was a shame. She didn't like the taste of mushrooms in her red bean cake.

"Bai Liu bought them for me," Liu Jiayi mumbled, bowing her head and clutching the red bean cake.

Lu Yizhan was shocked. "And he would spend money on other people?!"

Liu Jiayi shook her head. "It's not free."

Lu Yizhan's expression faltered. "I knew it! Did he ask you for money, Jiayi? No, you don't even have any money..." Lu Yizhan was puzzled when he spotted a piece of paper on the bedside table. He picked it up, and his face instantly split in disbelief.

[IOU: Today, Liu Jiayi asked Bai Liu to buy one red bean cake for ten yuan, and three pieces in total. The goods should be three pieces for three yuan.]

[Liu Jiayi instructed Bai Liu to pay for the errand: 5 yuan. Liu Jiayi chose to use the rest of the red bean cake to cover the debt, so Liu Jiayi actually owes Bai Liu 5 yuan.]

"This bastard!!!" Lu Yizhan was really convinced. "A cake costs three yuan, and he charged you five yuan for the errand. He's good at business! What did you use to cover your debt with the red bean cake? Don't trust him! He's a jerk. He probably took more than three yuan from you! Tell the police uncle—he'll help you recover it later!"

Liu Jiayi finished the last bite of her red bean cake, clapped her hands, and, as if remembering something, turned her head to look out the window. She squinted her eyes and smiled innocently, like a little girl. "I paid off my debt with something worth one red bean cake. He didn't overcharge me."

Lu Yizhan became even more confused. "What was it?"

Liu Jiayi replied, not particularly concerned. "It's not very important, and it doesn't hold much value."

"No matter how worthless it is, don't trade with Bai Liu..." Lu Yizhan said, exasperated. "He's so treacherous. He'll trade everything with people; he's so calculating."

"Is that so bad?" Liu Jiayi looked up at Lu Yizhan, her tone naive and almost ethereal. "Is it bad that I can get everything I want through trade, that he will never betray me, and that he'll never give me anything, good or bad, for no reason?"

She couldn't trust anyone else, so she simply didn't trust.

Bai Liu was the best choice for her because Bai Liu understood her, her lowliness, her evil, everything about her that wasn't like a child and wasn't like a normal human being.

She would never have to worry about hurting Bai Liu, nor would she

have to worry about Bai Liu hurting her. Their relationship was like a bank transaction, always calculated so clearly and reasonably that there would be no betrayal or suspicion.

Lu Yizhan looked at Liu Jiayi in stunned silence, but it wasn't long before someone came to call him.

"Yizhan, the other five children are awake!"

Lu Yizhan's eyes lit up, and he put down the red bean cakes he had bought for Bai Liu before rushing to see them.

Bai Liu took a bite of his red bean cake as he looked at an extra Liu Jiayi soul note in his old wallet. He took a big bite with his left hand, then frowned. "It's too sweet, and this goes for three yuan? I should have just bought one."

Bai Liu wrapped the red bean cakes, clipped his phone from his pocket, and scanned the screen—it was from Lu Yizhan.

"Where are you? I've bought you some food, so come eat it!" Lu Yizhan sounded excited. "I'm telling you, those five kids are awake! The doctor says they're doing better! If you need anything, you can ask now!"

"No, I've sorted it out," Bai Liu said slowly. "You should be able to sort it out right away too."

Lu Yizhan was shocked. "When did you sort it out? What do you mean, we sort this out right away?!"

Bai Liu looked back at the hospital with his phone in the air and, instead of answering Lu Yizhan's question directly, he lamented absentmindedly, "Lu Yizhan, I find that at fourteen years old, I really ate your shit up."

"Luckily, I'm more than fourteen now. I don't eat your shit anymore." Bai Liu took another bite of his red bean cake, wrinkled his nose, and swallowed. "Remember to buy me another meal when things are sorted out, or I'll be a bit short—I'm running out of phone bills. Hang up."

"?!?!!?" Lu Yizhan was confused. "I thought we were talking about a case. Why are we talking about... Hey!!! You're really dead! Bai Liu! Bai Liu!!!"

Lu Yizhan cursed and charged Bai Liu's mobile number, which was said to be in arrears. As soon as he did, he turned to see the police officer guarding Liu Jiayi with him, looking up in a trance.

"Yizhan, someone has posted our case on the internet..."

"?!?" Lu Yizhan opened his phone in disbelief. "There's no card over at Cyber Security? I thought the status of this case said they weren't allowed to post it?"

The police officer shook his head, slightly delirious. "It's not about the case circumstances, it's about the clues to the case. Someone compiled what happened to these kids back then, along with the medical records of those investors. It's now trending..."

Lu Yizhan: "?!?"

Reality

"I had my dad hire someone to handle it— a professional, with an overseas address. It shouldn't be that easy to trace, and my dad mentioned there are ways to track it down," Muke told Bai Liu on the phone, coughing awkwardly. "There's a business rivalry between my dad and someone here, so he left out some of the less credible details, like the blood ganoderma part, and vaguely hinted at the fact that these investors were experimenting on children to cure them. You don't mind if it gets bigger, do you?"

Bai Liu used the computer to search for the following trending topics.

#BlackheartEntrepreneursGroup
#ShockingInsideStoryOfTheWelfareHomePoisoning
...

"I don't mind," Bai Liu replied, leaning back in his sofa chair. "I'm the type who doesn't care much about the process, as long as it gets results. But they're probably spending a lot of money trying to hype it up now, aren't they?"

"Yeah, but it's not going to be easy to get them to pull back. We're also pouring money into the hot seat, so it shouldn't be easy for them to back down until the police get involved," Muke said.

"Please, Muke," Bai Liu said. "Rest up and get back in shape. Get into the game at midnight; I've got some business to take care of this afternoon."

Muke snorted. "Okay, Bai Liu."

At 3 pm, Bai Liu brought a couple back to the hospital.

Across from Liu Jiayi sat a couple, nervously rubbing their knees, looking expectantly and incredulously at the little girl sitting on the bed. Soon, their eyes moistened with disbelief as they looked at Bai Liu standing by and asked in a trembling voice, "Bai Liu, can we really adopt her?"

"... Are we eligible to adopt her?"

Bai Liu leaned against the door and gave Liu Fu and Xiang Chunhua a

breezy glance. "You are eligible for adoption."

The couple's tragic loss of their only daughter, their solid reputation, and their love for children, combined with their age and the fact that they didn't want any more children, made them ideal candidates for adoption. In fact, Liu Fu and Xiang Chunhua were among the best types of adoptive families—far superior to someone like Lu Yizhan, a small-town policeman with limited means.

For the children in the orphanage, Liu Fu and Xiang Chunhua were a dream adoptive family—this was their best chance.

Liu Jiayi was also aware of this. She propped herself up on the railing of her hospital bed and spoke in a guarded tone. "Bai Liu, I said I can stay alone. It's completely unnecessary for you to find me an adoptive family like this. I won't be grateful to you, and I don't want to keep acting or pretending in front of them. You have to understand, I'm a gamer. They might stay with me and say..."

"They're gamers too." Bai Liu interrupted Liu Jiayi with a nonchalant remark.

Liu Jiayi went quiet, a look of surprise crossing her face.

Bai Liu drew a bench and sat down, cutting off whatever Liu Jiayi was about to say. "They know you're a little witch. I made them buy and watch all your game videos, so they know what kind of kid you are. You don't have to pretend in front of them. Just go into the game and do what you need to do."

"I sold you on Lu Yizhan before, partly because he liked you so much, and partly because your brother really wanted Lu Yizhan to adopt you. He thought Lu Yizhan was a good man who could give you a perfect family." Bai Liu raised his eyes to Liu Jiayi. "But if you don't want that, I'll arrange something else so you can move around more freely without worrying about the aftermath."

Both Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu were still a little nervous.

Xiang Chunhua, rubbing her thighs, looked at the blind little girl. "My family had a child before, but... something happened to me and Mr. Liu. It's true we're not very well-off, not in the game, not outside the game. Otherwise, we wouldn't have let Guoguo..."

She paused and lowered her head to wipe her eyes with her palms. "Jiayi, I know you're a great little girl, and we can't do much for you.

But Bai Liu said you need a place to stay outside the game that's legal and sensible. You're a kid, and there's no good place for Fang Ke to go."

"We can still help with that." Liu Fu took over from Xiang Chunhua, leaning forward nervously, his words hesitant. "This adoption is just a stopgap measure. If you don't like us or don't want us as your nominal parents, you can dissolve the relationship when the game is over."

"If you need anything, you can always talk to us. We'll do our best to help. Do you think that's okay?"

Xiang Chunhua added, "Look how skinny you are. Stay with us, and at least you can have a hot meal when you come out of the game."

"I make great soup too," Liu Fu said, embarrassed.

It was clear that these two middle-aged people, almost a hundred years old combined, were speaking to an eight-year-old girl in a careful, consultative tone, afraid of scaring her away. They felt as though they had nothing to offer and couldn't keep her.

Liu Jiayi sat on the edge of the bed, her head bowed. She sat motionless, her thin fingers slowly gripping the covers, her toes curled in the air.

"Games, shelter, help with cover, a safe place to rest and rejuvenate—all of that is here. They're my people. I promise not to harm you and will help look after you. After all, you're underage, and there are many things that will be easier with two adults to guide you. Do you have any other questions?" Bai Liu asked. "Just ask, and I can figure everything out for you."

All the problems Bai Liu spoke about had always been ones Liu Jiayi solved on her own. She had gotten used to hiding, solving everything herself, with no one ever offering to help her.

Finally, Liu Jiayi looked up, her eyes red, but her tone cold. "Yes. How am I going to repay you for all this?"

Xiang Chunhua was confused. "Repay? What for?"

"For shelter, hot meals, the soup you made, all that." Liu Jiayi thought it was only right to repay what was owed. "How do you want me to repay you? Money? Points?"

Xiang Chunhua's eyes reddened, and she was about to protest when Bai Liu spoke up. "I'll have them list the money they spend on you each day in a bill and settle it when you get out of the game. Any other questions?"

Liu Jiayi slowly shook her head, still feeling like she owed something.

But for a moment, she didn't know what to repay or how.

Xiang Chunhua gazed at Liu Jiayi with affection, wanting to embrace her. After hesitating for a long time, the middle-aged woman, her face full of weariness, gently touched Liu Jiayi's face. Her tone choked with sobs. "How can you be so young? When Guoguo was eight, she would have been twice as big as you..."

Liu Fu's eyes were red, his voice hoarse. "Take care of her well, feed her lots of roast meat and bone broth, and she'll grow up fast."

"Eat as much as Guoguo did, and she'll grow into a big girl before you know it."

Liu Jiayi seemed unsure of what to say and remained silent.

Bai Liu looked at her. "I'll find you the best place to live. Don't think so much. Do what you need to do. I'll be in the game tonight. You can follow me if you want. It's okay if you don't want to. After Liu Fu and Xiang Chunhua adopt you, it'll be easier for you. You won't have to keep hiding from everything like you did before."

There was a long silence before Liu Jiayi whispered, "Hmm," indicating that she understood.

---------- --

When Bai Liu walked out of the hospital, Liu Fu shook his arm, unsure of what to say. When Bai Liu looked over, he saw Xiang Chunhua and Liu Fu both looking at him with tears in their eyes.

"Thanks, Bai Liu. Really, thanks," Liu Fu said, blowing his nose. He didn't know how to express his gratitude, so he got straight to the point. "We're going into the game tonight, right? We're going in too, right?"

They were prepared to die and had never expected to have a little girl as their daughter before their death. It wasn't that they hadn't thought about suicide in their darkest moments, but once they entered the

game, they became cautious, careful not to influence others.

"Yeah, you're going in too. I'll have Mu Sicheng continue to take care of you, probably for the second-level game. Is that okay with you?" Bai Liu asked.

Liu Fu and Xiang Chunhua nodded decisively. "No problem."

.....

After taking care of Liu Jiayi's affairs, Bai Liu returned to his small rented house.

Seeing that it was still early, Bai Liu, mentally exhausted and ready to rest before moving on to the next game, set his alarm, put on his pajamas, and lay down on his bed, closing his eyes.

Bai Liu was always a good sleeper and rarely dreamed.

But this time, perhaps due to being too drained or too tired, Bai Liu had a strange dream. He felt his body covered in white frost starting from his fingertips, freezing him irresistibly. A cold body appeared on him, pressing down on his heart.

It was this ghost, quite good-looking.

Tawil propped himself up beside him and looked down at Bai Liu, his pale pupils devoid of human emotion. "Your doom is coming."

Bai Liu could feel Tawil's small arm propped up against his ear, a cool sensation.

Half asleep, Bai Liu looked up at Tawil, tempted to say that he never seemed to have any luck, but was used to bad luck.

However, his voice felt stuck, as though it were glued to something, and he couldn't speak clearly. Instead, all that came out were strange, sticky short sounds that went with the position. Bai Liu stopped trying to speak gracefully and merely gestured with his eyes for Tawil to continue.

Tawil leaned over Bai Liu's neck, picked up the cross hanging from his chest with his fingers, kissed it with his head, and then placed it on Bai Liu's forehead, gently tapping it with his index finger.

"At a quarter to nine on the wall clock, the avenger from a timeline other than this one will come upon you with a death destined for you,

so that God will manifest Himself and reveal Himself to you here, to bless you and shelter you."

Tawil looked down at Bai Liu, who was frowning and struggling in his nightmare, his tone carrying a sense of indifference and solemnity, as if he were a god.

He continued, "Remember, my evil devotee, to dodge the bullet of the hunter's suicide, and don't feast your eyes on desire with your right side—the only and irreversible time in you, until real death comes."

Tawil placed his hand over Bai Liu's eyes as he bowed his head and kissed the reverse cross on Bai Liu's forehead, then said in a voice as cold and holy as the cross, "The key to everything lies in the hand of the witch. The poison or the antidote is the key to your choice."

"The gods live forever; the soul lives on."

Tawil placed the cross back in Bai Liu's shirt and gazed at him, his pupils reflecting a pale pink rose whose branches were gradually spreading and blooming. "Beware of the rose."

As soon as the words left his mouth, Tawil turned into a pile of luscious rose petals, scattering them over Bai Liu's body. A pungent rose fragrance filled the air, making Bai Liu uncomfortable. The petals quickly turned into light pink smoke that hovered obsessively over Bai Liu's blanket, before falling under the bed like burning ashes, swept away by the wind until they vanished.

Bai Liu's eyes snapped open.

What roses? What petals? What Tawil? He was lying on an old bed, with springs poking out at the foot of the bed in his low-rent house, less than three meters high. Sitting up, Bai Liu pulled the cross from his neck.

The crucifix he kept close was strangely cold to the touch. Bai Liu held it to his nose and sniffed it.

A rose scent, one that made him uncomfortable, lingered on the crucifix.

"Doom and death are about to befall me..." Bai Liu rubbed the cross and narrowed his eyes. "...Be careful of the hunter and the rose."

Tawil is a god, and the status he had acquired through the cross had

marked him as [a believer in Tawil]. The suggestive messages Tawil had just given him were, in colloquial terms, [oracles].

The [oracles] from ancient times to the present seem plausible but imprecise, including the one Tawil had just delivered. Many things were ambiguous.

If Bai Liu were to use his previous worldview to interpret these ambiguous [oracles], he would say that because God doesn't exist, these [oracles] are fabricated by the believing deities themselves, and must be vague in order to offer greater tolerance for foreseeing what is happening.

But this time, Tawil's [oracle] gave him a very familiar feeling.

"It's kind of like what I say after I've been shielded, because there are things I can't say outright that will be blocked, and I have to beat around the bush to convey the same message in other words..." Bai Liu pondered. "So it's quite possible that Tawil is also being blocked by a higher being and can't directly tell me what to avoid, but has to imply it in such a subtle way that I should be careful and alert."

The witch is a good guess, referring to Liu Jiayi.

But what do the rose and the hunter imply?

Bai Liu squinted as he held the rose-scented cross and glanced at the time on the battered wall clock.

It was exactly a quarter past nine.

Bai Liu heard footsteps coming one after another from the walkway in front of his house. The soundproofing in this rented house was poor, so Bai Liu could clearly hear the footsteps from outside—normal but regular, all going straight through the door and up the stairs, like regular residents of the building.

But when the fourth set of footsteps reappeared with great regularity, Bai Liu relaxed his breathing, got out of bed, put on his clothes and shoes, and opened the window to look outside. He quickly assessed his chances of surviving a jump from the fifth floor, then decided against it.

The building he lived in was a low-rent building from top to bottom. Bai Liu lived on the fifth floor, and there were only four other tenants on his floor. This meant these weren't normal tenants, and the trained

footsteps were familiar to Bai Liu. He had only heard them from one person before—

—Lu Yizhan.

The footsteps finally stopped in front of Bai Liu's door, which was violently kicked open. A group of men shouted at him, guns flat in their hands. "Police! Don't move! Put your hands up!"

Bai Liu quickly looked down, removed the coin from his neck, put it in his mouth, and pressed it under his tongue.

The night breeze came through the window as Bai Liu slowly turned and raised his hands unsteadily.

The wind whipped his hair across his forehead, and although Bai Liu did nothing, there was a sense of calmness, as if he anticipated his arrest. He obediently allowed the officers to twist his arms behind his back and tie him up without asking questions or showing fear.

Although Bai Liu hadn't yet figured out why he had been arrested, the officers were clearly terrified of him. The officers who had broken into his room at a quarter to nine were heavily armed, wearing leather gloves and protective clothing. Bai Liu visually estimated that they carried shields, maybe 2 to 3 cm thick, made from some strong metal.

Their gear made the officers look like bomb disposal experts preparing to defuse an explosive device.

And Bai Liu, who had no idea when he had become as dangerous as a bomb, dozed off in the car on the way to the station.

The car Bai Liu was in was special, with a thick metal plate separating the front from the back. Only a small 15 cm by 15 cm window allowed Bai Liu to see a small policeman nervously gulping, pointing his gun at him as though afraid that the young man, bound and restrained, might suddenly break free.

The light from the streetlamp shone through the small window in front, casting a glow over the back of Bai Liu's car. On the wall, a red triangular symbol depicted an octopus writhing hideously, with its tentacles. Next to it was a sketch of a small man with limbs scattered and bleeding, and a large red cross above the octopus.

Under the logo, the words read:

[This is an unknown supernaturally dangerous object that has a tendency to harm people! Please stay alert and keep your distance!]

A strip of light flashed across Bai Liu's emotionless face, scaring the policeman watching him from the small window. The policeman driving was startled by the movement. "What's wrong?! Has it mutated?"

The small policeman sobbed, "It! It's breathing!"

"Calm down!" The officer driving took two deep breaths. "It's the first humanoid heretic monster our precinct has captured. It's normal for it to breathe. Don't be alarmed."

The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment

Bai Liu's tongue moved in his mouth, the cold coin moving slowly under the thin mucous membrane at the base of his tongue, and with an inexplicable emotion in his eyes, he looked calmly out of the small window at the policeman who was guarding him with fearful eyes.

The lorry with its heavy metal tailgate sped across the deserted road at night, followed by several other cars, towards a huge, domed, stadium-sized white building in the middle of the moor.

The interior of the domed building is smooth and silvery white, a shiny metal that reflects light, cast in tightly knitted patterns, each side resembling a mirror. A huge lamp hangs in the center like the sun, its cold white light blindingly reflecting off the walls and coming from all directions. Everyone who enters wears dark goggles to shield their eyes.

The men who had arrested Bai Liu in the name of the police had expertly put on their goggles before entering the building, but Bai Liu, shackled with metal chains, had no goggles to wear.

It only takes a second or two for the eye to lose its normal function in such high light levels without goggles, and only a few spots of light are visible.

Bai Liu had hoped to take a quick look at the interior of this peculiar building to help plan his escape later, but the intense light and the building's design were clearly meant to prevent anyone from memorizing the layout.

In this light, the human eye cannot see anything at all, let alone remember the route.

Bai Liu quickly gave up on the idea, closing his eyes with a resigned smile as he was pulled along by the others.

The men eventually placed Bai Liu in a small, gray metal room, roughly square in shape, not very high. There was a table, two benches, a bright lamp on the table, and a small window in the wall, the same size as the one Bai Liu had seen in the car. He could hear voices from outside.

"Reporting to the 3rd Detachment Lieutenant! The squad has successfully captured the high-risk humanoid heretic with proposed code 006!"

"No one has gone mad on this mission! No one committed suicide under the heretic's influence! No one was physically maimed by the heretic's attacks! Because Captain Tang has classified this heretic as a red high-risk heretic monster, capturing him required 5 modified armored vehicles, 17-barrel guns, a straight gun barrel, 33 members of Team 3, and no personnel or weapons were expended. The mission was successfully completed!"

A gentle male voice replied, "Thank you, team. I will interrogate this captured humanoid heretic myself."

The voice of the reporter sounded anxious, "Captain Su, what's the rush? You should go with Captain Tang! He's more resistant, and it was his idea to capture this heretic by force tonight. It's too dangerous for you to face this unknown heretic alone."

"Where is Captain Tang?"

The gentle voice grew slightly colder, and the man addressed as Captain Su sighed with a touch of disappointment, "After pushing us to capture the heretic tonight, he went back to drinking and is now drunk somewhere. His phone isn't working, and people are looking for him."

"Captain Tang went and drank again?!" The team member's voice was full of disbelief. "How can he do that?! He used his captain's authority to force us to arrest this heretic without fully investigating the situation tonight! Didn't Captain Tang say he was going to handle it himself? Why is he getting drunk again?!"

"This isn’t the first time he’s gone overboard, sending a detachment to catch a monster in some strange place," Captain Su laughed bitterly. "He sees anyone as a monster when he's drunk, but this time he gave very specific and exact information about this humanoid heretic called Bai Liu. I thought he had genuinely investigated, but now... maybe the person is just an ordinary citizen."

"Let me go in first and see what's going on."

With that, the metal door to Bai Liu's small room was pushed open.

The visitor was a man in his thirties, wearing a police uniform, a

protective mask, and brown leather gloves. He had a gentle, modest face, stood over 5'8", and had soft amber-colored eyes. His hair had been unkempt for a while, hanging halfway down the sides of his face, and his eyes had a slight green-black tint from staying up too late. Despite this, he appeared clean and tidy, someone who managed to keep his life in order despite a demanding job. At first glance, he seemed affable—the kind of person people could easily let their guard down around.

Bai Liu's eyes fell on the identity tag clipped to his right breast pocket: [Su Yang, Deputy Head of the Third Detachment of the Dangerous Heresy Unit].

Su Yang gestured for Bai Liu to sit down. After Bai Liu complied, Su Yang noticed his gaze on the ID tag. He nodded at it and explained with a helpless smile, "You may not believe this, but we are indeed regular state department personnel."

Bai Liu raised his eyes, disinterested, and said nothing.

Su Yang’s expression grew more helpless. "As strange as it sounds, at a time when many ordinary people aren't aware of it, there have been many existences in this world that defy human scientific understanding—monsters, if you will. We call them heretics."

"Some heretics drive people to madness, others drain their blood, and to deal with these dangerous heretics, we created the Department of Heresy Disposal. The men who arrested you tonight are members of this department."

Bai Liu lifted his eyes. "What does that have to do with me? Do I look like a heretic?"

Su Yang didn’t answer directly. Instead, he pulled out a remote control from the table in front of Bai Liu, flicked it toward the wall, and a white screen slowly descended. A projector on the opposite side started displaying a PowerPoint.

[Dangerous Heresy Department Section]

Su Yang looked at Bai Liu. "Let me explain what I just said, and then I'll talk specifically about your situation. Our department has been around for a long time, but we still don't know where these heretics come from. They just appear, in all sorts of strange and terrifying forms—people, animals, objects."

Su Yang pressed the remote, and the slides switched.

He continued, "These heretics have the power to destroy us. Do you remember the Mirror City bombing?"

The PowerPoint displayed a photo of the antique mirror Bai Liu had seen in the 'Last Train to Burst.' Several people in uniforms, similar to Su Yang's, were examining the mirror with serious expressions.

Su Yang said, "This is the mirror from the Mirror City bombing. After the bombing, many people questioned how someone could bring a bomb onto the subway undetected. They said the mirror was too thick to hide a bomb, but our announcement was that the thieves had hidden the bomb inside the mirror. We were ridiculed for a month for suggesting such an absurd theory."

He pressed the remote again, and the image changed to show the same group of uniformed men pulling an immense black bomb from the mirror, their faces full of shock.

"But that's exactly what happened," Su Yang said. "The mirror shattered in the explosion, and we had to recover it from the underground station. After extensive testing, we discovered that the mirror was a fold in space, capable of storing objects much larger than itself. And what was stored inside was undetectable by any known rays or devices."

"Through further testing, we learned that the mirror not only stored objects but also had a mental materialization function. If someone stared at it for long enough, the mirror would change what it contained based on their deepest fears."

He continued, "The thieves had been staring at the mirror day and night, fearing it would break. Their collective fear materialized into the bomb, which eventually exploded on the train."

The screen switched again to a set of instructions:

[Heresy Name]: Murphy's Mirror of Theorem
[No.]: CEDT-0714
[Report]: Found in a mega-explosion. During recovery, it was discovered that the train had been trapped in a looping underground line an hour before it exploded. The loop was later confirmed to be the fear of the passengers, who couldn't leave the train as it was about to explode, their terror reflecting in the mirror fragments.
[Danger Class]: Light Grade Red

Su Yang chuckled. "After our experiments, the mirror no longer contained bombs. We had one experimenter, who really hated spicy food, stare at the mirror after eating a particularly fiery hot pot. After an hour, the mirror stored all the contents of his spicy hot pot."

Su Yang continued, "You saw the mushroom poisoning case in the orphanage on TV, right?"

Bai Liu glanced at the wall—on the screen was a hand-painted picture of the blood primrose.

Su Yang smiled faintly. "We took over that case, and our investigation revealed that the investors were likely connected to... substances that were supposed to cure all diseases. Unfortunately, we couldn’t find solid evidence. But coincidentally, this morning, someone revealed a clue to us. The second team is already on their way to arrest someone."

The PowerPoint switched to a small video clip from a hospital surveillance camera.

In the video, Bai Liu was visiting a young child in a hospital bed. After Bai Liu left, the child quickly recovered and whispered, "Thank you," looking at the door Bai Liu had just passed through.

Bai Liu mentally sighed.

"After you left, we did a test on the child's throat," Su Yang said. "And we found peculiar mycelium residue." He pulled out a small glass jar containing a blood-red mycelium and looked at Bai Liu. "Comrade Bai Liu, there was no one else visiting the children that day. They got better after you left. Can you explain where this mycelium came from?"

"That's why you cops brought me, a good, law-abiding citizen, here in these shackles at nine o'clock at night?" Bai Liu held up the heavy silver shackle in his hand and lightly digressed, "This surveillance video isn't conclusive evidence at all."

"Sir, isn't it a bit too arbitrary to arrest people like this?" Su Yang coughed awkwardly.

It was true—the video was only meant to intimidate Bai Liu and was not solid enough to be used as evidence for his arrest.

"I'm just a laid-off worker living in a cheap rental," Bai Liu said lightly. "If I could get my hands on that cure-all you're talking about, what wouldn't I do to feed it to these kids for free? You've done your research on me, and you know I'm short on money, right?"

It was true that Bai Liu's financial situation wasn't great, and if he'd really gotten his hands on the blood ganoderma, it wouldn't make sense for him to just give it away to a child without leaving his name on it. After all, if you thought about it, you'd realize how much money could be made from it, and few people could resist the temptation. Not to mention, Bai Liu had been laid off for almost a month now.

"An ordinary laid-off worker? Why would Miao, who killed his son and committed suicide not long ago, shout your name in terror before slitting his throat?" Su Yang quickly regained his composure and pressed the remote control.

A new video appeared on the screen.

On the screen was Miao Gaojiang's tired, manic, insane face. His eyes were sunken, his cheekbones high, and a knife pressed against his throat, a mess of blood at his feet, with the dead body of Miao Feichi lying unconscious nearby.

Someone in the video said, "Miao Gaojiang! Calm down! Put the knife down!"

"Suicide won't solve anything! Get a grip on yourself, and if you have a problem you can't solve, talk to us police!"

Miao Gaojiang shook his head in horror, his arms and legs spasming with mental instability. He growled hoarsely and sharply, "I'm dead!

I've been killed by Bai Liu!"

"This is not a suicide, this is a murder!" Miao Gaojiang seemed to resist the knife in his hand, his forehead tight as though he was trying to move away from the blade, but his hand, as if acting on its own, dug hard into the large vein in his neck. He broke down, screaming, "This is a homicide!"

"Bai Liu! Bai Liu! Bai Liu and the statue are my murderers!"

Blood sprayed from his arteries, hitting the ceiling as Miao Gaojiang collapsed in a pool of blood with his eyes wide open, still clutching the knife stuck in his neck.

The video froze on the image of Miao Gaojiang on the ground. Su Yang turned to Bai Liu: "Do you have anything to say?"

"There's nothing I want to say." Bai Liu's face remained unchanged, with a hint of forced confusion in his eyes. "Comrade police, I don't know this man at all. Is this the one who was on the news? Isn't he the one who committed suicide? You filmed the whole process of his suicide, so what does that have to do with me?"

"He shouted your name before he died," Su Yang said, staring intently at Bai Liu. "He said it was a homicide and that you killed him, which is most likely the death message Miao left for us."

"So, Comrade Miao's death has turned into a homicide?" Bai Liu smiled slightly as he looked at Su Yang. "Captain Su, you're pushing me like this. I'm mentally weak. If I can't bear the pressure you're putting on me and I kill myself, I can scream your name when I do it. By the same logic, Captain Su, you would also be the murderer who killed me, right?"

Su Yang exhaled slowly, not answering Bai Liu's words. If he had, he would have only been playing into the man's rhythm.

Bai Liu, a man more slippery and comfortable with such platitudes than he appeared, truly seemed like an ordinary person based on his CV.

"I certainly didn't mean that. It's just that you do look suspicious, Comrade Bai Liu," Su Yang tried to redirect the conversation.

"You cops are all about evidence, right?" Bai Liu gave Su Yang a casual glance. "Besides the fact that I look suspicious, is there any evidence

that I was ordered to kill Miao?"

Bai Liu emphasized the word look.

Su Yang fell silent again.

The fact that Bai Liu and Miao Gaojiang had never met or interacted made the fact that Miao Gaojiang had gone insane and shouted Bai Liu's name before his death even more bizarre, which was why the case had been moved to the Dangerous Heresy Bureau.

But apart from Miao Gaojiang's incoherent words, there was indeed no concrete evidence in this case.

Bai Liu calmly asked, "So, there is indeed no evidence, Captain Su? Then I don't quite understand how you can use such strong-arm tactics to bring me in for questioning when there is absolutely no evidence. It doesn't fit my common sense of legal science."

Su Yang locked eyes with Bai Liu's tired, seemingly sleepless gaze for a moment before sighing helplessly. As if struck by a sudden conscience, Su Yang took a new vial from his breast pocket and placed it on the table in front of Bai Liu.

The small bottle rolled and emitted a pink gas, swirling like a universe of broken and fallen stars. It looked pretty, glimmering around the little bottle.

Bai Liu's eyes twitched slightly—it was similar to the pink smoke he had seen Tawil shatter into in his dream.

"It's a gas perfume that's been selling like hotcakes on the internet lately, called Dry Leaf Rose Gas," Su Yang said, gazing at the small pink bottle with a sober expression. "It contains an invigorating substance that keeps you functioning at a high level all day if you spray it on. Many companies use this perfume as an air freshener, and it's been nicknamed 'Gas Coffee' and 'Love Work.'"

"But recently, we found that companies using this perfume on a large scale experienced employees going crazy after discontinuing or replacing it." Su Yang paused before adding, "But strangely enough, we couldn't detect any harmful ingredients with any of the standard instruments used to test it. The perfume met all the standards for manufacture and distribution. We investigated further, transferring affected employees for treatment and research."

"Under repeated testing, these employees exhibited withdrawal-like symptoms."

Bai Liu's gaze fell on the small bottle, and he understood what Su Yang was implying.

"We defined this perfume as a new type of gas opium and were planning to give these employees forced withdrawal." Su Yang took a deep breath. "But something happened during the withdrawal process."

Su Yang clicked the remote, bringing up a new video.

The video showed a middle-aged man with bulging eyes howling in a crazed attack. His face was flushed pink, like the gas in the vial. His forehead was bruised from pounding himself against the wall. Someone entered and tied him to a chair, but he tore himself free.

Soon, amid the man's agonized screams, a strange change occurred. A wilted rose appeared clearly in his pupils, and the flesh on his body began to dry and blacken, peeling away like wilted rose petals. Eventually, all that remained was a clean pile of white bones sitting on the chair before they fell apart.

A cacophonous background noise filled the video.

"…CEDT-0756 Contaminated subject attempted withdrawal 6 days 17 hours 56 minutes, failed…"

End of video.

Su Yang didn't look at the screen, and his voice was a little dry when he spoke again. "We tried everything, but we found no way to keep these employees alive other than keeping them on this perfume called Rose Dry Leaf Gas..."

"No, they will wither," Bai Liu interrupted.

Su Yang fell silent for a moment before continuing. "But the production and distribution chain for this stuff cannot exist. By the time we realized it, it was too late..." Su Yang let out a bitter laugh, picking up the rose-colored bottle. "Do you know how much this sells for every month on the internet? Over a hundred thousand, and the number doubles each month. So many people are using this stuff. If it's suspended..."

"So what?" Bai Liu asked, unmoved. "Captain Su, this problem you're talking about has nothing to do with me, right? I can't solve it even if you arrest me."

Su Yang looked straight at Bai Liu. "No, you have a solution."

He leaned forward, propping himself up on the table, and met Bai Liu's gaze. "Our captain says you're a monster who can fix all the evil in this world. He believes that by capturing you, these crazed events will stop flooding into our world."

At these words, Bai Liu raised an eyebrow in slight surprise.

A tall, drunken man in uniform was helped into the small room where Bai Liu was being held. Some of the team members glanced at the collapsed, drunken man and fanned his nose. "How much has Captain Tang had to drink?"

"I don't know. He'd been down in front of the base for who knows how long before being found by a patrol member," one of the team members said, laughing bitterly. "Where's Captain Su? Still working on that newly captured humanoid heretic? Eh, now that I see Captain Tang like this, I don't even know if he's directing us to capture a normal person or a real heretic..."

"Still believe Captain Tang? After all, he has the special ability to see the future. That's why he has such high emergency authority. He's been right about mobilizing us to capture things before. This time should be... too, right?"

A few team members glanced at Captain Tang, who was covered in unkempt hair, and saw him lying motionless on the floor, snoring slightly.

The tone of the team member hesitated, "While it’s true that... Captain Tang has been drinking a bit uncharacteristically lately, didn't Captain Tang say that the more he drank and lost his mind, the more heresies he could see coming in the future?"

"And you believe that?" Su Yang pushed the door open and stepped in, casually answering. "Tang Erda could foresee when and where the evil things would appear even when he didn't drink a drop of alcohol. But now that he's drunk, his ability's been deteriorating. He’s failed several operations lately—probably because the alcohol's gone to his head."

The veins on Su Yang's forehead twitched as he looked at Tang Erda,

who lay on the floor snoring. "Go to CEDT-0076, the Room of Eternal Ice, and get some ice water to wake him up."

The man's hair was messy, curly, and hung over his ears, his chin covered with stubble. He wiped off the icy water from his jaw with his thumb as he staggered to his feet, dragging one leg.

The uniform was crooked, with some buttons misaligned. The badge on his right breast was scrunched up near his jaw: [Captain of the Third Detachment of the Department of Dangerous Heresy Handling - Tang Erda].

"Whew—hiccup!" The man burped loudly, smelling strongly of alcohol. He pushed the hair that had covered his eyes back and revealed a pair of sharp, narrow, wolf-like dark blue eyes.

Tang Erda's eyes weren't hazy from alcohol—only for a moment. Soon, he propped himself against the wall, dazed, shaking his head. "Why do these bar walls look so much like the base walls..."

Su Yang slowly held his forehead in frustration. "In three minutes, wake him up, and then get him into the small room to deal with the humanoid heretic he must've captured—Bai Liu."

Three minutes later, Bai Liu raised an eyebrow at the drenched man sitting outside his door. His gaze shifted down to the badge on the man's chest. "Are you the Captain Tang who Su Yang said must have arrested me?"

"I don't know why you think capturing me will solve all these... quirky problems you guys are facing," Bai Liu said, his eyes flicking over the small rose-colored bottle on the table before returning to Tang Erda. "I'm just an ordinary citizen who's been laid off."

"Tsk, ordinary citizen? Heh." Tang Erda pulled out a packet of cigarettes from his pocket, lit one slowly, took a deep drag, and exhaled slowly. The red glow on his finger reflected in his wolf-like eyes.

His gaze didn't move as he stared at Bai Liu for a moment, then his mouth curled into a hostile smile. "Bai Liu, what are you pretending with me?"

"Do you know how many times I've put you in this place?" Tang Erda braced himself and stood up, pressing his cigarette into Bai Liu's handcuffs, releasing a mocking puff of smoke into Bai Liu's face. He

reached out to touch Bai Liu's face. "Dozens of times... It's been a thousand years since the fox. What are you playing at now?"

Bai Liu leaned back slightly to avoid Tang Erda's touch. "But this is the first time we've met, isn't it, Captain Tang? Are you mistaken?"

Tang Erda slumped back into his chair, narrowing his eyes as he surveyed Bai Liu. He suddenly snorted in disdain. "First time meeting? This isn't your first time with me. I've met you many times."

"Devotee of the legendary evil gods, faithful lackey of Tawil, most hated and wanted of all the Dangerous Heresy Handling Bureau around the world, interface of evil things, gambler who uses evil things to swallow gold... Let me think of another title for you... the reigning villain—"

"Oh yes." Tang Erda rolled his neck stiffly, finally locking his gaze on Bai Liu's face. "The captain of the famous game warriors, the Wandering Circus, Bai Liu—the White King."

"I don't remember meeting you, Captain Tang, and I don't understand what you're talking about," Bai Liu lied without blinking.

Tang Erda stood up and gripped Bai Liu's shoulders, and like a wolf attacking, he nuzzled Bai Liu's neck with his open mouth, slowly hooking a chain from Bai Liu's collarbone with his index finger. It held a reverse cross and a piece of greyish-white fish scale.

Bai Liu didn't pull away. It would've been strange to speak with so many objects in his mouth. Apart from the coins, all these things were ordinary pendants and props—losing them wouldn't stop him from entering the game.

But not the coins. Without them, you couldn't enter the game.

Tang Erda lifted the reverse cross with a smirk, staring at Bai Liu. "You're wearing the reverse cross of the evil god around your neck. What do you mean, you don't know the only follower of the evil god?" He tugged on the cross and lifted Bai Liu's head. "You're not afraid of angering the evil god, Bai Liu? I'm warning you again—better hide your tail before you talk to me. Let me guess... Where have you hidden your game manager?"

Tang Erda jerked his hand, dislodging Bai Liu's jaw, and Bai Liu squinted from the pain. Tang Erda used the plastic bag he'd used for his cigarettes to wipe his hand with disdain.

"No?" Tang Erda frowned, surprised by Bai Liu's reaction. "The rest of your timeline was hidden under your tongue after I caught it... Where is it?" He pulled his hand out of Bai Liu's mouth and shook it off with a look of disgust. "You didn't swallow it, did you? You don't usually do things like that in other timelines, it doesn't fit your villainous aesthetic."

Tang Erda tossed the plastic bag aside and slammed Bai Liu's jaw back, the crunch loud and painful.

But Bai Liu didn't look weak. Instead, he moved his jaw to adapt before calmly asking Tang Erda, "Other timelines? Your personal skill is time travel? You've captured me in other timelines many times?"

"My skill isn't time travel. Time travel is a high-danger ability, or rather, a godly prop ability in the game." Tang Erda slouched back in his chair, arms and legs spread out. He rested his head on the back of the chair, tilting it sideways without looking at Bai Liu. "I once won a league in one of the timelines and got a wish. The game rewarded me with this prop based on that wish."

Tang Erda chewed on his unlit cigarette, looking slightly drunk. "This prop allows me to jump through different parallel timelines at any time. Whenever I feel dissatisfied or regretful about something, I reverse time to change it."

"I thought I was reversing time, but I soon realized I wasn't. I was just in a different parallel timeline," Tang Erda muttered, dropping his eyelids as he chewed on the cigarette.

After a moment of silence, Tang Erda returned to his cynical expression and turned his head back to Bai Liu. "And it's funny, Bai Liu, you're destined to be the greatest enemy of our Heresy Handling Bureau in all the timelines I've been through."

"In all timelines of eternal continuity, you are destined to become the sole devotee of the evil god Tawil." Tang Erda pulled a gun from his waist and leveled it at Bai Liu's right eye. "And then you, a demon who will do anything for money, used your belief in an evil god to turn the world into a hell full of evil things in almost every timeline I've seen."

"You use your status as a follower of an evil god to create all kinds of evil things to enrich yourself. You auction off mirrors that reflect the fears of the human heart at exorbitant prices, letting shameless people steal them and circulate them at high prices. You display Siren's fish

bones in the most exclusive museums, letting viewers go mad over the decaying mermaids. You sell the most expensive life-saving remedy, the Blood Reishi, to the rich, smiling as you collect payment from these parasites who've survived by sucking the blood of children."

"And this dried rose leaf gas, which makes everyone fade in a frenzy." Tang Erda glanced at the small bottle of perfume on the table. "After you let it flood, you kept raising its price, leaving the poor who couldn't afford it to wither while the rich who could afford it saw it bloom in joy in their gilded halls."

Tang Erda's thumb rested on the safety, and his finger hovered over the trigger. His eyes locked on Bai Liu's with a piercing sharpness. "You're just like the game—a madman who buys human souls and pours evil into the world for his own gain."

"And it is my destiny to kill you."

Bang!

The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment

The bullet grazed past Bai Liu's eye, hitting the wall behind him with such a strong thud that people outside started banging on the door, asking what was wrong. Su Yang even opened the small window to warn Tang Erda seriously.

“Tang Erda, firing a gun in such a confined room is a death wish. The shrapnel could be shot through your head. You’d better not play this game of suicide in front of me, again and again, by accidentally killing yourself. You’re holding a gun, not a toy,” Su Yang said coldly. “I won’t collect your body if you kill yourself.”

Tang Erda carelessly put the gun down on the table and turned to Su Yang with a fake smile, raising his hands to show he wasn’t playing with it.

As if jokingly, he casually glanced at Bai Liu, who remained unmoved, and tsked. “I just wanted to scare him, but I didn’t expect you to be scared, Captain Su.”

“After all, I don’t think he and I care much about things like dying,” Tang Erda smiled, moving closer to Bai Liu. He raised an eyebrow and lowered his voice slightly. “It’s not like we’ve never died before, don’t you think, Bai Liu?”

Su Yang didn’t hear the rest of Tang Erda’s sentence. He gave him a warning glare, lowered the small window, and said nothing to the team outside.

“You do have to die, but not now, and not in the Bureau of Heresy. You’d be in a lot of trouble here.” Tang Erda lifted his wrinkled eyelids. “It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve killed you, Bai Liu, so if you don’t want to die so early without earning your keep, you’d better be honest about what the solution to the dried rose leaf gas on the table is.”

Tang Erda’s disgusted gaze fixed on the glass bottle as he spoke. “It was so popular all over the world soon after it appeared, that everyone had roses growing out of their eyes.”

“People who couldn’t afford it withered by the side of the street, the slums and low-rent housing were full of wilted petals, blood and flesh, while the roses in the eyes of the rich flourished. In the end, everyone started making and selling this stuff, and we can’t even find out where

it comes from. And this time, it's just inexplicable."

"I'm sick of this stuff, but you like it, don't you, Bai Liu?" Tang Erda's eyes were fixed on him.

"What makes you think I have anything to do with this rose gas?" Bai Liu asked rhetorically, not skipping a beat. "And is there even a solution to this thing?"

"Because somewhere in the timeline where I caught you, you helped us at the Bureau of Heresy Processing with this," Tang Erda said.

Bai Liu quickly caught the meaning of Tang Erda's words. "I'm not going to work for you for free just because you caught me and tried to kill me. Did you pay me?"

Tang Erda gave a look as if he'd swallowed a thousand flies before he finally waved his hand and admitted, somewhat sullenly, "Tsk, yes, quite a lot was given, and you were eventually acquitted in that timeline for your outstanding contribution to solving this dried rose leaf gas."

He looked down at Bai Liu with no emotion in his gaze. "Even though all of us knew that you must be connected to this thing, we let you go because there was no direct evidence that you took it for profit."

"All we could get was circumstantial evidence of your connection to the dried rose leaf gas. We knew full well that the source of this was you, and you did not deny it. But because there was no direct evidence that you profited from it, at Su Yang's insistence, we found you not guilty in this matter. So, you couldn't be arrested, and you were let go."

"A year later, the vendor of this stuff opened a retail shop outside the Heretic Authority, and the world is dying because of it." Tang Erda paused for a moment. "In that timeline, Su Yang's parents died at home because they couldn't buy dried rose leaf gas, and Su Yang entered the game to revive them."

Bai Liu's gaze fell on the rose-colored perfume. "It really doesn't fit my idea of profit-making."

Tang Erda's eyes swept over him with a sharp sneer. "You still have a profit motive? Don't you want all the money you can get? Because you were acquitted, this thing is somehow made grey and legal."

“Those manufacturers claim that this perfume is just like cigarettes and that it won’t be lethal except to a small number of allergic people, because your exoneration made it easier for them to market and promote the perfume. They handed you a large sum of money for that, and I didn’t see you refuse it.”

“Yes, I shouldn’t have turned down the money that was handed to me, but I wouldn’t have introduced this addictive perfume if I had the status and resources you mentioned in that timeline.” Bai Liu reached for the small rose-colored glass bottle and peered at it over his focused fingertips. “Because this perfume is under addictive exploitation, and resources like people are non-renewable and disposable, like a rose that can only bloom once before it withers.”

“It’s the lowest form of capital exploitation. It’s stupid.” Bai Liu looked up blandly at Tang Erda. “I prefer leeks to roses because they are renewable.”

“If I were a being who could permanently exploit the lower classes, then I wouldn’t easily harvest them completely. I’d nurture them, give them the space and resources to grow so they could always regenerate. Turning them into roses is too extravagant; it’s not my preferred way of enriching myself.”

Tang Erda: “…”

No matter how many times he saw this, Bai Liu’s nonsense and brainwashing skills remained intact.

“I don’t care if you like roses or leeks. You’d better give me an honest account of your solution to this rose gas or whatever it is.” Tang Erda gave a very false, polite laugh. “Also, the room we have here has been specially made by me with props to isolate all evil things, including that coin. Even if you swallowed the coin, you wouldn’t get into the game.”

He tapped Bai Liu’s face slowly with his gun, and his smile grew kinder. “I have plenty of time and ways to take my time with you, old friend.”

“Captain Tang, am I a prisoner of this timeline in a position to ask you one last question?” Bai Liu raised his eyes to look directly into Tang Erda’s. “If you managed to kill me in the other timeline, then in this timeline, I’m just an ordinary person. Why didn’t you kill me as soon as you came to this timeline, but waited until this gas appeared before coming to me?”

“Because I thought you were dead,” Tang Erda stared deeply at Bai Liu. “I wanted to kill you before you grew up, so I followed the clues I got from the other timelines to find the private orphanage where you were supposed to be, the place where you hadn’t grown up to stay.”

“In every timeline I’ve experienced and checked, you’ve grown up in that private orphanage that abuses children, and I’ve found traces of your existence there almost every time. But this time, the director there told me that Bai Liu died at the age of fourteen from swallowing a coin. Did you actually die?”

Tang Erda paused for a couple of seconds.

“You dragged out and dragged into the game almost all the investors and directors of that orphanage that led to your childhood tragedy after you grew up. All these people died horribly. You didn’t kill them yourself. You just lured them into the game by all means and let them die in the monster’s bite. Bai Liu, you’ve always been so clever at doing bad things. It’s hard for us to catch anything or trace it. It’s quite difficult to prove you.”

Tang Erda’s expression became slightly unfocused as he spoke, his fingertips tapping twice unconsciously on the table. “You couldn’t have died that easily. I don’t believe for a second that you did. If you entered the game, it would have been the others who suffered. That you would actually kill yourself by being tortured by these investors—that’s not something you would have done at all.”

“But every trace I’ve found proves that this child who committed suicide is definitely you.”

Tang Erda lit another cigarette, not looking at Bai Liu. His eyes fell lazily at some point in the room. “I didn’t even think there would be another you in this timeline.”

Slowly, he moved his eyes to Bai Liu’s face.

Tang Erda and Bai Liu looked straight at each other through the smoke.

“There’s actually a version of Bai Liu in this timeline who grew up in a public orphanage, changed his name, didn’t touch anything evil at all, and seems to have survived to the present day without doing anything bad for twenty-five years.”

“That’s something that couldn’t happen to an asshole like you. You

wouldn't have tolerated yourself in such a low-cost money-making position for so long." Tang Erda took a deep breath of his cigarette and exhaled in a daze, shaking the ash from his fingertips. "Working for someone else as a social animal for low wages? I'd wake up laughing in my sleep if I ever dreamed that you, bastard, would have that day."

"This is tailor-made torture for you. It's worse than killing you. I don't even know how you put up with it."

Tang Erda continued, "Given the slightest chance, you would become a money-grabbing machine without any conscience. You'd domesticate and possess the most fearsome and loyal criminal gangs in the world and turn them into a trained, gold-devouring syndicate. The world's wealth would fall like an old wallet with a leaky mouth into the long-open hands of your vagabond self."

Tang Erda sat at the table, his gaze deep as he took a puff of smoke and exhaled again through his nose.

Bai Liu's face tilted slightly sideways as his breathing slowed a little.

Tang Erda smiled suddenly and oddly, delightfully. "Yes, you hate the smell of smoke, and to see you forced to stay in an environment you don't like for so long is—"

"—worse than killing you with your own hands."

The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment

Tang Erda gazed at Bai Liu through a haze of nicotine smoke.

"But it's amazing," he said, "that you actually just did an honest job as a game worker for years at a normal company, and got laid off because of your boss's prejudice."

He couldn't help but laugh as he continued, "When I first looked into this, I wondered if I was mistaken—whether there really was an ordinary person named Bai Liu in this timeline, and the real Bai Liu had somehow swallowed his own game coins and died."

"Maybe it’s the bad luck of this timeline," he mused, "that Bai died in the game before he could become a scary trader, so the game let him die like that in the so-called real world. Who knows?"

Tang Erda shook the ashes from his cigarette. "But soon, I knew I was wrong."

"Because I'm in the game, right?" Bai Liu looked at him. "You relied on my skills to figure out my identity?"

"Yes." Tang Erda took a drag from his cigarette. "That personal skill of yours in acquiring souls—I wouldn’t mistake it even if I turned to dust. It’s how you gathered a bunch of psychos like you and nearly wiped out our base a few times."

"A bunch of psychos like me?" Bai Liu asked, amused.

Tang Erda scowled at him. "I’ve wondered in every timeline how you manage to find so many people who are as gifted and mentally unbalanced as you, to form your so-called wandering circus."

"And only in this timeline," he continued, tapping his finger on the table. "This is the first time I’ve seen your wandering circus take shape."

"In other timelines, when I met you, you were already powerful. Your origins were only unearthed after I risked my life digging through dozens of timelines. All I could find was that you lived in that private orphanage. I knew absolutely nothing about the mad dogs around you."

Tang Erda’s eyes narrowed. "One reason is that these mad dogs of

yours are both rampant and discreet—it's hard to trace their true identities. The other is that you protected them so well that, before this timeline, the base only knew their titles and habits. The rest was untraceable. Once traced, it would've been trouble for our people."

He leaned back on the sofa and lazily ticked them off on his fingers. "You should have met them: the monkey thieves who help you steal secrets, the little killer witches who like to poison men."

"The only person we can identify who's involved with you is Muke—the inland investor who inherited his father's business and helped you spread your evil. But Muke is a slippery man, hiding in a sanatorium most of the year, claiming he's suffering from a heart attack."

"But now," Tang Erda said, his voice lowering, "I know all about who they are." He clenched his cigarette in his hand, the ash drifting to the floor as he leaned in close to Bai Liu. "And then I realized—they weren't born mad dogs. They just had some mental gaps."

"You were born crazy, Bai Liu. You found their gaps and tamed them into mad dogs, so they would bite anyone they saw, except you."

"Is that so?" Bai Liu stared at him unflinchingly. "And do you think I've tamed them now? Do you think they'll bite you to death for capturing me, Captain Tang?"

Tang Erda's ghostly blue eyes narrowed. Then, he pressed the still-burning cigarette against Bai Liu's pale neck, the smoke hissing as it made contact, leaving a burn above his collarbone. Bai Liu's breath caught, but he managed to see, in him casually open bodice, a hideous scar—scratches from some fierce beast, with traces of corrosion.

It looked like the scars left by a combination of Mu Sicheng's monkey claws and Liu Jiayi's poison. These scars, brought out of the game, also required a low spirit value and a weakened will to leave such marks.

— Muke, the dagger that lowers the spirit value.

"How do you know I haven't been bitten to death?" Tang Erda buttoned his lapel to hide the wound, then whispered in Bai Liu's ear with a chilling smile. "I killed you, and you killed me, Bai Liu."

"But sadly," he continued, "we both didn't make it to death." He exhaled a puff of smoke into his ear and laughed softly at his choking cough. "We've both been brought back to life."

Tang Erda emerged from the room, where Su Yang was waiting for him. "How was it? Did he say what to do about the rose gas?"

"Not yet. He won't talk so easily." Tang Erda dangled the butt of his cigarette. "It'll take a while to grind it out and keep him in line."

"Grind for a while? How long is this 'while'?" Su Yang frowned. "Captain Tang, are you sure he can fix this?"

Tang Erda flicked the cigarette butt into the bin with perfect precision and glanced at Su Yang.

None of them knew what his powers were, or why he could predict where many of the heretics appeared—including the conversation he just had with Bai Liu inside the house. They probably wouldn't understand, even if they were in front of the surveillance.

That's because conversations like these, and abilities that would reveal the existence of the system and the game, were blocked out when spoken by players like Tang Erda.

It was a limitation of the game for the players. Tang Erda could only communicate about these matters with players like Bai Liu. As a timeline traveler, he also knew that, with each new timeline, personalities, family dynamics, and emotions changed slightly.

Only Bai Liu remained unchanged—ever wicked, ever greedy, like an anchor that didn't disorient Tang Erda, a sailor adrift in the flood of time. He was never shaken by his time-traveling dilemmas, only calmly watching him, amused, as though to say, "So the rest of me is so interesting."

To him, the world was just a game.

Tang Erda was the only player in this game who kept reading through the files, unwilling to let go, trying to beat the perfect ending.

It was ironic that Bai Liu, this strange anchor point, was the only person Tang Erda could talk to about anything.

Others—Tang Erda's colleagues, friends, and Su Yang—had all been lost an unknown number of times. The reunions were so painful that he couldn't even approach them.

As a player, Tang Erda knew he couldn't touch anyone, for doing so would bring them into the game—a truth he had learned after countless turns.

This particular department of the Dangerous Heresy Bureau, which fought evil, had always been a breeding ground for players. Tang Erda was not the only one on the base.

But these "player-players," who knew the ways of the evil, couldn't tell the non-players about the game, because of its limitations. They couldn't reveal that what they were fighting was not some external evil, but a product of a game that had no end. All they could do was run.

When a player died in the game, the non-players would watch in horror as those players logged out, dying in bizarre, miserable ways in reality. The desperation and scorn of the evil creatures grew deeper, and the normal players, influenced by the gamers, would develop a violent desire to survive and eventually fall into the game themselves.

Elsewhere in Tang Erda's timeline, most of the players in the Heretic Processing Bureau had become gamers and then died one by one in the game—including Su Yang, in front of him.

Tang Erda's gaze was long and distant, passing through countless deaths and untold time, before falling slowly on Su Yang's frowning face.

Su Yang had died trying to save him, in the semi-finals of the tournament.

The team members of the Heretics Directorate who entered the game tried desperately to stop others from entering, trying to do their duty in the game—to protect the fragile, unknowingly real world and their loved ones in reality.

But it seemed as though an invisible hand was driving all of this, unbeknownst to them. They had already become like rats in a sewer, afraid to see their loved ones, afraid to speak to their friends, afraid to kiss their lovers. They could only stand far away, in the shadows, watching from a distance, guarding what they held dear. They were terrified that being a player would drag their loved ones into this game, one that had no end.

When Tang Erda first entered the game, he didn't even dare go out to buy food or cigarettes. He ordered takeout and let it sit outside his

door for an hour before going to pick it up.

But sometimes, no matter how careful you are, the person you cherish will inevitably move on to a future you don't want to see, because of you.

Su Yang came looking for Tang Erda, who had been hiding at home, out of touch with everyone.

Tang Erda ran around, hiding from Su Yang, changing hotels and logging out coordinates. But Su Yang kept chasing him, going from place to place. When he realized that all those tricks could be avoided by Tang Erda, he started looking for him the foolish way—the dead way.

Finally, Vice-Captain Su was holding up Tang Erda's picture on the street, asking, "Have you seen my captain?"

Tang Erda was standing in an alley not far away, lighting a cigarette. He waited until Su Yang had gone past and it had burned his hand before he stepped out.

But in the end, Tang Erda met Su Yang in the game.

The moment they met, the much younger vice-captain smiled, arched his brow, and said, "Captain, I've finally found you."

The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment

Su Yang started a guild and a team in the game. His eyes gleamed as he shook Tang Erda's hand and told him that if he won the game, he would be granted a wish.

"Then, Captain, we can wish for everyone to be taken out of the game. We in the Dangerous Heretics Bureau can form a team and enter the tournament. We're fighting these evil things outside the game, so it wouldn't make sense for us to lose inside the game with the support of skills and props."

"Don't give up on the world so easily, don't be so pessimistic, Captain!" Su Yang said with a smile.

His teammates laughed and shouted, "Yes, Captain, don't be a coward when you enter the game! We're all on the third team. Don't back down, we won't admit defeat easily!"

They were born to die, unbreakable, never conceding defeat—and in the end, they won.

The men died victorious, content with their unfinished wishes entrusted to their trusted captain.

Su Yang stood resolutely in front of him, looking at Tang Erda for a moment. With a relieved smile on his face, as though he knew what was going to happen, he whispered to Tang Erda, "Captain, go on."

What followed seemed to play out in slow motion. In Tang Erda's open eyes, a pure white bone whip strangled Su Yang's slender neck, pulling him through as though he were carrying a rabbit. A silver bullet passed through Su Yang's skull, blood splattering across Tang Erda's face as his pupils dilated.

Tang Erda was the only one left alive.

At first, Tang Erda asked, "Why do you want me to live?"

Later, he asked, "Why did you let me live?"

At the end of the day, Tang Erda, who had won it all, knelt on the podium amidst a huge cheer, a victor who had won everything.

The champion, bruised and dying, bowed his head, his eyes lazily

tilting. In a dazzling white light, so intense he could barely see, his voice hoarse and dry, he wished for a god whose existence he couldn't be sure of, saying:

"I hope everyone, especially Su Yang, gets out of this game alive."

Then the merciful gods favored him and granted his wish.

The gods told Tang Erda that for his wish to come true, it could only be stopped before it even started. To this end, the game granted Tang Erda a god-level prop that allowed him to reverse time and change events.

But this was all a lie to deceive him. Even after reversing time countless times, he never succeeded in preventing everyone from entering the game. Instead, he found himself constantly reversing time, delaying others' entry, and consuming himself in the process.

And even if he did manage to stop it, he could never truly keep everyone out of the game. Since [Tang Erda] possessed the prop, he had to be in the game to use it. But with the prop, he couldn't escape, even if he managed to get everyone else out.

So Tang Erda asked the gods, "Didn't I wish for everyone to leave the game? Why am I not included in this?"

The gods, still compassionate, replied, "The moment you made your wish, you ceased to be human. You are a heretic, a monster, and so you are trapped in the game forever. That is the price you must pay for achieving a wish beyond your abilities."

And so, Tang Erda, now a heretic and a monster, broke down and went mad, silently accepting his fate and the cost of his wish. He continued his relentless pursuit of the end where everyone but him could leave the game.

This was the longest delay Tang Erda had ever experienced. It was already that time, Bai Liu—the bastard—was twenty-four, and no one in the whole department had ever entered the game except him.

And his co-captain, Su Yang, had finally survived past thirty-three—the age he should have died in the game.

"Captain Tang, Captain Tang! Captain Su is talking to you!" one of the team members shouted.

Tang Erda snapped back to attention and looked to Su Yang. "Oh, I'm sure he can handle it. You don't need to worry about that. Just leave it all to me. You just need to protect yourself…"

"Captain Tang, Captain Su is not asking you this..." another team member replied, somewhat helpless and amused. "Are you drunk? Captain Su's baby is having a full moon, and they're inviting you to the celebration. Are you going?"

Tang Erda's face turned pale.

"Yes, Captain Su! We're the fastest of us! We got married last year and have a baby this year!"

"Captain Su, the baby's just a month old now. Can it look like you or your sister-in-law? Eh, but you're both good-looking, so it doesn't matter. I just hope the baby's mother is pretty..."

"Wake up, you've been single for twenty-seven years."

Su Yang's normally gentle and elegant face flushed red, his eyes bright with the goofiness of a first-time father. "I can't tell who it looks like yet… but I think it looks good. Captain Tang, are you coming to my house for the full moon celebration? Little Ann cooked it herself."

Someone joked, "We always said Captain Su was Captain Tang's wife, but I didn't realize she was faster than Captain Tang, the head of the family."

"Jealous?" Tang Erda said lazily. "I was so jealous when I saw him get married, I didn't even dare go to the wedding. I told him not to tie the knot by stealing the groom away from me."

The others laughed, and Tang Erda added nonchalantly, "…I didn't expect it to happen so soon, before I even did, to get married and have kids."

Su Yang gave Tang Erda an expectant look. He smiled, "I've bought your favorite wine, we'll have a drink then."

"I've been your vice-captain for so long, Captain Tang, so I have to give you face, right?"

Tang Erda silently stared at Su Yang's joyful face. Then, he suddenly smiled, waved, and turned to leave.

"I really don't give Captain Su the benefit of the doubt. I prefer to drink alone. Congratulations on your new baby, Captain Su. I'll give you a big red packet sometime. I'll leave the man alone."

Everyone's laughter stopped awkwardly.

"...Captain Tang, are you sure you don't want to go?"

"No, Captain Tang, what's wrong with you lately? Why don't you even engage with us?"

"...Captain Su. After you got married, Captain Tang, you were always drunk alone, but you don't have to be so jealous, Mr. Tang! You're well-endowed; you can find anyone you want!"

Without turning around, Tang Erda just lazily waved his hand without answering and headed for the door.

"Tang Erda!" Su Yang reached out to grab Tang Erda's hand, looking somewhat angry. "What's wrong with you lately? You're always alone, avoiding me and the rest of the team? Do you have a problem with us?"

Tang Erda subconsciously pushed Su Yang's hand away, and then, seeing Su Yang's somewhat dazed look, Tang Erda stared back at him, his own expression full of confusion.

[Captain, why are you avoiding me?]

[Is there any point in hiding from me alone?]

[Tang Erda, we've been friends for so many years, captain and vice-captain. Do you really think I can't see that you're hiding from me?]

Su Yang from different timelines seemed to overlap in that moment.

Tang Erda opened his mouth, as if to laugh, but there was a weariness and hollowness that seemed to consume everything as he gazed at Su Yang's face—untouched by torture and death—and his own gaze began to fade.

Eventually, Tang Erda took a deep breath and smiled, as if forcing himself to let go. "Captain Su, you're a family man now."

Su Yang, confused, looked at Tang Erda. "What's wrong with me having a family? Does it mean I can't have a normal relationship with you just because I'm a family man? That doesn't make sense. We've

been friends for years."

Tang Erda had seen such a look before, such a gaze, a million times. But not once had he been silenced like this, for no reason.

"I have no problem with you," Tang Erda said quietly, pausing. Then, to ease the awkwardness, he smiled indifferently. "I think you're fine the way you are. Exceptionally fine, very fine. I have no complaints at all, and I sincerely bless you."

Su Yang's face relaxed slightly, as if sighing in relief.

But Tang Erda's next words came quickly: "Of course, it would be better to stay away from me, stop chasing me around, and learn to look after your family, Captain Su."

"Don't be so silly as to chase me into games anymore, Su Yang."

The subtle smile on Su Yang's face faded, and the light in his eyes dimmed as if he was saddened. He stared at Tang Erda, reluctant.

"I don't understand, Captain. Why are you saying and doing this? Did I do something wrong?"

"You didn't do anything wrong." Tang Erda paused. "It was my mistake. I got sidetracked... it was... me who didn't figure it out."

With those words, Tang Erda shook off Su Yang's hand and, without hesitation, put on his coat and turned to leave.

"In the future, no member of the team is allowed to come to me for personal matters unless it's for official business."

CEDT - In room 006.

Bai Liu slept on a mattress in the corner. Only faint light filtered through the small window, and the sound of regular, measured footsteps echoed at the door.

Following the steady pattern of footsteps that passed his window every fifteen minutes—like a prison—Bai Liu waited until the patrol passed before quickly removing a hollow coin—the game manager—from the edge of his handcuffs.

Bai Liu hid the coin under his tongue, inside the handcuffs, in the

interval between Su Yang's departure and Tang Erda's entry. He kept his head down to avoid surveillance. It was highly unlikely he could hide something in his mouth without being caught during continuous questioning, and according to Su Yang, the incoming Captain Tang might know something about him.

But Tang Erda didn't bother to search Bai Liu's body for the game manager either. His claim was: "[This room has been spiked by me with props, you can't get into the game.]"

Bai Liu's cross and fish scales had been taken by Tang Erda, and the only thing left on his body was the coin—one Tang Erda was too disgusted to search, so he had to try it.

[Go to game.]

[System Alert: Zizi... signal is isolated, touching the transcendent-level prop (magic space), the space owner can control the people in and out of the space. The game signal is isolated, player Bai Liu cannot log into the game!]

"[Magic Space]?" Bai Liu pondered. "Isn't this the prop Liu Jiayi gave Liu Huai?"

The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment

Bai Liu also notices something else strange—he is not allowed to use props in the real world, as the system places restrictions on him.

Except for certain items related to desire fulfillment, which can be used in reality without restriction, most props are restricted by the system, much like how Bai Liu was once prohibited from using his skills in the real world.

Typically, the higher the level of the item or skill, the greater the restrictions on its use in reality.

The prop Bai Liu used in reality was the Blood Lingzhi from before.

The system warned him, but after the warning, Bai Liu clearly felt the coin attached to the cross vibrate twice, and then he was able to use it.

However, even under the protection of the evil gods, many of Bai Liu's props cannot be used directly.

But Tang Erda, from the sound of his voice, seems to be able to use props in reality beyond the system's limitations.

Bai Liu considers two possibilities for this situation.

The first is that Tang Erda's special status as a time traveler allows him to escape the system's scrutiny and restrictions.

However, Bai Liu thinks this is unlikely because, if this were true, Tang Erda would not still be a player, and he had obviously seen Bai Liu's "little TV," proving that Tang Erda was still in the game.

The second possibility is that Tang Erda did not acquire his abilities from the system at all.

It's likely that Tang Erda has a deep understanding of the game, its props, the evil, and reality.

Tang Erda may have used his position as the leader of the third detachment of the Department of Heretical Hazards to acquire and use evil objects that had entered real-world replicas, collected by this department, and then used them as his own props.

Bai Liu had previously discovered that after clearing a game copy, the monsters generally reward players with props associated with the monsters, and sometimes even the monsters themselves.

For example, in the earlier copy of Siren Town, the rewards included fish scales, amulets, and fish bones. The last train to the explosion rewarded a shard of the mirror that caused the explosion, and Bai Liu's recent copy, Love Orphanage, rewarded Blood Lingzhi.

It's as if the game deliberately gives out these evil items, which cause all sorts of calamities, as rewards for completing quests, allowing the player to take them back to reality and use them.

The mirror that suddenly appeared, the recipe for the Blood Lingzhi that investors in the orphanage had just discovered—these items seem to be transported into reality, rousing the most evil, insane desires of the human heart. It seems some entity is deliberately sending these things to reality with the help of players, turning them into hubs overwhelmed by their own desires. This could be how the game loads its copies into the real world.

The "interface of something evil"—that's the term Tang Erda used to describe Bai Liu.

It's an apt description of players who constantly move between the game and reality, using evil objects to fulfill their desires in the real world, acting as mediums for the game to load core evil objects into reality, much like an interface.

And if Tang Erda was a devotee of the evil gods, he must have been a particularly efficient interface—his frequency and speed of loading evil items into reality must have been higher than ever.

Thanks to the blessing of the evil gods, Bai Liu is less restricted in reality than other players, and he has certainly felt this.

"If it can be used for profit…" Bai Liu's eyes darkened for a moment.

"It's quite an enticing future." He rubbed his chin in thought. "Is this considered smuggling illegal controlled substances? Is it illegal?"

After a moment of considering the nature of the trade, Bai Liu had to admit with some regret—it should be illegal, and if Lu Yizhan found out, Bai Liu would probably be read to death. So, forget it.

But if his other timeline self didn't have Lu Yizhan—someone who

could tear people apart—Bai Liu feels he would have likely chosen to be a smuggler. He wouldn't have chosen to profit directly from these evil objects; that would be too inefficient.

It would have been quicker to smuggle these evil items into the real world, then sell them to the relevant industries for patent and smuggling fees. He could control the entire channel for the profits earned from the evil goods. Just thinking about it makes Bai Liu feel regretful—what a great opportunity for wealth.

Unfortunately, it's not legal—as evidenced by Tang Erda's attitude. By late in the game, they've touched the interface with him, and as an evil entity, he will meet a gruesome end.

Bai Liu looked through his system panel again and found that without the protection of the fish scales and the cross, he was indeed unable to use any special items. He also couldn't use his personal skills—using skills to trade with people was now out of the question.

Sitting in the small, dark room, unsure of the time, Bai Liu sighed mentally. Tang Erda was a worthy opponent who had faced him many times and eliminated all risks almost as soon as they met.

He could tell he had suffered many times at his hands and truly hated him for it.

It’s not that Bai Liu didn’t want to ask for help, but people like Tang Erda wouldn’t leave him any openings to exploit.

If he's right, Tang Erda will soon have someone else to keep him company—he doesn’t sound too happy when he talks about [the Wandering Circus].

Hopefully, these people will understand what he meant when he sent them his last text message before he was caught and had his phone confiscated. Bai Liu doesn't want to see his property get caught up in this mess.

Bai Liu leaned against the wall and slowly closed his eyes.

U of C, 3rd floor of the 2nd dormitory.

Mu Sicheng stared blankly across the room at the bed wrapped in white cloth—the bed of Liu Huai, who had just returned from an

incident. Mu Sicheng had been logged out and taken to the police for questioning.

Even Bai Liu, with his pickpocket nature, probably considering the mental shock Mu Sicheng had endured, let him off the hook today and didn't immediately pull him into the game. Bai Liu simply sent Mu Sicheng a text message, saying he would be in the game tonight and advising him to get some rest first, without specifying when he would be let in.

When Mu Sicheng closed his eyes, all he could see was Liu Huai being hit by a bus, blood spreading across the floor.

He stared at the message Bai Liu had sent him at 9:16 PM. He could read the words, but they seemed jumbled, as if his mind couldn’t process them properly—almost like he had dyslexia.

"[Beware of the rose and the hunter, I may die by the hunter’s hand. Don’t wait for me. Get out of here.]"

... What does this mean?

The emotional drain and confusion persisted until a knock sounded at Mu Sicheng's dormitory door.

Mu Sicheng, still in a daze, stood up and opened the door. "Lao San, don’t you have your dormitory keys with you…?"

He stopped mid-sentence when his gaze met the cold eyes of a policeman in a dark grey uniform.

The policeman put one hand behind his waist, gripping something, and eyed Mu Sicheng warily. "Mu Sicheng, we need to ask you something. Please come with us."

Mu Sicheng hesitated, then responded, "I’ve just returned from giving my statement. Haven’t you finished asking me everything you wanted to know? If you have more questions, you can ask tomorrow. I’m really tired and need some rest."

He was referring to the Liu Huai incident.

"We're not from the traffic department," the policeman said, showing his credentials. "You’re connected to another very serious social incident. Please cooperate with our investigation."

Mu Sicheng's eyes casually scanned the back of the policeman's waist before resting on the papers the officer had shown him. He muttered to himself, "Dangerous Heresy Exclusion Field Unit 3… Coded…"

Mu Sicheng remained quiet for a long moment after reading.

"Although I don't fully understand what department you're from or why I'm suddenly involved in a serious social incident, I'll cooperate with your investigation." Mu Sicheng took a deep breath and rubbed his face tiredly. "But can I take a bathroom break first? I've been at the police station all day giving statements and haven't been allowed to go to the bathroom. They've been feeding me water, and I've only just returned."

The policeman looked at Mu Sicheng with hesitation.

Mu Sicheng's face displayed an outward weariness, as if he could fall asleep at any moment while holding the door. It seemed clear that the traumatic death of his roommate earlier that morning had affected him deeply.

Mu Sicheng didn't look like a heretic at all. He appeared more like an ordinary man who had been caught up in something that drove him to madness.

The policeman hesitated, glancing at his captain, who was known to be unreliable when it came to catching heretics and had been drinking heavily that night.

"Fine," the officer said after a few seconds, "You have one minute, and you can't close the bathroom door."

Mu Sicheng raised an eyebrow, slightly speechless. "I'm a citizen, and I can't even go to the bathroom without being watched? Can you at least give me some privacy?"

But seeing the serious expression on the policeman's face, Mu Sicheng shrugged. "Fine. If you don't feel embarrassed after watching."

As Mu Sicheng zipped down his jeans, the policeman outside the door glanced away awkwardly at the remark. In that moment, Mu Sicheng's tired, loose eyes sharpened instantly. He kicked the bathroom door shut, locking the unresponsive officer outside.

As the police officer shouted for the door to be opened, Mu Sicheng's body swayed slightly, and with one swift motion, he kicked open the

air vent and crawled through it.

When the officer outside kicked open the bathroom door, he stared at the open vent in confusion. He immediately spoke into the intercom, "Report, the proposed humanoid heretic number 004 has escaped through the bathroom vent on the 6th floor and vanished. Have you seen heretic number 004 anywhere?"

"No!" The voice from the intercom replied, "We have squads in all four directions of the dormitory building. The vent on the 6th floor was opened about a minute and seventeen seconds ago, but we didn't observe anyone escaping through it."

All they had seen was the vent open, but no one emerged from it, which meant Mu Sicheng had seemingly vanished into thin air inside the bathroom.

It really is a heresy!

The officer took a deep breath. "Report, the heretic, identified as number 004, who is said to be very skilled at stealing, has escaped due to my negligence. I will be punished when I return. Inform the other squads to be cautious and catch any heretics named by Captain Tang tonight!"

"They're all very cunning!"

In the hospital corridor.

The police officer guarding Liu Jiayi outside her ward is communicating with the team from the special unit that has arrived unexpectedly.

"Are you...?" The policeman guarding Liu Jiayi stared in disbelief at the heavily armed and well-trained visitors.

The team member in the dark grey uniform showed his ID. "We are from the Dangerous Heresy Unit. We've taken over the Blood Lingzhi case, which has had a significant social impact. Liu Jiayi is a key witness in the Blood Lingzhi case. We're not at liberty to disclose too much information, but you can confirm our identity directly with your superiors."

The two policemen guarding Liu Jiayi glanced suspiciously at the

weapons carried by the visiting group.

Handcuffs and wristcuffs, fully armed, possibly with anesthetic needles and steel bar cages, and two or three armored vehicles covered in green ponchos parked outside the hospital.

This didn’t seem like a team sent to escort an important witness. It felt more like a team prepared to apprehend a dangerous suspect.

Only after the two policemen called and confirmed with their superiors that the visitors were indeed from the regular department did they reluctantly allow them inside.

The group quickly and efficiently donned their gas masks, which startled the two officers once again.

The team didn’t just bring their own masks; they handed two masks to the confused policemen and advised, "Comrades, when we go in later, if a black mist fills the ward, you must get as far away as possible. Don’t inhale or touch it, and try to stay in areas with higher wind convection. It’s poisonous."

"Is there a toxic gas leak somewhere in the hospital?" the two bewildered police officers asked.

"No, it’s something much worse than that." The third team member, leaning against the door, took a deep breath and gestured to the rest of the team. "One, two, three!"

The door to the ward slammed open, and the team scattered quickly across the room in a fan formation, pistols raised, surrounding the small bulging mass on the bed.

The leader of the group was about to fire but soon sensed something was wrong. He raised his hand in a signal to pause. "Wait."

He stepped forward, gun raised, and pulled back the covers, revealing an ugly doll made of pillows about the size of Liu Jiayi. The doll was sticking out its tongue and grinning nastily, as though mocking the group who had worked all night and found nothing.

"Liu Jiayi, where is she?!" the leader of the team demanded, glaring at the two policemen outside the ward.

The two policemen were equally confused. "Look at the surveillance—she was asleep in the bed! The door and window were closed. Where

could she have gone?"

Liu Jiayi had disappeared from the sealed ward.

The team leader exhaled in frustration and reported into the intercom, "Report, failed arrest of proposed heretic number 601 with poison gas hazard."

Mu family villa area.

The third team member sat on the couch, watching Muke, who was clutching his chest, clearly in distress.

Muke frowned, biting his lower lip. His face was as pale as a sheet, and his hands gripped his chest tightly. His parents hovered around him, both visibly worried.

Papa Mu, for the third time that night, picked up his teacup, his voice as cold as a threat: "I don't know what kind of dispute my son has gotten involved in, but what kind of major social incident could he possibly be mixed up in? He's a preconditioned patient who doesn't even leave the house and won't even take a few steps without scaring us."

"To take him on a trip? Not to mention whether you even have the qualifications—if anything happens to my son, can you afford the consequences?!"

Papa Mu slammed his teacup onto the coffee table, puffing out his chest and glaring. "Don't think that I, Mu Jingwu, can just be pushed around by anyone, or that you can take my son away just because someone barges into my house and says a few words. I'm not an uneducated fool!"

Muke, lying on the sofa with his eyes closed, pretended to be suffering from heart pain. He peeked through a slit in one eye, catching sight of the awkward, embarrassed expressions of the team members sitting across from him. The corner of his mouth twitched slightly.

However, he soon silenced himself, frowning again as he lay back on the sofa, his face so pale it was almost transparent, as fragile as if the team could kill him with just a touch.

The team members were also struggling, but there wasn't much they

could do about Muke.

Captain Tang, the unreliable leader, had said that Muke wasn't strictly a heretic, but he had to be brought in.

Muke had no combat skills, and in any other timeline, he was more of an external spokesman for Bai Liu, relying on his excellent memory to handle and sell the various heresies born of Bai Liu's hands.

Though Muke had no abilities, he played an important role as an intermediary in Bai Liu's evil object-based gold-devouring network, acting as a manager for Bai Liu's underground criminal team.

For years, Bai Liu had relied on Muke to make contact with others under his command and pass on information. Bai Liu had hidden himself so well that the Dangerous Heretics Bureau had long thought of Muke as nothing more than a madman collecting money from evil objects. But eventually, they realized that Muke was just one of Bai Liu's cards on the table—the true king of ghosts was hidden even deeper.

Muke had relied on his illness for years to muddy the waters, pretending to be dumb with the Heresy Bureau. When things went wrong, he would collapse, eyes closed, playing his game. That's why they had to send Muke to the hospital for treatment, something that made Su Yang's hair stand on end every time.

It was the same this time.

Muke was not like the others—he had a powerful father and a natural protective layer provided by his condition.

Tang Erda's forced capture of Muke didn't meet the requirements for a heretic who must have had a harmful effect on humanity. The department couldn't afford to force Muke's capture. After all, Muke's heart condition was real, and his identity was not simple. It would be a difficult situation if he died in the Bureau of Heresy.

The heart patient, fragile as a crystal cat, seemed harmless. But in the eyes of the third team in this timeline, Muke was evil, sinful, and cunning.

However, this wasn't entirely true, because as Tang Erda had said, Bai Liu protected those around him—people like Muke—very well.

Muke, both in and out of the game, had never killed or directly

harmed anyone. His hands were not stained with blood. He only negotiated, did business, and ran the guild. Out of some sense of empathy, he had even saved a number of desperate, unskilled players in the game.

This was why it had been difficult for the Heresy Bureau to deal with Muke in other timelines—because, in a narrow sense, Muke hadn't had a harmful effect on humans. He was, in a way, just a normal human being.

Muke only invested in projects he thought were worthwhile, and he could easily claim ignorance about the consequences. After all, Muke had invested in numerous projects, many of which he hadn't even thoroughly examined, so he could genuinely say he didn't know they were evil.

Because, at first glance, they didn't appear to be.

These were, after all, just ordinary mushrooms, unremarkable antique mirrors, and beautifully crafted sculptures of mermaids.

Muke thought they were good projects and promoted them. He wasn't even directly involved in their processes. So unless Muke admitted it, he couldn't be judged a heretic.

Just like now.

For Liu Jiayi, Mu Sicheng, and Bai Liu—three heretics for whom Tang Erda could positively hold evidence of crimes that had caused harmful effects on humanity—it was possible to arrest them by force.

But not for Muke.

Tang Erda couldn't tell if Muke was being deceived or if he was actively working with Bai Liu.

In every timeline, there was no direct evidence that Muke willingly aided Bai Liu, nor that he was simply a poor man coerced into being an accomplice. The line between good and evil was strangely blurred in Muke's case.

Muke's father refused to comply, even threatening to call the police, claiming he would use his special connections to make sure the third team members left his home.

Muke, who had been lying on the sofa pretending to be ill, sat up

suddenly, breathing heavily. He grabbed his phone and opened a message sent to him by Bai Liu at 9:16.

[Beware of roses and hunters. I may die at the hands of a hunter. Don't wait for me. Get out of here.]

Muke's face hardened as he gripped his phone.

Dead at the hands of hunters? Was the group that came for them tonight [the hunters]? Had Bai Liu already been captured?

The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In-game:

Liu Jiayi meets up with Mu Sicheng at the entrance to the game, both having just experienced the death of Liu Huai, a person who meant something to them. The atmosphere between them feels stagnant and stiff, their faces numb. However, the silence doesn't last long.

Finally, Mu Sicheng speaks up, a little stiffly, "I got Bai Liu's text. Did you get it too?"

Liu Jiayi, who is blind, resists the urge to roll her eyes and simply points to her own eyes in silence.

Mu Sicheng coughs awkwardly, "I forgot you can't see. You don't act like a blind person at all in the game. How did Bai Liu inform you that something was going to happen to him and let you into the game?"

"He didn't tell me anything was going to happen to him," Liu Jiayi replies in a calm tone, "He just told me to enter the game at night. But that night, a group of people suddenly came to arrest me. The noise they made was so loud. I have good hearing, so I noticed something was wrong and retreated into the game immediately. Sure enough, the group who came to arrest me was related to Bai Liu. What happened to him?"

Mu Sicheng reads the message Bai Liu sent him aloud to Liu Jiayi.

Liu Jiayi listens carefully, then frowns in thought, "Hunter and Rose... If that's what it's called, I might have a clue... I might know who this person is."

"What's the clue?" Mu Sicheng reacts, unable to follow Liu Jiayi's reasoning. How could she deduce who arrested Bai Liu after hearing a text message?

He frowns at her, "You know this [Hunter] who took Bai Liu?"

"I'm not sure it's the same person," Liu Jiayi begins, "But when I was training with the King's League team, Hearts gave me an

extraordinary-level item called [Magic Space]." Liu Jiayi looks up at Mu Sicheng, her eyes misty, "Extraordinary-level props are usually only produced in Level 3 games, by collecting all the monster books, and are very difficult to obtain."

"This means this [Magic Space] came from a Level 3 game that's probably unexplored... But of course, there's another possibility." Liu Jiayi pauses, "A very rare, difficult possibility."

Mu Sicheng's face goes stony as he picks up on her words. "Another possibility is that someone cleared a Level 3 game with a monster book on their own and with the mini-TV turned off. We wouldn't be able to find any information about this Level 3 game because there's no clearance video in the library. If the mini-TV had been on, the video would definitely be in the VIP library."

"But if that's the case..." Mu Sicheng can't help but shiver, pulling at his hair in frustration. "Damn it. Whether it's a single-player Level 3 game or a multiplayer game, the abilities of this person are terrifying. One person passing a Level 3 game with a set of monster books... Could this be the person who took Bai Liu? How do you know?"

"I can't be sure it's the same person who took Bai Liu," Liu Jiayi admits, "But I think there's a strong possibility they're connected. Hearts said the prop came from an old player with a strange skill identity." Liu Jiayi looks toward Mu Sicheng, her voice low, "That player's skill identity is called [Withered Rose Hunter]."

"Tsk." Mu Sicheng tightens his brows as if he could kill a fly with them, "It matches the message Bai Liu sent me."

"But even if this hunter player is powerful, Bai Liu just needs to find a way to evade his surveillance to enter the game. At least in the central hall, this hunter has no way of hurting him. And why does Bai Liu always seem to attract such a great enemy?" Mu Sicheng mutters.

"Unlucky, I guess. Bai Liu's zero luck value truly lives up to its name." Liu Jiayi comments indifferently. "I thought he was unlucky enough to meet me in his third game, but I didn't expect him to be even unluckier."

Liu Jiayi adds calmly, "And, unfortunately for you, I don't think Bai Liu will be able to get into the game."

Mu Sicheng raises an eyebrow, "What do you mean, he can't get into the game? As long as there are no [onlookers], we players can enter

the game anytime. I don't think a hunter of some sort can trap Bai Liu in reality."

A system panel appears in front of Liu Jiayi, which she shows to Mu Sicheng.

[Prop Name: Magic Space]
[Prop Description: You can control a space you specify, allowing those you want to enter to enter and those you want to exit to exit. Sorry, this prop has been dropped and picked up by player Bai Liu. You cannot use this prop at this time.]

"Generally speaking, we players can enter the game at any time if there are no [onlookers]—ordinary people who haven't entered the game. But there is another way in which players can be prevented from entering the game," Liu Jiayi explains.

She looks at Mu Sicheng. "That's by using props in reality. If Hearts got [Magic Space], an extraordinary-level prop, from this [Fading Rose Hunter], it means this Level 3 game was cleared by this hunter. And—"

Liu Jiayi speaks calmly: "As long as this Level 3 game refreshes once and this hunter clears it once, they will have a [Magic Space]. They could even pass the [Magic Space] to the King's Guild. This suggests the veteran player has more high-level props, and Bai Liu is most likely being trapped by him with them."

Mu Sicheng's face darkens as he thinks about it. "But aren't props generally not allowed to be used casually in reality, except for those core props that fulfill desires?"

Liu Jiayi puts the panel away and shrugs nonchalantly. "What if this person's core desire is related to Bai Liu?"

"It can't be that much of a coincidence..." Mu Sicheng's voice weakens as he looks at Liu Jiayi's expressionless face. He grits his teeth, muttering, "Bai Liu, you unlucky bastard."

"You and I both know what Bai Liu's luck value is. So when thinking about things related to him, it's best to prepare for the worst," Liu Jiayi comments as she rummages through the prop store. "We've been in the game for so long, and Bai Liu hasn't come to meet us. He said he'd be in the game at night, and he rarely goes back on his word. So it seems the worst-case scenario I've been talking about has already happened."

"Let’s go." Liu Jiayi finds a dark goggle that’s slightly too big for her, putting it on. Half of her face is covered by the oversized goggles. She turns to Mu Sicheng. "Go save that unlucky bastard who keeps getting into trouble."

[System Alert: Player Liu Jiayi wears a prop (Blizzard Goggles) that keeps her vision clear in extreme weather conditions, such as blizzards. The prop expires when damaged.]

"But we don’t know the true identity of this hunter, we don’t know where he is, and we don’t know how to find him or Bai Liu, who was captured by him." Mu Sicheng asks, furrowing his brow.

"I don’t know." Liu Jiayi pushes the oversized goggles on her face, "But having dealt with players from the King's Guild, I know of one person who will definitely be looking into his reality information."

Mu Sicheng and Liu Jiayi exchange a look, realizing at the same time, "Wang Shun!"

"I’m a senior player in the King’s Guild now, so I can get him out. The problem isn’t getting Wang Shun out," Liu Jiayi takes a deep breath. "But if Hearts finds out I got Wang Shun out to set up a conversation for Bai Liu, that would be a problem. Bai Liu is now a member of another guild, and I would be betraying the guild. She won’t make it easy for me..."

Mu Sicheng sneers and asks, "Does she make you feel better?"

Liu Jiayi falls silent for a moment before exhaling. "Better than that. She used me, but her use has at least kept me safe until now."

"There’s nothing wrong with being used," Mu Sicheng remarks with a sarcastic smile. "Oh, you think it’s a good time, so you use Liu like this too..."

Liu Jiayi turns her head and looks at him, making Mu Sicheng stop mid-sentence.

Liu Jiayi's expression is one of shocking indifference, as if despair has drained all life and desire from her.

Mu Sicheng clenches his teeth, resisting the urge to continue pricking at Liu Jiayi with his words. Instead, he asks, "So if you still feel good about being used, why did you betray Hearts to save Bai Liu, the young witch seeded by the King's Guild?"

At the end of his sentence, Mu Sicheng's tone is mocking.

"Because I no longer have a reason to be used." Liu Jiayi lowers her head. "I was used as an excuse to die, and his soul chose Bai Liu. I rarely agree with my brother's choices because he is really stupid. He makes cowardly decisions, like being friends with dangerous people like you, going against the King's Guild, and trying to protect someone like me."

"I never agreed with his choice because it was clearly self-destructive. But this time, I wanted to try... my brother's choice."

Mu Sicheng falls silent for a moment. He looks away awkwardly and hands Liu Jiayi a tissue. "No."

Liu Jiayi pushes Mu Sicheng's hand away with an expressionless look. "I'm not crying. Save it for yourself, useless thief."

"Who are you calling useless?!" Mu Sicheng growls in frustration.

"If you were useful, I wouldn't have had to pull out the visualization props I stored with someone else." Liu Jiayi mutters, her voice dripping with annoyance, "I was going to use it in the league, but you're a fool with only 74 intelligence points, so it wouldn't have come in handy. Guess I'll do it myself..."

"What's wrong with having 74 intelligence points?!" Mu Sicheng growls. "Do you have an IQ point... that high?!"

Liu Jiayi shoots him a disdainful glance. "Heh, don't forget what I'm combining with Zhang Gui for."

[The highest intelligence duo ever - Little Witch and Puppeteer]
[A great combination of 91 and 93]
[The newcomer with the highest intelligence value has emerged! Will they be the next generation of league warriors?]

...

Mu Sicheng finally remembers — Liu Jiayi was famous for her intellect before her skills were fully revealed.

"What are you freezing for?" Liu Jiayi turns to Mu Sicheng calmly. "Come on. I'll find a way to get Bai Liu out. You don't have to be too scared."

"Who’s scared?! Don’t just slander me because you’re young..."

Chapter End Notes

Fun Fact .....
Liu Jiayi has 2 points more in intelligence than Bai Lui.

The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment

Mu Family Villa

Muke took a deep breath and looked at his father, who had just hung up the phone. "Dad, did the professional hacker you hired manage to find the address of these people? Who the hell are they?"

"No," Father Wood replied, furrowing his brow in thought. "The other side is very protective. There's no way to pinpoint their exact address."

Muke's eyes darted from side to side as his mind raced. After a moment, he looked up again. "What if it's not the address of another base, but rather specific personal information that we can track down?"

Father Wood asked a few questions in English on the phone, then turned to Muke. "Yes, but we need specific details like phone numbers, names, or photos. Unfortunately, we don't have any of that. They were using shields when we arrived, so we couldn't capture any photos, the surveillance was disabled, and they were wearing tight masks..."

"I can draw them out." Muke interrupted, his eyes suddenly sharp with determination. "A 3D scan of their facial bone structure should be enough to identify them. I can restore it."

Father Wood fell silent. "Wait, just a few minutes ago, did you note down the skeletal structure of everyone's face?"

"Yes, Dad," Muke replied calmly.

Father Wood spoke quietly into the phone, then turned to Muke. "Alright. Is there any particular information you need to focus on?"

"Anyone who might be under financial strain, or has bad habits—like drinking or gambling—or someone getting married, or with a newborn, or elderly family members in poor health," Muke said quickly. "Anyone likely to face a big expense soon. I need someone who could be swayed by money or material gain and would be willing to share information."

Father Wood gave Muke an understanding look before ending the call with a brief explanation.

He then turned to Muke, who was breathing heavily, his chest rising and falling, and regarded him with a complex expression. "This Bai Liu... he's done a lot more for you than just save you, hasn't he, Ke? Do you really have to be involved with him?"

"It's not that I have to be involved with him." Muke slowly lifted his eyelids, his voice strained with breathlessness, making him seem fragile. "Dad, he makes me feel alive. If he dies, my soul dies with him. He's... very, very important to me."

Father Wood was silent for a moment, then placed a hand on Muke's shoulder. "I'll help you. You need cash, right? I'll make sure you get it. How much do you need?"

"It depends on how much these people planning to come after me are willing to be impressed by," Muke replied coolly.

Inside the King's Guild

Wang Shun looked confused as his system flashed a red notice.

[System Alert: An anonymous invitation has been sent to you by a King's Guild Premium player, inviting you to meet at the game portal.]

[Meeting Code: Long time no see, old friend.]

An invitation from a premium access player was something a mid-level guild like Wang Shun's could hardly refuse.

Suspicious, Wang Shun made his way to the game's entrance. But when he arrived, he saw no senior guild members he recognized—except for Mu Sicheng.

Mu Sicheng saw him too and waved with a fake smile, greeting him with, "Long time no see, old friend."

Wang Shun subconsciously raised his hand to return the greeting, but then froze, a jolt of realization hitting him.

He felt something press against his rear end and instinctively threw his hands up—before his brain reminded him that this was a game lobby, where players couldn't harm each other.

A sweet, laughing voice came from behind him, "Don't worry, I can't hurt you here, but this is the game login. I can force you into the

game, and once you're in, I can do whatever I want to you, Wang Shun."

Cold sweat instantly dampened Wang Shun's back. He recognized the voice and quickly bowed his head, his posture submissive. "Little witch, Queen Hearts is looking for you. We can discuss anything you want, I'll serve you unconditionally. You're an important player in our team, but... would you like to talk to Queen Hearts first?"

"The Queen doesn't seem to be in a very good mood because of your actions."

Wang Shun's words were clearly a veiled threat aimed at Liu Jiayi with Queen Hearts, but Liu Jiayi merely snickered and pushed him further against Mu Sicheng.

Mu Sicheng wrapped his arms around Wang Shun's neck, seemingly friendly, but in reality, he was secretly pulling him toward a corner.

Once they reached the corner, Mu Sicheng pinned Wang Shun against the wall. His hand pressed into Wang Shun's throat, slowly tightening, his tone cold. "We need to ask you something. Specific information about [The Withered Rose Hunter]. What's his name? Where does he live? What's his core desire to enter the game? You should be able to find all that with your skills, right?"

Wang Shun's throat constricted, even though he knew he wouldn't die. The feeling was unbearable. The pressure from Mu Sicheng was so intense that it felt like suffocating, but he couldn't break free, no matter how hard he tried to pull Mu Sicheng's hand away.

Gasping and coughing, his voice hoarse, Wang Shun croaked, "I can't tell you that—it's an act of rebellion!"

"Rebel meeting, or go into the game now, and I'll kill you. Your choice." Mu Sicheng lifted Wang Shun by the throat, his eyes cold and merciless. "I don't want to waste too much time on you. Will you talk?"

Liu Jiayi tilted her head, her hands behind her back, her voice sweet but sinister. "I haven't taken you to level 2 yet, Wang Shun. Do you want me to take you this time?"

Take him where? To hell?

Wang Shun looked into Mu Sicheng's eyes. The emotions swirling in

them formed a black vortex that seemed to pull him in. Even though he felt dizzy, he realized that Mu Sicheng would really find a way to kill him in the game.

"Ahem! You guys put me down first! Put me down so I can talk!" Wang Shun choked out, pulling desperately.

Mu Sicheng finally loosened his grip, pulling his hands into his tracksuit pockets. He gave Wang Shun a disdainful look as he crouched on the floor, coughing weakly. "I can't even touch you."

But in truth, Wang Shun knew the real answer—he was intimidated by Mu Sicheng, something embarrassing he could never admit.

Thanks to his "Know-it-all" skill, Wang Shun was more attuned to emotions than most people. The malice from both Liu Jiayi and Mu Sicheng had made him shudder, pushing him to confess.

"I don't know all the specifics of the person whose skill identity is [Withered Rose Hunter]." Wang Shun finally calmed himself and spoke.

Mu Sicheng shot him a vicious look, but before his hand could move, Wang Shun quickly stepped back, continuing, "But I know some information that might be useful."

Mu Sicheng raised an eyebrow. "What news?"

Wang Shun warily held his hands out in front of his chest, preventing Mu Sicheng from grabbing him. "My personal skill is called [Know-it-all]. It can detect basic information about an opponent, but it's not universal. I can't always find out everything, it requires certain conditions."

Mu Sicheng's patience was thinning. "What are the conditions? Get to the point!"

Wang Shun's eyes darted around as he spoke, "To me, everyone is like a computer, and I'm like a hacker who needs to bypass the [firewall] inside the computer to steal information."

"The strength of each person's [firewall] varies. For example, take God Mu—you, before, I couldn't easily access your information because your emotions and attention were focused and stable. Your [firewall] was solid, and it was very hard for me to steal information from you."

At this point, Liu Jiayi, who had been listening intently, whipped her head toward Mu Sicheng and shouted, "Stupid! Calm down your emotions! He's about to steal the information in your head!"

Before Mu Sicheng could react, Wang Shun quickly continued, "But now there's a crack in your attention—"

Wang Shun's eyes changed as he quickly pulled up a notepad from his system panel. "Sorry, God Mu."

The notepad displayed like a terminal code, and suddenly a series of characters filled the screen.

Wang Shun skimmed through it quickly, spotting the message before Mu Sicheng lifted him again. Gritting his teeth, Mu Sicheng slammed Wang Shun against the wall. "Fuck..."

Wang Shun exhaled deeply, raising his hands in surrender. He looked steadily at Mu Sicheng. "You're going to save Bai Liu, aren't you? He's been captured. If you're planning to do that, maybe we can talk terms."

"Put him down," Liu Jiayi ordered coldly. "We've lost the initiative."

Mu Sicheng ground his teeth but eventually let go.

Wang Shun dropped to the ground and stood up, brushing off his clothes as if nothing had happened. "I can tell you what I know, but I need a guarantee when you save Bai Liu."

Liu Jiayi frowned. "What guarantee?"

"If I'm judged as a rebel by the King's Guild for leaking information to you, and they find out I know too much, the Queen will come after me." Wang Shun smiled bitterly. "At that point, it would be nice if Bai Liu could protect me."

"... That's all the guarantee you need?" Liu Jiayi frowned. "And you're willing to risk defecting to help us save Bai Liu? Do you know what rebellion means?"

"No one knows better than I do."

Wang Shun took a deep breath. "I helped the King's Guild recruit many promising newbies, using my skills to learn their inner desires and then coaxing them into joining. I've seen too many newbies rebel

after realizing they've been deceived."

"Most of the players from the Rebel Society have disappeared from the game." Wang Shun fell silent.

Liu Jiayi looked up at Wang Shun. "So, why are you helping us?"

Wang Shun smiled. "Because Bai Liu is my favorite player out of all the ones I've screened. So far, I've never been able to break his [firewall]."

He spoke in a sincere tone, "I'm looking forward to the day when he becomes a god."

"... So you're a fan of Bai Liu?" Mu Sicheng looked at Wang Shun with a strange expression.

Wang Shun shrugged indifferently and smiled slightly. "You could say that. I was his first loyal viewer, and I want to see his 'show' go all the way to the end—even surpassing the King's Guild."

"For that, you need to bring him out of the [Rose Hunters'] hands."

Liu Jiayi followed up, "What exactly is the identity of this [Rose Hunter]? I haven't seen him in the league player profiles, but if he can turn off the little TV, then he's at least a top 100 player. I've never heard of such a strange player among the current top 100."

"Because he wasn't a consistent player in the top 100 and has now fallen down the rankings, [Rose Hunter] might be someone you newbies don't know. But a few years ago, he was a top 3 player," Wang Shun explained.

He took out his notepad, flipped through the pages, and then showed the information to Mu Sicheng and Liu Jiayi. "See? He's a [Gunner] league player."

"[Gunners League players]?" Mu Sicheng looked confused. "What does that mean?"

Wang Shun explained, "It means [Rose Hunter] doesn't have a guild of his own, and he doesn't team up with anyone. He seems to reject group actions, so no player knows when he entered the game, but he participates in the league every year."

"We all know it takes five people to sign up for the league. One person can't participate, so [Rose Hunter] would join a guild's team during the league period and then break away from that guild when the league ends. He's an itinerant league player, also known as a hired [Gunner's Aid]. Guilds that want a strong single combatant will pay a high price to hire a [Rose Hunter] for their team."

Mu Sicheng asked, "So what guild is he in now?"

Wang Shun shook his head. "He's not in any guild right now. [Rose Hunter] hasn't played in a league in two years. No matter how much guilds want him, he hasn't shown up."

"[Rose Hunter] is a God Xiang who haunts the game and forbids people from following his little TV. He changes his appearance to disguise himself, so no guild can find him when he doesn't want to be found. It's no surprise you haven't heard of him."

"Do you have any precise information about him?" Liu Jiayi asked, looking directly at Wang Shun. "He's most likely the one who took Bai Liu."

Wang Shun sighed and shook his head. "He has a thick firewall, and the few times I've tried to steal his information have failed."

Liu Jiayi bit her lower lip.

But Wang Shun paused, then continued, "However, the one time I tried to steal a bit of his data was at a league match two years ago. [Rose Hunter] came in late, looked out of form, and rightfully lost that game to the other side. I thought I might have an opportunity then, so I waited for him to log out at the exit of the Den."

Mu Sicheng's face changed when he heard this. He suddenly realized something. "Holy shit, Wang Shun, when you went to the exit to find Bai Liu, who had low mental value, were you also trying to take advantage of the opportunity to steal information from his brain?!"

Wang Shun pretended not to hear Mu Sicheng's accusation and continued, frowning as if recalling the events.

"I remember the day [Rose Hunter] smelled heavily of alcohol and stumbled out of the boarding gate. The system panel wasn't even closed, just wide open with a system prompt on it. I pretended not to brush up against him and used my skill—"

Wang Shun took a deep breath. "I've never seen such strange brain data. Human brains usually focus on personal things like appearance, career, desires, and so on. But not [Rose Hunter's]. He only had one name in his head. A dense one."

Wang Shun flipped to the relevant page in his notebook.

The page looked like a name was scribbled carelessly, almost madly, with a pen, filling an entire page.

[Su Yang].

Su Yang, Su Yang, Su Yang—!!!

It was like the name of someone you hiss, miss, and desperately grasp for when drowning and trying to catch the last straw.

Wang Shun silently flipped through another logbook, which read:

"[You've finally gotten the happiness you wanted. It's great that you're engaged.]"

"[Shouldn't my timeline, at this happiest moment in all your time and

space, end here? After all, this is the wish I wanted, and it's finally been granted.]"

"[When I have destroyed the source of all the hidden dangers, I, the heretic, will leave you with all the elements that will endanger your happiness.]"

Wang Shun looked up at Liu Jiayi and Mu Sicheng. "I also saw a prompt on his system panel the other day."

"The system prompt said, 'Congratulations to the player for the change in the core of desire and the shift in skill identity from [Rose Hunter] to [Withered Rose Hunter].'"

Liu Jiayi and Mu Sicheng exchanged looks. "Do you know anything else about this Su Yang?"

Wang Shun nodded. "Rose Hunter's mind is filled with information about this Su Yang. When he thinks about him, his emotional and attentional [firewall] is full of holes. I'll give you all the information about Su Yang later..."

Mu Family.

It didn't take long for Woody's father's phone to ring again, an internet call. It was obvious that the hacker had come looking for him.

Muke's father gestured for Muke, who stood up with dead eyes, to calm down.

After exchanging a few words on the phone, he covered the receiver and turned to Muke. "I've got information on these people, but they're not showing any obvious distress about income or expenditure, and they seem loyal to the organization. It's probably going to be difficult to impress them with money."

Muke's face turned pale as he listened to his father continue, "These people are not in the portrait you sent over. However, we found that someone connected to all of them just had a baby in his family. The expenses have suddenly increased after the first month."

Muke asked, "What is this man's name?"

Father Mu looked at Muke. "Su Yang."

10:30 PM, Middle Construction Avenue.

The lights in thousands of homes were out at this time, and only the streetlights flickered. This was an old neighborhood, full of middle-aged and elderly people who lived here regularly, and there were no pedestrian lights at this hour.

However, a light was on in a room around the corner. Through the crack in the curtains lit by the pale light, you could see the mistress of the house, freshly bathed, tenderly looking at the child in the crib, gently rocking it with her hand while humming an unknown nursery rhyme.

She still seemed to have difficulty moving around. Sitting on a cushion, her back bowed for a while before the ache started to kick in. She frowned and leaned back, as if preparing to stand up with some support.

But as soon as she moved, the child in the cot began to make a grunting sound, almost as if about to cry. Its arms and legs flailed in restlessness, trying to grab her fingers.

She sat back down helplessly, lying on the edge of the cot with a sighing, contented smile on her face as she looked at the baby. "What's wrong with you today? You don't want mummy to go at all? Why are you so clingy? You don’t sleep well either?"

She gently pinched the tip of the little baby’s nose with her thumb, and the baby’s eyelids twitched. He sneezed and babbled a few times.

There was a sudden knock. She stood up with joy, turning her head and kissing the baby’s face. "Your daddy's finally home!"

The door opened, and Ji An’s delighted voice faded just as it rushed out. "You're back—"

She looked, somewhat amazed, at the little girl standing outside.

It was a thin little girl with strange, grayish eyes, wearing clothes that seemed too thin for the season. She looked fragile and had a sweet, doll-like face. She looked around the room, confused and timid but politely said, "Excuse me, big sister, I don’t see... I seem to be going the wrong way. This isn’t my home, is it?"

A blind little girl who had lost her way put Ji An's newly raised guard at ease.

She had just given birth and was overly caring for children, so she quickly softened her tone and demeanor. Kneeling down, she spoke to the girl face-to-face. "Where do you live? Do you have your parents' phone number? I'll call them for you to come and get you."

The little girl shook her head, her fingers twisting nervously. Her voice was faint. "I... I don't remember."

Ji An's maternal feelings flooded. "It's okay, what are your parents' names? Tell me, I'll see if I know them. I'll have to tell them how I can let you run around alone so late."

The young girl tilted her head seriously and said, "My parent's name is Su Yang. Can you help me find him?"

Ji An slowly stood up straighter, confused. "This is Su Yang's house. How can your parent be my husband?"

The little girl, or Liu Jiayi, instantly wiped the expression from her face, dropped her wringing hands, and waved them back. "Found it. This is it. Mu Sicheng, do it."

Ji An finally realized something was wrong and took two guarded steps back to close the door. But she couldn't pull it shut. A tall young man stepped out from behind her.

The young man was two heads taller than Ji An, with an exaggerated monkey headset around his neck. All he had to do was lift his elbow, and she couldn't close the door anymore.

Mu Sicheng's cold eyes met Ji An's. "Tell Su Yang to come out."

Ji An subconsciously reached for her phone to call the police, but she ended up emptying it into her shirt pocket.

Breathing heavily, she watched as the young man across from her slowly pulled out a pink-and-white mobile phone from his pocket and raised an eyebrow. "Looking for this, aren't you?"

"When did you steal that!" Ji An was on the verge of breaking down. "Who the hell are you people?!"

The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The cries of the baby in the nursery behind her rang out shrilly, and Ji An's face paled before quickly becoming desperate and broken.

"There's a child?" Liu Jiayi tilted her head slightly, always very attuned to sounds. She quickly concluded, "In the last room of the house, it must be Su Yang's child."

Ji An's mind went blank. She had no time to think and turned around, stumbling frantically into the nursery.

With trembling hands, she locked the door, turned, and picked up the baby. Breathing heavily, she paced back and forth across the room, tears of fear spilling from her eyes.

She pushed open the window and cried out into the empty street: "Anyone! Help! Somebody! Please!"

No one responded.

She sobbed hysterically, burying her face in the baby's swaddling clothes. Her hands covered the baby's ears as she kissed and soothed the frightened infant: "It's all right, baby. Sleep tight. Mummy's here. Mummy won't let anything happen to you."

The click of a lock being inserted with a key echoed behind her as it slowly turned.

Ji An's breath stopped. She reached into her pajama pocket with a trembling hand. The key to the baby's room was in there too.

Now, it felt as though everything was slipping away, as if those two had taken it all—her key, her baby.

Ji An let out a long sob, her face drenched in tears. She closed her eyes in despair.

The nursery door slowly creaked open.

It was empty, except for the cot bell still jingling.

Mu Sicheng gave a curious giggle, looking around the room and bending down to peek under the bed. “Where is she? I clearly saw her run in here.”

Liu Jiayi raised her hand to stop Mu Sicheng from advancing. “I can still hear her breathing.”

She half-closed her eyes, “She’s outside the window.”

“Outside the window?!” Mu Sicheng exclaimed in shock.

He stepped forward and yanked open the window to look outside, only to see Ji An holding the baby in her arms, perched on the external heater of the air conditioner. The tiny baby dangled helplessly in her embrace.

The night was cold and fierce, the wind blowing Ji An’s white nightgown, making it bulge and tremble. She looked like a dandelion about to be blown away, clinging to its seeds as tears streamed down her face.

Ji An’s eyes were bloodshot as she glared at Mu Sicheng, her teeth gritted. Like a protective mother, she threatened, “Even if I have to jump with the baby in my arms, I won’t let you use us to threaten Su Yang!”

Mu Sicheng’s head felt like it had doubled in size. “Big sister, we don’t have that in mind yet! Of course, there might be such an arrangement later, but right now, we mainly want to find Su—”

Before he could finish, Ji An took two alert steps back, shaking her head. The old air conditioning unit suddenly tilted, its rusted screws screeching as Ji An stepped back, causing her to lose balance and tumble down the stairs in a panic.

But, instinctively, Ji An threw the baby towards Mu Sicheng in a desperate move to save her child.

Her eyes were wide with desperation and pleading as her voice choked on sobs: “Please! Save my baby!”

Mu Sicheng’s pupils fluttered. His reflexes kicked in, and he hooked one foot on the window sill while reaching out with the other to grab hold of the crumbling air conditioning shelf, trying to prevent the baby and Ji An from falling.

The weight on his ankles caused the tendons in his forehead to bulge, and he pressed himself against the outer wall, gripping the window edge with one hand while the other wrapped around Ji An's waist as they descended.

"Shit!" Mu Sicheng's face turned red, his carotid artery pulsing from the strain. "You're heavy, big sister!!!"

The baby, loosened by Mu Sicheng's tugging, slipped from Ji An's arms.

The baby, dazed but somewhat happy, babbled and kicked her little legs, slowly sliding out of the swaddling clothes.

"Fuck!" Mu Sicheng's eyes widened in panic as the baby slid downward. "You hold onto your baby!"

The baby, now free of the swaddle, fell through the air with wide eyes, her arms and legs moving as if trying to reach her mother's fingers. Innocently, she continued to fall.

"The baby!!!" Ji An screamed, reaching desperately for her child. Her face twisted with panic, her tears streaming. "MY BABY!!!!"

Liu Jiayi leaped over Mu Sicheng, propping herself against the window with one hand before diving down without hesitation.

Mu Sicheng yelled, "Liu Jiayi! Hey! You can't see it!"

Liu Jiayi didn't look back, as if guided by a hidden sense, hanging lightly from the air conditioner. She jumped a few times before finally grabbing the foot of the falling child.

The baby hung upside down in mid-air, still confused, swaying on all fours and reaching out to Liu Jiayi for a hug.

With one arm stabilizing the child, Liu Jiayi landed swiftly, her feet touching the ground with a few more jumps. She waved casually at Mu Sicheng and then carried the baby, walking back up the stairs.

Mu Sicheng, visibly relieved, helped Ji An back up.

Ji An gasped in shock, her legs trembling as she stumbled toward the door.

When she opened it, Liu Jiayi was already standing outside, holding the baby's nappy far away from her. The baby, seemingly amused,

giggled and reached out to grab Liu Jiayi's face.

Liu Jiayi pushed the baby away with mild disgust and quickly handed Ji An the nappy. "Here, she peed all over me."

Ji An, still holding the baby, sank to the floor, taking deep breaths to calm herself before covering her face and sobbing.

Mu Sicheng came out, rubbing his shoulder, his eyes wide in amazement as he looked at Liu Jiayi. "You're good. How did you jump onto those air conditioners so accurately?"

"Listen to the sound." Liu Jiayi said naturally. "When it's quiet at night, I can tell where obstructions are by the reverberations. The air conditioning unit is box-shaped, so the reverberations are louder and more obvious. Don't you know how to do that?"

At the end, Liu Jiayi's expression took on a hint of contempt.

Mu Sicheng stared at her. "....."

Was this some kind of bat-like skill I'm supposed to know? It's no wonder she can jump six floors with ease. What a monster child!

When Ji An came out after setting up the baby, her pajamas were still marked with rust from the air conditioning rack.

Mu Sicheng and Liu Jiayi were relaxed on the sofa. They likely didn't know the meaning of "sorry," but Ji An, now standing, was visibly nervous.

Especially after seeing the scratches on Mu Sicheng's face from her own hands and the redness and swelling on Liu Jiayi's palm from catching the baby, Ji An gripped her wrist and opened her mouth, but no sharp words came.

After a long silence, she turned into the room and brought out a small medical kit. Kneeling before the coffee table, she placed antiseptic, band-aids, and bandages there.

Looking at the items on the table, Mu Sicheng glanced at Ji An in confusion.

Ji An kept her head down, saying nothing, but she slightly tilted her head, avoiding his gaze.

Her hair was disheveled, and her eyes were swollen from crying.

Eventually, Mu Sicheng picked up the kit and handed it to Liu Jiayi with some disinfectant.

Once Ji An had gathered herself, she took a deep breath, turned to the two unexpected guests, and asked, “What do you want with Su Yang?”

“His colleagues caught us—” Mu Sicheng began, but before he could finish his thought, Liu Jiayi took over, speaking flatly. “His colleagues grabbed my dad without warning.”

Ji An’s face grew surprised. “Your... Dad?”

Liu Jiayi nodded without flinching. “Yes.”

Mu Sicheng covered his mouth and let out a cough. He was about to speak when Liu Jiayi’s hand twisted his waist under the table.

Liu Jiayi blinked, tears welling in her hollow eyes. She bit her lip, sniffled, and said softly, “Big sister, we really don’t want to hurt you. But my dad was taken away. I heard them shouting that one of the people involved in the arrest was called Su Yang—that’s all I know.”

“I’ve been looking for him, searching for so long before I found your place.” Liu Jiayi reached out, pathetically grasping Ji An’s sleeve. “We don’t want to hurt you or your baby. I just want my dad to come home. And you... you’re waiting for your child’s father to return, too, right? You have a child too. You know what it’s like for a child to be forced to lose the only father they can rely on.”

“I know he was doing dangerous work, but I swear everything he did was legal, all to give me a better life. He wouldn’t have done anything bad, even for me,” Liu Jiayi choked out, her tears falling freely. “I just want to understand why he was arrested when he did nothing wrong.”

As a new mother, constantly in fear for Su Yang, Ji An couldn’t help but empathize with Liu Jiayi’s words. Her rejection slowly faded, replaced by hesitation.

As Liu Jiayi cried, covering her face with unbearable sadness, Ji An finally relented. She saw her own child in this vulnerable girl who had just saved her baby’s life.

Ji An reached forward and hugged Liu Jiayi gently, sighing as she stroked her hair.

“... Don’t cry.” Ji An sighed, patting Liu Jiayi’s shoulder in comfort.

“Your dad... should be fine.”

Liu Jiayi looked up from Ji An’s shoulder, her face streaked with tears, and silently mouthed to Mu Sicheng: learn from it.

Mu Sicheng stared, dumbfounded. “.....”

Chapter End Notes

Like Father, like daughter □

The moment Ji An let go of Liu Jiayi, Liu Jiayi's face shifted to one of confusion and helplessness, like a little girl who had lost her father.

She seemed reluctant to let go of Ji An's warm embrace and gently folded her arms around her. But soon, she realized she was doing the wrong thing and let go again, nervously.

Liu Jiayi pulled her hands away and shyly adjusted her shirt, tears still hanging from her trembling eyelashes.

These little gestures made Liu Jiayi seem like a very upset child who had lost a loved one, softening Ji An's expression.

Mu Sicheng, who had been watching all of this, looked more and more perplexed: "..."

He wasn't surprised anymore that Liu Huai was being played by Liu Jiayi.

Liu Jiayi's performance was worthy of an Oscar. The girl could go from emotion to tears in less than a second.

Mu Sicheng wanted to shake Ji An and tell her, "Wake up, big sister, three minutes ago you thought this poor, cute little girl had jumped from the sixth floor without blinking and landed safely."

And this little girl's original plan was to kidnap you, threaten your husband, and force him to reveal Bai Liu's location.

Mu Sicheng's back chilled as he watched Ji An's gentle voice soothe Liu Jiayi. He couldn't help but rub his arms.

Well, that was scary! Who did Bai Liu get on the team?

"I rarely interfere with Su Yang's work. It's very confidential, and I don't know exactly what he's doing," Ji An said, still wary under Liu Jiayi's coaxing. "But I can ask around for you, and if he's willing to talk, I can help pass on your address. You're relatives of the prisoner, so you should be able to visit."

"If it was your father who was arrested, then who is this man who came with you?" Ji An asked suspiciously, eyeing Mu Sicheng.

Before Mu Sicheng could respond, Liu Jiayi quickly replied, "He's my father's friend."

Ji An was about to ask more when another knock came at the door.

Mu Sicheng quickly nudged Liu Jiayi's hand, and before Ji An could react, the two men were in the nursery, dryly closing and locking the door.

Ji An knocked anxiously twice, shaking the handle, but it wouldn't open—the key to the nursery was still in Mu Sicheng's hand!

She couldn't get in from the outside, except for Mu Sicheng, who could open the door from the inside.

Liu Jiayi's soft voice came timidly from inside, "Big sister, just ask my father, Bai Liu, for news. We won't hurt your child, I swear."

The thought that Liu Jiayi had indeed saved her baby, and that Mu Sicheng had saved her too, eased Ji An's panic a little. She hesitated for a moment in front of the nursery door before preparing to open it.

But this time, it wasn't Su Yang at the door either.

Standing outside was a young man dressed in seemingly simple clothing.

Ji An recognized the watch on the young man's wrist, one she'd seen in a TV series, said to cost millions of dollars. The young man had an exquisite appearance, well-kept clothes, and a pair of elegant gold-rimmed glasses perched on his nose.

Ji An felt calmer after the night's events. The man looked about her height and didn't seem very aggressive. Plus, there was an adult male with high combat skills in the nursery—Mu Sicheng—hiding in there.

She settled herself and looked at the man at the door. "May I ask who you are?"

"My name is Muke." Muke bowed politely to Ji An, then straightened up and asked, "Is this Su Yang's house, and are you his lover?"

Muke was wearing black leather gloves and carrying two black suitcases with combination locks.

"I am," Ji An nodded hesitantly, eyeing the suitcase Muke was carrying. "Is there something you want from him?"

Muke opened one of the suitcases, turning the combination lock a few times. He then slid the box open to reveal gold bars inside.

Ji An stared at the box in shock. "What is—?!"

"May I come in and talk to you?" Muke smiled decently, shaking the boxes of gold bars in his hand. "After all, these two boxes of things your husband wants are quite light, and it's not very safe for me to stand outside the door carrying them alone."

Somewhat dazed, Ji An stepped aside to let Muke in. "Please, come in."

The bright golden glow from the box still flashed in her mind, and she was a little dizzy when she sat down—she had never imagined someone would come to her in the middle of the night with two boxes of gold bars!

"May I ask what you mean when you say that these two boxes are what my husband wants?" Ji An asked sharply.

"That's something you should ask your husband," Muke replied, sitting neatly on the sofa. He folded his hands in his lap and looked at Ji An with a wry smile. "Ask him why he let his crew arrest a man who'd committed no crime and then demanded a sky-high bail from me, the man's rich friend?"

"No way," Ji An denied without hesitation. "Su Yang couldn't possibly do such a thing!"

It was true that Su Yang hadn't done such a thing, but that didn't stop Muke from presupposing it and using it to put pressure on Ji An.

"He really didn't do it?" Muke raised his eyes casually, his smile unchanging. "Then why was my friend taken in, and around ten o'clock this evening, Su Yang's team even came to the villa where I was staying and warned me to pay bail quickly or I'd be taken in as an accomplice too?"

Ji An clenched her hands to her chest and bit her lower lip.

Su Yang did call her around ten o'clock, saying the team had to go on a special assignment in the rich district. It was a last-minute arrangement.

Su Yang's tone seemed helpless, even as he explained that his captain

had started making arrests before the case had a clear lead.

Why would they start arresting people in a case before it was clear?

And Su Yang had mentioned that the captain wasn't in good shape lately and had been arresting unrelated people...

Her eyes fell on the two boxes of gold bars on the table. Muke followed Ji An's gaze, watching as she opened the box. In that moment, the brilliant gold glow filled her vision.

Ji An quickly withdrew her gaze as though burned. Her fists clenched at her sides as she nervously paced across the room.

"No way!" Ji An's chest heaved as she closed her eyes, blocking out the gold bars and Muke on the sofa. "Su Yang is not that kind of person! Take the gold bars away!"

"You've been in a bad financial situation lately, haven't you?" Muke's voice came clear and steady as he continued. "This second-hand house isn't very safe anymore. You've been planning to get a new one, but the money hasn't been coming in. After all, a new baby costs too much."

Even with her eyes closed, Ji An could hear his voice.

"The birth of a child changes your thinking and values, Madam. You're willing to do things for your child that you weren't before, right?"

Ji An's breathing quickened, her nails digging into her palms.

"How can you be sure that your husband hasn't changed?" Muke's tone dropped lower. "Even if he hasn't, what if his boss has? What if the people around him have? Maybe he didn't do these things willingly, but everyone else did, and he had to go along with it. That happens all the time, doesn't it?"

"But what's done is done, and I won't blame him. He didn't mean to." Muke pushed the boxes of gold bars towards Ji An. "I believe your husband is a decent person. I won't tell anyone. Just take the gold bars and give me some information about where Bai Liu is, and I'll never speak of this again. You'll have done the right thing for Su Yang. You'll have saved an innocent man."

Muke adjusted his gold-rimmed glasses and smiled. "I'd feel it was money well spent, a good deal for me. I'm sure Su Yang feels the

same."

Ji An’s breathing was rapid. Her hands hung at her sides, clenched violently. Her closed eyes trembled.

"As long as you get Su Yang to give me Bai Liu’s information," Muke said softly, "I can keep making offers until you’re satisfied. I’ve brought a truckload of gold bars, and we have all night to talk."

Ji An’s eyes snapped open as she stared at Muke. "Who did you just say you were saving?"

Before Muke could repeat the name, Bai Liu, the nursery door opened. Liu Jiayi and Mu Sicheng leaned against the wall, arms crossed. They raised an eyebrow and looked at Muke. "You’re here fast."

At 1 a.m., a tired Su Yang knocked on the door.

The moment he opened it, he collapsed into Ji An's shoulder and rubbed his face against it. "Honey, I'm home."

But this relief lasted less than a second. Su Yang quickly straightened up, holding Ji An's shoulders and scanning the room warily. "Has anyone been in the house today?"

The room wasn’t quite right—something had been moved.

Ji An forced a reluctant smile. "The air conditioning unit outside the baby's room broke and almost fell, so I called someone to fix it."

Su Yang relaxed slightly and kissed the top of Ji An's head, his tone apologetic. "I'm sorry for making you live in a second-hand house like this. We'll have money for a new one once this is all over."

Where would the money for a new house come from?

Ji An wanted to ask, but in the end, she just silently rested her head on Su Yang's shoulder and mumbled softly, "There's nothing to be sorry about."

Su Yang didn’t notice Ji An’s strange behavior as he unzipped his coat and walked straight to the baby’s room. He smiled as he peeked inside and began making silly noises to entertain their little girl.

Ji An couldn't help but cry at the sight of Su Yang looking so carefree

after the emotional rollercoaster of the night. She felt like she might break down.

When Su Yang turned and saw Ji An wiping tears from her eyes, he walked over to her, helpless and heartbroken, and pulled her into an embrace, pressing his forehead against hers. "I made you wait so long, with all this worry."

Ji An shook her head, pushing gently on Su Yang's shoulders. She placed her hands on his temples and gave him a relaxing massage. "If I can't make it, can you?"

Su Yang relaxed completely under her hands, slumping in the chair. His eyes closed, and his breathing evened out.

But Ji An knew he was still awake, just in a sleepy state.

She asked softly, trying to sound casual, "You're working late tonight. Who are you arresting? Why so sudden? You told me you were coming home for dinner, but now you're working until 1 a.m."

Su Yang furrowed his brow but didn't open his eyes. "I actually think this person shouldn't have been arrested. It was Captain Tang who pushed for the privileged arrest, but I don't understand why. I didn't find any core evidence of a crime, but it seems like this person might be involved. Still, I don't think it warranted detaining him."

"Lately, Captain Tang's been asking us to arrest people with no core evidence, and we can't even see signs of a future crime," Su Yang continued with a sigh. "He's also in a bad state—drinking a lot and getting drunk. We had a fight tonight, and the team feels like he's acting out of character."

"He wasn't like this before..." Su Yang's head began to nod as he got drowsy, his words becoming less clear. "But still, I believe in Captain Tang. It's for all of our good. If this guy is really what Captain Tang says he is, locking him up will solve everything, and we won't have to work so hard in the future..."

Ji An exhaled slowly, her suspicions confirmed. She lowered her hands, still massaging Su Yang, her gaze focused.

Once Su Yang fell asleep, Ji An carefully slipped out of the bed. She grabbed Su Yang's work card and key from his jacket, which hung on the back of a chair. She opened the window in the baby's room and threw them downstairs.

Then, with a calm expression, Ji An closed the window, kissed the baby in the nursery, and left the room as if nothing had happened.

Two black leather suitcases were hidden along the edge of the crib.

.....

Downstairs, Mu Sicheng observed the dropped work card and keys. He sniffed them in distaste, waving them in front of his nose before smirking. "I don’t know what this is loaded with, but it smells terrible. Let’s go. I remember his scent."

Muke had already dialed a number. He looked at Mu Sicheng and Liu Jiayi, shaking the phone in his hand. "I got in touch with the hacker. He said if we hook up the car recorder on the GPS, we’ll be able to track where he's been."

"Let’s find the car."

The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment

1:30 a.m., Dangerous Heresy Bureau base.

Despite being caught, Bai Liu slept soundly against the wall, undisturbed. The footsteps of the patrols outside the room were loud but largely unobtrusive to him.

His eyes were closed, and his eyelids didn't flutter, much to the dismay of the patrol members who had been instructed by Tang Erda to check on Bai Liu's condition.

"This man is unbelievably mentally resilient..."

"I'm starting to wonder if he's really a heretic..."

"Hey, do you think he can really solve the problem with that dried rose leaf gas? The Bureau said the situation has gotten so bad that most of us in the Heresy Bureau have been reassigned to deal with it. There aren't many people left at the base, and many team members are starting to crack under the pressure..."

"Tomorrow, the third detachment is supposed to investigate the perfume production factory, right?"

"Yeah, I heard Captain Su is leading the team. A lot of members from the first two detachments started to deteriorate soon after returning. That heresy is awful—it's already at the level of a severe third-degree red heresy..."

Bai Liu, who they thought was sound asleep, opened his eyes silently once they had left. He counted the seconds in his mind—the patrols here make rounds every fifteen minutes, which is roughly nine hundred seconds.

Bai Liu took the Game Manager coin from around his neck and narrowed his eyes.

With the loss of the cross and scales, most of his special items were no longer accessible in the real world.

But there was one thing he could still use—money.

This [Magic Space] controls the entry and exit of people, but not of matter, meaning money can come and go freely in this space.

What if Bai Liu is money?

This kind of extraordinary item, which can trap people in and out of the game, is supposed to work on a soul level. If Bai Liu were to leave this [Magic Space] in the form of a soul note, would it, in a sense, release him? Would the space no longer be able to trap him?

Bai Liu slowly pulled a soul note out of his pocket.

The soul note bore the cold, astringent face of little Bai Liu— a coin generated from his half-soul, imprisoned in his wallet after a trade default in the previous round.

Bai Liu looked down at the soul note in his fingers, his head bowed, lips curled into a smile.

The only problem now was getting the patrolmen to open it for him voluntarily.

As another fifteen minutes passed, the patrolman opened the small window to check on Bai Liu's condition. Instead of seeing Bai Liu's sleeping face on the side of the bed as before, coins began pouring out in a steady stream.

A cascade of coins and dollar bills—some in cents, others in notes of various amounts—rushed through the small window in a frenzy. It was as if the patrolman had opened not a prison room, but the bottom bin of a game machine, overflowing with coins.

The coins and notes mixed together, forming a coin fountain as they spilled through the window.

Among the stream, a coin folded into a triangular shape followed.

This note was no different from the others, save for the subtle fold that disguised it. Its difference was hidden, a detail easily overlooked in the rush.

As this note gushed out, Bai Liu, now lying atop a mountain of coins he'd created, licked his lips in pleasure.

He realized that he was losing control.

But with the patrolmen still present, Bai Liu couldn't dive straight into the game. He needed to escape the prying eyes of the onlookers before

he could act.

Outside, the patrolman panicked, shouting into his comms: "Report to the night watchman! Room number 006 is pouring out so many coins that the humanoid heretic inside can't even be seen! It's drowning in coins!"

"What?!" The night watchman's voice crackled with surprise, but he quickly regained his composure. "Open up and find the Humanoid Heretic! Captain Tang is very concerned about this heretic and has requested the use of heretic number [2617] [Magic Space] for this room. This heretic can control the entry and exit of people inside, so don't panic too much. I'll transfer you to Captain Tang now!"

The patrolman nodded. "Yes, I'll continue the search!"

Just then, a transfer signal came through.

Tang Erda's unusually stern scolding rang out from the communicator: "Don't open it!"

Tang Erda gritted her teeth. "Once this man starts spending, he must have found a way to recover it. He's found a way to escape!"

"Eh...?" The patrolman sounded confused. "But I've opened it already. It should be fine. Using 2617—a creature trapped inside could never escape easily—"

Before he could finish, a muffled sound, like something falling, followed by the patrolman's voice disappearing, was all that was heard.

After a burst of static, Tang Erda's voice returned, calm but full of urgency: "What happened? Report in!"

Bai Liu's unhurried laughter filled the line, "Captain Tang, how about we make a deal?"

Tang Erda, pressing the accelerator to the floor as he drove, forced himself to stay calm, trying to stall Bai Liu. "What deal? If you're talking about the money-for-roses deal with the dried leaf gas, we've already settled that—"

He paused, his voice taking on an air of exasperation. "I can offer you the solution to buy the dried leaf rose gas at the original price, but you swear you'll never smuggle it in again! Nor cause any more

accidents that would make dried rose leaf gas popular again!"

The rapid footsteps and shouts of alarm soon reached Tang Erda's comms as patrolmen from the base spotted Bai Liu fleeing. "There's a heretic out there!"

Bai Liu, in no hurry, replied with an amused tone, "Oh? Sounds like I've gone back on our deal, huh?"

Tang Erda's frustration boiled over. Yes, this time, he had no intention of dealing with Bai Liu using money. After all, Bai Liu had backtracked on the last deal with them.

Bai Liu had helped the Bureau of Dangerous Heresies with the dried rose leaf gas, but after being paid, he never disclosed the treatment method, claiming the protocol was his exclusive patent. After saving those affected by the gas, and at Su Yang's insistence, Bai Liu was released.

However, a year later, a factory that had previously produced dried rose leaf gas began operating again, and some people fell victim to it. The Bureau had to bring Bai Liu back in, paying him to assist once more.

But Bai Liu didn't play along quietly. When he was driven to the factory, he stood on the rooftop, gazing down and asking the team guarding him, "Do you want to know what the gas smells like when it explodes?"

The confused officers didn't understand what he meant. Bai Liu raised his hand, mimicking an explosion, and smiled. "BOOM! Then, you'll smell it—the scent of burning roses. It's beautiful."

The factory exploded shortly after.

Rose-colored smoke flooded the area, igniting everything in its path. Su Yang's home was nearby, and the explosion killed the entire 3rd detachment.

Tang Erda had led the investigation into the perfume factory, and he would never forget the moment he turned to see Bai Liu standing on the rooftop amidst the chaos. Bai Liu looked at him lazily, one hand in his pocket, a mischievous smile on his lips.

"Does it smell good, Captain Tang?"

The memory of that moment stung Tang Erda as he tried to regain composure.

"I can make a deal with you, as long as you don't back out," he said through clenched teeth. "I'll offer you a considerable sum."

Bai Liu replied smoothly, "I must say, I'm impressed. But what you're really thinking right now is that you'll kill me once you get the solution, right? After all, there's no better way to prevent me from backtracking than that—the dead can't backtrack."

Tang Erda's teeth clenched as he floored the gas, nearly speeding out of control. He could already see the circular building that housed the base. Almost there.

Bai Liu's voice rang out again, lightly teasing. "Captain Tang, you care so much about me. But after you caught me, you left me alone in that room all night. Isn't that a bit strange? Let me guess—you went behind my back to see someone, didn't you?"

Bai Liu's tone was sharp, a mix of ambiguity and coldness. "You found it hard to control me, so you wanted someone who could hold me in check. Someone who could interrogate me... Lu Yizhan."

Lu Yizhan, sitting beside Tang Erda, blinked in confusion. "Huh? Did you call me, sir?"

Tang Erda slammed the steering wheel, a mad grin on his face as he looked ahead. "I've always wondered why you're like this in this timeline. After looking into your past, I realized that the deviation point is this guy sitting beside me—Lu Yizhan."

Lu Yizhan glanced at Tang Erda, perplexed. "Sir? What are you talking about?"

Tang Erda swerved into the parking lot, barely missing a mark as he parked the car with a screech.

After dragging Lu Yizhan out, Tang Erda began dialing his comm again, calling in the escapee. "Report: 3rd Detachment Leader Tang Erda, pursuing escaped heretic 006. Request to close all base entrances. We have him on surveillance—"

But then, he paused. His tone shifted, darkening.

"Heretic number 006's weakness is water. I request to use room 1087

[Devouring Fountain] for his interrogation."

A dark gleam appeared in Tang Erda's eyes. He licked his canines, his voice dropping low. "Heretic 006 hates having his head held under water. That's how I'll interrogate him."

Lu Yizhan's expression faltered, and he grabbed Tang Erda's arm to stop him from moving forward. "You can't do that. Even if he committed a crime, he still has rights."

Tang Erda gave a dry laugh, his eyes darkening. "Oh? You think he still has rights?"

Bai Liu's voice cut in from the comm, smooth and unbothered. "Captain Tang, don't you think he knows who I am?"

He paused, a teasing edge in his tone. "What makes you think he can be my friend for ten years?"

Lu Yizhan stood frozen, realizing the truth. He suddenly understood that Bai Liu might have committed serious crimes. He turned to Tang Erda with a panicked expression.

"Sir, it's not true, right? He's not involved in anything serious? He didn't—" Lu Yizhan trailed off, his face twisted in concern. "He didn't commit murder or something, right?"

Tang Erda remained silent, his demeanor grim.

Lu Yizhan, with his hands to his face, sank into despair. "Has he turned into a serial killer, or some kind of criminal mastermind? God, I've only been away for two days and—"

Bai Liu's voice broke through the tension, carefree as ever. "You see what I mean?"

He dodged a patrolman's reach, speaking to Tang Erda as if they were discussing business. "Why don't you consider making a deal with me?"

Tang Erda's expression was dark and sullen as he dragged Lu Yizhan by the back of his collar toward the lift in the underground car park. Upon reaching the lift doors, he swiped his work pass open without hesitation and pressed the special warning button inside after stepping in.

"I can pay," Tang Erda said, his tone growing increasingly annoyed.

“You name the price, and I’ll get the solution for the rose gas!”

As Tang Erda pressed the alarm button, a piercing siren echoed through Bai Liu's corridor, and the bright white lights shifted to a flashing, dark red alarm.

“Warning! Warning! Heretics are on the loose!”

Bai Liu, unhurried, turned into a side corridor, easily evading those who came after him.

Fifteen minutes of patrol rotations and the long night of waiting had given him enough time to deduce something: there wasn’t much staff at this base, or else it wouldn’t be the same patrolman checking on him each time.

Bai Liu’s escape seemed calm. He wasn’t the one anxious—his pursuers were. His escape proved that, as a heretic, he was difficult to handle, and ordinary patrolmen might not have dared to confront him. Even if they caught him, they wouldn’t have known what to do with him.

But that was before Tang Erda arrived.

Bai Liu listened to the sound of the lift arriving from Tang Erda’s communicator, hearing the beeps as the lift moved between floors. One... two... three.

It could either be three levels down or three levels up from the car park, but Bai Liu’s impression was that the building was not very tall, so it was more likely to be down.

He must be around the fourth basement level, Bai Liu mused to himself.

Casually, he stuffed the soul notes he had taken from the mountain of coins into his pocket, then spoke into his communicator. “I’m not going to negotiate a money deal with you. I can give you the solution for the dried rose leaf gas, but I want something else.”

Tang Erda, hearing Bai Liu refuse the payment, frowned. “What do you want?”

“I want you to sell your soul to me and join my team,” Bai Liu quipped. “I’m playing in the league this year, but my team is still in the process of gelling. They need an experienced coach to guide them

through."

"You've won the league, you have a lot of experience, and you should know plenty about the team you're playing against." Bai Liu offered a sincere compliment. "There's no better coach for my team than you, Captain Tang."

"I've left a room full of money for you to use in buying your soul. How about it? Think it over. I haven't been this generous in a long time." His voice was light and flirtatious, with a cocky grin, as if toying with a small pet.

Tang Erda, clearly furious, took a deep breath. "Bai Liu, you better hope I don't catch you."

With a cold look on his face, Tang Erda ended the call, the lift's arrival dinging in the background.

He yanked Lu Yizhan out of the lift, his face still cold, as he resumed dialing his communicator. "Report, 3rd Detachment Leader Tang Erda, in pursuit of escaped heretic 006. Request to close all base entrances and exits. He's visible on surveillance—"

He paused, his deep blue eyes turning almost black with rage. His tone dropped low, yet his face remained unnervingly calm.

"Heretic 006's weakness is water. I request to use room 1087, [Devouring Fountain], for his interrogation after capturing him."

Tang Erda licked his canines, his pupils dilating with excitement, as his breathing slowed in anticipation of the kill. "Need me to report on the interrogation method? Heretic 006 hates having his head held down and repeatedly dipped in water. That's how I'll interrogate him."

Lu Yizhan slowly looked at Tang Erda, noticing the calmness in his expression, and his own face shifted uneasily.

"Sir, you can't do that. Even if he committed a crime, he still has human rights," Lu Yizhan said, grasping Tang Erda's hand to stop him from moving forward.

Tang Erda chuckled nervously, his eyes sparkling unnervingly, but his face remained expressionless. He looked at Lu Yizhan and pulled his wrist away. "You know, I've told Bai Liu the same thing countless times. Even if he didn't do it, I wouldn't be in this situation now."

Tang Erda yanked Lu Yizhan's hand away so forcefully that the veins on the back of his hand stood out, but Lu Yizhan held firm. Then, with a sudden motion, Tang Erda locked eyes with him, and with a swift twist, he bent Lu Yizhan's wrist downward with ease.

Lu Yizhan couldn't help but hiss, his face contorting in pain.

"Human rights?" Tang Erda's deep blue eyes gleamed with a frightening light as he moved closer to Lu Yizhan. He gripped the loosened wrist and snapped it back into place with a sharp crack.

Lu Yizhan's face went pale, and cold sweat trickled down his forehead.

"All the world can live, but the heretics cannot," Tang Erda muttered, his pupils trembling with cold fury. He smirked maniacally. "Because we are not human. We are monsters."

"Monsters don't have human rights."

The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment

Meanwhile, in the underground car park.

The door of the car next to Tang Erda's parking space slowly creaked open.

Mu Sicheng, who had been keeping watch, got out of the car and walked quickly to the lift, watching as Tang Erda entered. The lift descended fast and finally stopped at -4.

They exchanged glances as Liu Jiayi swiped Su Yang's work pass to unlock the lift, then pressed the -4 button.

Liu Jiayi's gaze remained fixed on the red alarm flashing inside the lift. Mu Sicheng's expression was so dark it felt like the color had drained from him, and Muke remained silent.

"Tsk." Mu Sicheng let out the breath he'd been holding while listening to Tang Erda and Bai Liu in the car. "Can I beat up this Tang guy later?"

"Did he say anything wrong?" Liu Jiayi asked nonchalantly.

Mu Sicheng faltered—technically, no. That Tang guy hadn't said anything untrue... Bai Liu really was nasty from head to toe, down to every last strand of hair.

But still... it was annoying!

"But so what if he's right? I'm still upset." Liu Jiayi tore her gaze from the siren, her nose wrinkling slightly in rare childish frustration. "I'll do my best to buy you time, so you can beat that frustration out of me too."

Mu Sicheng blinked, then smirked. "OK."

On the fourth basement level, Bai Liu moved quickly through the winding passages.

On either side of the corridor stood oddly shaped, numbered metal rooms, each painted in the same unsettling style. Occasionally, eerie noises echoed from within.

Even more troublesome were the patrols stationed at every corner.

Though few in number, they were positioned so strategically that Bai Liu couldn't enter the game smoothly—every attempt was interrupted by a patrolman suddenly rounding a corner.

It didn’t take long for Bai Liu to realize that this patrol layout had likely been designed by Tang Erda specifically to hinder [players].

With these ordinary guards patrolling the area, slipping into the game undetected was nearly impossible.

First, Tang Erda had used [Magic Space] to create a small cage around Bai Liu. And once Bai Liu escaped that, he found himself inside a larger, shifting cage formed by the patrols.

Pressing himself against the wall, Bai Liu regulated his breathing, preparing for one last attempt.

He pulled out the coin hanging from his lanyard, ready to enter the game. But just as he was about to summon the system, a patrolman appeared at the other end of the passage. Bai Liu had no choice but to put the coin away and turn down another corridor.

Sure enough, these patrols acted as an elaborate interruption mechanism.

Bai Liu sprinted forward, chased by the patrolman behind him, his eyes flicking to the room markers on either side—1097, 1096…

His escape route was supposed to lead to Room 006. But somehow, he was already in the thousands, despite not having passed every number. It felt like he’d been funneled into a shortcut leading straight into one of the rooms.

…This wasn’t an illusion. The patrols were deliberately herding him toward a specific location.

Bai Liu skidded to a stop at another corner. His gaze landed at the end of the corridor—a dead end.

The room waiting for him was numbered [1087].

Watching from the monitors, Tang Erda raised his communicator and gave a ruthless command.

"All patrolmen, put on your breathing masks. I’m activating

waterproof mode. Open the door to the heresy containment room [1087], codename [Devouring Fountain]. Underwater mode will commence. All units, prepare—"

"—3, 2—"

The small windows on the metal doors around Bai Liu snapped shut one after another. Each door retracted, blending seamlessly into the corridor's smooth metal walls.

Across from him, the patrolman was securing a transparent breathing mask just as the final countdown echoed through the communicator—

"—1."

Behind Bai Liu, the door to [1087] creaked open.

Crystal-clear water spilled out in a steady stream.

Then, with a violent surge, a torrential flood crashed through the corridor. Bai Liu barely had time to turn before he was swept away.

Lift Room
As soon as they stepped inside, Mu Sicheng smashed the surveillance camera.

He tensed slightly. "There's surveillance all over this base, right? Should we be hiding or something…?"

"There's no need to go deeper into the base," Liu Jiayi replied indifferently. "Our goal is to infiltrate, grab Bai Liu, and get him into the game as quickly as possible. Wasting time avoiding surveillance will only slow us down. Let them record if they want—I don't care."

Muke quickly added, "Doesn't matter to me either."

"…Fuck, but I have a final exam," Mu Sicheng groaned, rubbing his forehead. "If I get arrested, can I take it in jail? I really don't want to retake it…"

Liu Jiayi ignored his complaints and looked at the other two. "Let's go over the plan again. We don't have a map, and we don't know what's inside. To avoid being caught, we'll use a coordinate-jumping system. That means if someone tries to capture you, you enter the game."

“As soon as you enter, you receive a twelve-digit coordinate. When all three of us get inside and meet up, we’ll swap hazard coordinates. Then, we’ll switch out, return to the original coordinates, and rendezvous again. That way, we won’t get separated, and we can trace a movement curve.”

“We’ll each move in three mutually perpendicular directions—think of them as the z-axis, y-axis, and x-axis of a three-dimensional coordinate system. By marking our positions at different points and connecting them, we can reconstruct a rough map of the building.”

Liu Jiayi gestured between them. “Buildings follow patterns. Once we have the general curve of this place, we can piece together its layout. Got it?”

“Got it.” Muke nodded, thinking for a moment. “I have a good memory. I can help reconstruct the whole map using the coordinates.”

Mu Sicheng stood there, face blank.

…The hell is this? He hadn’t touched coordinate systems since high school!

Liu Jiayi narrowed her eyes at him. “You didn’t understand, did you?”

Mu Sicheng sighed, lowering his head. “…No.”

The elevator chimed.

Liu Jiayi turned calmly toward the doors. “It’s fine. Just follow my instructions.”

As the doors slowly slid open, she crouched slightly, readying herself. “Prepare for an attack—there are usually guards stationed outside.”

Water surged into the elevator. Liu Jiayi reacted instantly, climbing onto Mu Sicheng’s shoulders to avoid being submerged. Her brows furrowed as the water sloshed in waves around them.

Two patrolmen peered into the elevator. “Are you with the second detachment? You were called in to capture Heretic 006, right? Remember to put on your breathing masks—the area is being flooded—”

Their words cut off as their gazes landed on Liu Jiayi, a child who clearly didn’t belong here.

“You’re not with the crew—?!”

They moved to raise their communicators. “Report! We have intruders on—”

Before they could finish, Mu Sicheng and Muke yanked them inside, knocking them unconscious in one swift motion.

Mu Sicheng quickly stripped off their uniforms and mask communicators, handing them to Muke, who struggled to change in the rising water. Once dressed, he and Mu Sicheng propped the unconscious patrolmen against the wall inside the elevator, then hit the button for -1.

As the doors closed and the lift ascended, a questioning voice crackled over the communicator. “Hello?! What’s the situation with the intruders?!”

Muke grabbed the communicator Mu Sicheng handed him and responded smoothly, “Two intruders were caught at the elevator entrance. We removed them immediately. They’re being sent to -1 now.”

With that, he switched the device off.

Mu Sicheng stepped out of the elevator with Liu Jiayi still on his back, shaking the water off his hands. He frowned. “What’s with all this water?”

Liu Jiayi pulled off her goggles, her expression cold. “The plan needs to change. Someone is using water to trap Bai Liu.”

She paused. “I played a round with him before—he has an extreme aversion to water. If they’re flooding this place, they’re likely torturing him for information. We need to hurry.”

Mu Sicheng’s face darkened. “How fast?”

Liu Jiayi’s sharp gaze swept over the corridor. “They’ve sealed off this floor and turned it into a watertight chamber, then released water to drown Bai Liu while he’s on the run. But in doing so, they’ve made this entire area resemble a sewer.”

Her eyes flicked to the water swirling around them. “Bai Liu should be near the drainage outlet. We’ll find him faster if we follow the current instead of using the coordinate system.”

“I get it.” Muke nodded. “We track the water flow, right?”

Liu Jiayi nodded. “Exactly.”

“…Wait.” Mu Sicheng squinted at them. “Can you two, just once, say something that makes sense to a guy with a 74 in intelligence?”

Liu Jiayi exhaled. “It means we can find the drainage point by listening to the water’s direction and sound.”

Mu Sicheng still looked doubtful. “But how? It’s not like there’s only one current—”

Liu Jiayi shoved her goggles into his hands. “Hold these.”

He took them, still confused, and before he could say anything else, Liu Jiayi inhaled deeply and dove underwater.

A second later, she surfaced, pointing in one direction. Then she turned, glancing at Mu Sicheng with mild disgust, as if she didn’t want to waste any more time explaining things to an idiot.

“In the water, I can hear the current and tell its direction,” she said. “I can also tell where you’re standing because your body blocks the flow, creating a backcurrent. That makes a distinct sound, which helps me detect obstacles.”

Muke turned to Mu Sicheng. “It’s like how fish sense water currents using the lateral lines on their bodies.”

Liu Jiayi nodded. “More or less.”

“…How the hell can you do that?!” Mu Sicheng gawked at her. “Hey! This is the real world! Are you human or some kind of monster? That’s basically a superpower!”

Liu Jiayi didn’t bother answering. She simply gave him a blank stare, then turned and dove back into the water, moving through it as effortlessly as a fish.

She had this ability for two reasons.

The first was that she had been born blind. Her other senses were naturally sharper than most.

The second…

As a child, her father often threw her into a weir to catch fish with her bare hands. If she failed, she would be beaten. To survive, Liu Jiayi had learned to sense movement through water—to track the tiny vibrations of fish burrowing into the mud.

She had always hated this ability.

But this time was different.

“Whoever decided to flood this place…” Liu Jiayi swept a hand over her face, shaking off the droplets. Her body sank slightly as she floated in the water, her tone calm and ice-cold.

“…While they were busy torturing Bai Liu with water, they also made it easier for me, a blind girl, to track him down.”

"-148, 149, 150—that'll do. Drain."

The door to [1087]'s room closed. The walls on both sides of the corridor loosened, and water spilled through the gaps.

Bai Liu surfaced, coughing and choking on the water.

He fell to his knees, head bowed, his back arching violently as he struggled for air. His white shirt clung to his trembling shoulder blades, soaked through.

His complexion turned an unnatural shade of pale, almost lifeless in the water’s aftermath. His fingertips were bruised from oxygen deprivation, his chest rising and falling erratically. The three-minute-long suffocation had drained him completely.

Soon, Bai Liu's body went limp. His mouth hung open, his eyes unfocused as he collapsed onto his back. His lungs clawed for oxygen, but no matter how hard he gasped, it felt as if the air refused to reach him. He looked like he was going into shock.

"How did it feel to be underwater for three minutes? Still used to it?"

Tang Erda’s voice crackled through the comm in the patrolman’s hand at the end of the corridor. "They say the world record for breath-holding is thirteen minutes. Want to try for it, Bai Liu?"

His voice turned mocking. "Does it bring back any bad memories?"

Then, almost absentmindedly, Tang Erda asked, "Have you thought about how you're going to deal with the Dry Rose Leaf Gas scenario?"

He continued, voice even but razor-sharp: "Death won't scare you. It never has. So I won't threaten you with it. Instead, I'll give you two choices. First—cooperate. Give an honest answer about how to neutralize the Rose Dry Leaf Gas, and I'll give you a sum of money that satisfies you. Do your job, and we won't interfere with you anymore."

His tone darkened. "Second option—I lock you in with this [Devouring Spring]. I'll drain the water every minute and a half to three minutes. You won't die, but you'll be drowning over and over again. You should be familiar with that feeling, right?"

Tang Erda let out a light chuckle, slow and deliberate. His voice dropped.

"After all, the director of your orphanage used to teach you that way. You were such a bad child, weren't you? So strange, so wrong from the start. She only wanted to correct you, guide you back to the right path. That's why she taught you like that."

"It's a pity, though."

Tang Erda sighed as if discussing something mundane. "No matter how harshly she 'taught' you, you never changed. Never reacted. And for someone who delights in tormenting others, Bai Liu, you must know—there's nothing more frustrating than breaking in a child who won't even flinch."

Bai Liu slowly raised his arm to shield his eyes from the glaring white light above him. His breathing grew faint.

Tang Erda pressed on. "So she changed tactics. And eventually, she found the one thing that made you struggle."

A sharp, panicked voice cut through the comm.

"STOP IT!"

Lu Yizhan's voice was raw, desperate, straining to drown out Tang Erda's words. "He's forgotten! Don't make him remember!"

But Tang Erda only raised his voice. Cold. Unrelenting. A thorn burrowing deep into Bai Liu's already dazed, suffocating mind.

Bai Liu flinched. A rare, involuntary reaction. His head ached as if splitting apart.

"Have you really forgotten, Bai Liu?" Tang Erda's voice was laced with something between mockery and something far, far crueler. "No one pushed you into the water. You were the one who kept shoving your own head under."

"Because someone else took the blame for what you did. Someone took the punishment meant for you. The teachers singled him out. And in the end, they drowned him in the orphanage pond."

"You watched him sink."

"You kept dunking your head under the water, trying to pull him out."

Tang Erda's voice dipped lower. "You're not afraid of water, Bai Liu. You're afraid of what you saw in it."

"Do you remember who he was?"

Lu Yizhan fought desperately, thrashing, trying to stop him. His voice cracked in agony. "DON'T TELL HIM!!!"

Tang Erda ignored him. His voice turned eerily calm. "His name was Xie Ta."

"But in this timeline, you forgot him."

"And you mistook him for Lu Yizhan."

"Do you remember now?" Tang Erda's words cut through Bai Liu like a blade. "Do you remember if Xie Ta was beside you…or if he was watching you from beneath the water?"

"Xie Ta really did die for you. So wake up, Bai Liu."

Xie Ta...?

A blinding white light flashed through Bai Liu's mind, cutting through the suffocating darkness.

Memories—shattered, buried, distorted beyond recognition—resurfaced in fragments.

The white light flickered, illuminating long-lost images. Black-and-white, then colored edges, the blurred profile of someone long

forgotten.

And then, as Tang Erda's voice anchored him to reality, the broken pieces realigned—frame by frame—like a film reel playing his past.

Memories lie to their owners.

When emotions are too overwhelming to bear, the mind distorts them. Shapes them into something more manageable. Hides the truth, lets its owner continue forward as if nothing happened.

In simpler terms, self-preservation.

Bai Liu's mind had carved the memories into something he could endure. He had rewritten the past, locked it away. But now, that illusion crumbled.

The familiar, unassuming face of Lu Yizhan was swallowed by the white light.

And in its place, another face emerged.

A face with striking, delicate bone structure. Long, slightly wavy hair that draped over his eyes. Lips that were eerily well-defined.

He turned.

From the abyss of forgotten memories, he turned toward Bai Liu.

And he whispered his name.

"Bai Liu, it’s been a long time."

The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment

Beautiful children often become targets in private orphanages.

This place doesn't accommodate beauty well.

Yet, despite always being covered in bruises, he rarely seemed to be bullied. It was the bullies who were unlucky.

Bai Liu enjoyed watching this quiet, sharp-edged boy fight back against those who tried to torment him.

A loner. He smelled of strange mushrooms and blood, the backs of his hands always covered in fresh pinpricks—sometimes with blood seeping through, which he wiped away with casual disinterest.

He barely spoke to anyone, and, in turn, no one dared approach the pale, ghostly boy whose complexion grew whiter by the day, like a vampire draining itself dry.

But he didn't seem to mind. He wandered off to places no one else wanted to go, disappearing for entire days at a time.

Bai Liu liked that.

The man sat in the church behind the orphanage, in the first row beneath the statue of God, head bowed over a book, turning the pages one by one. Bai Liu—or rather, Bai Six—sat nearby, chin in his palm, watching with lazy curiosity. Observing both the boy and the book in his hands.

Then, suddenly, the boy turned to him and held up the book. His tone was light:

"Do you want to read it too?"

Bai Liu glanced at the title—The Long, Thin, Ghostly Book of Murder—and smiled.

"Yeah."

Sliding onto the bench beside him, Bai Liu tilted his head. "Do you invite people to read with you like this often?" He nodded toward the book. "And how do you even get stuff like this in here? It's contraband, isn't it? That woman would lose her mind if the director

caught us. She'd say it's violent, corrupting."

The boy flipped another page, head still bowed. His hands, even as they turned the paper, bore the same pinpricks. He answered without looking up:

"I asked others, but they screamed and ran the moment they saw what it was about."

"And the book?"

"I got it from outside. I like reading scary things."

Bai Liu smirked. "Why?"

The boy finally looked up, pale eyes narrowing. "Because I think I'm scary too."

Then, he asked, "Do you like it?"

"I do," Bai Liu said easily, lips curling. "I like watching monsters tear apart human players."

From that day forward, the boy would find more horror books, more forbidden games, and share them with Bai Liu.

They hid beneath the church's statues, in the shadowed places ignored by gods, indulging in their forbidden collection. Flipping through grotesque picture books, playing eerie games—while Bai Liu, for the first time, found himself enjoying someone's company.

This one was different from Lu Yizhan, who always let him win. Lu Yizhan would scratch his head and laugh when he lost, saying, Wow, Bai Liu, you're really good.

But this boy? He played to win. No matter the horror game, he killed ruthlessly, leaving Bai Liu trailing behind. And if Bai Liu sulked over a loss, he would—clumsily, awkwardly—pat his shoulder and say, "Come on. You might beat me next time."

Bai Liu would challenge him again, over and over, relishing the repeated defeat. He found it... fun.

They spent their days together, becoming the orphanage's resident freaks.

Then, the book was discovered.

During a routine sweep, a teacher found The Long, Thin, Ghostly Book of Murder and reported it to the director.

Furious, she assembled the entire orphanage, forcing them to stand outside as she demanded to know who had brought such a filthy, sick book into their walls.

Silence. Heads bowed. No one stepped forward.

And so, in front of everyone, she ripped the book apart. Page by page.

Bai Liu stood in the crowd, lips pressed in a tight line, watching as the book he and the boy had pored over countless times was torn to shreds.

No one confessed. No one wanted to be blamed. But everyone pointed fingers at Bai Liu and the strange, pale boy.

When the director interrogated him, Bai Liu denied everything.

But the boy didn't.

He simply stood there, gazing down at the torn fragments on the ground, and asked,

"Are you afraid of this book?"

Then, he lifted his eyes to the director.

"Or are you afraid of me?" His voice was calm, almost curious. "You think I'm a monster, don't you? That I'll bring something terrible upon you?"

The director stiffened. Her eyes flickered toward the pinpricks on his hands. Then she looked away.

And so, the matter was quietly dropped.

The boy, as always, was untouchable.

Not just the director—the teachers feared him too. They recoiled from the blood on him, from the scent of mushrooms clinging to his clothes. Their fear was obvious. And soon, the other children, skilled in reading unspoken things, became afraid as well.

They ostracized him. Beat him. And when they couldn't win, they kept their distance, whispering behind his back. Spinning rumors, stories,

nightmares.

They turned him into a monster.

But he didn't care.

After everyone had left, he knelt to pick up the torn pages.

Bai Liu knelt beside him. Together, they gathered the pieces and carried them to the church—their safe zone.

No one went there unless they had to. On certain days, rich people came to the orphanage for baptisms, for strange rituals. Bai Liu avoided them. He didn't like the way they looked at the children—like inspecting goods for sale.

After each ceremony, the boy's pinpricks multiplied. His face grew paler. He looked less human, more like a bloodless marble statue.

Now, beneath the unfeeling gaze of the idol, the two of them sat at the church table, piecing together the book as if it could be restored.

"Do you think people here actually believe in God?" Bai Liu asked suddenly. "Do you think God exists?"

The boy kept his head down, fitting the torn pages together. Then, without looking up, he asked, "Do you?"

Bai Liu shrugged. "No. If God were real, he'd fix this book for me."

The boy remained patient, but Bai Liu, frustrated with the mess, gave up.

"Were you upset when she tore it?" the boy asked.

"No," Bai Liu said quickly.

The boy stared at him. "Do you like this book?"

"I told you, no."

He only nodded. "I know."

For some reason, Bai Liu felt suffocated. "What do you know?"

A month later, he understood.

Beneath the church, an ugly, makeshift doll sat calmly in the first row. It had the rough silhouette of The Long, Thin, Ghostly Figure.

It was made of torn orphanage sheets, covered in patches, a straw-stuffed head—clumsy, pathetic, like a homeless effigy.

And the boy sat inside it. Holding the taped-up book in his hands.

"Do you want to read it together?" he asked, voice unchanged.

Bai Liu sat. Read.

And then, less than a minute in, he collapsed against the table in laughter.

"—your face in that thing is too much—"

The boy adjusted the fabric. "I couldn't find enough bandages. My face should be scary enough."

Bai Liu smirked. "Doubt it." Before the boy could react, Bai Liu reached up and pushed back his hair.

For a second, they stared.

Pale, silver-blue eyes. Colorless lips. The sharp angles of his face reflected in Bai Liu's dark pupils.

Then, at the same time, they looked away.

Bai Liu clenched his hand, his breath unsteady.

The boy, face hidden once more, rapidly flipped through the book as if reading something he wasn't.

"Do I look… horrible?" he asked softly.

Bai Liu exhaled. "Not really."

"Then why is your heart beating so fast?"

Bai Liu stood abruptly, book in hand. "That's enough for today."

The boy reached forward, pressing the mended book into Bai Liu's arms.

"It's fixed," he said quietly. "It's yours."

Bai Liu left without looking back with a tense expression on his face.

Soon after, it was time for the wealthy patrons to arrive at the church and perform their strange rituals.

Normally, the dean would summon Bai Liu to the church a day in advance. On those nights, he wasn't allowed to return to his usual sleeping quarters—he had to stay in the church instead.

Bai Liu tossed and turned, clutching the copy of The Long, Thin, Ghostly Book of Murder he had been given. Eventually, he got up, carefully slipped into his shoes, and headed for the church.

The doors were locked, as always, but Bai Liu had spent enough time in that place to know a few ways to sneak inside. One such entrance was a small broken window, concealed by a curtain.

He climbed through the window, landing quietly inside. In the moonlight, he searched the pews for any sign of another person. Eventually, he found him—hidden behind the statue.

The moment Bai Liu saw him, his face was devoid of emotion.

Xie Ta was curled up in a bathtub, slightly too small for his body, filled with blood. His nearly translucent white face was half-submerged, breath undetectable, his eyelashes dusted with frost. Stitches covered his hands, feet, and forehead, still oozing blood.

"Xie Ta." Bai Liu spoke his name for the first time.

Slowly, Xie Ta stirred in the bathtub. He opened his eyes and saw Bai Liu. It seemed as though he wanted to reach out, but before his fingertips could touch Bai Liu, something in the blood shifted. A thorny vine, thick with mushrooms, slithered out, wrapping around Xie Ta's wrists, ankles, and neck, pulling him back into the bloody baptismal pool.

Bai Liu's voice remained calm. "What are you doing?"

"Baptism," Xie Ta replied. "It's the ritual before the blood is drawn."

"They're taking your blood, aren't they?" Bai Liu continued, just as calm. "They need it to save themselves. And after they've drained you, you're going to die, aren't you?"

“I won’t.” Xie Ta looked at him. “I’m a monster. Monsters don’t die.”

As he spoke, he exhaled a breath of white mist—a testament to how low his body temperature had become.

“So, you’re just sleeping here? Aren’t you cold?” Bai Liu asked.

Xie Ta shook his head, answering honestly, “I can’t feel it.”

But Bai Liu’s warmth carried through the blood, spreading toward Xie Ta. He blinked, slowly. The frost on his lashes melted with each breath Bai Liu exhaled.

Now, he could feel the cold—because Bai Liu was warm.

Then, as if nothing had happened, Bai Liu opened the book Xie Ta had given him and stepped closer. “Want to read it together?”

They lay together in the blood-soaked baptismal font, speaking in a hundred meandering ways beneath the gaze of the statue looming above them.

“Does baptism mean anything?”

“It’s a blessing,” Xie Ta murmured. “God’s blessing for His most beloved, newborn believers.”

“You call this a blessing?”

“…A blessing for them, I suppose.”

“You really believe that? You don’t actually think there’s a God, do you?”

“…Hmm.”

Bai Liu curled up in Xie Ta’s cold embrace and fell into a deep sleep.

When he woke the next morning, he was in his own bed—completely clean, without a trace of blood on him.

Xie Ta returned that afternoon, paler than before. This time, the needle marks reached his face, and the backs of his hands and feet were mottled with bruises from repeated blood draws.

Bai Liu said nothing as he carefully wrapped the still-bleeding stitches with bandages he had stolen from the infirmary.

Xie Ta watched him quietly, then spoke. “Once this bandage comes off, your long, skinny ghostly shadow doll will have a face.”

Bai Liu’s lips pressed into a thin line.

The blood rituals grew more frequent. Xie Ta appeared less and less, and when he did, the scent of blood and mushrooms clung to him so heavily it was suffocating.

The other children avoided him, waving their hands in front of their noses in disgust, as if trying to dispel both the stench and Xie Ta himself.

Perhaps knowing how repulsive he smelled, Xie Ta stopped coming near Bai Liu. He only watched from afar.

When he didn’t want to be seen, it was as if he didn’t exist. No one could find him—not even Bai Liu.

So Bai Liu turned outward. He began making contact with adults, taking on small, illicit jobs—things suitable for a child operating in the grey areas of the world. It made him good money.

And with enough money, with enough preparation, he was sure he could take Xie Ta away—off the investors’ radar, far from the orphanage. It was an immature, naive plan, but still… it was something.

A growing sense of unease settled in Bai Liu’s chest. If Xie Ta didn’t leave soon, there was a very real chance that he never would.

But in the end, Bai Liu was caught.

The child who had betrayed him stood cowering behind the dean, his face a mixture of fear and excitement. He swallowed several times before finally raising a trembling hand to point at Bai Liu, whose expression remained impassive.

“I saw him… doing something weird with an adult! He’s helping grown-ups do bad things! I saw it! They’re paying him!”

The dean’s gaze bore into him, stern and unyielding.

“Did you do this! Bai Liu?!”

Bai Liu did not deny anything. He simply stared indifferently away from the group, his gaze fixed on Xie Ta, who sat in the middle of the

crowd, silent.

He didn't explain what he had done—because there was no point.

These people didn’t care about the truth. They never asked, never wanted to know. They had already judged him guilty.

Of course, what he did wasn’t exactly a good thing. That much was true.

But the teachers were just afraid—afraid of him, the weird kid who spent all his time with Xie Ta, who grew more unsettling by the day, who read gory stories, and who always looked at people as if they were animals lined up for slaughter.

So, of course, he was punished.

Yet Bai Liu, rather than feeling regret, found himself coldly analyzing the measures these teachers used to discipline their students—as he had done many times before.

When the teacher grabbed his arm, trying to drag him away, Xie Ta suddenly staggered to his feet, bracing one hand against the back of his chair.

His face and voice were as calm as ever, untouched by time or circumstance.

"I made him do it."

The teachers erupted.

They feared Xie Ta even more than Bai Liu. He was surrounded, yet the space around him remained eerily empty—a cautious one-meter gap creating a vacuum.

The dean’s voice trembled, though she tried to mask it with authority. "Why did you make Bai Liu do such a thing?"

There was never a question of Xie Ta’s innocence. The verdict had been delivered as swiftly and definitively as it had been for Bai Liu.

Because Xie Ta was a monster. And Bai Liu? He was just a bad kid who followed monsters and took their actions for granted.

Xie Ta glanced sideways at Bai Liu, who was being restrained by the teachers. Then, very, very lightly, he smiled.

For a fleeting moment, Bai Liu thought that if not for the strands of hair obscuring them, Xie Ta's silver-blue eyes must have looked soft, beautifully curved.

Xie Ta spoke in the same quiet tone he had used when he first gave Bai Liu a book.

"Because I wanted to contact someone outside and run away with Bai Liu."

"You dare try to escape?!" the dean shrieked, her voice nearly breaking. "Do you have any idea how much trouble that would cause?! We're already in the second round of screening! Those investors won't pay without your blood!"

The children scattered in a panic, whispering fearfully among themselves.

"Blood?! What blood?! You mean all that blood from his pinholes?!"

"He really is a monster, isn't he?"

The dean's hand flew to her mouth as she realized what she had blurted out. A moment later, she turned on Xie Ta, her grip on his slender wrist tightening.

"You've been given everything by this institution, and yet you dare try to run?" Her fear curdled into something cruel, something righteous. "We've been too lenient with you. You need discipline. You need to be cleansed."

She tugged Xie Ta forward. "You will be baptized in the church tonight."

She dragged him away.

Bai Liu fought against the hands holding him back, struggling through the crowd of children and teachers, reaching desperately for Xie Ta.

"Xie Ta!"

Xie Ta turned to look at him. The wind lifted the curls from his forehead, finally revealing those silver-blue eyes—serene and breathtaking, like a lake thawing after a long winter.

Bai Liu froze, staring into them. They were not sad. Just calm. And in them, Bai Liu saw only himself, reflected entirely.

Xie Ta reached out, taking Bai Liu's outstretched hand. Their fingers interlocked.

Cold and warm, the touch of his skin carried the raised pinhole scars along the back of his hand.

"Bai Liu."

Xie Ta's smile was small, barely there, but his grip was firm. "Don't be afraid. I'm a monster. I won't die."

"Let go!"

The dean tore their hands apart.

Bai Liu gritted his teeth, unwilling to let go, but Xie Ta released him first. The moment he did, the connection between them snapped.

Xie Ta shook his head at Bai Liu—a quiet warning not to follow—before turning to walk away with the dean, toward the church.

But Bai Liu had never been an obedient child.

A few minutes later, he slipped through a broken window, slipping behind a curtain and curling himself into a tight ball. He peered out from the shadows, eyes locked onto Xie Ta and the dean standing beneath the statue.

Xie Ta stood barefoot before the altar, dressed in pure white, holding a flickering candle. His head was tilted back, eyes closed, lips moving in slow, measured prayer.

The dean stood beside him, clutching a whip.

When Xie Ta finished his prayer, the abbot stepped forward, his gaze heavy.

"Now for the baptism. But since you dared to think of betraying God, tonight's cleansing must be thorough."

Xie Ta lowered his lashes. "It won't work."

His voice was soft, almost absent. "I am the evil itself that cannot be washed away."

The dean's expression darkened.

She snatched the candle from his hands and shoved him into the baptismal pool.

For the first time, she smiled.

It was the twisted smile of someone who believed she had finally conquered her greatest fear.

"You will not surface until the candle burns out," she said coldly.

Drops of wax dripped into the water, blooming into tiny white flowers. One by one, they floated above Xie Ta, who lay beneath the surface, motionless.

The baptismal font was too small, too tight—less like a place of cleansing and more like a coffin.

And then, something changed.

The statue looming over the font shifted.

The pure white marble took on a distinctly human expression—one of judgment. Accusation.

Why have you misbehaved? it seemed to say. Why did you try to escape the sanctuary of God?

A voice, cold and absolute, resonated through the air.

[You are an evil thing. A fallen god. You cannot leave this place.]

[Tawil, you know the boy was merely caught in your corruption. He is not the disciple you seek.]

Under the water, Xie Ta's fingers twitched.

[No, I do not see him as a disciple.]

The idol's voice hardened.

[Then what is he to you? He has seen your eyes. He is already slipping toward madness.]

[If you do not kill him, he will become a monster just like you. He will destroy the world. You know this. Everything you touch is doomed to corruption.]

Xie Ta’s fingers folded over his chest.

[I took him… because…]

He hesitated.

[I want to read with him forever.]

The voice turned to fury.

Kill him. Kill the boy you have defiled!

[I can’t.]

Xie Ta’s expression was peaceful, unwavering.

[If you must kill someone, kill me. But I will not harm him.]

The idol’s face twisted with rage.

[Even in exile, you dare defy the gods?]

The water around Xie Ta thickened. Grew heavy. Grew cold. Ice laced through his veins, pressing down on him like a thousand spiked chains.

For a brief moment, his lashes fluttered.

And then—nothing.

His grip, once so desperate to hold onto Bai Liu’s warmth, loosened.

Slowly, Xie Ta’s body drifted, lifeless, beneath the water.

"Thank you, Xie Ta?!"

The dean took two panicked steps backward before lurching forward again, pressing trembling fingers to Xie Ta’s nostrils. Her grip on the candle slipped in her shock, and as she stumbled, her foot extinguished the only remaining light in the church.

"It's over..."

She collapsed to the ground in a trance, her hands clawing at her hair as she muttered incredulously, "Isn't he a monster?! After all that blood, he's still alive? He's been baptized so many times without dying —why is he drowning this time?!"

Her breathing turned ragged. "It's only been a few minutes, hasn't it?! The candle hasn't even burned out!" Her eyes widened in terror, her head shaking violently as if denial alone could keep Xie Ta from returning to life. "It can't be. It can't be! It can't be!"

Then a new thought gripped her.

"What am I going to do now that he's dead?!"

The dean broke down, collapsing to her knees before the baptismal font.

She had never imagined that even in death, this child could still instill such mortal fear in her.

Dazed, she stared at Xie Ta's flawless face submerged in the water, whispering, "...If I drown Xie Ta myself, the pack will drain my blood. I need to find another child to take his place."

Hidden behind the curtains, Bai Liu watched the dean's frantic breakdown with an eerie stillness.

There was something unshakable about him, an unwavering patience as he observed.

Xie Ta had told him before—he was a monster. He couldn't die. He had to be playing dead, fooling the foolish dean.

Yes.

Bai Liu could already see it: once the dean left, he would approach the baptismal font. Xie Ta would rise from the water, a rare smile curling his lips. Maybe he'd push back his wet hair, tilting his silvery-blue eyes toward Bai Liu with that deep, unreadable gaze.

Maybe he'd ask why Bai Liu had come.

The mere thought sent Bai Liu's heartbeat quickening.

But the dean—terrified of letting the investors know she had killed Xie Ta—lifted the boy's body from the font, sneaking out the back door of the church under cover of night. She tied stones to his hands and feet before tossing him into a small, barren lake behind the church—one that fed into a river beyond.

After a few circulations, Xie Ta's body would drift from the lake into the river. From the river into the sea.

But Bai Liu would not let him go that far.

Silently trailing behind, Bai Liu made no move, no sound. The dean was already teetering on the edge of madness—if he revealed himself now, she might not hesitate to dispose of another child.

Only when she had fled did Bai Liu finally step forward.

He buried his face in the water, pushing through the bright green duckweed as he dove down to reach Xie Ta's sinking form.

The lake was deep. The duckweed was thick. And Xie Ta was sinking fast.

The black silt, like some ravenous creature, coiled over his body, greedily dragging him into the abyss.

Bai Liu clenched his teeth, resisting the instinct to choke as the filthy lake water poured into his mouth, his nose, his ears. His lungs burned, his vision blurred, but he reached—grasping at Xie Ta's hand buried in the silt.

With his last shred of strength, Bai Liu yanked him free.

His lungs screamed for air. His mind flickered at the edges of consciousness from the lack of oxygen.

But he did not let go.

Breaking the surface, Bai Liu dragged Xie Ta onto the shore, collapsing beside him, gasping. His hands braced against the dirt, his head tipped back toward the vast, starless sky. Water dripped from his face, from his eyelashes, from his clothes. The cicadas cried in the grass around them, a shrill, discordant symphony.

And yet, for some reason, Bai Liu let out a small, breathless laugh.

He turned, nudging Xie Ta's still, unmoving body with his foot.

"How do you know I'd take you away?" His voice was rough, yet teasing. "What if I worked for those adults? What if I earned money just to spend it all on myself?"

He squinted at Xie Ta, a strange, conflicted smile tugging at his lips.

"Aren't you being a little self-centered, Xie Ta?"

Xie Ta's face was pale, his lips tinged with dampness. He remained unresponsive.

Bai Liu sat up, then shifted into a crouch, watching him. Slowly, he reached out, brushing aside the wet strands of hair clinging to Xie Ta's forehead.

This one… was really beautiful.

His fingertips trailed downward, from Xie Ta's long, damp eyelashes, over the bridge of his nose, before finally settling on his lips—lips that were impossibly pale, impossibly cold.

And those silvery-blue eyes…

Eyes that, somehow, had always seemed meant for Bai Liu alone.

"Xie Ta."

His voice was quiet as he leaned down, pressing his ear to Xie Ta's chest. His breath hitched.

No heartbeat.

No breath.

No warmth.

No sign of life at all.

"I mean it," Bai Liu murmured, his voice barely more than a whisper.

He buried his head in Xie Ta's arms, fists clenching so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

The scent of blood was thick—familiar, metallic, laced with the damp musk of lake water. The scent of something perilously close to death.

Bai Liu tightened his grip.

Water dripped from his clothes, from Xie Ta's, their bodies pressed close, dampness merging together.

"I don't think you're playing dead, either," Bai Liu whispered, resting his forehead against Xie Ta's shoulder.

A drop of water slipped from his lashes, disappearing into the fabric of

Xie Ta’s shirt.

Xie Ta’s head lolled against Bai Liu’s shoulder, lifeless. His eyes remained open, empty, unblinking.

The only reminder that he was still there… was the cold water trickling from his hair, seeping into Bai Liu’s skin.

Bai Liu breathed out, voice barely more than a hush against the night.

"Didn’t you say you were a monster?"

He tilted his head, pressing his forehead against Xie Ta’s chest, closing his eyes.

"Then come back to life like one."

A pause.

Then, softer—almost broken—

"You're making me feel horrible right now, Xie Ta."

A single drop of water slipped from Xie Ta’s eyelashes. It landed on Bai Liu’s hand—silent, cold, like a tear.

The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment

“The Bai Six guy… he’s been getting weirder and weirder lately…” The children whispered fearfully, their heads pressed together.

After the director claimed that Xie Ta had run away from the orphanage, the fear that had once been reserved for him was transferred onto Bai Liu.

The other children eyed Bai Liu warily from across the long dining table. He sat alone at the far end, eating in silence—the same seat that Xie Ta had occupied before. Their gazes flickered between curiosity and dread.

“The new kid—your name is Lu Yizhan, right?” A boy scowled at another, slightly older child. He pointed toward Bai Liu. “That one at the end—Bai Six. You better stay away from him.”

Lu Yizhan turned back with a puzzled expression. “Why? Did he do something?”

“Because he’s a monster!” The boy bared his teeth and curled his fingers into claws, making strange howling noises. “He ate his only friend! And his friend was a monster too—a freak with bleeding pinholes all over him! If you get too close, he’ll eat you next!”

The other children shrank back, giggling nervously, but Lu Yizhan only frowned. He looked toward the end of the table, where Bai Liu sat—thin, quiet, and seemingly ordinary. In fact, he was almost too thin.

Bai Liu looked like he never had enough to eat. His cheeks were sunken, his frame frail. He ate quickly, as though he were starving.

But—Lu Yizhan’s eyes fell on Bai Liu’s plate, where a piece of bread remained untouched. He showed no intention of eating it.

Bai Liu finished his meal without a word, then lifted his head. His gaze met Lu Yizhan’s—calm, unreadable.

Lu Yizhan was the first to look away.

Bai Liu got up from the table, his face expressionless, and quietly slipped out the back of the church, holding the untouched bread.

Lu Yizhan hesitated, then followed. But the moment he reached the church doors, Bai Liu had already disappeared.

What is he doing…?

That evening, Lu Yizhan, the orphanage's newest arrival, was assigned to sleep in the bed that had once belonged to Xie Ta. Just as he was about to drift off, he turned his head—and nearly jumped out of his skin.

Bai Liu stood at the foot of his bed, face blank, holding a futon.

Lu Yizhan clutched his blanket to his chest, his voice wary. "Bai Six… what are you doing?"

The other children in the dormitory screamed in fright, scrambling away.

"Bai Six is gonna eat us! He's gonna eat us!"

Lu Yizhan barely managed to keep his composure. He glanced at Bai Liu, who remained motionless, still holding the bedding.

"…You want to switch beds with me?"

Bai Liu stared at him for a long moment. There were dark circles under his eyes, his expression dazed, as if he hadn't been sleeping at all. Slowly, he nodded.

Lu Yizhan exhaled in relief. So it was just a bed swap.

He didn't particularly care where he slept, so he handed Bai Liu the bed without argument. Before lying down in his new spot, he reminded Bai Liu to switch back in the morning—since the teachers recognized children by their beds. They could change secretly among themselves, but if they were caught, there would be trouble.

After their quiet agreement, Bai Liu began making up his new bed in silence. As Lu Yizhan was settling in, he glanced back—and noticed something odd.

Bai Liu lay curled up on the mattress, his arms wrapped protectively around a long, thin, faceless rag doll.

He didn't seem like the kind of child who would sleep with a doll at his age. But he clearly cherished it. Not only did he leave most of his blanket covering the doll instead of himself, but he also held it tightly,

as if shielding it from the cold.

The night was chilly, yet Bai Liu didn't shiver. He simply curled up around the doll and drifted off.

Lu Yizhan's eyes lingered. The doll was crudely made—patched together, seams fraying at the edges. An unfinished thing. Yet Bai Liu clung to it like something irreplaceable.

His sleeping position is… strange.

Bai Liu's body was curled in a way that mirrored the doll's embrace—like two figures pressed tightly together in a narrow, oval-shaped space.

Like they were in a bathtub.

Lu Yizhan found himself staring longer than he intended. Then, shaking his head, he turned away and lay down in Bai Liu's old bed.

This Bai Six is strange.

But… not as bad as the others say.

As the days passed, Lu Yizhan noticed something else: Bai Liu never seemed to eat properly.

On the seventh day, Bai Liu nearly collapsed at the dining table. Lu Yizhan was the first to react, shoving a candy into Bai Liu's hand and forcing him to eat half of his meal. Bai Liu's fingers trembled slightly—he was clearly suffering from low blood sugar.

He's not eating enough.

He always had leftovers, sneaking food away instead of eating it himself. And each night, when he returned to the dormitory, his condition only worsened. He was coming back more exhausted, more drained.

What the hell is he doing?

Lu Yizhan began intentionally sharing his food with Bai Liu. Most of the time, Bai Liu refused coldly.

"I don't need it."

Meanwhile, the orphanage's atmosphere grew increasingly eerie. More

and more children disappeared—some running away, others forced to. The place was not as safe as it seemed.

And then, one night, Lu Yizhan noticed something else.

When Bai Liu returned, his body carried the faint scent of blood.

Someone's been drawing his blood.

The night Lu Yizhan planned to escape, he grabbed Bai Liu's wrist before he could disappear again.

He leaned in, voice low. "Listen. This place isn't safe."

Bai Liu didn't react.

Lu Yizhan's grip tightened. "I know of another orphanage—a public one, near the police station. If we go there, they'll protect us."

Still, Bai Liu remained indifferent. "No. I'm not going."

Lu Yizhan's expression twisted with frustration. "Why? Something's really wrong here!"

Bai Liu finally met his gaze. His pupils were unfocused, his tone sluggish.

"I'm waiting for someone to wake up," he murmured. "And when he does… I'll take him with me."

Perhaps it was curiosity, or perhaps Bai Liu's growing weakness that finally gave Lu Yizhan a break from tailing him. After another baptism, Lu Yizhan seized the opportunity and followed Bai Liu into the back of the church—an area he would sneak off to every day.

The back of the church had always been a restricted area within the orphanage. The director strictly forbade the children from going there, claiming it was unsafe—an untamed jungle with a small, undeveloped lake. The terrain was treacherous, with deep mud and hidden dangers where a child could easily drown. To prevent access, the church remained locked throughout the week.

And yet, Bai Liu had found an isolated path leading there.

Lu Yizhan trailed behind, watching as Bai Liu expertly slipped through a broken window behind the side door of the church. Without hesitation, Bai Liu crossed the church interior, exited through the back

door, and disappeared into the tall, unruly grass—swallowed whole by the greenery.

Bai Liu moved with practiced ease, nimbly avoiding thorny bushes and jagged rocks. Eventually, he came to a stop beside a small pond, its surface thick with floating weeds.

Lu Yizhan crouched behind the grass, confused. What is Bai Liu doing here? Is he going to swim?

Ordinarily, Bai Liu would have noticed if someone were following him. But days of hunger had left him physically drained, his mind sluggish. His focus was entirely consumed by whatever purpose had led him here, and so he failed to sense the presence lurking nearby.

With his back to Lu Yizhan, Bai Liu undressed unguardedly, revealing a stark white frame marked by protruding ribs. He bent down, carefully setting aside a piece of bread on top of his clean clothing before turning and diving into the pond.

Lu Yizhan remained hidden, eyes fixed on the water.

Now I'll finally find out what he's been doing all this time.

But as the minutes ticked by, Bai Liu did not resurface.

A creeping unease settled over Lu Yizhan. Something was wrong. Without a second thought, he rushed forward, plunging into the murky water fully clothed. Desperately, he searched the depths—until at last, he saw him.

Bai Liu was motionless, his feet ensnared in mud, his hands limp, drifting weightlessly in the water. He was drowning.

Lu Yizhan held his breath and swam toward him, grasping Bai Liu’s shoulder and hauling him up. But there was resistance—Bai Liu was clutching something, struggling to drag it with him.

It was only with Lu Yizhan’s help that Bai Liu finally managed to pull both himself and the mysterious object out of the water.

They collapsed onto the shore, gasping for air.

Bai Liu’s body spasmed as he coughed up water, his breathing shallow and uneven. It took him a long moment to regain his senses before he slowly pushed himself onto his side.

He had nearly drowned. His body was too weak, his blood sugar too low. He shouldn't have been doing anything this physically strenuous.

"What were you thinking?!" Lu Yizhan burst out, still panting. "If you couldn't drag it out all at once, why didn't you come up for air first?! Were you trying to drown yourself?!"

His frustration was met with silence.

Then, as Lu Yizhan turned his attention to what they had dragged ashore, his breath caught in his throat.

Lying beside Bai Liu was a body.

Its face was bare, its ankles bound with rope—ropes that had kept it from sinking.

Lu Yizhan's stomach twisted. His voice rose with disbelief. "You hid a body in this lake? Are you insane?! No one would ever find it here, sure, but—who is this? And why the hell are you dragging him out every day?"

Bai Liu did not respond. He simply knelt beside the corpse, his expression unreadable.

With quiet, deliberate movements, he picked up the untouched piece of bread from his clothes and crumbled it, gently pressing it to the corpse's cold lips.

Lu Yizhan felt a chill run down his spine.

Bai Liu wasn't hiding the body.

He was feeding it.

Silence stretched between them, thick and suffocating, as Bai Liu calmly finished his task.

Only then did he brush the crumbs from his fingers and finally lift his gaze to meet Lu Yizhan's. His voice was light, almost matter-of-fact.

"He's not a corpse," Bai Liu said. "He's a monster. And monsters don't die. He'll wake up eventually, so I can't let him starve."

Lu Yizhan stared at him, expression unreadable. Finally, he exhaled, rubbing a hand down his face.

“You know something, Bai Liu?” he muttered. “You’re starting to seem more like a monster than him.”

His gaze flickered to the corpse—Xie Ta, Bai Liu had called him. The body was already beginning to decompose, the right hand sickly pale and rotting. Bai Liu had been ‘feeding’ him for a long, long time.

“Whether he’s a corpse or a monster,” Lu Yizhan said, his voice tight, “you need to let him go.” He knelt beside Bai Liu, gripping his shoulders firmly. “You can find out who did this. You can get revenge when you’re older. But right now, you can’t bury yourself with him.”

He softened, voice barely above a whisper.

“He’s not breathing, Bai Liu. He has no heartbeat. You don’t know when—if—he’ll wake up.” Lu Yizhan exhaled. “You can’t stay here with him.”

Bai Liu’s fingers curled into the fabric of Xie Ta’s clothes. For a moment, he remained motionless. Then, as if in a trance, he reached for a knife and cut through the ropes binding Xie Ta’s ankles.

The body sank, strands of dark hair fanning out as it slipped beneath the water.

Lu Yizhan felt an odd sense of relief when he saw Bai Liu’s eyelashes tremble—as if two droplets of water had fallen from them.

Then, without warning, Bai Liu took a deep breath—

—And plunged back into the pond.

“Bai Liu!” Lu Yizhan shouted, diving in after him.

Bai Liu swam toward the sinking form, reaching out as the mud and silt swallowed Xie Ta’s face—consuming him like the night itself.

His fingers brushed against the corpse’s hand.

For a fleeting second, Bai Liu swore he felt the fingers tighten around his own—

Then, they slipped away.

Lu Yizhan grabbed Bai Liu, yanking him to the surface just as his lungs began to burn, just as his vision started to blur.

Bai Liu gasped for air, limbs heavy and unresponsive.

Memories flickered behind his eyes. Broken picture books. Dolls held together by stitches. Promises that were never kept. A face hidden forever behind dark hair.

Is this person really coming back?

Did he even exist?

Or had Bai Liu—a boy the world had already deemed 'sick'—simply imagined a monster who had been kind to him?

A voice echoed through his mind.

[Bai Liu, why do you believe in the existence of monsters—but not in the existence of God?]

Because God has never been kind to me.

Bai Liu opened his eyes. His lips parted, releasing a final stream of air.

"Xie Ta," he murmured. "I have to go. Goodbye."

And for the first time, it felt real.

A proper goodbye.

Lu Yizhan's hands tightened on his shoulders, pulling him up.

"We need to change your name," Lu Yizhan said as they lay on the shore, exhausted. "If the orphanage tracks you down, no other place will take you."

Bai Liu was silent for a long time. Then, hoarsely, he murmured—

"I don't want to change my name too much."

Lu Yizhan blinked. "Why?"

Bai Liu turned onto his side, eyes dull as they stared into the water.

"...I don't know. I just feel like—maybe someone will come looking for me under my original name."

The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment

The blurred memories. The odd, unclear points of connection. The flooded pond he could never quite recall. The strange, altered name—just a single word different…

And now, as the water recedes, Tang Erda's hiss finally emerges in its entirety from the depths of Bai Liu's submerged memories, buried beneath layers of mud and sand.

A dizzying white light swirls and dissipates before Bai Liu's eyes, shifting into the cold gleam of a metallic ceiling. It feels as though he's been dragged up from the bottom of a deep, frozen lake—his fingers tremble slightly, his chest heaving violently as he coughs and chokes, trying to expel the water that had filled his throat and lungs.

Tang Erda is still pressing him. "Bai Liu, do you remember?"

Bai Liu rolls over, bracing himself against the ground with one hand before staggering to his feet, coughing as he steadies himself against the wall. It's only when his breathing finally evens out that he takes the time to button his shirt, fingers fastening the collar that had been torn open twice by the water.

He lifts his gaze—slowly, deliberately—toward the communicator through which Tang Erda is speaking to him.

"I remember." Bai Liu adjusts his cuffs as he responds, his voice casual, almost careless. Then, with a rhetorical lilt, he adds, "So what? Xie Ta is dead. And now we're the ones making the deal?"

Tang Erda grits his teeth in silence.

This guy… He's been put under psychological pressure three times, and his composure hasn't so much as cracked. He's harder to deal with than any Bai Liu from the other timelines…

And has he really remembered?

"The solution to the dried rose leaf gas—I can certainly hand it over." Bai Liu tilts his head, speaking as if he has the answer at his fingertips, despite the fact that he himself has no clue.

His expression is sincere—too sincere—as he begins to spout nonsense. "But you'll need to give me something in return."

Tang Erda feels an uneasy premonition creeping up his spine.

Then Bai Liu narrows his eyes and smiles. “Didn’t I tell you before? Sell me your soul, and I’ll give you the cure, Captain Tang.”

Expressionless, Tang Erda increases the drainage time on the operating table to [240 seconds].

The team member beside him looks on anxiously. “Captain Tang, four minutes of submersion is too long. What if he’s just a normal person and drowns—”

“I’m in full charge.” Tang Erda shoots him an indifferent sidelong glance, and the team member swallows his protest, falling silent.

Behind them, Lu Yizhan struggles against the two operatives restraining him, shouting, “You haven’t investigated the full story! You can’t just torture Bai Liu like this—he’s innocent!”

Tang Erda doesn’t even turn around. With a dismissive wave, he orders, “Take him to the other room and lock him up. Make sure he doesn’t interrupt us again.”

Lu Yizhan is dragged away.

Tang Erda fixes his gaze on the screen as he picks up his communicator once more. “Bai Liu, this is your last chance. What’s the treatment plan for the dried rose leaf gas?”

Bai Liu smiles at him. “And I’ll say for the last time, Captain Tang—make a deal with me now, and I’ll give you a price for your soul that you’ll find quite satisfactory.”

Tang Erda takes a slow, deep breath, barely keeping his anger in check. Forcing himself to remain calm, he presses on. “Tell me something, Bai Liu. I never understood—why are you so obsessed with bringing these horrific heretics into the real world? Why turn it into a full-fledged horror game? What do you get out of this?”

“You live in this world too. A world where monsters roam freely—how do you survive in it?”

Bai Liu tilts his head, his smile widening into something unsettling. “A world full of horror games and stories…” His voice softens, almost fond. “That’s what makes reunions worthwhile, don’t you think?”

His black eyes gleam, dark and unfathomable, as he lifts his gaze. “I’ve always thought the world we came from was far more terrifying than one filled with monsters.”

Shrugging, he grins lazily. “Maybe I just like monsters more than people. I don’t find them scary.”

Tang Erda clenches his teeth so hard his communicator creaks in his grip. “You know,” he mutters, his voice taut with frustration, “I’ve always thought you were sick. But the more I interact with you, the more I realize—you’re even crazier than I imagined.”

His fingers tighten around the controls, his patience at its limit. Without hesitation, he presses the button. “I hope you’ll give me the same answer in four minutes.”

Behind Bai Liu, the door to [1807] opens once more. The water surges in.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the base.
Liu Jiayi stands motionless in the receding water, her eyes narrowed in concentration.

Even Muke, usually the more composed one, starts to lose patience. “Still no movement?”

Liu Jiayi shakes her head. “The current is flowing in the wrong direction. It’s draining now, not filling. The flow is leading toward the outflow channels. Bai Liu should be somewhere near there.”

“Did you not feel it?” Mu Sicheng, already on edge, is practically vibrating with anxiety. “Shit, if only I had a lateral line to sense water currents!”

But in reality, only Liu Jiayi possesses that ability.

“If this doesn’t work, should we switch back to the previous coordinates?” Muke asks, frowning.

Before he can finish, Liu Jiayi suddenly jerks her head up. Her gaze sharpens. “It’s filling again—this way!”

Without hesitation, she dives, her bare feet kicking off against the floor as she propels herself forward. She moves so fast she leaves only a sleek, fish-like streak in her wake.

Against the powerful current, Liu Jiayi flips and sprints forward, her strokes swift and precise.

Somewhere ahead, she hears the telltale struggle of someone caught in the rushing water—choking, mouth about to open, bubbles rolling toward the surface.

At each corridor and passageway, patrol guards are stationed. Liu Jiayi, undeterred, nudges the corners and twists her body like an agile fish, slipping smoothly past outstretched arms attempting to catch her. Eyes closed, she launches out of the water.

“A patroller,” she murmurs under her breath.

Without another word, she flips midair and vanishes beneath the surface with barely a splash.

The base’s surveillance relies heavily on patrolmen to report intrusions. And with all this water, interference is possible.

Just as one patrolman raises his communicator to report the anomaly, two other men—dressed in patrol uniforms—suddenly rush in from around the corner. Before the patrolman can react, one delivers a swift chokehold, rendering him unconscious. The patrolman, still wearing his breathing mask, drifts limply in the water.

Muke, panting, exchanges a glance with a visibly trembling Mu Sicheng.

“Go!”

---------- --

"It's been over three minutes..." The team watched in horror as Bai Liu remained suspended in the water, his back arched, limbs floating, eyelids closed. "He hasn't breathed in almost ten seconds. Captain Tang, should we continue?"

Countless tiny bubbles floated from Bai Liu’s eyelashes, dissolving into his drifting hair. His face was an eerie shade of blue-white, lips slightly parted—he looked like a drowned corpse.

Tang Erda frowned. He had done this to Bai Liu in other timelines, subjected him to ten cycles of asphyxiation, let his lungs fill with water—yet Bai Liu would still grin at him, lips trembling, and calmly explain the solution to the dried rose leaf gas. A veritable psychopath.

A monster.

Even when Tang Erda got what he wanted through these means, there was no satisfaction, no sense of victory. Only exhaustion.

But this timeline's Bai Liu was different. Too different. In every possible way.

"Three minutes and thirty seconds!" The team member monitoring the screen sounded panicked. "Captain Tang! Drain it!"

Tang Erda stared at Bai Liu's unmoving form, his hesitation lasting only a second before he waved a hand. "Drain."

The team let out a collective breath and pressed the button.

Then the base shook violently.

"Shit—!" The team grabbed the control panel to steady themselves as alarms blared. "What the hell?! What's happening?!"

"Report—!" A breathless officer ran into the control room, face pale. "Captain Tang, all the heretics housed in the base have suddenly started rioting! And—we've identified three intruders!"

"Heresy riots? What does that even mean?" One of the team members looked bewildered.

They had never seen these creatures riot before. Tang Erda had always neutralized threats before they escalated. He knew these heresies better than anyone.

But now, standing among his panicked, unprepared team, a chilling realization hit him.

These men had never truly dealt with heretics.

Simply put, they were incapable of handling this.

Even the elite players Tang Erda had once taken to the championship —the members of his third team—were unequipped for a full-scale heretic outbreak.

They had been raised in a controlled, sanitized environment. They had only learned about humanoid heretics tonight and still doubted Tang Erda's judgment—doubted him, feared him.

They thought he had lost his mind.

They thought exposure to heretics had broken him, that he had drowned his sanity in alcohol.

Even Su Yang felt the same way.

Tang Erda's extreme methods had already alienated the base. They looked at him not as a leader, but as something else. Something dangerous.

They looked at him the way they looked at a heretic.

He had gone from Captain Tang Erda—respected and trusted—to Tang Erda the drunkard, the madman.

The remaining team members trembled.

"Why are the heretics rioting?! Find the cause!"

"I don't know! Some are banging on doors, some have disappeared from surveillance—they're all showing extreme instability!"

Tang Erda braced himself against the monitor panel, eyes locked on Bai Liu's face as the water level drained.

The cause of the riot had to be him.

Bai Liu's soaked shirt billowed in the current, no longer clinging to his frame. A pendant—a gleaming silver coin—drifted from his collar, slowly rising with the water.

The moment Tang Erda saw it, a sickening realization hit him. He fumbled for his pocket, his face darkening.

The reverse cross pendant he had confiscated from Bai Liu burned hot against his palm.

This bastard—

Bai Liu had been stalling. He had deliberately provoked Tang Erda into keeping him submerged. He had used the coin to search for the cross pendant on Tang Erda's person.

He had planned this from the start.

Tang Erda gritted his teeth, jaw locking so tightly it ached.

The evil god's followers had prayed. And in response, the evil god had commanded its contaminated heretics to save its dying believer.

That's why the heretics were rioting.

Tang Erda lunged for the control panel, his hand slamming down to stop the drainage—

But the base convulsed again. He was thrown to the ground. A single team member managed to hold onto the lever, barely keeping their grip.

On the monitor, the waterline kept dropping. It had already reached Bai Liu's head.

"Shut off the drain!" Tang Erda roared, struggling to get up. "Don't let him out of the water!"

The team member hesitated. "What—?!"

Too late.

On-screen, Bai Liu's eyes snapped open.

In Tang Erda's pocket, the reverse cross pendant vibrated.

A deafening series of metallic bangs echoed through the base.

All the doors in the heretic containment cells—every single one—unlocked.

Silence fell over the surveillance room.

Wide-eyed, the team members turned to the screens.

As the water fully drained, Bai Liu went from floating to standing, his breathing still uneven. He leaned against the wall, dripping, weak—but smiling.

He looked up at the camera with deathly pale lips and said,

"Well. Are you willing to reconsider a deal with me now, Captain Tang?"

A second later, every surveillance feed went dark.

The face of the team member who came to report was now bruised, as if Bai Liu had not been drowned but had drowned someone else instead.

At the thought of all the heretics in the base being released, the team member's legs went weak. He could hardly stand and collapsed onto the ground in a daze, looking helplessly at Tang Erda. "Captain Tang, what do we do now?!"

They had been reluctant to trust Tang Erda's judgment about capturing living heretics, but now they had seen Bai Liu overturn everything, releasing every heretic in the base…

It was hard to believe. They still hadn't fully processed what had happened.

"Stand up. Get your guns, put on your suits, seal off the base to prevent the heretics from escaping, and bring them back one by one." Tang Erda pulled the gun from the holster on his back and swept his stern gaze over the stunned team. "What are you waiting for? Inform every unit in the base. Level One alert—now!"

Several team members scrambled to their feet, some rushing to inform others, others grabbing protective suits.

"Level One alert! Level One alert! Over 80 percent of heretics on the loose!"

One team member's hand trembled as he hovered over the red button that would completely seal the base. He looked at Tang Erda, fear filling his eyes. "Captain Tang, do we really have to seal the base completely? If we do, no one from outside can come back in. We'll have no backup. If we can't contain these monsters… we'll die with them in here."

Tang Erda regarded him impassively. "Do you know why the base was designed as a sphere?"

"To… better reflect the lights that protect the base's information?" the team member answered hesitantly.

"Not quite." Tang Erda's voice was cold. "It was built this way so that, in the event of an emergency, it could be completely sealed off and

buried underground—ensuring that none of the heretics escape and endanger the outside world."

"When we joined the Dangerous Heresy Disposal Authority, we accepted that we might be buried here with these monsters. Either we die, or the rest of the world dies. Understood?"

The team member's eyes welled with tears. His hands shook violently, but despite that, he managed to raise a trembling salute. "Yes! Understood, Captain!"

Gritting his teeth, he slammed the button.

The massive, white, circular base slowly began to rotate, sealing itself off as it sank beneath the ground. Plumes of dust and smoke billowed into the air, and when they cleared, the base had transformed into a tightly packed, sunken structure—hidden below the surface.

Thanks to Tang Erda's unshaken command, the team quickly found their footing and resumed operations in an orderly manner.

One of the team members, hastily putting on his protective helmet, rushed to keep pace with Tang Erda. His voice was anxious. "Captain Tang, aside from the heretic riot, we've also detected three intruders!"

Tang Erda frowned. "Intruders? The base is only accessible to authorized personnel. How did they get in?"

"That's the thing!" The team member's expression was grim. "They used Captain Su Yang's work pass to gain entry. Captain Su's pass has high-level clearance, but we have no idea how they got their hands on it—"

Tang Erda had been listening emotionlessly, but midway through the report, he suddenly froze.

Slowly, he turned to the reporting officer, his gaze chillingly sharp. "Whose work pass did they use?"

The team member flinched at the terrifying look in Tang Erda's eyes, his voice faltering. "Y-Your lieutenant… Su, Su Yang…"

The night was deep.

A weary Su Yang was sleeping soundly on a double bed, but the pillow beside him was empty.

Tonight, Ji An had chosen to sleep in the nursery. The lingering fear of nearly losing her baby kept her from resting away from it, so she had curled up beside the baby's pram. The night's events had clearly unsettled her—she tossed and turned, her brows furrowed, trapped in uneasy dreams.

Su Yang's phone, which she had placed beside her work pass, kept vibrating next to the cot.

The caller ID flashed: [Captain].

The phone rang. Stopped. Rang again.

Ji An, locked in a nightmare, barely stirred. The ringing grew more frequent, more insistent—but she only knitted her brows tighter, rolled over, and fell deeper into the dream.

Eventually, the ringing stopped.

On the screen, a red notification appeared: [Missed Calls: 21 from Captain].

Tang Erda lowered the phone, his expression murderous.

The team members around him were already unnerved by his demeanor, hesitating before speaking. "C-Captain Su still isn't picking up?"

"Mobile, landline—I even called his lover's number. No answer from any of them." Tang Erda's eyes were bloodshot, raw from barely restrained rage. "……Why the hell is Su Yang's work pass in the hands of that little witch?!"

He had already checked the surveillance. The three intruders—two in team uniforms with masks, their faces obscured—and one unmistakable figure, rising and falling through the water with practiced ease.

Liu Jiayi.

Or, as she was infamously known—the Little Witch.

A lethal member of Bai Liu's team.

Notoriously dangerous in water, she had killed more people in it than she had on land—practically a man-eating shark.

And she had a particular preference for targets: men aged 30 to 45. Especially those with daughters.

Su Yang fit that profile perfectly.

And his work pass was in her possession.

Tang Erda took two deep breaths, trying to calm himself, but it was no use.

Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Su Yang lying in a pool of blood, smiling at him, calling him "Captain."

The vision clawed at his mind, filling him with an unbearable rage. He wanted to put a bullet in his own head just to silence it.

"The surveillance is still down…" One of the team members cautiously turned to their only pillar of stability—Tang Erda. "We've already started the search for the heretics as per your orders. Shall we begin as well, Captain?"

Tang Erda was silent for a moment. Then, he rose, pulling a second gun from his back.

It was an old revolver—exquisite craftsmanship, faded rose engraved into the handle. With a sharp flick of his wrist, he cocked both guns.

His crimson eyes burned as he looked over the group. His voice was hoarse but unwavering.

"If anyone encounters the intruders—or Bai Liu's humanoid heretics—there will be no internment priority."

His grip on the triggers tightened.

"No one will be spared. Kill on sight. I will take full responsibility."

Lu Yizhan had been placed in another room, but not long after he was locked up, the base began to shake. While he was still trying to make sense of the situation, the two team members guarding him were already shoving a protective suit and a gun into his hands.

"You're a cop, right?" One of them asked urgently. "The base is in an emergency. If you can fight, we need your help! Take care of yourself—there are a lot of strange monsters here. If you see one and can't

handle it, run! Don't go head-to-head!"

With that, the two were about to rush off when Lu Yizhan grabbed one of them by the arm.

"Wait!" he said, his voice tight. "My friend—Bai Liu—how is he? Is he okay?"

The team member gave him a strange look. "Bai Liu? If you mean the [humanoid heretic] we captured, our captain just issued a [shoot-to-kill] order on him."

Lu Yizhan froze. A beat passed before he snapped back to his senses.

His expression hardened as he pulled on the protective suit and gripped his gun. Looking at the team members seriously, he asked, "If I find Bai Liu before you kill him and prove he's not dangerous—not some monster or heretic like you say—will you call off the execution?"

This time, it was the two team members who hesitated. They exchanged uneasy glances.

"Technically speaking, we don't advocate killing if capture is possible," one of them admitted reluctantly. "But Bai Liu is extremely dangerous. We strongly advise against—"

"I know better than you whether he's dangerous or not." Lu Yizhan cut him off. His voice was calm, but his hands moved with practiced efficiency—loading the magazine, clicking it into place. Then he looked up at them with an easy smile. "I've known him for ten years. I'd say that gives me a better understanding of him than you."

The two team members, who had just witnessed Bai Liu unlocking all the heretics' cells, clearly didn't share Lu Yizhan's confidence. One of them said grimly, "He'll kill you."

Lu Yizhan's smile didn't falter. "Then I'll bet my life that he won't."

---------- --------

Liu Jiayi's group stopped in front of Room 1807. The door was wide open.

Muke cautiously peered inside, scanning the area, then pulled back. "He's not here. The room's empty. Are you sure this is the right place?"

"This is it." Liu Jiayi adjusted her visual goggles, her brow furrowing.

"The water has receded, but something isn’t right. The doors to all these rooms are open—they were closed when we came in. Whatever was locked up in here was dangerous. But now..." She trailed off, eyes narrowing. "Now, they’re gone."

"Wait." Mu Sicheng suddenly removed his breathing mask, crouching down. He sniffed the air a few times, his expression turning serious. Then he waved them over. "I smell Bai Liu."

Muke and Liu Jiayi both blinked at him. "You... what?"

"What does Bai Liu even smell like?" Muke asked skeptically.

Mu Sicheng replied with a completely straight face: "Copper."

Muke: "..."

Liu Jiayi: "Are you seriously cracking jokes right now?"

"Don't look at me like I'm an idiot!" Mu Sicheng snapped, exasperated. "I'm telling you, I can really smell it! Bai Liu was here. Liu Jiayi was right—this is the right place!"

Liu Jiayi frowned in deep thought, her mind racing. "If you really smell Bai Liu, that means I was right. But then... why isn't he here? I doubt they would've let him go so easily. So what's going on?"

No sooner had she spoken than an ear-splitting alarm blared throughout the base.

"Level 1 alert! Level 1 alert! Total lockdown of the base is imminent! Over 80% of the heretics are on the run! Prepare for battle!"

"In cases involving alien invaders and humanoid heretics such as Bai Liu, priority is to eliminate rather than contain!"

Mu Sicheng pointed at himself, eyebrows raised. "Wait—'humanoid heretic intruders'... that's not talking about us, is it?"

"I think it is." Muke's voice was steady, but his eyes flicked warily behind Mu Sicheng. He reached out, gripping Mu Sicheng's right shoulder to keep him from turning. "And I also think now isn't the best time to look behind you."

Mu Sicheng inhaled sharply. He could feel it. "There's something behind me, isn't there?"

A pale, corpse-stained hand, its nails blackened and rotting, rested bonelessly on his shoulder. The hand belonged to a figure dressed in a traditional Ming and Qing dynasty bridal jacket, its face obscured beneath a thick, moldy red veil embroidered with the xi (囍) symbol. The lower half of her face peeked out—her rigid mouth twisted into an eerie, unmoving smile.

None of them had noticed when the bride had appeared. Or how close she had gotten.

"What do I do?" Mu Sicheng's voice was eerily calm.

Liu Jiayi studied the figure before raising an eyebrow. "...I think I know this monster. I've played the game she appears in."

Her tone was almost amused as she explained, "She's called [New Bride]. In the game, she attacks by 'marrying' the groom she chooses... and then drags him into the underworld." She turned to look at Mu Sicheng, whose expression was rapidly crumbling. "In other words,

since she's put her hands on your shoulders, she's chosen you."

Mu Sicheng let out a strangled laugh. "But I don't even see her! Can someone please tell her we don't do arranged marriages anymore?!"

Muke caught onto Liu Jiayi's words immediately. "She's from a monster book? That means she has a weakness. What is it?"

Liu Jiayi's tone shifted, turning serious. "First, don't turn your back on her. Second, you'd better hope you're not a man of the right age to be her groom. And third—"

Before she could finish, she leapt onto Mu Sicheng's shoulders, her hands shooting forward to grab hold of the bride's head. Her gaze was fierce.

"—Third, she can't survive without it."

With a swift, forceful motion, Liu Jiayi ripped off the veil. The bride's decayed, rotting face was fully exposed. A piercing, inhuman shriek filled the air as she clawed at her own face in agony.

The veil fluttered to the ground. The bride immediately broke into small, frantic steps, blindly chasing after the discarded red fabric as if drawn to it.

Liu Jiayi didn't waste another second. She grabbed Mu Sicheng and pulled him to his feet.

"Don't look back—RUN!"

---------- --

Tang Erda stepped into the corridor. Directly across from him lay a foul-smelling, tangled mass of what looked like hair—thick, slimy strands clumped together like something pulled from a clogged bathtub drain. Several team members hesitated, visibly trembling as they prepared to move in for containment.

Before they could act, Tang Erda raised a hand, stopping them.

His gaze remained fixed on the writhing mass as he spoke. "Every heretic or monster with active aggression has a weakness. When containing them, it's critical to exploit those innate vulnerabilities."

Taking a slow, measured breath, he stepped forward. "Take this one, for example—heretic number 1402, [Iron Worm Algae]. It looks like a

mass of hair, but in reality, it's a swarm of highly reproductive parasites with extreme resilience. The worst thing you can do when approaching it is display any trait that signals you as a viable host."

He glanced back at the team. "Unfortunately for us, the human body is its preferred host. Which means we'll need a diversion."

A team member rushed forward, handing him a small caged Little Bai rat.

Tang Erda took the cage, flipped open the latch, and with practiced precision, grabbed the rat and flung it toward the tangled mass.

The reaction was immediate. The parasites, once motionless, erupted into action, their tentacle-like appendages latching onto the rat. Writhing threads burrowed beneath its skin as the creature convulsed violently, spasming against the ground.

"Feeding time is its only vulnerability—it won't attack another creature while it's consuming its host." Tang Erda's voice was calm, methodical. Wearing thick leather gloves, he swiftly grabbed the infested rat and tossed it into a reinforced glass containment box.

The moment the rat hit the box, it burst into a fine mist of blood. The parasites, now fully engorged, slithered up the glass walls, their elongated bodies twisting like centipedes as they searched for an escape.

The sight sent a visible shudder through the team. None of them wanted to imagine what would happen if these creatures ever got loose.

One of the members steadied himself, took a deep breath, and raised his communicator.

"Report—heretic 1402 successfully contained."

---------- ----

A translucent, crawling creature scuttled silently past Liu Jiayi's back.

Mu Sicheng's nose twitched. Before his brain could even process the scent, the strange yet familiar pungency triggered pure instinct. Without hesitation, he drew the gun he had stripped from a patrolman and fired.

A sharp, lizard-like screech echoed through the corridor. The creature, once colorless, turned into a slimy, ink-black mass, tumbling from the wall before scrambling away with frantic, slithering limbs.

Liu Jiayi turned, slightly surprised—she hadn't heard a thing.

"Transparent Chameleon," Mu Sicheng muttered, rolling his shoulder. "A monster from a level-one game I played. Low defense, but ridiculously high stealth."

He flexed his fingers around the gun, grinning. "Never figured out its weakness, but my attack stat was high enough to brute-force my way through it." He glanced at his weapon, tilting his head. "Guess these monsters still can't resist bullets, in-game or out. Good thing I've played with guns a few times."

Muke had already holstered his gun. He knew how to shoot, but his reflexes weren't nearly as sharp as Mu Sicheng's. His mind was elsewhere—searching for Bai Liu.

"Mu Sicheng, can you smell Bai Liu?" he asked, frowning.

Mu Sicheng clicked his tongue in annoyance. "Normally, yeah. But not here. The air's too cluttered with different smells—too many monsters, too much interference."

Liu Jiayi crossed her arms, her expression thoughtful. "There's no way the base itself released these monsters," she mused. "I don't know how Bai Liu got the power to do all this, but if I had to guess, I'd say it's him."

Her voice turned sharper. "The real question is—why? What's he trying to accomplish by causing all this chaos?"

She turned to Mu Sicheng and Muke. "Our original plan is in shambles. The only thing we can do now is figure out Bai Liu's motives. Once we understand that, we'll know where he's headed."

Her gaze flicked between the two. "You guys are close to Bai Liu, right? Willing to risk your lives for him. So tell me—what do you actually know about him?"

Muke hesitated, then tentatively offered, "Uh... his computer was an Alienware I lost to him in a bet? He seemed to really like that brand..."

Mu Sicheng rubbed his chin in deep contemplation. "He had a

discounted hotpot last week. Does that count?"

Liu Jiayi stared at them, deadpan. "...That's not what I meant. Are you two elementary schoolers?!"

So they had followed her here without actually knowing anything.

The realization hit her all at once—Bai Liu had them completely figured out.

He knew their psychological profiles, their motivations, their backgrounds—probably even their damn family trees. If they were trapped in this base, Bai Liu wouldn't need to search for them. He already understood their habits, could predict their thought processes, map out the exact routes they'd take to escape. He could locate them before they even realized they needed to be found.

His mastery over them created an illusion—that they and Bai Liu were close, that they understood him just as well.

But that was a lie.

They knew nothing about Bai Liu.

Or rather, Bai Liu had never let them know what he was thinking.

Who could?

That man was slippery, cunning—a thousand masks hiding a thousand smiles. Everything he did was deliberate, calculated to keep people disoriented, never truly seeing the real him.

Could anyone in this world predict what Bai Liu was thinking?

Could anyone possibly know where he was going or how to find him?

---------- --------

Lu Yizhan walked solemnly down the corridor, moving deeper underground as a tide of people surged past him in the opposite direction.

Someone stopped him. "Hey! Where are you going? That's the most dangerous place in the facility—heretics are sealed down there! Only detachment members are allowed!"

Lu Yizhan didn't respond. He gripped the gun in his hand, brushed

past the man without a glance, and continued forward with unwavering determination.

The most dangerous heretics were imprisoned here.

And he knew Bai Liu too well—perhaps even better than Bai Liu knew himself.

Bai Liu was drawn to danger like a moth to flame, compelled by play, by risk. The more uncontrollable and unknown something was, the more it fascinated him.

After years on the force, Lu Yizhan had learned another name for someone like Bai Liu.

A born criminal.

Low empathy. High intelligence. A thirst for thrills and fear. No social identity. A childhood filled with trauma. People like him were statistically far more likely to go astray.

And yet, Lu Yizhan had always trusted Bai Liu.

Bai Liu had promised him—he wouldn't commit crimes so easily. And Lu Yizhan had believed him.

The squad claimed Bai Liu was controlling the heretics, which meant that no matter how dangerous they were, they wouldn't kill him. Because Bai Liu was the one pulling the strings.

Because Bai Liu had been Lu Yizhan's only friend for ten years.

Lu Yizhan walked alone into the depths of the earth, dull light streaking across his face as grotesque, inhuman figures twisted and writhed around him.

The monsters lunged—gnashing teeth, clawing limbs.

But Lu Yizhan didn't flinch. He didn't hide. He didn't run.

He just kept walking.

Silent. Unyielding. Teeth gritted as the tide of creatures surged and then, just as suddenly, receded. He staggered, battered and bleeding, leaning against the wall as he finally emerged from the darkness.

At the end of the corridor, a blinding white light poured in.

Bai Liu stood there, watching him quietly.

"You shouldn't have come, Lu Yizhan." Bai Liu lowered his gaze.

Lu Yizhan exhaled sharply, forcing himself upright. His usual gentle, steady smile returned as he met Bai Liu's eyes. "But you still let me find you." His voice was soft, knowing. "If you really wanted to hide, Bai Liu, I never would've been able to reach you."

He extended a hand toward Bai Liu—just as he always had. "Come out with me."

Bai Liu didn't move. His eyes flicked to Lu Yizhan's bloodied, trembling hand.

Lu Yizhan had always reached out to him like this.

He had given Bai Liu food. A name. A friend.

And despite Bai Liu's cold rejection every time, Lu Yizhan would simply laugh, undeterred, and drag him up from the depths—brutally, unreasonably, never letting go.

"Lu Yizhan." Bai Liu's voice was calm, even. "You should know better than anyone—I do very nasty things."

His gaze lifted, sharp and calculating. "I have power, intelligence, and no particular concern for whether people live or die. If I can profit from it, why shouldn't I?"

Bai Liu's tone was emotionless. "We were never really friends. You're just another person to me."

His expression didn't change. "But you're not him."

Bai Liu's voice was quiet, but firm.

"You're human. Not a monster."

"Humans and monsters can't be friends, Lu Yizhan. You've been forcing this relationship for ten years—don't keep doing it."

He tilted his head slightly. "In a normal story, I'd be the kind of criminal you'd shoot. And you'd be the kind of cop who pulls the trigger." Bai Liu smiled faintly, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I'll let you go this time. But next time you see me, don't reach out your hand. Draw your gun."

Lu Yizhan inhaled slowly. His fingers curled into a fist against the wall, knuckles white. Then, without hesitation, he reached behind him —

—and drew his gun.

Bai Liu's expression didn't flicker.

He had expected this.

Lu Yizhan was no fool. He understood what releasing Bai Liu would mean. He knew killing him here was the best option. Even with the gun aimed at him, Bai Liu's heartbeat remained steady. His breathing was calm.

Then—

Lu Yizhan smiled.

He stumbled forward, dragging his injured leg, closing the distance between them. Then, slowly, he placed the gun into Bai Liu's stunned hand.

His own bloodied fingers curled over Bai Liu's, forcing the weapon upward—aiming it at himself.

"I'd never pull a gun on you, Bai Liu." Lu Yizhan's voice was gentle, unwavering.

His face was covered in blood and grime, and yet he still smiled—bright, lopsided, completely out of place in the bleakness of it all.

He looked straight at Bai Liu and flicked the safety off. "If you really want to leave here and start hurting people—then let me be the first one you kill."

His breath was unsteady, but his hands were steady as they pressed the gun to his forehead.

"Because the police can't turn a blind eye to what you're trying to do. But I—" Lu Yizhan let out a shaky laugh. "—I just can't bring myself to shoot you."

He swallowed, voice softening. "And from the looks of things... you're already beyond anything I can stop."

His eyes never wavered.

"So please." Lu Yizhan's voice was almost pleading. "Before you go out and do all those terrible things—kill me first. So I won't have to watch."

He didn't move. Didn't flinch.

At gunpoint, Lu Yizhan smiled that same helpless, familiar smile Bai Liu had seen countless times before.

"But if you don't pull the trigger—if you let me live—then at least, until the end of this cop's life... you're still his friend."

[Because a policeman's friend must not be a bad guy. And if you ever do something bad, Bai Liu, I will arrest you myself.]

[So if I become a bad guy, will you kill me, Lu Yizhan?]

[If you commit a crime worthy of prison, then you go to prison. And if that's not enough—if death is the only way to atone—then I'll fight to the death to stop you before you ever cross that line.]

Bai Liu's grip tightened around the gun.

Lu Yizhan raised both hands in surrender.

And then—

Without the slightest resistance, he calmly closed his eyes.

The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment

One second, two seconds—no movement. Lu Yizhan cracks one eye open cautiously. Bai Liu, expressionless, lets the gun slip from his hand.

Bai Liu shoots Lu Yizhan a mildly disgusted look and tosses the gun back to him. “I’m not going to shoot you. Don’t pull these ridiculous stunts again. It’s annoying.”

Just as Lu Yizhan would never turn his gun on Bai Liu, Bai Liu would never harm Lu Yizhan—a mutual understanding ingrained over ten years of trust.

Whether one had the other at gunpoint, neither man's heartbeat nor breath would quicken. They knew—without needing to think about it—that the other would never pull the trigger. The trust was so instinctive, it didn’t even allow for fear.

Lu Yizhan scrambles to catch the gun. “Be careful! You can’t just throw these things around! I put the safety on, but still—”

“If you’re dumb enough to shoot yourself while handling a gun, you deserve it,” Bai Liu says flatly, casting Lu Yizhan a sidelong glance.

Lu Yizhan immediately recognizes that expression. Bai Liu is in a bad mood.

Usually, whenever Lu Yizhan talks him down from whatever scheme he’s concocted—whether by reason, manipulation, or sheer persistence—Bai Liu retreats into a silent sulk. Like a mischievous child whose favorite toy has been confiscated for being too dangerous.

Lu Yizhan knows Bai Liu isn't upset about morality or consequence. He’s upset because he’s not allowed to play his game.

But Lu Yizhan is used to this.

It’s been like this since they were kids—Bai Liu trying to do something reckless, Lu Yizhan stepping in to stop him. Over time, he’s learned how to handle him.

His voice softens, his gestures careful, as though pacifying a petulant child. “How about we go outside first? Or maybe we put all the dangerous things away?”

Bai Liu fixes his gaze on him. “What do I get in return?” He lifts a hand, palm up.

Lu Yizhan glances at Bai Liu’s outstretched hand and instantly understands.

“I’ll treat you to hotpot! A year’s worth! No—two years! You can eat whatever you want, all on me!”

Bai Liu’s expression remains unchanged.

Lu Yizhan sighs. “Three years? Four? Five?—Come on, Bai Liu, I need to save some money to get married! Don’t push it!”

Bai Liu smirks. “I haven’t been human for years… Ten.”

Lu Yizhan: “…”

Tears practically well up in his eyes. “Fine! Ten years! You win!”

This is, without question, the most miserable deal Lu Yizhan has ever made.

After securing Lu Yizhan’s promise, Bai Liu still doesn’t move. He watches him with that same detached expression, utterly unmotivated to follow through.

It’s rare for Bai Liu to feel reluctant after making a deal. But somehow, whenever it’s with Lu Yizhan, a strange, stifling sensation creeps in—like a corporate employee being asked to work overtime without pay.

And right now, Bai Liu is feeling exactly like a disgruntled office worker again.

Lu Yizhan beams at him. “Come on, take back the Avatar! I swear—ten years of hotpot! Isn’t that an amazing deal?”

Bai Liu: “…”

No excitement. No interest.

But after a long moment, he finally pulls the still-vibrating coin from his collar. He holds it in his palm for a second before the tremors die down.

He looks back at Lu Yizhan. “Done.”

Lu Yizhan exhales a deep breath, wiping cold sweat from his forehead.

...This must be what it feels like to babysit a delinquent child who nearly wrecked a priceless museum exhibit (in this case, a world-ending heretic) before the parent managed to drag them away just in time.

His legs feel weak.

He doesn't even want to imagine what would have happened if Bai Liu had actually let loose in this place…

Once he regains his composure, Lu Yizhan glances around, suddenly curious. "How did you even get here?"

Bai Liu leans casually against the wall and gestures toward the room behind him. His gaze lingers on the small, welded-shut window in the door.

"I sensed a trace of Xie Ta's aura here right after the riot."

Lu Yizhan follows his gaze. The door is unnervingly large and tall—more an entrance to a tunnel than a standard doorway.

A metallic plaque labels it: [0001]. Below, a red skull-and-crossbones warning reads:

[EXTRAORDINARY DANGER].

---------- --

The sweaty crew glanced around at the heretics, who had suddenly stopped attacking and rioting, now standing in a daze. These otherwise fierce heretics had come to a complete halt, as if their energy had been drained.

This made the intake much easier.

Tang Erda observed the strange scene, his fingers brushing the reverse cross in his pocket.

Sure enough, the reverse cross no longer pulsed with heat and now lay cold at the bottom of his pocket.

"… Bai Six actually stopped…" Tang Erda furrowed his brow. "He just needs to connect to the reverse cross. If he doesn't stop voluntarily, there's no one who can interrupt his prayer to summon the evil gods

and the monsters…”

This ritual to summon the evil gods and drive the monsters away always cost him dearly. If not handled properly, the backlash from the monsters could kill him outright. Yet this time, Bai Six had voluntarily stopped.

This was uncharacteristic of him. The return on investment was far too low. Given his usual style, if he’d spent half his life on such a high-risk, high-consumption ritual, he’d expect to see the base overrun with monsters as a reward.

“Captain!!!” A surprised voice came through the comm. “Surveillance is back online!”

Tang Erda quickly inquired, “Can you see where Bai Six is?”

“I’m checking now! Ah! Got him!” The team member reported rapidly. “Captain Tang, Bai Six is on the lowest level! I’m not sure how he got down there, but he’s in a restricted area—outside the door to Heretic [0001]!”

“Heretic [0001]?” Tang Erda’s voice grew increasingly suspicious. “What’s he doing there?”

“What kind of heresy is in there, Captain Tang?” the team member asked nervously. “Bai Six wouldn’t be trying to release this heretic, would he?”

Tang Erda fell silent for a moment. “I don’t know what’s inside there either.”

The team member sounded shocked. “You don’t know either, Captain Tang?!”

“The file for Heretic [0001] is classified as extra top secret,” Tang Erda explained, leaning against the wall, his eyes distant. “My clearance doesn’t allow me to access it. But for now, we don’t need to worry about Bai Six releasing this heretic. He won’t be able to.”

“The room housing Heretic [0001] doesn’t have a door. It’s a completely airtight hexahedron constructed from various metals and materials from the heretic’s own body. The room was never designed with a door, key, or exit in mind. No one knows what’s inside because no one can get in, and absolutely nothing can get out.”

Tang Erda tilted his head back, recalling something. “There was only one person in the entire base who had access to the files on Heretic [0001]—the leader of the first detachment.”

The team member’s voice grew more confused. “The leader of the first detachment? But Captain Tang, the leader of the first detachment has been dead for years…”

The team member gulped nervously. “And, and didn’t he… didn’t he kill himself?”

“I know.” Tang Erda’s voice remained flat, without emotion. “He destroyed the files on Heretic [0001] before he died, so no one knows what’s inside that room now.”

The team shuddered, murmuring Tang Erda's words in a daze, "No one knows what monsters are in there..."

"I'm going down now. Don't let the rest of the team follow me—it's a restricted area, and it's too dangerous for them to come with me." With that, Tang Erda pulled a plastic-wrapped cigarette from her breast pocket, lit it, and inhaled deeply.

The scarlet smoke flickered in the air, swirling around her as Tang Erda's dark blue eyes glinted with a fierce, aggressive intensity. "Seal the lift before I get to him. No one is to come up."

"If I'm killed by him, seal the lift and never let him leave the base. If Bai Six vanishes into thin air inside the base, surround the address I left for you. The moment he reappears, make sure you kill him—at all costs."

With her orders given, Tang Erda descended deeper into the earth, alone.

Meanwhile, at the other end.

As the monsters were methodically taken in by the team, the strong, strange smell from the monsters cleared from the air, revealing the original coldness of the base.

Mu Sicheng sniffed, frowned, and looked in one direction. "I smell an underwhelming scent."

"Is that Captain Tang, who said he was going to hunt Bai Liu down?" Liu Jiayi instantly understood what Mu Sicheng meant.

"The smell's getting stronger, a very nose-rattling scent of smoke." Mu Sicheng waved it in front of his nose in disgust. "He seems to be heading somewhere."

Liu Jiayi quickly made up her mind. "We'll follow him! He is responsible for pursuing Bai Liu and should know where he is!"

Shortly after Tang Erda went down in the lift, Liu Jiayi's group turned quickly around the corner. They watched Tang Erda descend all the

way down to the 10th floor. Mu Sicheng couldn't help but spit out, "Is this thing that deep?"

Liu Jiayi swiped Su Yang's work card twice, but it did not respond.

This made her realize something quickly. "Bai Liu is really down here, and this guy went down to kill him! This lift should have been locked to prevent Bai Liu from coming up."

"Of course, there is another possibility." Liu Jiayi raised Su Yang's work permit in her hand and looked up at Mu Sicheng and Muke. "We've been found out, and this work permit is locked."

Meanwhile, the team member who had been watching the surveillance was urgently reporting to Tang Erda. "Captain Tang! The other three intruder heretics are right behind you! They seem to be trying to follow you down, but we've locked the lift, and they can't get down with their Captain Su badges, so we're calling in patrols to arrest them..."

"No need." Tang Erda's indifferent voice interrupted the team's report. "Unlock the lift and have them swipe Su Yang's work pass to come down."

The team was stunned. "But Captain Tang, they had guns on them and there were three of them..."

Tang Erda, gun in both hands, walked steadily through the darkness, only his eyes glowing with hysteria, on the verge of madness, but his tone was incredibly calm. "With Bai Liu, there are only five monsters, and it's not like I haven't killed them before."

The team member flinched and asked rhetorically, "Five monsters? No, there are only four humanoid heretics. Who is the other one?"

"Don't unlock the lift until I've killed all the monsters, including myself," he said.

The players stood up in shock. "Captain Tang! Captain Tang! What are you talking about!"

"Captain Tang! It's not just heretics down there! There's also a regular cop in the restricted area somehow! Captain Tang!!!"

But the communicator over there was silent.

Mu Sicheng and his group, who were at the door of the lift and trying to figure out what to do, noticed that the lift, which had been locked, slowly rose up again and opened before them of its own accord, as if inviting them.

"Wow." Liu Jiayi raised an eyebrow. "Looks like this Captain Tang is pretty tough, inviting our whole crew down with him. Can be, very confident in his abilities."

She turned to Mu Sicheng and Muke and tilted her head questioningly towards the open lift doors. "So, do you dare to go down? It's most likely him down there waiting to ambush us."

Mu Sicheng didn't say anything. He rubbed his elbow, took his gun in his hand, and led the way into the lift, followed by Muke.

Liu Jiayi was the last to enter the lift. She turned and pressed the -10 button, gathering all expression on her face. "It seems we agree on this point."

The lift door slowly closed and plunged rapidly towards the ground.

---------- --

10th floor, base exclusion zone.

Much of this level of the base is unlit, a deep, bottomless darkness, for the heretics in this place are like creatures from the bottom of the sea.

They are full of unknown dangers, and much of the information in the file, such as weaknesses, is not exact. They are also odd-looking and do not like sunlight—too much bright light makes them restless. Because of this unknown danger, their rooms are tailor-made, and it is very difficult to get out.

But even so, Tang Erda came down and saw several rooms that had been opened.

His back teeth clenched as he alertly bounced around the floor with his gun raised.

This level, because of the almost total darkness, relies on familiarity with the map to move quickly within it.

However, only a few detachment leaders and some reappointed detachment members know the map of this floor, and the lift to the

ground floor must be swiped with the permission of the detachment vice-captain or above.

Tang Erda couldn't imagine how Bai Liu managed to come down. Still, in a dark corridor, Bai Liu had managed to find the spooky room of the Heretic [0001] in just a few minutes.

But the man always has a way.

When Bai Liu wants to do something, even if the whole world is against him, he will do it successfully.

But why did he go to this room?

It’s not as if Tang Erda hadn’t explored this room in all the timelines he'd been through, but in every one of them, he hadn't found the answer.

The only one who knew what was in this room was the leader of the first detachment, called [the prophet], one of the founders of this base.

But this captain had tragically gone mad and committed suicide in almost every timeline Tang Erda had appeared in.

Before committing suicide, this captain would destroy the files in this room and leave a message:
"Never open it. It hides the most horrible truth that will drive all who witness it into madness. Let me be the last of its madness, the last string that suspends your sanity and your future."

The captain is called [the prophet] because, like Tang Erda now, he could predict the most dangerous things that would happen. Because of this, the captain had a very high level of authority at the base.

After his death, he left this authority to Tang Erda, who knew nothing at the time.

At the time, Tang Erda was still a regular captain who had not yet gone back in time. But this captain said that only Tang Erda could carry on what he was going to do and could continue to lead the base in removing the dangerous heresy that was about to emerge.

He prophesied that Tang Erda had the power to eradicate the greatest and most dangerous heresies, and that the most horrible heresies were associated with the number six.

And when Tang Erda retraced his steps across the timeline and possessed millions of memories from other timelines, he really did have the ability to "predict" the appearance of extremely dangerous heretics in advance, just as the captain had predicted.

Tang Erda started to be called the "little prophet" by the other players, but Tang Erda knew that he was no "prophet."

He was just a hunter who had gone through it all and nothing had changed, who had incompetently retraced the timeline time and time again.

And the true prophet predicted his arrival, bestowing upon him a right and a responsibility that Tang Erda, a hunter on the verge of madness, simply could not bear.

The Prophet's prophecies had never been wrong, and all the team members at the base were convinced by the Prophet, who had saved them countless times.

Since then, the room had become an invisible room at the base, and no one had tried to explore the secrets of its interior.

Tang Erda, on the other hand, had become the person with the highest authority at the base.

But as time passed, Tang Erda's unstable mental state and the slowly eroding authority of the long-dead legendary captain began to change the players.

They became distrustful of Tang Erda and questioned whether he could really have such a high level of authority, whether he was abusing his power and just doing what he wanted to do.

The capture of the Living Heretic, which Tang Erda had ordered by force, began to send everything spiraling out of control, with the team's suspicions and doubts exploding.

--If even the living can be captured as heretics, has the existence of such authority begun to change from protection to slaughter?

Can this supreme authority really be possessed by a [person] who is full of feelings and desires and who makes all kinds of mistakes?

Only [God] can have this kind of access.

The captain of the first detachment was rumored to be like a god—without selfish desires, never making mistakes, admired by all and loved by all as a god-like captain.

Unfortunately, this [god] went mad in the end and committed suicide.

All the players already had a vague sense that Tang Erda, the successor chosen by [God], was also vaguely on the verge of going mad and committing suicide—like this was the doomed fate of these heretical, near-godlike humans who had seen more of the heresy for real.

The team's silent acquiescence to Tang Erda's suicide to take away all heresy was like acquiescence to a fate he had long been destined for—a fate from the hunters.

[Hunter] is a [Divine Identity Card] in Werewolf Kill, whose destiny is to take away the evil fellow the seer tells him is most likely to be a [Wolf] on the field before his own death.

The hunter takes the silver gun engraved with a rose and heads for his destined end.

The entire base is spherical in shape, and Heretic [0001]'s room is situated at the pole of the sphere, at the deepest, most isolated point of the structure. Because of this unique design, the path leading to Heretic [0001]'s room slopes downward, an ever-deepening descent.

Tang Erda presses forward, descending step by step.

The further he goes, the denser the vapor becomes. A strange, fishy odor fills the air—an unsettling mix of deep-sea fish and seaweed. The stench is not overpowering, but it drifts in and out, persistent and disorienting, evoking the feeling of being submerged underwater. Tang Erda, hardened by countless encounters with heresy, is not affected by the smell; it no longer clouds his mind.

However, for those sensitive to such odors, the scent could cause a drastic mental decline. Mu Sicheng, his pupils constricted and his breath shallow, begins to feel the effects. Liu Jiayi quickly notices the change: "Mu Sicheng?"

"It doesn't smell right," Mu Sicheng mutters, shaking his head as he fights to keep his wits about him. "It reminds me of a level-one game I played, Siren Town. The mermaids there... they had a similar smell." He pauses, his face tightening with concern. "There could be some sort of mermaid-like monster on this floor."

The group is now in reality, where there is no bleach to cleanse their minds from such disorienting sensations, and they must rely on their senses to survive.

Muke pulls a packet of toilet paper from his bag and hands it to Mu Sicheng. "Plug your nostrils for now. Don't inhale too much of this. If your mental state drops, we'll all be in trouble."

Mu Sicheng reaches out to take the paper but then hesitates, his brow furrowing. "Wait... there's something else mixed in this smell," he says, his voice laced with disbelief. "A faint trace of money... It's tangled up in the odor."

Muke's expression sharpens. "Is it Bai Liu's scent? Can you pinpoint where he is?"

Mu Sicheng's hand freezes in mid-air as he looks at Muke, whose eyes are now gleaming with intensity.

Muke is determined, eager. "Can you smell him? Where is he?"

Mu Sicheng, his face unreadable, pulls his hand back and glares at Muke in silence.

The moment is tense. As Mu Sicheng stands frozen, Tang Erda slowly makes his way through the oppressive darkness, methodically dispelling the black mist that clings to him. He holds his hunter's gun tightly, his eyes narrowing as he approaches the door that guards the Heretic [0001]'s chamber. Just ahead, Bai Liu stands, a figure poised in the gloom, silently awaiting his arrival.

"We meet again, Captain Tang," Bai Liu's voice breaks the silence, smooth and controlled. He gives a smile, faint but knowing, as he looks at Tang Erda, who lifts his gun with an unwavering hand. "How about we talk about a new deal I've come up with?"

Bai Liu's words are casual, yet the underlying tension crackles in the air. "I can give you the solution to the dried rose leaf gas, but in exchange, I need you to open this door behind me and let me see what's inside."

Tang Erda's gaze hardens, his blue eyes darkening with a tumult of emotions that swirl violently within him. He remains silent, his grip on the gun tightening as his words come slowly, thick with conviction. "If there hadn't been that explosion, the world wouldn't be choking on dried rose leaf gas. But you... you're more dangerous alive than the gas itself."

Bai Liu raises an eyebrow, his lips curling into a small, amused smile. "So you've decided to kill me and give up on striking a deal?" He tilts his head slightly, unfazed by the threat. "Is that it, Captain? You're willing to let the thousand or so innocent people who've already been tainted by the gas perish, just so you can make this choice?"

Tang Erda's heart pounds in his chest, but he stands resolute, his hand steady on the gun. "If I keep you alive, it only prolongs your ability to harm others. Your survival might spare a thousand, but it endangers everyone else." His eyes meet Bai Liu's with cold clarity. "The most effective option is to sacrifice them and end this—end you."

Bai Liu steps forward, not an inch of fear in his demeanor. His face inches closer to the barrel of Tang Erda's gun, and with a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes, he says, "That's what I would say. You've finally made a choice that aligns with my values, Captain Tang."

He reaches forward, taking the gun from Tang Erda's hands, his expression challenging. "You've made the right choice. What's the hesitation now?"

Tang Erda's breath hitches, his gaze narrowing. "It's because one of those thousand is named Su Yang, isn't it?"

The mention of Su Yang causes Tang Erda's hand to tremble. His blue eyes, momentarily flickering with the darkness of his emotions, tighten. His grip on the gun tightens, his knuckles turning white, as his breath quickens, heavy with regret and sorrow.

Su Yang coughs intermittently, the smell of perfume lingering around him. He's long been contaminated, but he fights against his inevitable fate. His body, once full of life, now withers. The dried rose leaf gas eats away at him slowly, his bones weakening, his organs failing.

"Captain," Su Yang says weakly, a faint smile on his lips. "There's no need to rush for a solution to the gas problem. This was always the likely end for us. But if I die, at least Ann and I always dreamed of moving to a new house. With the pension, she'll be able to take the kids and live somewhere she likes."

"Captain!" Su Yang calls out, his voice strong despite his condition. He salutes Tang Erda, his eyes clear and unwavering. "Lieutenant Su Yang, 3rd detachment, requesting one last mission. I've been contaminated. Please, let me take your place and lead the investigation into the perfume factory."

Tang Erda's teeth grind together, his body trembling with emotion. His heart aches as Su Yang's words strike him, as they always do. Su Yang, even as he is dying, insists on letting Bai Liu go, believing him to be innocent despite everything.

Tang Erda is torn. He knows that if he allows Bai Liu to walk free, the consequences would be catastrophic. Bai Liu, with his connections to the evil gods and the heretics, would only continue to wreak havoc. The faces of the countless victims flash in Tang Erda's mind—the bloodied faces of those who died because of Bai Liu's cruelty.

"Captain, kill him!" The voices in his head shout. "Kill him and end it all, or the world will fall into the hands of the evil gods!"

But as he prepares to pull the trigger, a figure lunges from behind.

Lu Yizhan, once a mere bystander, now steps forward, his hand

grasping Tang Erda's wrist, twisting it inward. The bullet flies off-course, grazing Bai Liu's foot as Lu Yizhan yells in panic, "Dad, Bai Liu, can I call you dad? Please don't aim that gun at yourself next time! If I'm late, I'll have to share a hot pot with you in hell!"

Bai Liu, unfazed, leans against the wall lazily. "I've just learned that from him," he says, glancing at Lu Yizhan with a smirk.

Lu Yizhan, who had once held Bai Liu's gun to his own forehead, is speechless. "Can't you learn something good from me?"

Bai Liu shrugs, unbothered. "Can't. It's not my style."

Tang Erda, momentarily stunned, fails to react in time when Lu Yizhan, an ordinary man, lunges at him from behind. He hadn't expected Lu Yizhan to be here, especially not in such a restricted area. His instincts, trained for combat, told him the figure was an enemy, a monster under Bai Liu's control. His gun instinctively rises.

But then he sees Lu Yizhan, the man he once trained, now struggling to control him. For a split second, Tang Erda almost fires—but with a grimace, he restrains himself.

Lu Yizhan, taking advantage of Tang Erda's hesitation, pulls his hands free and forces them behind his back. He pushes Tang Erda against the wall.

Tang Erda growls in frustration. "I'm your superior! Let go of me!"

Lu Yizhan, pinned to the wall by Tang Erda's weight, pleads, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Sir, just don't move your gun! Why can't we sit down and have hot pot? Why does it always have to be bloodshed? I swear my friend may not be a good person, but he's not worth the death penalty!"

Bai Liu, casually stepping up, adds with mock innocence, "Yes, sir, I'm just a small businessman. I promise the maximum transaction is under $10,000. No need to go to such extremes with me, right?"

The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment

Tang Erda, so furious that he was on the brink of fainting, shouted, "Lu Yizhan, let go of me! You have no idea what a dangerous monster Bai Liu is!"

Lu Yizhan suddenly became serious. "I guarantee on my life that Bai Liu has never committed a crime or done anything illegal."

Tang Erda's eyes reddened. "So far, then. Don't you understand? Bai Liu is the type of person born to commit crimes!"

"If you give him the slightest chance, he will definitely commit an irreparable crime. You're a police officer; don't you know how to deal with people like him when you meet them?!"

"...Suppress crime, govern behavior, and observe motives," Lu Yizhan replied after a short silence.

"Control and observation can be removed," Tang Erda breathed heavily, his voice cold. "At the Bureau of Heresy, we only have one way to deal with dangerous and uncontrollable heretics — snuff them out."

As he spoke, Tang Erda's arm broke free from Lu Yizhan's grip as he loosened his hold. Tang Erda twisted his hand around Lu Yizhan's arm, pulling it downward. He let go in pain, and he swiftly turned the attack, catching his neck with his elbow.

Lu Yizhan struggled, holding onto Tang Erda's hand, kicking at him in the corridor and flipping him over while his gun was at his waist.

Tang Erda's gun flew from his hand, the bullet missing its target. It struck the metal jamb of the corridor, creating a sharp noise as it ricocheted, and Lu Yizhan let out a heart-wrenching roar, yelling, "Bai Liu! Get down!!!"

The bullet grazed Bai Liu's ear before smashing into the door behind him [0001], which fell softly to the ground without a sound.

Tang Erda's eyes took on a bloodthirsty gleam. "Do you even understand what you must save?!"

Lu Yizhan involuntarily released his grip on Tang Erda's hands as he struggled to breathe. Tang Erda's right foot hooked around his right

arm, which was still wrapped around him, and he drove his knee into the back of his head.

Lu Yizhan crashed to the ground, pinned by Tang Erda's knee against his spine. He felt his teeth loosen from the impact.

Tang Erda had been holding back his strength until now. This time, Lu Yizhan had no energy to fight back.

His mouth filled with blood as his jarred teeth bled onto the floor, staining his face.

Bai Liu was blocked in the corridor. Tang Erda raised his gun toward him again. Bai Liu, unmoving, held the coin to his chest, eyeing Lu Yizhan who was under Tang Erda’s control.

Though Bai Liu had promised Lu Yizhan not to use the monsters lightly, the situation was far from simple.

However, every time he used them, Bai Liu felt his strength drain away, as though his life force was being siphoned off, weakening him rapidly. He had no idea what would happen if he used them again.

Lu Yizhan saw Bai Liu’s subtle gesture of holding the coin and could not help but shout, "Bai Liu! Don’t use that! Don’t summon those monsters again!"

Tang Erda acted quickly, throwing his hand at the approaching monster-like figure. But the figure swiftly moved, intercepting his motion.

The dark figure was struck in the face and let out a curse before quickly retreating into the shadows.

"?!"

Lu Yizhan, lying on the ground, screamed in horror. "I thought I told you not to summon those monsters!"

Bai Liu shrugged innocently. "I didn’t. Not yet. These [monsters] came out on their own."

Mu Sicheng stepped out from the shadows, wiping blood from his face with his thumb and glaring at Bai Liu. "Who are you calling a monster?!"

He held a gun, aimed directly at Tang Erda.

Unfazed, Tang Erda responded, "It's you, Mu Sicheng the thief."

Tang Erda immediately recognized the hook move, a signature move of the [Capuchin Thief] under Bai Liu's team. He had once been caught in a chase where his gun was stolen by an opponent using that very technique.

The thief had then spun the gun around his finger and used it to take down all the team members who were pursuing him with Tang Erda.

From the shadows, another figure emerged, holding a gun: Muke. Liu Jiayi stood next to him, looking emotionless as she glanced at Tang Erda.

Trader Muke, little witch Liu Jiayi, and Capuchin Thief Mu Sicheng... Tang Erda surveyed the room slowly, recognizing all of them as old acquaintances.

— Only one core player was missing, and Bai Liu's [Wandering Circus] was complete.

In five years, these people would be molded by Bai Liu into the most ruthless players — the monsters Tang Erda knew so well.

A thief who could hook a gun in a single glance, the little witch who ranked fourth on the King's list, and Muke, who had amassed a fortune even as his team hid behind him.

Then there was the deadliest player, the [clown shooter], who had slaughtered his entire team in a league match. He was the son of an arms smuggler, a wanted criminal with ties to every major terrorist organization.

And, of course, the same [clown sniper] who, in the beginning of this timeline, had teamed up with Bai Liu to kill Su Yang with a silver bullet.

But for now, nothing was happening.

These monsters, who would later wreak havoc and commit atrocities, were still fledglings — far from the point where their actions would haunt them with the weight of their sins. Tang Erda could still stop it all with one shot. The future he had fought to avoid could be stopped before it began.

Tang Erda's unfocused eyes moved from Liu Jiayi, soaked and dirty, to

Mu Sicheng, whose bloodied face was contorted with pain as he gripped his gun. He then shifted to Muke, whose face was taut with tension as he aimed at him with deadly accuracy.

Finally, Tang Erda looked at Bai Liu, standing in front of the Heresy [0001] door.

None of them were what Tang Erda remembered. They were too weak, too thin, as though his memories of them fighting each other had been mere illusions to comfort himself. But that illusion shattered the moment he saw Bai Liu.

Only Bai Liu remained unchanged, standing exactly as Tang Erda remembered him from every timeline — in his plain, cheap white shirt and trousers, with a slim build and those dark, lifeless eyes.

Bai Liu calmly gazed down at Tang Erda, his eyes as dark as an abyss, watching him like an impotent hunter. It felt surreal.

Tang Erda had countless memories, but he couldn't recall how many timelines he had traversed. His mind was filled with so much pain that he was losing track of most events.

But Bai Liu's black eyes, always present, haunted him relentlessly.

Bai Liu was like an invincible, indestructible god of evil, eternally present at the end of every story, gazing at Tang Erda with that same smile, as though at his mercy. "You see," he seemed to say, "no matter how much you struggle, you will never get the result you desire. You can't save the person you want to save."

The memories of those who had died over and over again reached out, grabbing Tang Erda's wrists and ankles, trying to drag him into the abyss and hell. They screamed in despair, "Captain! Kill him! Avenge us!"

These memories flooded every part of Tang Erda's brain, eventually blending into a grey-black, indistinguishable haze of hatred. It was no longer just Tang Erda's hatred, but the collective wrath of all the lost souls.

It felt like many of the dead were living in his head, whispering in his ear, "Captain, why haven't you avenged us? Have you forgotten about us?"

This unrelenting anger peaked the moment Tang Erda saw Bai Liu in

each timeline.

It was as though the spirits of resentment possessed him at that very moment, screaming at Bai Liu in fury, "Why did you do that?!"

"To commit such heinous acts against innocent people, to watch them suffer because of you—doesn't that pain you?!"

These were the words Tang Erda had spoken when he first captured Bai Liu and confronted him.

Back then, he was nowhere near as calm as he was now. Back then, the only thought on his mind was to shoot Bai Liu sitting in the interrogation room.

It had taken nearly two detachments of dead men to bring this man to base, and even then, some members of the [Wandering Circus] had taken a few team members alive.

Every second of Bai Liu's interrogation was broadcast to the survivors, who watched the torturous confessions of their captured comrades.

Those who had been taken alive suffered worse than death. As they endured their torment, videos were sent to the phones and computers of every survivor.

Anyone who watched those videos would never feel lucky to have survived — whether they had returned to base or not.

The clown's face appeared in the video, a square or plum symbol painted on his face, with a giant teardrop smeared under his right eye. His lips were outlined in exaggerated red, smiling cheerfully as he held the hair of one of his tortured team members.

He said, "If you want your team member back, take our boss in exchange."

The face of that player was one Tang Erda would never forget.

His uniform was already soaked in blood, his entire body trembling in unconscious spasms. The ID badge on his chest, also stained with blood, faintly showed the word "Su," with the rest of the text obscured by dark red patches.

The Joker held the team member by his hair, dragging him, though his unfocused, vacant eyes were still fixed on the camera.

As if suddenly remembering something, the clown grabbed the man's hair and sneered at his dying face, the eyelids drooping as he tilted his head towards the camera. "Ah, I almost forgot to introduce this fine fellow," he grinned. "This is the deputy leader of the third detachment, Su Yang."

With great effort, Su Yang lifted his scarred, filthy face. Blood dripped from the gash on his forehead, sliding in patches over his eye, down his jaw, and splattering onto the floor.

It was as though the Joker's movements had torn open his wounds anew, the pain briefly reviving what little consciousness Su Yang had left. His gaze sluggishly locked onto the camera, his voice dry and strained. "Captain, it must be... calm... don't follow their pace... go."

Tang Erda could barely think as he stood frozen, watching the video of Su Yang's torment, the white light flashing in an eerie haze, thick with blood.

He told himself he had to stay calm, that he couldn't be swayed by his emotions. He needed to act justly, to avoid lynching a prisoner without evidence. Su Yang was speaking to him from that tortured state, urging him to hold his ground, to keep the last line between man and monster intact.

There was no difference between the law enforcement officer who lost control and began abusing a prisoner, and the Joker who tormented his own team.

Tang Erda wanted to kill Bai Six, who sat across from him, leisurely smiling.

But Su Yang's bloodstained words wrapped around him like an invisible bandage, holding him firmly in place. He could only stare at Bai Six, his eyes burning with fury and helplessness, and hiss, "You—this manipulative, vicious man—are the one behind all of this."

Sweat beaded on Tang Erda's forehead as he glared at Bai Six. "You've got enough money. Enough wealth to last several lifetimes. Why do you keep doing this? Hurting people, all for profit? You're smuggling evil into the world!"

Bai Six smirked and casually leaned back in his chair, propping his elbows on the armrests and interlocking his fingers in front of him, his silver handcuffs jingling faintly.

He tilted his head, eyeing Tang Erda with amusement as he repeated his words, “Why do I smuggle evil into the world?”

Then Bai Six stood, bracing himself on the table, his eyes locking onto Tang Erda with a force that felt suffocating. A coin and a pendant—a reverse cross—hung from his shirt, swaying in front of Tang Erda’s eyes.

Tang Erda instinctively put his hands behind his back, uneasy under Bai Six’s gaze.

Bai Six’s voice was slow, almost gentle as he looked down at the officer. "Officer, why would I smuggle evil into the world? Because there are people on this earth who are more than willing to buy it from me."

“I don’t do things without a profit. But overall, I’m just one link in the supply chain of evil. The problem isn’t with me—the smuggler. The real question is, why are people so eager to buy this ‘evil’? They’re the ones you should really be going after. Without them, there would be no need for people like me."

Tang Erda’s chest tightened as he watched Bai Six, his eyes burning with anger.

Bai Six slowly lowered himself back into his chair, eyes glinting with an almost playful malice. "Why don’t you go after those people, officer? Isn’t that the real issue?"

“You’re upset because there are so many of them, aren’t you? So many that they make up more than half of the population you're supposedly trying to protect. I get it.”

Bai Six’s voice took on a mockingly philosophical tone. "When cigarettes first became popular, they faced a lot of opposition, from the government and the public alike. But no matter how high the taxes or how much the health risks were preached, cigarettes still became one of the most widely consumed substances in the world, contributing massively to the tax revenue of countless countries."

Bai Six's eyes flicked to Tang Erda’s chest, where half of a cigarette case peeked out from his breast pocket.

Tang Erda subconsciously gripped the cigarette case as Bai Six’s gaze lingered.

"You see," Bai Six chuckled, spreading his hands, "you're obsessed with this stuff too. Sir, don't you think you're being a little hypocritical? You can't resist cigarettes, but you're asking the public to resist the 'dried rose leaf gas'? There's no real difference between the two. They're both mildly addictive, dangerous substances that people willingly consume."

"These are nothing alike!" Tang Erda snapped back. "Don't try to twist my words, Bai Six! I can quit smoking, but these things... they'll kill you! They'll wither you away!"

Bai Six burst into laughter, his voice rich and unbothered. He watched Tang Erda with a calm, mocking expression. "When cigarettes first became popular, didn't people swear they'd never be able to quit? Have you ever met someone who really managed to quit them?"

"Isn't your claim that you can quit smoking just a delusion? You're using that excuse to justify your addiction. Tell me—would you be able to quit if your cigarettes were tainted with that dried rose leaf gas? Wouldn't the thought of your health deteriorating make you frustrated? Wouldn't you hate yourself for letting it take control of you?"

Bai Six leaned in, his eyes fixed on Tang Erda with a knowing smile.

Tang Erda could only stare back, speechless, as the manipulation seeped into every word Bai Six uttered.

Bai Six slowly withdrew his gaze and spoke unhurriedly, "So, based on the idea that you can't quit, as long as the supply keeps flowing, this stuff is no different from cigarettes. It's refreshing, boosts productivity for everyone, and provides cheap, easy pleasure."

"Do you really think anyone would reject something like this? No. Profitable capitalists will automatically promote it, using it to boost employee productivity, and eventually, it will have the same status as coffee."

Tang Erda's breath hitched in his throat.

Bai Six looked at him with pity. "As soon as this kind of thing spreads, the people who have gotten used to it will start to make automatic, reasonable excuses for its existence—just like cigarettes. There are many countries where cannabis is legal, where Christmas gifts are cannabis, and people use this evil substance, given by the devil, to celebrate the birth of God."

"They may have once thought it was wrong, but now, they feel free to enjoy it. They think they're superior to us and even begin to sympathize with us, as I'm sure you've seen, Officer Tang."

"Even if you slap a warning label on the dried rose leaf gas—'smell and die'—they'll just peel it off and revel in the fragrance of the rose."

Tang Erda glanced at the red warning label on his cigarette packet—Smoking is bad for your health—his eyes wide.

"It's not me you need to stop," Bai Six whispered softly. "It's these self-serving humans. I've warned them about the roses, yet they still volunteer to become puppets of evil and wither for it. How can you blame me for that, Sergeant?"

"Captain Tang!" The door to the interrogation room slammed open, and a team member glared at the languid Bai Six. His eyes then fell on Tang Erda's face, his tone sharp. "Something's wrong. Come out and take a look..."

As Tang Erda stepped out of the interrogation room, his team members bowed their heads in unison, as if in silent mourning. Some had red eyes, gritted teeth.

"What's going on?" Tang Erda forced himself to stay calm. "Did the other side send a new video?"

A team member gave a bitter laugh. "No, it's worse than that. Captain Tang, our capture of the producer behind the Rose Dried Leaf Gas has been exposed online. Now... we're being boycotted by many people starting new topics."

"Boycotted?" Tang Erda asked, his voice calm but growing concerned.

"Being boycotted means..." the team member took a deep breath, his eyes reddening. "They don't want us arresting the producers of the dried rose leaf gas. They want to legalize it. Many people know full well the dangers of the stuff, but more and more are becoming addicted to its aroma..."

"They think the producers are reasonable and shouldn't be captured so brutally. They believe this stuff isn't as harmful as we say. On the contrary, it brings great benefits..."

The team member continued, numb, "People who work can finish their tasks faster after using it. Students can easily get better grades in

exams. Women become self-disciplined and beautiful. Men become fit. The elderly even find relief from certain diseases. There's no reason to boycott something like this, even if there are aftereffects. They still think we're... we're..."

Tang Erda fixed him with an emotionless stare. "Think we're what?"

"Think we're stopping the general public from enjoying something that only the privileged class can access... we're... lapdogs." The team member gritted his teeth. "Many people who the public thought were rich are making a big deal of posting videos of themselves using the perfume online. And after the internet police delete them, people still spread it privately. We can't stop it."

"And these people are pushing the narrative that we'll call off the production of the perfume at any moment..."

Tang Erda closed his eyes. "Did we send out a statement explaining that many of those people they think are rich are actually the purchasers and marketers of this perfume, and that this is likely a publicity stunt to encourage impulse spending by the general public?"

"Yes," the team member said bitterly. "But no one believes us."

"There's another important reason we can't stop it now," the team member continued. "The people already contaminated with this stuff, fearing we'll shut down the factory, are spraying it in public, forcing others to be contaminated. Once people are exposed to it, their judgment deteriorates, and they fall into an irrational obsession. They start joining the boycott against us..."

"Captain, some of the contaminated crew are staging a sit-in in front of the government, demanding we be banned as a department..."

"Captain, they're still sending videos! What do we do?!"

"Captain, the already contaminated crew are starting to wilt. Does Bai Six really know what to do with this stuff?!"

"Captain..."

"Captain..."

Tang Erda's disoriented gaze drifted over the anxious, frightened, and resentful faces of his team members. He then fixed his eyes on the cloudy expression in the small window of the interrogation room.

Through the glass, Bai Six turned his head, his dark eyes absorbing the light. He gazed at Tang Erda, smiling, and mouthed words to him.

"Captain Tang, Rose... does it smell good?"

An ear-piercing, unmistakable scream drilled into his eardrums as a team member stumbled forward, clutching his computer. "Captain! The clowns have started killing people!!!"

Tang Erda felt as if his hands were forced onto the computer screen, almost instinctively clicking on the video that had been sent to him. The Joker's comically oiled face filled the screen, his exaggerated smile wide as he aimed a gun at the limp, bloodied figure on the floor. He made a mechanical announcement, like the start of a game.

"Stampede Crew Trivia, Ready—Go!"

"Bang!" A shot hit the palm of the man's right hand, causing him to tilt his head back, crying out in hoarse pain.

"Bang!" The left ankle.

"Bang!" The right hand.

"Bang!" The left hand.

"Bang!" The calf.

With each shot, the man shuddered, struggling to control his pain, trying not to cry out. He didn't want his reaction to shake the others in the game.

But halfway through, nearly all the team members turned away, eyes red. Only Tang Erda remained transfixed on the screen, as if possessed, unable to look away.

The Joker adjusted his aim twice, then pointed the final shot at the man's head.

He stepped on the back of the beaten man, lifted his head by the hair, and positioned his face to the screen, showing his vacant eyes. Su Yang, the once neat, reliable lieutenant of the third detachment, was now so filthy he would normally have washed up before going to the hospital.

But now, he would never have that chance.

The only word visible on his work card was [Su], stained with blood dripping from his face.

"From now on," the Joker laughed playfully, "If you don't release Bai Six, I'll kill one of your team members every hour. Starting with him." He aimed his gun at Su Yang's head.

Su Yang blinked slowly, his dry lips moving with difficulty, his breath so shallow it was barely perceptible. "Never... be... carried away by him. Captain... save... those... contaminated..."

"BANG---!!!"

Blood splattered in front of Tang Erda's eyes.

The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment

The cacophony of background noise fades for less than a second, transforming into a low rumble in Tang Erda's ears.

None of the players spoke.

The silence didn't last long. Soon, a team member approached hesitantly, holding up another computer, tears in his eyes. "Captain, they've sent pictures of the next dead team member."

Tang Erda shakily stood on the back of his chair, his head bowed for a long time, silent. When he finally raised his head, his eyes devoid of any light, he looked at the team gathered around him and softly asked, "Bai Six, afraid of water, right?"

It seemed that from that moment on, a part of Tang Erda's body—along with Su Yang's brutal death—collapsed completely under the weight of the clown's manic laughter.

All memories began and ended with Bai Six's calm eyes, like a stagnant lake covered in floating weeds, without wind or waves.

This time was no different.

Tang Erda, kneeling over Lu Yizhan, staggered to his feet. His dark blue eyes were devoid of light as he raised his hand and aimed his gun at Bai Liu.

Just as the clown had laughed and raised his gun at the innocent Su Yang, Tang Erda numbly raised his gun at the innocent Bai Liu.

The righteous hunter had been tainted by the color of wanderlust through countless retrospections, finally embodying one of the wandering circus members he had always despised.

Mu Sicheng and Muke, their guns pointed at Tang Erda, moved closer cautiously. Mu Sicheng's gun was nearly at Tang Erda's head, but Tang Erda kept his gun trained on Bai Liu, which puzzled Mu Sicheng. "What's this, Captain Tang? Before you shoot Bai Liu, we'll blow your head into a puddle of popcorn."

Muke calmly advised, "You'd better put the gun down."

Lu Yizhan, who had just been knocked to the ground by Tang Erda,

waved his sore wrist and got up. Liu Jiayi jumped past him, nimbly reaching Bai Liu's side. She looked him over, checking that he was okay, before turning to the confrontation on the other side of the corridor. The four older men were locked in a standoff.

If it were normal, Liu Jiayi would have suggested killing Tang Erda and proceeding with the game, but now her gaze fell on Lu Yizhan, who had stumbled to his feet. Lu Yizhan was an onlooker who hadn't entered the game, and with him present, entering the game wasn't an option.

If they had killed Tang Erda, Liu Jiayi knew they would be left with an innocent, terrified Lu Yizhan, who would likely end up reporting them to the authorities.

Liu Jiayi thought about how Lu Yizhan would probably be shocked, confused, and then educated on the situation. When they were being guarded, the young officer was annoyingly inquisitive—like Liu Jiayi's recently retired mother, who had fifty menopauses at the same time, making Liu Jiayi's skin crawl.

She felt an odd discomfort and a tingling sensation at the thought, and instinctively stepped behind Bai Liu, adjusting the large goggles on her face to hide better.

Bai Liu glanced at her subtle move, catching her avoiding Lu Yizhan. Lu Yizhan glanced at him briefly before averting his gaze.

— Certainly, they were all people ruined by Lu Yizhan's presence.

Lu Yizhan stood up and immediately addressed the three men confronting him with guns. He positioned himself in front of the gun that Tang Erda had raised, aimed at Bai Liu. With a clear, firm gaze, he held the guns that Mu Sicheng and Muke aimed at Tang Erda with both hands. Sighing, he was ready to start speaking.

"How bad is it to fight and kill? Can't we just sit down, have hot pot, and talk? Why does everything have to be solved with guns? Look at this narrow space, metal walls everywhere. Bullets could ricochet and cause more trouble for us than for the enemy. This proves a point—bullets meant for others always come back to you. Why suffer?"

Mu Sicheng, stunned, asked, "Who are you?"

Muke tried to retract his gun but couldn't. "What...?"

Behind them, Liu Jiayi and Bai Liu exchanged a look. Liu Jiayi rubbed her arms, feeling a familiar chill.

Tang Erda suddenly interrupted Lu Yizhan's rambling with a quiet comment: "You're right. Bullets meant for others always come back to you."

As he spoke, he slowly raised his elbow, swung it back at ninety degrees, and with a cold expression, he turned the gun around, aiming it at himself. The brilliant silver glowing rose revolver was aimed at his own head.

Tang Erda flicked the safety off with his thumb, speaking softly, "I understand this better than anyone."

[System Alert: Player Tang Erda's mental value is zero in reality; he is fully monsterized and can now unlock his access to reality-based games.]

[System Alert: Player Tang Erda uses the Monsterization skill to unlock the Monster Book: Fading Rose Hunter form, enabling the use of the Personal Skill (Russian Roulette).]

[Russian Roulette: The revolver contains six bullets, three of which will kill the user, and three that will kill the enemy. The hunter raises his suicide rose, and when the trigger is pulled, it's a gamble—will he kill himself first, or the enemy? Is it certain to use the skill?]

[... loading...]

[Skill Target: Bai Liu]

[System Alert: The roulette wheel is spinning, gambling is about to begin...]

The revolver by his temple began to twist, the sound of the loaded bullet spinning in the chamber was so familiar to Tang Erda that it sent a wave of panic through Lu Yizhan, who feared Tang Erda was about to pull the trigger on himself. Even Mu Sicheng and Muke were unsure how to react, their guns still pointed at him.

Liu Jiayi, however, sensed something was wrong. She frowned and stepped forward, standing in front of Bai Liu. Wang Shun's words echoed in her mind:

[Rose Hunter is a marksman whose target is nearly impossible to spot,

but once targeted, the opponent dies with deadly precision...]

Liu Jiayi's gaze fixed on the silver revolver in Tang Erda's hand—this was a skill weapon!

Why does Tang Erda get to use a skill weapon in reality? It didn't make sense!

But whether it made sense or not, Liu Jiayi couldn't hesitate any longer.

"Muke! Mu Sicheng! Shoot him!" she shouted. "His gun is wrong!"

Tang Erda chuckled abruptly, his laugh blending with Liu Jiayi's shout into a chilling symphony. His deep blue, nearly black eyes locked onto Bai Liu behind Lu Yizhan, his tone light. "You know, Bai Six, I've never lost at this game of chance. I've never lost. It's the only game I can beat you at."

"Because you're so unlucky that every time I shoot a bullet, it's always the one that kills you."

This was a skill developed by the hunter chosen by the gods to hunt sinful "werewolves," and now, as a soon-to-be monster, Tang Erda had perfected it.

Lu Yizhan's pupils contracted as he watched Tang Erda pull the trigger.

The silver bullet spiraled out of the chamber, passing through Tang Erda's skull in slow motion. Tang Erda was struck into the wall by the impact, but the bullet continued, miraculously grazing the metal wall and flying toward Bai Liu with sparks flying.

Liu Jiayi moved faster than the eye could follow, climbing up Bai Liu's body. Before he could react, she covered his head with her hands, arching her back to leave a gap, allowing the bullet to hit her instead.

The bullet struck her waist like a cannonball, and she grunted as her body shifted with the force. The impact sent blood pouring from the wound, instantly staining Bai Liu's shirt red.

Liu Jiayi gripped Bai Liu's shirt as the bullet struck, but her hands loosened as she fell into his arms, blood beginning to flow from her mouth.

With a laborious effort, Liu Jiayi grabbed Bai Liu's collar, leaving a bright red handprint on it. She choked and whispered, "Get... go..."

Bai Liu looked down at her, his tone calm. "Get rid of Lu Yizhan, take you into the game. I know."

Liu Jiayi closed her eyes, curling up in his arms as her breath grew shallow. Blood seeped through his fingers as he pressed against her wound, her voice fading. "The rest... yourself... go on, I'm... not awake..."

Tang Erda was thrown against the wall by the force of the bullets. He shook his head and tried to stand but failed multiple times, as if his ability had taken a toll on him.

[System Alert: (Russian Roulette) has entered cooldown. You can use it again in 10 minutes. Player Tang Erda is losing strength…]

The veins on Tang Erda's arms throbbed as he struggled to his feet, unsteady but determined. Without hesitation, he raised his other real-world gun and aimed at Bai Liu, intent on shooting.

Muke had heard Liu Jiayi's warning and immediately moved to fire at Tang Erda, but his gun was blocked by Lu Yizhan. Lu Yizhan looked confused but still hadn't let go of Mu Sicheng and Muke's weapons. Muke was aware of Bai Liu's connection to Lu Yizhan—he couldn't just shoot him.

Mu Sicheng hadn't fully processed the situation, but the moment he saw Liu Jiayi, bloody and weak in Bai Liu's arms, his fury ignited. He kicked Lu Yizhan aside, snapping, "Who the hell are you?! Let go of me!"

Lu Yizhan hit the ground. At the same time, he caught hold of Tang Erda, who was slipping, and backhanded the gun Tang Erda had aimed at Bai Liu.

Mu Sicheng was on the verge of losing control, but Muke had already steadied himself, pressing the barrel of his gun to Tang Erda's head.

Bai Liu clutched Liu Jiayi's fading, cold body and gave the order: "Take Lu Yizhan. I need to enter the game—now."

Lu Yizhan, still on the ground, blinked in confusion. "Enter the game? What are you talking about?"

The moment Bai Liu issued the command, Muke and Mu Sicheng reacted instinctively, answering in unison: "Yes."

Muke forced the dazed and shocked Lu Yizhan forward with a gun to his head, while Mu Sicheng kept Tang Erda at bay.

Bai Liu lifted Liu Jiayi, whose chest rose and fell faintly. The moment Lu Yizhan vanished, ensuring there were no more onlookers, Bai Liu

and Liu Jiayi disappeared before the door of [Heretic 0001].

Immediately afterward, Mu Sicheng and Tang Erda, still locked in a standoff, also vanished.

Muke dragged Lu Yizhan into the darkness.

Lu Yizhan kept glancing back, searching for Bai Liu. He knew he had just done something that had slowed Bai Liu down. Muke, gun pressed against his back, forced him toward the elevator. Once inside, he pushed the "close door" button and stepped back out.

As the doors shut, Lu Yizhan and the rose-patterned gun he had seized from Muke vanished.

At the same time, the team monitoring the situation outside [Heretic 0001]'s room saw their surveillance screens flicker. When the feed stabilized, everyone was gone. Only a pool of unknown blood remained in front of the door—along with Lu Yizhan, staggering out of the elevator, wounded and unsteady.

Recalling the orders Tang Erda had left before his disappearance, the team raised their communicators with grave expressions.

"Attention! Heretics 0006, 0601, 0004, and an unidentified humanoid heretic have vanished into the base's lower levels, as Captain Tang predicted. Inform all members outside the base—prepare to surround the last recorded coordinates."

"Possible coordinates for Humanoid Heretic 0006: a rental flat off Welcome Road..."

"Possible coordinates for Humanoid Heretic 0601: the Love Welfare Home in the city and Caojiagou in Bingzhou..."

"Possible coordinates for Humanoid Heretic 0004: the Mirror University dormitory building..."

"Possible coordinates for the unidentified humanoid heretic: the cottage area of Fragrant Hill..."

"And lastly, their final known location," the team member's voice dropped to a hushed tone, "the lowest level of the base—outside the door of [Heretic 0001]. Once containment is secured, the detachment members permitted in the restricted area will stand by with weapons drawn."

“All units will be on standby at these coordinates. Shoot the humanoid heretics on sight.” The team member’s voice hardened. “After tonight, I trust we all understand just how dangerous these humanoid heretics are. Captain Tang wasn’t wrong—they are an extreme threat.”

Silence filled the base as its members surveyed the wreckage left behind. The aftermath of the heretics’ escape lay before them—injured soldiers on stretchers, debris scattered across the floor, and the bloodstained ground where the heretics had fought their way out.

In the surveillance room, a team member stared at the crimson smear on the screen. His fists clenched as he spoke into his communicator, his voice weighted with resolve.

“If there’s any liability in this chase, we take full responsibility—along with the leader of the third detachment.”

“These dangerous humanoid heretics must never be allowed to manipulate monsters and unleash them on the world.”

---------- -----

[System Alert: Welcome back to the game, Bai Liu]

Bai Liu's sudden appearance in the game lobby, carrying a bleeding Liu Jiayi, instantly captured the attention of every player. Both he and Liu Jiayi were already hot topics in the game, but now, the situation had exploded into something even bigger.

Within ten seconds, the in-game forums were flooded with discussions —Bai Liu’s first reappearance since making the King’s List, and the shocking sight of the Little Witch gravely injured.

His disappearance had been so quiet last time that the major guilds and the Scavenger’s Guild had been searching for him relentlessly. Now, his return was so dramatic that no one dared approach him—at least, not while he was clearly in no mood for distractions. But that didn’t stop a large crowd from following, eager to witness what would happen next.

Bai Liu, however, ignored all of it. He carried the weakening Liu Jiayi straight toward the game’s entrance.

Liu Jiayi’s personal skill, [Poison or Antidote], was offensive in nature, meaning it couldn’t be used inside the game lobby. To heal her, they had to enter a game.

As Bai Liu walked, he spoke quickly to Liu Jiayi. “One, Level 2 games operate on a life-value-based mortality system, which severely restricts your skills. If we enter one like last time and your cooldown gets extended to six hours, it’ll be terrible for your injuries. You’ve been in Level 3 games before—are they just as restrictive?”

Liu Jiayi clutched her bleeding abdomen, her voice weak. “There’s no… restriction…”

Bai Liu made his decision instantly. “Then we’re going into a Level 3 game.”

“But Level 3 games… only allow a limited number of players to pass,” Liu Jiayi forced out. Her face grew paler as blood continued to flow, and she gripped Bai Liu’s sleeve tightly. “You can’t just go in alone… You’ll die…”

“We’ll deal with that later. Your condition comes first. I’ll handle the rest.” Bai Liu’s voice was firm as he reached the game login.

His eyes swept across the game selection screen, finally landing on a game in the corner—one that no one had entered yet.

Its interface displayed a fluorescent-colored rose inside a long, semi-circular glass vessel. The rose was wilting.

Bai Liu clicked on it, and the introduction appeared.

[Game Copy Name: The Rose Factory]
[Level: Level 3 (Games with a player mortality rate between 80% and 90%)]
[Mode: Multiplayer (0/6)]

"Only a true perfumer can uncover the secrets hidden within the pistil and extract more fragrance from a withering bloom."

[The human heart weighs 250g. Do you know how much a rose weighs?]

Bai Liu’s eyes narrowed. Once again, a game had appeared that directly correlated with a recent event in his life.

This wasn’t a coincidence.

It was becoming clear that these games weren’t randomly generated, but followed some set of rules—rules Bai Liu had yet to decipher.

This familiar sensation, as if the system had been waiting for him, made his skin crawl. He had felt this before, back when [Love Welfare Home] had appeared, pulling him in like it had always been meant for him.

The unsettling feeling of being manipulated had been haunting him ever since he first entered the game—or perhaps even before that. He could sense it, but he couldn't pinpoint exactly where it originated.

And judging by the [Oracle] Tawil had given him in advance, the one orchestrating Bai Liu's life and fate was someone known to Tawil—or rather, Tawil himself was just another piece in this larger game.

But Bai Liu had never been one to avoid the unknown. He preferred to face things head-on.

Without hesitation, he logged into the game, cradling Liu Jiayi's fading body in his arms.

[The game "Rose Factory" has registered two players. Four more players are needed to start.]

Meanwhile, Mu Sicheng and Muke, who had been chasing Bai Liu, suddenly heard a system notification.

[System Alert: Your favorite player, Bai Liu, has logged into a game~ Go watch him now~]
[System Alert: You have bookmarked small TV player Liu Jiayi...]

Mu Sicheng and Muke exchanged dark looks.

Mu Sicheng was the first to speak, frustration clear in his voice. "Bai Liu went in alone… and with an injured Liu Jiayi. What game is he in?!"

"What the hell is he thinking?! Couldn't he have waited for me?!" Mu Sicheng growled, scanning the screen filled with different games. "How the hell am I supposed to find him now?!"

Muke, though visibly tense, forced himself to remain calm. "He didn't wait for us… which means he didn't need us." He spoke through gritted teeth. "If Bai Liu thought we were necessary, he would have waited. The fact that he went in alone means only one thing—"

Muke's hands clenched into fists, his expression bitter. "He believes we're useless in the game he's entering."

He inhaled sharply, pushing his emotions aside to continue his analysis. “Liu Jiayi’s skills were blocked in the last round because the game used a life-value mortality system. If Bai Liu is trying to save her, he would have picked a game where her skills aren’t restricted. Are there any games like that?”

Mu Sicheng fell silent, fists tightening before he finally exhaled. “Yes. Level 3 games.”

The Rose Factory

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Fuck!” Mu Sicheng cursed, so frustrated he wanted to punch the air. “I can’t even guarantee I’d make it out of a Level 3 game alive! How the fuck does Bai Liu—a low-level panel player—have the balls to walk straight in?!”

Muke took a few steadying breaths before turning to Mu Sicheng, who was far more experienced than him. “So what do we do, then? How can we help Bai Liu now?”

Mu Sicheng was silent for a moment before finally responding. “The only thing we can do is stay out of the game, keep our people from going in, and let Bai Liu call on our skills freely.” His voice was flat, almost resigned. “That’s all we’re worth to him—for now.”

He let out a bitter laugh, looking down at his own palm before clenching it tightly. “I told him before that selling my soul for a hundred points was too cheap, that I was getting a bad deal… but I never thought that after just one game, I’d already be useless to him.” His grip tightened. “In the end, he really did overspend those hundred points.”

A familiar, suffocating feeling crept up Mu Sicheng’s spine—the same powerlessness Liu Huai must have felt, forced into someone else’s hands, unable to fight back, forced to die in front of him.

It was always the same.

He was always watching, helpless, as someone who could actually make him feel something was held hostage by fate, dragged toward inevitable danger and death.

First, the man who started it all. Then Liu Huai.

And now Bai Liu.

Bai Liu, who thought he could do so much—yet always came up just short.

Mu Sicheng clenched his fists harder, forcing the feeling down before

it could consume him.

But Muke found something before he did.

Staring down at the roaring activity in the game forums, Muke's head suddenly snapped up. His eyes burned with a sharp, almost dangerous light.

"There's something else we can do."

Mu Sicheng turned to him. "What?"

Muke's expression was determined. "The guild. Bai Liu's guild. The Scavenger's Guild he took over in the last round."

Mu Sicheng blinked.

"He talked to me about some management ideas," Muke continued, his mind moving quickly now that he had something to grasp onto. It steadied him, made him sharp and rational again. "The Scavenger's Guild has lost a lot of its strongest players. The ones left are just those who still want to cling to Bai Liu. But they're not entirely useless. I need information on all of them. Then, I can figure out how to make them the most useful to Bai Liu."

He laid out his thoughts one by one, analyzing the next steps they could take.

Mu Sicheng listened, his frustration slowly giving way to focus.

Had Tang Erda been there to witness it, he would have been stunned. Just ten minutes ago, he had dismissed the [Wandering Circus] as nothing more than an immature, directionless group. But the moment Bai Liu entered the Level 3 game with an injured Liu Jiayi, it had already begun to evolve—quickly shaping into the embryonic team he had encountered in other parallel timelines.

Muke, a thief desperate for strength, had started taking on the role of a guild leader, a stage manager.

And the little witch, the one who shielded Bai Liu with her own body…

Everything seemed to be falling into place, as if following a script laid out long before they even realized it.

The only uncertain variable left—the only thing that could still change

the course of fate—was the hunter himself, caught deep in the abyss.

---------- ---------- --

Tang Erda stepped into the game and immediately redeemed a bottle of psycho-bleach. He took a deep swig, breaking free from the near-death haze that made him want to kill either someone else or himself. Leaning against the entrance to the central hall, he closed his eyes to rest, not rushing after Bai Liu just yet.

He had already caught up with Bai Liu in the central hall once—and failed to kill him. Now, all he could do was wait for Bai Liu to enter the game.

It was a dangerous place for him, but Tang Erda knew Bai Liu wouldn't hesitate for long.

Because Liu Jiayi was wounded.

Unsurprisingly, the system notification came soon after:

[System Alert: Your favorite player, Bai Liu, has logged into the game~ Please go and watch~]

At the sound of the beep, Tang Erda didn't hesitate. He turned on his heel and headed straight for the game's login portal.

As he walked toward the boarding gate, his cold gaze swept over the senior guilds that had tried to recruit him for this year's league.

They had all received the same straightforward message from him:

He wanted to kill Bai Liu.

Any guild willing to help him corner Bai Liu would get Tang Erda on their team—for free.

It was an offer too tempting to ignore.

The infamous [Rose Hunter], a player rumored to have reached S-rank long ago but who had always kept his stats hidden, was suddenly willing to join a team. This was a game-changing announcement that could completely reshape the direction of the league.

The moment Tang Erda's message was sent out, several high-ranking guilds exploded into heated discussions.

Of course, with his strength, Tang Erda didn't need a team to go after Bai Liu.

But there was one problem—Bai Liu knew how to run.

If Bai Liu kept clearing low-level games quickly, jumping between them using the pass mechanics, evading pursuit with sheer speed, then catching him would be nearly impossible.

If no one helped fill the player slots in those games to block Bai Liu from entering, then all Tang Erda and any other hunters would be left doing was chasing his ghost across the screen while the audience marveled at how fast Bai Liu cleared games.

Tang Erda knew this because he had already been played like this—once, in another timeline.

Bai Liu was born for these horror games. No one could outmatch him inside one.

Tang Erda understood this better than anyone.

If that weren't the case, Bai Liu would have died a thousand times over by now. He wouldn't have had to resort to [Russian Roulette], a desperation skill, just to barely kill Bai Liu once.

That was the skill Tang Erda had used to win his league match against [Wandering Circus]—because he had killed Bai Liu.

Of course, Bai Liu hadn't truly died. His popularity had granted him a death exemption for the league match.

But that didn't matter.

The moment Bai Liu went down, every member of the Circus stopped playing to ensure his safety, effectively forfeiting the match.

Even though Tang Erda was the last man standing in the ring, the entire Circus team had surrendered without hesitation.

To Bai Liu's trained mad dogs, his life meant far more than any league victory.

Perhaps only Bai Liu, that lunatic himself, would place money and winning above his own survival.

Tang Erda reached the game portal just as his system panel lit up with

a response.

The King's Guild was the first to reply.

[System Alert: Player Tang Erda, you have a guild notification from (Queen of Hearts)~]

He tapped the fire-sealed envelope on his screen. A message appeared:

[Reply from the Queen of Hearts:
Dear Lord Hunter, I, too, am tracking Bai Liu—after all, he did abduct our lovely little witch.
Of course, if you'd like to join our team afterward, the King's Guild would be honored. But if not, we won't force you. In the matter of Bai Liu, I believe we can have a mutually pleasant and short-lived cooperation~]

Tang Erda's eyes darkened.

Hearts.

An incredible woman.

In all the timelines he had seen, aside from Liu Jiayi, Hearts was the only woman who had ever been directly entangled with Bai Liu.

Her willingness to cooperate now was almost amusing.

Because in most timelines, the Queen of Hearts had never been so friendly to him.

Different identities. Different circumstances. Different choices. That was the nature of parallel timelines.

Just as no two leaves are exactly alike, no two versions of the same person would make all the same choices. Even the smallest divergence in a moment could send a life down a completely different path.

Except for Bai Liu.

Bai Liu was a counterexample to this theory—a bug.

No matter the timeline, no matter the circumstances, whenever Bai Liu reached a major turning point that would shape his future, he always made the same decision.

The one that would earn him the most money.

No matter how much the details differed between timelines, Bai Liu would always become a heretical smuggler.

Tang Erda had once heard a Bai Liu from another timeline laugh as he told him,

"Most ways to get rich quickly in this world rely on one thing—tickling people's desires, making them want to spend."

"But tell me, Captain Tang—what excites the human heart more than the sale of evil itself?"

And Bai Liu had proven it to him, over and over again, across countless timelines.

Bai Liu's pursuit of wealth was as steady as a fixed coordinate—never shifting, never swaying. And because of that, his future was always the same.

That was unnatural.

No one could be that consistent.

A normal person's future fluctuated. Like Hearts—who, in one timeline, was rumored to be Bai Liu's mistress. In another, his smuggling partner. In another, an ally of the Bureau of Heresy trying to kill him. And in some, she had nothing to do with him at all.

That was normal.

A person's future was never infinite—it wavered within a set range, determined by their background, circumstances, and choices.

And Hearts was proof of that.

In most timelines, she crossed paths with Bai Liu. But whether she worked with him, fought against him, or ignored him entirely depended on the choices she made in each one.

Unlike Bai Liu.

Unlike the man whose path to wealth was so absolute, so eerily fixed, that it defied the natural laws of time itself.

Chapter End Notes

Little Spoiler ....

Bai Liu used 100 points to buy Mu Sicheng's soul, which is one of the highest price he has ever paid

At first, Tang Erda contacted Hearts because he suspected that, in this timeline, she might have a connection to Bai Liu. He intended to use her to gather clues about him. Tang Erda had just been to the orphanage to confirm the death of the other [Bai Liu], but he was still reeling from the shock. What he hadn't expected was that Hearts had no ties to Bai Liu in this timeline.

After all, who would have thought that Bai Liu would enter the game so late, only to blaze through three games at eight times the usual speed? He took a fledgling team and rapidly built it into a force capable of challenging veteran guilds.

If this continued…

Tang Erda gritted his teeth and replied to Hearts: [Yes. Have your people block the other games. I'll go after him myself.]

Hearts: [Do you know which game he's in?]

Tang Erda: [Level 3.]

Liu Jiayi was injured. To avoid limiting her abilities with a life-card mortality Level 2 game, Bai Liu would have entered a Level 3 game to ensure her survival. He always looked after his players.

Hearts responded quickly: [If you're sure Bai Liu is in a Level 3 game, I have three high-level guild players with decent attack power. They've practiced Level 3 games and serve as backups for our team. They'll join you in surrounding Bai Liu—he's not easy to deal with. See you at the game login.]

A 10-20% clearance rate for Level 3 games… and she just handed him three guild members to use.

Hearts was just as ruthless as in other timelines.

She didn't see her guild members' lives as real lives. Or rather, in this game, no one's life was real. The members themselves probably didn't even see their own lives that way. As long as they could be resurrected, their existences were nothing more than lines of data carrying a soul.

---------- --

Hearts arrived without a glance, draped in burgundy waves, a rose-colored hat perched atop her head. She wore a short, open-shouldered blazer with a matching wrap skirt and a pair of peach-hearted, spike heels—elegant, predatory, and unmistakable.

Behind her, hundreds of King's Guild members followed in perfect formation, clad in black, white, and red uniforms emblazoned with playing card suits—hearts, diamonds, clubs. They moved with calculated precision, their presence consuming the game registration area.

As they reached the large selection screen, they split off seamlessly. Each member filtered through the available games, selecting only those they were sure to clear based on their level, stats, and skills. Without hesitation, they entered the games, vanishing one by one behind Hearts.

Not a single sound was out of place. No hesitation. No missteps. Their practiced efficiency was so honed that they could determine their odds of success with nothing more than a glance at the game interface.

The moment they began logging in, a system notification rang out:

[System Alert: The player you have bookmarked... is now logged into the game~ Please go and watch~]

By the time Hearts reached Tang Erda, most of her entourage had already disappeared into their respective games.

At the same time, the hundred public games displayed on the massive screen—each previously marked [Waiting...] in green—flipped, one by one, to red [Full] indicators. The transition was almost instantaneous, as if an invisible hand had turned the pages of a book.

Within moments, the entire public game selection was full.

Ordinary players froze, confusion flashing across their faces as the screen turned entirely red. A hushed murmur spread among them. Those who recognized the group stood in stunned silence, before instinctively stepping aside.

Some of the more seasoned players, however, couldn’t resist whispering.

“Holy shit?! What the hell?! These are the King's Guild's reserve

players, right? Shouldn't they be training in the game pool? Why are they here?"

"This is insane… It's like they're sieging someone. And Hearts is leading them personally? This isn't normal."

"There's still two months before the tournament starts. Why would they be here instead of training? Did some regular player piss them off?"

"No, no, look at those reserve players' stats—some of them are reaching S- rank!"

"King's Guild has been training monsters, I swear. Everyone used to think Puppet Master only got into the team because of his skill synergy with Little Witch. That his stats were too weak to qualify. But now? He got wiped out by a newcomer…"

"Wait, does this mean they're here to deal with Spades? Are Hearts and Spades finally having their long-awaited lovers' quarrel?"

"Wake up. Spades is training in the play pool. He's not even here."

The public game selection screen glowed red—except for one remaining game at the top right corner. A single game still marked [Waiting...], its interface displaying the image of a falling rose.

Because Tang Erda stood guard in front of it, Hearts had left it untouched.

She approached him, lifting the brim of her hat slightly, her ruby-red lips curving into a knowing smile. Her gaze followed his, landing on the interface with the fading rose.

Unbothered by the commotion she'd caused, she spoke softly:

"Mr. Hunter, are you sure this is the game? Or did you simply get carried away?"

A reference to Tang Erda's skill name—[Faded Rose Hunter].

A shiver ran down his spine.

Hearts was an uncomfortable presence at the best of times. But when Tang Erda met her gaze, something within her expression twisted.

Her jawline shifted—soft, delicate features giving way to the sharper,

more angular bone structure of a man. The color of her eyes faded from dark red to a familiar shade of light brown. Her hair shrank, strands curling into a short, neatly kept style. Her outfit warped, the flowing dress morphing into the crisp uniform of the Bureau of Heresy.

Tang Erda turned away sharply.

—She was starting to look like Su Yang.

His voice was cold when he spoke. "If this is your idea of cooperation, then our deal ends here."

Hearts chuckled lightly, withdrawing her skill, returning to her original form as if nothing had happened. "Mr. Hunter, so afraid of being seen as sentimental? How unfortunate. I thought it was rather sweet."

Tang Erda shot her a glare. "It's none of your business what he was to me. Stop using your skills to pry into my head. We're here to talk about Bai Liu."

Hearts merely smiled, tilting her head playfully. "Fair enough. I overstepped. My curiosity got the better of me."

Despite her shifting face, despite the games she played, there was something unmistakably constant about Hearts. An aura, a presence—one that was unmistakable no matter what face she wore.

And yet, those who looked at her could never quite separate her from their own illusions.

That was the nature of her ability.

Hearts took on the appearance of the person closest to her target's heart, using their own emotions to confuse and control them. A weaponized mirage. A hunter wearing the skin of prey.

Tang Erda had first uncovered Xie Ta's existence because of this very skill.

In one of the timelines where Hearts had worked alongside the Bureau of Heresy, she had told him something chilling—

The first time Bai Six saw her, her face had immediately taken the form of Xie Ta.

From that moment on, Bai Six had pursued her relentlessly, as though under a spell. He invited her into his team, an unprecedented move for a man who never took in players without long-term value. The entire [Wandering Circus] had resisted the decision.

But Bai Six's choices were never up for negotiation.

Hearts infiltrated the core of his team under orders from the Bureau. She watched as Bai Six, normally so calculating, treated her like a mistress he couldn't resist, as though he had abandoned reason for obsession.

Yet, when they met in secret, Bai Six never seemed enthralled. He would sit in the dark, beneath the waterlogged ruins of the guild building, watching her face with a quiet intensity.

He would hand her a tattered book—The Book of Killings by Long, Skinny Ghosts—its pages torn and fragile. A relic of something long lost.

And then he would instruct her to read.

Nothing more.

She would ask him, "Is this face on me someone important to you, Mr. Bai?"

Bai Six, slouched in his chair, eyes half-lidded, would answer without emotion:

"I don't know. I don't remember."

She had pressed further. "Then why let me join your team? You only take in players with long-term value."

Bai Six had closed his eyes. "Because the moment I saw this face, I wanted to possess it completely."

And that, apparently, had been enough.

Hearts had spent countless encounters trying to kill him. Sneaking up on him. Trapping him. Yet, Bai Six never retaliated.

He never killed her.

Because every time he saw her face, it wasn't her he was looking at.

And every time she called his name with that face, his breath would hitch—just for a moment.

Hearts never gave up.

And Bai Six never let her go.

He only ever whispered one instruction: "Keep reading. And don’t ever let me hear you call my name with his face again."

The Rose Factory

Thinking about what would happen between Bai Six and Hearts after the events of the other timelines, Tang Erda gives Hearts a look of indescribable complexity and sympathy.

But he quickly reins in his unnecessary emotions and succinctly answers the question Hearts had asked him earlier.

"I think it's this third-level game," he says. "A new game that no one has entered yet."

Bai Six has always enjoyed new games, especially when there's an opponent to challenge. His greatest advantage is in unfamiliar settings, where he can push his skills to the maximum.

"The Rose Factory?" Hearts lifts her gaze, a faint smile lingering on her lips. "It sounds like a very romantic game—and an oddly fitting match for your skill set, Mr. Hunter. I'm sure you'll have no trouble eliminating the newcomer who stole my little witch in this game."

Her gaze grows obscure as she looks at Tang Erda. "Mr. Hunter, I will do everything I can to help you. I believe you can already sense my sincerity. But my only request is that no harm comes to the little witch, inside or outside of the game."

Tang Erda falls eerily silent for a second. Liu Jiayi had helped Bai Six take his shot, and now it was a matter of life or death.

Hearts wisely averts her gaze from Tang Erda's face, not probing his silence too deeply. Instead, she casually remarks, "I heard my little witch had a gunshot wound when she entered the game. I hope that doesn't happen again, Mr. Hunter."

She smiles with dignified grace. "She is the child I raised. She is very important to me. Any harm to her would be a failure on my part—a disappointment to the happy future I promised her. I don't want to see her pay the price for trusting the wrong person."

"I don't want her to be led astray by anyone else. So you can do whatever you want with the adults who try to mislead her."

Tang Erda feels a familiar sense of unease.

...Hearts. This woman's extreme protectiveness is... very troubling.

Liu Jiayi is now in her guild, and despite the fact that she has, quite literally, defected, Hearts doesn't seem to care at all.

With the league about to start, it's clear that Hearts needs Liu Jiayi as a player. All she truly requires is Liu Jiayi's safe return, and she has made it clear that she will overlook everything else—as long as that condition is met.

If he harms Liu Jiayi, Hearts will find a way to retaliate. She will use her abilities to track him down—and she's already showing signs of doing so.

"These three are all reserve members of our guild's combat team." Hearts sidesteps, revealing the three players who had been standing behind her. "They've trained alongside the little witch and know her skills and attack patterns well enough to keep her under control without hurting her."

Hearts lifts the brim of her hat. Her pupils are the same light brown as Su Yang's. Her face, charming as it is, holds a softness that Tang Erda recognizes well. Even her voice bears a slight resemblance to Su Yang's.

"Mr. Hunter, I'm entrusting everything to you." She leans forward slightly. Her eyes become more and more like Su Yang's, and her voice takes on a strangely masculine quality.

Then, standing on tiptoe, she whispers intimately into Tang Erda's ear, "My witch—I'm counting on you to bring her back."

"Captain."

The word is spoken with a tone that teeters between a lie and a wavering smile. It snaps Tang Erda back to his senses.

Hearts had already turned and walked away. All she left behind was the sight of her retreating back—elegant, feminine—and her laughter, a teasing murmur: "Mr. Hunter is so wary of me... it's not as if I can see the whole of that face in your heart..."

Tang Erda's face darkens for a moment. He says nothing to the guild members who had brought him in. After carefully warning them to watch out for Bai Six's penchant for slipping money into people's hands—and instructing them not to engage in any monetary dealings with him—the four of them enter the game together.

[The game 'Rose Factory' has gathered all players. The game will start soon...]

As the game begins, Bai Liu's eyes snap open. A small, dark TV screen in the multiplayer area flickers to life with a loud electrical hum, displaying his blood-stained face. Almost immediately, five more screens around him light up.

For a brief moment, silence reigns.

Then, as recognition sets in, the audience erupts. A frantic rush of spectators swarms toward Bai Liu's small TV.

"Holy crap!!! Jumping straight into a level 3 game? He's ranking up a level with every game!"

"I just saw Hearts gathering her players... it can't be him, can it...?"

"Haven't you checked the forums yet? Bai Liu entered this game carrying a wounded Little Witch! Hearts is definitely out to get him for hurting her! The King's Guild's entire team this year is built around her skill set!"

"I see a lot of King's Guild prep players here, but last time, Bai Liu won against the Scavengers. Maybe he'll pull it off again!"

Wang Shun watches grimly as the player on the screen next to Bai Liu's is revealed—The Rose Hunter.

In terms of sheer combat prowess, the Hunter alone is more dangerous than all three reserve guild members combined.

But the ordinary players watching have no idea. The Hunter has been a recluse for years, and with his stats hidden, they remain oblivious to the true extent of his strength. Instead, they eagerly anticipate another thrilling match, convinced that Bai Liu—having miraculously won against overwhelming odds before—can do it again.

Wang Shun, however, has seen the Rose Hunter in action.

There's a reason guilds still pay exorbitant prices to hire hunters for the league—because that man has never lost a single match. His skill is a force of nature, almost godlike in its precision.

Two years ago, the player base was different. Back then, everyone who had witnessed the Rose Hunter knew exactly what was coming.

The moment his bullet fired, the crowd had already been cheering—because his victory was inevitable.

Bai Liu won't survive a match against the Hunter in the league.

But in the game, there's still a slim chance.

Because of the in-game shop system, Bai Liu can use a large number of points to interfere with or counter the Hunter's attacks. It's his only viable path forward.

...Assuming he has enough points to pull it off.

Wang Shun frowns, standing in front of Bai Liu's small TV, about to recharge it—when suddenly, Hearts walks into the viewing area with a group of people.

The crowd instinctively parts, making space at the front of Bai Liu's TV for her arrival.

Wang Shun stiffens, quickly adjusting his appearance. He pulls his hood further down, withdrawing to the back of the crowd—but he doesn't leave. He keeps watching, his expression dark as Hearts tilts her head, resting her chin in her palm as she gazes at Bai Liu's TV with unsettling interest.

Something about her demeanor unsettles him. It's familiar.

Hearts turns and smiles.

"Forgive me for interrupting," she says, her tone polite. "But from this moment forward, Bai Liu is officially the number one enemy of the King's Guild. We forbid anyone from liking or donating points to his game. I trust you will all understand."

She waves a hand.

Immediately, the King's Guild members fall into formation, creating a human barrier around Bai Liu's TV.

Wang Shun clenches his jaw.

This is bad.

If Bai Liu falls into the No Name Zone, he's as good as dead.

He needs reinforcements—fast.

And there's only one guild president he can think of who might be interested in this situation.

The richest guild in the game.

The Fifth Guild.

The League of Gamblers.

But before he can reach them, Bai Liu has to survive the Hunter first.

---------- ----------

Meanwhile, the Temple of Lalaye.

A small island rises from the sea—or perhaps it would be more accurate to call it a fragment of a vast, ancient ruin, long submerged and now returned to the surface.

Slanted grey-white stone pillars, both pristine and stained with filth, lean against the deep blue water. Beneath the shifting waves, fish dart between the decayed vines that cling to dark green steps, nibbling at the rot.

Atop the shrine's magnificent stone steps, a man clad in a black hood and a mask engraved with a spiral cross sat motionless for an eternity —until he moved.

The sudden shift startled the fine layer of grey dust settled on his old cloak and sent a seabird fluttering away from its perch on his shoulder. Slowly, he removed the bird's abandoned nest and placed it carefully onto the dust-covered stone table before him.

The tiny bird hopped from its nest and pecked absently at his fingertips before turning its attention to a single card lying face-down on the table. Tilting its head, the bird regarded the idols encircling the stone surface with its small, inquisitive eyes.

Eight grotesque idols loomed around the masked figure. Though their upper halves bore human forms, their lower halves twisted into a nightmarish amalgamation of tentacles, thick fish tails, mottled bird feathers, and parasitic plant growths.

Their sacred eyes remained closed, and despite being mere statues, they exuded an oppressive aura of inviolability. A strange, ancient sheen pulsed over their time-worn surfaces, making them almost

unbearable to behold. To stare too long upon their hideous lower halves was to risk madness—to feel an overwhelming, irrepressible urge to surrender one's soul to these ancient gods and offer up one's own life in tribute.

The only solace lay in the fact that these gods still slept. The misfortune was that they seemed poised to awaken at any moment.

The idols rested upon a massive stone platform, and the masked man sitting among them had begun to succumb to the same fate. His lower half was turning to stone, his toes entwined with coiled snails, moss, and tangled roots of strange, grass-green plants.

At the center of this gathering lay an immense, weathered stone table, its surface pitted and scarred by time. Once engraved upon it was the image of a monstrous octopus, its tentacles stretching outward—a symbol eerily identical to that of the Bureau of Dangerous Heresies.

Opposite the masked man sat another figure, also hooded, yet far more composed. His robe was immaculate, his posture relaxed. His face remained hidden in the shadows of his solid black hood, but his neck—pale to the point of translucency—was faintly visible. A bony hand emerged from his sleeve, reaching for the damp, face-down card on the table.

"Prophet." His voice carried a faint amusement. "This is the fourth night of our little game of werewolf killing. Whose fate will you divine tonight?"

The seer remained silent. The only response was the ceaseless crash of waves against the shrine's ruined walls.

The hooded man chuckled, his fingers idly tapping the cards already turned over. "Would you like me to review our game so far?"

His hand traced across the table, tapping deliberately on a card—the Siren King, its eyes closed.

"On the first night, you verified nothing, and I devolved a mermaid. A peaceful night. No one died."

"On the second night, you examined a thief. I placed a mirror. Under your guidance, the werewolves slaughtered a guilty puppeteer and a villager burdened by sin—two [Sinwalkers] fell to your cause. A victory for you."

"On the third night, you placed a [Witch] and [Cupid] on the board, while I played a [Blood Lich]. That night, you orchestrated a masterful pairing—your [Cupid], Liu Huai, linked the [Werewolf] and the [Witch]. The werewolf culled two [Sinwalkers] in their frenzy, but [Cupid], an innocent, was caught in the bloodshed. A draw."

The man's fingers ghosted over the deck before settling on a single card—The Joker. A figure of wild mirth grinned up from the illustration, a reverse cross drawn beneath its right eye—the very same symbol etched onto the back of this man's robe.

At last, his fingers came to rest upon another card—The Hunter, entwined in curling rose vines. A breeze lifted the edge of his black cloak as he lifted his gaze toward the Prophet.

"This is the last of your god cards to be tested," he mused. "Will you divine him tonight?"

The seer, his lower half consumed by petrification, remained still for a long moment before answering in a quiet voice:

"I will examine him. I ask—" He exhaled, "—is he a man, a god, or a monster?"

The hooded man smiled wryly. "This hunter was once on the cusp of godhood… then, as your chosen hunter, he became a man. Now, he teeters on the brink of monstrosity, caught in an unending cycle of reincarnation."

He leaned forward, voice low and teasing. "Are you certain you wish to devolve this card, Prophet? If the hunter or the werewolf takes another life, you lose. And tomorrow night, only you and the God Zhang card remain—if all gods are tainted, the werewolves claim victory."

The Prophet closed his eyes. "Yes."

The hooded man let out a soft chuckle. "Then I'll place a rose."

He flipped over a slender cardboard card before him and whispered, "I rather like the scent. I think it suits your fallen hunter. It carries the air of something that is dying…"

His voice dropped to a murmur. "—like the scent of a monster."

On the upturned card was an image of a single rose, sealed within a

long cylindrical glass vessel. Its petals drooped, on the verge of fading.

The Rose Factory

Tang Erda opens his eyes within the game.

The sky is a deep, inky night, and as he moves further into the field of roses, an abrupt sight disrupts the rustic scenery—a modern, out-of-place factory looms in the background of the rural town.

At the entrance stands a massive brass still, its surface dulled with time. Beside it, a white lacquered wooden sign swings slightly in the breeze, bearing the words [Dried Leaf Rose Factory] in both English and Chinese.

Tang Erda's breath catches as his gaze instinctively shifts to the factory's rooftop. It is empty—except for a few fresh roses climbing the metal framework like beanstalks, their petals unfurling in the moonlight. The thick, intoxicating scent of their nectar drifts down, a maddeningly sweet perfume.

This is the same rooftop where Bai Liu once stood, looking down at him and asking, "Rose, does it smell good?"

In all the timelines, Tang Erda has never seen this tertiary game before.

He knew there had to be a game somewhere in the system that held the solution to the Dried Leaf Rose Gas, yet no matter how many times he frantically refreshed the game list, he could never access it.

It was as if something—someone—was blocking him from it, teasing him with its existence. He had long since abandoned hope of ever encountering a game related to the Dried Leaf Rose Gas.

But this time, after falling into complete despair, he had somehow—accidentally—chased Bai Liu straight into it.

[System Alert: Player Tang Erda has discovered the factory entrance and triggered the game's main quest.]
"You will need to work hard in the factory and prove yourself as a top perfumer. Once you become a perfumer, you can challenge the current factory manager and take their place.
[The game ends when a new factory manager is born. The player who becomes the factory manager wins.]
[Now, please enter the factory and begin your first shift!]

Meanwhile, behind the factory, Bai Liu crouches in the shadows, looking profoundly miserable. Liu Jiayi, seated beside him, takes slow sips of an antidote. Her complexion is significantly better now, the bleeding from her gunshot wounds having finally stopped.

As she finishes reviewing her main quest, Liu Jiayi glances at Bai Liu's deeply unenthusiastic expression and mutters under her breath, "...I told you not to enter a third-tier game so recklessly. It was hard enough dragging you out last time, and now you've walked right into another death trap."

Bai Liu glares at her. "It's not because of you. It's because of the mission."

Liu Jiayi frowns. "What's wrong with it? The mortality rate in third-tier games is high because of the limited number of winners. I warned you before we came in..." She trails off, her brows furrowing in thought. "Third-tier games usually have an 80-90% mortality rate. There are six players in this game, so only one can win. That's normal. But there's always a loophole to exploit."

She taps her fingers against the brass still. "The problem is that this game locks the winning condition to becoming the factory manager. And since there's only one perfume factory here, it means there's only one available win condition. It's a tricky setup, but it makes sense for a third-tier game..."

Bai Liu remains silent, his eyes wandering, his entire posture radiating reluctance. "...Another part-time job," he finally mutters. "Even in death games, I have to work like a corporate drone. I don't like being exploited."

Liu Jiayi: "..."

This is why you became a slacker, isn't it?!

Expressionlessly, Liu Jiayi climbs onto the decorative brass still and smacks Bai Liu on the back of the head.

"Enough whining! Focus!" she snaps. "Your chaser—what's-his-name, Captain Tang—definitely followed you into the game. He's a strong fighter, and if you don't figure out how to clear this level fast, he'll tear you apart before you get the chance!"

Bai Liu doesn't move.

Liu Jiayi: "..."

She grabs him by the head and yanks him out of his slump, growling, "Don't play dead to avoid working! You brought me into this game, so you're responsible for getting me out! Be a grown man, Bai Liu!"

Bai Liu slowly peeks out from under his hood and looks at her, utterly lifeless. "...Do we get paid for this job?"

Liu Jiayi: "Of course not, what the hell are you thinking?"

Bai Liu: "Oh."

Without hesitation, he buries his head back into the wall.

Muffled: "Then I'm out. I just got tricked into a very bad ten-year deal, and now you're telling me I have to work for free? I need to recoup my losses. I refuse."

He looks exactly like an elderly miser who just found out his entire inheritance was left to an ungrateful child before he even had the chance to die. Clearly, he still hasn't gotten over Lu Yizhan's ten-year hot pot contract.

Liu Jiayi plants her foot on Bai Liu's shoulder and drags him out of his hiding spot, scolding, "Men can't just say they won't work! Get up and work!"

But when nothing brings Bai Liu back to life, she finally resorts to her ultimate weapon.

"...Fine. I'll pay you. A hundred dollars an hour. Deal?"

Bai Liu, still buried in the wall, whips his head around instantly.

Eyes shining, he holds out his hand. "Deal. Pay first. Then I work."

Liu Jiayi: "..."

Damn it. He was waiting for her to make this offer all along.

Is this man so stingy that he's shaking down an eight-year-old?!

Liu Jiayi curses internally, but outwardly, she maintains a calm facade, hands over the money, and watches as Bai Liu immediately dusts himself off, straightens his clothes, and transforms back into a fully functional worker.

"Alright," he announces. "Let's check out the factory's operations first."

"Wait!" Liu Jiayi grabs Bai Liu by the sleeve, exasperated. "Are you even listening?!" She lowers her voice. "Captain Tang is in the game. If you waltz into the factory to get the quest from the NPCs, you might run into him—and if you do, he'll kill you on sight!"

Bai Liu simply takes her hand, his expression unreadable.

"He wouldn't have killed me the moment I entered this game."

Liu Jiayi blinks. "Why not?"

Bai Liu's gaze darkens. "...Because this game—The Rose Factory—was built for Tang Erda and me."

His voice is light but carries an eerie certainty.

"Somewhere in this game lies the secret to curing Dried Leaf Rose Gas—just like the Idol Monster Book from The Love Orphanage held the key to curing Blood Lingzhi Poisoning."

"And Tang Erda... he thinks I have the answer."

Bai Liu's lips curl into a smirk. "As long as this game holds the antidote he desperately needs, he won't dare to kill me. Not until we clear it. Not until he gets what he came for."

A slow, amused chuckle escapes him.

"After all..." Bai Liu murmurs, leading Liu Jiayi by the hand through the rose fields, past the brass stills, and toward the open iron doors of the factory.

"My life... should never be worth more than that lieutenant of his, Su."

Above them, a wooden plaque swings slightly in the night breeze, its faded letters barely visible beneath layers of time:

[Welcome to the Rose Factory.]

Bai Liu took Liu Jiayi's hand and led her inside. They entered a vast, open-air work yard, where freshly picked roses lay scattered across the ground. Someone was crouched on the earth, separating the stems and petals from the piles of roses, carefully sorting them into categories.

On either side of the yard stood large, operational copper furnaces,

billowing a constant stream of hot, white steam. Workers stirred the mixed rose petals inside these furnaces with steel shovels, creating an image of bustling productivity. However, something felt off about the workers' appearance, and the timing was strange, for it was clearly late at night.

The workers, clad in black protective suits with elastic bandages tightening around their wrists and collars, white numbing gloves, black rubber boots, and sandy bucket hats, resembled virus-processing researchers or beekeepers in a hazardous laboratory more than people handling roses.

The workers stopped as soon as Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi entered.

One of the staff handed them identical sets of protective clothing, as if they had been custom-made for them. Their voices were dry and hoarse as they looked directly at the two uninvited guests, a mix of hatred and caution in their gaze. "You must wear this protective clothing when entering," they said sternly, "and don't let your scent contaminate the roses. Do you understand? Your smell cannot taint the roses' fragrance."

Up close, Bai Liu could see that beneath the black veil, the worker who had handed him the gear — or rather, the person who could no longer be called human — had a deep, jagged crack running through his face. From the crack, a black, decaying sliver of flesh curved outward, resembling a rose blooming along the grain beneath his eyes.

In the worker's eyes, Bai Liu saw the image of a fading, deep red rose with blackened edges — much like the one on his face.

Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi exchanged a glance before silently accepting the full protective clothing handed to them by the workers. They put it on and followed the workers deeper into the factory.

As they walked, the worker turned to introduce Bai Liu to the three different workshops within the factory. However, Bai Liu's attention was clearly drawn elsewhere.

The worker's face, concealed beneath the protective suit, rustled as he moved, producing the sound of leaves falling. The faint smell of rotting flesh, blood, and dampness lingered in the air, but the worker seemed unconcerned, continuing to explain the factory's layout and rules.

"There are three workshops within the perfume factory," he said. "The first is the concoction and distillation workshop for the petals you just saw, then there's the purified essential oil workshop we're in now, and finally, the core perfumery workshop, which you're not yet qualified to enter. Only perfumers can work there…"

"We recruit four types of workers here," the worker continued. "Flower pickers, the lowest level of workers, pick roses in season. Newcomers start here, and those who excel move to the petal processing workshop. Processors who perform well are promoted to the purification workshop and become full factory workers, only at which point you can start learning perfumery..."

"The worker with the best learning ability and talent for perfumery becomes a perfumer — that's a great honor," the worker added, almost wistfully. "But it's too early for you to be thinking about that..."

While listening to the worker drone on about the factory, Bai Liu observed his surroundings before asking, "So, what does it take to become the director of this factory?"

The worker stopped mid-sentence at the mention of the factory director.

Turning sharply, the worker's face, stripped of blood and flesh, revealed sharp cheekbones beneath the black veil. In a low, eerie voice, he responded, "The factory director isn't something you can be promoted to. The director holds the core technology of the factory's perfume and the methods of cultivating dried leaf roses. These cannot be passed on. If you want to become the director, wait until you have those."

Bai Liu, unfazed, asked another question, "How many directors have there been?"

"Eight," the worker replied.

Bai Liu nodded thoughtfully. "And how did they change hands?"

The worker's face stiffened, realizing the direction of Bai Liu's question. He paused unnervingly before answering, "When the last factory director disappeared, the next one, who possessed the perfume recipe and rose cultivation methods, automatically took over."

Bai Liu stayed silent, piecing together the implications. This seemed to be a system of rotation born out of rebellion. The last director's

disappearance couldn't have been simple, and the new director was far from innocent. The perfume recipe and rose cultivation methods were akin to an heirloom seal—whoever held them could take control.

As they continued deeper into the factory, the space gradually expanded. Aluminium cooling tubes were embedded in the walls, water flowing swiftly inside them. A line of distillation and drying apparatus lay on the concrete floor. The casings of these machines were stained a pale pink, almost resembling rose petals, glistening in the dim light. Metal shouldn't be this corrosive, yet here it was, tarnished by the roses.

Despite being in protective suits, the strong scent of roses filled the air. Through the glass pipes of various installations, droplets of rose-colored oil slowly flowed, dripping into beakers the size of a fist.

"We are the only factory in the world that can produce [Dry Leaf Rose Gas] perfume," the worker boasted, his tone oddly proud. "Our perfume is shipped globally. Everyone's crazy about it—they can't live without it. But it wasn't easy to get here."

He gestured to the left. "On the wall, you can see the history of our factory, as documented in local newspapers."

Bai Liu's gaze shifted to the left, where a wall was covered with old newspapers. The glass window displayed several trophies and golden awards, such as [Best Perfume of 202X] and [Top 10 Companies of the Year].

"Ten years ago, when dry leaf rose gas was still banned, our factory nearly shut down," the worker continued. "But then a huge explosion nearly destroyed the factory and sent the scent of dry leaf gas into a nearby city. Overnight, millions of people became addicted to the perfume. A good perfume can be that powerful. It brought the factory back from the brink and made it the top player in the industry!"

"The perfume is now in high demand worldwide, more valuable than gold!" the worker concluded, as if proud of the factory's success.

Bai Liu's eyes scanned the wall of newspapers, and his attention was suddenly drawn to a familiar face. He stopped abruptly in front of one of the yellowed clippings.

The headline caught his eye:

"[139 workers were injured and 17 police officers who came to

investigate fell unconscious after smelling gas at a perfume-processing chemical plant on the outskirts of Mirror City due to a leak caused by inadequate protective measures]."

Bai Liu's eyes fell on the black-and-white photo beneath the headline, where two familiar faces were pictured—both in uniform, lying on stretchers, delirious and seemingly on the verge of being carried to an ambulance. The photo appeared to have been taken right after the perfume factory's gas leak.

Liu Jiayi also recognized one of the men. Her eyes widened as she stepped forward, standing on tiptoe to get a closer look at the unconscious policeman. After staring at the photo for a long time, she accessed the system panel.

[System Alert: Does player Liu Jiayi wish to spend six hundred points to enable the small TV mute space? The words spoken by you and players within one meter of you will be muted before being broadcast to the small TV the audience is watching.]

[System Alert: Transaction completed; players can now speak freely!]

Liu Jiayi turned to Bai Liu, her voice tight. "Isn't that Lu Yizhan, the policeman from...?"

Bai Liu shrugged nonchalantly. "The other one's name is Su Yang."

He glanced at the date on the newspaper. It was the day after they entered the game.

It was now clear: this Rose Factory game mirrored a world that had not yet entered reality. The game's entry was triggered by the explosion.

The game began more than a decade after the explosion, marking the present time.

The explosion that triggered the game's arrival in reality—the one that made dried rose leaf gas popular worldwide—happened the day after Bai Liu entered the game.

Bai Liu examined the time reported for the explosion: around 4:15 AM. It was nearly the same time he entered the game, no more than ten minutes off.

This meant that either Tang Erda or Bai Liu would have to survive the

game, and once they did, they would witness the aftermath: Lu Yizhan or Su Yang, affected by the explosion and contaminated with dried rose leaf gas, slowly withering away.

Even if the game offered props to save the contaminated population, they were likely limited, like the [Blood Lingzhi] Bai Liu received last time, which saved six children.

As Bai Liu understood, the game had been arranged so that after clearing the Rose Factory, they would be forced out, and it would be difficult to re-enter and collect the props again.

Thus, if they obtained the prop to save the contaminated people, it might only help the existing thousand or so victims. But if the contamination spread further, there might not be enough props to save everyone.

From what Bai Liu knew of Lu Yizhan and Su Yang, both were deeply committed to justice. They would never use a life-saving prop for themselves if the general public hadn't been fully rescued.

This was precisely what the man behind the curtain wanted to see—Bai Liu and Tang Erda, helpless as their closest friends withered away, forced to watch the tragedy unfold. Perhaps they would even fight or sacrifice themselves, only to be seen as villains by those they tried to save.

What a perfect arrangement.

Bai Liu remembered hearing that Su Yang had visited the perfume-making factory the day after the explosion.

And tonight, Lu Yizhan, the fool, would have willingly joined the Third Squad to investigate Bai Liu's involvement with the dried rose leaf gas—perfect for the one behind the curtain, who orchestrated this entire game.

The stakes had been tipped in reality, the players trapped within the game, while the unseen spectators observed from the shadows, watching the drama they had meticulously planned.

The show was about to begin. Bai Liu could almost hear someone whispering in his ear, frantic and delighted.

Liu Jiayi also noticed that something was wrong. She looked up at Bai Liu, who was holding his hand, frowned, and asked in a low voice, "I have the small TV space muted, so even the audience can't hear what we're saying. What's going on? This feels off, like too many coincidences... it seems like..."

"Someone set up this game for me and Tang Erda to enter, didn't they?" Bai Liu spoke indifferently.

Bai Liu's gaze remained fixed on the wall of newspapers in the glass window. "Don't you think the last game was also designed to bring you and me together? A game that had already been played once shouldn't have occurred again. But by coincidence, your orphanage was cut off from all investment and was at its breaking point. The orphanage director had to leverage the last of you—the only children left—and brought the matter to me."

"By coincidence, Liu Huai owed me a debt when I met him in 'Last Train to Burst,' and then he chased me into Caring Home because of the circumstances. The game was designed to separate you from him and place me on his side."

Bai Liu stared motionlessly at Lu Yizhan's pained, black-and-white face in the newspaper, his tone unwavering.

"Even in the second round, Mu Sicheng happened to meet Liu Huai. Liu Huai was a link between you and me, and he was also placed in the game as your psychological weakness, which I would naturally exploit. The conflict between us intensified, and you would choose to kill me, forcing me to kill you in return."

"I generally don't believe there are so many deliberate coincidences in the world." Bai Liu lowered his eyes, withdrawing his gaze from the wall of newspapers.

Liu Jiayi murmured, "... It's almost as if someone deliberately created all these coincidences, exposing our weaknesses for you to exploit, and then made us kill each other..."

"But I didn't kill you, and you didn't kill me, so this game, orchestrated by the people behind us, reached a stalemate." Bai Liu spoke in a light tone. "So now, to further stoke my rivalry with you, they've targeted my weaknesses in this game."

"Your friend Lu Yizhan is involved as well," Liu Jiayi quickly responded. "You'll definitely speed up the pass for this, but only one player can be the factory manager to clear this game. So, you'll be in more competition with Captain Tang."

"True." Bai Liu's attitude remained calm. "But the chips the other side has dealt are likely to drive Tang Erda completely mad. The seventeen members of the team involved in the explosion just now—each from the third detachment—were in trouble when Su Yang led the team to inspect that factory."

"Tang Erda has a hard time maintaining his sanity in situations like this."

Bai Liu fell silent for a second, not speaking to Liu Jiayi, but in a more complicated situation—one in an alternate timeline—Tang Erda witnesses the rose-colored explosion that ultimately pulls the world down.

This leads Tang Erda to kill Bai Liu, the potential culprit of the explosion, in order to prevent the tragic ending from repeating.

Everything fits together as if a trap were created to ensnare both Bai Liu and Tang Erda. The only way out of this trap is to kill each other. Just as Tang Erda's only escape is to kill Bai Liu.

The man behind all of this has used Su Yang's death to push Tang Erda into a state of uncontrollable madness, transforming him into a boundaryless monster hunter. Now, this man is doing it again—using Lu Yizhan's death to induce Bai Liu to abandon the principles and boundaries that Lu Yizhan had built for him. Again and again, he is pushing Bai Liu to kill the innocent with his own hands, to become the mad and sober monster that Tang Erda is.

This man is forcing Bai Liu to become the "Bai Six."

The workers continued walking down an extremely deep and oppressive corridor. An office appeared before Bai Liu. Inside was a classically furnished room. Behind a walnut desk sat a steward, sipping rose tea and wearing glasses.

The stewards were not in protective clothing but wore well-tailored suits, clearly belonging to a higher class than the workers who had brought Bai Liu and the others here.

The steward looked up, surveying Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi, a slow-

blooming rose in the center of his eyes.

The rose in the steward's eyes was fresh and delicate, clearly more alive than the dying rose in the workers' eyes. Along with it came the subtle scent of roses, which Bai Liu could smell even through his protective clothing. This steward was like a fresh, lightly scented rosebud.

"You are the new workers?" The steward put down his cup of tea and looked at Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi with a slight air of superiority. "You've come to the most famous rose factory in the world, where we prepare the world's finest perfume. I hope you take your work seriously."

With that, the steward took two contracts from a drawer under the desk, raised his chin, and pushed them across to Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi.

"This is our employment contract. Sign it, get your work badges, and you can start."

Bai Liu picked up the contract, flipped through it quickly, then set it down and looked at the steward with a meaningful glance. "No working hours? Three free meals a day and a place to stay? A salary based on the perfume Rose Dried Leaf Gas? No actual money?"

"Do you have a problem with that?" The steward sneered at Bai Liu. "Only the top companies in the world now pay employees with dried rose leaf gas as a salary. Ordinary people who can't afford it are dying to get into our factory just for the perfume."

"Go outside, and you can trade the perfume for anything—food, houses, jewelry, gold, even beautiful men and women, or the flesh of any rare animal. The whole world is going mad for dried rose leaf gas."

The steward sipped his tea slowly, the roses in his eyes growing even more brilliant, his smile tinged with a wry smugness. "Without perfume, people wither. Money is just a pile of scrap paper that ceased to be currency long ago."

"Rose is the one."

Bai Liu fell silent for a moment, then quickly bent down to sign the contract. Liu Jiayi did the same without a word. The worker who had led them here hesitated before leaving, looking eagerly at the bottom of the cup of rose tea the steward had drained.

The steward habitually poured himself another cup of tea, a drop falling to the floor. The worker who had led Liu and Bai to the steward instantly dropped to his knees, bowing like a dog, greedily and feverishly sticking his chapped tongue out from under his protective clothing to lick the soon-to-evaporate drop of tea.

As he licked the tea, the worker's black, cracked tongue—like a dry field nourished by rain—transformed from a cracked, petal-like shape into a normal, light pink tongue.

The steward kicked the worker away in disgust. "Be careful not to let the stench of your body contaminate the scent of roses in my office."

The worker crouched down, nodding gratefully and joyfully, "Thank you, Steward, for this drop of tea! It's the best rose tea I've ever tasted! It's made from the dried rose flowers after the dried leaf gas has been extracted!"

The worker pressed himself to the floor, his tongue licking the ground, taking a deep breath. "It tastes so... wonderful!"

Realizing he wouldn't be getting any extra reward for staying, the worker stood up and looked at the teacup, bowing deeply. "Steward, I'll take the two new flower-pickers to work now."

With a scowl, the worker waved at Bai Liu with great impatience. "Follow me!"

Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi followed the worker, heads down, walking briskly all the way outside the factory.

The flower fields were mysterious and delicate at night. Blue luminescent insects dotted the budding flowers. The breeze swept between the petals, making the roses undulate and crash like waves in the night, accompanied by a subtle scraping sound. The crimson wet earth reflected a blood-tinged hue in the moonlight.

The worker looked at them. "This is where you'll be working—the fields we use to cultivate dried leaf roses. There are 16,000 acres in total. Each worker is responsible for one of the fields. The roses in this field are yours to pick."

"Late at night is when the dried leaf roses bloom fully. These roses are sensitive to daylight, so you need to pick as many as possible before the first light of sunrise and gather their petals. Only the dried wild roses at night can produce the purest fragrance. The dried leaf roses

lose their scent after dawn."

The worker led Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi to the edge of the flower field, pointing to several small, simple tents along the flower field's aisle. "See those tents? The factory doesn’t provide dormitories for you lowly flower-pickers, so you’ll live in these tents in the flower fields."

The narrow ridge between the fields was lined with dirty cloth tents, varying in size, each allowing up to three people to stay. The tents were made of grey-blue canvas—sturdy, resistant, but stained with splashes of blood and handprints.

It was unclear whether it was real blood or if the workers had just wiped mud off their bodies and onto the tents.

The Rose Factory

"After we gather, we'll meet you at the tent before dawn to get the roses."

"Remember, don't let the picked petals be stolen by the stragglers around the fields who covet the dried leaf roses." The worker warned them sternly, "If they do, not only will you not get a drop of perfume, but you'll be fired from the factory, and you'll end up like those stragglers! Do you understand?"

With that, the worker handed Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi two linen pockets for the flowers, a pair of heavy cotton gloves for picking, to prevent the smell of roses from contaminating their hands, a pair of long tweezers to pick up the fallen buds, and a specific wage form.

The worker handed Bai Liu his pay slip and said smugly, "You won't be working for long before you're fired and turned into stragglers. Our factory has a high turnover rate, and those like me who get promoted to processors are one in a hundred flower pickers who can pick six kilos of roses an hour."

"You probably won't even get a sixth of what I have, and this will probably be your last night at the factory. So enjoy the scent of the original dried leaves and roses; you're not missing out. Our Flower Field tent is the most expensive hotel room in the world, and many people are waiting for their gold. Many have to wait for a reservation to stay the night."

"It's just your luck..." the worker muttered indignantly as he quickly walked away. "Last year, the dried leaf roses weren't producing well; too many withered, and this year it's hard to recruit people who don't have a tendency for severe blight and won't steal roses from the fields. It's hard to find ordinary people who don't have a tendency to steal roses from the fields, and with the May Rose Festival coming up again, it's the flowering season when there's a shortage of people before it's your turn to recruit new people like you..."

"...Think my batch, but only recruit 985211 graduate degree or above, published more than three dried leaf rose research papers with a sci impact factor of 1.0 or more..."

Bai Liu, who graduated from a low-ranking university after spending all his time playing games as a student, muttered: "..."

Liu Jiayi, a second-grade student with disabilities (enrolled), looked up at Bai Liu silently: "Can you pick roses?"

-- From what the worker said, it was clear that picking the dried leaf rose was a skilled job.

"No, I haven't picked any roses," Bai Liu replied dryly. But he quickly tied the sack next to his belt, smoothed his white shirt sleeves, tied up his trouser legs, and put on the thick cotton gloves, instantly transforming from a city white-collar worker to a country boy, looking ready to work at any moment.

He looked at Liu Jiayi with a questioning expression, [why do you look so skilled?] Bai Liu took the tweezers and explained naturally, "I used to cut pigweed when I was a kid, and although it's a different crop from roses, I think the harvesting technique is similar."

Liu Jiayi: "..."

"Don't treat roses like pigweed!!!"

Bai Liu knelt on one knee and helped Liu Jiayi pull up her sleeves and tighten her trouser legs, then tucked her gloves underneath and gave her a barely fitting pair. As he did so, he calmly explained to Liu Jiayi, "Don't worry about anything happening for now."

Liu Jiayi had actually figured it out but hadn't yet understood why.

"If the man behind the curtain wanted you to fight Tang Erda, he would've unleashed Tang Erda, a powerful beast that could kill you, to end you quickly." Liu Jiayi placed her hands on Bai Liu's shoulders and lifted her feet for him to fix her shoes and socks. Despite her young face, her expression was deep, beyond her years. "But he deliberately separated you from Tang Erda as a form of protection. Why?"

"Because he didn't design this game stage so that I could be killed." Bai Liu stood up, clapping his hands as he lowered his eyes. "Rather, he gave me the ability to catch weaknesses and kill my opponent."

Liu Jiayi was stunned. "It's like the last game, where you first got Liu Huai's soul and then came after me, right? It's quite possible that Tang Erda has been sent to other flower fields this round, and it will take until—"

"—until he thinks I'm capable of killing Tang Erda before we face off,"

Bai Liu added lightly to Liu Jiayi's words, a faint smile on his face that seemed to amuse him. "After all, a feeding scene where a simple beast kills a human is nowhere near as entertaining as a colosseum where two fully grown, raging beasts fight each other."

"Of course, there's another reason he did it, but I think you've already guessed it." Bai Liu looked over at Liu Jiayi.

Liu Jiayi's face went cold as she slowly spoke, a chill running up her spine. "Because the audience also likes to see such developments the most. He can profit from the system if it's related to it. Such a small TV direction is the easiest to get charge points and likes, and our various gains from the audience are taken by the system in part..."

"Even if we die, all our earnings, including our souls, will be taken by the system..."

"They are just random animals... that the people behind the scenes have put out there for people to play with and watch for their amusement..."

"So don't worry about our life and death for now. The people behind the curtain won't let me die easily." Bai Liu pulled the payroll form out of his pocket, sighing as he showed it to Liu Jiayi. "I can't believe it's really a part-time job..."

The pay scale clearly listed the weight of the roses picked and the corresponding wages.

Reference data: one dried leaf rose (not dried) weighs approximately 2g.

Forty kilograms of dried leaf roses (with branches intact) can be exchanged for a bottle of low-grade dried leaf rose gas perfume of 30% to 40% concentration, 35ml.

(Note: A bottle of low-grade perfume with a concentration of 30 to 40 percent will last on the body for 4 hours.)

[System Alert: Player unlocks side quests]

[Side Quest: Player collects 40kg of roses tonight]

[A successful mission will result in the player redeeming the first bottle of Rose Dried Leaf Gas, a low-level perfume that can be used to alleviate contamination, taking the first step towards promotion as a

processor! Failure of the mission results in being laid off and exiled to the periphery, becoming an exile.]

Bai Liu did some mental math to calculate 2g per rose, so 40kg of roses would be...

"...20,000 roses..." Liu Jiayi looked up from her payslip at Bai Liu in disbelief. "You want us to pick 20,000 dried leaf roses before they give us a bottle of low-grade perfume that lasts for 4 hours? Are they treating us like animals?"

Bai Liu gave Liu Jiayi a normal glance. "Congratulations, kid, you've learned the true meaning of working early."

"That's what I said to my boss when I was paid every month," Bai Liu paused. "Then I got fired from my supervisor. But I wasn't really interested in doing something that was extremely cost-effective, and after I just learned the benefits of not working part-time as a freelancer (meaning earning money in horror games), I didn't think I'd have to start working part-time in horror games too, for less money than I had before..."

Bai Liu is beginning to lose his way, visibly.

Liu Jiayi: "..."

OK, seems like he's gotten to his breaking point...

However, Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi were able to carry the sacks down to the flower fields with their hands and feet.

The flower fields were densely fenced with lush roses, and the rows of rose bushes created a narrow aisle about a man's width, in which Bai Liu moved slowly, using tweezers to pick roses from either side.

Bai Liu tried to move quickly, but the bottom of the rose field was wet, soft, and sticky, like stepping into a swamp. It was difficult to move in the smooth plastic-like boots.

The weird thing was that almost every rose here, in full bloom, was exactly the same size, color, and number of petals, as if someone had pinched a rose and then copied and pasted all the roses in the entire field.

Bai Liu held the rose by the roots with a pair of tweezers and lifted it upwards. He looked at the freshly picked dried leaf rose from a

distance — a very unique species of rose that Bai Liu had not seen in reality, at least.

The petals were a dark red, almost blackish-purple from the roots, fading to a manly rose towards the edges and a lighter pink on the outermost side. Unlike the dull green oval leaves of the common rose, the heart-shaped leaves and thorns on the stem of the dried-leaf rose turned yellow at maturity and faded as soon as they were picked — this was where the rose got its name.

At the moment of ripening, all the stems and leaves that had nourished the dried leaf rose dried up, leaving only the full, fragrant buds behind — just like humans who are addicted to its concentrated fragrance but aren't fed constantly.

It is a very aggressive rose, both in its growth and in the perfume it prepares.

Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi walked deep and shallow through the flower fields. After almost an hour, they both stopped in unison and made their way to the edge of the field.

Liu Jiayi wiped the sweat from her forehead, exhaled, and handed Bai Liu the sack full of roses she had just picked at her waist. Then, she sat limply on the ground, gulping down a stamina supplement.

It was almost April/May in the game, and the nights weren’t very cool anymore. Staying in a place like the flower field, where the plants were overgrown with humidity, created a stifling heat that climbed up your neck and down your spine, especially when they were also moving deep and shallow in a swampy flower field picking flowers. It was definitely physical work.

Not to mention children like Liu Jiayi and adults like Bai Liu, whose shirts were soaked with sweat. Half-crouching, they caught their breath and wiped the sweat dripping down their right cheeks. Then they looked down and did a simple count of the flowers in the sacks of the two men he had opened.

"Less than 1,300," Bai Liu said, lifting the sack and shaking it. "At 2g per flower, the two of us working together for an hour with no rest at all would have picked less than three kilos."

Liu Jiayi, who was resting with her hands propped behind her, sat up as soon as she heard Bai Liu's estimate. "Does that mean we'd have to work for fifteen hours without sleep just to get a bottle of low-grade perfume?"

She had played many Tier 3 games, but this was the first time someone had actually asked her to do hard work. Liu Jiayi had been a rare healer, praised by the whole group, and mostly handled intellectual tasks or high-level combat skills. In other words, she was a support character.

"I didn't expect to be thrown into such a hardcore netherworld worker situation the first time I played with Bai Liu."

Liu Jiayi slumped back, staring blankly at the night sky. "When will this ever end? I'm going to have to work until I become the factory manager! How long is this going to last?"

"When I was working, I asked myself the same thing every day," Bai Liu said quietly. "But then I realized that there's only one end to working: death, or worse, being laid off."

Liu Jiayi: "..."

Bai Liu, how much of a shadow has life as a corporate worker and being laid off really left on you...

Liu Jiayi sat up silently, sighing ruefully. "How are we going to get out of this now? We can't get the perfume. It's supposed to be a key item, and if we don't get it, we're going to hit a roadblock."

"I don't think we need to continue," Bai Liu removed his black veil mask and slowly, a delicate rosebud began to stretch its green

branches in his right eye. "We've already been contaminated during the rose picking."

Liu Jiayi was stunned. She quickly removed her linen gloves and looked at her hands. Her eyes were too grey to determine if roses were blooming in them, so she couldn't use this to tell if she was contaminated.

But there was another way to confirm.

After removing her gloves, Liu Jiayi held her breath at what she saw.

The backs of her hands and fingertips were clearly marked, as if black shards from broken rocks were spreading across her wrists, joining into the shape of petals within her palms.

"I thought it wouldn't happen until we used the perfume for the first time," Liu Jiayi pursed her lips. "We wore masks the entire time we were picking and never made direct contact with the roses. We didn't smell the strong aroma, except when we were in the factory. None of us were contaminated when we left the factory, so we must have gotten contaminated in the flower fields, but the fragrance there wasn't as strong as inside the factory."

Liu Jiayi put her gloves back on, covering the cracks that were still growing on her flesh, and looked up at Bai Liu. "But why? Shouldn't the contamination spread through smell?"

"From what we've both seen, it seems it may not be spread by smell," Bai Liu replied.

The rosebud in his right eye grew silently, black lines running along his eye socket while his left eye remained unaffected.

Liu Jiayi frowned, staring at Bai Liu's eyes. "It's strange. Your left eye is fine, but your right eye is full of roses. Does that mean you're half-contaminated along the vector line? But both of my hands are already wilting."

Bai Liu lowered his gaze slightly, half-obscuring the rosebud in his right eye. He said softly, "I don't know. Let's wait and see."

— [Do not feast your right eye on desire.]

That's what Tawil had told him, also warning him to watch out for the roses.

Bai Liu's gaze fell on the large, lush roses in the field.

These roses were quietly beautiful, gently swaying in the pure white moonlight, as if to make them easier to pick. They didn't even have the usual thorns on their branches, appearing delicate and elegant, without a hint of aggression.

It seemed that, aside from being an ingredient for extracting that compulsive perfume, this rose was so harmless that it was almost intoxicating. It seemed like the least likely thing to actively harm the player in this scenario.

Indeed, they had just spent a lot of time picking roses, and these didn’t trigger the monster book or attack them.

Bai Liu re-donned his sand-stained black mask and turned to look out at the rose field under the night sky. "At this rate of contamination, we probably won’t last fifteen hours before we start to wilt."

"It’s not just wilting; we’re being alienated." Liu Jiayi opened her panel, where her spirit and life values were dropping, with the spirit value dropping much faster than the life value.

Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi looked at each other in silence, both simultaneously pulling out a bottle of psycho-bleach, preparing it for use.

[System Reminder: In this game, mental bleach is not effective in restoring mental values.]

In the game "Rose Factory," only the Rose Dried Leaf Gas perfume could restore mental value. Without it, the player couldn’t complete the task within the given time. If they couldn’t obtain the perfume, they would begin to suffer from fragrance addiction as their mental value dropped, eventually turning into a monster with no reasoning ability.

Liu Jiayi looked at Bai Liu with a stony face. "The spirit value is stuck."

The rose in Bai Liu's eye trembled and stretched its first petals. The cracks around his eyes deepened, but his tone remained light. "The perfume is indeed a crucial item."

The other end of the flower field.

Tang Erda sat half-crouched on a mound, his mask discarded. Both of his eyes were filled with spreading roses, and his face was beginning to take on the cracked texture of grey earth, petal by petal snaking across his skin.

At first, Tang Erda thought the mask would slow down his contamination, but realizing it did nothing to block the scent of the dried leaf roses, he simply threw it away to increase the speed of his picking.

He propped his hands on his knees, tilted his head back, and downed a bottle of stamina restorer. Wiping his mouth, he looked over at the bulging sack at his feet.

It looked like a lot, but it was only eight kilos of roses, which already filled up the sack.

If he wanted to reload, he'd have to go to the small tent to unload, because the workers only counted the weight of roses picked overnight the following day. The stuffed sacks could only be unloaded at one designated spot.

A worker told Tang Erda the unloading point was the small tent in the middle of the field and warned him to watch out for stragglers who might come at night to steal the roses.

"The roses in the tent aren't always safe," the worker said with a disgusted look. "There are always greedy, lowly people who'll go mad stealing them."

But Tang Erda, an experienced player of Level 3 games, had a strategy for dealing with this: a considerable stock of props.

As a player who had traveled through many timelines, Tang Erda's prop inventory was unmatched by most. The only exception was the Killer Sequence, which also boasted an obsessive amount of props.

With this stockpile, Tang Erda could defeat most lower-tier guilds in the game. Many high-level guilds were willing to pay him to join their teams, not only because he was a great fighter, but also because of his impressive prop inventory.

Tang Erda dumped the roses into the small tent, then bent down and walked out, dropping a Rubik's Cube behind him. A watery barrier

rose from the ground, forming a tetrahedron at the top of the tent.

[System Alert: Player Tang Erda used a prop (Magic Space). The space is now under the player's control, and only those allowed by the player can enter or exit freely.]

After setting up the prop, Tang Erda left without looking back. Although the prop hadn't trapped Bai Liu in reality, Tang Erda was sure that no ordinary monsters in Level 3 games would be able to figure out how to enter or escape.

It's not that Tang Erda hadn't tried to find Bai Liu since entering the game, but with a map covering 16,000 acres of lush flower fields and countless small tents scattered around, it wasn't easy to find a player skilled at hiding and using game mechanics to escape—especially someone like Bai Liu, who was always good at using his opponents' weaknesses against them.

After all, he hadn't even met up with the other three players from the King's Guild yet. The map was so large, and with its design, it was easy to get lost.

Especially if your mental value was dropping fast and there was no way to recover, wandering through this map felt like walking through a dizzying red kaleidoscope while drunk on ninety-six-degree vodka—nauseous, disoriented, and unable to find any sense of direction.

Tang Erda had encountered similar games before, and wandering in them was dangerous. Once you strayed into monster territory, it was very difficult to find your way back, and there was a good chance the player would go mad from endlessly getting lost before they ever returned.

Clearly, this was a game that focused on mental value attacks.

Tang Erda knew he couldn't match Bai Liu when it came to finding people, so he decided to focus on completing the task and then wait until Bai Liu also finished and entered the factory.

It was always easier to find someone in the factory than in the flower fields.

Tang Erda had no doubt that Bai Liu would complete the game beautifully. He probably had more confidence in Bai Liu's success than Bai Liu himself, especially in a game like "The Rose Factory," which was tied to the real-world Rose Gas.

Tang Erda looked at his palm, cracked to the bone with no trace of blood, as his sea-blue eyes swelled with pale rose petals. The petals spread for a second time, the end of the first petal turning deep red.

[System Alert: Player Tang Erda, your spirit level has dropped to 89...]

The Rose Factory

Tang Erda took a deep breath, stood up with his sack, and started picking roses again—quickly and neatly. Though he still looked a little unskilled and clumsy, the roses in the sack were growing fast, at least faster than Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi working together. It seemed much faster.

After all, he was a strong man skilled in physical work, and there was a clear difference between a child like Liu Jiayi and a social animal like Bai Liu, who sat in front of a computer all day long, working the grueling 996 schedule.

However, when Tang Erda's sack was half full of dried leaf roses, a sudden rustling from the surrounding flower field caught his attention —like some animal creeping on the soil, its limbs quickly pawing the ground, or perhaps more than that, moving towards him.

The sound of fine, slimy, dense knuckles sinking into the dirt and pulling out made Tang Erda turn his head in alarm. A silver revolver appeared in his hand, seemingly out of thin air, and he instinctively gripped it, raising it.

Tang Erda moved cautiously toward the source of the odd noise, thumbing the chamber slightly to cock the cartridge and aiming the gun at the churning rose bush.

The lush flowers shook and trembled, and something hidden in the earth came closer and closer to Tang Erda, releasing a strong smell reminiscent of long-decomposed dead leaves.

The shuddering continued, growing nearer and nearer, until it came to a halt about half a meter from Tang Erda.

He moved carefully, his body in a half-crouch. His unarmed hand parted to shield the flowering branches from whatever creature was near, while the hand holding the gun stayed steadily aimed at the last tremor.

The creature seemed to realize Tang Erda was aiming his weapon at it. It remained silent for a moment, but eventually, the scent of the flower petals in his sack overcame it, and a hissing humanoid monster burst out of the mud.

Its body was covered in soft scarlet mud, still dripping, and only a

vague outline of a humanoid form could be made out. The flesh of its body had spread out in flaps, like a leaf branching out and blackening as it decayed. Its bones resembled plant stems, and the blackened flesh split away from the bones, withered and yellow like dried leaves.

With each step, the creature's dangling "blades" trembled. The mud finally dripped off its face, revealing a rough idea of its true nature—its eyes were sunken and blackened, and the flesh on the right side of its face had almost completely withered away, leaving only bone. Strangely, dense, white, fleshy spines of bone writhed on its cheekbones, as if they were about to grow at any moment.

The monster lifted its eyes, which were on the verge of falling out, revealing a pair of roses, their petals withered and dying. It opened its mouth, which had rotted to the nostrils and the beds of its teeth, and uttered an eerie, hoarse sound with its white teeth: "I want perfume!!! Give me perfume!!!"

The fleshy spines writhing on its bones instantly elongated into long, flesh-colored tentacles, with air holes, which stabbed towards Tang Erda. Areas of its body that had no flesh, only bone, were quickly filled with thick, writhing tentacles.

Tang Erda waited for the monster to strike first. Only after it attacked would he be able to trigger the Monster Book.

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Tang Erda for triggering the Monster Book]

[The Rose Factory Monster Book Refresh - Dried Leaf Addicts (1/3)]

[Monster Name: Dried Leaf Addict (Drifter)]

[Characteristics: The lowly stragglers gradually wither away after being denied access to low concentrations of perfume. Before withering away completely, these stragglers fall into madness from perfume addiction, a madness that makes them believe they can do anything...]

[The daring lowlife addicts have come to the flower fields producing dried leaf roses to steal them, seeking the last pleasure before they wither and die. Unfortunately, they cannot touch the roses in the fields, so they can only steal the ones that have already been picked by flower pickers.]

[Weakness: ????? (to be explored)]

[Attack: Stealing Roses (A+), attacking flower pickers with tentacles to steal the fruits of their labor.]

The creature's tentacles were long, and their sweeping movements forced Tang Erda to retreat several steps. He did not strike immediately.

According to the factory worker who had brought him here, there had to be more than one monster like these stragglers in Hanada. Tang Erda was prepared to bait this monster into attacking a few more times to get a feel for its full range of attacks.

He was agile enough that dodging a level A+ monster wouldn't be difficult, but that thought lasted only a second.

When the creature reached out to attack, Tang Erda saw the tentacle brush just two centimeters in front of his eye—its root-like appearance marked with scars, as if something had fallen off.

It soon became clear what the scars were—marks from joints left on the bones after the flesh and blood "blades" had dried and fallen off. These marks were also present on the tentacles that had grown from the bones.

—This mark matched the one left on the rhizomes of dried-leaf roses after the leaves had withered and fallen from the ripe ones Tang Erda had just picked.

Tang Erda grimaced, realizing what was happening. He immediately pulled out his gun and shot the creature in front of him.

The monster hissed and collapsed, but it was too late. More rose bushes shook.

Tang Erda stepped back onto a soft, fleshy, writhing patch of earth. He looked down to see countless root-like tentacles twisting around his feet, like a pack of mating pythons, spreading from his soles all the way to every corner of the flower field, which was beginning to undulate.

In the vast rose fields, shadowy stragglers emerged from the mud. Their faces and bodies were covered with tentacles, pushing them deeper into the earth. These twisted tentacles connected to the roots and leaves of the roses in the fields, making the flowers grow even more beautiful under the moonlight.

These [stragglers], parasites of the dried leaf roses, lived in the soil of the roses.

They remained hidden in the earth, languishing, their rose-soaked eyeballs peering out at night, salivating, waiting for the full flowers with fading leaves to be picked by flower pickers.

In the end, even their bones became parasitized by these rose roots, and their bodies were covered with scars from the dried leaves that had fallen off.

The flower fields turned from soft crimson mud to a swamp of rotting flesh and blood. The slippery red mud on the surface was a heap of [leaves] fallen from the stragglers and trampled on, but the strong fragrance of the roses overpowered the stench.

The tentacled stragglers, their eyes framed with roses, approached Tang Erda step by step as if pulled by invisible strings. His ankles became entangled in the tentacles that emerged from the ground.

A human face emerged from the earth near Tang Erda’s feet, nearly two-thirds decayed, covered in tentacles. Tentacles emerged from its open mouth, wrapping around Tang Erda's ankles, pulling him into the ground.

It slurred and gurgled with tentacles in its mouth.

"Give me the perfume!!!"

"Give me roses!"

The unearthly sound, like a chorus, echoed from all directions. The moon shone brightly on the crimson ground as Tang Erda gritted his teeth and shot at the tentacles on his ankles. The moment they broke off, a second petal of the rose bloomed in his eyes.

[System Alert: Player Tang Erda's spirit level has dropped to 78. Please use perfume to restore your spirit level as soon as possible to prevent being alienated.]

In the distance, under the pure white moonlight, Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi were lying exhausted on the shore at the other end of the endless flower field.

They lay motionless, staring up at the sky, their chests still heaving from the intense physical exertion, resembling two corpses just carried

there.

"I've been resting for five minutes; I should get up and pick flowers," Liu Jiayi said.

"Do you think taking a five-minute break and a ten-minute break will have any impact on our inability to finish the job?" Bai Liu asked calmly, rhetorically.

Liu Jiayi fell silent for a moment. "…Doesn't seem like it."

After all, they had only collected six kilograms so far, and it seemed unlikely they would complete the task of picking 40kg of roses before dawn.

Bai Liu shrugged. "Then we can rest a little longer."

Liu Jiayi: "..."

What is this half-hearted mentality all about?!

"You're in a very depressed state of mind this time, Bai Liu," Liu Jiayi said, sitting up and looking at the motionless Bai Liu. She hugged her chest and glanced down at the salty fish lying next to her. "You're usually operating at your limit to pass the game. I don't believe you don't have ideas in your head to break the game."

Bai Liu looked up at Liu Jiayi with slanted eyes. "I don't believe you don't have any ideas either. So the reason we both aren't acting now is the same."

Liu Jiayi fell into delicate silence for a long time.

Bai Liu turned his head back to the sky and continued, "The first reason is that it's impossible for us to obtain 40kg of roses through regular labor. Without a way to get through this, our labor is unrewarding, uneconomical, and will only speed up our contamination."

"After tallying the results of our first hour of work, we can already conclude this approach won't work. There's no point in continuing this pointless labor."

Liu Jiayi didn’t say anything, but she thought the same. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have gone ashore to count the flowers with Bai Liu as soon as the hour was up.

"And the game has given us a clue," Bai Liu said flatly. "You don't need to work hard to gain a productive promotion. In fact, working hard is the stupidest route to advancement."

"In the real world, the most direct way to rise is usually to plunder the fruits of someone else's labor."

"So, when we can't get paid for our direct labor, we have only one option: to rob other flower-pickers of their petals."

"But the problem is, these flower-pickers seem to be NPCs right now, and offending most of them at the start of a game is not a smart move. It's like in the workplace—blatantly stealing someone’s hard-earned fruits will only make things difficult for you down the line."

Bai Liu sat up, brushing the mud off his body, and glanced sideways at Liu Jiayi. "From this perspective, we need to choose a more reasonable method of plundering."

"Stragglers," Liu Jiayi said, her gaze fixed on Bai Liu as she quickly responded.

Bai Liu stood up, pulling Liu Jiayi to her feet. He patted the dust from her body. "Yes, stragglers are the best opportunity for plunder."

"Stragglers could be monsters or NPCs in this game. According to the processor who brought us here, this group of stragglers steals rose petals. We don’t need to confront the other flower-pickers directly; we just need to grab the roses the stragglers steal."

"But only if—" Bai Liu smiled, the kind of businesslike and almost hypocritical smile that suggested he was about to reveal something more. He patted Liu Jiayi’s shoulder. "Our little witch can perfectly snuff out these stragglers and snatch the roses from them."

Liu Jiayi stared at him, the corners of her mouth twitching. "You planned this from the beginning, didn’t you?"

But then she frowned, concerned. "But this plan is risky, you’re putting

yourself in danger."

Liu Jiayi had considered this solution too, but she hadn't been sure about the level of the monsters in this Level 3 game and whether she could defeat them. She certainly hadn't expected Bai Liu, a player whose original rank was F and who barely rose to C, to be able to fight a Level 3 monster.

Maybe it was also because of her personality—Liu Jiayi was too used to taking on everything by herself.

She instinctively envisioned herself as the one protecting Bai Liu—attacking and guarding, poison and antidote. That was the role of a witch, and it was why Liu Jiayi had become one.

But Liu Jiayi hesitated. She wasn't sure if she could protect her companion perfectly. She would be the main attacker, leaving Bai Liu vulnerable in an unprotected vacuum, which was dangerous in a Level 3 game with a 90% mortality rate.

But Bai Liu neutralized her hesitation.

He smiled. "Of course it's dangerous, but you're clearly the bigger threat. This is the most cost-effective path, and we have no reason to hesitate."

He dropped his hand and casually wiped the mud stuck under Liu Jiayi's right eye with his thumb, interrupting her attempt to speak. "You just need to do what you do best. Don't worry about me. I'll be there to match your attack. If we fail, we'll likely die together. But if we succeed, we'll win together. In this game, it's not cost-effective for both of us to survive if only one of us makes it out—because we have a bigger victory to win together."

Bai Liu looked directly at Liu Jiayi with his rose-colored eyes. "Do you understand what I mean? I'll stand with you in the line of attack to cover you. We're in this together."

Liu Jiayi was slightly stunned, then opened his hand to brush away the mud. She looked away, took a deep breath. "Got it. So, what do we do now?"

"Wait," Bai Liu replied, his eyes scanning the distance. "We wait for these rose-stealing stragglers to 'ripen.' Instead of picking roses, we'll pick the stragglers."

Liu Jiayi asked, "When do you think these stragglers will be 'ripe'?"

"By the time they come to attack us, the two flower-pickers with the lowest crop, I think the stragglers will be nearly ripe." Bai Liu glanced at the sacks of rose petals he had carelessly placed on the ground. "Normally, robbery goes from high to low. By the time the stragglers come after us, they'll have already raided all the other flower-pickers with higher harvests. Even if some raids were unsuccessful, I think there's at least 80kg of rose petals here."

"So, until then, we'd better prepare for the stragglers to attack." Liu Jiayi spoke, but she didn't sit down. She stayed a little further from the flower fields.

They had been resting at some distance from the flower fields, but the moment Liu Jiayi stepped back, Bai Liu followed suit, stepping further away from the flowers.

Liu Jiayi's senses were sharper than his. She must have heard something when she stepped back.

Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi were the kind of people who didn't need to say anything explicitly. They acted in sync—like when they went to the shore to count the flowers or stopped working when they found the harvest too small, as they were now, moving away from the fields.

At this hour, the stragglers should have started attacking the flower-pickers. But as far as they could see, the fields were calm and quiet. Apart from the glowing dots and the workers, no strange people or monsters had appeared.

This counterintuitive sight could only mean two things:

The first was that the stragglers hadn't started attacking the flower-pickers yet.

The second was that the stragglers hadn't come from above the flower fields—they had come from below.

So, Liu Jiayi and Bai Liu, staying off the ground, considered the possibility that something might be going on underneath the surface. They observed that the scene above ground was unnaturally calm, which made them suspect something could be happening below.

The flower field in front of them began to undulate slowly, turning into waves of red in the moonlight. The air filled with the sound of

what seemed to be an unmoving, pattering vine.

Liu Jiayi alertly placed her hands behind her back, the black poison held in a glass bottle taking shape in her palms.

[System Alert: Does player Liu Jiayi want to use the skill (Poison)?]

[System Alert: Yes... poison is being generated in bulk. Skill cooldown is 1 hour. Player Liu Jiayi's stamina is dropping significantly...]

Liu Jiayi removed eight bottles of poison from behind her, holding each bottle by the neck between her fingers.

Each vial was full, and deep black smoke poured from them, enveloping her. Her orange worker's suit was swept away by the smoke and replaced with a long black robe that covered her completely.

"Bai Liu, my poison skill is on cooldown. It will be an hour before I can use it again." Liu Jiayi approached Bai Liu, facing the flower field back-to-back with him. Her tone was serious. "I also have a potential S-overdraft skill called Poison Fountain."

Liu Jiayi opened her system panel and turned slightly to show Bai Liu the explanation of the skill.

[System Description: Personal Skill (Poison Fountain) - Deals indiscriminate slow damage to all players within range. After using this skill, player Liu Jiayi's stamina tank will be depleted, causing severe stiffness and immobility.]

"The only two skills I can use for the main attack are these," Liu Jiayi said, her face grave as she looked at the wave of roses slowly moving toward them. "Monsters in a Level 3 game are usually above A+. I can handle a small number of monsters at this level, but if it's a group attack this size, my burst speed attack can't sweep them all at once."

"I'll be stuck in a wheel stand and have to rely on blood-back to hold out. But my skills are on cooldown, and spirit bleach is ineffective. It's unrealistic to expect to find these monsters' weaknesses to restrain them now that the city is under siege." Liu Jiayi looked up at Bai Liu. "The chances of winning are too low. Are we still fighting?"

As a backline healer, Liu Jiayi's main criterion for a mission was survival and a chance to live.

But Bai Liu's judgment was different. He was decisive. "Fight. We can try if there's a chance of winning. You just take the main attack; I have an idea."

Liu Jiayi didn't have time to ask what Bai Liu had in mind. In a game like this, the situation could change rapidly. Without any relevant information, one could only develop a countermeasure based on real-time circumstances, combining players' skills and reserves—that's what tactics were all about.

In a situation like this, where the monsters had already started attacking, Liu Jiayi had no choice but to trust Bai Liu's command and tactical expertise.

Although Hearts intended to train Liu Jiayi to be the next generation of tactical masters, the games she had played so far had been with at least five S-ranked reserve players. She had never played a Level 3 game with a C-ranked player like Bai Liu, let alone an A-ranked support player like herself.

Liu Jiayi would never have attempted a head-to-head in such a game. The odds were too low, and it would have been too easy to be defeated, violating her tactical aesthetics.

But now, it wasn't she who was in control—it was Bai Liu.

Bai Liu's tactical aesthetic was summed up in one word—gambling.

No matter how low the odds were, if there was a non-zero chance of winning and a high return, he would take the chance.

Without delay, Bai Liu drew a snow-white bone whip from his back. His eyes, filled with affection, looked out over the field of roses that was beginning to surge.

The Rose Factory

Out of the writhing rose bushes, shadowy and dim, one shifting straggler after another emerges. Their bare bones, hollow eyes, and rotting lips are full of writhing, flesh-colored tentacles, like vine stalks. These tentacles drag them down into the mud to join the roots of the swaying roses, like a swarm of unidentified swamp squid, their hands pulling the tentacles through the mud toward the shore, where Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi stand.

Lush tentacles, like fishing bowls full of worm bait, spill over the edge of the ridge. A thin ponytail-like tentacle bursts out of the earth, twisting and wrapping around Bai Liu's ankle, trying to pull him toward the mud.

Bai Liu's sharp eyes fling out a fishbone, whipping the twisting tentacle with precision.

Liu Jiayi, on her side, uses poisonous fumes to corrupt a tentacle attempting to wrap around her waist.

After being attacked by the monsters, both Liu Jiayi and Bai Liu activate their monster books.

Bai Liu flips through the book, reading up on the straggler's characteristics. He then calmly gives the order, "Liu Jiayi, use the poison mist for a group attack, the largest you can. I'll clean up the ones the attack misses."

"It's a cluster of A+ monsters," Liu Jiayi says grimly, her gaze scanning the surroundings. The poison fumes form a protective circle around her and Bai Liu to keep the tentacles at bay. "They don't come out one by one—they fight together. Seemingly individual, but connected by underground tentacles, they form a symbiotic bunch of roses."

With no way to recover their mental energy, fighting these monsters, which can't be fully killed, becomes an exercise in attrition. It's clear they can't outmatch these cluster-growing monsters, so it's only a matter of time before they lose.

However, Liu Jiayi doesn't question Bai Liu's decision. She simply carries it out.

Taking a deep breath, Liu Jiayi asks, "Okay, what do I need to focus

on for the main attack?"

Bai Liu flicks a monster that had climbed ashore back into the field with a whip, then looks sideways at Liu Jiayi. "Stall for time. Your skill cooldown is an hour. We need to last for an hour, and during that time, control your poison usage."

"How much control?" Liu Jiayi asks.

Bai Liu raises his eyes to the overwhelming mass of stragglers and speaks softly, "Control it so you can stall all these stragglers coming in from the scent for an hour or more. Once your skills finish their cooldown, I'll try to contain them in a small space and trigger an explosive skill to maximize your poison attack."

Liu Jiayi is momentarily stunned, but quickly understands Bai Liu's plan. Her face changes several times before settling into a subtle, relieved expression. "Of course."

"For A+ monsters, my poison is indeed harmless," she adds.

As the writhing tentacles toss and turn in the pool of roses, Bai Liu stands at the edge, using the ridge as his last line of defense. He pins the sack of roses to his waist as bait while he uses his whip to fan the climbing stragglers and tentacles back into a fixed area—luring and slapping as much as he can to drive the stragglers into place.

Liu Jiayi keeps Bai Liu protected, and aside from draining his stamina quickly with the whip, Bai Liu is barely caught by the stragglers or the tentacles. However, his constant use of stamina restorers makes cold sweat bead on his forehead. Despite the effort, his exhaustion shows, and the roses in his eyes grow more delicate, while the black cracks on his face deepen.

Both Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi are unable to resist the large line of A+ monsters for an hour. With skills on cooldown, neither of them has the ability to kill the relentless stream of monsters. Bai Liu's whip merely drives the monsters down, doing no real damage.

But Bai Liu's goal isn't to fight the A+ monsters directly. He's simply driving them down and preventing them from climbing back up.

It's a simple game of 'duck rush,' one that Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi can play to its limits, lasting an hour without Bai Liu making a mistake and perfectly sweeping up any missed monsters.

However, this also creates a pile of ghastly stragglers beneath the ridge—not just those Bai Liu had driven down, but others that had followed.

Dense tentacles tumble through the velvety red mud like boiling water or the lint of small intestines digesting food. Human faces, broken and decaying bones, and limbs flow and howl through the rolling red waves of mud. The roses sway unscathed, untouched, as if the stragglers are deliberately protecting the roses that have yet to be picked.

Some distance away from the flower fields, away from the roses' rich scent, the stench of these piled-up stragglers and the tentacles growing from them is overwhelming. Countless tentacles grab the mud along the shore, attempting to reach land.

Against this high density of tentacles, Bai Liu's whip moves in rapid, white streaks.

With a bottle of advanced stamina restorer from the Mu Sicheng panel in his mouth, he swallows it to replenish his strength while continuing to swing his whip at the massive influx of monsters.

This pure, high-precision mechanical movement has been going on for nearly forty minutes.

Sweat slides down Bai Liu's hair, dripping onto his drenched work jacket, which now looks as though he's been pulled from the water.

Liu Jiayi's poison is also running low. She has a higher panel than Bai Liu, but an hour of such high-precision intensity, with skills protecting herself and Bai Liu, has her gritting her teeth.

Despite their hard work, the audience in front of the screen—specifically, the players from the King's Guild—are unimpressed.

Most of those watching, brought here by Hearts to block Bai Liu's small TV, are grassroots and mid-level players, a group who've risen through the ranks by tearing each other apart.

With Hearts already hostile, and the entire venue belonging to the King's Guild, their scorn for Bai Liu's display is evident.

Some of the King's Guild players sneer at Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi's "feeble" and "pointless" resistance.

"Trying to stall in a third-level game? Is he afraid he'll be late for the drop? He only got on the King's list last time because of the heat the witch gave him," one comments.

"This game is supposed to be about hunting monsters for roses. Looking at the monster setting analysis, the other four have already started hunting. Only Bai Liu's group has made no progress," a spectator says, pointing at the small TV next to Bai Liu. "That small TV is some sort of hunter. I haven't seen it, but I heard it's the reinforcements our queen got. Looks quite strong, already started a massive counter-kill."

The small TV next to Bai Liu is Tang Erda's, showing him with blood splattered on the right side of his face. His ethereal blue eyes glow like ghosts amidst a sea of bright red mud and flowers. His right hand grips a silver revolver, its engraved rose now saturated with blood, turning it into a deep red "Rose of Dried Leaves."

Tang Erda is surrounded by writhing tentacles and dead stragglers. Silver gun casings litter the ground around him.

Under the full moon, the dark blue-eyed hunter grips his gun tightly, firing it with brutal precision to kill any monster attempting to steal the roses he guards. His blood-stained figure exudes a sense of madness, like a werewolf in waiting.

After another round of shooting, Tang Erda grimaces, blood dripping down his arms and clothes. He kicks away the tentacles clinging to his feet, quickly biting down on a bandage to treat a wound on his palm. He hadn't treated the other wounds, but this one would make his palm slippery and affect his grip on the gun.

Once the wound is treated, Tang Erda coolly reloads his revolvers.

The bodies of dead stragglers have piled up around him, almost overwhelming him. The roses they stole fall as they die, and the clumps of corpses tumble downward like curling willows.

The viewers on Tang Erda's small TV can only watch in awe, their view obscured by the constant stream of rewards popping up on the system:

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Tang Erda for killing a monster drifter who stole 1.5kg of dried leaf roses, now added to your loot.]

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Tang Erda for killing a monster drifter who stole 11kg of dried leaf roses ...]

As Tang Erda lifts his blood-stained, emotionless eyes toward the small TV and pulls the trigger, the audience in front of the TV steps back instinctively. Though they know it's Tang Erda attacking the in-game monsters, the overwhelming intensity of his presence makes them uneasy.

Tang Erda carries an undeniable visceral force and creepy aggression that makes the audience swallow nervously, whispering among themselves:

"Who is this guy?! From the first shot to the last, nearly every one had a bonus screen pop up. Each shot killed an A+ monster, with a flat attack skill value of 6000. No apparent cooldown. How come I've never heard of this player?!"

"A man can wipe out a swarm of monsters in a Tier 3 game with raw power... that's the strength of a top-tier player... It's horrifying. Is the King's Guild hiding such cards this year?!"

The Rose Factory

"If this man is really a player from the King's Guild League team, his skills and combat ability are impressive. With his performance in this single combat, I predict he's likely to secure a spot in the top five this year."

"Who the hell is he? I've scoured the entire video library and haven't found anything on him. How could he be so ridiculously strong without a name? The player has set his panel to be visible only to himself, and now I'm scratching my head wondering what his panel level really is!"

A man in a tall hat, a neatly tailored suit, and several large sparkling diamond rings on his fingers, yet strangely wearing a layer of white gloves underneath, stood at the end of the crowd. He was looking up at Tang Erda's small TV, which was propped up on a black lacquered wooden cane of civilization.

The man's fingers, holding the oval-shaped tip of his civilizing staff, tapped thoughtfully before he curled his lips into a smile. "There are a lot of dark horses this year," he muttered.

He casually pulled half of a white scarf from his chest, but it kept coming out in a steady stream, one after another, as if by magic. Each section featured different designs and pencil drawings of players' heads, with the last one depicting Spades.

If Wang Shun were here, he would immediately recognize this low-profile, enigmatic spectator — the man he had been looking for, the one he believed could break Bai Liu's siege of the King's Guild: Charles, president of the fifth guild, the Gamblers' Club.

Charles is known as the "Magician at the Table." He has a unique habit of identifying promising players, funding their development, and helping them grow into strong contenders who can shine in the league.

At the same time, Charles places sky-high bets on his chosen "dark horses" during the league, depending on their stunning performances to win him large amounts of points as an investor behind the scenes.

In short, Charles enjoys gambling on his dark horses, recording each year's winning player on his magical prop (like a silk scarf).

For example, this year, Charles is pulling out scarf after scarf from his breast pocket, each featuring pencil drawings of players who could be potential winners in the league.

The Spades drawing on the last scarf represents last year's league champions.

Spades was a newcomer to the league last year. Charles selected Spades as his dark horse, and thanks to Spades' stunning performance, Charles made a fortune on every league bet involving Spades.

However, this year, the odds on Spades are so low that hardly anyone is betting on him to lose; everyone is betting on his victory, meaning the potential payout will be minimal.

For a gambler like Charles, who thrives on high-risk, high-reward bets, a low-odds bet like Spades doesn't excite him. He wants a true dark horse, full of potential and uncertainty, one that can give him a massive return.

So, after the league started, Charles set out to find a new, promising dark horse.

Just like the big guilds, the Gamblers' Club has its own information network, known only to insiders. Charles was one of those who knew how to make the most of it.

He rummaged through his suit pocket for a moment before pulling out a bright rose-red silk scarf, exhaling with a smile, "Found it."

The front of the scarf featured a pencil drawing of Tang Erda. He looked younger and cooler than he does now, though the drawing depicted him in rough shape, wearing a bloodstained Authority uniform, with a bruised face and a vacant, disheveled look. Despite that, his eyes seemed to contain a kind of floating hate and despair.

The painting showed Tang Erda holding a small golden trophy under his right breast, with a laurel branch symbolizing victory painted on either side.

The back of the silk scarf contained strange hieroglyphs that no player from Puchong would understand. Charles squinted at them for a moment, glanced at Tang Erda's little TV, and smiled knowingly.

"No wonder he looks familiar. It's you, the Faded Rose Hunter," Charles muttered, lowering his hat and grinning. "A time traveler,

former champion from another world line. Let's see how the fools who witnessed your victory cheered for you, the savior they thought could lead them out of the game..."

Charles slid his fingers down the silk scarf and read the support slogan for Tang Erda: "- The legendary hunter who saves the people by slaying monsters with a hundred shots, the steel fist without ears, the sharpshooter, Tang Erda." (A reference to Uncle Li, a marksman from the Qing Dynasty.)

Charles laughed more deeply as he read the slogan: "[If I win, I'll end this game and protect every innocent person, so you can successfully leave.]"

"How naive," Charles said, absently crumpling the rose-colored scarf with Tang Erda's image and making it disappear. "But how many players in this game are truly innocent?"

"Players whose aims and methods are in conflict often end up mad, even if they win," he mused.

In short, Tang Erda was not the right dark horse for him. Charles preferred more pragmatic players, who understood what they were doing and what they could gain from it.

The magician flicked his hand, and as the scarf fluttered out of his fingers, it transformed into a bouquet of roses that exploded in his palm with a bang.

Charles casually handed the bouquet to a woman in the crowd who had been cheering for Tang Erda. She had been startled by the sudden 'bang' and looked confused as she accepted the bouquet. Charles offered a half-curtsy smile, "Apologies for the interruption. This player's little TV looks better with this bouquet of roses. For you, madam."

Before the woman could react, the strange magician vanished, leaving her staring down at the wilting roses in her arms.

As she pondered the peculiar encounter, her attention was soon caught by something even more exciting. She held her breath, anxiously watching Tang Erda's little TV as calculations were made.

[System Alert: Player *** (name blocked because the player chose not to disclose)]

[10,107 new people liked player ****'s TV, 0 new people favorited player ****'s TV (the player banned viewers from favoriting his TV), 7003 people charged 10,102 points for player ****].

[18,020 new viewers are watching player ****'s TV show. Congratulations to the player for receiving 10,000 likes in one minute! 10,000 points! The audience loves you!]

[Congratulations to player **** for securing a promotion spot and entering the core promotion zone on the central screen. Viewership is rising rapidly...]

"Promoted! Level 3 game opening tour promotion! Open the door!"

"Holy shit, who is this person? So strong and mysterious! Name and panel are hidden, and no one can even favorite..."

Back to Bai Liu's small TV.

Unlike Tang Erda's promotion, where cheers erupted, Bai Liu's situation was more grim.

Not only was Liu Jiayi struggling, but it looked like she was stalling until her skills were replenished, just surviving without showing any courage to fight back.

There was no audience to speak of, just a group of people hoping for Bai Liu to die early.

"What a waste of the witch's powers. Why is she chasing after him..."

"Didn't he say he's a control player? He must be controlling the witch, but with her abilities, playing like this is such a waste. The guild didn't go to all this trouble for the witch to waste her power! Why isn't he protecting her?! If you're a man, stand in front of her!"

The group of mid-level guild players in the front row were so anxious they could barely contain themselves, wanting to take Bai Liu's place.

Unlike the grassroots players who were sour on Bai Liu, many of the King's Guild's mid-level members had risen through the ranks with Liu Jiayi's healing support.

Liu Jiayi was a strong player with great intuition, and Hearts often didn't care much for the lives of guild players, pushing a large group

through brutal game mechanics. This left the advanced players to filter out mid-level ones, and many members feared Hearts' ruthless president more than they revered him.

Liu Jiayi was particularly valuable in this harsh practice. She controlled the group’s progression and ensured everyone’s survival while pushing through the game.

For many mid-level players who weren’t so strong, Liu Jiayi was their lifeline, and they felt deeply grateful toward her.

When the Little Witch's age was unknown, they treated her like a goddess. Once she became well-known, they fought to be her brother or her father.

When they saw the Little Witch running away with Bai Liu, it was like their little sister (or daughter) had been abducted, and they harbored a deep grudge against him. They wanted to kill Bai Liu on the spot and bring the witch back.

Now, though, the Little Witch was diligently protecting Bai Liu, pushing herself to the limit without complaint. Despite their animosity toward Bai Liu, many of them quietly watched the Little Witch’s TV, secretly liking and charging points for her safety.

The Rose Factory

[Added 0 likes for Bai Liu's TV, Added 0 favorites for Bai Liu's TV, No one is charging for player Bai Liu]

[0 new viewers are watching Bai Liu's mini-TV. The difference between this and the last game video is too big. Player Bai Liu will be dropped from the (Multiplayer Zone) to the (Graveyard Bounce Zone). Please play carefully!]

It was only a matter of time before Bai Liu's promotion status dropped. With the King's Guild guarding the small TVs and keeping a tight rein on them, his fall to the [No Name Zone] seemed inevitable.

Hearts stood in front of Bai Liu's small TV, her eyes misting over the pale, sweaty face of Bai Liu, as if she were admiring a painting of death in a gallery—yet with a faint regret, as though lamenting the death of the person in the painting, or perhaps even regretting that she was the one who caused it.

She lifted the brim of her wide hat, turned to the members behind her, and with a remorseful look in her eyes, gave an even harsher order. "Go to the Nova Fall Zone (alias the Graveyard Bounce Zone) and continue to surround Bai Liu. Make sure he doesn't pull out of the group until he enters the No Name Zone."

Meanwhile, Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi inside the small TV were also in trouble.

If the stragglers couldn't be eliminated, the poison used to protect the two would deplete rapidly. Eight vials of poison, even under Liu Jiayi's careful control, were now running low.

The fields of flowers were piled high with parasitic stragglers and multiplying tentacles, roaring, flowing, and boiling like waves in an all-consuming sea, raising a wall of tentacles at the edge of the ridge. It seemed unthinkable to drive back all these monsters with only Liu Jiayi's poison and Bai Liu's whip.

But both managed to do it.

Liu Jiayi's face was pale; the high consumption of her skill had left her almost unsteady on her feet as she gripped the nearly empty bottle of poison, gasping for breath.

As the tentacles twisted and turned, Liu Jiayi, her head bowed and gasping, pulled the bottle tighter in front of her. A web of poisonous fumes fell, severing the tentacles within the web. The poisoned tentacles “cut” by the fumes fell away, their fractures blurred by the poison.

Liu Jiayi shook slightly, the taste of blood rushing up her throat, but she swallowed it back through clenched teeth. The poison bottle in her hand was nearly empty.

A tentacle, slipping through the net, came from behind, its sharp head about to pierce Liu Jiayi’s chest. In an instant, a whip—white as lightning—lashed out, snapping the tentacle that was about to touch her face, and with a second crack, Bai Liu swept back the other tentacles that were ready to attack.

Bai Liu’s face was paler than Liu Jiayi’s, nearly the same color as the bone-white whip in his hand, and his hand trembled faintly.

"Your skill cooldown is almost over, isn't it?" Bai Liu squinted at Liu Jiayi, who was half-crouched on the ground behind him.

Liu Jiayi reluctantly tilted her head and looked at him. "…Less than a minute to go."

"Then just hold out for the last wave of these stragglers," Bai Liu said, looking up at the wall of stragglers, growing more grotesque by the second. "Then we can start reaping the rewards."

The broken tentacles instantly regenerated, arching and mixing with the dense mass of tentacles in the flower field to attack Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi.

But Bai Liu didn’t even lift his whip, his eyes calmly watching the tentacles and shattered bodies of stragglers twisting and intertwining into a massive wall, hissing as they poured down like a tidal wave about to engulf a shore tourist.

A spinning Rubik’s Cube suddenly appeared in Bai Liu’s hand.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu uses a prop (Magic Space). The space is limited to the field of flowers directly opposite. The prop has reached its maximum space width, and the time limit for use is only 5 minutes. Any stragglers who enter the space are forbidden from leaving.]

[System Alert: Space Construction Complete.]

The next second, the "waves" of tentacles collided with an invisible transparent wall with a resonating "buzz," slowly falling back into the flower field. The resentful eyes of the stragglers greedily focused on the roses on the ground.

The stragglers were trapped in a four-sided invisible cage, writhing and struggling inside. They crawled all over the walls like a room full of human-faced snakes, seemingly on the verge of breaking through and attacking Bai Liu, who stood nearby.

But these stragglers might never get that chance.

Behind Bai Liu, Liu Jiayi, having consumed a stamina restorer, slowly stood up. The "stragglers" they had so carefully stacked were finally ripe for harvesting.

She glanced at Bai Liu, waved her hand, signaling him to move away.

[System Warning: Does player Liu Jiayi use her personal skill (Poison Geyser), which deals indiscriminate slow damage to all players within range? After using this skill, player Liu Jiayi's stamina slot will be empty.]

[OK.]

A thick, curling black smoke spread out from Liu Jiayi's cuffs, swirling into the limited flower field of the [Magic Space], filling the space instantly. The tentacles slid helplessly off the transparent walls.

A minute later, the last tentacle fell to the ground along with a pale Liu Jiayi.

Before Liu Jiayi could sit down, Bai Liu picked her up steadily, holding her against the aftermath of her skill's depletion. Though she didn't want to lean on him, she had no choice but to rest her head on his shoulder and close her eyes to catch her breath.

Of course, Bai Liu was now unsteady on his own feet, so it wasn't long before he too collapsed, exhausted.

Liu Jiayi, sitting back down again, asked, "…So why did you just pick me up again?"

Bai Liu stroked Liu Jiayi's damp fringe and smiled. "I've seen other parents encourage their kids to do well. I thought I'd learn from them. You were really cool, little witch."

Liu Jiayi, lying on Bai Liu's chest, was silent for two seconds before looking away. "…I'm number one in Nova."

She muttered quietly, "Isn't that par for the course?"

As the black mist in the [Magic Space] cleared, roses continued to bloom from the bodies of the corrupted dead stragglers. Meanwhile, Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi's system alert screens kept ringing.

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Liu Jiayi for killing a monster drifter and stealing 1.5kg of dried leaf roses, which are now your loot.]

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Bai Liu for using props to trap and kill a monster straggler who stole 0.3kg of dried leaf roses…]

[System Alert: …]

The ground, once covered with stragglers, was now littered with scattered dried leaves and roses. Bai Liu sat up slowly, with Liu Jiayi on top of him, looking at the loot on the ground and smiling.

"Not bad, it's still a bumper crop. The night wasn't in vain."

The King's Guild audience watching Bai Liu's small TV in the game lobby stared in awe at the system reward screen that kept popping up on Bai Liu's face.

They had previously mocked him for not knowing how to use such a powerful card as the Witch, but now they realized that he didn't just use it, he maximized the AOE effect as a healing card!

Previously, the little witch was seen as just [the only healing player in the game], but now they were shocked by her powerful [poison] attack.

In Bai Liu's hands, using the [Magic Space] prop, Liu Jiayi's A-rank panel combined with Bai Liu's C-rank panel, managed to survive a wave of A+ level monsters in a level 3 game.

It was a miracle.

But Bai Liu did it.

This was the same rookie who had almost been killed by an A+ monster just two games ago! His growth rate was nothing short of terrifying!

The man who had been sneering at Bai Liu for relying on the witch's popularity in the King's leaderboard now muttered, his face twisted in disbelief, "…Our guild's witch... is that powerful? She can resist the soldier line of a third-level game at once?"

Another man echoed him, his expression equally stunned, "…I remember there's no…"

"It's tactics," a more knowledgeable mid-tier player analyzed thoughtfully, though his expression wasn't as confident as before. "Bai Liu's tactics maximized the witch's offensive utility, using the whip to herd the monsters, then trapping them, while stalling the cooldowns with the witch's poison. In the end, Bai Liu cleared them with a burst skill."

The player who analyzed it couldn't help but feel suffocated by his realization. "We've never even tried to tap into the witch's attack skills before, but Bai Liu used his strong field control weapon, the Fishbone Whip, to set everything up. He got enough stragglers to explode rewards, then cleared the monsters and prepared for the next wave…"

Bai Liu developed the perfect tactic for this mission.

There were also some unconvinced grassroots players whispering and grumbling.

"Tsk, what tactics... I could have played this game if I had his weapons and the witch match!"

"Yeah, isn't that just stacking monsters, placing props, and then letting the witch clear them? That's a nifty tactic? An insult to tactics, if you ask me!"

"It's not just that. You guys are over-simplifying things." Another higher-level mid-tier player sighed. "Bai Liu's tactics are actually pretty standard. Do you guys remember Mu Sicheng? The rising star player who was targeted by our guild's Zhang Gui?"

Several other players paused as they recalled this senior King's Guild player, who had been brutally counter-killed by Bai Liu. Their original desire to dismiss Bai Liu subtly faded, and their voices softened: "… yeah, I remember. What's the big deal?"

"Mu Sicheng never stood a chance against Zhang Gui. On several occasions, he was almost controlled by him. But after Bai Liu took control of Mu Sicheng, when he was only playing for the second time.

Do you remember how Zhang Gui ended up?"

The King's Guild member analyzing Bai Liu for the others took a deep breath, pausing for a moment of silence before continuing. "After Mu Sicheng was being controlled by Bai Liu, he managed to counter-kill Zhang Gui, who was burned alive in the mirror."

"Before Mu Sicheng met Bai Liu, could you have imagined that Mu Sicheng would be able to kill Zhang Gui?" The man looked steadily at the others. "No one could have imagined this, could they? You all thought Mu Sicheng was a fish on Zhang Gui's plate, and that it was only a matter of time before he was caught."

Everyone stopped talking, and an eerie silence fell over the players who had just criticized Bai Liu.

They slowly looked up at Bai Liu's small TV and suddenly felt a genuine sense of dread and unease. Yes, Bai Liu had used Mu Sicheng —who was no match for Zhang Gui—to overwhelmingly kill Zhang Gui instead.

…If they remembered correctly, the game wasn't even halfway through when Zhang Gui was already defenseless against Bai Liu…

—Bai Liu is only a newcomer, his panel is only C-rank, his intelligence value isn't the highest, and not to mention the dead Zhang Gui. Even the little witch he's working with now is stronger than Bai Liu.

How is it that this guy can so easily take control of the field and outsmart the weak?

The man who had been analyzing Bai Liu also followed the crowd's gaze to Bai Liu's small TV and felt an inexplicable fear rising within him. "This is what makes Bai Liu's tactics so scary."

"Bai Liu doesn't have the best cards, nor does he use the most unconventional tactics. But he works with the cards in his hand at an incredibly high success rate, like his flawless partnership with Mu Sicheng in the Burst Last Train. And in this game, Bai Liu's clean sweep after the witch closed the net—Bai Liu accounted for every tactical part that could have gone off-plan, but wasn't even on our radar, and executed them perfectly..."

The man sighed, his expression complex. "…obviously just their first cooperation, but this newcomer already acts as if he's worked with these people a million times, bringing out the best in everyone. It feels

like the moment this guy with exceptional ability formulates his tactics, he's already seen all the players' endings—what an amazing combination of game strengths…"

"Bai Liu's tactics have never gone wrong. He has never made a mistake himself and is 100% confident that his cards will never fail under his hand. With this kind of insane confidence, the rookie gambles with a killing power that we can't even imagine."

…And if this newcomer enters the league, if he has five good cards in his hand to use and develops corresponding tactics on his enemy...

The man couldn't help but shiver at the thought. His gaze toward Bai Liu's small TV hardened. "Let's go. The Queen said we must block Bai Liu here and push him into the [No Name Zone]. Otherwise, if this guy enters the league next year, our guild team will have endless trouble afterwards."

The picture of Bai Liu on the small TV suddenly went out.

Bai Liu followed the system's instructions and dropped into the [Graveyard Bounce Zone].

The Rose Factory

In-game.

Liu Jiayi's skills have finally been reset.

Liu Jiayi's skills are unique in that they do not depend on how much stamina is used in the previous round to determine their availability in the next round.

However, for most players, the use of personal skills is severely limited when their stamina is empty. For example, if Mu Sicheng's skill "Thief's Monkey Claw" is depleted, Mu Sicheng can only continue to use the skill with his natural stamina unless he can restore it using potions.

Liu Jiayi's skills are not restricted by this, except for the explosive skill [Poison Fountain], which is classified as a [Mage class] skill and can be used again once the cooldown finishes.

So, after the skill finished its cooldown, Liu Jiayi created eight more bottles of poison that she couldn't move herself and handed them to Bai Liu, who was resting on the ground to regain his strength.

With the poison in hand, Bai Liu went around the area to check for any remaining stragglers still alive in the [Magic Space]. If there were any, he poured a little poison on them to finish them off.

After checking all the stragglers, Bai Liu opened the [Magic Space] and quickly collected the roses—because not far away, stragglers and tentacles began to appear again.

After briefly calculating that the rewards he and Liu Jiayi had earned, as seen on the system panel, added up to more than eighty kilograms, Bai Liu decided to put Liu Jiayi on his back and start running toward the tent.

Liu Jiayi slumped onto Bai Liu's back, her hands clenching his shoulders, her tone hoarse and calm. "I just remembered something. You took the [Magic Space] prop from me, and I thought you'd lost it. If you had it with you this whole time—"

"Then why didn't you just use it on us from the start and keep us safe for an hour until my skill cooldown was over, so we wouldn't have had to fight so hard..."

Liu Jiayi shifted slightly, her face expressionless as she gripped both of Bai Liu's shoulders with trembling hands. Her voice ghostly, she asked rhetorically, "The [Magic Space] prop needs to be used with maximum spatial breadth, and it has a time limit for use within a day."

"...Bai Liu, you're not going to tell me that you made me last against monsters for an hour just so we could use the full spatial breadth of [Magic Space] and clear the most monsters at once for the most roses, are you...?"

Bai Liu: "."

Liu Jiayi was so resentful she was nearly spitting blood. "Bai Liu, you **used me again! You **, you **, give me **! You could ** be ** a little stingier!"

[System warmly reminds underage players not to use foul language—small TV will block inappropriate content!]

The stragglers chased after Bai Liu, and bedore the tentacles wrapped around his ankles, Bai Liu rolled into the tent in the middle of the flower field and zipped it up quickly.

The tentacles thrashed against the fabric of the tent, and the zipper slowly moved upward, as though the stragglers could burrow it in with their tentacles and drag the exhausted players out at any moment.

Bai Liu took out the spinning Rubik's Cube with a calm expression.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu uses a prop (Magic Space), designated space (tent), with restrictions in place (no creatures other than the player and Liu Jiayi are allowed to enter).]

[System Tip: Due to previous overuse of the maximum breadth of the prop (Magic Space), the time limit for using Magic Space has been reduced and can only be used in the tent for about 3 hours.]

The spinning cube in Bai Liu's hand became significantly narrower after a few revolutions, transforming into a square, quadrilateral, tent-like shape.

Liu Jiayi, who had just been scolding Bai Liu, suddenly felt embarrassed.

Her eyes fell on the tetrahedral cube in Bai Liu's hand, which had

become much smaller. She had thought Bai Liu was choosing to confront the monsters head-on for one-time benefits, but she hadn't expected that he'd done so to ensure they could both stay safely in the [Magic Space] until dawn.

Bai Liu had obviously calculated the timing... Perhaps she shouldn't have speculated so poorly about his intentions—she'd gone a bit too far with the scolding.

Liu Jiayi wasn't the type to dwell on things; she looked at Bai Liu and immediately apologized. "I'm sorry, I scolded you too much. I didn't know you kept the prop to make sure we'd be safe."

Bai Liu gave her a strange look. "No, I saved the prop so you could take on the most monsters at once."

Liu Jiayi: "..."

Bai Liu explained seriously, "I reserved the time limit for using this prop so that if I didn't collect enough roses at once, I could still use the prop to lift your stamina tank's negative status, allowing you to continue using your skills to trap more monsters. This way, we could earn more roses. Even though we've already earned eighty kilograms, the prop fits the overall strategy of the game, and it's more than enough..."

Liu Jiayi: "..."

Bai Liu seemed lost in thought as he looked at the exhausted Liu Jiayi with what seemed like great regret. He let out a long sigh. "But you still don't look well. You're clearly drained, and after all your strength is exhausted, it's... not good..."

Liu Jiayi suddenly smiled, a sweet smile that even showed two dimples. She held up two bottles of magic potion to Bai Liu and looked at him cutely, "Brother Bai Liu, if you say another word, I will really get angry."

Looking at the black mist of poison swirling around his neck, Bai Liu quickly changed the subject. "Liu Jiayi, you've had a hard night! Would you like to sleep now?"

Liu Jiayi: "..."

Damn, it's so tempting to swear.

Bai Liu brought Liu Jiayi into the tent to rest for a reason.

After three hours, if it's still light out and the tentacle monsters are still around, they'll have to go out again for a tug-of-war. Liu Jiayi's skill cooldown will allow her to create more poison, and she can recover some stamina while resting, so they can last until dawn with the poison they've accumulated.

Inside the tent, there's only a dirty and greasy cot, half the size of an adult, with a stained woolen blanket along the edge.

Bai Liu placed Liu Jiayi on the cot and curled up on the modest blanket, casually padding it with a woolen blanket, then fell asleep.

The right side of his face still bore the blood from the tentacle's eruption, but he closed his eyes in exhaustion before he could wipe it off and fell asleep.

Unable to recover his spirit level, Bai Liu took on the role of sweeping up and protecting Liu Jiayi, the main attacker. This caused him to lose a significant amount of spirit due to the constant tentacles and stragglers. The low spirit level worsened his physical exhaustion, as if he were working overtime in an intense, sleepless state, unable to afford any mistakes. This made Bai Liu's fatigue double.

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu's Spirit Level has dropped to 61, please restore your Spirit Level quickly!]

The black cracks on his face were partially sunken, and his skin seemed like it was about to peel off.

He glanced at Liu Jiayi, curled up on the cot, then looked down to confirm that the time limit for Magic Space hadn't expired—there was almost an hour left.

Then he slept for almost two hours.

The stragglers outside the tent seemed to have disappeared by dawn, and the sounds that woke Bai Liu didn't come from outside the tent but from inside.

Bai Liu's eyes slowly dropped to the bottom of the bed where Liu Jiayi was sleeping—a pattering sound, like something slowly crawling, grew louder from beneath the bed.

Liu Jiayi, still asleep, seemed to be disturbed by the noise and rolled

over with a frown.

Bai Liu crouched beside Liu Jiayi's bed, holding the whip and looking down.

When he used [Magic Space], he had explicitly designated the tent as a space for only himself and Liu Jiayi, with no other creatures allowed. The sound coming from beneath the bed meant whatever was there wasn't a living creature or was powerful enough to break the [Transcendent] category prop's barrier.

Bai Liu cautiously held the whip to his chest and swept his gaze under the bed. It was a mess: a broken pencil, used toilet paper balls, a torn sack, and a beautifully moulded right-hand die.

There was no sign of anything living under the bed. It looked like a normal, dirty bed that hadn't been cleaned properly.

It seemed the sound he heard might have been a hallucination; after all, his mental values were low enough to be close to the threshold of hallucination.

But Bai Liu didn't withdraw his gaze. He stared motionlessly at the bottom of the bed, or rather at the hand model that resembled a toy.

Bai Liu recognized the perfect model of the right hand, sculpted from a gold model. It was the right hand he had once held tightly in a death grip and had willingly let go of.

This was Xie Ta's right hand.

Bai Liu looks at the hand. He dives into the darkness of the bed and tries to reach the snow-white sculpted hand. But the moment he is about to touch it, a rose-like vine bursts out from under the bed, making the same pattering and crawling sound Bai Liu had just heard.

The vine wraps around the hand before Bai Liu's eyes, seemingly dragging it into the ground. Bai Liu stretches his body forward and throws his whip to open the vine, but the vine has already contracted and wrapped itself around the hand.

The cold, broken right hand curls up in Bai Liu's palm, as if to shake him back. Then it turns into scattered rose petals in Bai Liu's hand, and the vines slowly dive into the ground and disappear.

The scattered petals of the severed hand burst into a phosphorescent light-blue flame and dissipate into ashes and smoke before Bai Liu's eyes.

There is nothing under the dimly lit bed—only a hazy reflection of everything in Bai Liu's empty, dark reflection of Rose's eyes, a hallucination that he isn't sure ever happened.

Bai Liu hadn't touched a real object. The broken hand he thought he had clasped was just a shadow.

Bai Liu feels nothing but a coldness that seems to linger on his closed fingers.

Liu Jiayi was awakened by Bai Liu's movement. She rubs her eyes sleepily, sitting up, dazedly reaching for the goggles she had placed on the side of her pillow and putting them on.

Liu Jiayi is instantly sober, and her voice changes slightly. "What are you doing, Bai Liu?"

Bai Liu slowly retreats from under the bed. After propping himself up on the edge and shaking his head to meet Liu Jiayi's gaze, Liu Jiayi is stunned.

Bai Liu looks, for once, in a rare kind of ecstasy, as if something had compelled him to take his soul away in a floating trance. The rose in his eyes sways and blooms with a fourth petal. The black crack under his right eye deepens, the piece of flesh beneath his right eye peels

away, with a shaky quality.

"...Bai Liu," Liu Jiayi's voice is inexplicably dry. "Pull up your panel and show me your current spirit level."

Bai Liu is quiet for a moment before he seems to realize what Liu Jiayi is saying to him. He obediently lowers his head, fishing out the coin on his chest, half-smiling as he pulls up the system panel and leans over to show it to Liu Jiayi, a very inviting, burned rose scent scattering over his shoulder.

The fragrance puts Liu Jiayi into a trance for a moment before she quickly opens the panel to purchase two breathing masks, putting them on both Bai Liu and herself before her mind starts to wander.

But it's still a little late.

[System Alert: Player Liu Jiayi has smelled a high concentration of primal rose incense, and as the player is now intolerant to that concentration, she enters a (stunned) debuff effect. Her spirit level drops to 63, and she is about to see a hallucination.]

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu has smelled a high concentration of the original rose fragrance. As the player is now intolerant to this concentration, he has entered a (stunned) debuff effect and his spirit level has dropped to 46!]

Liu Jiayi's eyes are spinning, and she falls back onto the cot, covering her mask and breathing hard, while Bai Liu falls backwards onto the floor, his faint breath painting a mist of water on his mask.

A strong, regal, torturous aroma—so strong that one cannot move but only let it torment them—runs through their brains, making them gag. Liu Jiayi coughs violently several times. Bai Liu's eyes twist and spin.

He's plunged into a sort of rosy, underwater, suffocating darkness—as if an unseen broken right hand had calmly strangled his throat.

Bai Liu's eyelids droop slowly.

"Get up! Get up now!" A vicious, impatient voice, accompanied by "slap, slap, slap" sounds, yells. "How fucking late it is, and you're still sleeping! Do you know how much a night in this tent costs before and after the May Rose Festival?"

"If we weren't short of people, we wouldn't let you lowlifes in as

flower pickers!"

With the scolding, Bai Liu, half asleep, feels his arms being grabbed and pulled straight up from the ground. His mind is dizzy and swollen, as though he's worked all night for a week, been dragged to a social gathering by colleagues, poured ten bottles of vodka, and then dragged up after just an hour of sleep to continue working late.

--Bai Liu could die suddenly on the spot and fall into a long sleep with just one breath.

Bai Liu shakes one side of his numb, tingling head, propping himself up against the back of a chair with his hand to steady his uncoordinated body. He takes several deep breaths before he can overlap the swaying, spinning scene before him.

It's the same old, shabby little tent, but much brighter—after all, it's already light outside.

Bai Liu looks over at Liu Jiayi, who has crawled out of bed. After lifting Liu Jiayi out of the bed, the processor turns to them and yells, "Where are the roses? Where are the roses you were told to pick all night? You're getting high without doing anything! Two useless bitches!"

With that, the factory worker brings up his foot in a burst of anger and kicks Liu Jiayi in the back, who is still walking staggeringly.

The kick narrowly misses Lui Jiayi.

Bai Liu gives a respectful nod to the processor and points to the bulging sacks behind him, the roses covered by blankets. Bai Liu looks calm and collected, not at all like he had been unsteady just ten seconds before.

"All the roses we picked last night are here," Bai Liu raises his eyes. "83.7 kg in total."

The processor changes his expression several times before finally retracing his steps and walking behind Bai Liu to check the roses. After making sure that Bai Liu's weight is correct, the processor turns his head with a look of fear and resentment in his eyes and stares at Bai Liu for a moment before saying, "You've barely done your job."

"Don't be complacent! Even if all of you newcomers complete your tasks, it's still early days before you can be promoted to processors

and eliminate us hard-working veterans!"

He had already reached the tent when, without warning, he turned around and gave Bai Liu a vicious kick, curling his mouth with malice.

"Double your task tonight! You have to pick 80 kg of roses each. If you can't do that, then wait to be laid off and exiled!"

The kick lands on Bai Liu's shoulder. Bai Liu, still under the stun debuff, is "weak" and has little resistance, so he's kicked backward with such force that he falls a distance and hits the chair he had just used as an armrest.

With a grimace, the processor walks away with the roses Bai Liu had picked, tossing two small glass bottles of pale pink perfume, which Liu Jiayi is quick enough to catch before they hit the ground.

[System Alert: Congratulations to Player Bai Liu for completing the (Picking 40 kg) Rose side quest and receiving the reward (Low Level Rose Dried Leaf Gas Perfume) in one bottle.]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has triggered a new quest. Please pick 80 kg of roses tonight. Upon success, you will receive a reward (two bottles of low-level dried rose leaf gas perfume) and main quest progress (processor's promotion qualification).]

Liu Jiayi twists and turns towards Bai Liu, who is sitting on the floor, and pulls out the perfume, spraying it right in Bai Liu's face.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu's (Stun) debuff is lifted, and his spirit level has increased to 81.]

The cracked opening on Bai Liu's face visibly heals, returning to a shallow depression, but the rose in his eye seems to be nourished in some way, shaking its branches and spreading its petals outward—a change that, at first glance, isn't enough to make Liu Jiayi stop spraying her hand with perfume.

She hesitates for a moment before gritting her teeth and spraying herself in the face a few times as well to release her [Stunned] status.

Liu Jiayi leans back in her chair, half-deflated, and waves her hand from side to side in front of Bai Liu's face to catch his eye. Her tone is wan. "Hey, are you awake yet? You met something under the bed last night that nearly killed us both."

The smell of cheap perfume makes Bai Liu choke and cough uncomfortably as he comes to his senses. He tilts his heavy head back in his chair and looks up at Liu Jiayi, his eyes still a little sleepy. Bai Liu gives an articulate account of what he had seen and what happened last night.

"Something got into our tent while [Magic Space] was in effect?" Liu Jiayi's brow tightens the more she listens. "That's unlikely."

Bai Liu gives her an enquiring look.

Liu Jiayi turns over and looks down squarely at Bai Liu as she continues to explain. "I know what you mean. In a new level 3 game, there could indeed be monsters that can break through the boundaries of [Magic Space]. But think about it, Bai Liu. If it really was this kind of monster last night, we were sort of attacked, right? Dis it trigger the monster book?"

"And if this monster, strong enough to break through [Magic Space], did get into our tent—" Liu Jiayi clasps her hands to her chest and raises her eyebrows in a good-natured way, "—why didn't it kill both of us? It didn't kill both of us, so that it could drill into your tent, under my bed, in the middle of the night just to shake your hand and show you the roses it turned into?"

"There's some truth in what you say," Bai Liu speaks nonchalantly. "But what if it's intention wasn't to attack and hurt? So it didn't appear as its entity last night, and that's why it didn't trigger the monster book, and all I saw was a figment of what it was trying to present to me?"

Liu Jiayi subconsciously tries to retort. "There are no monsters whose ultimate intention towards the player is not to attack and damage. There is no such..."

Bai Liu looks at her quietly.

Liu Jiayi's words abruptly stop as she remembers something. Her expression turns gloomy. "...The godly wandering NPC of the 'Love Welfare Home'... What is your relationship with him?"

It's true that she had never seen a monster before that wasn't designed to harm the player, but the last copy of the god-ranked NPC had saved Bai Liu by offering to give blood when he could have been killed.

This is the first and only time Liu Jiayi has seen a monster save a

player in all the times she has played the game.

"...Why does that matter?" Bai Liu's eyes jerk and begin to drift subtly around the top of the tent.

He tries to find a precise and straightforward definition of his relationship with Xie Ta, but it's indescribably weird and difficult for Bai Liu.

If Bai Liu could have told Liu Jiayi with a clear conscience that Xie Ta and he were innocent friends before he entered the game, he would have been able to say so.

...But now that the word "friend" is on his lips, Bai Liu inexplicably thinks of Tawil's unadulterated, slightly confused eyes and the cold, reverent kisses that had fallen on his lips and forehead time and time again.

And the greasy opening line of Bai Liu to Xie Ta after their reunion in 'Siren' – [What do I want... maybe you can give me a kiss?]

Bai Liu: "..."

Liu Jiayi asks this question, expecting to get something like [This monster is a player who was alienated after I acquired his soul], but Bai Liu's strange reaction causes a bunch of question marks to pop up in her head.

Bai Liu's tone is cool: "We were friends before, and then when we reunited, I wasn't quite in my right mind (low mental value), so I did something to him that crossed the line and we had something that shouldn't happen between friends (meaning a smooch)."

"But then, after I got sober personally, I still wanted to be friends with him again. Although I don't know how he feels about it, in my case, we're still friends—that's probably how he and I are at the moment."

Bai Liu sums up what happened between him and Xie Ta in a nutshell.

Liu Jiayi says slowly, "Huh?"

What kind of scum talk is this? What have you done to a NPC, Bai Liu!

The Rose Factory

During the day, the roses in the field were closed, their petals tightly curled into unbloomed buds. The moist soil had dried, and the field appeared calm and harmless. However, after some experimentation, Bai Liu discovered that their spirit levels dropped faster when near the field than when anywhere else.

They had only two bottles of low-grade perfume, and to keep their spirits up, the perfume might not last through the night if they stayed near the flower fields. So, Bai Liu made the decisive choice to stay away from the flower fields—or, more precisely, from the entire polluted area, the perfume factory.

With two bottles of perfume that lasted four hours each, they would make it through the night. Staying in a more contaminated area wasn't a wise choice.

Bai Liu decided to investigate the area around the factory to understand what was happening on the lot where it stood.

"What you can think of, others can think of too," Liu Jiayi, holding Bai Liu's hand, said with a grimace. "If we go out like this, we'll run into other players easily. Aren't you supposed to figure out how to get 80kg of roses for each of us tonight? I barely managed to gather 80kg last night, and doubling that to 160kg is out of the question."

Bai Liu remained calm. "Didn't you hear the processor say this morning that all the new flower pickers finished last night?"

"There are six players in this game, and they start as new flower pickers. If all the flower pickers have completed their tasks, it means the other four players, aside from us, are also capable of picking 40kg of roses in one night."

Bai Liu smiled. "Four people picking 40kg in one night—that's exactly the 160kg we need."

"..." Liu Jiayi rubbed her arm, which had goosebumps from Bai Liu's smile. "What do you plan to do?"

"First, we investigate the area around this factory," Bai Liu said, his eyes darkening. "Every monster in this game has an origin and a cause. Stragglers are transformed from people, and since I can make deals with people, I thought..."

"You want to make a deal with these stragglers?" Liu Jiayi frowned. "Many of the monsters in the game are tainted, mentally broken humans who've gone insane. How do you make a deal with creatures like that? They don't even have the sanity to understand you."

Bai Liu lowered his gaze to Liu Jiayi. "What if they can regain their sanity for a short time?"

Liu Jiayi was taken aback and reflexively retorted, "Impossible."

The alienation of monsters in the game is irreversible; that's a game [rule]. Once a monster's spirit value drops to zero, it freezes and turns grey. It can't be restored with [spirit bleach].

A monster will always remain a monster, unable to turn back into a human.

But soon, Liu Jiayi noticed something unusual—the [mental bleach] in this game was already frozen!

It wasn't just for the monsters, but for them too. The perfume wasn't limited to [drifters]. This meant that if the perfume could work on [drifters], causing them to regain their sanity, the monsters might also be temporarily brought back to a normal state. This could stop them from attacking, much like how a [mermaid statue] halts its movement when stared at.

"Perfume might be the weakness of this group of stragglers," Liu Jiayi said, looking up at Bai Liu. "When did you come up with that idea? That the game's [perfume] could serve as a [mental bleach] for monsters?"

"Before I entered the game," Bai Liu replied.

"Before entering the game?!" Liu Jiayi was puzzled.

Bai Liu tossed the bottle of perfume in his hand, his eyes following its arc, and smiled. "Someone told me before I entered the game that even using this perfume on a staff member who had gone mad would restore their sanity. No matter how insane they were before, once they sprayed the perfume, they returned to their normal selves, as if nothing had happened."

"I thought... this is like a reversed version of spiritual bleach."

Bai Liu lowered his eyes, idly playing with the two perfume bottles in

his hands. "It can restore and enhance one's state, pulling them back from madness. And considering the game's setting, for players, if they don't use [mental bleach], their spirit values will drop, causing them to go insane."

"For players, [spiritual bleach] is [Rose Perfume]. We're all 'addicted' to it—surviving and working for the game to earn [Flower Picker] status. If we can't earn points, [Rangers] get [laid off] and sent to the [Unknown District]. Meanwhile, advanced players who earn it get promoted."

Bai Liu looked at Liu Jiayi. "Don't these mechanisms seem familiar?"

Liu Jiayi shuddered as she understood Bai Liu's implication. "The game is one big [rose factory]."

-- If the game is a factory that exploits players, who is the [factory manager] extracting everything from them?

Bai Liu's eyes grew dark as they approached the edge of the flower field.

Beyond the beautiful fields of flowers was not a pleasant, fragrant town, but a desolate and dilapidated suburb. Curling discarded newspapers and long-abandoned factories stretched for dozens of meters, creating a stark contrast between the vibrant flower fields and the bleak surroundings.

Bai Liu walked up to the door of an empty factory, with a job advert that was ten years old. But it seemed the factory had no need for new recruits—the tin-skinned roller shutter door was painted with the word [dismantle], the paint peeling at the edges, showing clear signs of age.

Liu Jiayi crouched down to examine the scattered pieces of newspaper on the ground.

[Rose Perfume Introduced?! New Addictive Substance, Banned Nationwide, Sparks Public Protests!]

-- "This stuff should be banned. How come coffee and cigarettes aren't? This is a serious infringement of our freedom to consume!"
(Mr. Wang, the convenience store owner leading the protest, allegedly stocks a lot of rose perfume in his shop, making hundreds of thousands of dollars in profit this year.)

[Factory Explosion, Perfume Spreads, Protests Win, Dried Rose Leaf Gas Sells Worldwide!]

[Rose Perfumed Gas Lifts People's Spirits: Students Learn More Efficiently, Employees Work Better... Factory Expands by 7.2% This Year...]

[Rose Gas Sees Third Price Increase This Year, Causing Protests Worldwide—It's a Necessity That's Becoming a Burden for Most People, Especially Those Earning Less Than 100,000 Per Year...]

[Global Governments Unite to Protest Sky-High Perfume Prices, Sanction Rose Dry Leaf Gas Factories... Demand Closure or Face Forceful Action...]

Bai Liu crouched down next to Liu Jiayi, eyeing the newspapers.

Even Liu Jiayi, who wasn't the softest person, felt a chill from the shocking black-and-white photos.

The chaotic crowds, bloodied roads, and the eerie images of people hanging lifeless from bridges were chilling.

"This kind of thing destroys the ecology," Bai Liu muttered, picking up a photo with the caption, [Desperate, Wilted Exiles Hang from a Bridge, Rose Factory Indifferent—Won't Sell Perfume at Reduced Prices].

[Rose Perfume, once promoted for free with promises of low prices, has now soared to unaffordable heights...]

"They give it to you for free during promotions, then raise the price once you're hooked, cornering the market until you can't survive without it—and now, you have to pay an even higher price just to stay alive. You become a slave to the rose."

"It's a classic exploitation scheme, but when applied to an addictive item that leads to death, it becomes a crime that consumes everything. In these apocalyptic times, even money loses its meaning."

"I don't like this stuff," Bai Liu said, "It erases the very meaning of what I'm after."

He uncrossed his fingers as the cold wind swept past, taking the old newspaper fragments from his hands.

Is this the future Tang Erda sees, where there is no escape except drowning?

Watching Su Yang and her team members become obsessed with roses, with no way to save them except to watch them wither or retreat into the next cycle...

After a few more instances like this, it's no wonder this man is losing his mind.

Liu Jiayi snapped out of her thoughts as she stepped in front of Bai Liu —[stragglers] were hiding in the factory, ready to attack.

"Perfume! He smells of perfume!"
A shrill, maniacal scream came from the shifting shadows, and all the figures lunged toward Bai Liu.

"I'm surprised there are so many stragglers here," Liu Jiayi said, pulling her weapon taut. "Do you think we have enough perfume?"

"Not sure," Bai Liu replied calmly. "But isn't that why you're here?"

Liu Jiayi: "..."

Liu Jiayi cursed under her breath, "Shit!!!"

The mass of stragglers, their tentacles slithering like snakes from the ground, swept the scattered newspapers into the air, sending them flying in the dark, dusty sky.

One of the photos showed a flower-picker with a torn face shell smiling in agony :

[Despite working overtime every day without rest, not a regular employee, picking 40kg of dried rose leaves just to get one bottle of low-grade perfume... It's the happiest thing in the world to work in a rose factory.]

[We're changing the world, saving others.]

[If we work hard, we might lower the price of perfume and save more lives!]

-- Said a dying flower-picker.
(At the time of this report, the flower-picker was fired for breaching Rose Factory regulations by leaking details of his work to the public.)

The Rose Factory

The sky darkens.

Liu Jiayi and Bai Liu, battered and bruised, lay by the flower field. They had been back for a while, recuperating after a daytime battle with the stragglers that nearly drained their stamina.

But they had managed to make it back.

Upon his return, Bai Liu noticed two new, larger sacks of linen by the flower field. The processor had come and left them, to be filled with roses picked from this evening.

Liu Jiayi, still lying next to Bai Liu and catching her breath, spoke up. "I've got about an hour or two to recover my stamina. Do we wait, or do we head to the fields to pick roses and attract the stragglers?"

"Your plan to use the other four requires a lot of stragglers, doesn't it?" Liu Jiayi sat up, propping herself up with her hands, twisting her shoulders and shaking her hands to warm up.

She glanced at Bai Liu, who sat beside her. "I think it's a risky option, but you're not changing it, are you?"

Bai Liu rolled his eyes at her. "No."

Liu Jiayi sighed deeply, her expression like that of a worried old lady fretting over the future of her lazy, laid-off son. She turned to Bai Liu, propping her forehead on her hand.

"I sometimes wish you, an adult in your twenties, would make better choices than always betting on winnable fights. Why not take a more sensible approach like some other players?"

She sighed again. "But it's still too early to expect much from you. You're a C-rank player. You can rely on me now, but later, you'll have to rely on yourself."

Bai Liu stayed silent.

"So, what now?" Liu Jiayi asked. "Your plan is to use the stragglers to draw the other four players, right? But how are you going to attract the stragglers if we don't pick roses?"

Bai Liu slowly pulled a bottle of perfume from his pocket.

Liu Jiayi stared at the bottle for a moment before turning her gaze to Bai Liu's face, expressionless. "This is our last bottle of perfume. If you waste it as bait, I swear I'll kill you."

Bai Liu didn't respond.

He cautiously twisted open the cap of the perfume bottle.

Liu Jiayi held it up, giving him a sweet smile. "I'm not joking, Brother Bai Liu. This is something I earned from my first job. Don't waste it on me — you've already used one bottle today."

Bai Liu didn't reply.

Liu Jiayi crossed her arms, visibly angry. "You're really something... though, I suppose you've made a mess of things today."

Thinking back to the events of the day, Bai Liu's eyes wandered. "But perfume is the fastest way to attract stragglers..."

Liu Jiayi snapped. "If you knew you'd use the last one at night, you shouldn't have wasted the others during the day! Please, cherish the fruits of our labor! Stop trying to take shortcuts!"

Bai Liu knelt down with his hands on his thighs, apologizing quickly. "Sorry. I got so focused on maximizing the perfume's value that I didn't consider our survival rate. My bad."

Liu Jiayi, still angry, pointed at him. "You're a child! Don't keep doing this! Survival should be your priority! How will you ever survive in a game where survival is the key to victory?"

She scolded him like a nurse reprimanding a tactician who was too focused on strategy and points.

"I'll consider survival rates next time," Bai Liu said, nodding and pretending to take her words seriously. He quickly changed the subject. "But for tonight, to get the most dried leaf roses, let's just do it. I'm using the perfume."

Bai Liu's hand was already on the bottle.

Liu Jiayi didn't even respond.

The night grew darker.

Tang Erda stood alert, holding his gun, eyes scanning the area, ready to hunt. His sack lay discarded to the side, containing only a few dried leaf roses—far less than he'd hoped for.

After learning the game's rules, he realized the rose-picking task wasn't about gathering roses; it was about stealing the fruits of others' labor by luring stragglers.

Since he had gathered 40 kg of roses the previous night, he could have collected more, but tonight's 80 kg was too much. Tang Erda abandoned the task and decided to spend the night hunting stragglers instead.

But something was off. Last night, a large number of stragglers had attacked him, but tonight—Tang Erda walked along the ridge and saw nothing but the few that had attacked earlier in the day.

He frowned, eyeing the sack he'd discarded. Had he not picked enough roses tonight? Was the bait not as effective as it had been last night?

By this time, the presence of dried leaf roses should have attracted at least a few stragglers. No experienced player would move recklessly in such a mentally contaminated map, but the situation was unusual. Without stragglers, Tang Erda wouldn't be able to complete his mission.

With no other choice, he decided to take the initiative and search for the stragglers himself.

The flower field was eerily silent as Tang Erda walked along the ridge in a particular direction. There, he saw other flower-pickers—like him—moving silently to gather the roses. The workers were wrapped in black veils, their movements quick and mechanical. As Tang Erda watched, he noticed something strange. Some workers seemed to be withering before his eyes, their hands reduced to white bones, yet they continued to pick.

The fear on their faces wasn't from their own deterioration, but from the possibility of losing their jobs—because in this world, not having a job was worse than death.

Tang Erda's heart hardened as he turned away from the grim sight. He had seen this before so many times that it no longer stirred anger, but cold indifference.

It seemed that once the dried leaf rose gas became widespread, it would be impossible to change the world. Those deceived by it would gladly offer their life savings and labor, still convinced it was worth it.

A full moon shone overhead, casting its pale glow across the field. The flower field was divided into two distinct worlds by the moonlight—outside, a dark and empty landscape; inside, a beautiful, oil-painted scene of roses and workers, all bathed in the soft light.

The flowers, the workers, the scent—all seemed to tell a story of paradise, one that the media would soon glorify, painting the rose factory as a symbol of beauty and rarity.

To the citizens watching, this scene was a lie, a sedative to mask the truth. The high price of perfume became acceptable because it was easier to blame the rose factory than face the truth of their own inability to afford it.

The rose was a false salvation—a message pushed by the media, convincing people to buy into the illusion.

Tang Erda's hand tightened around his gun as he watched.

Suddenly, a shadow flickered across the field. Tang Erda's eyes narrowed.

A swarm of stragglers, moving in unison, approached something in the field—a bottle of perfume placed carefully in the center. The stragglers, attracted by the sweet smell, couldn't reach the perfume. It was as if an invisible barrier kept them at bay.

It was a trap.

Without hesitation, Tang Erda drew his gun and aimed at the bottle, but as he did, he felt a strange, suffocating pressure. The air around him seemed to freeze, restricting his movements.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu extends (Magic Space) to trap player Tang Erda.]

The Rose Factory

In just a second, a white bone whip materialized from nowhere, shattering the perfume bottle with a sharp "pop."

The perfume seeped into the ground, leaving only a faint pink fragrance to fill the night air. The pure scent of roses drove the stragglers into a frenzy, causing them to swarm into the space.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has changed the rules for entering and exiting the Magic Space. The rule has been updated from "No stragglers allowed" to "No players allowed out, stragglers allowed in and out freely."]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu changes the shape of the Magic Space from an irregular rectangle to a 6-square-meter hexahedron, ensuring that player Tang Erda can move freely within it.]

The stragglers opened their scarlet, greedy eyes, extending their tentacles toward the perfume-soaked Tang Erda, one by one entering the [Magic Space].

The narrow stacks that had bound Tang Erda widened with a swoosh, his jammer's draw flowing seamlessly as his gaze remained fixed on the group of stragglers lunging toward him. He flicked the hammer of his revolver.

A crisp "click" echoed from the chamber, followed by six consecutive shots: "Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang."

The revolver discharged six rapid bursts of fire, each bullet hitting its mark with deadly precision, cutting down the stragglers an instant before they could reach the trapped hunter.

As the roses fell from the withered stragglers, their twisted faces wore mad, contented smiles. They had finally smelled the roses they had dreamed of before dying.

Before Tang Erda stood the masses of fallen stragglers, yet no matter how many he killed, more would emerge from the ground.

He gritted his teeth, pushing back the steady stream of stragglers drawn by the scent. His deep blue eyes glowed a fiery red.

— Bai Liu, this guy is always one step ahead!

Bai Liu had carefully set this trap to lure in other players chasing the stragglers for their quest. He had then trapped Tang Erda in the Magic Space while hiding in the shadows, relying on the others to eliminate the stragglers for him.

Bai Liu planned to let the players exhaust themselves all night, then swoop in to collect the roses the stragglers had left behind, finishing the job they had done.

As for those who failed the task and lost the fruits of their labor—either they'd be exiled or forced to keep working while Bai Liu breezed past, rapidly climbing the ranks on their efforts.

Tang Erda's teeth clenched as his revolver fired faster, mowing down the stragglers. He was surrounded by roses falling from their lifeless bodies—but even so, there was no time to use his [Suicide Bullet] skill.

Tang Erda wanted to strike back at Bai Liu with a [Suicide Bullet] or at least force the man hiding behind the scenes to show himself. However, with the constant stream of stragglers flooding in, it was impossible to find an opening to use such a powerful burst skill, especially since [Suicide Bullet] had a ten-minute cooldown.

Bai Liu had planned it perfectly, never giving Tang Erda a chance to retaliate.

"Mr. Hunter?" One of the three members of the King's Guild, who had entered with Tang Erda, was trailing behind the wave of stragglers. He came out to look for them, as few stragglers were left near the Rose Field.

The man eyed Tang Erda, who was barely moving, still fighting off stragglers in the middle of the flower field. He took a step toward him. "You're...?"

Tang Erda snapped his head around and barked, "Stay back!!!"

But it was too late.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu extends the Magic Space, trapping player Qi Yifang.]

Trapped in an invisible glass cage, Qi Yifang blinked at the stragglers advancing toward him and then at Tang Erda, holding his forehead. Realization dawned, and he finally understood why Tang Erda had

warned him to stay back.

Forced to pull out his weather gauge, Qi Yifang couldn't help but laugh. Bai Liu had set up a one-on-four trap.

No wonder the Queen was struggling with him.

"What a shot, tsk tsk." Liu Jiayi, holding a telescope, watched the scene with great interest. Under her breath, she sighed dramatically. "Bai Liu, you're too much. You've got all four of them working for you without lifting a finger."

Bai Liu, having retreated after breaking the perfume with his whip, was now hiding behind the factory with Liu Jiayi. He too had a telescope, watching the scene unfold.

Through the lens, they could see the four players from opposite sides of the fence working tirelessly for Bai Liu. What a touching sight it was!

Unfortunately, the people involved didn’t share the same sentiment.

The roses piled up, but Tang Erda, despite his immense effort, couldn't pick them up as the stragglers kept coming. Yet, Tang Erda remained composed. His shots were precise, taking down one straggler after another. He was surrounded by the most roses, consciously piling them around himself, his cold eyes scanning the fields for Bai Liu.

It seemed Bai Liu was waiting for an opportunity to show himself and pick up the roses.

"Eh!" Liu Jiayi nudged Bai Liu and pointed at Tang Erda through the binoculars. "I didn’t expect Captain Tang to be this strong."

"Not bad for an opponent you’ve unfortunately recruited," Liu Jiayi praised.

Bai Liu: "..."

Liu Jiayi continued watching Tang Erda through the binoculars, then lowered them, her tone turning serious. "This man’s gun skills are even harder to deal with than I thought. I’ve been watching him—aside from a brief moment to reload, I haven’t seen any noticeable skill cooldowns."

"His quick reloading and high attack value—judging by the fact he can

kill an A+ monster with one shot—his attack value must be at least five thousand."

Liu Jiayi looked at Bai Liu. "You've got them all trapped in a small area now, but this Tang guy is a long-range attacker, and his shot accuracy is flawless. He'll be able to target you whenever you show yourself. He's probably just waiting for you to show up and pick up the roses."

"Have you figured out how you're going to do that yet?" Liu Jiayi raised an eyebrow. "Are you still going with that plan from this morning? It could easily flop."

"It doesn't matter if it flops. Nothing will happen to us," Bai Liu replied with a smirk, holding up his binoculars. "After all, I'm not the one picking up the roses."

Liu Jiayi sighed from the bottom of her heart. "Yes, you really are a master at undermining others."

As Liu Jiayi observed, Tang Erda was indeed waiting for Bai Liu to appear so he could pick up the roses.

At first, Tang Erda had been frustrated after being trapped, but he soon calmed down. The [Magic Space] wasn't just limiting their movement—it was also restricting Bai Liu's ability to move and access the loot. The roses from the slain stragglers were concentrated around Tang Erda, and with the space so confined, Bai Liu would have to come to him if he wanted to collect the loot.

So Tang Erda simply needed to be patient, waiting for his prey to appear. After all, patience was the hallmark of a hunter.

Tang Erda and Bai Liu had chased each other through so many worlds. Patience was something Tang Erda had mastered, especially when it came to Bai Liu.

But time passed—an hour, two hours, three hours...

The first rays of dawn broke the sky, but Bai Liu still hadn't shown up.

The other three members of the King's Guild, exhausted after hours of fighting, were starting to falter. Only Tang Erda maintained his accuracy and efficiency, while the others began to slip.

The gaps left by their mistakes were swiftly filled by Tang Erda.

Qi Yifang, panting and wide-eyed, observed the mysterious hunter they had come in with. He had thought they were supposed to protect this unknown player, given the Guild's reputation and the unknown player's seemingly low profile.

In the game, players who were strong yet obscure were a rare sight.

But this man...

"Bang bang!"

Qi Yifang watched in slow motion as a silver bullet whizzed past him, hitting a lunging straggler behind him, clearing a hole in his defense. Another bullet grazed the shoulder of a teammate, taking down a straggler from behind, relieving the pressure on the tired player.

Qi Yifang turned his astonished gaze toward Tang Erda, who was reloading with precision.

Tang Erda never looked away from the battlefield, his eyes fixed on the pile of stragglers, swiftly switching magazines before raising his revolver again.

Qi Yifang was dumbfounded.

This man's combat prowess was terrifying!

While he dominated the battlefield, he also provided silent support for his teammates, covering their defenses and protecting them seamlessly.

This man was a one-man army—a [gun] and a [shield] in one.

And all at a league-level ability!

If the King's Guild had someone like this on their team, along with the little witch who could both attack and heal...

Qi Yifang swallowed nervously as he watched Tang Erda, who was still attacking with flawless precision.

This was undoubtedly the strongest King's Guild team configuration ever.

In his mind, he already envisioned their victory, standing on the podium with the Queen of Hearts in his arms, a wicked smile on his face.

Another player frowned as he approached Qi Yifang, interrupting his thoughts.

This was the player who had just been saved by Tang Erda after struggling to withstand an attack. Now, his voice trembled with fear as he spoke: “Brother Qi, something doesn’t feel right…”

Qi Yifang, the strongest member of the King’s trio and likely to be in the King’s core team, was more accustomed to receiving reports from the other two players than from Tang Erda, who was quiet, distant, and unnervingly strong.

Turning away from Tang Erda, Qi Yifang looked at the player and asked, “What’s wrong? What’s happening?”

The player’s face was grim as he replied, “Brother Qi, don’t you think… that the roses around us are slowly disappearing?”

Qi Yifang froze at his words. The back of Tang Erda’s attack faltered for half a second, and he briefly paused while withdrawing his gun.

Both men looked around, but the roses showed no visible signs of fading.

However, something felt off.

After three hours of attacking stragglers, the roses should have been increasing, not disappearing!

Qi Yifang’s expression shifted. “Could someone be stealing the roses? Has Bai Liu arrived?”

They were patiently battling these frenzied monsters, waiting for Bai Liu to come and steal the exploding roses!

“Impossible,” Tang Erda replied immediately, his voice firm. “I haven’t seen anyone else approach. Only the stragglers are coming near, attracted by the perfume.”

But as soon as he finished speaking, Tang Erda’s expression darkened. He had been vigilantly watching the surroundings, and if Bai Liu had really appeared, he would have noticed.

So, who was stealing the roses?

In the distance, Bai Liu raised his binoculars, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. A mountain of dried-leaf roses had accumulated around him, still growing as people—stragglers—transported or stole roses.

The stragglers, though ragged, appeared clear-headed and were silently assisting in the rose theft. They were the same group that had attacked Bai Liu at the abandoned factory earlier.

The stragglers had quietly blended into the chaos of the attacking monsters, carefully picking the roses from the edges of the [Magic Space], making sure not to draw attention or get too close to Tang Erda's line of fire.

While the others were distracted by the attacking monsters, the more conscious stragglers managed to transfer a significant amount of dried-leaf roses to Bai Liu's side.

Bai Liu had once considered using stragglers from the flower fields to help him steal from other flower pickers. After his interactions with the stragglers at the factory, Bai Liu realized that those who spent too much time in the flower fields were hopelessly addicted to the perfume.

Even in higher concentrations, the perfume only temporarily subdued them but couldn't bring them back to their senses.

The stragglers who haunted the night had fully merged with the dried-leaf roses, losing their humanity and becoming full-fledged monsters, which was why they were listed in The Rose Factory's monster book.

But Bai Liu had realized something important: stragglers who hadn't fallen too deep into addiction could still regain their sanity. If he could keep them away from the perfume, they could be restored. This was crucial, as the game wouldn't include pointless rules.

One of the stragglers, now clearer-headed, approached Bai Liu with gratitude.

"Mr. Bai Liu, we've gathered 160kg of dried-leaf roses. Should we collect more?" he asked, his face still marked by the wilting effects of the perfume, but his eyes far more lucid.

Bai Liu nodded. Meanwhile, Liu Jiayi, who had been healing some

injured stragglers, looked on. The injured were mostly minor wounds, easily treated with Liu Jiayi's antidote.

The healed stragglers were visibly moved—no one had treated them like human beings in a long time. In the factory, they were outcasts.

The straggler who had spoken to Bai Liu hesitated, then looked up at him, his face a mix of awe and uncertainty.

"I'm… I'm grateful for the perfume you gave us during the day. It helped us regain our sanity, even for a brief moment, so we could talk to you like human beings again," he said. "Please, I must ask, is it true you'll make the perfume available to all the exiles?"

Bai Liu smiled, not missing a beat. "Of course it's true," he replied, setting his binoculars down. "If you're willing to work with me and support me in becoming the factory manager, I promise that all stragglers will stop falling into madness and can live normal lives."

He gestured for them to follow him. "Tomorrow, I'll continue distributing the perfume I've earned. Just meet me at the usual place."

His words were met with silence, then a flurry of quiet murmurs as the stragglers looked at him with disbelief.

"Of course," Bai Liu added with a smile, "There's one more thing I need you to do: gather all the stragglers around tomorrow and bring them to me. I'll help them regain their sanity as well, and together we'll work towards a better future."

The leader of the stragglers, eyes glistening with emotion, wiped his hands on his tattered clothes before carefully shaking Bai Liu's hand.

"We believe in you!" he choked out, voice shaking with emotion. "We'd do anything for someone like you—someone who has selflessly rescued us. We'd give our lives if necessary!"

Bai Liu smiled softly, exuding an almost holy aura. "No need to thank me. We're working together—that's just what I do."

Tears welled in the straggler's eyes as he gripped Bai Liu's hand. "No… no, you gave us your precious perfume. You worked so hard for it, and now you've given it all to help us. You're truly a good person!"

Liu Jiayi quietly observed the scene, her gaze shifting from the 160kg of roses being carried by the stragglers to the distant four players still

trapped in the [Magic Space], fighting fiercely.

Her eyes then fell on Bai Liu, who was smiling contentedly but had done nothing himself throughout the night.

“It’s not too hard,” Bai Liu remarked with a casual wave. “It’s like working for the capitalists. They suck the life out of you, and there’s no time to enjoy it. So, I might as well use the perfume I’ve earned for a good cause.”

The stragglers were moved beyond words. “Mr. Bai Liu, you’re a great man!” they cried.

Liu Jiayi couldn’t help but think, “Bai Liu is truly frightening.”

The next morning, as the roses in the flower fields began to close their petals, the waves of attacking stragglers ceased. The invisible barrier vanished, and Qi Yifang, exhausted, collapsed onto the ground after the last straggler was taken down by Tang Erda.

His muscles and mind were drained, and even the best restorative couldn’t relieve the intense fatigue. Even someone as trained as Qi Yifang struggled to keep up with the non-stop battle.

The other two players were equally exhausted, lying limply in the mud.

Only Tang Erda, after collecting some roses and securing them in sacks, remained standing. With a cold, stoic expression, he said, “I’ll take these. The rest are for you. The workers who helped count my roses are waiting for me in the field.”

Without another word, he turned and walked away.

Qi Yifang watched him go, stunned. He reached out, unsure of what to say. Should he thank the powerful hunter who had protected them all night? But Tang Erda’s cold departure made it clear that his thanks were unnecessary.

It seemed that the mysterious hunter’s protection was driven purely by a sense of duty toward his teammates.

One of the players next to Qi Yifang began counting the roses. Halfway through, he looked up, confused. “Brother Qi, we didn’t collect 80kg of roses each last night, did we?”

Qi Yifang sat up, rubbing his temples. “No, I counted earlier, and it was still a long way off. What’s wrong? Did that hunter take a lot of roses?”

“Well, yes,” the player said, trailing off. “He probably took the roses that completed the job.”

Qi Yifang thought for a moment, realizing that the three of them had likely collected less than 80kg in total, and some roses had gone missing.

“Wait,” he said, a sudden realization dawning on him. “That hunter left enough roses for each of us to reach 80kg?”

The player nodded. “Yes, exactly.”

Qi Yifang was stunned. “How many monsters did he fight alone to gather this much?”

Only after the three men left Bai Liu’s flower field did Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi emerge from the shadows.

Though they had stayed away from the flower fields to avoid contaminating their minds with the perfume, they had not used any themselves. Now, both were feeling the effects.

But this soon became irrelevant.

The processors who came to settle the bill were shocked by the amount of roses Bai Liu had brought.

After weighing the pile multiple times in disbelief, the processor turned to Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi with a suspicious gaze.

“200kg of dried-leaf roses?” the processor asked incredulously. “You gathered this in just one night?”

Bai Liu spoke sincerely, "We have an exceptionally high level of labor coordination; one person can accomplish the work of a hundred kg."

Liu Jiayi nodded eagerly, "Yes, yes!"

Though the processor wasn't convinced and clearly reluctant, the two hundred kilograms of roses sat right in front of the tent, making it undeniable.

The processor shot them a hateful glare, threw four bottles of low-grade rose perfume their way, grabbed the heavy sack of roses, and gestured for them to follow.

"You've been promoted to processor," the processor said coldly. "Competition in this line of work is fierce. If you don't perform well, you could easily be demoted back to a lowly flower picker. Now, follow me and learn how to become a proper processor."

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Bai Liu for exceeding the side quest's requirements.]

[Mission Reward: Player Bai Liu receives 4 bottles of low-level perfume and gains progress in the main mission (promoted to Processor).]

Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi exchanged a glance and followed the processor, returning once again to the rose factory where they had been working day and night.

This was the second time Bai Liu had stepped into the piazza outside the Rose Factory.

The rose petals collected on the piazza were sorted and dried on thick plastic sheets. Processors in tight protective clothing moved back and forth, while several large pots were set up to dry the petals.

"The processors are responsible for collecting freshly picked dried-leaf roses from the lower-level flower pickers," one of them explained.

The processors led Bai Liu inside without a glance, continuing to explain as they walked. "Once collected, the roses are washed and

dried here in the piazza and on the roof. After the leaves and stems are removed, the fresh petals are dried under both daylight and moonlight for twelve hours before moving on to the next step."

The processor pointed to the cauldrons in the corner where workers were pouring petals into them.

"Once the petals have dried sufficiently, they are tossed or further dried in these pots until they turn a light pink, like the inner lips of a young girl. At that point, the dried-leaf roses are ready for pre-processing, and you will need to deliver them to the official factory workers for the next stage."

The processors led them down the same long corridor they had walked through before, but this time, instead of going straight, they turned right as they passed the exhibition hall. The narrow corridor stretched ahead.

To the left and right of the hall were serially numbered rooms, reminiscent of prison cells, with a staircase at the end leading upward.

"This is the processors' dormitory," the processor said, gesturing toward the rooms. "You won't be staying in tents anymore. Our dormitories are on three floors, one room per eight people. You can use the stairs to go up. The factory workers' rooms are above, two people per room, and on the top floor, we have the perfumers' rooms. They're single units—spacious and bright. But the factory workers and perfumers' floors are off-limits to lowly processors like us."

"The top floor is for the perfumers' rooms," Bai Liu asked, "So where is the factory manager's room?"

The processor paused at the question, seeming taken aback, and snapped angrily, "The factory manager's room is somewhere you won't be going!"

Bai Liu looked at the processor innocently. "But I need to know where it is, right? So I don't accidentally wander in. What if I break into the factory manager's room by mistake?"

The processor's face tightened slightly, but he sneered, "The factory manager's room isn't somewhere you can wander into just by chance."

"Alright, then," Bai Liu continued, "I'll move on to the next thing. What's upstairs?"

The processor's tone softened. "Up ahead, to the right, is the infirmary. Staff can call in sick there, but if you're lazy, you'll have to come back and work as soon as you're healed."

"Now, let's talk about processor salaries." The processor turned to look at Bai Liu. "As processors, you're now considered half-time employees of the Rose Factory, and you'll receive a base salary of three bottles of low-grade perfume per day as long as you complete your basic tasks."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "What are the basic tasks?"

"You'll each need to process 240 kilograms of dried-leaf roses per day for the factory workers," the processor explained.

Liu Jiayi slowly looked up, her voice strained. "Did you just say 240 kilograms?"

The processor sneered, "Yes, 240 kilograms. Your job includes sifting, drying, and processing those roses. It's the most basic task, and if you don't finish it, you won't receive your base salary and will be replaced by upgraded flower pickers after three days."

"For new processors, working all night is the norm to finish the job, and you'll find the dormitories to be a luxury."

The processor gave Bai Liu a false pat on the shoulder. "Oh, and here's something you probably don't need to know, but I'll tell you anyway. The May Rose Festival is coming up, and processors have been given an incentive to work in the factory. For every additional 60 kilograms of roses processed beyond the basic task, you'll get a bottle of medium-grade rose perfume."

"Do a good job," the processor mocked, "Don't keep wandering around thinking about the factory manager. If you don't finish your tasks, you'll be left behind in three days."

"With your current work badges, you can levy roses from the flower pickers. Take as much as you can handle, but remember, the roses you pick won't stay fresh for more than half a day. Any wasted roses will be deducted from your pay. Over there is where you can collect your processor uniforms. Change and get to work."

The processors showed Bai Liu where to change and then quickly turned away, with Rose in tow, heading back to the open-air factory.

[System Prompt: Trigger a side quest - Get a bottle of medium-grade

Rose Dried Leaf Gas perfume.]

Liu Jiayi stood in silence for a moment before speaking. "240 kilograms for daily tasks and 60 kilograms for bonus tasks. That's a total of 300 kilograms of dried-leaf roses to process. Even if we work non-stop for 24 hours, that's still 12.5 kilograms per hour…"

"No," Bai Liu interjected, "It's more than that. Since the drying process takes a full day and night after collection, we won't even be able to start on the first day. And according to what the processor said, if we don't finish the basic tasks in three days, we'll be replaced. So in the next two days, we'll need to process 360 kilograms. And if we also add the bonus tasks…"

Bai Liu shrugged calmly. "Well, it's just normal overtime for us working stiffs. I can live with that."

Liu Jiayi sighed. "..."

Liu Jiayi was starting to dread entering society too soon.

Bai Liu and his team went to collect their uniforms. Normally, they would have gone to the flower fields to collect roses as instructed, but Bai Liu was relieved to leave Liu Jiayi alone to handle 720 kilograms of roses. Waving his hand, he said he had to go.

Liu Jiayi, speechless, called after him, "I can't handle that much alone. You'd better come back soon."

"I know," Bai Liu replied with a grin, lowering his eyes to the four bottles of perfume he was holding. "I'm just going to get some help, aren't I?"

As Bai Liu turned to leave, Liu Jiayi called out to him, "Wait!"

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow and turned back.

[System Alert: Player Liu Jiayi spent 200 points to activate the (Small TV Mute) service.]

Liu Jiayi glanced around to make sure no one was near, then stepped closer to Bai Liu and whispered, "I told you about the four players you lured in last night, three of whom were senior members of the King's Guild, right?"

Bai Liu nodded.

"I think it's that hunter working with the King's Guild," Liu Jiayi said, her frown deepening. "The hunter's target is obviously you, and I think the King's Guild is working with him because their target is me."

Liu Jiayi paused for a moment, her lips pressed together before speaking again. "Hearts… The Queen has high expectations of me. She's training me to be a tactician for this mission. If I betray the guild, it would have a huge impact on the King's Guild's standing in this league…"

"By you blatantly bringing me into the game, the group is probably coming for you. With how the Queen works, she's bound to think that if I kill you, I'll return to the King's Guild…"

Liu Jiayi tugged at the oversized protective suit she was wearing, her fingers nervously twisting behind her back. She looked away and muttered a quick apology, "Sorry, I know this is troubling for you."

There was a reason Liu Jiayi said this. If Bai Liu had simply saved her and let her heal her injuries, she could have been thrown into the Level 3 game to pass and come out on her own.

This would have kept Bai Liu from becoming a target for the Hearts Guild and allowed Liu Jiayi to heal quickly and escape. It would have been the best solution, though admittedly without much conscience.

But doing that would have left Liu Jiayi alone to face the King's Guild. The King's Guild wouldn't harm her, but they would try to restrict her freedom and keep her trapped in the guild for the tournament.

Hearts' brainwashing skills were effective, and with all their mental manipulation techniques, it wouldn't be hard for them to control Liu Jiayi's loyalty to the King's Guild.

Liu Jiayi feared falling under the Queen's spell again and becoming the same confused, doubting person she once was.

Bai Liu, however, had entered this situation alongside her, clearly to protect her and take on the King's Guild directly, using himself as a diversion.

Liu Jiayi wasn't foolish. She knew Bai Liu was asking for trouble to help her, and that's why she offered her apology.

--Although she had once saved Bai Liu's life by taking a bullet for him, it was only a way to return the favor.

Little Bai Liu saved her once at the orphanage, and Bai Liu had saved her from death at the church.

Now, it was her turn to owe him. Liu Jiayi was somewhat regretful, knowing her debt to Bai Liu wasn’t going to be settled anytime soon.

After her quiet apology, she quickly glanced up to gauge Bai Liu’s reaction. When he calmly said, "Is that really how you're going to apologize?"

Liu Jiayi: "..."

The Rose Factory

Liu Jiayi expressionlessly lifts the poison.

Bai Liu glances at the steaming glass bottle in her hand and quickly changes his tone: "It was a whisper, but I heard it clearly, a thunderous apology—just like I expected from Liu Jiayi's little friend."

Liu Jiayi holds her forehead in frustration. "You don't give me the benefit of the doubt, then go off and do something dangerous. I'm asking you this because I need to know—do you have a solution?"

Bai Liu, who rarely talks to his teammates about his plans, appears pleasant but is a dictatorial leader when it comes to executing his strategies. He only expects others to follow without questioning his decisions because his plans are fixed. There's little reason to share them, after all.

The truth is, this "sick-brained king" is always the one on the frontlines, carrying out his dangerous schemes.

"When you come up with a plan, talk to your teammates," Liu Jiayi, a reserve tactician with advanced league training, sighs in frustration. "If there are unexpected changes, I can assist with maneuvering."

Bai Liu watches Liu Jiayi quietly as she speaks, waiting for her to finish.

Liu Jiayi meets his gaze. "I understand why you didn't share your plan with the others. It's because your plans are so extreme, so finely tuned, that there's no room for error. Telling anyone wouldn't change anything."

"You're great at the game, Bai Liu. You win every gamble, but you're playing a different kind of match now."

"In the league, your approach is a failure."

Liu Jiayi continues, "You're not playing against a fixed game—you're up against five highly coordinated players. Teams bring far more unpredictability than a game ever could."

"Don't underestimate your opponents," she urges. "And don't underestimate your teammates."

Liu Jiayi steps closer, her fist clenched. "Tell me about your plans."

Bai Liu stands still for a moment, then stares at Liu Jiayi, who refuses to look away.

Liu Jiayi is right—Bai Liu has grown accustomed to making decisions alone, giving orders instead of collaborating. Most of his previous teammates, like Mu Sicheng, weren't sharp enough to keep up with him. Others, like Muke, were dependent on him and had a psychological barrier. Neither could truly contribute to the planning phase, and following Bai Liu's lead could either bring riches or disaster.

But Liu Jiayi is different. She's the first teammate who's capable of effective counter-strategizing, and her analytical mind is just as sharp as Bai Liu's.

Liu Jiayi's tactical knowledge, experience, and maturity surpass even Bai Liu's in some areas. She's not like the players he's worked with before.

In the last round, Liu Jiayi even played against two league-level players despite his emotional vulnerability and triggered the main storyline to save Bai Liu. He was the first to find Bai Liu after the match and the first to realize something was off when Tang Erda took a bullet for him.

Bai Liu couldn't deny it—Liu Jiayi was a teammate worth having a serious conversation with. His advice was practical, grounded, and effective.

To Bai Liu's surprise, Liu Jiayi's words have an effect. He squats down to meet her eye level, admitting his mistake. "You're right. I should've shared the plan with you."

Liu Jiayi blinks, taken aback.

Sitting cross-legged on the ground to lower his height, Bai Liu accesses his panel and explains his plan openly. "Here's the strategy... Their main goal is to kill me in order to capture you. If that's the case, we can do this..."

Liu Jiayi listens intently before cutting in. "No. You'll be used as bait. You can't fish for five people alone; it's too risky. If anything goes wrong, you're as good as dead."

Bai Liu considers her advice. "Is there a way to reduce the risk?"

Liu Jiayi pauses, then browses her system panel. After a moment, she pulls out a Hearts Ace playing card. "This is a skill card given to me by the Queen. It can protect me and can only be used once in the game."

She hands it to Bai Liu. "Based on your plan, I think this could help reduce the risk."

Bai Liu examines the card, then looks back at Liu Jiayi. "You're asking me to make both of us bait, huh?" He grins, taking the card between his fingers. "I trust your ability to escape as bait. This gives me a great tactical idea."

"Is there someone on the team you're particularly close to?" Bai Liu asks, casually stuffing the card into his pocket and standing up.

Liu Jiayi thinks for a moment. "Yes. Qi Yifang. I've saved him more than once."

Bai Liu's eyes brighten. "Ah, I remember hearing about Qi Yifang. He has a unique skill set that could be useful in the processor segment."

He turns, walking ahead, then suddenly stops and looks back at Liu Jiayi, his expression full of gentle curiosity. "Really? Can you tell me more about him?"

Liu Jiayi smiles inwardly, knowing that Bai Liu's delight signals another "recruitment" for his schemes.

I'm sorry, Qi Yifang -- Liu Jiayi silently apologises in her heart.

Qi Yifang sneezes, rubs his nose, and continues struggling with his black protective suit, hopping on one foot to put on his boots.

The other two King's Guild players are changing clothes, their faces full of concern.

They haven't played many level 3 games, though they've watched plenty of videos to prepare. This is their first time encountering such strange game rules.

240kg of dried leaf roses—this is no game, it's a job!

"Brother Qi, it's really hard for us to continue at this pace," one of the

King's Guild players says. "All three of us are stuck at 720kg of dried leaf roses per day now. With sifting, drying, and concocting, we don't have enough time."

After dressing, Qi Yifang pats his thick protective suit, which feels a little uncomfortable. He recalls the main steps of the work process he saw earlier in the piazza.

...sifting out stalks, drying, drying, and concocting...

After briefly running through the steps in his head, Qi Yifang remains calm. He casually pats the two worried players on the shoulder, giving them a thumbs-up and a confident smile.

"I don't know how to pick roses, but I can handle the processes of drying the roses!"

The two King's Guild players exchange a quick glance, and suddenly the realization hits them.

Right!

Qi Yifang's skills are perfect for this!

He's a [weather observer]!

Tang Erda tightened the collar of his suit, exposing one ankle beneath. He moved uncomfortably, the zipper on the collar and waist too tight, and the suit itself slightly too small for him.

The factory worker who had brought him here scratched his head, looking a bit flustered. "This is the largest size of protective clothing. Wait here; I'll go see if there's an extra-large one available for you."

"You're too tall..." The factory worker's gaze subtly shifted to the tight arms of the suit, the fabric pulling against Tang Erda's muscles. "And over-muscled..."

Great workout for the new processor...

Tang Erda ignored the factory worker's lingering gaze. He politely removed his protective clothing and handed it back to him. "Please."

"But it's good to be muscular," the factory worker remarked with a smile. "After all, being a processor is physically demanding. Do a good

job, and when you move up from processor to factory worker, you'll be a full-time employee and won’t be easily let go."

As the factory worker turned to leave, Tang Erda, who had been quiet up to this point, suddenly spoke up. "May I ask, do the processors all work together?"

The factory worker paused, thinking. "Not really. The open square in the factory where the dried leaf roses are handled is divided into four sections—southeast, northwest, and so on. The drying area is large enough to dry them near the flower fields, but they have to be guarded there to prevent theft. It’s better to dry them inside the factory."

"But if you’re a new processor, you won’t be able to grab a spot inside the factory," the factory worker continued, shaking his head. "The veteran processors will push you out, so you’ll only be able to dry them outside."

"Is there a place where all the processors work together?" Tang Erda asked.

The factory worker thought for a moment. "Yes, there is. After drying, everything is weighed centrally at the entrance on the north side of the factory."

"Oh, and one more thing," the factory worker added, returning with Tang Erda's clothes. "Be careful with the weather while drying the roses. If it rains, you’ll be in trouble. Any leaves that don’t fully dry will get moldy, and if the roses get moldy, the factory will punish the processors for wasting them."

The Rose Factory

Beside a field of roses, hundreds of kilograms of roses were gathered and stacked on a hill, facing the field. Qi Yifang stood before the roses, pulling out a directional marker that swung gently with the wind. He raised it toward the hill of roses, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath.

"… Air relative humidity: 78%, temperature: 26°C, cloudy to overcast, wind shifting from north at force one, light breeze..."

Qi Yifang's eyes snapped open. He adjusted the wooden directional marker with his thumb, his voice calm and steady: "Now, let's move on to today's daytime weather forecast."

[System Alert: Player Qi Yifang uses the skill (Weather Broadcast)]

[Skill Usage Range: A localized circular area with a radius of ten meters]

[Technique Effect: Predicts the weather in a local area and controls wind direction, wind speed, sunlight, rain, and possible weather changes within a designated area.]

[Note: This skill will drain a certain amount of stamina and mental strength. Are you sure you want to use it?]

[Confirm: OK]

The wooden directional marker in Qi Yifang's hand began to swing rapidly as the system processed the command, and his stamina and mental strength bars on his personal panel started to deplete.

Qi Yifang exhaled deeply and began broadcasting in a deep voice.

"… Light tornadoes with local winds for object weighting around 2g throughout the day, followed by twelve hours of sunshine, light winds overnight, cloudy to clear skies..."

The weathervane in his hand shifted from swaying side to side to spinning steadily as his words continued.

A cold, swirling wind suddenly formed, stopping at a small area beside the field. It began to swirl around the mound of roses, which weighed about 2g. The gentle rotation of the wind lifted the lighter

impurities, blowing them away, while the heavier debris remained undisturbed on the ground.

This magical tornado, calibrated to specific weight parameters, acted like a high-tech centrifuge, perfectly separating the roses from the rest of the debris.

In just ten minutes, what would have taken all day and night to sift through was cleaned, tidied up, and neatly stacked in a crumpled heap.

Qi Yifang retracted the weathervane, surveying the pile of dried leaf roses in front of him. He brushed off the scattered grass and debris from his clothes, turned with a satisfied smile, and looked at the two men beside him.

"It’s all taken care of. We can move on to the second session by tomorrow morning."

Rose Factory Piazza

A long queue had formed around a fully automatic mesh sieving apparatus.

This machine was a rare modern piece of equipment in a rose factory, where the roses were simply poured in for a few minutes of sifting, resulting in clean, dried leaf roses after sorting.

However, since the Rose Factory prided itself on its handcrafted, anti-industrial perfume brand, such machines were few and far between, and the old processors treated them like their own personal privilege.

Qi Yifang's group was about to queue up to use the apparatus, but they were quickly chased away by the older processors. The processors scolded them for being lazy, accusing them of trying to take shortcuts by using the machinery so soon after their promotion, and for not doing their jobs properly.

Although Qi Yifang and his companions weren’t intimidated by the processors, they understood the importance of not offending the NPCs in the game. They had a way of handling the work—namely, Qi Yifang's skills.

Using a skill that drained mental energy in a game where such energy

could not be replenished wasn't ideal, but Qi Yifang didn't want to escalate things. Their main objective was to save the little witch, so, in the end, he chose to hold his breath and move on with his companions.

But things took a turn when Tang Erda stepped into the queue.

The old processors, noticing he was a new recruit, immediately began muttering impatiently.

"Why are you newcomers so clueless?! Ah?! Trying to steal our instruments already! Do your job!" one of them barked.

"That's right. You just started, and already you're trying to use machinery to be lazy. If you don't learn the ropes, you'll be demoted. We're just trying to help you out," another processor sneered.

Tang Erda silently scanned the processors who were glaring at him. He didn't say a word, but his tall, muscular frame and the snug, fitted protective suit made it clear that he wasn't someone to be messed with.

The processors fell quiet, muttering under their breath but too intimidated to speak openly.

Just as Tang Erda was nearing the front of the line, an older processor cut in front of him, throwing him a provocative look. He clapped his hands and signaled for someone behind Tang Erda to also cut in.

It was clear that this processor was trying to prevent Tang Erda from using the apparatus, treating him as a newcomer who didn't deserve it.

Wouldn't the new recruits be more productive if they could use the instruments? But if the old processors didn't squeeze out the newcomers, it would be harder for them to climb the ranks to factory workers.

The Rose Factory had a high turnover rate among its workers, and the old processors knew that in order to advance, they needed to push the new recruits out of the way, using unspoken rules to squeeze out the newcomers' potential, ensuring their own promotions.

This was an accepted practice, even if it meant effectively ruining the newcomers' chances and forcing them into early demotion.

Qi Yifang, caught in the same predicament, saw no other option but to leave. They hadn't fully figured out the dynamics of this third-tier game yet, and provoking a large group of NPCs was not a good idea.

But Tang Erda wasn't afraid of offending the NPCs.

He was strong enough to take on the challenges of a Level 3 game, and if this situation led to him attracting hate from the processors, it would be the processors who would turn into monsters, not him.

Tang Erda shifted the sack of roses to his left hand, and with a cool, indifferent motion, a silver gun materialized in his right hand.

The heavy gun spun around his index finger before being lifted and aimed at the back of the older processor's head.

"I don't mind killing people before I start work," Tang Erda said calmly, his tone cold. "My previous job was to eliminate those who went bad. Do you think you're bad enough now?"

The older processor, who had been smug just moments ago, froze. His face drained of color, and with a nervous gulp, he stepped aside.

Tang Erda walked past him, pouring the roses into the sieving apparatus with no further words. He sifted the roses, filled the sack with the sorted flowers, tucked the gun behind his waist, and threw the sack over his shoulder. Without a word, he walked away.

The processors, who had just tried to give Tang Erda a hard time, quickly cleared a path for him, scowling in silence.

"What the hell is wrong with this new batch of processors?!" the processor who had been held at gunpoint muttered after making sure Tang Erda was out of sight. "They're either stealing our instruments or somehow finishing their work in no time. Two of them haven't even started sifting yet!"

"It's almost noon, and they've disappeared. If we don't start drying soon, we won't have enough roses to meet the required weight when we weigh them tomorrow." The processor gloated. "These two newcomers will probably be demoted straight to flower pickers."

Inside the Abandoned Factory

Bai Liu stood on a rusted shipping container, surrounded by a group of stragglers who had recently regained their senses.

The stragglers, still disoriented from their awakening by Bai Liu's perfume, sat obediently on the grimy floor, their eyes lifted toward him as if he were a savior— the last flicker of hope in their despair.

"I'm sure you all know Mr. Bai Liu," said a straggler standing next to Bai Liu on the container. This was the same man who had led them the previous night. He stood a half-step behind Bai Liu with deep respect, his eyes gleaming as he introduced him to the others. "The rose perfume you all received was earned by Mr. Bai Liu working in the factory. He distributed it to us for free!"

These words stirred a brief murmur among the stragglers, which quickly settled when the speaker pressed his hands down, signaling for calm.

"Alright, alright, please, no excitement just yet. Mr. Bai Liu has more good news for us." The straggler excitedly stepped back and gestured for Bai Liu to speak. "Now, please, Bai Liu, say a few words to us!"

Bai Liu stepped forward, his voice calm yet clear. The stragglers fell silent, their attention fixed on him. His voice resonated in the empty, decaying factory, undisturbed by the dilapidation around them.

"I want to help you from the bottom of my heart," Bai Liu began, pulling out a fresh bottle of perfume from his pocket. His expression was serene, his tone sincere. "But as it stands, I am only a lowly processor in the factory, earning my wages like everyone else, paid regularly each day."

"I can currently earn up to three bottles of low-grade perfume a day. A single bottle lasts up to four hours, but with that amount, I can't afford to keep all of you awake for long. At this rate, I won't be able to help you for much longer."

His words caused the stragglers' faces to fall. Their hope dimmed.

But no one voiced anger or disappointment. After all, Bai Liu had been their divine-like figure, offering them a glimmer of humanity, however fleeting. It had been so long since they had felt human that they struggled to remember what it even meant. Their bones itched from the growing tentacles beneath their skin, their minds clouded by the perfume. They hadn't felt truly human in ages, and yet, here was Bai Liu, offering them a reprieve, if only for a short time.

"But if you are willing to help me," Bai Liu continued, his voice steady, "I can help you for much longer."

The stragglers, who had lowered their heads in despair, raised them now in cautious hope.

Bai Liu spoke deliberately, "There's a limit to what I can do alone, but if you help me work in the factory and produce more perfume, I promise that every bottle we produce will be used to help more of our kind. Together, we can awaken even more stragglers. We can bring them into our ranks until I become the factory manager."

The stragglers listened intently, their eyes bright with longing.

"The day I become factory manager," Bai Liu said firmly, "I promise that every bottle of rose perfume produced will be free—forever."

His words were a sweet temptation.

The stragglers couldn't suppress their nervous excitement. But there was also a lingering doubt in their eyes. They had been promised such things before. In the past, manufacturers had lured them with promises of free perfume, only to later sell it at exorbitant prices.

Bai Liu's offer was a double-edged sword—a promise they had heard many times before, but one they had no choice but to entertain. They had no other options. They could either believe in Bai Liu's words, or resign themselves to the slow agony of their existence.

Finally, one woman—half-decayed, her body withered—raised a trembling, bony hand. She spoke softly, "Mr. Bai Liu... would you really make a good factory manager?"

In her arms, she cradled a baby, its feet withered, its body on the brink of death. The baby's black, slithery eyes were as decayed as hers, its small form at odds with the roses growing from its eyes, so out of place for its age.

Her voice cracked as she asked, tears brimming in her eyes, "If you become factory manager... will you truly be someone who helps us? Will you help my child?"

Bai Liu's answer was blunt, his gaze unwavering. "No. There's a good chance I won't be. I'm only saying this now to get you to work for me, just like the last factory manager who promoted the rose perfume."

The stragglers froze, shocked by his brutal honesty.

Some of them stood, their fists clenched, rage flickering in their eyes. The faint hope they had clung to evaporated, replaced by anger and a sense of betrayal. Others lowered their heads, their hearts resigned.

The young mother, her tears streaming, covered her face and sobbed, murmuring her child's name.

Yet, no one attacked Bai Liu.

Even though he had openly admitted his deception, he was still their last hope—their only chance to escape the nightmare of rose perfume. As long as they could briefly escape the addiction that gnawed at their bones, they had no choice but to follow him, even deeper into the hell he promised to save them from.

Bai Liu scanned the stragglers below, noting the mix of emotions on their faces.

He had just given them the truth—the truth they might not want to hear—but it was still the truth. He had offered them no illusions, no empty promises. Yet, in their desperate state, they would continue to believe. For as long as the perfume existed, the vicious cycle would continue. Hope would always be fragile, and faith would be their prison.

"I'm not a good person," Bai Liu said flatly, his gaze unwavering. "No one who becomes factory manager will be. But if I become the manager, I promise you this—I will find a way to make the rose perfume disappear, to end your suffering."

His voice was calm, but there was steel in his words. "Help me become the factory manager, and I will help you end this curse. This is a deal of equals. Will you do it?"

Slowly, the stragglers' expressions changed. Doubt still lingered, but a flicker of hope began to rekindle.

The young mother, her voice trembling with emotion, stood and raised her child, asking in disbelief, "Mr. Bai Liu... do you truly have a way to end our suffering? To end my child's curse?"

Bai Liu smiled. A faint rose petal bloomed in his right eye, the sixth one, as he replied, "If I can't do it, I'll wither too."

"I've given you most of the perfume I've received. You can watch me closely. If I don't find a way to relieve us, I'll be the first to wither. Will you trust me?"

The silence that followed was thick with tension.

Finally, the young mother collapsed into sobs, her body shaking as she hugged her child. "Thank you... thank you!!!"

The stragglers, with renewed hope, looked at Bai Liu with a mixture of awe and determination. They raised him up, throwing him into the air, the rose in their eyes burning faintly yet resolutely. The faint light of hope flickered in their hearts, stronger than before.

The Rose Factory

Beside a Field of Roses

Liu Jiayi, exhausted and panting from the pile of dried leaf roses she had collected, sat on the ground, sipping a refreshing drink.

There's no way to store this pile of rubbish roses in a space prop. It has to be carried by hand!

It took her three hours to gather enough dried leaf roses for a total of seven hundred and twenty kilograms. After their two-day task to dispose of 480kg, they still had 240kg left, enough to exchange for four bottles of medium-grade perfume.

Liu Jiayi checked the payroll. The Intermediate Rose perfume, with a fragrance strength of 50-80% and a lasting power of 12 hours, triples the duration of its scent.

If they can collect that much mid-level perfume, it'll help more stragglers regain their senses and join them.

But only if they can manage to process all these roses.

Wiping her mouth after drinking the restorative, Liu Jiayi stood up, turning to face the stragglers behind her.

Bai Liu stood in front of them, the stragglers cowering behind him, subtly bowing and nodding toward Liu Jiayi.

Despite her youthful appearance, there was a natural awe for Liu Jiayi, who worked at the Rose Factory.

"These are the stragglers I found who know more about the work of the processors." Bai Liu stepped aside to reveal the group behind him. "Some were once processors at the Rose Factory but were sidelined and laid off."

At Bai Liu's signal, the stragglers, initially hesitant, gained the courage to step forward. They crouched down and began sorting the roses on the ground.

They worked quickly and efficiently, quickly falling into a steady rhythm. They were skilled, their actions almost mechanical as they sorted and flattened the roses into drying patches.

These seasoned workers were far more capable than novices like Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi, who were unaccustomed to the work. Their efficiency, however, made up for the lack of experience. Some of the processors sifted as quickly as the machinery.

Liu Jiayi had initially planned to join the stragglers in sorting the roses but quickly realized her dirty hands would only make them uncomfortable. She stepped back.

Bai Liu, on the other hand, lazily stayed away from the roses, watching the scene unfold without joining in.

Liu Jiayi saw him and didn't tease him for being lazy. Instead, she felt a twinge of mixed emotions and sighed softly.

Bai Liu, having shared most of his perfume with the civilians, needed to avoid the roses to prevent his spirit level from dropping too quickly. In a game where perfume was the primary means of restoring one's spirit, he was taking a significant risk by staying away from the roses.

But Bai Liu didn’t seem particularly bothered by it.

Once the roses were sorted, the stragglers took Bai Liu to a hidden spot where they usually dried the roses. There, they carefully laid them out, nodded to Bai Liu to signal they would return the next day if needed, and left.

Spending too much time with the roses would cause the perfume to dissipate faster.

“It takes twelve hours of daylight drying and twelve hours of nighttime drying,” Liu Jiayi said, glancing at the time. “We won’t finish drying until noon tomorrow, which will give us some time before the others’ weighing.”

“But I’m sure they’ll wait for you,” she added, turning to Bai Liu. “So, what will you do then?”

“Let them catch me,” Bai Liu smiled. “But they won't be bothered to kill me.”

---------- ----

The Next Day

By noon, the north entrance to the rose fields became the main point of activity.

Qi Yifang, already having been weighed, stood by the weighing point with his arms crossed. Tang Erda leaned casually against the entrance, his sack in hand, his dark circles suggesting he had stayed up all night, though his spirits were high.

Tang Erda's batch of dried leaf roses was still being weighed, but the processor handling them looked visibly strained.

To minimize errors, the roses were weighed in 5kg batches. A pile of dried leaf roses had already accumulated at the processor's feet.

"715kg, 720kg, 735kg…" the processor took a deep breath and looked at Tang Erda. "Are you sure you want to weigh that much at once? If you can't properly dry them and some turn moldy, you'll be fined!"

Tang Erda handed over the last sack nonchalantly. "It won't go to waste. Weigh it."

Qi Yifang watched with a mix of complexity and sadness. The three of them, using their skills, had only managed to gather 100kg more than Tang Erda.

What exactly does this man do in real life? Is he a professional rose breeder? Why is he so familiar with this process?

After Tang Erda finished weighing his roses, the processor moved on to the next batch, quickly handling the drying process.

As Liu Jiayi had predicted, Qi Yifang and Tang Erda stayed on the sidelines despite having finished their weighing early.

They stood, staring at the rose field, clearly waiting for Bai Liu, who hadn't yet arrived to be weighed.

The sun was now at its peak, casting a bright and oppressive heat across the fields. Most processors had already been weighed and gone to work.

The processor in charge of weighing was preparing to pack up when a group of people, small and large, appeared on the horizon, dragging a sack placed on a trolley.

The heat of the midday sun distorted their figures on the ground,

making them appear and disappear, yet they still caught everyone's attention.

Qi Yifang uncrossed his arms and took the directional sign in his hand, his expression serious.

Tang Erda stood up straight, snapping out of his seemingly relaxed posture, his gaze sharpening. His right hand moved toward his trousers, and a revolver appeared in his grip, loaded and ready.

Before the group could approach, Tang Erda raised his pistol, and Qi Yifang's weathervane began to turn.

But soon, both men were caught off guard.

Although two people arrived at the weighing point, one of them was Liu Jiayi, and the other was just an ordinary drifter.

The drifter, who seemed to have been hired by Liu Jiayi to carry the roses with perfume, nodded to her gratefully after she sprayed his face with perfume before quickly leaving.

"Where's Bai Liu?" Tang Erda raised his gun toward Liu Jiayi, his voice cold. "Why didn't he come to the weigh-in?"

Liu Jiayi acted as though she hadn't noticed the gun pointed at her. After handing the trolley with dried roses to the processor, she turned to Tang Erda with a confused expression and innocent tone. "What Bai Liu? I didn't enter the game with him. I haven't seen him. These roses I picked and dried myself—they're all going under my name. What's he got to do with it?"

Tang Erda's brow furrowed, but he didn't lower the gun.

Something's not right. If Bai Liu hadn't been with Liu Jiayi, then he wouldn't be able to register his roses for drying. Without this, he wouldn't be able to enter the workflow or turn in his roses for processing.

Failure to register ingredients was a serious offense for a processor. If Bai Liu didn't show up today, he'd be demoted to a flower picker and would miss the chance to turn in his dried roses in two days.

Qi Yifang, who had been ready to join the fight, had no reaction to the gun pointed at Liu Jiayi. But when he snapped back to reality, he almost slipped out of position.

That's not what we agreed on, hunter! I thought we weren't supposed to rough up the little witch!

That's my former goddess… now daughter… the one who saved my life!

Qi Yifang stepped forward, raising his hands in a gesture to de-escalate. He looked straight at Tang Erda's gun. "Mr. Hunter, our enemy is Bai Liu now. First, let's unite. The little witch is only eight years old. It seems she was tricked by Bai Liu."

With cold sweat dripping from his forehead, Qi Yifang carefully moved Tang Erda's gun away, but Tang Erda merely shot him a sharp glance. With a flick of his wrist, the gun moved past Qi Yifang and aimed straight at Liu Jiayi.

"I didn't promise not to hurt Liu Jiayi outside the game either," Tang Erda said, his eyes cold and his gaze fixed. The dark blue of his eyes was like a pool of blood, chilling to the bone. "I only promised to join you in killing Bai Liu."

The Rose Factory

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

What Tang Erda wanted from the King's Guild was simple: he wanted them to "fill" the remaining gap in the game and prevent Bai Liu from escaping, which the King's Guild had already done before entering the game. However, once inside the game, the goals of the King's Guild diverged from his own.

The issue with the Little Witch was where a clear disagreement arose. It was likely the reason Hearts insisted on inserting people into the game alongside Tang Erda—people who could see that the Little Witch's injuries were tied to him. These individuals were sent in by Hearts with a greater purpose than simply killing Bai Liu. They were assigned to protect the Little Witch under Tang Erda's command.

This explains why Tang Erda did not take the initiative to act alongside Qi Yifang from the start.

We can work together toward a common goal for a brief time, but there's no need for lasting unity. Eventually, alliances born from different purposes will fall apart.

Qi Yifang, gripping Tang Erda's arm with one hand, and Tang Erda, with his dark eyes, locked in a silent confrontation. Cold sweat beaded at the tips of their noses and down their backs, while the two other men surrounded Tang Erda nervously. Despite the tension, Tang Erda remained emotionless, his gun raised.

Qi Yifang gritted his teeth, fully understanding why Tang Erda hadn't dropped his gun in this three-person standoff.

Because they couldn't defeat him. It was a clear display of superior strength—Tang Erda only needed three shots to bring them all down. His gun skills were fast and precise, and his hand-to-hand combat was formidable.

Qi Yifang's right arm clenched around Tang Erda's, his entire body weight hanging from it, attempting to force his hand down, but Tang Erda's right hand remained steady, supporting his weight as if she were a monster, keeping his gun aimed at Liu Jiayi.

The processor next to them looked on, nearly dumbfounded.

Liu Jiayi took a step forward, but Tang Erda's arm, with Qi Yifang on it, followed her with a measured step, the gun still aimed at her. Yet Liu Jiayi didn't panic. Instead, she calmly addressed the bewildered processor. "Could you please weigh the rose quickly?"

"... Oh, yes," the processor stammered, his mind in a daze as he hastily took measurements, still unsettled and fearful.

Liu Jiayi turned her head, the cold muzzle of the gun now barely a centimeter from her brow, a distance that would surely have killed her with a single shot.

But in the game, even a shot to the head could be survivable, as long as her life wasn't entirely erased by the bullet. The Little Witch had the power to revive as long as she could access the antidote.

Liu Jiayi raised her head, pulling off her black hood to reveal a delicate, obedient girl's face. She wore oversized, transparent goggles, through which sunlight refracted into a dark, intricate film of black light, intertwining with the silvery gleam from the gun barrel in front of her eyes.

Liu Jiayi looked at Tang Erda, her smile sudden and eerie. She quickly reached out and grabbed Tang Erda's gun, her slender finger pressing the trigger.

As Tang Erda stood there, stunned, Liu Jiayi's expression remained composed, her fingers pressing down with swift resolve.

At the same time, a completely different, terrified shriek escaped her, "... Don't shoot me! Don't—!"

"Bang!"

The muzzle flared, the muffled sound of the bullet hitting flesh rang out, and the silver bullet pierced Liu Jiayi's skull, spilling a line of bright red blood onto the ground as she collapsed, her body slowly crumpling to the floor.

As Liu Jiayi fell behind Qi Yihang, the movements around them slowed, as if frozen in time within their small three-person enclosure.

Tang Erda watched in disbelief as Liu Jiayi hit the ground, blood spilling out around her.

Qi Yihang, who had been facing away from Liu Jiayi, froze as he heard the shot. His pupils constricted as he spun around, sweat flying off his jaw.

Liu Jiayi's goggles slipped off, and her lifeless, gray eyes stared vacantly, a bloodshot wound between her brows. Blood pooled at her lips, which had parted slightly in shock before death overtook her.

She was near death, unable to use her skills or defend herself, with no one left to save her but herself.

The Little Witch, who had saved his life countless times... was not protected by him and was struck by Tang Erda's bullet.

She would likely die in front of him.

Qi Yifang's pupils widened, his breath quickening as cold sweat dripped from his chin. His expression became one of numb disbelief, as if his soul had temporarily left his body, only to be pulled back by a sharp pain in his temple.

[System Warning: Qi Yifang's spirit level has faltered! Please recover quickly!]

His breath came in shallow, ragged gasps, but he forced himself to regain control.

Slowly, Qi Yifang turned his head to face Tang Erda. His grip on the wheel tightened, the motion so rapid it was almost a blur, with only the faintest trace of the wind vane visible.

Two deep breaths steadied him as he gripped the wheel with a vice-like hold.

Calm down, Qi Yifang. You can't beat him! Unless you're willing to fight to the death and lower your spirit level to the point of explosion, you have no chance against this hunter. Right now, you're leading the group—don't lose control! The Little Witch's debt can wait; avenge her later... Make sure to avenge her!

But right now, the priority is survival. Don't let emotions cloud your judgment—protect the Little Witch's retreat!

Liu Jiayi, lying on the ground, gave a small, triumphant smile as Qi Yifang struggled to regain composure.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu uses Player Muke's Personal Panel to activate Player Muke's skill (Flashing Strike).]

A blurred figure, nearly torn apart by speed, suddenly appeared between Qi Yifang and a disoriented Tang Erda.

Bai Liu, armed with a whip in one hand and a dagger in the other, leapt between them, forcing Tang Erda to draw his gun and shoot as he reacted instinctively.

Bai Liu struck with his whip, aiming for Tang Erda's face. Tang Erda, fast and skilled, dodged with a quick side-step, but Bai Liu was already moving, slamming his fist down toward him.

Tang Erda's left fist collided with Bai Liu's face in a swift, decisive blow, but Bai Liu spun and dropped to one knee on Qi Yifang's shoulder to avoid the punch, his movements fluid and precise.

Tang Erda's fist followed, nearly landing on Bai Liu's nose, but Bai Liu ducked, bending backward, pulling Qi Yifang with him in the process.

In the chaos, Liu Jiayi, who had feigned death behind Qi Yifang, sprang to her feet, kicking Tang Erda's gun from her hand in one swift motion.

With Qi Yifang still pinned under Bai Liu, Liu Jiayi, bloodied but determined, glared at the two members of the King's Guild and shouted, "What are you waiting for? Attack before he gets his gun back!"

Tang Erda's gun shattered into particles as it was kicked away. He pulled his hand from under Qi Yifang's arm with a steely expression, the gun reforming in his grasp.

But it was just enough time for the others to gather their strength, preparing to trap Tang Erda for a brief moment.

The scariest part of Tang Erda's ability was his speed. If they didn't eliminate him completely, they would only be stalling for time before he killed them all.

And that was exactly what Bai Liu wanted.

Bai Liu raised his dagger, and Tang Erda quickly responded, preparing to counter. But Bai Liu, with a smile, turned and backhandedly stabbed the dagger into Qi Yifang's shoulder.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu attacked Player Qi Yifang with (Flash Attack), reducing Qi Yifang's Spirit Level by 27 points.]

[System Warning: Qi Yifang's Spirit Level has dropped to 13 points, entering Berserk Phase!]

[Player Qi Yifang’s Panel (Berserk Status)]

[Spiritual Value: 40 → 13]

[Strength: 1339 → 1873]

[Agility: 1795 → 2010]

[Attack: 2700 → 6100]

[Resistance: 1840 → 2100]

[Defensive Power: Increased, total attributes over 10,000. Rated as S Player, Qi Yifang's level increased to Brass S.]

[Congratulations, Player Qi Yifang! Your potential panel value has reached S level, unlocking the Brass pseudo-god rating! Collect faith points to ascend to godhood!]

Qi Yifang’s pupils contracted to the size of pinpricks, and his hand shook violently, spinning the steering wheel so fast that it became a blur, moving like a fan oscillating from the force.

He stared at Tang Erda, his expression vacant, the wind swirling around him, a subtle breeze ripping at his trousers.

[System Alert: Player Qi Yifang activates personal skill “Monster Book: Announcer of Extreme Weather.”]

Chapter End Notes

Liu Jiayi literally shot herself in the head

The Rose Factory

Qi Yifang shakily raised his directional indicator, muttering under his breath:

"…Extraordinary gale force winds with gusts of 14 or more, clearing to very heavy rainfall exceeding 100mm… A hurricane is imminent in the area. Red Weather Warning."

The constantly spinning black weathervane suddenly turned bright red and locked in place, pointing directly at Tang Erda.

For a brief moment, there was silence. Then, the rain and wind converged into a violent gale so powerful it could have lifted everyone into the sky.

Liu Jiayi, the lightest of the group, and Qi Yifang, still dazed and unsteady, were the first to be swept up. Bai Liu followed, managing to balance himself midair. Tang Erda entered after him, with two members of the King's Guild being the last to be caught in the storm.

Nearby, a processing clerk weighing roses was so startled by the sudden tempest that he rolled into the factory along with the scattered flowers. To his shock, the storm—seemingly powerful enough to engulf the entire rose factory—remained contained at the entrance, spanning only about ten meters in front and behind, without spreading any further.

The contrast between the storm's confined chaos and the outside world was jarring.

Beyond the factory, the sky was clear and cloudless. But directly above the Northgate factory, the heavens had turned black with churning storm clouds, streaked with flashes of lightning.

The spinning hurricane devoured everything within its reach, forming an opaque, towering vortex—an enormous gray cylinder stretching into the sky. Objects and people alike were tossed within it, swirling as if trapped inside a high-speed washing machine.

The moment Tang Erda was pulled into the storm, he understood why Bai Liu had chosen to attack Qi Yifang instead of him.

Because attacking him wasn't worth the effort.

Bai Liu knew that without a surefire way to kill Tang Erda outright, any attack would be ineffective and futile.

If they had allowed Tang Erda—a high-damage, fast-attacking combatant—even a moment to get his hands on a weapon, he would have turned the battle into a massacre. With a gun in his grasp, the odds of the entire team being wiped out would be significantly higher than a mutual loss.

So Bai Liu switched tactics. Instead of confronting Tang Erda head-on, he used Qi Yifang's skill to neutralize him.

Even for a sharpshooter like Tang Erda, aiming in a "washing machine barrel" of high-speed spinning bodies was nearly impossible.

The hurricane was so intense he could barely keep his eyes open, let alone focus on a target. His vision was severely impaired by the man-made storm, rendering his marksmanship useless.

Firing blindly in such conditions was a gamble—one that could even result in him shooting himself.

But Bai Liu was different.

Spreading his arms and legs, he leaned back into the wind. His shirt, neatly tucked into his suit trousers, flared as the gusts whipped past him. A few drops of blood slid down his goggles, staining the crisp white fabric before he carelessly flicked them away.

Over his eyes, he wore a large, black pair of goggles—ones still stained with blood.

They had just been removed from Liu Jiayi's face.

This was Liu Jiayi's visualization prop—【Blizzard Goggles】.

【System Alert: (Blizzard Goggles) – Ensures clear vision in extreme weather conditions such as blizzards. Expires upon damage.】

【System Prompt: Activate (Extreme Weather) infrared mode to locate teammates?】

Bai Liu adjusted the goggles.

【Confirm.】

Instantly, the chaotic storm transformed before his eyes.

What had been a blur of wind and movement became clear: four distinct heat signatures, glowing red against the swirling gray, as if someone had thrown strips of crimson cloth into a washing machine.

A smile tugged at Bai Liu's lips.

The King's Guild had really been good to Liu Jiayi.

These 【Blizzard Goggles】 had originally belonged to Qi Yifang, a reward from a Level 3 game where Liu Jiayi had saved his life. After learning about her vision problems, Qi Yifang had handed them over to her without hesitation, a gesture of gratitude.

At first, Liu Jiayi had politely refused. But Qi Yifang insisted, so she stored them in her inventory, only retrieving them now because she needed them to help Bai Liu.

It just so happened to be the perfect fit for this game.

Liu Jiayi had mixed feelings about the situation. Bai Liu, however, ever pragmatic, simply took full advantage of it.

And then there was Hearts.

Among all things, Hearts had been incredibly generous to Liu Jiayi.

Few people in the entire game would go so far as to embed their skills into a playing card just to give someone a life-saving tool.

Hearts had not only shared her personal skill with Liu Jiayi but had gone through extensive trouble to encrypt the card. Even if someone else got their hands on it, they wouldn't be able to discern its true function.

Even Bai Liu—who had direct access to Liu Jiayi's panel—had been unable to figure it out.

In every sense, Hearts had shielded Liu Jiayi completely.

No other player in the game received such treatment.

Liu Jiayi had complicated emotions about this, but in the end, she told Bai Liu how to use the card—and what Hearts' skill actually was.

Bai Liu turned the glossy Hearts card between his fingers, his gaze locking onto Qi Yifang, who was spinning uncontrollably in the hurricane. The conversation with Liu Jiayi echoed in his mind.

With a quiet sigh, Liu Jiayi had handed him the card.

"This card contains the Empress' skill," she explained. "It allows you to temporarily transform into the person the target most desires or fears, with a certain level of compulsion. It also nullifies all detection props —meaning that once you take on someone's appearance, no one will be able to distinguish you from the original."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow.

"A skill like this… would be perfect for begging for mercy, turning the tables, or scamming someone at the brink of death. Hearts really knew what she was doing."

Liu Jiayi was silent for a moment before muttering, "The Queen has indeed been very kind to me."

Except, of course, for that one time…

But in every other way, Hearts had been flawless in her treatment of Liu Jiayi.

She had trained her, nurtured her, taught her strategy, and showed her how to survive—both in the game and in real life.

At a time when Liu Jiayi's abilities were still developing, when whispers of doubt echoed within the King's Guild, Hearts had funneled nearly all of the guild's resources into her.

The towering woman had even personally taken Liu Jiayi out of the game, patiently teaching her with kindness. Later, she had elevated Liu Jiayi to the team's core tactician, even tolerating her quirks—like refusing to restore her eyesight immediately.

Everything Liu Jiayi had become was because of Hearts' unreserved care.

If kindness could be quantified, then before meeting Bai Liu, Liu Jiayi could confidently say that Hearts had been the best person in her life —even more than Liu Huai.

That was why she had once wanted to live in the game.

Hearts' unconditional kindness had given her a sense of belonging in a world that was otherwise cold and cruel.

To Liu Jiayi, Hearts was more than just a leader.

She was family.

And yet, it was also Hearts who had taken away the only family she had ever known.

Liu Jiayi took a deep breath, then handed Bai Liu the card.

"Qi Yifang… If he sees me die, his reaction combined with your mental attack will create the perfect opening."

She looked up at Bai Liu.

"In that moment, if you're close enough… you can become another me."

Bai Liu's grip tightened on the bone whip.

The storm howled around him as he locked onto his target.

The Rose Factory

The twisting grey whirlwind, tinged with black, churned violently, the poisonous mist swirling around it obscuring the vision of those trapped inside.

Silver bullets grazed Bai Liu's ears as he sprinted through the black whirlwind, the Hearts A deck clenched between his teeth. He reached for the whip and pulled himself toward Qi Yifang, who hovered at the other end.

Qi Yifang, dazed and disoriented by the little witch's poisonous fog, flailed helplessly in the powerful winds he had summoned, his limbs limp like a ragdoll.

But Qi Yifang wouldn't die—Liu Jiayi had no intention of killing her teammates. They were all S-rank players, well-protected and resilient enough to withstand her poisonous mist attack.

Still, paralysis was inevitable under the effects of the poison.

Bai Liu followed the whip's length and grasped Qi Yifang's ankle. The red heart on the playing card between his lips began to spin eerily as Bai Liu maneuvered himself, turning Qi Yifang—who had been lying flat in the wind—upright to face him.

Qi Yifang, his gaze unfocused, stared at Bai Liu in a trance. The red heart in the center of the Hearts card spun faster.

Bai Liu pressed his lips to Qi Yifang's, feeding him the antidote.

Qi Yifang swallowed with a few choking coughs, the wind whipping around them. Though the antidote neutralized the poison, his low spirit level and the lingering effects of intoxication left him disoriented. His eyes reddened with emotion as he whispered weakly, sorrow lacing his voice:

"..... Sorry, Little Witch ....."

—I couldn't protect you. I let you come to my rescue.

—I came to take you back to the guild, but it didn't work out. You've found a better home .....

As the peach-colored heart on the card spun, a human figure emerged.

Bai Liu's limbs shrank and thinned. His hair, once reaching just below his ears, lengthened down to the nape of his neck. His clothes morphed into a dark, gauzy, hooded shirt. His once-calm black eyes dulled to an opaque grey, like poorly made frosted glass.

Bai Liu had transformed into Liu Jiayi.

The grey-black haze of poison cleared from Qi Yifang's face as the antidote took effect, and he slowly closed his eyes.

As his consciousness faded, the eerie, spinning hurricane dissipated. Those caught within it plummeted to the ground as the winds gradually ceased.

Tang Erda, who had been affected by the poison, swayed but managed to steady himself. He raised his gun, scanning the battlefield for Bai Liu's shadow.

Qi Yifang, upon landing, immediately threw up.

Although he was no longer poisoned, his condition was inexplicably worse than the others.

But that was to be expected—Qi Yifang was "windy."

Yes, despite being a skilled wind user, Qi Yifang suffered from severe motion sickness.

Just a few high-speed revolutions in his own whirlwind were enough to make him vomit bile.

This was why, despite his impressive skills and high stats, Qi Yifang remained in the King's Guild reserve team rather than being a full-fledged member—he couldn't fully utilize his abilities.

Not far from where they had landed, two figures sat draped in black robes. Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi.

Tang Erda, still on high alert, strode toward them. He reached down, warily pulling apart the wide hoods of the robes.

Two identical, thin, young faces peeked out from beneath the fabric, both gazing up at him blankly.

Qi Yifang stared, stunned, at the two Liu Jiayis before him.

Tang Erda's grip on his gun tightened. His expression darkened.

Trapped.

He should have known.

Back in the whirlwind, he had hesitated—hesitated because of the ten-minute cooldown on his burst skill. He should have just used [Suicide Bullet] and taken Bai Liu out.

Tang Erda understood Bai Liu's strategy.

This bastard knew Tang Erda wouldn't kill him outright—not while they were in the Rose Factory. Tang Erda needed Bai Liu to tell him how to counter the dried leaf rose.

Bai Liu had the answer. He had a way to clear the game and obtain the key item needed to stop the rose.

That made him indispensable.

Tang Erda's objective wasn't to kill Bai Liu in the game, only to restrain him. Liu Jiayi, too, was not a target—his gun had only been aimed at her to draw Bai Liu out.

But Liu Jiayi had acted first, making Tang Erda look like the aggressor. Now, with Bai Liu's calculated moves, Tang Erda had been forced into a losing position.

Now, Bai Liu had become Liu Jiayi.

And without knowing which one was real, Tang Erda—labeled as a Hunter—was in a dangerous predicament. If he shot the real Liu Jiayi, the three King's Guild members would fight to stop him.

Bai Liu had scattered their formations, reshuffling their roles with this whirlwind deception. The three King's Guild players had been maneuvered into Bai Liu's camp.

It was no longer Bai Liu versus the four of them.

Now, it was Tang Erda against five.

Tang Erda, still pale from the effects of the poison, clenched his gun so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

The situation was spiraling beyond control. A one-on-five battle wasn't unwinnable—he could kill them all if he fought to the death.

But he didn't want to.

He was after Bai Liu to save people. Killing three innocent players from the King's Guild, who had been manipulated by Bai Liu, went against that goal.

He didn't want to work with them, but he hadn't intended to drag them into this mess either. He'd wanted to keep them out of this dangerous game with Bai Liu.

Yet, ironically, his actions had pushed them straight into Bai Liu's hands.

Tang Erda hated it.

But he was used to it.

Ever since realizing he was a hunter cursed by fate, a harbinger of misfortune, he had distanced himself from people, resigning himself to the company of monsters.

Tang Erda raised his head, his sharp, wolf-like gaze locking onto the two identical Liu Jiayis. His expression was one of a predator, intense and unreadable.

He had once been an alpha—a leader who led his pack into battle, unquestioned and unyielding, always the strongest warrior on the field.

But Bai Liu had stripped him of that.

Forced him to abandon his identity.

Turned him against his own team.

Forced him to forsake even his humanity—all for the sake of defeating Bai Liu.

Now, he was just a dying wolf, trying to do one last thing for his pack before his time ran out.

Between him and the two Liu Jiayis, Qi Yifang and the other two King's Guild members stood their ground.

Despite their confusion over the identical Liu Jiayis, they knew one thing for sure: the real Liu Jiayi was among them.

And they had to protect her.

Tang Erda's near-fatal shot at Liu Jiayi had left them shaken. Their guild had sent them to retrieve the Little Witch, and instead, she had nearly been killed.

They stood firmly in front of her, wary of Tang Erda, ready to defend her if he so much as lifted his gun.

From behind their protective stances, the two "Liu Jiayis" exchanged a subtle, knowing smile.

This hunter, though lacking intelligence, was indeed a good man.

And good men were the kind of people Bai Liu loved to toy with the most.

Because good men—bound by morals and principles—always left just enough room for someone like Bai Liu to exploit.

After Tang Erda somehow managed to turn away and put a safe distance between them, Qi Yifang was perfumed by his companion to restore his spirit level. Gasping for breath, he collapsed onto the ground alongside the other two men.

Qi Yifang gulped down his stamina restorer, still shaken. He had genuinely thought Tang Erda was going to shoot all five of them.

The shivering, weighing processors, who had been huddled together for some time, only dared to emerge once the storm had passed, their pockets holding the precious roses.

Qi Yifang glanced at the two identical Liu Jiayis standing before him, his face tightening in confusion. With difficulty and caution, he asked, "There are only 360kg of roses—just enough for one person to remain as a processor. So… which one of you picked the roses?"

The weigher's words drew the attention of the entire group. Everyone turned to the two Liu Jiayis, even Tang Erda, who was some distance away, raising his eyes to observe.

Liu Jiayi had arrived with exactly 360kg of dried leaf roses, while Bai Liu had appeared in a flash—empty-handed. There were only enough roses for one person to continue working as a processor. If Bai Liu couldn't produce the required amount, then one of the two Liu Jiayis would have to be demoted to a flower picker.

Qi Yifang and the three King's Guild members had no intention of letting Liu Jiayi be demoted. They scrutinized the two identical figures, trying to determine which one was an imposter.

First, they used detection props, but quickly realized that Bai Liu had disguised himself as Liu Jiayi using an ability that was difficult to counter. Most detection props couldn't differentiate between the two.

Qi Yifang frowned. Aside from the Queen’s skill, he had never heard of a disguise so advanced that it could evade all detection tools.

What these rich kids didn’t know was that the Queen had been so partial to her little witch that she had gifted her a skill base of her own.

Few people in the guild knew that Liu Jiayi possessed the Empress of Hearts' playing cards ability.

But the three men quickly calmed down. After all, they had worked with the little witch enough times to recognize her.

Qi Yifang had even sparred with Liu Jiayi in a practice match when she was still a reserve member. And while Bai Liu might look exactly like her, they were confident that, through subtle gestures, behaviors, and habits, they could tell who was truly the same.

It wouldn’t be so easy for Bai Liu to fool people who knew Liu Jiayi well.

Tang Erda thought the same thing. Though he wasn’t very familiar with Liu Jiayi, he knew Bai Liu inside and out.

The moment one of the "Liu Jiayis" revealed Bai Liu's habitual mannerisms or speech patterns, Tang Erda would be able to tell immediately.

But then, their expressions froze.

The two Liu Jiayis stood up at the exact same speed, their heads tilting at identical angles. They both turned to dust off their trousers, straightened their collars, and adjusted their wrist cuffs in perfect synchronization.

These actions didn’t resemble Liu Jiayi’s usual behavior at all. Instead, they were the refined, deliberate movements of a grown man in his twenties—someone meticulous about his appearance, who regularly

wore suits and carried himself with precision.

The King's Guild members had been correct in their assumption: Bai Liu wasn't particularly good at mimicking a little girl. He hadn't known Liu Jiayi for long, and it would have been difficult for him to replicate all her mannerisms convincingly.

However, Liu Jiayi—who had been groomed by the Queen of Hearts as her successor, who was already a master of deception and performance, and who was at the prime age for learning—had no trouble mimicking Bai Liu's movements.

And this clever little girl could imitate him seamlessly.

In other words, they were now in the trickiest situation possible.

It wasn't a case of two Liu Jiayis.

It was two Bai Lius wearing Liu Jiayi's face.

They had no way of telling who was who.

The Rose Factory

The processor in charge of weighing the roses was dumbfounded by the uncanny similarity of the two Liu Jiayis' movements.

"So this... is the dried leaf rose for one of you..." he said, holding up the sack, breathless with uncertainty.

The two Liu Jiayis exchanged a glance, as if they had come to a prior agreement, and simultaneously pointed to the calm Liu Jiayi on the right. "Give her the rose."

The processor's gaze shifted to the Liu Jiayi on the left. "If it's hers, then you'll be demoted to flower-picker."

Liu Jiayi, on the left, nodded as if she had been expecting this. "So I start picking flowers tonight? The reward is still the same, right? Forty kilograms of dried leaf roses for one bottle of low-grade rose perfume?"

The weighing processor was growing more and more confused by the scene unfolding before him. But he was only following the rules, so he answered honestly. "Yes... Later, you'll come with me to collect the flower-picker's uniform and tools."

"As for you," he said, turning to the Liu Jiayi on the right and handing her the weighed sack, "that's 360 kilograms. Take it to the factory for the next step in processing."

The two Liu Jiayis seamlessly fell into their respective roles—one following the processors to collect her flower-picker's uniform, the other carrying the sack of dried leaf roses to the piazza.

But Qi Yifang and his group were frozen, watching one Liu Jiayi head toward the factory while the other walked toward the flower fields.

One of the King's Guild players turned to Qi Yifang, his head spinning. "Brother Qi, which one of these little witches are we supposed to follow?"

They all knew that one of them was the real Liu Jiayi and the other was Bai Liu. But the real question was—without knowing who was who—who should they follow?

Qi Yifang frowned at the two parting figures, while Liu Jiayi remained

eerily composed.

Tang Erda's gaze flickered between them.

Liu Jiayi had never been the mastermind of Bai Liu's plans—she was only an executor, a mediator. Her choices weren't what mattered. It was Bai Liu who always decided which path to take.

For once, everyone in the group shared the same thought: Which path would Bai Liu choose?

Tang Erda contemplated. If Bai Liu was true to form—ruthlessly pragmatic, controlling, unwilling to entrust main objectives to others—then he would handle the most critical task himself.

His eyes locked onto the Liu Jiayi struggling to haul the heavy sack of dried leaf roses into the factory. That one was likely Bai Liu.

But then something caught his attention.

His gaze shifted to the other Liu Jiayi, the one recently demoted to flower-picker, walking toward the flower fields. There was something unnervingly familiar about that posture.

Tang Erda narrowed his eyes.

If Bai Liu had managed to steal an enormous quantity of roses last night under far worse conditions, how had he ended up with only 360 kilograms today—just barely enough for one person to continue working as a processor?

And if the purpose of the two Liu Jiayis was to confuse him and the King's Guild, wouldn't it have been more effective to keep them together? That way, their group's protection would be more concentrated, making it even harder to tell them apart.

Bai Liu never made unnecessary arrangements. So what was the point of this Liu Jiayi, who had seemingly abandoned the main objective and accepted demotion to flower-picker?

…But the main goal of the game was to become the factory manager, and the bonus rewards for Rose Factory would only be available after completing the main storyline.

After careful deliberation, Tang Erda tightened his grip on his gun and followed the Liu Jiayi who had entered the factory.

Qi Yifang repeatedly glanced between the two, struggling to grasp Bai Liu's strategy. Seeing that Tang Erda had already chosen to follow one of them into the processing plant, he made a swift decision.

"Split up," Qi Yifang commanded, taking a deep breath. He turned to the Liu Jiayi who had become a flower-picker. "I'll follow this little flower-picker witch. The rest of you follow the other one. If anything happens, contact me immediately."

His voice grew serious, eyes dark with something unreadable. "We all owe our lives to the little witch. Make sure you protect her."

Then, after a pause, he added, almost to himself, "She's fought so hard to protect someone else... If you can, please—protect the other her too."

The other two members of the King's Guild exchanged puzzled glances, but they understood what Qi Yifang meant.

"We all owe her that."

With that, Qi Yifang shoved his own roses into the arms of the others and, without hesitation, turned to follow the flower-picker Liu Jiayi.

Game Hall, Graveyard Bounce Area.

The members of the King's Guild crowded around Bai Liu's fallen TV screen, their faces stiff with anger and resentment, all directed toward the little witch who now filled the screen—teasing and toying with Qi Yifang as if she had never been on their side.

But then something changed.

Their expressions froze.

When Liu Jiayi pulled out the Hearts Ace playing card and handed it to Bai Liu, the room was engulfed in stunned silence.

What they couldn't believe wasn't just that the Queen had trusted Liu Jiayi so much.

What was truly shocking was that Liu Jiayi—despite being favored so heavily by the Queen—had betrayed her.

Revealing the Queen's skills so openly, handing Bai Liu the very

foundation of Hearts' abilities… It was as if she had given him direct insight into the Queen's desires, her vulnerabilities.

"Emperess, Emperess," a nearby player said cautiously, "the little witch… she muted the TV. Aside from Bai Liu, she didn't want anyone else to hear. Maybe… maybe it was just a moment of rebellion. Please, don't be angry with her…"

His voice faltered at the end, fear creeping in, but he still forced himself to finish. "Please… forgive her."

They all knew that what Liu Jiayi had done was an undeniable betrayal.

But they still didn't want the Queen to be truly angry.

Because if she was, the little witch wouldn't survive.

And Liu Jiayi had saved them before.

If she came back, she would save many more.

She wasn't a good child.

But she was good to them. And that was enough.

For them—the weaker, underdeveloped players in this brutal guild—the little witch was their only saving grace.

Even if she had betrayed them, they didn't want her to die.

But Hearts didn't seem angry.

Her expression was as calm as a still lake in autumn, her gaze lingering on the small TV, a hint of boredom in her posture as though she had been standing too long.

Onscreen, Liu Jiayi tilted her head, puffed out her chest at Bai Liu, and demanded, "I want to be part of your plan."

The sight reminded Hearts of the first time she had met this little girl.

Defensive, wary, unnervingly intelligent for her age. Suspicion and hostility had been written all over her face, a child standing on the thin line between self-redemption and self-destruction. Holding both poison and antidote in her tiny hands.

Hearts had loved this thorn-covered girl.

She had seen too much of herself in Liu Jiayi's pain.

So she had reached out and pulled her into her embrace.

Liu Huai had never been the right brother for this child.

If Liu Jiayi was ever going to break free from her unstable mental state, if she was going to become a true pillar of strength, she needed something more—a family she could trust.

A brother who would never betray her.

A brother who would love her unconditionally.

A brother who would die for her.

Hearts' eyes flicked to the screen where Qi Yifang was now chasing after Liu Jiayi, the flower-picker.

Little Witch, she thought. You have the brother you always wanted. The ones I chose for you. If you follow Bai Liu… you'll have to sacrifice them to escape.

Can you do that?

The Rose Factory

Bai Liu's small TV rankings continued to drop under the relentless scrutiny of the King's Guild.

[Added 0 likes for Bai Liu's TV. Added 0 favorites for Bai Liu's TV. No one is charging for player Bai Liu.]

[0 new viewers are watching Bai Liu's mini-TV. The system is extremely disappointed with the lack of interest in player Bai Liu. You have lost your right to bounce in the grave. Please let player Bai Liu rest in peace.]

[Player Bai Liu's TV is about to drop from the Graveyard Bounce Zone to the Black House Zone. Please play carefully!]

If the Graveyard Zone was the game's cold house, then the Black House Zone was its prison.

Only players who were extremely inactive or openly resisted the game were exiled by the system.

For example, if a player failed to enter a game on their own within seven days, the system would automatically assign them a high-difficulty game, and their small TV would be sent to the Blackout Zone.

In short, the Blackout Zone was a punitive promotional area. While the Graveyard Bounce Zone still had a normal audience, the spectators in the Blackout Zone were essentially passive viewers who would never like or charge a player's TV.

In fact, there wasn't even an option to like or favorite small TVs in the Black House Zone.

The TVs were locked inside a rigid, prison-like shelf. The [Collect] and [Like] options were grayed out, leaving only the option to [Charge] available.

In other words, players exiled to the Black Room could only be released if they received enough charge points—hence the saying among players:
"Those in prison can only be ransomed."

If the ransom was insufficient, the system would "rip off" the player's

TV entirely, banishing them to the game's ultimate grave—the No Name Zone.

This was a mere step away from total erasure.

Hearts led the other members of the King's Guild into the hut area.

Bai Liu's small TV was placed in the most prominent position on the prison-like shelf, right next to a glaring red message:

[You can leave the Black House Zone after reaching 100,000 charge points.]

But in this situation, forget 100,000 points—there wasn't a single spectator willing to charge even one point for Bai Liu. The King's Guild occupied the entire Blackout Zone, scaring off even those who might have watched out of curiosity.

With no charges at all, Bai Liu would soon be condemned to the No Name Zone.

Hearts watched Bai Liu on the small screen with an air of unperturbed amusement, her eyes half-lidded in what seemed like contemplation—or perhaps indifference.

The fact that the Little Witch had shown her cards to Bai Liu hadn't disturbed the high and mighty queen in the slightest. She continued to observe Bai Liu's small TV with deliberate patience, waiting for the moment when the screen would turn to static—when he would die.

A circle of guild members stood around the small TV, their expressions ranging from serious to worried.

At this moment—when Bai Liu was about to fall for good—even those who resented him, envied him, or outright hated him maintained a solemn silence.

It was a basic show of respect for the Little Witch, who had fought to protect Bai Liu with everything she had—and for the player who was once poised to accomplish great things.

They all stood in silence, looking up at Bai Liu's small TV, waiting for the system's final announcement.

[System Alert: Since no one has charged up to 100,000 points after Bai Liu's TV entered the Black House Zone, the system has made the

following ruling on Bai Liu's TV.]

[Player Bai Liu has shown no seriousness in playing the game. He has not taken action since entering the Rose Factory, has failed to attract an audience, and has achieved an incredible record of 0 likes, 0 favorites, and 0 charge points. Even after entering the Black House Zone, he has not managed to break past 0, rendering all previous promotional efforts meaningless…]

[…Therefore, the system has determined that Player Bai Liu is no longer suitable to remain active on Little TV and will now be removed —]

Just as the system was about to announce the final ruling, a sudden commotion erupted at the edge of Bai Liu's TV.

A blur of movement—too fast to track—broke through the King's Guild defenses, forcing its way into the viewing area of Bai Liu's TV.

At the same moment, the numbers on Bai Liu's small TV jumped.

The charge data changed from a stark red 0 to 14,000.

[System Alert: An advanced player has charged 14,789 points to player Bai Liu's small TV! The ruling is interrupted! Player Bai Liu's TV is reserved.]

Mu Sicheng, his face drenched in sweat, wiped his jaw with the back of his hand. His glowing eyes remained fixed on Bai Liu's small TV as he exhaled sharply, a grin spreading across his face.

"Got it."

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng has emptied his points wallet and charged player Bai Liu's small TV.]

A moment later, another figure rushed through the opening Mu Sicheng had torn in the King's Guild's defense.

Muke arrived, breathless, his nose and lashes glistening with sweat. He bent over, hands braced on his knees, panting heavily. His cheeks were flushed, his body trembling with exhaustion.

[System Alert: Player Muke has emptied his points wallet and charged player Bai Liu's small TV.]

Bai Liu's TV counter jumped again—from 14,000 to 16,000.

Though they had barely made it in, their sudden intrusion had clearly rattled the King's Guild.

Someone sneered.

"Two people? Seriously? You think just the two of you can challenge the King's Guild?"

Mu Sicheng wiped the sweat from his face, his lips curling into a cocky smirk. His eyes glinted with mockery.

"Who said there were only two of us?"

Muke straightened his posture, his demeanor shifting into something poised and diplomatic. He smiled politely.

"As I've recently learned about guild diplomacy… Queen Hearts, we have come to greet you on behalf of our entire guild."

More and more figures emerged behind them.

Their expressions were tense, hesitant. They didn't seem to be particularly strong players—certainly not in terms of panel levels or game quality.

These were bottom-tier players. The kind no one wanted.

Under normal circumstances, they wouldn't have dared to face the elite members of the King's Guild, let alone challenge them outright.

And yet, despite their fear, they didn't retreat.

Instead, they slowly gathered behind Muke and Mu Sicheng, forming an unsteady but growing force—like loose grains of sand piling up, shifting, and threatening to become a landslide.

One of the King's Guild members grimaced and whispered to Queen Hearts.

"…These should be the remaining low-level players from the Scavenger Zombie Guild—the ones Bai Liu picked up last game. The high-level players already ran away, leaving only this bunch of useless nobodies who are too afraid to run…"

"…It's no big deal, they'll be easy to deal with—"

Hearts turned to look at Muke, her gaze cold and unreadable.

"No big deal?" she echoed, voice dangerously soft.

"Didn't you tell me this guild had already been taken care of? That you had informed them the King's Guild would take them in after Bai Liu's death? That they wouldn't oppose our move to intercept him?"

She narrowed her eyes at Muke, who remained standing there, smiling.

"So tell me—"

"Why, then, are they gathering against us?"

Half a dimensional clock ago in the game (equivalent to half an hour in real time).

Scavenging Guild.

Unlike the King's Guild, which had the luxury of buying an entire building for its headquarters, the Scavenging Guild operated out of a humble, low-rent room.

For just 60 points per day, players could stay in this cheap lodging for a night. The small TVs in these budget rooms allowed free access to VIP videos, making them a popular choice for players looking to study game footage and clearance strategies while saving points.

The guild relied on these off-the-beaten-path, low-cost houses as its base and used the promise of free, cheap housing as a gimmick to attract budget-conscious players.

The guild's founders, the Miao father and son, had been notoriously stingy, keeping the lion's share of the guild's earnings for themselves instead of reinvesting in their members or improving the guild's infrastructure.

After their deaths, many capable players fled, leaving behind a dwindling membership of even lower quality.

Finding the Scavengers' Guild's base took some effort on Muke and Mu Sicheng's part. But when they arrived, it was already too late— the King's Guild had beaten them to it.

The remaining players of the Scavenging Guild had gone through a rapid emotional shift. They had barely finished mourning the

absurdity of their situation—[Our guild president just took office and doesn't even know what the hell is going on, and now we're about to get sniped by the King's Guild?!]—when they were suddenly hit with an unexpected windfall—[Oh my god, we can just join the King's Guild instead! How is this even real?]

So, when Muke and Mu Sicheng arrived, introducing themselves as Bai Liu's representatives, they were met with awkward resistance. The guild members were reluctant, their attitudes vague but dismissive, carrying an unspoken contempt for Bai Liu as their so-called new president. In other words, they had no intention of going along with Muke and Mu Sicheng.

This vague rejection quickly escalated into outright confrontation as Mu Sicheng, never one to hold back, slammed his hand on the table and started demanding answers.

Of course, violent clashes in the game didn't allow for actual physical fighting, so the whole scene was reduced to a chaotic mess of people pushing at each other and throwing insults.

At first glance, it seemed like Mu Sicheng was single-handedly taking on an army, swearing louder and pressing harder than anyone else, his aggressive stance making it seem like both a monkey and a general had been let loose in the crowd.

But everything ground to an abrupt halt when Muke climbed onto the table with a megaphone.

In the middle of the brawl, he had somehow pulled a plastic megaphone from somewhere in the dingy room. He stomped up to the highest table, commanding everyone's attention.

As the guild members stopped to gawk at the young master standing above them, Muke cleared his throat, turned on the megaphone with an air of practiced authority, and prepared to speak.

Unfortunately, what he didn't know—having never used one of these cheap plastic megaphones before—was that they usually had a built-in pre-recorded message that played upon activation.

Muke took a deep breath and began, "Listen to me, all of you. Today, we have come to you for something very important. Bai Liu has sent us as his representatives to secure a better future for all of us, for—"

A piercing, robotic voice from the megaphone cut him off.

"—Recycled old TVs, old game managers, old Ma Baoli runners, old judge's scales!"

Muke: "....."

Mu Sicheng, in the middle of throwing a punch: "....."

Everyone else: "....."

Muke stood frozen, gripping the megaphone like a lifeline, as if holding onto the last minute of his dignity. The broken speaker let out a final, pitiful croak before falling silent.

When the awkward hush settled, Muke, his ears burning with embarrassment, pretended as if nothing had happened. He cleared his throat and picked up where he had left off, though his voice had lost much of its former strength.

"—Bai Liu asked us to come to you, to help you build a better guild."

The Scavenging Guild players below collectively turned their gaze to the broken megaphone in Muke's hand, pausing just long enough to let the moment sink in. Then, as if on cue, their eyes shifted back to Muke's face.

Though no one spoke, Muke could read the sentiment clearly in their expressions: That's it?

Muke: "……"

The entire room fell into an uneasy silence, as if someone had hit a pause button.

Mu Sicheng stood at the hall's entrance, blocking the only exit. No one in the room had the strength to take him down and escape. But at the same time, these players weren't easily swayed. Even if they were trapped here, they wouldn't give up the opportunity to join the King's Guild just because Muke asked them to.

If they had survived in this game for so long, it wasn't because they were strong—it was because they knew how to avoid danger.

Muke took a deep breath and raised the megaphone again. The sharp whine of the PA system echoed through the cramped, low-rent building before his clear voice followed.

"We won't stop anyone from joining the King's Guild. If you want to go, you can go. But I want to speak to those of you who don't want to be exploited anymore—who don't want to be trapped in this cycle of abuse but have no better way out."

He looked out at the players.

“If you’re tired of being at the bottom of a guild, of being used and discarded, of living in fear because no matter how hard you struggle, you’re always just another pawn—another piece of fodder with no dignity and no real power—then listen to me. Because Bai Liu has given you a choice.”

Muke’s gaze was unwavering. “Once I’m done speaking, you’ll be free to leave, no matter what you decide.”

The players below still looked skeptical, but a flicker of curiosity had sparked in their expressions.

Logically, they knew that the kind of future Muke was offering couldn’t exist in this game. It was an impossible dream.

But still.

People who had lost everything would cling to even the smallest shred of hope.

Most players couldn’t survive in this game without joining a guild. That was a brutal reality.

In extreme conditions, like in this game, individuals had a much lower survival rate than groups. It was like being stranded in the snow—those who huddled together had a better chance of living than those who tried to go it alone.

Even if being in a guild meant being used, sacrificed, or trampled on, it was still something. At least they could survive, even if they had to swallow their pride to do it.

And so, at first, the crowd had pressed toward the exit where Mu Sicheng stood. But now, slowly, they were shifting back toward Muke.

Their expressions remained wary, disbelieving, but their bodies betrayed them. They were no longer fleeing. They were gathering.

These players had been living in low-cost housing for so long that they had the same tired, beaten-down look as those who had spent decades in poverty in the real world—unkempt, gaunt, and hollow-eyed.

When they relaxed, their faces lost all expression, like people who had been ground down until there was nothing left.

As they crowded together beneath the table where Muke stood,

looking up at him with those vacant, empty stares, he was struck by the eerie resemblance to a refugee camp.

In a game where appearances could be changed at will, players who looked like this were the lowest of the low—people who had no energy to care about their own image.

People whose only priority was survival.

Muke stood over them, more than a meter above, surveying the desperate faces that turned up toward him.

And for a moment, he had a strange sense of déjà vu.

He saw the same flickering, fragile hope in their eyes that had once lived in his own.

The same silent, aching cry for help.

Then, someone finally spoke.

“You said… the new president, Bai Liu, has given us another choice,” a player stepped forward hesitantly, tilting his head to look up at Muke. “What is it?”

Muke took a steadying breath.

“It’s a deal,” he said. “Bai Liu will make a deal with you. And in exchange, he will help you develop your abilities so that you can clear games on your own and support yourselves.”

A ripple of confusion passed through the players.

Muke continued.

“As a group, you’ll pay him a fixed salary every month—divided equally among you. After that, whatever points and items you earn in the game will belong entirely to you. Bai Liu won’t take a single cent beyond his agreed-upon salary. He won’t demand outrageous commissions like other guilds.”

The players’ eyes widened.

“No commission?!”

“He won’t take our items?”

“He’s going to train us?!”

“Yes,” Muke affirmed, his voice strong. “Bai Liu doesn’t want to be an untouchable leader ruling over you. He won’t control or exploit you. He’ll help you, train you, so that you can become strong enough to survive on your own. And then, in exchange, you’ll pay him for his management services—just like a real-world talent agency.”

Muke let a small smile cross his lips.

“Your new president isn’t interested in being your ruler,” he said. “He told me himself—if you agree to work with him, then you are the ones hiring him. That makes you the bosses. The guild will belong to you. And that means you’ll have the most power in it.”

“He will delegate his authority to all of you. The guild will operate as a collective.”

The players broke into an uproar.

They had never heard of such an idea before.

A guild that wasn’t built to exploit them? A guild where they held the power?

It sounded like a trap.

It sounded like a dream.

But they couldn’t stop listening.

Muke could see it—the hesitation, the fear. They wanted to believe, but they had been lied to before.

Finally, someone asked, voice unsteady, “How… how is President Bai going to delegate his power?”

“If you all agree to cooperate,” Muke said, activating his game panel, “I’ll show you the documents Bai Liu signed before entering the game.”

A contract appeared on the panel: The 78 Explanatory Regulations for the Transfer of the Management Rights of the Scavenger Guild.

Thousands of copies, already signed by Bai Liu.

The only thing missing was their signatures.

The room fell deathly silent.

Players leaned forward, squinting at the fine print, desperate to read every word.

Muke knelt on the table, lowering the system panel so that they could see clearly.

In this game, everything could be faked—names, appearances, items, skills.

But there was one thing that could never be forged.

A contract, stamped and certified by the system.

“It’s real!!!” someone shouted.

The silence shattered into chaos.

Muke barely managed to calm the players down before one of them, hands clenched in nervous excitement, stammered out, “We—we’d love to work with President Bai! But… what exactly does he want from us in return?”

A hush fell once more.

Muke smiled.

“President Bai,” he said, voice light, “wants your souls.”

The Rose Factory

Bai Liu is still in the game. Although these people have signed the contract, they must wait for Bai Liu to return before they can trade their souls. In other words, Bai Liu is dismantling the Scavenger Guild first and only then allowing them to collect their promised rewards before any transactions take place.

As he watched the guild members eagerly signing contracts with Muke, Mu Sicheng, standing on the sidelines, frowned. Something felt off. A familiar, nagging feeling of being screwed over crept up his spine…

But he couldn't quite put his finger on why.

At first glance, it seemed like these players were getting the better deal. After all, they had gained control of the guild without handing over their souls yet—essentially acquiring power with no upfront cost. Who wouldn’t take such an offer? It was a no-risk, high-reward deal.

And yet, the mere idea of Bai Liu being taken advantage of set off alarm bells in Mu Sicheng’s head.

After Muke finished distributing the contracts, Mu Sicheng sidled up to him and muttered, "What the hell are you up to? Bai Liu isn’t the type to hand over goods first and collect payment later."

Bai Liu’s business model had always been simple: payment up front, no refunds. If you got scammed, that was your problem.

Muke kept his usual polite, reserved smile, tilting his head back slightly to put some distance between himself and Mu Sicheng. With a calm glance, he asked nonchalantly, "What do you think is the most valuable thing in this pathetic excuse for a guild?"

Mu Sicheng blinked, thrown off by the question.

The most valuable thing in the guild?

Normally, a guild’s worth would come from high-tier items in its inventory, top-secret information in its database, large amounts of saved-up guild points, or an organized collection of game strategies to help players clear dungeons efficiently.

But none of those things existed in this Scavenger Guild.

Any valuable items or points had long been hoarded by Miao Feichi and his father—only for Bai Liu to strip them clean during the last round of games.

As for dungeon strategies? Bai Liu never played the same difficulty level twice. He jumped straight into increasingly insane challenges, making any information stored in the guild database completely useless to him.

A terrible realization dawned on Mu Sicheng as his gaze shifted to the ordinary players around them, laughing and signing contracts without a care in the world.

There was nothing left in this guild. Bai Liu had already hollowed it out into a worthless shell. And the only valuable assets remaining… were the players themselves.

Bai Liu had just sold these players an empty husk and made them believe they now owned something worthwhile.

But what came next was the real trick: these desperate, lower-tier players would work themselves to the bone to develop and grow this shell of a guild, pouring resources into it. Whether or not their souls were eventually traded to Bai Liu, he had already won.

Because what he had just sold them… was nothing. A bomb filled with air—loud and flashy, but ultimately hollow.

And these people, oblivious to the truth, would throw everything they had into stuffing that air bomb with value, only to hand it back to Bai Liu with gratitude.

He had wrung out every last ounce of productivity from these bottom-feeders.

Was this even human?! This was outright fraud!

Mu Sicheng clenched his fists, struggling to contain his outrage, but finally turned to Muke and hissed, “This is too cruel!”

Mu Sicheng had played solo for years, scraping by as a casual player. He understood what it was like to struggle in this brutal game. And now, looking at these desperate people, he couldn’t help but empathize.

Once upon a time, he could’ve been one of them.

Forced to join a guild. Forced to be squeezed dry. Forced into a situation where his only value was what others could take from him.

"If we didn't do this, they'd be dead soon anyway."

Muke's voice was cool and composed, betraying none of the weight of the conversation. He adjusted his glasses, his expression unreadable as he cast a sidelong glance at Mu Sicheng.

"What do you think is really trapping them?"

Mu Sicheng faltered.

"My father's factory was full of people like them," Muke continued evenly. "People who worked themselves to the brink of death, yet refused to leave. Some couldn't afford to, while others were simply afraid—afraid they wouldn't survive on their own."

"They would sabotage new machines and block modernization, desperately clinging to outdated methods, believing that if they held back progress, they wouldn't be replaced."

"But when the inevitable happened—when factories evolved, when machines became more efficient, when economic downturns hit—the ones who refused to move forward were the first to be discarded."

Muke's eyes flickered with something unreadable before he finally looked away. "But you know what happened when every employee was given a share of the factory's profits? When they were made to believe they owned something?"

Mu Sicheng swallowed. "What?"

"They worked themselves to death to build it up and keep themselves —and each other—alive."

Muke's voice was soft, almost distant. "Not a single worker was laid off. Not until the very end."

Mu Sicheng turned back toward the guild hall, watching as the crowd roared with excitement over their new contracts.

Countless system screens overlapped, held high in eager hands.

In the reflection of the dull eyes of these bottom-rung players, he saw Bai Liu's name glowing on the contracts. One by one, they reverently signed their own names beneath it.

The dim blue light of the screens flickered in their eyes—like faith reborn from ashes.

Small Dark Room Area
Bai Liu's small TV screen displayed two groups of people standing off against each other, motionless.

On one side stood the senior members of the King's Guild—strong, towering figures radiating an oppressive sense of superiority. Their sheer height made the low-level players of the Scavenger Guild seem a full head shorter, only deepening the power imbalance. Their condescending, cross-eyed stares and the occasional disdainful grunt made the situation all the more suffocating.

The Scavenger Guild members behind Mu Sicheng and Muke instinctively shrank back. They had never been in a confrontation like this before.

The most rebellious thing they'd ever done up until now was following Miao Feichi to block Bai Liu. Even then, their highest ambition had been to join the King's Guild, not fight against it. And now, suddenly, they found themselves facing off against the very guild they had once idolized.

Internally, they were screaming.

You've got some nerve! Can't we just keep our heads down? We just took over the guild, and now you're already about to get us wiped out?!

A man standing at the edge of the room sneered, breaking the silence. "I thought no one came to collect Bai Liu's corpse when he fell into the Graveyard Bounce Zone. But now, suddenly, people are crawling out of the woodwork to enter the dark room? What, does it finally make sense to you now?"

Muke lifted his eyelids lazily. "Why wouldn't it make sense?" His voice was calm. "The Graveyard Bounce Zone didn't offer a way to save Bai Liu. But the small dark room does."

This was Muke's plan.

After carefully analyzing most players' ranking data, he had done some quick mental calculations to determine Bai Liu's most likely

location among the thousands of game partitions. The answer had led them here—to this small dark room.

This area was obscure, overlooked. Most players only knew of its existence, but those who had actually fallen into it were already long gone.

Fortunately, Muke was a quick thinker. When he first entered the game, he had memorized the structure of most routes and partitions. His sharp memory allowed him to pinpoint this overlooked zone in record time.

The Graveyard Bounce Zone had a rule: to escape, the player needed to exceed their last ranking score. But that was simply impossible under siege.

Last time, Bai Liu's stats had been so high that he had nearly made it onto the King's Guild leaderboard. There was no way the Scavenger Guild alone could match the sheer number of likes, favorites, and donations needed to surpass that record. Muke was realistic enough to understand that with only the Scavenger Guild at his disposal, it was impossible to pull Bai Liu out of the Graveyard Bounce Zone.

However, the small dark room area—before a player completely fell into No Man's Land—was different.

Here, the system had a ransom mechanism in place. A last-ditch effort to squeeze every bit of value out of a fallen player. This meant that, in this area, Bai Liu's small TV could still receive donations from viewers willing to pay for his release.

Usually, this ransom amount wasn't impossibly high. It was calculated based on the total points his supporters could reasonably afford.

For Bai Liu, that amount was 100,000 points—a sum that, when pooled together, equaled the total points of Mu Sicheng, Muke, and every ordinary player in the Scavenger Guild combined.

The only problem was…

Muke lifted his gaze toward the King's Guild members standing in their way.

A human wall had formed at the edge of Bai Liu's TV viewing area. Apart from the brief gap Mu Sicheng had just created, the formation had already "healed" itself, becoming an unbroken blockade.

There was no way the players behind Muke could push through on their own.

If they wanted to break through, they needed someone on the inside to tear open the barrier.

Just a small opening—one moment of chaos—would be enough to embolden these cowardly Scavenger Guild members to follow the lead and start donating.

Muke inhaled deeply, then flipped his hands outward.

With a clean motion, a pair of sleek, dark daggers materialized in his pale palms.

One of the King's Guild members instinctively tensed at the sight of the weapons, almost taking a step back. But then, he quickly remembered—this was the game lobby. Attack skills and weapon damage weren't functional here.

Realizing this, the man's lips curled into a mocking grin. He looked down at Muke's small stature and sneered, "Kid, maybe figure out the rules before you start flashing your knives. You seriously think you can use combat skills in the lobby?"

Muke's expression remained unreadable.

In the next instant, he moved.

His body flickered like a shadow as he stepped forward, slicing through the space between them. The mocking player's expression froze.

The words died in his throat.

[System Alert: Player Muke has activated the skill (Flash Strike).]

Muke raised an eyebrow, his tone almost amused. "Who said I needed to attack to use my knife?"

His back now turned to the stunned King's Guild member, Muke didn't hesitate. He slammed his elbow backward, gritted his teeth, and shoved with force.

"It's a mental value reduction skill," he added, lips curling into a smirk. "No damage function. Just movement."

The barrier was breached.

The Rose Factory

Perhaps it is a long-standing understanding between assassins and thieves.

Although Muke hadn't informed Mu Sicheng of his plan, the moment Muke drew the King's Guild's attention, Mu Sicheng—ever the opportunist—seized the chance as a thief with a keen eye for "loot."

Mu Sicheng's gaze sharpened. With one hand gripping the shoulder of the man Muke was pushing forward, he leaped up, stepping on the back of an unsuspecting King's Guild member.

He then gave the Queen of Hearts at the very back of the group an obscene middle finger, raising an eyebrow and smirking. Without missing a beat, he moved the middle finger to his neck and made a slashing motion.

After the King's Guild members—angered by Mu Sicheng—came after him, Mu Sicheng hopped from the shoulders of the guards, balancing perfectly as he moved.

The human wall of the King's Guild holding the edge collapsed in an instant.

"Now is the time!" Muke shouted. "Charge in! Ransom Bai Liu out!"

While Muke shouted orders, Mu Sicheng stomped on the guards, trying to defend himself. Muke occasionally darted out, using his [Flash Strike] skill to cause chaos.

The scene was as chaotic as the morning rush hour on Mirror City Line 4, with bodies tangled and crushed in every direction.

As the two sides clashed, the ransom for Bai Liu on the small TV began to rise, signaling that people were charging in.

The system panel flashed intermittently, and blue screens of light lit up beneath Bai Liu's small TV.

Meanwhile, Bai Liu, chained to a small television screen in a high, old, barred shelf, looked down with calm, impassive eyes. It seemed as if he could see what was happening below him. Yet, despite this awareness, he withdrew his gaze with a single glance, as though he were a cold and distant god, indifferent to mortal life.

But it was this very god—money-hungry and unfeeling—that controlled the chaos unfolding.

Amidst the turmoil, only Hearts stood poised, holding her hat and skirt in place, seemingly oblivious to the chaos around her. Instead, she tilted her head slightly, scrutinizing Bai Liu on the small TV with a look that was both sizing and amused.

“No wonder Jiayi picked you.” Hearts’ half-closed eyes sparkled with affection as her red lips curled into a smirk. “You’re a perfect fit for her ‘brother.’”

But why not the most perfect brother? Or the one she likes best? The one who treats her best? Why Bai Liu?

Bai Liu was a man who could be described as selfish and self-serving. Devious, cunning, with only a thin veneer of humanity, a smile designed to fool others. He was calculating, loyal only to his own desires, never betraying his own ambitions.

With so many better alternatives around, why would a witch offer her antidote and soul for someone like Bai Liu?

The wind from the brawl ruffled Hearts’ burgundy curls as she watched Bai Liu on the small TV, her eyes clouded with thought.

When a person has already revealed themselves to be a “werewolf,” doesn’t that make any suspicion unnecessary?

Liu Jiayi would never have doubted Bai Liu. And that was why she chose him.

The little witch wouldn’t return; she had found her perfect “brother.”

Hearts looked up as Mu Sicheng appeared to her left. He stomped on a player’s head, pushing forward until he stood in front of her.

To her right, Muke appeared, hot on Mu Sicheng’s heels.

Muke struck at Hearts’ ankles with his daggers, while Mu Sicheng jumped onto a player’s shoulders and delivered a brutal flying kick to Hearts’ face. The two of them moved as if they had done this a thousand times before, working seamlessly together to block any possible escape routes for her.

While Mu Sicheng’s face was twisted with frustration, Muke remained

more composed. As soon as he saw Mu Sicheng charging, he knew what the impulsive man was up to, but he couldn't help thinking it was a pointless endeavor.

Muke knew there was no point in attacking anyone in the game—there was no way to harm them.

But as Muke's thoughts raced, his body preemptively followed Mu Sicheng's lead.

Mu Sicheng was more impulsive, and even if he couldn't defeat her, he was determined to make a fool of the Queen of Hearts in front of her own members. He had had enough of the King's Guild and their ridiculous antics.

You always act like a beautiful woman, forcing your men around. Let's see how you act now that you've fallen.

Mu Sicheng's eyes gleamed with ruthlessness as he delivered a hard kick. Muke's dagger scraped the ground with an ear-splitting screech, the sharp blade heading straight for Hearts' bony ankle.

But everything slowed as Hearts moved.

The woman in the hip-hugging skirt adjusted the end of her skirt and leapt lightly on her knees, her movements delicate, almost childlike. Yet as she landed, her heel caught the hole of Muke's dagger, stopping it dead in its tracks.

At the same time, Hearts gracefully leaned forward, ducking under Mu Sicheng's flying kick, her wide hat brushing against him.

The kick didn't land—only slightly scuffing the hat, which then fell lazily between her and Mu Sicheng.

Hearts reversed gracefully, keeping her heel on the round hole of Muke's dagger. With one hand, she adjusted her hat, and with the other, she reached out and grabbed Mu Sicheng's ankle, pulling him upwards.

Caught off guard, Mu Sicheng fell backward as Hearts yanked him down.

The woman slowly lowered her hat, revealing a face now wearing a smile that was both model-perfect and more seductive than anything else. Her crimson lips, flawless skin, and piercing crimson eyes exuded

an otherworldly charm. Her burgundy curls, disheveled from the fight, only enhanced her beauty.

Hearts leaned forward, her face hovering near Mu Sicheng's as her expression changed. Her long curls transformed into a sleek ponytail, her elegant suit became a simple school uniform, and her once-aloof, red eyes softened into kind, almond-shaped ones.

Halfway through the change, Mu Sicheng seemed entranced.

He stared at her face, unable to look away, his expression not one of fascination, but of confusion—fear and silence combining into something indescribable.

Hearts smiled as she placed her finger under Mu Sicheng's chin, teasing him: "... That's who you're most afraid of, isn't it?"

The moment Hearts touched him, Muke kicked Mu Sicheng away, who then collapsed on his back, breathing heavily, his eyes wide.

Mu Sicheng had just witnessed Hearts' skill, but Muke didn't understand exactly what it was. In any case, it wasn't good. Mu Sicheng had looked as though he had seen something truly incredible.

"Muke," Bai Liu's voice suddenly rang out.

Muke subconsciously looked up. The next second, his pupils contracted in shock.

Hearts, now fully transformed into Bai Liu, was smiling at him just like Bai Liu would.

Hearts extended her hand slowly to Muke, her voice soft and inviting: "Want to get out of here with me?"

"Want to play with me all the time?" Bai Liu's voice had never sounded so gentle with him. "You're my most useful teammate, Muke. I trust you more than I trust Mu Sicheng. I'm sorry for treating you coldly before. I didn't actually hate you."

"Even if we didn't start off on the right foot, I don't mind. You've proven how much you mean to me."

Muke's breath caught in his throat, and before his eyes, it felt like the world was hazy and dreamlike. Everything seemed clouded except for Bai Liu—so real, so captivating, so willing to follow.

“Muke.” Bai Liu smiled, his hands outstretched. “What are you hesitating for?”

Muke felt the ground drop beneath his feet, the world shaking around him. He staggered back, shaking his head as hard as he could, trying to wake up from the beautiful dream. But it was like a ghost haunting him—he knew it was fake, yet he couldn’t move, couldn’t wake up.

Like a puppet on strings, he stepped toward Hearts, his hand lifted and placed into hers.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu’s small TV has reached 100,000 points, officially unbanned!]

[Now re-posting Bai Liu’s TV to (Multiplayer Zone)]

Muke, who had almost placed his hand in Hearts’ palm, snapped back to reality. He looked up at the small television, which was flashing a notification. He saw the smirk on Bai Liu’s—or rather, Hearts’—face, and for the first time, someone had escaped the King’s Guild’s blockade.

Bai Liu's small TV in the dark room shuts off, and the next moment, it's in the multiplayer section again.

Hearts regains his calm and turns away without a second glance.

There was no point in fighting the group in the hut area. The other side had enough points to "redeem" Liu Bai—after all, the system was designed to encourage people to throw money at it.

But what happens once he's redeemed?

Hearts gestures to her men with a casual flick of her brow. "Back to the multiplayer area, and re-block Bai Liu."

The men beside her, still secretly annoyed that Muke and Mu Sicheng had messed things up at one end, now look up at Hearts in unison, stunned. "Empress, is there going to be another siege?"

It’s humiliating enough that such a big guild is blocking a newcomer who’s only played for the fourth time and hasn’t even been blocked yet. But to do it again?

"Don’t you have the guts to face this?" Hearts’ brow furrows slightly, and she tilts her waist to the side, sweeping a lazy look over the men as she speaks. Although her voice is inquisitive, her eyes glimmer with an indescribable charm.

The man she addressed can’t help but stiffen, from the top of his head to the knot in his throat. It’s as if he’s been singled out by a drill sergeant. He stands straight, his legs pressed tightly together, and answers in a weak tone, "…What if the other side cuts us off again during this siege?"

The ransom for the hut varies depending on the person’s point balance. If Bai Liu is besieged again, the system might set a lower ransom depending on the situation.

It’s as if Bai Liu, held hostage by the system, were a rich kid, and the ransom could be set at 100,000 points, something Muke and his group could afford. But now, Bai Liu is just a bunch of poor kids, so naturally, the ransom won’t be that high.

With the ransom lower and more reasonable, Muke’s group is

desperate to get Bai Liu out, even if they have to borrow money.

That means there's still a chance they won't get blocked the second time around.

Hearts says, "Then block him a third time."

The man stares at her, bewildered, and blurts out, "A third… time? Do we really need to do that?"

"What makes you think you'll stop him on the first try?" Hearts responds, her tone bemused. "He's the president, it's a guild vs. guild game. Not to mention Bai Liu—a guy with a sharp mind, an ability to manipulate and control people, and an exceptional game strategy. The last person who made it to level three in a game called Spades killed our entire team in less than two dimensional clocks during the league last year."

The man falls silent, staring blankly at Hearts.

Hearts lifts her eyes and gives him a teasing look. "We're up against a player who could cause us serious problems later in the league, and you expect to take him out in one go without losing a single soldier?"

"You're not underestimating Bai Liu, but you don't think I need to go to all this trouble to deal with him? You're questioning my judgment, aren't you?" Hearts asks lightly, her tone rhetorical.

The man immediately bows his head, hastily replying, "I didn't mean that! Empress!"

Hearts brushes past him and orders, "Try to surround Bai Liu before he escapes the game, and blockade him until the Scavengers can't afford the ransom and he drops into no-man's land."

Muke, standing at the back, watches Hearts leave. He turns to the others with a stone-cold expression and explains.

"Hearts is probably going for a second siege. We'll have to find a way to get Bai Liu's little TV in the lobby to delay his arrival in the hacks section. After one more round of ransom, we might be out of points and just have to watch as Bai Liu falls into the no-name section in round three."

Muke takes a deep breath and glances at Bai Liu's small TV.

Hearts walks to the edge of the dark room and looks back at Bai Liu's small TV.

Two men—one scowling, the other smirking—speak.

"The rest is up to Bai Liu. Let's see if he can get out of the game before the third round of ransom payments."

"If he doesn't make it out before then, he's going to fall into no-man's land forever."

In-game.

Tang Erda and two other members of the King's Guild follow behind Liu Jiayi in the processing plant. The other two members keep an eye on Tang Erda, wary of a potential sneak attack.

Liu Jiayi, at the front of the group, doesn't care what's happening behind her. She focuses on the next step in drying the rose leaves—concocting and drying them.

The dried petals are stir-fried in a massive iron pot until the water evaporates, turning them a deep reddish-brown and giving off an exotic, smoky aroma.

It may sound simple, but this intense stir-frying process lasts over eight hours. If the stir-frying stops, the pan may become sticky, and the petals will burn black at the bottom.

Not to mention that newcomers can only use pots with batter marks, which makes them prone to staining, and new processors often have to stir up 360 kg of roses at once to keep their pots from being taken over by more experienced workers. It's an exhausting, physical job.

Liu Jiayi pours the dried rose leaves into a pot on the stove, which is taller than she is. The spatula she uses to stir stands high above her head.

As soon as the stove ignites, Liu Jiayi jumps up, pressing her body weight on the spatula like a seesaw, stirring with great effort.

It's clear she's determined, but the task looks unforgiving.

The sight of her furiously working the spatula has the NPC processors looking at her with expressions of disbelief.

It’s a job of strength, but Tang Erda is handling it more easily. Her eyes are shining as she powerfully stirs the pot, and soon a faint white smoke rises with the aroma of the roses.

The scent causes Tang Erda to shake slightly. He steadies himself with his shovel, and a piece of skin falls off at the corner of his mouth like peeling puppet paint.

[System Alert: Player Tang Erda's spirit value has dropped to 51, please rebound in time!]

Tang Erda pulls out a bottle of perfume from his pocket and sprays it on himself. His spirit value recovers to a safe level, and the cracked skin on his face begins to heal under the perfume’s effect. But the more the rose blooms, the more it fills his vision.

The rose is already in full bloom, having reached its tenth petal. With only ten more petals to go, Tang Erda sees it as fully opened.

The two members of the King's Guild watch for a while, then reluctantly step forward, lifting Liu Jiayi, who’s sweaty, tired, and trembling. She refuses to stop and sighs, "Little witch, leave this to us grown men."

Though they aren’t sure if this little witch is the real one, she seems different from what they remember. The Little Witch usually avoids physical labor, knowing it’s not her strength. She would typically find more clever ways to handle such tasks—like using props.

But now, Liu Jiayi seems to be pushing herself deliberately, hoping they’ll do the work for her—something that feels more like Bai Liu's tactic of taking advantage of people.

[We all owe her that.]

[The first time she wanted to protect someone like this, it's better to help as much as you can.]

Thinking of what Qi Yihang had said to them earlier, the two men from the King's Guild exchange a glance before letting out a long, bitter sigh.

Even if this Liu Jiayi isn’t the real Little Witch, when they see how desperately she’s using herself as a shield to protect Bai Liu, they can’t bear to see her fail.

--So what if this is the real Little Witch?

Liu Jiayi has literally saved their lives! Do they really want to see something happen to her if she fails her mission?

Resigned, one man lifts a spatula while the other picks up a sack of dried roses, working feverishly as sweat drips from their foreheads.

Exhausted, the two men drink stamina restorers before forcing themselves to continue.

Liu Jiayi, standing on the sidelines with her head down, sips from a recovery drink, looking worn out but still determined.

But Tang Erda, watching the scene, frowns. He glances at the 360 kg of dried rose leaves in the iron pot and senses something's off.

He doesn't believe that Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi, both quick-witted, could only produce 360 kg of dried leaves. That amount is just enough for one person to work as a processor.

But if they gathered more than 360 kg and didn't use it for promotion, where did the rest of the roses go?

Tang Erda guesses correctly that they collected over 360 kg—900 kg in total, reaching the maximum weight limit they could carry in a day.

Liu Jiayi glances absently at the sap left on her hand—the same sap she secretly helped carry out of the factory this morning.

The Rose Factory

Inside the abandoned factory, the freshly picked dried leaf roses were piled high in the open space, next to the dazed exiles who had been rehabilitated by Bai Liu. They stared in awe at the pile of 'loot' that had been brought here only that morning.

A few sweaty stragglers leaned against the rose bushes, shaking drops of sweat from their hands and breathing sighs of relief. These were the same laid-off rose factory workers who had been taken away by Bai Liu earlier to help dry the rose petals. This considerable pile of dried leaf roses had been carried back by them.

Someone, shocked by the pile of roses, stumbled forward to ask the men, fear visible on their faces, "Why did you steal so many roses? If they catch you at the factory, you'll be executed!"

"Yeah, yeah, give it back!"

"If you steal more than 1 kg of dried leaf roses, you won’t be able to work in the rose-making industry again, unless you’re killed."

Following the global spread of dried leaf rose gas, those involved in the rose factory had pushed for specific laws to protect this precious and limited resource.

Despite all the controversy, the law was published.

The law covered denunciations of the Rose of the Dry Leaves, fines and detentions for civilians promoting the idea that the Rose of the Dry Leaves was harmful, exclusive rights to the Rose of the Dry Leaves gas perfume (which could be used for 10 million years without being shared), and private research into the perfume's formula—a serious infringement punishable by a fine of 10 million dollars or more.

Any person who steals, smuggles, or deals in illegal dried leaf roses of more than one kilogram or more than three to five bottles of low-grade dried rose leaf gas would be punished by death or by life imprisonment with hard labor if the rose factory was willing to privately handle the matter.

A simple translation of the latter penalty means that if someone commits a crime related to the Rose of Dried Leaves, they can be handed over to the Rose Factory for disposal—alive or dead—if the factory so wishes.

When the law was first introduced, half the world protested against the severity of the punishment, but no one questioned the validity of it.

At this point, the Rose Factory introduced a regulation that it would reward those who reported people around them harboring illegally obtained dried leaf roses or developing perfume with a ten-year supply of free perfume.

At one point, there were voices everywhere attacking each other. It was said that at its peak, the Rose Factory could receive 100,000 tip-off calls a day. After this crackdown, which saw the Rose Factory take down many criminal civilians, the opposition waned, and fewer people questioned the rules.

Everyone had gone from fierce resistance to fear at the sight of the stolen roses—not just fear of the regulations but also fear of betrayal from within their own ranks.

The Rose Factory's reward for reporting still exists today, though it has been reduced from ten years to one. Yet, there is still a steady stream of people calling the tip-off line.

Desperate mothers or sons, trying to save their dying children or parents, have stolen dried leaf roses and become criminals, only to force their families to report them, so that they can receive the ten-year supply of perfume that could extend their lives.

But now, no one dared speak of these fears.

"It doesn’t matter to me anymore if I’m dead or not." One of the stragglers who had carried the roses caught his breath and looked up at the fearful stragglers around him with a bitter laugh. "Mr. Bai, for all the risks we took to get this pile of dried leaf roses out, he wasn’t afraid to die. Is it our turn to be afraid?"

Someone propped himself up by the rose bush, stood with a long, complicated sigh, and raised his head with a steely gaze. "Mr. Bai, a fabricator who could have lived a life of wealth and prosperity, yet he was willing to fight tooth and nail to help us, and so openly handed us such a dangerous weapon... he really believes in us, the untouchable, rotten folk."

There was a moment of silence as everyone's eyes moved towards the pile of roses.

"And I know you're all bitter and scared," the man said, turning his gaze to a couple of other porters who had stood up. "These flowers were carried by a few of us, and just now on the way here, we discussed that if any of you wanted to claim that year's perfume reward through the Rose Factory tip-off..."

He looked at the mutilated and miserable faces of the stragglers. "Then report us porters. We were the ones who moved it in the first place. We can't let the good people who stood up for us get killed."

"In this day and age, to be a good person is to break the law, and people are afraid to take the risk of being good anymore." He smiled with tears in his eyes, his voice choked as he wiped the corners of his bursting eyes. "Now, without this Mr. Bai, the next Mr. Bai probably won't come until my daughter and grandson are dragged to their deaths. I don't want him to die; he's too rare."

When the man finished, no one moved, standing still and motionless.

One minute. Two minutes. Finally, someone moved.

The young woman who had previously been holding the child and asking questions about Bai Liu put the child down to the person next to her. She took a deep breath and stepped forward, bending down to grab a large pile of roses in her arms. She turned to look at those who hadn't moved yet.

"This pile of roses must be over 1 kg." The roses set off her otherwise lifeless, white face with the rosy anger of someone still alive. She looked up at the men and said, "I count these roses as stolen, they have nothing to do with Mr. Bai. So, if you want to report me, report me."

"I believe Mr. Bai will give my children a new, free world where there will be no more death sentences for stealing roses." Her eyes burned, the roses in her eyes as bright as fire, and she spat out with clear certainty, "I would die for that."

Someone's eyes changed.

Gradually, slowly, hesitantly, as if they had made up their minds, the stragglers moved towards Rose Hill.

They came forward to embrace bush after bush of roses—dried leafy roses that would never wilt, blooming brilliantly and passionately on their chests and under their eyes like fire.

"This kilo is on me..."

"We are a family of three, including children. Please give me 3 kg..."

"Can I get 10 kg per person? It's a death sentence anyway. It can't be any worse than it is now..."

The huge mountain of roses faded into small bouquets in each stranger's arms. They stood like actors receiving flowers on an empty construction site, performing a curtain-raiser called [Defiance], just as Bai Liu had arranged and intended.

And as a token of appreciation for their perfect, passionate, wholehearted performance, Bai Liu presented each of them with a bouquet of dried leaf roses.

Standing aside, the porter who had spoken earlier looked at the stragglers in front of him, bewildered.

In all those years, there was never a collaboration against the dried leaf rose that couldn't be dismantled by the reporting reward from the Rose Factory. He had simply done what Mr. Bai had told him to do.

It was surprising that this time, not a single person had reported them for the more than 1,000 kilos of stolen roses.

This porter recalled the events of the morning.

While he was secretly carrying the roses, he had worriedly told Bai Liu about the reward for reporting, anxiously saying that everyone who helped carry the roses was committed to helping Mr. Bai and wouldn't betray him. But they were afraid someone might have a different intention!

Reporting this kind of behavior simply couldn't be stopped! Bai Liu, as their leader, must be the easiest to target!

Standing in the sun, Bai Liu lifted his eyelids, and the rose in his right eye was as vibrant and beautiful as the drifter had ever seen.

With a strange little smile on his face, Bai Liu rhetorically asked the straggler, "Why do you want to put an end to this behavior?"

The straggler was stunned. "But if you can't eliminate it, everything you've led us to do will be completely scrapped..."

"Firstly, people are self-interested creatures, and it's not logical for

anyone to give up the benefits available to them and take risks for someone else's cause. So, it's fundamentally impossible to stamp out this kind of profitable prosecution of others."

Bai Liu waved him off and continued, "Secondly, I think you've been getting one thing wrong: I'm not leading you on this. The subject of this is you. I'm just a manager from whom you've bought a solution. You're the ones paying the price of the deal."

"In my opinion, the only way to completely solve this whistleblowing issue is to make the subject of the revolt against it everyone in your group—not me, some nebulous figure."

"The logic behind the benefits of reporting doesn't hold when everyone realizes that they're the ones who will get the most out of it."

Bai Liu looked at him blandly. "All you have to do is get everyone in your group to recognize, at your instigation, that they are the subject of the crime, not the object. The person they're reporting includes themselves."

"So, what do I do?" The straggler looked at Bai Liu with confusion and hope. "Mr. Bai, how should I incite them?"

Bai Liu curled his lips into a smile that would make Mu Sicheng, Muke, Liu Jiayi, and Tang Erda shudder when they saw it. "If it were me, I'd probably say this..."

The straggler's gaze became dazed and disoriented as he watched what was happening in the factory.

Almost every step of what had just happened was exactly as Mr. Bai had told him, and Mr. Bai had even mentioned a few times that he should emphasize the importance of children and offspring when speaking, making more eye contact with the mother who had asked him questions yesterday—so that this mother would be the first person to successfully incite the crowd.

As soon as the first person stepped forward, the rest would follow.

It wouldn't have been difficult, as Mr. Bai had tersely commented. Such oppressed, common-interest groups were the easiest to instigate.

Because they had no worse option than the status quo.

The Rose Factory

The roses were distributed and weighed by the stragglers.

Bai Liu used Liu Jiayi's and his single daily quota of 900 kg, leaving 360 kg for Liu Jiayi, to smuggle here.

After distributing the roses, the stragglers looked at the porters with confusion. "What are we supposed to do with all these roses, Mr. Bai?"

"The roses are to be used for brewing perfume, which Mr. Bai plans to distribute to the stragglers in order to relieve as many people as possible as quickly as possible," the dispenser explained.

Had they been discussing making perfume earlier, they would have been horrified, as stopping was a crime. But after everything that had happened, this step felt natural to them.

Someone wondered aloud, "Did Mr. Bai already have the recipe for making the perfume?"

There are two main reasons the Rose Factory holds such high status: the first is its unique cultivation of dried leaf roses. The second is the secret recipe for making dried rose leaf gas.

The aroma of dried leaf roses is fragile. If not treated and preserved in time for perfumery, the flowers lose their fragrance in minutes.

Transporting the roses from the flower fields to the abandoned factory requires more than just simple preservation.

By the time the dried leaf roses reach the factory, the scent is so faint that it’s barely noticeable without burying your head in them. For the dying exiles, this faint scent does little to help, let alone saving more people.

Strangely, perfumes are generally made in the same way. When the main ingredient is a single flower, it’s easy to decipher the process. Even if a perfect replica cannot be made, the basic steps of picking, drying, distilling, and re-drying would at least yield a crude essential oil that could preserve the aroma for some time. This could be used to provide relief to the displaced population.

However, many people had risked their lives trying to secretly research the process of making dried leaf gas. Despite numerous

attempts, no one had succeeded in determining the exact recipe.

Quite a few people were aware that the basic treatment steps for dried leaf roses produced a rough essential oil with only half an hour of fragrance. This scent would dissipate instantly once the bottle was opened.

Only the Rose Factory's perfume, Rose Dried Leaf Gas, retains the rich aroma of roses for a long time.

This means that the processing steps for this perfume are entirely different from regular raw material handling.

"Mr. Bai doesn't have the secret recipe yet," the head porter sighed. "He's still just a processor. The secret recipe would have to be known by someone at the perfumer's level."

A former porter who worked in the rose factory recalled, "It is said that only the factory director knows the complete secret recipe for making dried rose leaf gas."

"So, what do we do with these roses now?" someone asked.

"Mr. Bai said we should first dry the concoction into semi-finished products. We have a lot of veterans here, and many nearby factories used to be rose factories for cottage perfume processing. Though they were closed down due to infringement, many of their tools remain and can be used," a porter explained.

"But what if we make the concoction and Mr. Bai still doesn't have the recipe? The semi-finished dried leaf roses will only last for three days before the fragrance fades," another porter replied.

"We don't have any senior factory workers here. None of us know what to do next with the semi-finished products or what vessels to use. If we don't have the means to take the next step, all those semi-finished products will be scrapped," a porter said, taking a deep breath. "Mr. Bai said that in three days, he will tell us what to do next."

"Get to work!" the head porter ordered.

---------- --

Late at night, in the flower fields.

Liu Jiayi, now relegated to the role of flower-picker, sat at the edge of the field, donning the protective clothing of a flower-picker. Beside her, Qi Yifang, who had silently followed her all day, also silently put on his gear and gloves.

Qi Yifang had given up his chance for promotion and had been demoted to a flower-picker, along with Liu Jiayi.

This Liu Jiayi adjusted the protective goggles on her eyes, and with her hair pulled out of the collar of her suit, she looked up at Qi Yifang through her goggles, her expression indifferent.

Qi Yifang, looking at Liu Jiayi's small face, half the size of her protective suit, felt mixed emotions and didn’t know what to say.

He couldn’t tell if the little witch who resembled Bai Liu—sometimes a petulant little girl—was the real one or the fake.

Finally, Qi Yifang sighed. "If we complete the guaranteed task of picking 40 kg on this map, we shouldn't be laid off and become stragglers."

He paused, sensing Liu Jiayi's indifferent reaction, which he couldn’t tell if it was genuine or feigned. He added, "If you can't gather enough later, you can come to me. I won’t be far—just call me if you need help."

With that, Qi Yifang carried his sack and prepared to head into the flower fields. But just before he left, his voice lowered to a near whisper, "Whatever you have to do to avoid me seeing, you can do. I won’t look this way."

He shrugged the sack onto his shoulder and walked away.

Liu Jiayi blinked and quietly watched Qi Yifang’s retreating figure, her gray, foggy eyes empty of any emotion.

As the night wore on, strange tentacles appeared beneath the flower fields, and the fierce-faced Rose Drifters resurfaced.

But this time, Liu Jiayi made no move. After Qi Yifang left, she laid down in a tent far from the field and opened a small Magic Space around her, perfectly protecting herself by restricting any creatures from entering.

Liu Jiayi leisurely snapped her hatchet, looking as if she were about to

sleep rather than pick flowers.

The rules of Magic Space use depend on its size and the time limit. The smaller the space, the longer it lasts.

Liu Jiayi's Magic Space, which only encompassed her body size, theoretically allowed her to sleep peacefully until the next morning.

But this only ensured her safety, not her gain. Especially now that she had been laid off, with no steady income, and the perfume for the stragglers was expected to last longer—it didn't seem very sensible.

If Qi Yifang, standing at a distance, had been more perceptive or had glanced back out of curiosity, he might have been surprised to see Liu Jiayi not doing anything. He would have come over to help.

After all, in a world where spiritual bleach equals perfume, a day without labor and a constant supply of perfume would lead to madness.

But the Weather Forecaster, currently amidst a gale of Rose Drifters, kept his word and did not look back at what was happening on Liu Jiayi's side of the flower fields.

Soon, however, the situation reversed.

On Liu Jiayi's side of the field, stragglers appeared, backpacks in hand, picking dried leaf roses as quickly as their eyes could follow.

The stragglers moved cautiously around the field, avoiding the tentacles swarming beneath their feet and the thieves who might steal their roses. Their hands moved swiftly over the bushes, picking roses so quickly that it was almost impossible to track, each hand laden with freshly plucked roses in mere seconds.

Most of the stragglers were experienced flower-pickers who had been laid off for various reasons. But when the porters returned from transporting roses, the question was asked in the factory: "Who wants to go to the flower fields tonight and help Mr. Bai steal roses?"

Had they been asked to steal roses before, the stragglers would have refused.

But tonight, these stragglers brought out their long-lost speed, determined to clear the entire field of roses in one night, their eyes burning with resolve.

If Bai Liu succeeded in becoming a factory worker, eventually the factory manager, and obtained the full recipe for dried rose leaf gas perfume, all these roses would be processed into the perfume they had dreamed of and distributed to them.

That would keep them alive for a long time!

With this hope in mind, the stragglers—who had come of their own free will—became increasingly vigilant and quick, looking around as they picked, avoiding both the Rose Drifters and being reported by other flower-pickers.

Fortunately, Liu Jiayi was guarding the roses in this field.

Earlier, the porters had informed the stragglers, so they dared to come out at night and steal roses, knowing the field was safe.

The best fighters against rose thieves were the flower-pickers, because stealing roses was something every flower-picker despised. Too many stolen roses would lead to fines or even layoffs.

But now, the tables had turned. The rose-stealing drifters—former flower-pickers—looked at the growing number of roses in their arms, realizing for the first time that picking roses was a symbol of harvest and joyful labor.

The roses they had worked so hard for, risking their lives to pick, were no longer exploited. They truly belonged to them.

This joy was something the lower-class commoners, who had previously lived in misery and worked diligently out of fear of being laid off, had never experienced.

But now it was possible—all thanks to Mr. Bai's operation.

After a long night of hard work, the stragglers, exhausted and pale, with smiles of satisfaction on their faces, quietly went to the tent area. They found the right tent and reverently placed a portion of the dried leaf roses they had picked in front of Liu Jiayi's sleeping tent.

This was the reward they were willing to pay.

The Rose Factory

While the stragglers were secretly picking roses in the flower field, Bai Liu, who had been transformed into [Liu Jiayi] in the tent, reverted to his pale face. He ran out of stamina, curling up on the tiny bed in the tent, panting slightly before closing his eyes and falling asleep from extreme exhaustion.

As a player with a low base panel, Bai Liu no longer relied on stamina from higher skill cards. He had overdrawn his stamina slots and had no way to recover by drinking stamina restorers, not to mention his low spirit level.

With all these factors at play, Bai Liu knew he really needed to rest, and he didn't have the strength to return to picking roses tonight.

Thankfully, Bai Liu had built the scene earlier, leaving himself plenty of time to rest.

However, a few hours into his sleep, Bai Liu, half-awake, felt an extremely cold hand on his ankle, gently pulling him as if trying to wake him.

The crucial detail here was that Bai Liu's entire body was currently encased in the [Magic Space] prop.

What had happened the previous day occurred again—something had broken through the Magic Space barrier and touched Bai Liu, as a dizzying, rich scent of roses began to permeate the tent.

Bai Liu's eyes snapped open when he felt the object grab his ankle, but the impact of the overpowering aroma quickly caused his consciousness to blur.

It was a subtle sensation. While his mind maintained some clarity, his limbs and muscles were paralyzed by the perfume. He could barely move, his breathing slowed, and a kaleidoscope of red pike petals began swirling in front of his eyes.

It felt like being ghosted in bed.

Bai Liu noticed that the hand holding his ankle seemed to realize he was awake and let go. The fingers slid gently down his protective suit, crawling slowly upwards against his skin, their cool, thin, smooth fingers moving up his warm thighs like jade sculptures.

The slight, non-stick, almost inhuman sensation made Bai Liu arch his back and shudder. A knot formed in his throat, and his exhalation grew heavier.

The hand was almost up to his...

Even Bai Liu, who usually didn't care much about this, now felt a tingle at the back of his neck, breathless, realizing that the hand in his trousers could very well belong to Xie Ta.

His eyes were red and drowsy from the scent. Bai Liu shook his leg with all his might, and the hand, reacting, slipped down his trousers and out.

The hand seemed confused, as if it had been trying to climb up Bai Liu's body without sight. But Bai Liu's resistance threw it off with a kick, leaving the hand unsure of how to proceed.

Eventually, the hand curled into a crouching position, like a small octopus with its tentacles curled up, head down in self-imposed isolation.

Bai Liu lowered his gaze to the right hand, and for some reason, he felt a strange sense of sympathy for it, like the hand was a little cat-like.

Bai Liu: "....."

Wasn't the other person supposed to be the one causing trouble? Why did it feel like it was doing it wrong?

The hand didn't stay silent for long. It soon perked up again, struggling upwards by grabbing at Bai Liu's layers of protective clothing, eventually fumbling around his neck, searching for a rope with a coin hanging from it.

White fingers twisted down the lanyard, pausing when they didn't find it the first time before twisting it obsessively a second time.

Bai Liu understood what the hand was searching for—Tawil was looking for the Inverse Cross.

He wasn't sure what had happened to Tawil in this Rose Factory instance, but it was clear that Tawil, with only one hand, couldn't communicate. The Inverse Cross was crucial for him.

The Inverse Cross was used to channel Tawil's oracles.

But it had been taken from Bai Liu by Tang Erda before he could enter the game.

As the hand continued running the lanyard around Bai Liu's neck for the fourth time, Bai Liu leaned forward slightly, raising his hand to stop it. The scent from the factory and flower fields had overwhelmed him all day and night, but now, though still dizzy, he was at least able to move a little.

He grabbed the right hand in front of him, but the hand didn't seem to believe that Bai Liu would lose the Inverse Cross and struggled to escape, its fingers digging stubbornly into Bai Liu's slightly open collar.

Bai Liu's strength was no match for the hand's. Under the rose-scent's influence, his whole body felt soft, and moving his hand took all his remaining energy.

Seeing how the hand was playfully rough and unaware, Bai Liu realized that if it got in, some indescribable things might happen below the neck.

But in order to prevent this and keep the chapter within bounds, Bai Liu took a professional approach. He quickly figured out how to communicate with the hand without words.

Bai Liu wrote on the palm of the right hand with his fingertips: [The Inverse Cross was taken from me and I lost it.]

The hand stopped struggling, took two slow steps back, and curled into the self-conscious, octopus-like crouch again.

Bai Liu: "....."

He felt a rare sense of helplessness, leaning his head against the knuckles of the "little octopus" with a faint sigh, before gently pushing his fingers away from Tawil's wrapped fingers. He then wrote on the pale palm: [Sorry].

Tawil paused, stretched his bony fingers, and stood up, writing on Bai Liu's palm in return.

[Remember what I told you? The key to everything lies with the witch, and the antidote and poison are the keys to your choice... until

your true death comes.]

After writing, Tawil's palm covered Bai Liu's face. Bai Liu blinked slightly as Tawil's index finger nudged his forehead, the cool, gentle touch reminiscent of when Tawil had lightly kissed Bai Liu's forehead during an oracle descent.

Then the pure white right hand fell to the ground in a streak of light pink petals, dragged into the earth by vines.

Bai Liu slept in a rose-colored prophecy.

The following day, Bai Liu's eyes snapped open. He sat up, finding nothing around him. Everything looked like a dream, but when he sniffed the pillow, he could still smell the lingering roses.

The scent of roses was strong on his thighs, neck, and waist—so strong it felt as though he had slept in them all night.

A right hand had indeed come uninvited last night.

Tawil seemed very limited, as shown by his fragmented form and the vines pulling him into the ground.

Despite these restrictions, Tawil had appeared multiple times, likely to alert Bai Liu to something.

Bai Liu narrowed his eyes.

Tawil's words from an earlier oracle echoed in his mind.

Was there something he had missed?

"The key to everything is in the hands of the witch... Poisons and antidotes are the key to your choice..."

"The time in you is unique and irreversible until real death comes."

As Bai Liu pondered, he heard footsteps outside the tent. Instantly, he equipped his Hearts skill card.

Qi Yifang's surprised voice rang out from outside the tent, "Did you pick so many roses last night?!"

Seeing himself transformed back into a little witch, Bai Liu looked down, momentarily pausing as a realization struck him.

[The key to everything is in the hands of the witch, the poison and the antidote are the key to your choice.] He had previously thought this referred to Liu Jiayi, but now, he understood it was about him.

Since there were two "witches" in the Rose Factory instance, and the later sentence about antidotes and poisons revealed that "witches" in Tawil's oracle weren't actually little witches...

No—he was the false witch.

Bai Liu slowly lifted his head, a smile of amusement creeping onto his face.

Tawil's oracle had foreseen that he would turn into a little witch to deceive others. If the "witch" in the oracle was false, then the antidote and poison he—the "false witch"—possessed weren't antidotes and poisons in the conventional sense.

If the "key" in Tawil's oracle was a hint for breaking the Rose Factory, then, from Bai Liu's perspective as the game's designer, the antidote and poison were likely two different endgame choices.

The poison in this Rose Factory game was obvious: [Rose Dried Leaf Gas]. Choosing [poison] meant obtaining the secret recipe of the Rose Factory, then taking the most extreme steps to become the factory manager.

Tawil had said the "witch" had a choice of [poison] and [antidote], which meant he had both.

But what exactly was the [antidote]?

The Rose Factory

Although Bai Liu had told the other stragglers that he knew a way to end it all, he had not yet been given enough information about the exact solution to the problem of dried rose leaf gas.

The current Bai Liu is unsure how to solve the problem of dried rose leaf roses.

In short, Bai Liu gave the exiles a blank cheque to settle the rose perfume, putting his life on the line to get them to work for him first.

But the 'cheque' was not without foundation. There had to be a solution to the dried rose leaf gas, and the odds were that he would get it — as Tang Erda said, and as the Bai Liu from other timelines could surmise.

Bai Liu assessed the likelihood that he would be able to complete the task as over 50%.

As a player who bets it all with more than a ten percent chance of success, Bai Liu has now used [the ability to fix dried rose leaf gas] as his prerequisite and is using it to manipulate others.

It wasn't until Tawil reminded Bai Liu of the oracle again that he was able to determine the exact solution to [dried rose leaf gas] — it was a specific [antidote].

If rose perfume is [poison], then the [antidote] would be something that dilutes or neutralizes the toxicity and addictive properties of dried rose leaves.

But in the game, Bai Liu had not been given any hints about this [Antidote], nor had the system given any related quests. From this, Bai Liu deduced that the path to the [Antidote] was most likely not the regular path, meaning it was not connected to the [Become a Factory Manager] main quest. The main quest, "Become a Factory Manager," was not connected to the main objective.

Horror or drama games usually have three endings: [good], [normal], and [true].

The first two are the easier and simpler ways to finish the game without having to uncover all the hidden information, and they are the most common paths players take. However, game designers

usually hide a deeper, more complete story about the game world in the [true ending].

To reach the [true ending], the path becomes more dangerous, and sometimes players must take actions completely opposite to the main quest to trigger special plot points and uncover more information.

Apparently, Rose Factory is one of these games.

Bai Liu had previously followed this same line of thought. While preparing [the poison] secretly for his own rose factory, he also looked for traces of [the antidote] in the real rose factory.

To obtain the potion, he needed more information — but it was up to Liu Jiayi, who would soon be promoted in the factory, to take on this part of the task.

Bai Liu concentrates, closes his eyes to collect all his emotions, and after assuming his full Liu Jiayi form, he raises the curtain of the tent and steps out.

In front of the tent stood Qi Yifang, looking in awe at the small mountain of roses.

Qi Yifang saw him come out and scratched his head a little embarrassedly, "I thought you might need a little help from my side..."

He was also carrying a small bag of dried rose leaves, fearing that [Liu Jiayi] might not have enough to bring, but it seemed that it was still unclear who needed the subsidy.

Bai Liu shook his head, refusing the rose offered by Qi Yifang, his eyes dark as he looked through Liu Jiayi's grey eyes at the rose factory with smoke billowing from its chimney, resembling a heavy industrial processing site.

Inside the Rose Factory.

The dormitory for the new processors was on the ground floor of the Rose Factory, with dozens of people sharing a bunk, regardless of gender, and without the usual sour smell of sweat.

These two odors mixed into a fragrant yet nauseating scent that overwhelmed anyone who entered for the first time, forcing them to

breathe heavily outside several times before daring to enter.

Liu Jiayi, the two King's Guild members, Tang Erda, and some other processors slept in the bunkhouse.

After a full day of hard work, the new processors rested for less than three hours before it was light again.

Liu Jiayi was the first to open her eyes in the dorm. She left the [Blizzard Goggles] for Bai Liu's disguise, her last visualization prop, which had kept her operating blind yesterday.

The two King's Guild members who followed her had their usual visual aids with them. Liu Jiayi thanked them politely and, in return, poured a small cup of antidote for each of them to stabilize their vitality.

The two men hesitated, as the prop was meant for the little witch, but eventually drank it with mixed feelings under Liu Jiayi's insistent gaze.

They all understood that it was the Little Witch’s habit to never owe anything to any team.

Liu Jiayi had rested well thanks to Bai Liu over the past few days. Since she hadn't done much physical work the day before and had been helped by two others, Liu Jiayi was in the best physical and mental condition compared to the processors, who had been sweating all day. As a result, she was the only one awake in the bunk.

The others, including the more perceptive Tang Erda, drifted off to sleep, exhausted by the combination of physical exhaustion and the hypnotic scent of roses in the air.

However, Liu Jiayi, who had been exposed to the original rose scent (the aroma from Tawil's hand) on her first day, was much less affected by the rose scent in the factory.

Although she had the visualization prop, Liu Jiayi didn’t want to waste it and had not used it from yesterday until this morning when she could locate her normal movements with her ears. But as she got out of bed, Liu Jiayi suddenly heard an unusual noise.

A sound like a giant octagonal spider spitting, weaving, and crawling on the ceiling, pattering back and forth above Liu Jiayi’s head. It was a small noise, but Liu Jiayi still heard it.

The evenly rising and falling breathing and snoring of the processors lying on the narrow beds, the occasional crackle of wall coverings peeling off and falling to the floor, and that faint sound, like something dragging and swimming.

She put on her visualization prop and looked up overhead, but saw nothing. The old, mottled, pale yellow walls were only a constant fall of wall skin, with a few smoked or stained, dark rose-colored marks that looked a bit like dried blood stains.

Liu Jiayi frowned. As someone who had survived on her hearing for a long time, she trusted her hearing more than her eyesight, especially on these very quiet mornings when her hearing should not be at fault.

Unless it was something that existed but couldn't be seen.

With that in mind, Liu Jiayi promptly shook a member of the King's Guild sleeping next to her, and while he was dazed and half-awake, she whispered in his ear, "Shh, can you see anything now that you're looking up?"

Although not fully awake, it was already in the nature of these rescued team members to obey the witch's orders. Without hesitation, he looked up, and after a moment, turned his head in confusion to Liu Jiayi. "There's nothing there..."

If this team member can't see either, then it's not her eyes. Liu Jiayi's mind wandered as she calmly and quickly pondered the problem.

There must be some kind of monster above the ceiling, but it is invisible to the naked eye and visual props. So in this game, the monster must meet certain conditions to be visible.

But what is this condition?

Liu Jiayi's thoughts were running extremely fast. They had only been in this factory for a day, and most of it had been spent on various types of labor. Information had not been acquired well, and trying to deduce from this factory any clues about the conditions under which the monster could be seen was something Liu Jiayi felt she couldn't do with what she had observed so far.

Normally, Liu Jiayi would have taken a step back and been more conservative, leaving the dormitory first and then returning to unlock the monster when she had gained enough information.

But now, she has another source of information — Bai Liu.

Bai Liu had spoken to her about Tawil's oracle as she entered the game.

She wasn't sure what the strange, every-game-sticks-together-and-gives-her-goosebumps relationship between these two was, but if Bai Liu was right and Tawil was the central monster of the game Rose Factory and had come to him the night before, then there was a good chance that the oracle Tawil had given Bai Liu before entering the game was some hint about the game.

Liu Jiayi closed her eyes to recall the oracle Bai Liu had told her, searching word by word for a valid message within, while murmuring in a low voice: "Don't use your right eye to feast on desire..."

Bai Liu's right eye had been eroded by the rose, but his left eye was fine!

It's a hint! Tawil is suggesting that Bai Liu sees with one eye!

Liu Jiayi's eyes snapped open as she read this sentence, moving quickly to cover the right eye of the still dazed King's Guild member next to her. She lifted his head with one hand to his chin and aimed it at the corner where she heard the sound, asking in a cold tone, "Can you see anything now?"

The King's Guild member's sleepy expression tightened, his pupils contracted, and his face twitched as if he had seen something extremely terrifying.

"Look, see a lot," his voice hitched, and his neck flickered as he turned to Liu Jiayi and said, extremely wavering, "Little witch, a room full of them... monsters."

The Rose Factory

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After seeing the King's Guild member's reaction, Liu Jiayi wasted no time removing her right visibility prop, leaving only her left eye visible as she looked up and around.

In the four corners of the large bunkhouse, there lay a huge, spider-like creature, or perhaps a human.

The creature’s skin split from the center of its head, flap by flap, across the upper half of its body. Instead of peeling away, the skin bent at the end like a rose in full bloom, transforming into a hard, spider-like attachment embedded in the wall, allowing it to move quickly.

The flaking siding and hollow spots on the walls were the result of the creature cracking and disintegrating as it moved.

At the center of the "rose," the bloody, skinned human column became the stamen of the "blooming rose."

The upper parts of the "pistils" dripped with blood, fresh as though they hadn't been "blooming" for long. They left a trail of flesh and blood as they moved, their faces completely disfigured, with bare teeth and half-exposed, dead white eyes staring motionlessly at them. Their faces were unrecognizable, adding to their grotesque appearance.

Liu Jiayi turned her head, her face grim as she surveyed her surroundings.

In addition to these eight larger monsters, there were many more in the dormitory that appeared to not yet be fully "bloomed." The "pistils" were only half or less than half of their faces, and these smaller creatures seemed unable to fly.

Most of these smaller monsters were sleeping beneath Liu Jiayi’s bed, their eyes staring straight at them through the bedpan. This was why the King's Guild member had just turned pale with fear.

A "petal" from the creature beneath his bed pressed against his hand

through the bedpan, the skin's muscular edges writhing and oozing blood, just out of his reach.

They had slept the previous night under the watchful gaze of these invisible monsters.

The palpitating aftermath was connected to the scene now unfolding. Even though this member had experienced many dangerous situations in the game, he was now paralyzed with fear, his heart trembling at the sight.

He had never seen such a bizarre monster before, and it was strange enough that he could only see with one eye. But what disturbed him most was that the monsters had stayed with them all night without attacking.

But now, this strange, unsettling calm was about to be shattered.

The monsters seemed to sense that the two could see them. All the creatures in the dormitory, large and small, twisted their heads in various directions, their eyes turning toward them. Their bright red "petals" shaved away, and they slowly formed a circle around Liu Jiayi and the others.

The member shuddered and turned to Liu Jiayi, who was on the verge of tears. "What do we do now...?"

"I wish I could pretend I didn't see this pile of monsters," Liu Jiayi said, standing on the bed with a dark expression. "But that doesn't seem possible now. Trigger first—see if you can kill one. If you can't, just run!"

As soon as she spoke, the large monsters in the eight corners of the room let out a shrill wail, and all the monsters in the dormitory began to dart toward Liu Jiayi.

But strangely, even though these monsters were making so much noise, the people on the bunks remained motionless, as though they were dead, completely unaware of the chaos unfolding. The monsters passed by the processors without causing any disturbance, as if they only existed in the world seen by the players.

Once the players sensed them, however, the monsters were in the same dimension and could kill the players.

The availability of the right and left eyes, which held desire, was the

key to breaking the dimension and seeing another world in this factory.

Liu Jiayi ran as fast as she could, trying to wake up another King's Guild member still asleep. But when she reached his bed, it wasn't the guild member's face she saw.

Instead, it was the face of another processor, completely new to her, someone she didn't recognize.

The face was withered and decayed, as if it had been dead for a long time. The processing uniform was covered in dust and cobwebs. With the strength of an eight-year-old girl like Liu Jiayi, she shook the man's body twice before his skeleton fell apart and his dried skin crumbled into dust.

Liu Jiayi looked around. The large bunkhouse that had once been full of living people had now become a morgue.

As far as the eye could see, the bodies were covered in dull grey, dusty white cloths, huge cobwebs fluttering in the air and tumbling into the room like dead willow leaves. The room was decrepit and lifeless, and the dust on the floor was so thick that it made her cough with each step.

Another member, still running frantically, saw the scene and turned to Liu Jiayi, hissing, "Little witch, we've entered the inner world where these monsters are! Do something! They're moving too fast; we can't hold out much longer!"

Liu Jiayi sidestepped fluently to avoid one of the monster's sharp petals that thrust toward her. "I know. I'm trying to figure out how to get out."

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Liu Jiayi for triggering the Monster Book]

[The Rose Factory Monster Book Refresh - Celiac Staff (2/3)]

[Monster Name: Celiac Staff (Processors, Factory Workers, and Perfumers)]

[Characteristics: The upper class, who had adapted to the low concentration of rose perfume, soon could not get satisfaction from it and had to use higher and higher concentrations of rose perfume in...]

[... As they used more and more concentrated rose perfume, they became radiant, youthful, and beautiful, as green and perfect as a dried leaf rose in full bloom for life...]

[... But soon, they realized they were becoming more and more like roses, with enough energy in their muscles to burst into bloom before they could be satisfied. To delay the bloom, the addicted roses had to tame their bodies with higher concentrations of perfume, delaying their blooming...]

[... Blooming is the destiny of roses. Refusing to wither will bring about their destined bloom. The aristocrats tear off their hypocrisy to reveal their bloody true hearts. At this moment, you see a group of high-class slaves bred by roses, enjoy watching their last magnificent bloom. If you refuse, you will be taken to another world to see them in all their former glory...]

[Weakness: ????? (to be explored)]

[Mode of Attack: Rose Crushing Limb (A+), attacking the opponent with a knuckle.]

Liu Jiayi quickly skimmed the monster's description, her mind racing as she dodged the pursuing monsters behind her. In games with an in-world setting, there was usually more information hidden within the game.

If Bai Liu, the psychopath, wanted to play for the [true ending], he would need to turn the world upside down and uncover all the information hidden in the smallest details.

But in this situation, Liu Jiayi just wanted to run. She wasn't good at fighting this kind of head-to-head battle, just like Bai Liu wasn't good at the kind of strategic matches she had been in before.

While Liu Jiayi, as a caretaker, wasn't inclined to praise desperation, Bai Liu was indeed good at gambling battles—those where the odds seemed insurmountable and he would force a chance.

Such a strategy could shine in situations where the opponent was far stronger than you.

The riskiest way to fight was to leave it to those who excelled at it, rather than taking all the risks yourself. This was Liu Jiayi's tactical guideline—something she had taught Bai Liu before, and now she was about to implement.

Liu Jiayi took a deep breath, offering a sincere apology in her mind to the King's Guild member still hiding from the monsters. "In a moment, I'm going to leave you in the hands of one of your unreliable lunatics."

-- You must be careful working with him; while he generally won't let you die, he also won't make it easy for you to live.

With your intelligence, just trust him.

After muttering these words, Liu Jiayi opened her system panel and took a Spades Ace playing card from her prop library.

The skillful playing cards left by the Queen of Hearts for Liu Jiayi were a pair of Aces, Hearts and Spades.

However, without the Hearts card, these two skill cards were only useful for the Hearts A—since the Spades A skill was called [Hearts Heart].

The [Hearts A] skill meant that after Liu Jiayi used the Hearts A card, she could use the Spades A card to implement [Hearts A], swapping identities with her opponent three times.

This card was generally only useful in the presence of the Queen of Hearts, as she was the only one who could turn into anyone Liu Jiayi wanted. In extreme emergencies that Liu Jiayi couldn't handle, Liu Jiayi could use these cards to alternate with the Queen of Hearts, allowing her to take the risk for Liu Jiayi.

-- This was a skill set used in combination and was the Queen of Hearts' life-saving code for Liu Jiayi in the league. It was essentially a sacrifice, allowing Liu Jiayi a chance to escape.

Now, Liu Jiayi had given it to Bai Liu.

Running, Liu Jiayi let out a long breath, closed her eyes, and held up the Spades A card.

[System Alert: Does player Liu Jiayi use skill card (Telekinesis)?]

[OK.]

The black peach heart on the top of the playing card began to rotate rapidly, and the face in the heart gradually changed from her own to Bai Liu's. Her body jumped gently, as if it had taken off, and the next second, [Liu Jiayi] opened her eyes.

[She] looked at the situation before her and raised an eyebrow in a smile.

"Well done, little witch. You found the source of information I was looking for."

Chapter End Notes

> The card can swap two people under the influence of the Heart's card

The Rose Factory

The creature crawled, its petal-like skinned knuckles scraping against the old wall, as it scuttled forward. Its bloodied face opened wide in a fierce gape, and from its writhing throat came a low, muffled roar that seemed to shock Bai Liu.

Liu Jiayi's skill, [Telekinesis], swaps two bodies directly, which means his body is now his own. However, Bai Liu's panel speed is not very high, so he quickly falls behind as these monsters chase him.

Another member of the King's Guild spots Liu Jiayi about to be engulfed by the monster behind him, opening his "Pod" to swallow him whole.

Seeing the situation, the King's Guild member grits his teeth, reaches over, grabs Liu Jiayi by the collar, and runs with him.

Soon, they reach the door of an old bunkhouse. The member twists the rusty handle twice, but it doesn't open.

"Damn it." The member curses angrily, quickly turning around to press his back against the door, his eyes grim as he watches the bloodthirsty monsters closing in. He draws a long hammer from his hand. "These monsters are S-rank. You and I won't last long."

Bai Liu abruptly asks, "If you were alone, how long could you hold them off?"

"Five or six minutes." The member answers, confused. "Wait, why would I need to hold them off alone? Little witch, aren't you with me...?"

Bai Liu gives him a gentle smile, raising a bottle of low-grade perfume he received earlier that day. Without hesitation, he sprays it directly at the unprepared team member.

The stifling perfume forces the member to cover his face, coughing violently. As the scent spreads, a light, rosy fragrance emanates from his body. The surly monsters, who had been eyeing them closely, now lower their gaze in unison, turning toward the team member beside Bai Liu. A salivating grin stretches across the monsters' fuzzy, bloodied faces.

[System Alert: Warning! The perfume on the player is too

concentrated! It has attracted the attention of the (rotten staff)! They are about to come over and suck the smell out of you!]

The team member looks up in horror. “...”

“F*ck you! You’re Bai Liu!!!”

The monsters swarm toward the team member like spiders from a nest, quickly forming an impenetrable circle around him. Trapped and cursing Bai Liu’s ancestors, he futilely swings his sledgehammer to draw the monsters' attention away from Bai Liu.

Meanwhile, Bai Liu, quick as a flash, slips through the monster's enclosure and begins searching for clues in the large passageway of the Reeve's World.

The in-world setting in games often involves two parallel worlds from different time branches or different points in time overlapping in one location. Players who enter can travel between the two world lines when certain conditions are met.

This supplemental world line usually allows players to return to certain past or future points in time, uncovering hidden information behind the game’s worldview. Therefore, there is often key information to be found within this inner world.

Bai Liu’s task was simple: find the crucial information he needed.

The bodies of a dozen workers lie on twisted bunks, dressed in uniforms similar to those Bai Liu and the others wear, though much older. This suggests they may belong to a past [inner world].

Bai Liu's theory is confirmed when he finds a newspaper underneath one of the bodies.

The newspaper is from the Mirror City Evening News, with the headline: [Illegal perfume may contain poisonous addictive substances, causing several employees to become addicted. The whereabouts of several employees have been covered up by the authorities.]

Bai Liu scans the article, his eyebrows rising as he reads further.

The report states:

[The director of the illegal perfume factory is an orphan named

Zhang. Due to congenital cataracts in his left eye, he grew up in a private orphanage called Love Orphanage, aspiring to become a billionaire. Zhang was adopted at the age of thirteen. After the death of his adoptive parents, he inherited the estate. He has been in and out of prison three times, and although he has accumulated wealth and contacts, he is still unsatisfied...]

[In September, when a poisoning incident broke out at the orphanage, Zhang saw the news and returned to raise money. However, he made a strange condition for the donation. He wanted to buy a sculpture from the orphanage, claiming it was something he deeply admired...]

[Eventually, Zhang offered a $10 million donation in exchange for the statue of a deity buried during the orphanage's renovation...]

[Shortly afterward, the director of the orphanage was imprisoned in connection with the blood lingzhi incident. Authorities investigated Zhang, who claimed ignorance of the director's actions. He said he only wanted to donate money to help the children and liked the statue.]

[When asked about the statue’s origin, the director went mad, saying it was an unsettling, evil idol purchased from a decaying seaside town known for its amulet statues. The investors believed the statue would help the blood lingzhi farming, and it was said to be the most expensive statue in the town.]

[The director claimed that the statue’s face resembled that of a long-dead child, who was said to be evil and hyped up.]

[Afterward, Zhang began developing new types of roses and perfumes. He leased large fields in the suburbs, hired workers, and started cultivating roses, calling them "dry leaf roses," named after the withered petals.]

[The dried-leaf rose grew rapidly in soil unsuitable for Rosaceae flowers, filling the countryside almost overnight.]

[Zhang’s perfume, made from the altered crop, became a hit on the market through online sales. However, the regulators intervened, declaring the perfume a serious safety hazard. It was banned, and Zhang was fined and prohibited from producing or selling it again.]

[A week later, Zhang disappeared, and his whereabouts have been unknown since.]

This is the end of the article.

But in reality, Zhang, the original director of the Rose Factory, didn't stop there. He secretly reopened the factory, turning it into a larger operation, eventually attracting the Bureau for the Treatment of Dangerous Heresies.

The employees lying here must be the original workers from the Rose Factory who died because they were intolerant to the rose perfume and were discarded here, their disappearances covered up by the authorities.

Bai Liu browses through the papers and continues searching, looking under and around each body for any clues—notes, calendars, video tapes, or diaries—anything that might serve as a message.

Soon, Bai Liu finds a diary in the abdomen of a face-up body, a knife lodged in its neck, the expression frozen in pain.

Opening the dusty, decaying diary, Bai Liu reads the first page. At the bottom right-hand corner, a regretful inscription reads:

[I have never regretted anything more than unleashing this unprecedented evil. I thought my boundless desire was the most horrible thing in the world, but then I realized it was not. The statue I brought back was.]

[The dried-leaf rose is brewed by evil gods; it does not wither, fade, or decay. It only grows beautifully in the human body it has compelled, a product of divine affection, lingering in the bones and flesh, in the fragrance of madness.]

[The rose's dried-leaf gas is the perfect perfume, a poison with no antidote. I understood the first part as an excavator and proved the second as a dead man.]

Bai Liu turns the page, his gaze unfaltering.

[I grew up in a subsidized private orphanage, and I know that the investors here were connected to a strange, evil magic, all tied to a strange child in the orphanage—a child whose face I could never see because he always hid his eyes with his long hair.]

[But I am sure that anyone who has seen this child once will recognize him again.]

[Because he was so terrifying. The moment I saw him, I had only one horrible thought that still haunts me: I was terrified of him. But after I saw his light blue eyes—like those of a giant beast in the deep sea—through his soft, fine hair, all that remained was an impulse as if I were possessed by a demon.]

[- I'll kill him! I'll tear him apart!]

But the thought was fleeting, and soon I felt shocked and frightened by the unthinkable thought that had crossed my mind. I began to reject and even bully Xie Ta, just like everyone else, though I always avoided looking him in the face. Not that I could see his face clearly, given my poor eyesight.

I was soon adopted by a middle-aged couple who had no children and left the area. But from time to time, I would dream of those silver-blue eyes, which I had merely glimpsed, devoid of any human emotion. After dreaming of them, my inner fear and an unwarranted desire would both begin to stir, making it impossible for me to sleep peacefully.

I could feel my breath burning, my blood rushing like boiling water, causing my temples to pound.

There was something magical in those eyes that drew me in.

One night, I got up from the bed, grabbed a knife as I passed the kitchen, and went to the head of my adoptive parents' bed. I looked down at the pair, sleeping peacefully, unaware of me. My breath caught.

In that moment, just like when I first saw Xie Ta, a long-lost impulse surged within me—violent, fierce, and forgotten—resurging.

I wanted to kill these two! I wanted to chop them into pieces!

The people of this world are all pigs, all dogs, all animals who have abandoned me and don't care about me! A bunch of inferior creatures who only care about money and future potential! They abandoned me just because I can't see! I've never been treated like a human being. I've never even been given charity or treated like a dog or a cat!

I will step on your heads; I will control all of you with my one seeing eye! I will make you wag your tails at me like I do now to barely survive!

When I regained some semblance of consciousness, I saw the golden-haired puppy my adoptive father had bought for me. It barked furiously at me, its tiny body covered in blood.

This little golden retriever, only two months old, had been bought by

my foster father to give me a companion to grow up with.

Seeing the puppy snapped me back to reality. I knelt in front of my adoptive parents, shaking as I held their lifeless hands, crying bitterly. I called them "Mom" and "Dad," apologizing profusely.

But the little golden continued barking, and I quickly grew scared. I cried as I let the puppy, which should have been growing up with me, stay with my foster parents.

When I stood up, I looked at the scene and knew that nothing could be undone. Only I, the living one, mattered. I cleared the room, cooked them, and buried them in the backyard. A month later, when they had nearly rotted, I went to the police, crying, and reported my parents as missing, claiming they had gone out for a walk with their dog.

No one doubted that a fourteen-year-old with poor eyesight, and the unknown energy I had, could have inherited my adoptive parents' estate at the age of eighteen, especially after more than three years with no trace of them.

But the eyes inside me still stared, and I knew it wasn't enough. It was far from something that would satisfy them.

I knew there was one thing that would make it quick and satisfying—it was what the investors in the orphanage had dreamed of. Once I had it, I could sell it for an unprecedentedly high price, and soon, I would be a rich man who could dictate my own destiny!

When I returned to the orphanage, the secret was so tightly guarded that I couldn’t get it. I only vaguely knew it had something to do with the statue that resembled Xie Ta.

Soon, I got married. My wife was a perfumer with a greenhouse full of roses, and she developed many lesser-known perfumes. But it still wasn’t what I wanted—not enough to make a fuss, not enough to surpass those who were better off than us.

I did everything I could to improve our situation, but my wife never understood me. Every time she came to pay my bail, she would hysterically question why I did such things. I had to helplessly explain that I was sacrificing myself for our better future.

Soon, she left me, saying she needed a break and would come back to divorce me, leaving me with only the greenhouse full of roses.

The police later told me my wife had disappeared. Three years later, I inherited her entire estate.

Soon after, something happened at the orphanage, and I sold everything to buy the statue. The moment I saw its snow-white eyes, I knew I was going to be lucky.

I placed the statue in my wife's rose conservatory. The leaves of the roses quickly withered, and the edges of the petals turned a deep, misty crimson. The fragrance was so intoxicating that even I, who had never known perfume, was overwhelmed by it. I began to cultivate the dried-leaf rose, but no matter how much I tried, it couldn't grow properly without the statue.

I gazed at the beautiful, broken, and sacred statue, which stared back at me with its pupil-less, pure white eyes. That first, cruel, bloody, insatiable urge surged again in my chest. I smiled as I raised a sawblade towards it.

In that moment, I felt the silver-blue eyes inside me close.

After scanning through the long and disorganized diary in one glance, Bai Liu ignored the frantic cries of the King's Guild members behind him and quickly flipped to the last few pages.

He was searching for the recipe for dried rose leaf gas and the location where Tawil had been buried after being dismembered.

But no, Bai Liu kept turning the pages, not finding what he sought.

The diary was followed by Zhang's fragmented ramblings and eventual transformation. The first director of the factory, the one most poisoned by perfume, had been the first to "blossom" when he began to develop higher concentrations of perfumes. He eventually took his own life in agony, leaving behind a remorseful suicide note. Bai Liu scanned it to ensure there was no useful information and then discarded it. He was left with a letter.

— He knew Zhang well. Zhang wrote to glorify himself and deceive anyone who came after him. His logic was self-centered, a typical moral criminal justifying his actions.

This type of reasoning had been used by many serial killers throughout history—"I was compelled by the devil, and I am

innocent."

Bai Liu even sensed a hint of mischief, as if the game's designers were mocking him—Zhang's early life mirrored his own: money-loving, rebellious, orphan-born, spurred by Tawil to escape the orphanage.

It felt as if something in the underworld was whispering wickedly in his ear—"Look, this is the original path your life was meant to take."

Just as Bai Liu was about to close the diary, the withered body in front of him—Zhang from the diary—sat up abruptly.

This didn’t faze Bai Liu, who calmly stepped back. While he wasn’t sure how much of the diary's information was true or false, Bai Liu was certain that the self-serving factory manager could never have killed himself.

This creature was pretending to be him, likely to trap the players who entered the inner world.

From the hollow ribs of the dry corpse, numerous tentacles began to sprout, and its skin rolled up, transforming into vibrant, bright red blood and flesh.

It's deflated head twisted, returning to a normal human shape, though disjointed. The left eye was an opaque white marble, and the right eye contained a fully bloomed rose.

If one only looked at the head, the man seemed polite and good-looking. But seeing the tentacles and tangled petals on the lower half of his body, he appeared more like a grotesque mobile incubator with roses growing from his bones.

The roses bloomed, releasing a far stronger fragrance than ordinary roses.

The aroma was dizzying, and as it filled the air, the sounds of fighting behind Bai Liu faded. He turned to see that most of the King's Guild members' head had been swallowed by a monster, their limbs limply lying outside.

Without hesitation, Bai Liu lashed out at the creature's head. It hissed in a strange tone, spat out the King's Guild member's head, and turned to glare at him in resentment.

The "spiders," drawn by the stronger scent, began to scuttle toward Bai

Liu. Behind him stood the enormous "Zhang," almost as tall as the bunk, surrounded by the increasingly intense scent of roses.

[System Alert: Warning! Player Bai Liu's spirit value is below 60!]

As if hypnotized by the intoxicating rose scent, Bai Liu collapsed to the ground, dazed. Tentacles coiled around him, tearing at him with gleeful force, while a jagged, round-mouthed creature mumbled in its strange voice:

"... You carry the breath of an ... evil god ..."

Bai Liu heard the system beep just as the creature lifted him by the waist.

[The Rose Factory Monster Book Refresh - Celiac Staff (2/3)]

[Monster Name: Surly Employee (Generation Factory Manager)]

[Weakness: ????? (to be explored)]

[Attack type: Aroma lure (S-), lures the opponent with its scent and devours them.]

As Bai Liu was lifted by the creature, a dying King's Guild member looked up in shock.

He stared at the factory monster with an instantly pale face. After inspecting its panel, he stuttered, "S—S rank monster!!!"

S-rank monsters weren't uncommon in Tier 3 games, but this one wasn't just any S-rank—its level was 13,000, a high-level monster even among S-ranks.

Since most players weren't S-rank, the only way to fight an S-rank monster was by finding its weakness.

But damn! There were only seconds left before the creature tore Bai Liu apart! Where could he find its weak point?!

Meanwhile, in the multiplayer section of the gaming lobby, in front of Bai Liu's small TV viewing area, Mu Sicheng and Muke, along with the members of the Scavenging Guild, were fighting hard against the members of the King's Guild. They seized every opportunity, though the King's Guild members were notably lackadaisical, often half-heartedly acknowledging and stomping with little effort

Almost everyone in the Food and Corruption Guild had sent Bai Liu a collection of likes. With charging points hard to come by, Bai Liu was quickly nearing a drop-out from the multiplayer section.

As Bai Liu's TV screen flickered with the threat of failure, Muke, who had been focused on giving commands, was now visibly shaken. His fists were clenched, his eyes red with worry.

Unable to think outside the game, Muke went pale when someone mentioned that the monster holding Bai Liu was an S-rank monster.

If Mu Sicheng hadn't acted quickly to support Muke, Muke might have collapsed.

The previous game had seen an S-rank monster defeated by three players, but that victory had only been possible after Bai Liu managed to acquire a god-level NPC, something that had become a psychological hurdle for Muke.

Muke struggled to hold himself together, but he couldn't stop the tears from spilling. He sobbed, "Ooooooooooooooooo, Bai Liu! Bai Liu, don't let anything happen to you! What will I do if you leave?"

Mu Sicheng, taken aback, exclaimed, "!"

It wasn't over yet, and Muke was already crying as if Bai Liu had already been lost!

Mu Sicheng composed himself, but his calm didn't last long. He exploded with fury when the King's Guild members began mocking Bai Liu.

One of them sneered, "I don't think we'll last long without stomping on this trash."

Another joined in, "It's not very ethical to order a stomp, but I'm okay with it. Seeing this, and then ordering a stomp, feels so... satisfying!"

Mu Sicheng gritted his teeth, pushing up his sleeves. "I'll fucking make you comfortable..."

The two sides quickly descended into a physical clash.

The ongoing battle between the two guilds had attracted a lot of regular spectators. However, because of the King's Guild's power, the onlookers couldn't help but sneak glances at Bai Liu, curious but too

intimidated to approach.

At this moment, some food-loving spectators who had been watching from the sidelines couldn't contain their curiosity any longer. They slipped closer, hoping to see more of the action.

The sight of Bai Liu's small TV immediately shocked them. This was the first time they had seen such a drastic point-to-pedal ratio on a small TV, and they were certain Bai Liu was about to drop out of the multiplayer section.

Watching the screen again, the regular viewers, though sympathetic towards Bai Liu's situation, had to agree with the King's Guild member who had mocked him—Bai Liu wouldn't last much longer without a stomp.

Some players, aspiring to the spirit of the King's Guild, condescendingly remarked, "I thought this player was making a big deal out of nothing, but it turns out he can't even pass this level. What a waste of the King's Guild's time."

Though many ordinary players disagreed with this sentiment, they couldn't help but sigh, acknowledging that Bai Liu had terrible luck.

Even knowing the weaknesses of S-rank monsters, Bai Liu had to exploit them, yet his panel was proving to be too much of a challenge.

Just as the spectators were about to turn away, someone gasped, drawing everyone's attention. On Bai Liu's small TV, as he was about to face the monster eye-to-eye, his right hand transformed into a black monkey claw, aimed at the creature's right eye. Without hesitation, he grabbed it.

The monster let out a heart-wrenching cry of pain and released Bai Liu. Bai Liu then turned, surrounded by approaching spider monsters, and launched a whip at one of the dumbfounded King's Guild members on the edge. He wrapped the whip around the man's waist and reeled him in, locking eyes with him.

The massive monster pounded the ground in fury, its tentacles whipping dangerously near Bai Liu. The ground shook as if the entire world might collapse.

Yet Bai Liu remained calm, quickly issuing orders. "Do you see the other world through this eye? Close your left eye and look at this eyeball with your desire-filled right eye."

The player, still stunned, closed his left eye. In the next moment, he found himself in a normal passageway with Bai Liu, no longer amidst the chaos.

The two guilds, who had been violently clashing in front of the small TV, stopped in their tracks.

Mu Sicheng's anger subsided. He smugly slapped Muke on the shoulder and looked provocatively at the other guild. "What did I tell you? If all these people die, Bai Liu will be fine."

Meanwhile, Muke was still staring blankly at Bai Liu's small TV. The likes on Bai Liu's TV had, for the first time, surpassed the number of likes on the stomps, a significant margin.

Other viewers, aside from their own guild, had silently liked and bookmarked Bai Liu's small TV.

Muke sighed in relief, his eyes glowing with hope. There was still a chance in this tug-of-war!

In-game:

The King's Guild member, his face pale, staggered to his bunk, gasping for breath.

Bai Liu observed him calmly before drinking a bottle of stamina restorer. He then jumped off the bunk and walked out.

Still wearing the shell of Liu Jiayi, a full-fledged fabricator from the Rose factory, Bai Liu had yet to be expelled.

It didn't take long for the King's Guild player to sneak up behind him. Bai Liu glanced back and noticed that the man had taped his eyelids open with double-sided tape, his eyes wide as copper bells, fixed on Bai Liu like a tomcat in a game of Cat and Mouse, trying to stay awake.

The man seemed dumbfounded by the blink-and-switch mechanics of the game.

Bai Liu: "..."

He silently recalled the people he had encountered within the King's Guild—Liu Jiayi, Qi Yifang, Tang Erda—and now this somewhat dim-witted player.

Why did the King's Guild members seem so out of their minds?

After following Bai Liu for a while, the man couldn't hold back any longer. He bowed slightly and whispered, "How did you react so quickly to catch the monster's eye and escape?"

"He wrote it down in his diary and told me himself," Bai Liu responded casually.

The man fell silent, then, convinced and amazed, muttered, "It's the first time I've seen such a frank monster!"

Bai Liu: "..."

He recalled Liu Jiayi's words about one of the King's Guild members being somewhat lacking in intelligence, with an IQ of 59, and sharing her surname, Liu Ji.

The fact that his name was Liu Ji seemed almost ironic, given the circumstances.

The Rose Factory

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Liu Ji followed Bai Liu's lead, saying nothing, showing no intention of attacking him, nor turning to Tang Erda to negotiate a confession.

But to remain so calm in a situation where the man clearly knew he was Bai Liu felt a bit off.

Bai Liu glanced at him sideways but said nothing.

Liu Ji was a bit of a deadbeat, to put it simply. He would do anything to help Bai Liu but wouldn't do anything harmful to him. Like his weapon of skill, Liu Ji was a bit of a stick figure, easy to deal with. This is why Liu Jiayi had shaken him up; if Bai Liu needed help, Liu Ji was the best choice.

Liu Ji, however, was unaware that he had been set up by Liu Jiayi and Bai Liu. He believed his involvement was an accident and thought Bai Liu had saved Liu Ji's life in the Inner World.

It seemed like he remembered Liu Jiayi for saving his life.

Coincidentally, the King's Guild was full of crafty people, but the reserves were mostly good-hearted—these were the people Hearts had chosen as Liu Jiayi's "spare brothers." They needed various types of character but not much intelligence, with loyalty and self-control being their most important traits, making them unlikely to betray Liu Jiayi.

The reserve team members chosen through this screening process were picked up by Bai Liu, as their personalities were exactly the type he could easily manipulate.

Bai Liu withdrew his gaze from Liu Ji and walked toward the piazza—it was the day they would hand over the semi-finished products to the factory workers.

The three processors with the highest delivery rates of semi-finished products would have the chance to be promoted to factory workers.

Liu Ji walked over and saw several factory workers sitting in the

piazza.

They were dressed head to toe in robes made of pure white fabric, wrapped tightly from neck to ankle, with their faces covered in loops of gauze, making them look like they were wearing dense, heavy masks.

The first batch of fabricators arrived, but the factory workers didn't pay much attention—they had to wait for most of the fabricators to arrive before they could start collecting the semi-finished products.

Bai Liu wasn’t in a hurry. He asked Liu Ji where they kept their semi-finished products before walking over to inspect them.

The roses in the iron pot had shrunk considerably since they were first picked. What had once filled the pot was now just a layer at the bottom.

"Yesterday, we were frying them until they got lighter," Liu Ji sighed. "The semi-finished dried leaf roses are only yielding about a quarter to a tenth of a percent. With everything we had yesterday, we’ve got less than 100 kg left to fry, and there are three of us."

Bai Liu glanced around. All the other processors had more roses in their pots than they did, especially the one not far from them, which was nearly overflowing—it looked like it should have the most semi-finished products.

Seeing Bai Liu inspecting the other pots, Liu Ji quickly reminded him, "That’s Tang Erda’s. Processors are forbidden from stealing each other’s work, and if caught, they’ll be removed from their jobs!"

Bai Liu nodded in acknowledgment.

From the way the roses were placed in the iron pots, Bai Liu realized that management at the processor level was strict—at least in terms of preventing the kind of "robbing" mechanism among flower-pickers. Otherwise, the entire operation would fall apart, with no one working, just guarding and stealing from each other.

Bai Liu made the rounds and returned to their pots. Liu Ji sighed ruefully, "We have the least amount after splitting things equally. I don’t know if we’ll be demoted."

"No." Bai Liu looked at him sideways. "If you're willing to pay a small price, you can get a promotion."

Liu Ji stared at the meager layer of semi-finished products at the bottom of the pot, then looked at Bai Liu with confusion. "What's the price?"

Bai Liu smiled. "Perfume."

Liu Ji, who had a surplus of perfume, looked at him in confusion. "Perfume will get me a promotion? But I only have low-grade perfume here. How can that be worth anything?"

Even if he bribed the factory workers, they wouldn't be impressed.

Liu Ji asked a few more questions, but Bai Liu didn't respond further, which made Liu Ji suspicious. Was Bai Liu just trying to cheat him out of his perfume?

Given Bai Liu's reputation for trickery, Liu Ji couldn't believe that a few bottles of cheap perfume would lead to a promotion in this game. If it were that easy, it wouldn't be a Level 3 game.

Liu Ji shook his head, realizing that as a not-so-smart player, it was too easy for a highly intelligent player like Bai Liu to fool him.

The only thing he could do was tell himself—no matter how tempting Bai Liu's offers were later, don't give him the perfume!

There's no way Bai Liu's promise is real! No one would trade a promotion for a few bottles of cheap perfume!

Bai Liu didn't notice Liu Ji's internal conflict and quietly watched the entrance to the factory, where a white mist was swirling. He seemed to spot something in the mist and got up to walk out.

Liu Ji hurriedly followed. Bai Liu made his way around the flower field to the spot where they had been drying the roses.

There was a faint layer of mist near the flower fields in the early morning, and a few figures stood in the mist. This instantly alerted Liu Ji, but Bai Liu approached them as if he hadn't seen them, unsuspecting.

As the distance shortened, the fog quickly cleared, revealing several stragglers, each carrying a sack. When they saw Bai Liu, they approached with glowing eyes, speaking to him with the utmost respect, "Mr. Bai's sister is here!"

"We're not too late!"

Bai Liu nodded and asked, "Did you bring everything?"

"Yes, here it is!" they replied eagerly.

Liu Ji helped pick up some of the sacks that the migrant workers handed to Bai Liu.

When Liu Ji grabbed one, he was surprised by its weight. Opening it, he was stunned to find it filled with semi-finished products that had already been dried and fried!

So many sacks—how many semi-finished products must be in here?

"Thank you for your hard work." Bai Liu nodded sincerely to the stragglers, then turned to the dumbfounded Liu Ji, tilting his head naturally. "One sack of perfume for each, four sacks in total for me and you—pay up."

Liu Ji, still dazed, was about to hand over his money when he stopped, realizing something. "Wait, I'm fine with paying for the sacks I want to use, but why are you asking me to pay for yours too?"

Liu Ji was shocked by Bai Liu's bluntness. His girlfriend had never taken him for granted like this!

"What you paid for me was an intermediary fee." Bai Liu smiled smoothly. "I'm the broker for the deal between these stragglers and you. You couldn't have made a deal with them without me. Try seeing if they'll do business with you without my introduction."

Liu Ji instinctively turned to look at the stragglers.

The stragglers eyed him warily, reaching out to snatch the sack back from his hands. "Mr. Bai's sister doesn't agree to this deal. Please return the semi-finished products to us."

Liu Ji was furious. "..."

He sulked but reluctantly paid Bai Liu's share, handing over five bottles of low-grade perfume. The stragglers eagerly took them, bowed to Bai Liu, and left in gratitude.

Liu Ji: "..."

I'm the one who paid! Why isn't anyone thanking me?

What's wrong with these NPCs? They should be thanking the right person!

But what Liu Ji didn't know was that the stragglers were thanking Bai Liu because they had originally intended to give him the semi-finished products for free. Bai Liu had provided the raw materials and even gave them the perfume, but they were selling it back to him for money. This was a bit ungrateful, but Bai Liu had just smiled mysteriously, saying that someone would pay for him, and they should go along with it.

He hadn't expected any fools to take the bait! They earned five extra bottles of perfume for nothing, so naturally, they were more than grateful to Bai Liu for looking out for them.

Liu Ji wasn't exactly thrilled about the promotion, but he returned to the piazza with several sacks of semi-finished products. The piazza was gradually filling up with processors.

Tang Erda and another member of the King's Guild were working overtime to finish up, while the rest of the processors were busy, with the factory workers' audit set to begin soon.

Bai Liu followed Liu Ji over, standing still as they mixed the semi-finished products he had bought into their iron pot.

Another member of the King's Guild glanced up at them in surprise at the extra dried leaf roses in the pot.

Bai Liu subtly shook his head, signaling the other to stay quiet, and the three of them quietly shared the pot of roses.

The factory workers' audit began in earnest.

The processors lined up, placing their finished roses into sacks. The factory workers first checked the quality of the semi-finished products and then weighed them. The audit had two criteria: yield and the color of the roses.

Bai Liu's team was at the back of the line, surrounded by a chorus of regretful or evasive comments.

Most of the processors had steady outputs around two hundred kilograms per person.

Then there was an exclamation.

"352.3 kg! This one's producing at a high rate—almost fifty percent!"

"... damn, it's that new processor. The man's strength and stamina are outrageous. This output rate means he's flipping the roses fast enough to evaporate the water without too much effort..."

"That's a lot! Damn it, that'll definitely earn a spot for factory worker promotion!"

The processors behind them cursed, and Bai Liu turned to see Tang Erda standing next to the weighing table, unfazed by the rules.

He didn't seem to think that his high output of semi-finished products —three times that of others—was a violation of the trade. He shook hands with a delighted factory worker and nodded as he moved down.

Liu Ji's face froze when the total weight of their semi-finished products was revealed—it was just over eight hundred kilograms, averaging more than two hundred per person. Still, it wasn't nearly enough to compete with Tang Erda.

If someone else behind them had a higher yield... their chances at a factory worker position were looking grim.

"Pick one person who's guaranteed 200 kilograms. The other two should aim for around three hundred," Bai Liu decided quickly. "We'll keep the factory worker position."

The last member of the King's Guild let out a bitter laugh. "I don't even know how you guys got this much. It wasn't even my job, I was just trying to keep up."

Bai Liu simply nodded.

When it was Bai Liu's turn to be weighed, the factory workers, after checking his picking and output weights, looked at him in disbelief. "360 kg of fresh roses... and you've produced 302.7 kg?"

"An 84% output rate? How do you do that?"

Bai Liu: "..."

He'd gotten careless. Too many copied assignments and not enough thought about output rates.

Chapter End Notes

Bai Lui did his job too well and people are freaking out because of it.

He was too absorbed in achieving a high volume without paying attention to how well the results aligned with the expected or performance metrics, like the quality of the semi-finished products.

The Rose Factory

Bai Liu, his expression unchanged, confounded the curious factory worker: "I have special processing skills."

The factory workers looked at him with suspicion. Processing dried leaf roses was a manual task, and children had no advantage in such a high-output environment.

Bai Liu cast a feigned anxious glance at the two members of the King's Guild standing below.

Now, the factory worker understood—it was the two men who should have helped the young girl by sharing their roses with her.

Although it was forbidden to openly steal from one another, smuggling was possible, with one party 'voluntarily' giving their work to another. In every sense, the promotion of processors to factory workers wasn't entirely fair.

These unspoken rules were well-known to the factory workers who had risen through the ranks of the processors, and they weren't prepared to take on too much responsibility.

It was unclear what this little girl had done, or what the other two processors were to give her their dried leaf roses voluntarily. But, as things stood, the regular factory workers—who had stable positions and weren't easily laid off—weren't about to make life difficult for these processors trying to climb the ladder.

After all, the competition among them wasn't as fierce.

"Processor number 71063 surrendered 302.7 kg of semi-finished dried leaf roses."

The factory worker beside him recorded Bai Liu's numbers, waved him off, and let him go, turning a blind eye to the situation.

Most other processors had values under 250 kg for dried leaf roses, with only a few exceeding 280 kg.

Bai Liu, Liu Ji, and Tang Erda were the only three processors to provide dried leaf roses weighing over 300 kg.

The weighing was soon complete. While the factory workers checked

the data, Liu Ji took Bai Liu's arm and led him away from the processors who glared at them with hostility.

The processors surrounding Tang Erda looked at him with similar hatred. He was more than a head taller than the others, but they dared not approach him. Instead, they stepped back, glaring at him from a distance.

These three newcomers had taken the opportunity to be promoted to factory workers right away!

The factory workers looked up after reviewing the data. "Will the following three numbered processors please come with us?"

"The three processors numbered 71063... will be led into the next workshop by our three factory workers to learn about the daily work of a factory worker. But please note that this does not qualify you to become a factory worker."

The factory worker at the head of the group spoke seriously: "This is just to give you a chance. You still have a long way to go before becoming full factory workers."

With that, he turned to Bai Liu and waved him over. "You come with me."

Bai Liu walked up, Liu Ji gave him a concerned look, and they parted ways, each following a different factory worker.

Tang Erda left with another factory worker, casting a lingering, intense stare at Liu Jiayi before walking away.

He sensed something familiar and unpleasant in Liu Jiayi today.

Bai Liu was led through a deep, vaulted, narrow corridor flanked by the bunk rooms they had stayed in the night before. The doors were closed, blocking any light from entering the corridor.

Strangely, the corridor, though occupied by only the two of them, was filled with hurried footsteps, creaking doors on either side, and gaps in the doorways as if something was staring at their feet.

The factory worker in front of him turned pale. He seemed to hear the voices too and quickened his pace.

Bai Liu remained calm, knowing that if he closed his right eye, he

could see a very different reality.

But there was no need to do so now. Although he had the "key" to freely travel through the Inner World, he had entered it to gather more information, and there were clearly more important things to discover at this moment.

Bai Liu glanced at the factory worker, who was now hurrying, and politely asked, "Excuse me, if I want to become a full factory worker, what should I do?"

The factory worker, startled by the voices, snapped back to attention at Bai Liu's question. He relaxed his face and replied, "We offer some of our more accomplished processors the chance to be promoted to factory workers, but it's not an opportunity everyone can seize. Only those with certain natural traits are selected."

Bai Liu tilted his head. "What kind of traits?"

"The traits of a perfumer," the factory worker replied softly. "The reason the factory workers at the Rose Factory are regular employees who can be laid off without consequence is because we are all reserve perfumers. Perfumers have a very short career lifespan, and if we don't select our reserves in advance, there could be a break in the workforce, and the factory would have no one to continue operations."

"That's why the factory worker position is also known as an apprentice perfumer," the factory worker continued with a complex expression. "Before becoming a full perfumer, we are responsible for basic tasks like distillation, extraction, purification, and concentration. Only once we become perfumers can we actually produce the perfume—Rose Dried Leaf Gas—for the factory in its truest form."

"Most perfumers can only produce low-level perfumes in their lifetime. The intermediate perfume blending process is so complex that it is produced in small quantities, and a single drop can sell for a thousand dollars."

The factory worker turned to Bai Liu. "It's only auctioned at the annual May Rose Festival, and it's sold to the highest bidder."

"So, how do you screen someone for the qualities of a perfumer?" Bai Liu asked, mulling over the real-world requirements for a perfumer. "Is it olfactory sensitivity?"

As he spoke, he began switching panels in his hands.

[System Alert: Does player Bai Liu use player Mu Sicheng's soul note to access his opponent’s system panel?]

[OK.]

Mu Sicheng—Bai Liu recalled—had a great sense of smell.

But even with an excellent sense of smell, Bai Liu couldn’t identify too many specific fragrances. However, the game at this level likely only filtered for certain qualities. Otherwise, no ordinary player—only a professional perfumer—would be able to pass.

This seemed like something the game designer would have thought about; they wouldn’t want the game to be unplayable.

"We don’t screen processors based on a simple sensory trait like smell," the factory worker shook his head. "We screen based on a very important flavoring instrument."

Instruments?

Bai Liu had never heard of an instrument that could detect the qualities of a perfumer.

Most of the perfumery instruments he knew were for stirring and mixing—simple pipettes, paddles, and test papers, all quaint and low-tech. In a game world where technology appeared backward, such an instrument still existed?

However, when Bai Liu pressed him further, the factory worker refused to answer any more questions about the instrument.

Whenever Bai Liu tried to broach the subject, fear and awe appeared on the factory worker’s face.

Finally, he said evasively, "No, it's not any instrument you can imagine. It's an instrument from a dead person... but it’s really a living instrument—it even has a heartbeat!"

"The instrument, part living and part lifeless, selects the people who can use it."

After these words, the factory worker fell silent.

In silence, his face pale, he led Bai Liu into a plain white room, the size of an operating theatre, used for cleaning.

Bai Liu was told to change into clean, sterilized protective clothing and to wash his hands before entering the next room for screening.

The factory worker led him through a purple sterilization room, then through several others filled with an unpleasant gas. The factory worker explained that the purpose was to sterilize them before they entered the core perfumery. The heavy protective suit Bai Liu had changed into earlier would offer basic protection.

These rooms disinfected the living in a crude, direct manner, not caring whether the intensity of the sterilization could kill them. This showed that the builders of the Rose Factory prioritized the instrument that could test the perfumer's qualities over the lives of those in their care.

After passing through several rooms, Bai Liu was led into a tightly sealed, metal-filled room.

By this point, Bai Liu's eyes changed for the first time since entering this dangerous factory. He looked up and scanned the doors of the room from top to bottom.

The door was completely airtight, impossibly tall, and identical in construction to the one at the Bureau of Dangerous Heresy, number [0001], even down to the small, forcibly welded window above it.

The factory worker knocked twice on the small window. A moment later, the door, heavy and scarred from welding, slowly opened inward.

Bai Liu’s pupils contracted slightly as he took in the scene inside.

The Rose Factory

In the room, which had a luster akin to a dull red, cold water pipes emerged from all sides and clustered in the center like twisted, grotesque snakes, wrapping around some of the wooden, narrow-beam-like support structures at the top of the room. These pipes twisted and fell, converging in the middle of the space.

In the center of the room stood a huge display case made of glass, brass, and iron—once seen by Bai Liu—filled with an unknown viscous liquid.

That was the display case he had used to house Tawil when they first met in the museum in Siren. Now, in this game called The Rose Factory, that same case no longer contained a decaying, beautiful mermaid, but instead a bright red, beating heart.

Cold metal pipes were drilled through small openings in the top of the display case, connecting to the aorta, pulmonary artery, pulmonary vein, main vein, and both the upper and lower vena cava of the heart, each secured to the vessel walls with a staple-like device.

The tubes transformed into steel veins, "veins" that pumped a rose-scented pink liquid—the color of blood after carbon monoxide poisoning. Meanwhile, the heart, the color of a branding iron, hung suspended in the center of the display case, beating regularly and calmly, one after the other.

It was the heart of an old friend of Bai Liu's, a being called Tawil, the monster named after an evil god.

Bai Liu’s blurred memory momentarily cleared as he stared at the bright red heart.

He remembered when he was six, not long after meeting Xie Ta. He leaned over the front table of the church with a mischievous grin, nudged Xie Ta's heart, and asked teasingly, "You say you're a monster who can't die—what if someone, like me, deliberately ripped out your heart? Would you die?"

Xie Ta had answered without missing a beat: "No, my heart will beat in your hands."

Xie Ta had never lied to Bai Liu. Tawil would never die. But now, his heart no longer beat in Bai Liu's hands; it beat in a game of roses and

destruction.

Tawil's heart, like the withering thorns of a dried rose, materialized just when Bai Liu sought it, stabbing the man who had once promised to rip it out with his own hands.

The factory worker who had led Bai Liu to the heart display led him up a wooden ladder to the back of the heart's enclosure.

Standing on the first rung, Bai Liu could reach the openings where the pipes connected to the display case.

The factory worker explained the next steps: "Be respectful of the apparatus (instrument). Use it carefully. Do not touch the pipes above; inside are extracted and distilled perfume raw liquids, sometimes boiling hot, passing through the heart cycle to become usable by perfumers. However, this raw material is weak, and the perfume will remain of low quality. It’s only after the talent of a perfumer that the fragrance will become stronger."

"Next, we’ll give you a raw, uncirculated perfume to drop into the glass case. If the raw liquid discolors, it means you have the talent to use this instrument. The darker the color, the stronger your talent as a perfumer." The factory worker looked at Bai Liu. "If you’re sure you have the talent, you can be promoted to factory worker."

The factory worker handed Bai Liu a vial of original perfume, carefully moved the clustered tubes to reveal a tiny opening, and gently nudged him. "Now, go ahead and try it."

Bai Liu held the vial of raw perfume in his palm, staring down at the heart with a motionless gaze. His eyes were empty of emotion.

His heart pounded under his eyes as though it were still inside Xie Ta's chest.

The factory worker, eyeing Bai Liu's stillness, asked with suspicion, "Processor number 70365, why aren't you down yet?"

It might have been an illusion, but the factory worker could have sworn that the processor, usually calm, seemed to grow... angry the moment he saw the apparatus.

Though Bai Liu's expression didn’t change, his aura suddenly became terrifying.

The worker, normally bold, was now too scared to prod him, whispering quietly, too intimidated to even ask why Bai Liu was taking so long during the test. Usually, at this point, someone would have been scolded harshly for being so indecisive.

The instruments were valuable; exposure to the air too long would contaminate them.

Bai Liu stepped forward at the urging of the factory worker, expressionless. He raised his hand flat, then turned it and dropped the original liquid through the opening.

A drop of the rose-red liquid landed in the glass case. As it washed over the surface of the viscous liquid in ripples, the rose-red color deepened and spread.

The factory worker's eyes widened in shock as he stared at Bai Liu, unable to believe what he was seeing.

But this was only the prelude to the change.

Soon, an inexplicable wind swept through the confined space, and the drops of original liquid, now like concentrated pigment, began to spread and thicken in a bizarre curvature, darkening layer by layer.

The liquid spread from a faint pink rose to a deeper rose, then to a lighter red, and finally to a vibrant red, the color of a ripe rose by the time it reached the heart.

At the same time, as the color deepened, the heart began to beat faster, accelerating the rate at which the liquid was pumped out.

The pipes fixed to the wall struggled to handle the pressure. Their joints began to ooze "blood" and tremble, threatening to detach, while the thick glass "cracked" as the color turned red.

The factory worker panicked, calling out to the employee guarding the apparatus, who, like him, was confused.

This was all thickened metal piping and bulletproof glass!

"Release the water for the tank!" the employee shouted, yanking at the lever.

Immediately, the lid beneath the glass case opened, a spout underground opened, and the reddened liquid poured out. Almost

simultaneously, a newer, more solid case rose from below, filling it with liquid and suspending the heart once more.

Bai Liu was escorted by factory workers to the next room while the water was being changed—an area where only a few were allowed to be present to prevent contamination.

The factory worker, trembling with fear over what had just happened, overheard Bai Liu laughing.

It was a smile of demonic satisfaction, as though he had received a response from the living-dead heart that unnerved him.

The smile was particularly unsettling on the grey-eyed, blind little girl's boyish face.

The factory worker didn't dare ask what Bai Liu was laughing at. He recalled what he had just seen and, with some hesitation, began to think that the factory had just welcomed the most talented perfumer ever.

That color—one only seen in extravagant perfumes.

The worker swallowed nervously, still holding a stain of the original liquid on his hand. In a small room next to the apparatus, he began writing an application:

—"One of the three processors selected today to test the perfumer's talent caused a serious accident by cracking the glass case during the test. This sounds like an unforgivable mistake, and punishment by death is required..."]

[...but allow me to argue on behalf of this processor. This is truly an extenuating circumstance, and I petition that you not only spare her life but specifically promote her to perfumer..."]

[...This time, the test caused the instrument to produce a red color I've never seen before—ruby, blood-like, deep and beautiful. If I'm not mistaken, the processor who made this mistake would be the most talented perfumer we've ever had at the Rose Factory.]

We know how dangerous it is to be a perfumer in this world. It's a profession tied to the organs of the dead, creating the perfume of death, and ultimately heading to hell with a fragrance full of death."

[This processor is the person with the most death in her that I've ever

seen. She was born for this. She's a genius in the profession—both I and the apparatus think so. Please, consider my petition carefully.]

[The May Rose Festival is coming, and we have never needed a perfumer who can produce an exceptional perfume more than we do now.]

After finishing the application, the factory worker hurried to take Bai Liu up to the office on the third floor to begin the process of converting the processors into factory workers.

At the same time, Tang Erda, now in his sterilized protective clothing, entered the freshly tidied instrument holding room, accompanied by another factory worker.

Tang Erda stared at the room with a frown—he recognized, as Bai Liu did, the odd construction.

This room in the game looked exactly the same as room [0001] in the Dangerous Heresy Bureau, a facility created for dealing with dangerous heretics.

His gaze swept across the entire dark-red, cooling-piped apparatus storage room, finally settling on the bizarre, disembodied heart linked to the cooling pipes. The heart was still beating, suspended in a large glass display case at the center of the room.

Tang Erda, with years of experience handling dangerous heretics and clearing countless games, had never seen such a strange heretic or monster, either in reality or in the game.

It was as though by allowing this heart to beat for just one more second, his own heart rate would be compelled to beat in unison with it.

He looked at the beating heart, his brow furrowing deeper as his hand reached behind him. A tiny dot of light converged to form a silver pistol in Tang Erda's palm.

The gun was aimed at the heart at an imperceptible angle.

The Rose Factory

In the end, Tang Erda did not pull the trigger.

The factory worker had told him that this was the only way he could be promoted to factory worker and then to perfumer, the central figure in the running of the entire rose factory.

Tang Erda had reason to believe that this strange heart was connected to the main quest of the game—[Become a Factory Manager].

At the sight of the heart, he felt an uncontrollable killing intent, almost as if it were being induced by the heart itself. The feeling was unusual, like something was deliberately urging him to kill, and it made him uncomfortable.

What if the heart, instead of being a monster as he had initially believed, was simply the heart of a contaminated innocent?

Tang Erda had never encountered anything like this before, so he paused for a moment, controlled the sudden urge to kill, and calmly lowered his gun. He decided to find the source of the game's contamination before making a decision.

Guided by the factory worker, Tang Erda took a bottle of rose liquid, climbed the ladder, and poured it down. The employee guarding the apparatus nervously watched as Tang Erda's hand rested on the sluice gate, ready to pull it down. The noise Bai Liu had made earlier had clearly left an impression on him.

Tang Erda's drops of the original perfume only glowed a light rosy red.

The factory workers and watchmen, waiting for the results, felt both disappointed and relieved at the same time—though it was a good result, it was far too different from the previous processor's inspection.

"You don't have much talent, but it's not entirely hopeless for you to be promoted to factory worker. We're short on staff with the May Rose Festival coming up," the factory worker who had guided Tang Erda said, looking at him. "You'll need to take another scent paper test. If you show some basic talent, you'll be ready to move on."

Tang Erda frowned. "What's the fragrance paper test?"

Meanwhile, on the third floor, in the factory workers' office.

Bai Liu looked up at the Director of Plant Engineering behind his desk. "What does the fragrance test paper mean?"

The director of the factory replied, “To confirm whether you’re talented enough to be promoted to perfumer, we dare not take the risk with the instrument again. The paper audit isn’t as accurate as the instrument, but it can provide a general range.”

“However, considering your destructive tendencies toward the instrument, you're likely to break the test paper during the test.”

He looked at Bai Liu and tapped his fingers on the table. “Although test papers are precious and non-renewable for any perfumer, if your talent is as exceptional as it seems, it would be worth the risk of losing one to test you again.”

A fragrance paper test?

The strange term caused Bai Liu to raise an eyebrow.

He had seen fragrance test papers at some perfume counters in shopping malls and remembered them as stiff sheets of paper, similar to pH test strips. These sheets are highly absorbent and can retain a perfume’s fragrance for a long time.

By placing a perfume-stained test paper about ten centimeters in front of your nose and fanning it, you could better smell the pure fragrance —this was a common device used by perfumers.

However, the word "piece" seemed off; it should be “sheet” or “slice.”

Bai Liu didn’t question further and waited for the director to continue.

“If you’re physically fine, we can proceed with the tests.” The director nodded toward the factory worker who had previously led Bai Liu through the instrumental testing and turned back to Bai Liu. “I’ll have him take you to the lower levels, where the test papers and the Rose’s death row inmates are kept, for the test.”

The director handed the factory worker a set of keys. “Take him down and show him.”

Bai Liu, a prisoner on death row, understood what was going on.

The stragglers had explained the concept to him earlier. Prisoners who

had committed crimes related to the Rose of Dry Leaves could be taken in by the Rose Factory. In exchange for performing labor, they could have their death sentences converted to life imprisonment, with the factory taking control of their lives.

But holding the scent paper… and the unit of "one"…

A vague and unpleasant feeling stirred in the back of Bai Liu's mind. He recalled a vision he didn't like and the malicious intentions of the game's designers, which made the smile on his face fade.

The factory worker led Bai Liu down, passing the long corridor they had walked down earlier. They turned a corner into a shaded bend and reached the dormitory corridor.

There, a wooden door exuded a completely different smell from the rest of the rose factory—no fragrance, just a particularly foul odor.

The factory worker took out a set of keys, picked one, and unlocked the door. It creaked open slowly, releasing a stench of meat and sour sweat, reminiscent of methane gas.

The stone walls on either side of the staircase were narrow. A dim yellow bulb, not very bright, had been installed at intervals. The illumination was so poor that Bai Liu could see no more than ten meters ahead.

Anticipating this, the factory worker brought a torch and led Bai Liu down with the light.

As they walked, the factory worker explained, "This is the lower floor of the factory, where only senior factory workers and perfumers are allowed."

Bai Liu estimated they had descended about twenty meters before reaching the bottom, where he saw a structure similar to a prison.

A cramped path stretched through the wet, dreary ground, flanked by cage-like bars embedded in the wall. Inside, condemned prisoners—human and ghostly—filled the cells.

Bai Liu described them this way because they resembled the stragglers he had seen in the rose fields.

The condemned prisoners made slurred noises, weakly reaching out toward Bai Liu and the factory worker as they passed. However, they

were too feeble to move, struggling briefly before letting out a mournful, desperate scream.

That scream made Bai Liu feel that they weren't calling for help but were asking for a bit of torment.

Others lay dead, their eyes and mouths wide open, decomposing to the point where only bits of maggot-filled flesh remained. Flies buzzed around, adding to the grim atmosphere.

Strangely, most of the corpses seemed to have contented smiles on their faces, if their features allowed such an expression.

It was as if living had been a painful, torturous experience for them, and death had finally brought the relief they had waited for.

Bai Liu's gaze slowly swept over the condemned prisoners, trying to read something in their expressions.

The factory worker seemed to notice Bai Liu's gaze and defensively said, "The factory doesn't have a penchant for mistreating these death row inmates. When we take them in, we perfume them almost daily to keep them alive—it's better than how most flower pickers are treated."

"Oh, really?" Bai Liu asked indifferently, "So, you're philanthropists, giving free perfume to criminals? Why don't you ask them if they want to die, or if they want to be taken over by you?"

The factory worker, struck by Bai Liu's unsavory tone, remained silent.

The Rose Factory was definitely not a place that would waste perfume. The fact that they didn't take in all the condemned prisoners, but only some, suggested something was amiss. Judging from a profit standpoint, the condemned prisoners chosen by the factory must have qualities that benefit the factory's development.

Bai Liu hadn't understood what this "profit" was at first—spending perfume on a small group of workers didn't seem like a good business move.

But now, he finally understood what this "profit" truly was.

It took a moment of silence and a sigh before the factory worker spoke with some embarrassment. "These death row inmates were specially

selected by the factory to have some resistance to rose perfume."

"These people, even if they are corrupted by the perfume, do not easily show signs of addiction to it. They stick to themselves, they stick to their roots, and would rather die than give in easily to dried leaf rose gas. In fact, the reason they were caught for their crimes was mostly to develop an antidote to the rose perfume."

After another moment of silence, the factory worker spoke again. "At a time when most people have succumbed to the addictive nature of rose perfume, it is difficult to test the concentration and holding power of a rose perfume specifically through ordinary perfume test papers, except for instruments."

"Because it is difficult for people like perfumers, who are already highly addicted, to screen a perfume by their own reactions to it, most of them have become numb to the scent due to the high concentration of rose perfume they use day and night."

"But as you can see, instruments are precious, and we can't activate them to test perfumes all the time."

"At this point, we need people who can resist the rose perfume and are more sensitive to its rejection as experimental subjects. By observing the painful reactions of these people, we infer the effectiveness of this perfume. We call such people test papers."

The factory worker said as he led Bai Liu deeper inside. "What you saw just now were scrap test papers. They were on the verge of failure, but they could still be used once or twice. But I led you through a special passage this time, and the test paper you used is one of the oldest test papers we have in the factory."

The factory worker sighed. "These old test papers are also dying. Yesterday, it was said that for the May Rose Festival, a perfumer tested a bottle of extra perfume and scrapped another one. It's been transferred to the lower periphery, but this one you used this time is the highest quality test paper in our factory. He seems to be in good spirits, and his rejection reaction to the rose perfume is stable too."

Speaking of which, the factory worker couldn't help but sigh. "I've never seen someone so steadily rejecting rose perfume. It's all been so painful, and yet they never change their rejection of it. The steadfastness of mind is admirable."

"The May Rose Festival has tested several bottles of the Extraordinary

Perfume on him, and although his body has suffered a certain amount of poisoning, organ failure, and weakness, the rejection has not changed in ten years."

"I wonder if people like this are really human... or too stubborn."

Bai Liu didn't say a word as he looked around at the condemned prisoners. His eyes grew darker before he finally said very softly, "Too stubborn, I think, too."

The factory worker didn't hear Bai Liu's words and turned to him, asking, "What did you say?"

This time, Bai Liu did not answer.

The factory worker led him on. As the tunnels became darker and darker, the cages to the left and right grew larger, and the living conditions inside became more like a temporary room for a person.

Finally, the factory worker stopped by a separate cage, a larger one. At the far end of the cage, the "incense paper" inside was hidden in the darkness, only vaguely visible as the black outline of a hunched human figure sitting on the edge of the bed.

The cage was much tidier than the others, with two old, yellowed clothes hanging on the bars and a table inside with some books, paper, and pens neatly arranged. A few scattered cigarette cases lay around, all empty.

The factory worker, who had led Bai Liu here, looked at the cage, which was so clean it didn't look like a dungeon, with a complicated expression. "He's cleaned it himself again... It's nothing like a man who's been tested with incense for so long to maintain such sanity."

"This is the test scent paper you tested today." The factory worker pulled out the key and inserted it into the lock.

Meanwhile, in another tunnel a wall away, another factory worker led Tang Erda inside and was proudly explaining the dungeon that is the Rose Factory.

Tang Erda frowned as he looked at the condemned prisoners in their cages. He subconsciously drew his gun the moment he saw the Rose Drifter-like condemned prisoners, but soon realized they were not the same as the Rose Drifter.

But this difference made his brow furrow even more.

These people, all awake despite having been contaminated by the perfume to this extent, were struggling to fight the rose perfume that was corrupting their consciousness.

The factory worker, walking in front of Tang Erda, knocked on the iron door of a cage and said with envy, "You're lucky. It's an old scent tester that's about to be scrapped. It was tested yesterday by a senior perfumer's bottle of Grand Cru."

Tang Erda turned his head to look inside this gloomy, dark, hazy cage.

There was little light in the dungeon, and visibility was minimal. He could only roughly make out a dark figure of a man with his back against the wall, his torso rising and falling faintly with each breath. A stench bordering on decay permeated from the man's body, causing the factory worker to wave the air from his nose in disgust.

The man—or rather, the scent-testing paper—had only one arm and half of his face poking out of the shadows, exposed to the faint light and presumably visible. Tang Erda looked up at the other man's hand and face.

The hands were almost completely cracked, dark, bloodstained lines spreading from the tiger's mouth to the elbows. The half of the face that was exposed was completely disfigured, cracked, and bloody. The light-colored eyes lolling open and unfocused, stared at Tang Erda from beyond the fence.

For a moment, an unspeakable fear rushed through Tang Erda's mind. This half-face, this half-bloodied face, which he had seen in some nightmarish world line, made Tang Erda's hand shake uncontrollably as he gripped the gun.

Tang Erda's chest was still heaving, but his breathing had almost stopped. He stood motionless, as if frozen, staring straight into the face.

The pistol slipped from his palm and fell to the ground with a dull clink.

The factory worker, however, did not notice Tang Erda's abnormality. He inserted the key into the turning hole.

The dusty and rusty door opened slowly in front of Bai Liu and Tang

Erda at the same time.

The factory worker moved out of the way so that Bai Liu could see inside the cage. He handed him the torch in his hand, inclined his head, and indicated for Bai Liu to go in and wait outside himself. He explained, "The smell of roses on us is too strong and will interfere with the fragrance test paper. Usually, only one person can go in."

"When you go in, this incense-testing paper will teach you how to test your talent. He's very skilled now and has a good temper. He won't attack you." The factory worker thought for a moment and added, "Although this fragrance test paper sometimes says some very strange things to the people who come to test it, it is generally very cooperative."

Bai Liu nodded to show that he understood. He calmly took the torch handed to him by the factory worker, turned it up to maximum brightness, and took one step into the cage.

As Bai Liu walked in, the beam of the torch slowly approached the bed. In the ghastly white glow, the first thing to appear was an old leather shoe that looked familiar to Bai Liu. Then, a pair of white-washed uniform trousers. Then, sweeping upwards, he saw a man holding the butt of an unlit cigarette, sitting with his head down on the edge of the bed.

The man's face and arms were completely deformed. The joints of his fingers were bare and full of tentacled bone. His breathing was thin, near nothing. His face was pale, his eyes bulging, the sides of his otherwise square and handsome cheeks sunken in, as if he hadn't eaten meat in decades. He was so thin he was almost a skeleton.

Bai Liu had never seen him like this when they were at their most miserable.

This man was never so hungry as to be emaciated, even when he gave up a lot of food to Bai Liu in the orphanage.

Only one pair of eyes remained unchangingly gentle and firm, in which not a single rose grew.

Bai Liu finally spoke up, pointing his torch at the man's head. His tone was level, neither rising nor falling. "Lu Yizhan, you finally ran out of money to buy cigarettes, didn't you?"

He looked at Liu Jiayi, who was standing in front of him. After a

moment of confusion, as if he had suddenly come to his senses, he scratched his head with some embarrassment and said to himself in a silly manner, "Ah, did I just see a vision again?"

"This time it's Bai Liu's voice and Liu Jiayi, the little girl—wow, this Liu Jiayi really looks like Bai Liu." With that, Lu Yizhan reluctantly propped himself up and moved a little closer to the bed, curiously taking a look at the emotionless Bai Liu.

Bai Liu looked at him expressionlessly.

Then, Lu Yizhan suddenly curled his eyes and smiled gently, extending his hand, which was already covered with white bones, to Bai Liu. "But even if it's an illusion, I'm still quite happy."

"Because even in the world of illusion, we haven't seen each other for a long time, Bai Liu."

The Rose Factory

The iron gate swung open, and Tang Erda, standing before it, did not move.

For a moment, it was as though he had turned into a wooden statue—or rather, in that instant, he wished he were just that.

The factory worker gave him a couple of confused pushes, but Tang Erda was too large for him to budge. It was then that the 'incense paper' inside the cage suddenly twitched, its fingers moving ever so slightly toward him.

The dimly lit eye, leaning against the wall of the 'scent paper,' struggled to focus on Tang Erda, making a faint, questioning, hoarse sound: "..... Captain?"

With a soft thud, Tang Erda, who had been frozen in place, was jolted, his body hit by the blow so hard that he almost had to grit his teeth to keep his expression under control.

Scarlet eyes, still holding onto the wall for support, glanced down at the man in the cage—or rather, at the incense paper. Something drained Tang Erda of all strength, leaving him bruised and battered, barely able to steady himself. Each step he took felt like it was bringing him closer to the cage that had always trapped him... and Su Yang.

Tang Erda walked up to the scented paper, and in that moment, he saw the other man's face clearly.

Su Yang’s face was bloomed, the roses in his eyes as vibrant as a field of flowers. His features were marred with lines of spilled flesh, and he wore the uniform of the deputy captain of the Bureau of Dangerous Heretics, complete with his badge.

The work photograph on his badge was stained with blood, dirty and worn.

That face, and the image on the badge, reminded Tang Erda of the time Su Yang had been shot by the Joker. The anguished screams of their team echoed in his mind.

Tang Erda had watched the video of Su Yang's death with a blank expression, as if detached from his own body. His mind

malfunctioned, repeating a single thought over and over—If only I had been next to Su Yang.

—I wish I had been caught with Su Yang. I wish I had been the one to be captured instead of him. I wish I had been Su Yang.

If only I were the one being tortured, the one hurting, the one dying.

—Why does it always have to be Su Yang? Why, every time?

It had to be the most important person—the one he, a coward across so many timelines, had been too afraid to speak to, too afraid to look at, too afraid to confront.

Tang Erda closed his eyes, his hand still pressed against the wall, and struggled to remain standing.

In Su Yang's eyes, there was the faintest light. Despite his pain, he appeared almost innocent, his face unmarred by malice, as if he wanted to smile, to express the trust and joy of seeing Tang Erda, the captain.

But the cuts on his skin prevented him from doing so.

Instead, the corners of his mouth curved downward in helpless resignation, though his voice remained full of warmth: "It's really you, Captain!"

Su Yang tried to lift his hand to reach for Tang Erda's coat, but failed, his hand trembling with the effort.

Once again, as Su Yang lifted his hand and was about to drop it, Tang Erda silently half-crouched down. With a trembling hand, he placed it lightly, almost hesitantly, over the back of Su Yang's hand, but kept his distance.

Su Yang gasped weakly, leaning against the wall, half-closing his eyes and smiling at him. Then, with effort, he turned his hand to grasp Tang Erda's.

Tang Erda took a deep breath, trying to suppress the flood of emotions overwhelming him. For the first time in this timeline, he didn't reject Su Yang's closeness. Instead, he gently returned the grip, his voice hoarse and strained: "Yes, the captain is here to get you out."

"No, you can't... get me out of here," Su Yang coughed, a wry, helpless

smile curling on his lips.

As he had so often done in the past, Su Yang seemed distressed by Tang Erda's reckless determination but remained patient, trying to persuade him.

His voice sounded broken by rapid breaths: "It's useless if you help me out. I'm really dying."

Su Yang's eyes lowered, his voice softening: "My family, my parents, my team... they didn't make it. They've all withered away. Now, I'm the only one left... but I won't last much longer."

"I've come to terms with it. I can't do anything in front of this thing. I'm too much of a failure." Su Yang's voice trailed off as he looked up, his rose-colored eyes almost unnaturally clear. His grip tightened around Tang Erda's hand, which was trying to pull away. "But you, Captain, are different. You're the one chosen by the prophets. You can change all of this."

In that moment, it was as if all the memories of countless timelines coalesced into a single sentence.

[Captain! You can do it!]

[Captain, I believe in you!]

[Captain, as long as you live, there's hope for us!]

Countless versions of Su Yang—bloody, broken, pale, scarred, or bloodied—looked at him with the same bright eyes full of hope, calling him Captain.

Then, in the next instant, they died laughing for him, their souls dissipating into the light with no trace left behind.

Tang Erda's mind blurred as he watched Su Yang's anxious expression. For a moment, he didn't feel like he was accepting Su Yang's trust and mandate, but rather a desperate curse—one he couldn't escape.

Su Yang shifted his body forward with difficulty, leaning on Tang Erda's shoulder. He whispered, his voice low: "Captain, listen... There's no point in saving me anymore. You've gotten yourself mixed up in this. You should be promoted to factory worker soon, and then to perfumer. There's an antidote to the rose perfume, but only the factory managers know it."

"Once you're promoted to factory manager, you'll know the antidote," Su Yang continued, taking shallow breaths. He leaned back against Tang Erda's shoulder, his voice light despite the situation. "That's when you'll be able to save these people."

Tang Erda was silent for what felt like an eternity before he spoke hoarsely: "What about you?"

Su Yang said nothing, instead leaning quietly against Tang Erda's shoulder, his chest rising and falling slightly, his eyes closed.

Neither of them needed to speak much. They both understood what Su Yang had decided—to sacrifice himself so Tang Erda could be promoted to factory worker.

This meant that, in the end, Tang Erda would have to kill Su Yang to save the rest.

Even if this Su Yang was just a game character, a mere shadow of the real person, Tang Erda couldn't bring himself to do it.

"But Captain..." Su Yang leaned on Tang Erda's shoulder, his eyes vacant as he whispered, almost as though to himself, "I'm beyond saving... I'm addicted."

"Captain, be a man. Look on the bright side. Everyone's going to die, eventually." Su Yang's tone was casual, almost as if he were reassuring Tang Erda. "If I have to die, I hope my death means something to you."

"I'm glad I got to see you before I completely wilted. At least that means my struggle... my refusal to give in to the rose perfume... had some meaning." Su Yang turned his head on Tang Erda's shoulder, gazing at him gently. "My meaning... is that I waited for you, Captain."

Tang Erda could see the cracks deepening in Su Yang's face, the blood seeping from the edges, reflecting in his pupils as he became more and more like a rose.

More and more, he resembled a monster.

Tang Erda had never seen life slip away so clearly in a human form.

Su Yang looked at him.

Slowly, Tang Erda released Su Yang's hand, shaking it free from his

grip. He lowered his head, his expression unreadable, his voice barely audible: "Testing... what's it going to be?"

Su Yang smiled from the bottom of his heart. "Thank you, Captain."

"That's right." Su Yang suddenly seemed to remember something important. His face turned grave. "Captain, do you remember the living heretic Bai Liu you caught and then escaped from back then? When you leave here, if you have the chance, find him and make sure to kill him."

"This is the man who blew up the factory we were testing at the day he escaped from the Bureau of Dangerous Heretics."

In another cage, one wall away.

After Lu Yizhan had managed to figure out that Bai Liu had become Liu Jiayi, the two of them chatted without tension.

Bai Liu lifted his eyes to look at Lu Yizhan sitting across from him. "I blew up the Rose Factory?"

"Yes." Lu Yizhan didn't seem to think it was a big deal. He lay back on the bed, his hands behind his head, and his tone relaxed. "I, along with the other staff of the Bureau of Dangerous Heretics, saw it, and I'll go with my ten years of knowing you to vouch for the fact that the man who stood above the Rose Factory, the one who claimed he was going to blow it up, was definitely you."

"You said you were going to set off an explosion, leak dried rose leaf gas, and destroy the world," Lu Yizhan continued, his face turned upwards. "I had several conversations with you, and finally decided that you were the same 'you' I knew."

The timeline of the Rose Factory—a game set ten years after the real world—flickered in Bai Liu's mind.

He sorted through the details of Lu Yizhan's story.

The explosion that triggered the spread of dried rose leaf gas around the world occurred the day after Bai Liu escaped from the Bureau of Dangerous Heresies.

On the same day, Lu Yizhan and Su Yang, the deputy head of the third

detachment of the Bureau of Dangerous Heresies, arrived at the Rose Factory to investigate the forcibly closed but secretly reopened factory. This was something Bai Liu had read about in the factory's newspaper, and it was consistent with the reality Bai Liu had suspected. It also aligned with what Lu Yizhan had just told him.

Bai Liu raised his eyebrows after hearing only a few words from Lu Yizhan about what happened next.

Lu Yizhan explained that when they arrived at the factory, they searched the entire premises for what appeared to be a stockpile of dried rose leaf gas. The whole factory was strange: all the equipment was intact, but the people had seemingly vanished.

They searched until the early hours of the morning, finding only a few iron pots with the remains of rose exercise and a distillation apparatus.

That's when Bai Liu appeared out of nowhere—almost as if from the sky—on the roof of the Rose Factory, holding a large lama from somewhere, with one hand in his pocket. He lazily shouted down to the crowd below.

Lu Yizhan said, mimicking the scene with his hands: "I am Bai Liu, a sociopath. I've been laid off for more than a month, can't find a job, and have no money to earn. I'm very sad and think the world will end with me, so later I'll detonate this factory and make the rose dried leaf gas leak, so that everyone ends with me."

Bai Liu was eerily silent for a moment, then asked, "And then the Rose Factory exploded?"

Lu Yizhan nodded honestly. "Yes. Then you disappeared completely, and because of that, for a while, the Dangerous Heresy Agency put a bounty of sixteen million dollars on your head. I was a bit moved."

Bai Liu narrowed his eyes at Lu Yizhan lying on the bed. "You don't think I did the explosion?"

If Lu Yizhan was sure that Bai Liu had caused the explosion, he would have jumped up from the bed and shot Bai Liu on the spot as soon as he walked in—if he could move. But the fact that Lu Yizhan was still calmly lying in bed talking to Bai Liu proved that he thought the explosion had nothing to do with him.

Lu Yizhan was quiet for a moment before speaking. "I'm sure it was

you who shouted from the roof of the Rose Factory that you'd blow it up. I'm also sure that less than fifteen minutes after you said that, the Rose Factory exploded, releasing this perfume spill that endangered everyone."

Then, Lu Yizhan gave a very clueless speculation. "But I don't think you did this."

Bai Liu asked, amused, "Why?"

Bai Liu rarely doubted Lu Yizhan's assumptions about him. Lu Yizhan probably knew him better than he knew himself and would never lie to him.

Lu Yizhan said that the man standing on the roof was Bai Liu, so Bai Liu guessed that it was really him.

Lu Yizhan looked up at the top of the cage for a moment, as if dazed, before replying to Bai Liu, "It's very unprofessional and subjective. I'm sure you wouldn't do something like that."

Bai Liu scowled at him. "I never knew you could trust my character."

Lu Yizhan gave a slow "eh" and turned his head to give Bai Liu a light look. "Not for that, I can't believe in your character."

If it weren't for the strange lines on Lu Yizhan's face, their conversation would have been as quiet as a normal joke.

Lu Yizhan looked at Bai Liu. "But I believe in your ethics of trading. You made a ten-year hot pot deal with me yesterday. You wouldn't destroy the world when you haven't even had a meal yet. That would be a loss. I don't believe you could do such a thing."

"Hmm." Bai Liu glanced at Lu Yizhan. "I feel the same way, but the others don't, do they?"

Lu Yizhan smiled and turned his head back, his tone emotional. "Indeed, I was the only one from the factory personnel who felt that way. My speculation was too subjective to convince them, which is why the high reward for you followed."

"It's a pity that they didn't last. They all left one by one." Lu Yizhan's expression finally turned complicated as he let out a long sigh. "It seems that there's only one person left in this world who can still hold on to believing in you—and those who hate you."

The person who believes in Bai Liu is obviously Lu Yizhan. If Bai Liu is right, the person who hates him would be Su Yang—most likely the person to whom Tang Erda's incense paper is addressed at this point.

Lu Yizhan went on, "I've been thinking about the ten years I've known you here, trying to find clues as to what you really are, something that would corroborate my suspicions that you wouldn't have set off the Rose Factory. The other guy kept emphasizing the evidence, insisting that he saw you set off the factory with his own eyes."

Lu Yizhan's eyes looked straight up at the ceiling, and his tone became soft, as if talking to himself. "What kind of person are you that becomes the only reason for our survival?"

"And late in the memory, I was beginning to wonder if you existed—if you were just a friend I'd conjured up because I was too lonely here. A murderer. A kind of self-compensating salvation to stay sober. Knowing you existed, at least I got through it with some hope."

Bai Liu turned his head calmly. "So?"

Lu Yizhan gave Bai Liu a grumbling look. "At least have some sympathy for me. I'm so miserable."

After a moment of silence, Lu Yizhan smiled. "So, for a while, whenever someone came in to test a perfume, I would ask them: 'Do you know Bai Liu, and what do you think of him?'"

"Probably because I was so cooperative in trying the incense, and they basically answered. I got many, many answers about Bai Liu, but none of them could convince me that you really existed or described anyone I knew."

Lu Yizhan sat up with difficulty on the edge of the bed, took two deep breaths, and looked up at Bai Liu. "Now it's your turn to answer my question. Do you know Bai Liu?"

He looked straight at Bai Liu, who was standing by the bed, and said, "What kind of person do you think Bai Liu is?"

"I know Bai Liu." Bai Liu looked calmly at Lu Yizhan, who was gasping for breath. "He is a shameless, despicable, empathy-free, uncompromising, unconventional person with no social conscience, unconventional in his values, and who doesn't accept the abduction of universal moral subterfuge. To say the least, a rather dangerous character."

"Uh-huh." Lu Yizhan nodded solemnly. "That's the Bai Liu I know. That's right. Go on."

Bai Liu gazed at Lu Yizhan for a long time before saying, "He is indeed your friend. So even if he were such an asshole, he would have kept his deal with you. I wouldn't have detonated the factory. And if the man standing on the roof of the Rose Factory was indeed me, then there should have been some kind of circumstance that compelled me to say that and make that choice. But I wouldn't do anything to go against the deal."

Lu Yizhan was stunned for a moment, then he smiled heartily. "Yes, that's what I believe too."

Bai Liu stepped forward. "OK, enough of your nonsense. Teach me how to test."

Lu Yizhan flinched for a moment and laughed helplessly. "You're being too cruel, Bai Liu. I just heard that factory worker say that your guy's talent is likely to test me to death at once!"

"You may die here." Bai Liu scanned Lu Yizhan. "But the real you won't die. Want to make a deal with me? I can stop the explosion that's already happened and save you and the others."

Lu Yizhan looked at Bai Liu for a long time. He didn't seem to understand what Bai Liu was talking about, nor did he know how Bai Liu could have managed to stop what had already happened—but he knew that at least 50 percent of the deals Bai Liu was talking about were things he could have done himself.

"Yes!" Lu Yizhan replied in one breath, his eyes glowing. "What's the deal?"

Bai Liu: "Treat me to twenty years of hot pot."

"With the previous ten years, that's thirty years! That's too many!!!" Lu Yizhan screamed. "Look at me now, I'm not even sure I'll live that long!!!"

Bai Liu glanced at him. "Then try to live to that point in order to make this deal with me."

Lu Yizhan was dumbfounded as he looked over at Bai Liu, who had an indifferent expression, and couldn't help but laugh.

Caring people are so roundabout—and really in person.

Su Yang grabbed Tang Erda's hands, a rare expression of remorse on his face. "Captain, every day that I've been here with the team, we've regretted not taking your orders seriously..."

His light-colored eyes filled with tears, and his voice cracked. "So many people wouldn't have died because of Bai Liu's revenge. This wouldn't have leaked, it wouldn't have spread..."

"Captain, if only I could have stopped this from the very beginning—it's all my fault…"

Overwhelmed by an unbearable sense of responsibility and guilt, Su Yang slowly bent in front of Tang Erda.

In that moment, he seemed to age decades, his spine bent under the weight of regret, his thin back so gaunt that his bones stuck out like beads, too fragile to stand straight.

Tang Erda clenched his fists—it was too late for the Su Yang in front of him.

But it was still not too late for him.

As long as he acted quickly, found the antidote, and killed Bai Liu—the Su Yang he had seen, broken and desperate, would never have to suffer again. None of this would happen.

Tang Erda mentally calculated the time: when the game ended and when Su Yang had just told him about Bai Liu triggering the explosion. His eyes widened as the realization hit him—Bai Liu had gone to the factory and triggered the explosion immediately after completing the game.

He had to kill Bai Liu in the game to stop it!

Tang Erda knew that the antidote would be available once he became the factory manager. Bai Liu could no longer stay alive.

The Rose Factory

The fragrance test is a simple matter.

"Simply apply the original perfume to the palm of your hand, spreading it evenly," Lu Yizhan says to Bai Liu.

"Then place your palm on the intact piece of skin on my body," Su Yang says to Tang Erda.

"The faster it cracks, the more pain I feel, the stronger your talent, and the more suitable you are for the Rose perfume."

Su Yang unbuttons his uniform, his fingers trembling slightly, and turns his back to Tang Erda.

The uniform piles loosely around his waist, revealing his pale back, where skin blooms like an unfinished tattoo, snaking from his neck, hidden by his half-length hair, to his slightly sunken waist. Only a small piece of skin, directly opposite the tip of his left scapula, remains intact.

--That’s exactly where the dorsal projection of the heart lies. Tang Erda knows that a shot from here, off to the side, could go straight into the heart, encased in the lungs.

Lu Yizhan sits cross-legged on the bed, his back to Bai Liu, lifting his hair to reveal an intact, unblemished patch of skin on the back of his neck. He lowers his head to expose it to Bai Liu, who stands behind him.

This is one of the few good pieces of skin they have left.

Su Yang and Lu Yizhan both take a deep breath and close their eyes. "Let's begin."

Bai Liu places a drop of the original perfume on his palm, and Tang Erda applies it to his own hand in a trance. Then, they reach up and place their palms lightly on Su Yang and Lu Yizhan’s skin.

Almost immediately, both Lu Yizhan and Su Yang collapse to the ground, letting out screams that send chills down their spines.

Outside the cage, the two factory workers realize from the scream that the incense test has started. They pull out a timer and, seeing no

surprise from the scene, begin recording the incense test—timing the duration of the scream.

Lu Yizhan twitches spasmodically on the bed. The back of his neck, touched by Bai Liu, appears as if carved with a knife—a deep line of blood in his bones. A rose looms in his eyes, and his face contorts with pain, all his muscles straining, yet a constant grunt of pain escapes his nostrils.

Su Yang is on the ground, breathing deeply with his forehead pressed against the floor, the roses in his eyes glowing so brightly they almost shine in the darkness of the cage. The lines on his back surge and gather, blood bubbling up from each of the saved wounds, quickly soaking the uniform hanging halfway around his waist.

Su Yang tries to hold back any sound that would burden Tang Erda, cold sweat mixing with tears that drip from the tip of his nose to the floor.

It hurts too much. It hurts too much to fight this off with all your might!

Tang Erda kneels beside Su Yang, his mind clouded by his profound pain. For a moment, he can't tell if Su Yang is being tortured or if he himself is.

For a few seconds, Su Yang’s tear-filled eyes meet his, and Tang Erda blanks. He instinctively pulls out his skill gun and tries to shoot himself in the legs, hands, and feet.

It seems that by enduring the pain with Su Yang, he can alleviate his suffering.

But Su Yang grabs his wrist tightly and says, each word deliberate, "Captain, you have more important things to do than hurt yourself out of guilt."

"There’s no point, Captain," he says softly.

Su Yang’s grip on him is light, so light Tang Erda could easily break free, but he shakily drops the gun anyway—he sees the numerous scars on Su Yang's thin arms.

Unlike the bruises from the rose perfume, these marks are man-made —self-inflicted wounds.

Su Yang, his face also bloodied from the wounds, looks up with a smile that's hard to break, and the rose-red light in his eyes dims, replaced by clarity.

"One person who went through the same thing stopped me from hurting myself. He told me if I could live by hating someone, I should hate."

"Even if the person I hate is his best friend."

Su Yang's breathing slows, his eyelids drooping as his tone weakens.

"Even with his own eyes, he believed Bai Liu didn't detonate the plant. I couldn't convince him, and he couldn't convince me."

"We don't have definitive proof whether Bai Liu detonated the plant, Captain. We've worked on these cases for years and know sometimes what you see with your eyes doesn't tell the whole truth."

"So, according to the benefit of the doubt theorem, the guy was probably right. I'm just too..."

"You can always redirect impotent anger onto others and become like a heretic."

"I've lived like a heretic, twisted and disgusted, until now. By the time I got to you, Captain, I wasn't sure if I was even human anymore."

Su Yang opens his mouth to speak again, but the wounds on his back squirm wildly, causing his eyes to turn red.

The rose that had faded starts to glow red again in his eyes, and he screams in pain, his once-soft expression becoming fierce.

Su Yang's grip on Tang Erda tightens for a moment as he leans forward, looking directly at Erda. The roses in his eyes bloom alarmingly, hatred and lust flashing across his face.

"Kill Bai Liu! Captain, I saw him detonate the factory. We can't hesitate anymore! If we don't kill him, it'll be irreversible!"

Su Yang's face falls, folding in on itself. The rose petals in his eyes stretch and bloom, completely consuming his gaze.

"Kill me, Captain. I'm really going to turn into a heretic."

Tang Erda pulls out his gun. Su Yang smiles and closes his eyes.

The silver bullets cut through the air with a thud, accompanied by a scream that could belong to anyone.

On the other side, the lines on Lu Yizhan's neck creep forward, crawling up his face as he lies on the ground, inhaling deeply. The roses in his eyes flicker, threatening to freeze in place, but stubbornly extinguish with each wave of pain.

Bai Liu stands by, watching quietly with downcast eyes, as though he has nothing to do with the man writhing in agony.

"I should have known... your talent as a perfumer was so strong," Lu Yizhan gasps, trying to control the pain. Cold sweat soaks through his clothes, but the bastard can still flirt with Bai Liu. "This job is lucrative. You should have been a perfumer."

Lu Yizhan refers to real-world perfumers.

Bai Liu gives a lazy "hmmm" and asks, "How long do you normally endure the fragrance test until my talent reaches Perfumer Extraordinaire?"

"It's hard to say. Look at the factory workers outside," Lu Yizhan says, his face pale, his words vague.

Bai Liu squats next to him, resting his hands on his knees, his gaze unyielding. "Let me ask you another way. How long do you think my talent can torture you in this test before it stops?"

The perfumer's test lasts ten minutes, depending on the person's talent. But with Lu Yizhan, it's already gone past that. The test spreads to other intact areas of his body.

If the factory worker had been inside, he would probably be shocked by the results and tell Bai Liu that his talent can endure the fragrance test.

This talent exceeds the paper's range. Usually, the test paper would transform into a monster—a scrap in factory jargon.

But Lu Yizhan, with his unyielding will, refuses to be alienated by his desires. He's holding on, but it's keeping him alive, enduring twice the pain.

Bai Liu can see Lu Yizhan is avoiding the subject, so he asks.

Despite his trembling limbs, Lu Yizhan jokingly replies, "At least 30 years. How else would I treat you to such a long hot pot?"

Bai Liu watches Lu Yizhan's white, bloodless face, cracked and oozing blood, but his eyes remain clear—just no longer rose-colored.

Lu Yizhan is one of the strangest people Bai Liu has ever met.

Most people, given the choice, would either surrender and become monsters or seek death. But not Lu Yizhan. He wants to live openly, painfully, with a smile.

He has the resilience and goodness that any ordinary person might have, only stronger, more stubborn, and unshakeable—qualities that Bai Liu usually associates with a lack of intelligence.

But Lu Yizhan is smart. He just channels all his intellect into doing good, and he's a true good person.

In Bai Liu's view, good people usually don't survive in chaos, or in a world like the Rose Factory's, they're the first to go.

But Lu Yizhan, according to his logic, would find a way to keep himself and others alive, saving more people. He would be the good guy who lives to the end.

"I actually wanted to kill you, Lu Yizhan," Bai Liu admits. "A good man like you has no place in a world like this. It's too painful to live."

Lu Yizhan, in agony, grits his teeth, his body trembling, but when Bai Liu speaks, he lets out a laugh. Struggling to open his eyes, he props himself up weakly and says, almost viciously:

"Don't underestimate the people's police. It's just a bottle of perfume."

"Does being a good person make you more vulnerable? Bai Liu, I'm telling you, good people will go to great lengths to be good!"

"You think you're bad and I'm good? I'm telling you, Bai Liu, you can't beat me!"

The Rose Factory

After a moment of meeting Lu Yizhan's stubborn, defiant eyes, Bai Liu stood up, putting away the bone whip he had taken out. He had planned to give Lu Yizhan a hard time, but it didn't seem necessary.

The snow-white whip curled to the ground, stained with the blood oozing from Lu Yizhan's body.

Lu Yizhan lay back down, his panting ragged, and his voice became a little disjointed from the pain. "You go outside and ask that factory worker. Ask him... your talent should have been extraordinarily high."

Bai Liu went outside and questioned the factory worker, who looked at the time and inquired about the characteristics of Bai Liu's test papers. He confirmed that Bai Liu's talent as a perfumer was indeed above the extra level.

At the same time, the factory worker asked, surprised, if the paper hadn't been scrapped.

Bai Liu was silent for a moment and replied, "No."

Lu Yizhan, as Bai Liu had seen him for the first time in this dungeon, sat on the edge of the bed and removed his clothes to be examined by the factory worker.

After the inspection, Lu Yizhan limped and placed his blood-soaked clothes into the sink, looking as though he intended to wash them later.

Bai Liu might have thought the man was fine if he hadn't noticed the lines on the back of Lu Yizhan's hand still spreading.

The factory workers were in awe, remarking that they hadn’t expected the paper to hold up even after the special talent test.

Before Bai Liu left, Lu Yizhan called out to him. Bai Liu turned and saw Lu Yizhan sitting on the edge of the bed, smiling with relief. The lines on his face were growing and healing, looking horrible and bloody, yet his smile held the warmth of a normal human expression.

Lu Yizhan stood up with difficulty and gently pushed Bai Liu’s back, urging him out of the cage. His voice was soft and tender.

"Thirty years of hot pot deals, you said it. Ah, remember to change the world for me."

Bai Liu, carrying the bone whip stained with Lu Yizhan's blood, didn't look back but muttered as he left the cage softly.

On the other end, Tang Erda bowed his head, stumbling out of the cage with a silver spear stained with Su Yang's blood.

When the factory worker saw Tang Erda walk out, gun in hand, he didn't say much. He just glanced at the bloody test paper in the cage and nodded to Tang Erda, uninterested. "Test paper scrapped, right? We'll take care of it later. You're qualified."

As though he hadn't heard, Tang Erda passed the factory worker with the gun in his hand and walked out, his gaze vacant, unseeing.

Su Yang's blood dripped from his fingertips. His clothes, shoes, and even his face were covered in the blood spilled from a shot through Su Yang's heart.

With each step, each breath, each movement forward, Tang Erda's path was stained with the blood of the withered Su Yang.

The blood that dripped from his hands and feet made its way to the closing cage behind him, where Su Yang was being held, as if he had never left the cage drawn by Su Yang's death.

He wanted to die in that cage with Su Yang, but he was a captain and did not have the luxury of such an end.

If Tang Erda had been any ordinary team member, perhaps Su Yang would have pitied him and let him die a clean death.

But he was the captain—a title that gave him responsibilities and meaning, ones Tang Erda hated in that moment.

Captain Tang cannot run away, cannot stop, cannot even die. He must witness, again and again, the miserable end of everyone in an endless, irreparable world line. He must watch it all in its entirety, like a machine, and then move on without any emotional turmoil.

How he longed to die, like the hunter who had completely withered, even his bullets marked with the desire for suicide.

Tang Erda's [Suicide Bullet] is a skill that can only be used if the user,

himself, is genuinely attempting to kill himself every time he raises his gun. Each shot is an act of self-destruction, every minute, every second.

In the end, Tang Erda couldn't even tell if he was trying to kill the enemy or himself when he fired.

But he was still alive, as if sliced by a thousand cuts, a walking corpse bearing the hopes of all those who had died.

Bai Liu can die. Su Yang can die. His teammates can die. Any person, good or bad, can die.

Only Tang Erda, chosen as the hunter, must never die.

Because he, God Xiang, wished that all men might live, and God deprived him of the right to die.

The factory worker's distant voice rang out behind the dazed Tang Erda, disgusted. "This scrap of test paper is disgusting. Let's stir it up and use it as fertilizer."

Tang Erda tightened his grip on the gun, but in the next moment, as if hearing voices, Su Yang's faint voice echoed in his ears before he died.

"Captain, go forward and don't... turn back."

[System Warning: Player Tang Erda has suffered a severe mental shock and is down to 11!]

Tang Erda turned back, expressionless, raising his gun to the head of the factory worker who was kicking Su Yang's body. He whispered softly to himself, as though answering someone, "Su Yang, I can't do this without turning around."

For there had been no turning back long ago, and the only thing he could do was turn back.

"Bang!"

---------- --

Bai Liu, only a wall away, also walks forward with his whip in hand, his gaze shallow.

Two men, separated by a wall, surrounded by the mangled bodies of their best friends and the closed road ahead of them. They are both in

the darkness of the earth, carrying weapons stained with the blood of those who matter most to them, heading toward the end of their fate.

The factory worker inserted the key into the lock and turned the door in front of Bai Liu.

Tang Erda kicked away the dead and unconscious body of the factory worker, the one who had just said he would stir up Su Yang's body.

A clear, one-shot kill wound is visible in the corpse's forehead, as if the factory worker, who had been killed by Tang Erda’s quick turn and shot a second before his death, was shocked that he would end up like this.

Tang Erda loosely grips the bloodstained gun in his two-fingered right hand and opens the dungeon door with the key clutched in his left hand.

Outside, the dawn light breaks through, casting a bright line that falls across the faces of both Bai Liu and Tang Erda.

Bai Liu looks up with a pale expression, the beam of light shifting and dazzling in his face.

Tang Erda's mouth curls up violently, his face covered in splattered blood, a strange and cruel grin on his face. His mouth stretches wide, as much as it can.

The light falls on the upper half of his face, the roses in Tang Erda's eyes stretching and blooming against the first rays of light that fall into his pupils, behind which the factory workers are dying.

"What a perfect encounter, not wasted all the time I spent designing it," the man in the black hood at the werewolf poker game says, moving the hunter card to his face with amusement.

This Hunter card is different from the opening Hunter card. The hunter, who had once worn a cold expression, now holds a wilted rose, tears of sorrow leaking from his turquoise blue eyes. As the tears fall, the rose in the hunter's heart wilts with them.

"It's interesting to watch the God-sign hunter who goes mad and turns evil, and the werewolf-sign who seems on a mission to save the world," the man adds, raising his eyes to the prophet sitting across from him, who has remained silent the entire time. He leans his chin casually on his folded hands and smiles meaningfully. "Prophet, would

you like to use your powers to predict the outcome? Or perhaps, did you see this situation coming?"

The prophet remains silent.

The man doesn't press him, instead smiling to himself and continuing, "In whatever world line, it's always Bai Six who's the most interesting."

The prophet finally speaks, his voice calm, "In this world line, his name is Bai Liu."

"If you insist," the man across the table shrugs. "I think he'd prefer to be called Bai Six."

The man chuckles, "Or rather, I think he's about to turn back into Bai Six. And at the end of his showdown with the hunter, if he kills the hunter, Bai Six will lose his stance as a normal person. Then, the outcome of our bet in this world line about Bai Six will be revealed."

"And all you have to do is lose once, and our werewolf game is over."

The prophet gazes at the weeping hunter card on the table, next to the werewolf card, his expression stone-like, without speaking.

Meanwhile, by the flower fields, Liu Jiayi flipped through the diary Bai Liu had placed in her prop library with a quick glance, gaining a basic understanding of the overall additions to the game.

Just as she was about to contact Bai Liu to confirm his next move, a loud gunshot rang out from a distant factory, followed by the sound of breaking glass. It was far enough away that Liu Jiayi could hear it clearly from the flower field.

Of course, her hearing was far superior to the average person's. For example, Qi Yifang, who stood next to her, could only vaguely hear the loud bang and looked over nervously.

She quickly turned her gaze back, and with the aid of her visualization props, she could clearly see the open dormitory window on the ground floor of the Rose Factory being shattered, followed by a very subtle, muffled grunt from Bai Liu.

"Shit!" Liu Jiayi's face changed. "Bai Liu, that guy and the gunman are

fighting!"

The shot was unmistakable; it was the distinct sound of the strange skill weapon she had taken a bullet from—the silver revolver!

This gun had a magazine change flap before firing!

She subconsciously wanted to rush over and see what was going on, but quickly calmed herself. Bai Liu wasn't the type to act impulsively—he was a player who liked to play small, calculated moves. There had to be a reason why he was facing Tang Erda, who had a much higher panel, at this moment.

Now was not the time to rush in to save Bai Liu, who had his own—or perhaps the witch's—skill panel, and could recover from lifesteal without dying easily.

As Bai Liu's secondary player, she now needed to figure out what he was trying to achieve by holding Tang Erda back.

Liu Jiayi opened the diary Bai Liu had placed in her props section again and finally found a hastily scribbled sentence on the last page:

-- [The time in you is unique and irreversible until the real death comes].

"Time, time..." Liu Jiayi muttered, "Before the real death comes, the real death—"

Throughout the game, there seemed to be something that represented time and death in the truest sense.

Liu Jiayi's eyes widened. "Newspaper dates of explosions and the exact times of some major deaths!!!"

The Rose Factory

Qi Yifang was confused by Liu Jiayi's sudden comment. "What? What time?"

Liu Jiayi grabbed Qi Yifang's wrist and ran. "With your intelligence, you won't understand for a while. Just come with me and help me if you want to pass the level!"

Qi Yifang, who was being dragged along, thought, "????"
I really don't get it, but you're hitting me too hard for saying it so bluntly, little witch!

As they ran, Liu Jiayi's determination was evident, but she also felt a twinge of chagrin. How could I not have figured it out until now, especially when Bai Liu had reminded me?!

When she saw the keyword "dismemberment," she should have realized that it was a collector's game, much like "Last Train." The game "Rose Factory" had a secret thread buried beneath its simple upgrade story, and that secret thread led straight to the collection Tawil, with a clue involving limbs!

The hint she had—[The time on you is unique and irreversible until the real death comes]—now made sense.

There was only one thing in this game that hinted at true death and irreversible timing: the newspaper display case she and Bai Liu had seen when they first entered the factory, which displayed all the major events in the history of the Rose Factory!

Every expansion of the Rose Factory had been accompanied by the death of countless people, a bloody path of development—a true death for those in this game world, an irreversible passage of time.

For her and Bai Liu, the outsiders, this time was illusory and reversible. But if they died in the game, they would be frozen in time—just another death at the Rose Factory, recorded in the newspapers, posted on the wall. That was the point!

Breathing heavily, Liu Jiayi entered through the main entrance of the Rose Factory and found the display case she'd seen earlier.

The display case was neatly lined with newspapers. Liu Jiayi focused intently on the wall of papers, narrowing her eyes as she began

counting them from top to bottom, using a marker to mark the dates and times of the deaths.

When she finished marking all the numbers, Qi Yifang couldn't help but feel a chill down his spine as he looked at the dense, death-filled numbers.

Once Liu Jiayi had sorted them out, Qi Yifang noticed something was off. The distribution of the numbers representing time appeared unusually neat in horizontal rows and columns, vaguely forming a square shape.

"Sure enough, the range of rows and columns where the dates of death appear is 400 by 400," Liu Jiayi observed, stepping back to look at the wall. She exhaled deeply, her gaze steely. "Exactly the number of acres in the Rose Factory's flower fields—sixteen thousand."

At this point in her deductions, it was clear: Tawil's dismembered body was buried beneath a field of flowers. Each number on the newspaper wall corresponded to a field of flowers. The question now was, which field—or which number—was Tawil's body buried under?

There were ten numbers, 0 through 9. What number would this psychopath who buried Tawil have chosen, or how many of any number, to bury him under?

Was it his birthday? The day he acquired his adoptive parents' property? The day he bought his wife's property? Or perhaps the day he bought the idol?

What numbers held special meaning to him?

No way! There are too many numbers! This guy's diary doesn't have the special markings and typical numbers that serial killers love to repeat! There's no way to tell!

Liu Jiayi grimaced, grinding her teeth as she re-examined the entire wall of numbers.

The deafening sounds of fighting reached her from outside the window, and the display case on the ground floor, near where Bai Liu and Tang Erda were battling, trembled violently.

The rubble slid down the wall, as though it might collapse at any moment.

Thinking in such an environment was obviously not easy, especially when she knew Bai Liu was up against someone with a panel value dozens of times higher than his own.

Even Qi Yifang, an outsider with no idea who was fighting, couldn't help but be on edge. He pulled out his weathervane to survey the area. "What's going on?"

Liu Jiayi took a deep breath, blocking out all the chaos around her. She closed her eyes.

No, I'm thinking about this the wrong way.

She wasn't supposed to think of it in terms of a big psychotic boss within a game, which was the conventional way of solving mysteries. That didn't apply to The Rose Factory.

Because this game was not a simple one—Rose Factory was a game someone, or something, had prepared specifically for Bai Liu, as Bai Liu had already told her. Everything in this game, including the psychotic factory manager, was designed to irritate Bai Liu in order to achieve the designer's goals.

If I think about it this way, what number would the people behind this choose to bury the body of someone who had special meaning to Bai Liu?

As debris cascaded down from above, Qi Yifang anxiously called out to her. "Little witch! This place isn't going to hold!"

Liu Jiayi opened her eyes. "It's six!"

Bai Liu's former name was Bai Six!

"Qi Yifang, help me mark the coordinates for the number six on the left!" Liu Jiayi yelled amid the chaos. "I'll mark the right!"

Qi Yifang choked, covering his mouth, then gave an OK gesture. He shielded his head with his weathervane, dodging the falling sand and gravel, and moved closer to the display case to memorize the details.

On the right, Liu Jiayi lay across the display case, her eyes darting rapidly as she whispered silently, marking the numbers as fast as she could.

Near the end of their shorthand, a sudden, earth-shattering explosion

echoed through the adjacent corridor. A twisted humanoid figure crashed through the wall, landing on the piazza floor with a massive impact, creating a huge crater.

With the sickening sound of a limb cracking, the man who was smashed into the pit let out a heart-rending scream of pain.

Moments later, the man, now bleeding from his seven orifices, his chest cavity sunken, slowly died, his head tilted, pupils dilated.

Liu Jiayi's pupils constricted as she looked back and saw the man who had just died. His face was familiar.

Dressed in the uniform of the Bureau of Heretics, his light-colored eyes lifeless, his face pale and bloodless, his limbs twisted unnaturally, his chest plate soaked in blood, Liu Jiayi immediately recognized him.

—This is Su Yang.

Fifteen minutes earlier, in a corridor across the piazza, Bai Liu leaned against the wall, his hands raised in surrender, facing off with Tang Erda, who had a gun pointed at him.

"I concede, how about we take a break in the middle? Captain Tang, would you mind pausing before you hit me?" Bai Liu leaned back against the wall, a smile on his face. He reached out and gently pushed Tang Erda's gun away. "You won't be using this for a while. How about putting it away?"

Bai Liu was badly bruised, blood seeping from the corners of his mouth from the beating and abrasions from being dragged across the floor. There were no gunshot wounds—everything was from the impact of fists and limbs. Tang Erda didn't want to finish him off so easily with a single shot.

Perhaps the former captain of the third detachment never expected that he would treat his enemies in the way he once most loathed and hated.

But no matter how much he tortured Bai Liu, he never saw the same pain on Bai Liu's face that he saw on his own.

Bai Liu always looked at him calmly, sometimes even with a smile. It was clear that the one being tortured was Tang Erda, but with every

punch he threw, every hard blow to Bai Liu's abdomen and face, hearing the other man's muffled grunts of pain, Tang Erda felt like he was suffering a thousand times more than Bai Liu.

Tang Erda felt pain from torturing others, anger at the innocent being tortured. This was what had driven him to join the Heretic Bureau in the first place, and to this day, there was nothing he could do to change it—even if it drove him mad.

Now, anger and pain were indistinguishably intertwined on his face, and in Tang Erda's dark blue eyes, a monster named Bai Six lurked.

Even being a villain takes talent, and unfortunately, Tang Erda didn't have it.

Bai Liu leaned back against the wall, his eyes pitying as he looked at the heavily breathing, grimacing Tang Erda. "Captain Tang, spare yourself. You're not good at this kind of thing."

The expression on Tang Erda's face vanished in an instant.

He looked up indifferently, grabbed Bai Liu's wrist with his left hand, and shoved him to the side. He landed, flipped, twisted, and stepped down, aiming to break his bones.

Bai Liu's face was covered in cold sweat from the pain, but he still looked calm. "Well, it hurts, but not like you can actually use it."

Tang Erda's expression darkened again. "This is the same torture method you used on Su Yang once!!!"

"He was shipped back with almost every bone broken! You left tapes in his stomach to tell me—"

The fury in his eyes intensified, but his voice grew bitter, thick with hatred and tears. "You said what I did to you was petty. You said you'd come and teach me yourself. Is this what you call fucking torture?!"

The Rose Factory

Tang Erda raised his fist and slammed it down onto Bai Liu's face. Bai Liu choked, coughing up blood, and turned away, his fist grazing his face before cracking against the ground.

Bai Liu had planned to play a few tactics and tricks with the captain, but Tang Erda's panel suppression was so overwhelming that he couldn't move under the captain's close-quarters assault—not even to tap on the system panel. Tang Erda moved too quickly.

Even though the man's mind wasn't right anymore, his physical reflexes were superb. Every time Bai Liu tried to resist, even with the slightest movement, Tang Erda would quickly counter and dislocate his bones before he could even react.

Bai Liu deeply understood the phrase "one power to rule them all" when it came to Tang Erda.

Experience, technique, ability, skill, speed—every criterion used to judge a player was on full display in Tang Erda.

Though it was just a feeling, Bai Liu had a vague sense that Tang Erda's panel value might have surpassed 50,000 by now.

This wasn't a match of the same caliber as Bai Liu's previous opponents. Tang Erda's frenzied intensity left no room for Bai Liu to counter.

He was indeed pinned down. In this rare instance, Bai Liu found himself at his wits' end, and all without Tang Erda even firing a shot.

If Tang Erda hadn't gone berserk and tried to torture him, Bai Liu would likely be dead by now. Tang Erda could have easily killed him.

—This situation might be seen as bad luck, but for Bai Liu, it could also be a stroke of good luck if you looked at the results.

Bai Liu had long outgrown the guise of Liu Jiayi.

After encountering the red-eyed Tang Erda, Bai Liu had quickly deactivated his Hearts A skill card—it wasn't wise to use the appearance of an eight-year-old girl when facing Tang Erda, especially considering the stamina cost.

So now Bai Liu was physically wrestling with Tang Erda—or, more accurately, being beaten unilaterally. Blood spattered between them as Bai Liu watched Tang Erda's twisted, brutal face, his own breathing growing faint.

—And then, suddenly, Bai Liu smiled.

[System Warning: Player life value drops below 3!]

But even in this situation, Bai Liu didn't believe all hope was lost.

Tang Erda had become an S-class monster, his strength amplified by madness, but this also exposed his weaknesses to Bai Liu.

He just needed to gamble once. Lose the bet, and Tang Erda would go completely insane, and Bai Liu would be dead. But if he won—

Bai Liu stared at Tang Erda, who had raised his fist high—now!

Bai Liu, relaxed and seemingly unconcerned, triggered Tang Erda's muscle inertia. As his opponent's fist landed, Bai Liu swiftly sidestepped, his movements fluid, no longer hindered by the weakness he had shown in his previous attack.

This gave Bai Liu a one-second window between Tang Erda's strikes, enough time for him to tap out of the system panel quickly.

[System Alert: Does player Bai Liu wish to re-use the skill Poker (Hearts A)?]

[OK.]

The heart at the center of the card spun rapidly as Tang Erda approached. The figure inside the heart shifted, changing form.

Tang Erda took a massive step forward, his fist raised, about to strike the back of Bai Liu's head. He hissed and roared, "Bai Liu—"

Bai Liu turned slowly, his protective clothing fading into the uniform of the Heretic's Authority. His dark eyes became light and transparent, his stature growing by half a head. His hands, now covered in snow-white gloves, were a stark contrast to the semi-long hair that reached his neck.

He turned to face Tang Erda, blood staining his mouth, seemingly unfazed by the captain's impending attack. Instead, his voice was low and gentle as he softly spoke, "Captain."

—He looked exactly like Tang Erda's first memory of Su Yang.

Tang Erda's fist stopped just inches from Bai Liu's nose, blowing the wind through the bloodstained hair on both sides of his face.

Bai Liu's face, covered in the scars from Tang Erda's assault, looked eerily fitting with Su Yang's gentle expression. It was an odd juxtaposition, one that unnerved Tang Erda.

His fist trembled as it hovered in front of Bai Liu's face, his pupils wide as he looked at the face of Su Yang, a man he knew so well.

—This was the Su Yang of the first world. The Su Yang from the beginning. The—

—The real one, hidden deep in his heart. The Su Yang who would never return, the Su Yang whose soul was destroyed.

"How dare you appear before me with his face?!" Tang Erda's eyes burned with rage, almost dripping with blood. His glare was filled with something grotesque as he looked at Bai Liu. A gun materialized in his clenched fist, and without hesitation, he pressed it violently against Bai Liu's forehead, firing instantly.

"BANG—!!!"

Su Yang was hit, his body slowly collapsing to the ground, motionless —not as Bai Liu, but as Su Yang, looking at his captain with eyes that had not yet returned, before he died.

No matter the skills or props, nothing could hold after death. If Su Yang remained like this after death...

Tang Erda realized what was happening. Dumbfounded, he dropped the gun and collapsed to his knees in front of Su Yang's body.

—This wasn't Bai Liu's Su Yang. This was Su Yang.

Bai Liu's voice rang out lazily, as irritating as ever: "Captain Tang, what you just shot wasn't the Su Yang I've become. It's the Su Yang you're afraid to see in your heart. Look up. See what's in front of you —and behind you."

Tang Erda seemed to freeze, his eyes hollow, before he raised his head.

At the end of the corridor, a massive mirror stood, reflecting another

mirror at the opposite end.

The two mirrors faced each other, creating an endless corridor of reflections, each mirror continuously reflecting the next. The images refracted endlessly between them.

Tang Erda recognized the mirror. It was the Murphy's Theorem Magic Mirror, specially protected by the Heretic Authority.

—This was a powerful heresy, difficult to break, and resistant to destruction. When you stared into it, the longer you looked, the more you saw the things you never wanted to face—things that would materialize before your eyes.

Bai Liu had placed two mirrors in the corridor when Tang Erda wasn't looking, creating this mirror maze. In reality, he only had one mirror to begin with—a monster book reward for the Exploding Last Train. The second had been taken at random when he was imprisoned in the Dangerous Heresy Treatment Bureau after causing a riot.

However, the real-world mirror couldn't be brought into the system, so Bai Liu had to work around it, making the mirror corridor to trap Tang Erda.

—For a hunter with a heart so twisted, there was no better prison than his own most feared past.

Various versions of Su Yang began to appear in the mirror, smiling as they crawled out, moving towards Tang Erda while softly calling to him.

"Captain..."

"Captain, look at this heretic..."

"Captain! Let's grab a drink after work! The second detachment's treating!"

"Captain, do you prefer a son or a daughter?"

It was such a familiar, warm, and happy routine, with smiling, long-lost friends, but Tang Erda was paralyzed with fear. Every finger trembled as he watched these real-life fragments of his memories, the dreamlike, haunting faces of those he'd lost. He stumbled backward, clutching the wall, shaking his head with a blank expression.

"Don’t—!"

"Don’t go on any further—!!!"

But he couldn’t retreat. Su Yang emerged from the mirror behind him.

Su Yang smiled and said, "Captain, if we win this final, we’ll have won Bai six. It’ll be all over—"

Before Tang Erda’s brain could process the words, he instinctively placed his hand over Su Yang's temple. A sharp pain surged through him, as if his very bones were cracking. He screamed, "Stop saying that! I don’t want to win!!!"

"—I want you to live!!!!"

Suddenly, a bullet fired from nowhere and passed through Tang Erda’s palm, piercing Su Yang’s skull with uncanny precision. A sickening crunch echoed.

A steady stream of blood poured from Tang Erda’s fingers as he covered Su Yang’s temple.

"Team... Captain..." The fragmented voice once again pulled Tang Erda’s focus.

Su Yang, who had just turned to smile and ask if Tang Erda preferred a son or a daughter, was now contorted unnaturally, as if something invisible was crushing him. His limbs twisted at strange angles, forcing his head back to look at Tang Erda.

This Su Yang’s face was half-covered in blood, his uniform torn and dirty, but he smiled with unshakable determination.

"Captain... must save those who are contaminated..."

"Bang!"

A shot rang out, hitting Su Yang in the back of the head, the bullet tearing through his forehead. Su Yang didn’t even finish his sentence before he fell to the ground, blood pouring from his wound.

The Su Yang who had once asked Tang Erda for a drink after work now lay curled on the ground, every bone twisted as if something invisible was torturing him. He could no longer scream; he could only shudder in pain, his pale face contorted with agony.

Invisible hands forced a piece of tape into the mouth of this Su Yang, clamping his jaw shut.

"Don't...!!!" Tang Erda collapsed to his knees in front of Su Yang, desperately trying to pull the tape out of his stomach. "Don't make him eat this! He's in pain! He really hurts!"

The tape, covered in goo, was difficult for Tang Erda to grip. In desperation, he bit down on it, tearing at it with his teeth, trying to swallow it himself.

Tears spilled from his ghostly blue eyes.

The entity forcing the tape into Su Yang's mouth seemed to realize the struggle, easily dislodging the tape and forcing it deeper, twisting Su Yang's jaw and making him swallow it, piece by agonizing piece.

Tang Erda could do nothing but watch as Su Yang spasmed on the floor, clutching his stomach, before finally falling still, his breath ceasing, his mouth filled with black blood—exactly as when he had been dissected.

Tang Erda knelt there, his soul hollow, his hands falling lifeless to his sides as if he, too, had died alongside Su Yang.

The Murphy Mirror, a reflection of everyone's deepest fears, now recreated Su Yang's death in every timeline before Tang Erda's eyes. Every moment, every fragment of their once-happy routine was now distorted, haunted by the memories of a life lost.

No matter how many times he tried, no matter how hard he ran, he had never been able to save Su Yang from Bai Six. Over and over again, he watched Su Yang tortured to death, as Bai Six calmly lectured him.

[It's true that I don't suffer because of others' pain, but you see, when I do even the slightest work, it's always you—the empathic good guy—who suffers more than me, the bad guy.]

A slow smile appeared on the tape as Bai Six's voice echoed, asking, [So, Captain Tang, after all this, can you still tell me what it means to be a good person?]

Tang Erda staggered to his feet, his mind filled with the image of the real Su Yang, as though answering Bai Six through time itself, or perhaps speaking to himself.

"It’s indeed thankless and pointless to be a good person."

"But I won’t become the bad guy, disgusting as that might be. Even if I already want to die, even if it’s just an illusion... as long as I live, I will save him!"

Tang Erda gritted his teeth, pulling out his gun and pointing it at his own head. "Because I’m his captain!!!"

"Stop this, Bai Liu!" Tang Erda’s eyes locked on to one of the Su Yangs who was behaving oddly, and without hesitation, he pulled the trigger.

The Su Yang in front of him slowly turned around, his eyes a deep, dark color—it was Bai Liu.

[System Alert: Player Tang Erda has a mental breakdown, panel is in full swing!]

[System Alert: Player Tang Erda has activated the Burst skill (Russian Carousel - Suicide Bullet)]

[Target: An anthropomorphic representation of the player Bai Liu]

[System Alert: The reels are starting to spin, the gamble is about to begin... Gamble failed, suicide bullets in effect—]

The bullet slammed into Tang Erda’s skull with a violent thud, blood pouring from half of his stunned face as he collapsed into the growing pool of blood around him, still unmoving.

In a daze, Tang Erda saw the 'Su Yang' from before suddenly transform into Liu Jiayi.

"How do you run away..." Tang Erda gazed upwards, his eyelids drooping, but a faint grin appeared on his face. "Never mind, there's always a way he can win the game."

Tang Erda’s eyes drifted closed. "I’ve finally lost the bet... and I can leave..."

"Hey, wake up." Liu Jiayi knelt breathlessly in front of Tang Erda.

Bai Liu had just teleported her there, using his telepathy. She had barely grasped the situation when she saw the big, stupid guy shoot himself. She panicked, fearing that history was repeating itself, rushing to give him the antidote.

Liu Jiayi stood frozen as she saw the big guy shoot himself in the head.

—How could he give up so easily?

As Liu Jiayi looked at Tang Erda, lying on the floor as though dying, the mirror vanished, and the corridor outside the door opened. Bai Liu walked through, seemingly having anticipated the scene. He glanced at Tang Erda lying on the floor but turned to Liu Jiayi. "Save him first."

As Liu Jiayi poured the antidote into Tang Erda, she looked at Bai Liu in disbelief. "How did you do this to him?"

Tang Erda was an S-rank player with an absurdly high panel value—no monster in this game could take him down. The only person who could defeat him in this game was himself.

But Bai Liu had somehow manipulated Tang Erda into shooting himself, with a burst of panel fire that completely penetrated his shield, leaving only a thin layer of skin between him and death.

Now, he was barely breathing, and Liu Jiayi was just one step too late. He would have been dead otherwise.

"Oh yeah, I've been studying his skill, Russian Roulette." Bai Liu explained methodically. "It's a luck-based skill. Whoever has a higher luck value won't get hit. So he should have beaten me every time, just in the nick of time. I changed the image stored in Hearts A to become you, then used Spades A to activate telekinesis and teleport you over."

"Now it's you and him. I thought you'd have better luck than me and a better chance of winning the bet." Bai Liu looked at Liu Jiayi innocently. "Looks like you won the bet."

Liu Jiayi: "....."

Liu Jiayi took a deep breath. "Bai Liu, you $#$!@#)*$@!!!!"

The Rose Factory

After milking Tang Erda until he appeared less weak—just a breath or two—Liu Jiayi stopped in time. She didn't dare revive the big guy after he'd lost his strength.

"And then what?" Liu Jiayi raised an eyebrow at Bai Liu. "What are you going to do?"

Bai Liu sat cross-legged beside Tang Erda, casually replying, "It's rare to get him to settle down. I'm ready to talk to him."

"And then we'll talk about a win-win deal," Bai Liu smiled, looking at Liu Jiayi.

Liu Jiayi took a couple of silent steps back at the sight of Bai Liu's smile, rubbing the goosebumps on her arms as she glanced at Tang Erda, still unconscious, with a little pity.
Poor fool. He's about to be conned by Bai Liu.

Qi Yifang's terrified voice echoed from afar. He was running toward them, likely still shaken from the big transformation between Liu Jiayi and Bai Liu. He was only now regaining his composure and heading down the corridor.

Liu Jiayi put away the antidote and stood up. "I'll go outside and stop Qi Yifang. You've got fifteen minutes to deal with... whatever Tang is. Is that enough time?"

Bai Liu leaned lazily against the corridor wall, raising his hand in an OK gesture.

Liu Jiayi turned to leave, tossing Bai Liu a bottle of antidote without looking back. "Take care of yourself before you take care of others."

"Shame on you for taking my skill panel and still getting hurt like that."

Bai Liu wiped the blood trickling down the corner of his mouth, caught the antidote she tossed him, and smiled. "Thank you."

Indeed, he had Liu Jiayi's witch panel, but Bai Liu had almost run out of stamina in his confrontation with Tang Erda. He hadn't had the chance to replenish it before using Liu Jiayi's skills.

Not to mention, being a player at heart, Bai Liu wasn't particularly attuned to his own life expectancy.

If Liu Jiayi hadn't been so quick to notice his low health and tossed him the antidote, Bai Liu would have been negotiating with Tang Erda on his meager three life points.

If Tang Erda were to revolt at the brink of death, there was a real chance something bad would happen to him.

The little witch waved her hand impatiently as she walked away.

Now, only Bai Liu and Tang Erda remained in the dim corridor, both having fought fiercely.

Bai Liu drank the antidote and stamina restorer to replenish his panel before approaching Tang Erda to pat his bloodied face.

Tang Erda's face was smeared with blood from his own suicide bullet, with blood continuing to pour from beneath him. His breathing and heartbeat were barely audible.

Bai Liu slapped him hard. Tang Erda's eyes faintly opened, the pale blue light filtering through his eyes, the only brightness in the dark corridor.

The moment he saw Bai Liu, Tang Erda's blood-soaked fingers twitched, as though reaching for a gun, but eventually, his strength failed him. He could no longer fight.

All he could do was stare at Bai Liu with blood-stained blue eyes, as though trying to grab Bai Liu's ankles. He laboriously managed to say, "… Let go of... Su Yang…"

"Actually, I'm curious," Bai Liu didn't dodge. Instead, he leaned closer to Tang Erda, meeting his gaze without flinching. "I saw in the mirror that the Su Yang who sent you to kill me must already be dead. His soul has disappeared, right?"

Tang Erda's pupils jerked, his hand twitching as though trying to grab Bai Liu.

Bai Liu continued calmly, "No matter what happens, even if your wish is granted, everyone's saved, and I die in every timeline, won't the Su Yang you wanted to save still not return?"

"So, what's the point of hunting me?"

Tang Erda, lying on the floor like a dead statue, didn't move. His fingers curled as if trying to form a fist, but he was too exhausted.

He couldn't even make a fist. All he could do was stare blankly at the ceiling, his mind filled with a flood of voices.

[..... Terrible opponents, the dreaded Wandering Circus. Due to the presence of their clowns, many are simply too afraid to fight them! A voice narrated passionately, But the other team in today's final match clearly wasn't composed of cowards, as they bravely confronted the Wandering Circus!]

You know the Joker Sniper's skill—Soul Crusher! This isn't a secret among us players, it was revealed by their captain, Bai Six, by default.

[This is a terrifying skill that has caused many teams to surrender before confrontation—because once hit by the clown sniper, your very soul shatters into a million pieces in an instant!]

[The people who have felt that pain themselves can no longer tell us about it, as they've all left this world. But that isn't even the worst part of the Soul Crusher. The worst part is that—]

[- It completely kills a person, with no chance of resurrection, completely vanishing from existence.]

[Even if time resets, even if the mountains and seas are reversed, there is no way they can come back.]

[For their soul is gone.]

[Today! As revealed through earlier interviews, the main target of the Wandering Circus' Clown Sniper is the captain of the other team, Mr. Hunter, who is also a gunner! Looks like we're in for an intense showdown between two top players with the same skill!]

The background noise of the field hums, bright lights spilling from above, the cheering and whistling crowd, and the other team approaching from a distance.

Liu Jiayi, Mu Sicheng, and Muke stand in slouching poses around Bai Six, who, wearing a cheeky clown mask, stands behind them with a gentle smile on his face.

Bai Six looked at him with amusement, reached out to shake his hand before the game started, and said something that has stuck in Tang Erda's mind ever since.

Bai Six smiled and said, "There's something about you that I don't have, Mr. Hunter, and I'm curious about you."

"I'd like to know under what circumstances you'd throw something like that away."

Tang Erda pulled his hand back warily. "Whatever it is you're talking about, I don't throw things away easily."

"Oh, really?" Bai Six said with the same polite smile, casting a meaningful glance at Su Yang, who stood behind Tang Erda. His smile deepened just a bit. "Mr. Hunter, it's best to ban intra-team romance; it's not appropriate for the team."

Tang Erda was stunned, and behind him, Su Yang's face shifted slightly.

Bai Six waved his finger, as if nothing had happened, and turned away with his smile intact.

"Intra-team romance?" Tang Erda frowned, turning to Su Yang in confusion. "Aren't we all guys on the team? How could anyone fall in love within the team?"

Su Yang's face paled for a moment. He looked at Tang Erda for a long time before finally smiling, almost as if surrendering to the truth.

He lifted his pale eyes, gazing tenderly at Tang Erda, took a deep breath, and slowly exhaled. With a soft voice, as if mentally preparing himself to take the blame, he said, "It's me, Captain. I liked you. I never planned to tell you. I was going to keep it a secret until I died." Su Yang lowered his eyes and smiled wryly. "Unfortunately, Bai Six saw right through it."

"Su Yang from the first world line has a crush on you, doesn't he?" Bai Liu looked down at Tang Erda. "I saw it in the mirror. You're so dense, can't you see that Su Yang likes you with those eyes?"

What men fear is not only the things they fear but also what lurks beneath them—the unspoken happiness they once missed.

Su Yang always looked into Tang Erda's light-colored eyes, always the

best support on the field as Tang Erda attacked the fastest. He would blush slightly when he was dubbed Tang Erda's sage, and then quickly avert his gaze as Tang Erda, flustered, looked confused and explained.

They were the best duo in that year's tournament, outshining the perennial number one duo. As Tang Erda stood on the victory podium, a smile on his face, he turned to Su Yang and asked what he wanted as a reward.

Tang Erda knew Su Yang had worked tirelessly, training for so long just to catch up to him and work with him.

Tang Erda felt he should reward his excellent teammate.

Su Yang tilted his head, looking at him for a long time, as if victory didn't mean as much to him as a sideways glance from Tang Erda. Then, Su Yang arched his eyes, his smile bright and full of happiness, and said:

-- "Being able to stand with the captain right now is the biggest reward for me."

-- "I hope that next time the captain faces something difficult, he won't bear it alone and will think of me."

[I want to be the captain's trusty lieutenant, always.]

Su Yang always said this, silently following behind Tang Erda, who couldn't shake him off. He'd turn around to see the look in Su Yang's eyes as he stood behind, always asking what he needed.

Su Yang would always be his best vice-captain, and Tang Erda never bothered to question why.

When Tang Erda finally realized it, it was too late. His mind was blank after Su Yang's confession, his face still serious as he said he would consider it, but inside, his heart was already in a panic.

Su Yang just waved his hand, smiling indifferently. "Don't worry about it, Captain. Pretend I never said anything. If Bai Six hadn't brought it up on purpose, I wouldn't have said anything now."

-- "Consider my words later when you have time. I just thought..."

Su Yang looked back, against the light, amidst the cheers of the field, still smiling gently, but there was an unmistakable sadness lingering in

his smile.

-- “It was just that moment, Captain, when you asked me, that I felt if I didn’t speak now, I might never have a chance.”

With the Wandering Circus pressing hard on the field and the presence of the clown sniper, their side hesitated to act, and Tang Erda was preparing to use himself as bait to lure the clown sniper into shooting.

As long as the Joker fired once, they’d have at least fifteen minutes to act freely, with their skills on cooldown.

But the Joker had no idea what orders he was taking from Bai Six, a man who was always impulsive and reckless. This time, however, no matter how much Tang Erda provoked him, he just circled the periphery, putting immense pressure on Tang Erda and the others.

Soon, Tang Erda understood Bai Six’s intentions—this guy was playing a war of attrition!

Bai Six’s team had a higher panel than Tang Erda’s new generation, and there was no advantage in waiting for their stamina to run out.

Tang Erda gritted his teeth, leaning against the wall. He had already lost two players to the opposing team.

But the bait wasn’t enough, and the clowns weren’t taking it!

“Captain.” Su Yang, who had been silent, suddenly spoke up. “I’ll be the decoy too.”

“No.” Tang Erda denied flatly. “You can’t be the bait. The Joker is mainly targeting me to roam. He won’t shoot if you step out there.”

“Their target is indeed you, Captain.” Su Yang smiled, holding up a Hearts A skill card. “But it’s not like I don’t have a way to completely transform into you, Captain. This prop I won from a player called Hearts can completely turn me into... you in my mind, without anyone noticing the difference.”

Tang Erda frowned. “What are the conditions for using this prop?”

“A mirror.” Su Yang lowered his eyes, his lashes fluttering softly. “All I need is a mirror that lets me see myself, and I can become you.”

Tang Erda frowned in disbelief. "All it takes is for you to look in the mirror? And you can become exactly like me?"

Su Yang looked up, smiling. "It's that simple. Nothing else is needed—just for me to look in the mirror, that's all."

Tang Erda turned to the other player. "Su Yang, you're the support. Your attack value is too low. As a decoy, you can't even land a hit. You should give the prop to—"

"No, Captain." Su Yang met Tang Erda's gaze, something flickering in his eyes, though the smile on his face was real. "This prop is only for me. To look in the mirror and become you."

"I'm probably the only person in the world who can use it this way."

They stared at each other. Neither looked away.

At that moment, they both knew—it didn't matter who else acted as bait, whether their attack value was high or low.

They were destined to lose.

The only question was who would take the Joker sniper's shot.

Tang Erda wished it were him. At least then, it wouldn't be Su Yang.

Su Yang straightened his back and saluted. "Captain! Please let me be your second-in-command—to support you until the last moment!"

Tang Erda was undone by Su Yang's unwavering, open gaze. He could feel it—Su Yang had seen right through his modest selfishness.

Just as he hadn't been able to stop Su Yang from following him into this game, he couldn't stop him now.

Su Yang had gotten his wish.

He had become another Tang Erda.

They split up, another teammate positioned at a distance, watching to see which decoy the Joker sniper would choose. With two targets, the Joker could only focus on one. He had to make a choice, or Tang Erda's firepower would turn the tide against the Wandering Circus.

Sure enough, the Joker made his move. Deep down, Tang Erda almost felt relieved when that eerie, grinning face locked onto him.

He had become the bait.

A chaotic struggle ensued. Tang Erda launched a frenzied, suicidal assault—Muke of the Wandering Circus fell dead, Mu Sicheng was badly wounded, and Bai Six lost more than half of his blood-soaked skin.

The Joker sniper, witnessing Bai Six's injuries, finally snapped. Disregarding his orders, he stopped holding back.

He raised his gun at Tang Erda.

A greyish flame ignited at the muzzle, swirling into the shape of a skull.

Tang Erda recognized it instantly—his opponent was using a skill.

A shattered soul? Seems like a fitting end.

Watching the black muzzle take aim, he even smiled. At least Su Yang and the others would be safe for the next fifteen minutes.

If the game ended within that time—win or lose—they'd be fine.

Just—

His heart stuttered, beating twice as fast, as he remembered the way Su Yang's eyes had lowered, the whisper that had left his lips just before the trigger was pulled.

"I like you."

It was a good thing he hadn't answered.

If he had said yes, Su Yang would have been devastated.

[System Alert: Player Su Yang activates the skill "Spades A Poker"—(Telekinesis) has swapped places with Player Tang Erda.]

Tang Erda would never forget what happened next.

His kind and upright lieutenant—who stammered when he lied to help teammates sneak out on lazy days—had told him one lie in his life without being caught.

And it was a lie Tang Erda would remember forever.

That Hearts skill card wasn't one, but a pair.

Su Yang had planned it all along. No matter which bait the Joker chose, he would take the shot in Tang Erda's place.

That's why he was so determined to come with me.

A white bone whip lashed out from behind, stopping Su Yang's escape. Bai Six, realizing the Joker had already committed to his shot, reacted swiftly. He played along, striking with his whip to seize Su Yang by the neck, pinning him in place.

A second later, the silver bullet pierced Su Yang's temple.

Blood splattered across Tang Erda's face before he could even process what had happened.

Su Yang crumpled. His disguise fell away, his blank eyes staring into nothingness as he returned to his true form.

He died too fast, leaving nothing behind—no final words, no last look—just the playing card still clutched in his fingers.

Tang Erda's likeness in the peach heart.

At the other end of the battlefield, his last remaining ally was quickly overwhelmed by Liu Jiayi and Mu Sicheng.

Tang Erda was alone.

Kneeling before Su Yang's lifeless body.

The Wandering Circus closed in around him—the game was over.

But all he could hear was the commentator's voice, from before the match began.

—[Soul Breaker Gun! Which is stronger, this gun or the Hunter's Revolver? The only thing we know for sure is that the Soul Breaker hurts more. After all, anyone hit by the Soul Breaker dies with a grimace, their face twisted in agony. But being shot by a Hunter's Revolver doesn't leave that expression!]

Tang Erda's gaze drifted downward.

He didn’t want to look at Su Yang’s face.

But he had to.

It was his vice-captain.

To his surprise, Su Yang wasn’t grimacing.

He was smiling.

Even with the whip marks on his neck, lying in a pool of his own blood—he looked happy.

And in that moment, Tang Erda understood.

Su Yang had felt the same thing he had, just before dying.

"The moment I knew someone else would survive in my place… I felt happy."

"A happiness so overwhelming that not even the pain of death—of a shattered soul—could overshadow it."

"Because that person was the most important to me."

—[To stand by the captain’s side is the greatest reward for me.]

—[Captain! You’re drinking again! Even if there’s no heresy, you can’t just slack off!]

—[You’re already thirty-six, Captain. Have you ever thought about settling down? No thoughts at all? No wonder you’re the one who gets pushed to marry at every New Year's party…]

—[Me? Why don’t I have a family? Probably because… the person I like doesn’t have one in mind either.]

It had been a Heresy Bureau year-end celebration.

Tang Erda had taken a sip of wine and, with some bitterness, given his ever-naïve lieutenant a piece of advice.

"You should give up on that guy before it’s too late. If he hasn’t even talked to you about marriage after all these years, he’s probably just stringing you along."

A slightly drunk Su Yang had leaned against him, his lips curling into

a boyish grin, like a child given candy.

"He wasn't stringing me along. He was just… really, really… dumb."

Su Yang had wrapped his arms around him, laughing softly.

"But that's okay. You can't get rid of me. I'll always, always…"

His eyes had fluttered shut, words slurring.

"…wait for you."

On the battlefield, Bai Six prepared to deal the final blow.

But before the Wandering Circus could strike, Tang Erda raised his gun.

And aimed it at himself.

With the same smile as Su Yang.

Closing his eyes, he murmured, as if speaking to him one last time.

"You won't have to wait any longer."

[System Alert: Player Tang Erda's core desires have shifted—new derived attack skill generated: "Russian Carousel."]

[Skill locked to player Tang Erda. Cannot self-lock. Target reassigned to player with the highest killing intent—Player Bai Six.]

[The carousel spins…]

The bullet pierced through Tang Erda's skull—

—And hit Bai Six.

The Wandering Circus was wiped out.

Tang Erda had won.

Alone.

The Rangers never cared enough about winning to give up easily—they played for the thrill, toying with their opponents.

A grueling, life-or-death struggle for Tang Erda was, to them, just another game.

The gods asked him what his wish was. The hunter who had won everything looked up with empty eyes and made a wish that could not be undone:

"I want everyone, especially Su Yang, to be alive for this game."

The gods asked: "For this, will you pay any price?"

Tang Erda closed his eyes. Tears slid silently down his cheeks.

"Yes."

Lying on the cold floor, Tang Erda stared blankly at the ceiling, his soul drifting somewhere far away. It took him a long time to register Bai Liu's voice and even longer to muster a response.

Bai Liu's voice was calm. "Is there even a point in saving these Su Yangs? They aren't the one you wanted to save in the first place, are they?"

Tang Erda's cracked lips parted, his voice hoarse and strained. "I know that... I know there's no way to bring him back. But I can't accept that I never once managed to save Su Yang from you."

His breath hitched, his hands clenched. "That you always get to torture him."

With sheer, desperate effort, Tang Erda pushed himself up from the ground, his face streaked with tears. He fell to his knees, lifting a trembling silver firearm, aiming it straight at Bai Liu.

His hands shook. His whole body trembled.

Liu Jiayi had checked him earlier—Tang Erda had blown out most of his own brain. And yet, here he was, standing, forcing his body to keep going. In every sense of the word, his willpower was terrifying.

"As long as I'm still alive," Tang Erda gasped. His eyes glowed an eerie gray, the damage rendering him nearly blind. He could no longer aim properly, his shots erratic as he broke down, screaming.

"You will never get past me to hurt innocent people!"

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Bai Liu remained still, watching as Tang Erda collapsed to his knees, staggering under the weight of his own failing body. He clumsily tried

to fire again but soon fell, limbs twitching in exhaustion.

His gun slipped from his grip, landing just out of reach. It flickered, threatening to disappear entirely, but Tang Erda could no longer feel it.

A hunter without his gun.

A wounded, cornered beast.

Bai Liu approached him, crouched on one knee, and picked up the weapon. He placed it back in Tang Erda's unsteady hand, guiding the barrel to his own forehead. His tone remained nonchalant.

"If you want to kill me, now’s your chance."

Tang Erda’s breath hitched, a flicker of hesitation in his ruined eyes.

Bai Liu met his gaze. "I understand why you don’t trust me. I wouldn’t trust me either. But from what I’ve gathered, we should be on the same side."

He exhaled, his voice almost contemplative. "I don’t know about the other world lines, but in this one, I have no interest in torturing your lieutenant. Someone set you up, hoping to force my hand."

A smirk tugged at the corner of Bai Liu’s lips. "But unfortunately, I don’t like playing by other people’s rules."

He tilted his head slightly. "Whoever is behind this wants one of us dead. Which means I have no choice but to keep you alive and see what happens next."

Bai Liu extended a hand toward Tang Erda.

"How about this? You give me your soul, and I'll help you get your wish."

Tang Erda barely lifted himself, his body trembling from the effort. With all the strength he had left, he knocked Bai Liu’s hand away.

Gritting his teeth, he gasped out, "Bai Liu... Do you really think I’ll believe you just because you say that?"

His fingers clenched around his gun, pulling it back toward himself, raising it shakily toward where he thought Bai Liu stood.

"Yes, I know breaking your deals has consequences. But I also know you've survived them before."

Bai Liu sighed and took half a step back. Damn. Tang Erda wasn't easy to fool.

His insight was sharp, honed through experience. He had been through this before—been tortured by Bai Liu enough times to predict his every move.

Tang Erda lifted his head slightly, his deadened blue eyes fixing on Bai Liu despite his failing vision. His gun wavered.

"I will never work with a monster."

Bai Liu hummed. "Captain Tang, what makes you so sure I'm a monster?"

His voice softened, almost teasing. "Do I seem so different from any normal person?"

Tang Erda took a deep, shuddering breath. "Of course you're different. You wear human skin, but you aren't human."

His grip on the gun tightened. "In other world lines, the Bureau of Heresy Processing classified you as a 'living heretic'—a monster that looks human."

A bitter, twisted smile curled Tang Erda's lips. "We tested you. Again and again. Every single time, we used the Murphy Theorem Magic Mirror."

Bai Liu arched a brow. "Oh? That's the first I've heard of that mirror being used to distinguish monsters."

Tang Erda's voice shook with rage. "That mirror forces people to see their greatest fear. But monsters like you? You don't fear anything. No emotions. No heart. Just a hollow vessel filled with endless hunger, consuming everything in your path."

His breath came in ragged bursts. "Every world line, without fail, we put you in front of that mirror—and every single time, you saw nothing."

Tang Erda coughed violently, blood spilling from his mouth. His body sagged against the wall, barely holding itself up. But his gun remained

steady.

"Your so-called weakness—water—is nothing but an inconvenience to you. It’s not real fear. That’s why my mirror trap didn’t work. Because the mirror never worked on you at all."

His voice dropped to a whisper. "Bai Liu, you monster who fears nothing."

His finger tightened on the trigger.

This time, Bai Liu didn’t step back. Instead, he moved closer.

Too close.

Tang Erda flinched as Bai Liu reached out, catching the barrel of his gun with a steady hand.

Bai Liu’s lashes lowered. His voice was quiet, almost introspective.

"That’s not true."

Tang Erda stared at him in stunned silence.

Bai Liu leaned in, his breath ghosting against Tang Erda’s ear.

"I do have something I fear."

His fingers tightened around Tang Erda’s jaw, forcing their gazes to meet.

"I’ve always been afraid of watching someone close their eyes in front of me… and never opening them again."

The Rose Factory

Tang Erda's breath caught for a moment as a memory surfaced—the godlike NPC with closed eyes inside the mirror when Bai Liu shattered it in the Burst Last Train video.

Wasn't that entity already inside the copy, mapped out because of Bai Liu's fear?

Bai Liu ruffled Tang Erda's hair, his fingers slipping through the strands clotted with dried plasma, preventing him from breaking free. Instead, Tang Erda found himself leaning against Bai Liu's shoulder, unable to resist.

Then, Bai Liu whispered, "Do you want to face my fear?"

As he spoke, his hand moved slowly upward. A massive mirror, shimmering with a diamond-like glow, materialized before them. The surface rippled, as if something within was about to emerge.

"No...!" Tang Erda instinctively tried to turn away, unwilling to look into the mirror again. But he was too close to Bai Liu. In his attempt to escape, he turned his head—only to press directly into the crook of Bai Liu's shoulder.

The position was too intimate, too dependent, and Tang Erda—someone who had never leaned on anyone—immediately tried to pull away.

Bai Liu's voice was softer than Tang Erda had ever heard it. "It's okay."

His fingers carded through the blood-matted hair at the back of Tang Erda's head, kneading it apart in a slow, soothing motion—like calming a large, frantic dog.

"I'm the one using the mirror this time. Your Su Yang will be fine."

Tang Erda's weak struggles faded, his mind hazy under Bai Liu's touch. He barely reacted as Bai Liu tilted his face, lifting his chin until he was forced to look at the mirror.

The moment Tang Erda's gaze met the reflection, his pupils constricted violently.

—He saw a man.

A child drowned countless times, sealed in a marble sculpture to be gazed upon.

A body restrained, bound in a grotesque display, riddled with needle marks.

A man shattered and dismembered, his still-beating heart carved from his chest and placed in a factory room, forced to keep pulsing as boiling liquid was pumped into it—

Perfume.

It surged into the heart like blood, forcing it to convulse in agonizing spasms.

The realization struck Tang Erda with the force of a sledgehammer.

The heart he had seen in the factory room was actually...

His stomach lurched. The sheer cruelty of the scene exceeded anything he had ever witnessed. He shuddered violently, dry-heaving as he desperately tried to look away.

He had thought he knew the limits of suffering—the worst tortures a living being could endure.

But this… this proved that suffering didn't end with death.

Bai Liu didn't allow him to turn away. His grip tightened, fingers digging into Tang Erda's jaw, forcing him to keep watching.

"See?" Bai Liu's voice was a murmur against his ear. "We are the same."

Tang Erda's mind was blank.

"We are both terrified," Bai Liu continued. "Angry. Unable to stop ourselves from feeling someone else's pain."

His voice dropped lower. "I can feel it too."

He exhaled softly, sinking to both knees in front of Tang Erda. As Tang Erda instinctively leaned back, Bai Liu did the unexpected—he embraced him.

Tightly.

Unyieldingly.

Tang Erda stiffened, but Bai Liu didn't let go.

"I know you're in pain," Bai Liu murmured. "As much as I am, Captain Tang."

His voice carried no mockery, no deception—only something raw, something Tang Erda couldn't immediately name.

"Please believe me," Bai Liu whispered against his shoulder. "I won't hurt you anymore. Let all the pain I caused stop here."

Tang Erda didn't move, couldn't move. His breath hitched as Bai Liu's next words cut through him like a blade.

"I may not be one of those Bai Six, but I know what you want to hear."

Bai Liu's hand patted his shoulder, the gesture startlingly gentle.

"I'm sorry."

"And for everything you've been through… thank you for your hard work."

Tang Erda's breath caught in his throat.

His wide, disbelieving eyes lifted to Bai Liu's face, his vision blurring as tears slipped uncontrollably from his gray-blue eyes.

Bai Six...

No.

It was Bai Liu.

And Bai Liu had just apologized to him.

In the mirror, Tawil's eyes lifted—silvery blue, like ice melting under sunlight.

Tang Erda was momentarily dazed by their gaze. A white light bloomed on his forehead, searing through his consciousness before he lost all sense of himself.

The light spread, vast and weightless, shimmering like an aurora borealis before his eyes. For a fleeting moment, he felt lighter, as if he

were floating endlessly within it.

And then, in the midst of the brilliance, he saw Su Yang's face.

Smiling. Stubborn. Unwavering.

"Captain, why are you so obsessed with convicting Bai Six? There's no solid evidence yet, is there?"

His voice was familiar, yet it struck like an accusation.

Tang Erda had said something—something that had angered Su Yang. A rare sight.

"Captain," Su Yang shouted, "if we act purely on emotion and desire, then what's the difference between us and those heretics?"

His voice rang out, sharp and raw.

"Whenever possible, always use your eyes and evidence to determine whether someone is a monster or a human being!"

Then, as if his own outburst had drained him, Su Yang lowered his head.

He looked like he wanted to leave.

Tang Erda tried to stop him, but Su Yang stood firm in the narrow aisle of the Heresy Bureau.

For a long moment, neither of them moved.

Then, at last, Su Yang lifted his head, took a deep breath, and met his gaze.

"If the day comes when you can't hold on any longer, when you become as tainted as the others..."

Su Yang smiled—gentle, as if he had never raised his voice in anger.

"I will bring you back."

He stepped forward, parting his lips to say something—

"--"

The sound of another voice cut through.

Bai Liu, whispering close to Tang Erda's ear.

"--"

The two voices overlapped in his mind, indistinguishable.

"Captain Tang, if you truly can't hold on anymore..."

"Leave the rest to me."

Bai Liu's hand cradled Tang Erda's head as he spoke softly.

"Give me your wishes.
Give me your soul.
Give me your pain.

Let me, the one responsible for it all, take it in your place—

As I should."

Tang Erda, half-conscious and barely breathing, slumped against Bai Liu's shoulder. His hollow gaze stared upward, emptied of life, his hands limp at his sides. He did not respond.

Time blurred.

Then—

A single tear slipped down his jawline.

His fingers twitched.

His arms moved—slowly, weakly, with great effort.

And then, he hugged Bai Liu back.

Desperately.

As if this was his last breath, as if he would collapse the moment he let go. His whole body trembled, and when he finally spoke, his voice was raw, choked with something fragile and breaking.

"Bai Liu..."

A sharp inhale.

"This is the last time. The last time I trust you with a deal."

Bai Liu's lips curled into an almost comforting smile.

"You won't regret it."

Tang Erda closed his eyes.

"I give you my soul in exchange for my wish."

Bai Liu chuckled, light and casual.

"I already left you the money. I'm not paying extra."

Tang Erda's breath caught.

He blinked, momentarily confused—until realization dawned.

Bai Liu was talking about the roomful of dimes he had left behind while escaping from the Bureau of Dangerous Heresy.

For a long moment, Tang Erda was utterly speechless.

Then—for the first time in what felt like forever—

He relaxed.

His gaze drifted far, far away, as if caught in a distant memory. And then, against all odds, his lips curled into something small, quiet, and almost wistful.

"You're still… as stingy as ever."

Bai Liu hummed, feigning contemplation.

"I hope you don't mind my little habit too much. After all, it looks like —"

He lifted a soul note, holding it up between his fingers.

Tang Erda's face was imprinted on the paper.

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow, smiling.

"—We're supposed to be working together for a long time."

*[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has purchased the soul of Player Tang Erda using RMB @&%@ (amount is cumbersome and still being calculated).]

Shrine.
The Hunter card on the tabletop floated, flipping face up the moment Tang Erda agreed to the deal.

The image shifted—from a weeping hunter to a hooded werewolf, fierce-eyed and predatory—and the card drifted away from the Seer's side, aligning itself with the Hooded Man.

The man in the hood caught the card between two fingers, his voice laced with amusement as he glanced at the Prophet.

"Your last devolvable god card, Hunter, has now switched sides to Werewolf.
What will you do now?"

The Prophet's gaze remained fixed on the card, unflinching.

"The game is not over yet."

The hooded man smirked, his fingers tapping lightly against the rose card lying beneath the Hunter.

"It will be soon."

"All the clues have fallen into place. Bai Six won't let this game drag on much longer."

Bai Liu stepped out of the corridor.

Liu Jiayi glanced down at the time.

"Sixteen minutes. You're done with the idiot already?"

"There."

Bai Liu casually adjusted his shirt cuffs, brushing away the dried bloodstains left from holding Tang Erda. Not that he cared.

He turned to Liu Jiayi.

"Go in and treat him."

She rolled her eyes, holding up two vials of antidote.

"Not like you really care what he's done."

"If I did, I'd have a problem with you too."

Bai Liu smiled, locking eyes with her.

"Clearly, I'm not that kind of person. Acting on personal grudges isn't in my best interests."

Liu Jiayi exhaled, withdrawing her gaze, and begrudgingly carried the antidote inside.

Bai Liu added nonchalantly:

"I'll need him later to fight the monsters in the inner world. Try to get him fully healed—
he's my personal property now, and I'd rather not have him fighting for me in a half-broken state."

"Got it, got it!" Liu Jiayi waved a hand impatiently.

Qi Yifang, standing nearby, watched the exchange in stunned silence.

Bai Liu had just casually ordered the little witch around—someone on the same level as the Queen of Hearts in the King's Guild. Even the Queen wouldn't treat the witch like a common soldier.

Yet Bai Liu did it so naturally.

Bai Liu caught Qi Yifang's stare and, without hesitation, extended a hand with an insincere, businesslike smile.

"I really like your skills.
Jump in and play for our team sometime."

Qi Yifang: "....."

What the fuck kind of opener was that?!

Before Qi Yifang could react, Tang Erda walked out after Liu Jiayi.

The Captain, having just switched sides, was visibly unsettled.

The moment he saw Bai Liu, his hand instinctively moved to draw his gun—

But then, with a grimace, he remembered.

He had just been saved. By Bai Liu's people. By Liu Jiayi.

His grip on the gun faltered.

Liu Jiayi was watching him with an extremely judgmental expression. Bai Liu, standing beside her, looked entirely at ease, as if this was all going according to plan.

Tang Erda felt sick.

These two were his real enemies.
The kind he had fought against and died fighting.

Just before entering the game, he had almost killed Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi with a single shot.

Now, barely ten minutes after sealing a deal with Bai Liu, Tang Erda was already regretting it.

Had he been brainwashed?
Was it some kind of hypnosis? Some trickery?

Why the hell had he traded his soul to Bai Liu?!

As Tang Erda stewed in his deep regret over his impulsive (and frankly reckless) spending (?), Bai Liu suddenly extended a hand toward him.

Tang Erda's entire body tensed.

On instinct, his gun was already drawn, pointed straight at Bai Liu.

Bai Liu, clearly reaching out for a handshake, and Tang Erda, glaring at him down the barrel of a gun.

The atmosphere froze.

Liu Jiayi, still holding a bottle of poison, scowled.

"Bai Liu, are you sure you trained this guy?"

Bai Liu, unfazed, shrugged.

"He doesn't trust me much."

Then, as if Tang Erda wasn't aiming a gun at his chest, Bai Liu calmly stepped forward.

Without hesitation, he brushed aside the firearm and took Tang Erda's clenched fist in his own.

Lifting it.

Shaking it.

A slow, deliberate motion.

His eyes glinted with something unreadable as he smiled at Tang Erda.

"It's fine. I trust your abilities just fine."

The way Bai Liu moved—it was like a patient owner teaching a wary dog to shake hands.

Tang Erda, still reeling from the sheer audacity of it, lowered his gun.

For a brief moment, their eyes locked.

Tang Erda's wariness lingered. But, hesitantly, his fingers curled just slightly.

He shook Bai Liu's hand back. Like a wolfhound, recently tamed—its fangs hidden, ears flattened, tail drooped.

The smile on Bai Liu's face deepened considerably.

Not very clever, but certainly very deceptive, which is a plus.

The Rose Factory

After Tang Erda lowered his gun under Bai Liu's gaze, Liu Jiayi begrudgingly put away her poison before turning to Bai Liu.

"I've gathered a group of stragglers to help," she said. "We're preparing to dig up the god-tier NPCs."

"Are you sure of the location?" Bai Liu scanned her expression.

"Not a hundred percent—maybe eighty, ninety," Liu Jiayi admitted. "Based on the information you gave me, I've marked locations in the flower fields, but there's a serious problem—"

She gestured around them, spreading her hands. "What are you planning to do about these Rose Factory employees trying to stop us?"

Now that the commotion had settled and Bai Liu's group had caused significant damage to the factory, the workers—flower-pickers and processors alike—stood in a tightening circle. Their eyes averted, yet their grips firm on steel tools and flower-cutting shears, they slowly advanced toward Bai Liu and his group.

As more workers awoke to the chaos, the crowd thickened, enclosing them in a dense ring.

Qi Yifang gripped his weathervane tightly, while Liu Jiayi retrieved her poison once more. Years of cooperation had trained the two into an instinctive rhythm—they turned their backs to each other, eyes scanning the encroaching figures.

"This group of NPCs isn’t strong," Qi Yifang said with a strained chuckle. "Individually, they’re easy to handle. But there are too many of them, and if the battle gets intense, they might transform into monsters. If we trigger a large-scale aggression—if the hate value locks—” He exhaled sharply, his knuckles whitening.

"My thoughts exactly." Liu Jiayi turned to Bai Liu. "Just a reminder—you’ll have to deal with the workers guarding the flower fields before you can start digging. Otherwise, there's no point."

"But with just the few of us, there's no way we can handle so many..." Qi Yifang hesitated.

Bai Liu thought for a moment, then suddenly turned to Tang Erda,

who had been silent all this time. His expression was serious.

"Can you handle it?"

Tang Erda, caught off guard, froze. He didn't answer immediately, but Bai Liu didn't look away, his gaze unwavering—calm, devoid of suspicion or scrutiny.

It was a look of complete trust.

Tang Erda barely lasted a few seconds before averting his gaze in discomfort. He opened his mouth as if to respond but hesitated.

…This was strange.

Across countless world lines, he and Bai Liu had faced each other in every way imaginable—anger, mockery, life-and-death battles, hatred —

But never this.

Bai Liu wasn't worried about him turning on them. On the contrary, he seemed to trust him without hesitation, as if he had already assigned him the rear defense.

If Tang Erda wanted to betray Bai Liu, this would be the perfect moment. A simple act of negligence in battle, a slight delay in response, and Bai Liu would fall.

It was absurd. Bai Liu was practically handing him his own throat and politely asking to be killed.

Tang Erda, who had spent so long hunting Bai Liu down, found the situation almost nauseating.

And yet—he no longer felt the desire to kill him.

It irritated him. Bai Liu irritated him.

The workers were closing in, but Bai Liu remained unhurried. He took a step forward, closing the distance between himself and Tang Erda, his voice gentler as he asked again:

"Captain Tang, can you handle this many people alone?"

…As if he were genuinely concerned about Tang Erda fighting alone.

Goosebumps prickled up Tang Erda's arms. He took a step back, turned his face away, and pushed Bai Liu back forcefully.

"I can handle them all by myself!" he snapped.

Bai Liu grinned, leaning in again. "Really? Then I'll be troubling you, Captain Tang."

Tang Erda bristled, his voice rising. "Stand still! Speak properly!"

—If he still couldn't tell that Bai Liu was messing with him on purpose, he'd have to be an idiot.

Bai Liu obediently straightened his posture, schooling his expression into something more neutral. His voice was calm when he gave the final order:

"Captain Tang, hold them off here. Liu Jiayi, Qi Yifang—you're coming with me to the flower fields. Any objections?"

Liu Jiayi nodded.

Under Bai Liu's expectant gaze, Qi Yifang automatically responded, "I don't have any issues either."

Then he froze.

Wait—what?

What did I just agree to?

Why am I suddenly working with them?

I'm in the King's Guild! This is the enemy camp!

Qi Yifang frowned. No, this wasn't just about him—the hunters were supposed to be enemies, too.

Then why was Bai Liu so casually ordering them around?

A few seconds passed before Qi Yifang finally realized the problem—

How the hell does this guy make commanding the enemy faction seem so natural?

Before he could dwell on it, Bai Liu flicked his whip forward. The strike sent factory workers tumbling aside, opening a clear path

toward the flower fields. Without another word, Bai Liu bolted through the gap.

"Move!" Liu Jiayi shouted at Qi Yifang.

Bai Liu's attack had drawn the full attention of the workers—if Qi Yifang hesitated now, he'd be their next target. With no time to argue, he swallowed his protests and ran after them.

What kind of person is this?!

The enraged NPCs roared and prepared to charge after Bai Liu—

—but before they could, Tang Erda stepped forward, silver revolver drawn, an arm barring their path.

His dark blue eyes, still streaked with blood, held a bleak, steely resolve.

With practiced ease, he cracked open the revolver, loaded the bullets, snapped the cylinder shut, and cocked the hammer. The silver casing landed at his feet, bouncing twice in the flickering light.

Tang Erda stood alone in front of the factory's gates, staring down the furious, hate-filled eyes surrounding him.

In the madness of the blackened rose fields, among discarded petals and scattered remains, the hunter raised his gun, unmoved.

The workers shrieked as they convulsed, their skin cracking in the overwhelming floral scent. Their bodies twisted, alienating, as they howled—

"Kill the thief who stole the rose!"

"Kill the criminal who destroyed the rose!"

"Kill the murderer who killed the rose!"

"Kill Bai Liu!"

Tang Erda exhaled, whispering to himself, "Yeah, Bai Liu killed my rose too. If anyone should want him dead, it's me."

The next moment, without hesitation, he pulled the trigger.

His voice was steady, resolute.

"But until I find proof to convict him—"

"I won't let any man, or monster, kill him before I do."

Bang.

The silver casing hit the ground with a crisp, final note.

Far ahead, in the flower fields, Bai Liu crushed a rose under his heel as he glanced back toward the factory.

A slow, knowing smile spread across his face.

Qi Yifang's eyes widened. "What the hell?! Why are the hunters actually fighting for you?!"

"Charisma," Bai Liu replied with a deadpan smile. "I charmed him so thoroughly that he's willing to work for me."

He turned to Qi Yifang, smirking. "If you don't do your job well, I might just steal your soul, too."

Qi Yifang: "???"

He bolted.

"MY LOYALTY BELONGS TO HEARTS! DON'T COME NEAR ME!!!"

Liu Jiayi sighed. "…Don't mess with him. He actually believes it. That guy trained himself into the King's Guild just to impress Hearts."

Bai Liu just smiled.

The flower pickers, most of whom had been drawn to the factory by this morning's commotion, are now surrounded by Tang Erda alone.

There are few flower pickers left in the fields, making them much easier to handle.

After tying up the flower pickers, Liu Jiayi dusted off his hands and allowed the stragglers, who had been hesitant to enter, to come in. Once he showed them the exact coordinates, the vast excavation began.

Liu Jiayi and Bai Liu helped with the digging, while Qi Yifang used the wind to sweep away the roots and soil from the roses. The digging progressed faster than expected, but soon, a change occurred.

Some of the stragglers, as if under the influence of something, began to alienate uncontrollably and descend into madness.

After rehabilitating the stragglers with rose perfume, Liu Jiayi and Bai Liu exchanged glances, silently confirming their understanding of what had happened.

— Liu Jiayi's speculation was correct. They had dug too close to where Tawil's body was buried, which was why the stragglers were affected and began to alienate.

Standing up, covered in mud, Bai Liu clapped his hands to gather the attention of the stragglers assisting him.

"Attention, everyone. If any of you start to alienate while digging, let me know immediately. I'll take over from there."

He faintly smiled at the stragglers who had gotten themselves filthy helping him. "This is a personal matter for me, so please, let me do the rest myself."

Whenever a straggler alienated in the flower field, the others would stop digging as Bai Liu had instructed. Before long, only Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi remained, digging on their knees in the vast field.

But when Liu Jiayi trembled for the third time, Bai Liu caught her wrist, stopping her from continuing.

"That's enough."

Bai Liu looked at Liu Jiayi and smiled. "You've already helped me more than enough. I'll take it from here."

"But..." Liu Jiayi bit her lower lip, lifting her small, dirt-streaked face to meet Bai Liu's. She looked as if she still wanted to push through.

Bai Liu patted her head, his expression serious despite the quirk of his eyebrow.

"You've done great, but you've got to let me, as an adult, have something I can beat you at, right?"

Then, in a quiet whisper near her ear, he added, "Don't worry about me. It won't hurt."

Liu Jiayi was silent for a moment before she staggered to her feet. Qi Yifang and the stragglers quickly pulled her up from the excavation

pit.

Now, in the middle of the flower field, Bai Liu was alone. Without a word, he remained kneeling in the messy, muddy ground, digging by himself.

The stragglers who had helped earlier didn't leave, despite Bai Liu insisting this was a personal matter. Instead, they stood silently at the edge of the site, maintaining an unspoken distance, watching him.

Liu Jiayi also stood among them, observing Bai Liu with an unfamiliar sense of awe.

She had never seen him like this before. He was no longer the lazy, indifferent trickster who always played everything off. Instead, he was serious, focused—so much so that it felt almost strange.

During their previous efforts to rescue Bai Liu, Liu Jiayi had realized how little they truly knew about him.

At the time, she had thought: Bai Liu is so smart. He has us all figured out. He never reveals anything about himself, always hiding behind a thousand masks.

But now, in this moment, Liu Jiayi had the unsettling feeling that she had finally glimpsed the real Bai Liu—the one he had buried deep inside himself.

—Bai Liu, alone, covered in mud, approaching someone else buried beneath the earth.

No one helped him. No one dared to come closer.

All they could do was watch—either by choice or by helplessness—standing behind the safety line, spectators to Bai Liu's solitary approach toward the monster underground.

For ten minutes, Liu Jiayi remained lost in thought, until a sudden commotion among the onlookers snapped her back to reality.

Bai Liu had unearthed something.

The crowd stirred with excitement as Liu Jiayi leaned forward, peering into the pit.

She exhaled in relief when Bai Liu pulled out a snow-white, knuckled right hand.

Good. She hadn’t guessed wrong.

Just as she was about to call out for Bai Liu to throw something up before the mental toll became too much, his movement suddenly made her pause. She watched as Bai Liu lowered his gaze, then, without hesitation, reached out and took the hand—his fingers clasping around it.

"Finally..."

His breath was still uneven from the effort of digging, his face smeared with dirt and sweat. But despite it all, his lips curled into a mischievous grin—the kind a fourteen-year-old Bai Liu might have worn after winning a game.

"Caught you."

Liu Jiayi blinked.

For a split second, she thought she saw it—the buried, broken hand twitching.

As if, buried beneath the roses, it had grasped Bai Liu back.

The Rose Factory

After the crowd dismantled a small tent and spread it out in the middle of the flower field, Bai Liu trudged up from the pit and carefully placed the hand he had been clutching in the center of the cloth.

Everyone kept their distance from Bai Liu to avoid contamination, yet they remained, lingering quietly like the tide—always chasing his muddy footsteps, pushing him forward.

Bai Liu continued digging, unearthing a fragmented body.

Piece by piece, he pulled the left hand, the left foot, the lower leg, half of the rib cage, and the first to third cervical vertebrae from the earth. Without a trace of expression, he placed them on the cloth, methodically reassembling the body according to human anatomy.

As the corpse slowly took shape, with only the head and heart missing, something unnatural occurred—blood vessels began to reform, growing out from the clotted musculature, torn nerves reconnecting along smooth fascial breaks. The hollow, heartless chest began to rise and fall faintly, as though it was breathing.

The sculpted body, devoid of warm blood, had been reborn in a strange and unsettling way. It functioned before Bai Liu's eyes.

Bai Liu remained silent, saying nothing. He simply continued digging, carrying, and piecing the body together. The mental strain weighed on him, and he nearly collapsed several times, but no one could help him —not that he needed it. Each time he fell into the mud, he would take a few deep breaths before pushing himself up again, staggering back to his feet.

His expression betrayed no emotion whatsoever.

Yet, for some reason, Liu Jiayi felt that, despite Bai Liu's miserable state—covered in dirt, exhausted, and barely holding himself together —he was happy.

—That kind of joy, of being reunited with someone very important after a long time.

"Mr. Bai, come on up! There's no more field left to dig!" the stragglers called from the edge, cupping their hands around their mouths.

Liu Jiayi, standing at a distance, scrutinized the statue Bai Liu had pieced together. She couldn't make out all the details, but something seemed off. She frowned. "Why is the head still missing? Did I miscount?"

Bai Liu wrapped the statue in cloth and attempted to lift it, but after failing twice, he finally motioned for a straggler to bring over a cart. Only then was he able to push the statue out of the flower field.

As soon as he stepped out, Liu Jiayi confronted him. Bai Liu waved a hand dismissively as he leaned against the cart to catch his breath. "It's not that you miscounted. The head wasn't buried in the flower field."

Liu Jiayi eyed him suspiciously. "Then where is it?"

Bai Liu's gaze drifted toward the rose factory, where the sound of gunfire echoed. A slow smile crept onto his face.

"It's a game," he said. "The best and most beautiful rewards always come after defeating the biggest boss."

Liu Jiayi stiffened, realization dawning on her. "Wait—no way. You're saying it's inside that monster...?"

"Yeah," Bai Liu replied casually. "The massive monster that used to be the factory owner."

He tilted his head slightly, half-closing his eyes, his breath still uneven from his efforts. "That factory manager saw Tawil as a symbol of desire. He blamed Tawil for his own killing spree, convinced that a demon had manipulated his mind into committing those crimes—a textbook example of a murderer with an overactive sense of self and warped morality."

"This type of serial killer usually keeps what they believe to be the most valuable trophies—an inheritance from an adoptive parent, a wife's rose greenhouse..." Bai Liu turned his head, looking at Liu Jiayi with an almost amused expression. "Or the parts of Tawil he found most beautiful—the head and the heart."

Liu Jiayi's face darkened. "So what's your plan?"

"That thing is an S-rank monster. You might be able to escape by exploiting its weaknesses, but actually trying to kill it? That's insane. Even the King's Guild would need at least twenty reserve team

members working together to pull that off!"

"I can't do it," Bai Liu admitted, handing the cart over to her. "But Captain Tang, in an outbreak situation, should be able to."

"I'll go find him and ask for help. You guys keep an eye on this—make sure that monster doesn't take it."

Bai Liu smiled, his eyes curving, and gave a small wave as he took off running toward the factory.

"I'd cry if I lost it."

"Hey! Wait!" Liu Jiayi instinctively reached for the cart, but just in time, she remembered—she couldn't touch it directly without getting contaminated.

With no other choice, she used the long pincers of a flower-picker to grasp the cart's handle and push it forward.

She watched Bai Liu's retreating figure, already far ahead, and felt a sudden surge of frustration. "I told you to let me handle some of it, not dump the whole mess on me!"

Muttering under her breath, she grumbled, "Why don't you ever tell me what you're planning…?"

Then, her expression twisted into a scowl.

"Captain Tang, Captain Tang… Is he your captain now? Since when are you two so close?"

She huffed, cheeks puffing out in annoyance.

"I even took a bullet from that 'Captain Tang' for you…"

The more she thought about it, the more irritated she became. She stomped her foot in frustration.

"You don't even hold a grudge!"

Meanwhile, Bai Liu hadn't even reached the factory before he cupped a hand around his mouth and called out gleefully:

"Captain Tang! I need your help!"

Tang Erda, who had been guarding the entrance with laser focus,

nearly had a heart attack.

At Bai Liu's shout, his soul almost left his body.

His grip on his gun slipped.

"—D—Damn it—Captain—you—what-are—you—doing?!"

Tang Erda didn't react at first, thinking it was one of Bai Liu's tricks to startle him. He almost shot Bai Liu on reflex.

Fortunately, he managed to control himself in time—otherwise, this story would have ended right here.

Tang Erda steadied his magazine, his heart pounding—half from the shock of nearly shooting Bai Liu, and half from Bai Liu's overzealous approach.

He quickly schooled his expression and took a step back, putting distance between himself and Bai Liu. His tone was cold: "Why are you calling me?"

"I need to ask for a favor." Bai Liu smiled, inexplicably in a good mood.

Tang Erda sharply raised his gun and shot down a monster creeping up behind Bai Liu. His usual icy scowl flickered into irritation. "Why aren't you watching your surroundings? What do you need my help with?"

Bai Liu gave him a brief rundown of the situation. As he listened, Tang Erda frowned, visibly unsettled. He had seen Bai Liu's mirror and knew that this godlike NPC was Bai Liu's most important person. And now, Bai Liu was looking for the NPC's severed head—hidden inside a monster's body.

That wasn't exactly a pleasant task.

Yet Bai Liu seemed… oddly cheerful. The contrast made Tang Erda feel a strange mix of emotions, a flicker of reluctant sympathy. Was Bai Liu hiding his grief behind that smile...?

He really was strong.

"I'll do it." Tang Erda's tone softened slightly. "But what about the monsters inside the factory?"

If he left his post at the factory entrance, the monsters inside could escape and wreak havoc. If he and Bai Liu both went into the inner world, the place would be completely unguarded.

"Don't worry about that." Bai Liu didn't spare a second thought for Liu Jiayi's feelings before casually selling out his teammates. "If the monsters come out, the little witch and Qi Yifang can handle it."

Tang Erda considered for a moment. Liu Jiayi and Qi Yifang were indeed strong—both had area-of-effect skills. In this timeline, they would have been trained by Hearts as reserve members of the King's Guild.

The factory monsters were numerous but not high-level. Once they scattered, it shouldn't be too much trouble for those two to handle.

Tang Erda holstered his gun and turned to Bai Liu. "How do we enter this 'inner world' you're talking about?"

Bai Liu held out a bloodstained eyeball—one he had torn from a monster's face. Only now did his smile take on a dangerous edge, an unsettling sharpness that made Tang Erda instinctively tense.

This Bai Liu… really did look like Bai Six in moments like this.

The aggression beneath his amusement was unnerving.

Bai Liu lifted his gaze and held up the eyeball before his right eye. "Just look at this with your right eye."

Tang Erda was a good dozen centimeters taller than Bai Liu. To align their gazes, he had to lean down slightly, lowering himself to Bai Liu's level.

As their eyes met over the disembodied eyeball, it suddenly blinked. At the same time, the rose in Bai Liu's right eye bloomed fully, its final petal unfurling.

The world fractured.

Roses reflected infinitely across shards of broken greenhouse glass, transforming into countless fading blooms that wrapped around their vision, the greenhouse, the land itself.

A deep red halo turned to pale pink, then splintered apart. Buds sprouted from their eyes, their skulls, their mouths. The silvery-blue

petals grew inward, consuming them, then withered—leaving behind a pavilion of dried roses, a grotesque beauty nourished by the touch of an evil god.

A wave of dizziness hit Tang Erda, weakening his knees.

When his vision cleared, he found himself inside the faded inner world.

A monster loomed before them, massive as a small mountain, its grotesque form devouring the rose greenhouse. Its skin undulated, thick and viscous, bubbling like a melting mass. Roses festered beneath its flesh, writhing, feeding. Everything it swallowed became sustenance.

Now, its remaining left eye—sickly yellow, oozing pus—fixed itself on Bai Liu. The man who had stolen its right eye.

[System Warning: The monster (Generation Leader) has locked onto player Bai Liu with maximum aggro! Player Bai Liu has no means to fight this monster. Please evacuate immediately!]

In the past, Bai Liu would have turned and fled without hesitation.

Now, he simply darted behind Tang Erda to a safe spot, waved at him, and called out cheerfully, "Captain Tang, please take care of this first."

Tang Erda: "……"

Tang Erda, once again regretting every life decision that had led him to this moment, exhaled sharply. He raised his gun, sharp eyes locking onto the monster as it lurched toward Bai Liu's hiding spot.

With a precise shot, he blasted the creature's left eye.

The monster roared, its massive frame trembling. Dust rained from the ceiling, the floor quaked beneath their feet.

From the cracks in the walls, small spider-like creatures, seemingly roused by the commotion, skittered out, their hideous hissing filling the space. They swarmed toward Tang Erda, fangs bared.

Against most players—including Bai Liu and even members of the King's Guild—these creatures would have been an overwhelming threat.

But against Tang Erda? They never stood a chance.

He moved crisply, each shot precise, except for a brief moment when a magazine change brought the monsters closer, steadily cornering a large group just three meters from where Bai Liu was hiding. The bullets from Tang Erda swept across the area like an invisible safety line, protecting Bai Liu without a trace.

After the first round of sweeping, Tang Erda scanned the room with cold eyes, ensuring there were no small monsters that could kill the now brittle Bai Liu with a single bite. Then, without turning back, he spoke coldly, "Come out."

"The little monsters are cleared, the big ones are invisible, and the hate value locks on you are useless."

Bai Liu moved out from behind a wardrobe, patting himself down and surveying the room. The bodies of monsters, all killed by near-perfect shots, were neatly strewn three meters away from where he had been hiding. They even appeared in similar positions to how they had been before their deaths.

Bai Liu couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at Tang Erda, who stood calmly before him, not even a trace of dust on his sleeves.

— This guy is really strong.

Earlier, Bai Liu had a strong feeling that Tang Erda's panel value was well above S.

Tang Erda tossed Bai Liu a semi-circular sniper scope and gave a slight sideways nod. "Take this. I don't usually use a scope with guns in the game, but this one has a slow-playback function. You can use it to see inside the monster's body and track my bullet movements."

"There are too many human heads inside this monster, and I'm not sure whose you want, so there's a chance you'll need to aim while we fight it. If you see I'm about to hit the head you want, just warn me, and I'll move out of the firing line."

"Won't it affect you if I interfere with the command like this from the sidelines?" Bai Liu politely asked, glancing up at the large monster. "This is an S-rank monster."

Tang Erda gave him a faint glance. "Not really. On the field of play, the tactician's commands interfere more than that."

"Aren't you going to play in the league?" Tang Erda looked up at the

large monster, one leg back in a jumping position. Countless points of light converged on the silver revolver in his hand. "Now you'll get a taste of what it means to be a league player."

[System Alert: Player Tang Erda is equipped with Monster Book Status: The Fading Rose Hunter]

[OK.]

Tang Erda's hair floated and blew in the points of light, and the pupils in his ethereal blue eyes contracted violently and vertically, resembling wolf's eyes.

The silver pistol in his left hand gathered points of light, elongating to about a meter. A vine-like band of equipment rapidly grew from his chest, coiling around the gun, and a large rose-decorated hovering magazine floated behind the revolver. The constant clicking of bullets being loaded echoed through the air.

"Watch the trajectory of my bullets." Tang Erda gave Bai Liu a sidelong glance. "If you're not paying attention, it's not my fault if you get hit."

The next moment, Tang Erda seemed to press down slightly with his retreating leg. With a single shot to the ground from the excessively long, bizarre revolver, the recoil sent him levitating backward, vanishing before Bai Liu, leaving only a strong, gunpowder-scented wind that ruffled Bai Liu's hair.

It soon became clear to Bai Liu why Tang Erda had given him a scope with a slow-playback function.

Because Tang Erda was moving so fast, Bai Liu couldn't even see his form, only the trail of countless bullets and the blurred motion of the man crisscrossing in front of him. Then, the creature violently twisted and struggled, letting out a heartbreaking scream as though it were being tortured.

Bai Liu put on the scope.

In the red field of view of the scope, the bullets tumbled forward in an odd trajectory, intertwining as if they were infrared alarm devices scattered across the space.

A tentacle flung toward Bai Liu, but before it could reach him, it was pierced by an unseen bullet, turning into a charred mass that bounced

helplessly on the ground.

The creature's body was filled with numerous heads, like a crane machine stuffed with similarly-sized dolls, still bouncing, making it difficult to pinpoint the exact location of any one of the heads.

Bai Liu quickly scanned the creature's body twice and soon located Tawil's exact position. He saw a bright red firing line aimed directly at Tawil.

"We're almost there, Captain Tang," Bai Liu said quickly.

Almost as soon as the words left his mouth, Bai Liu saw the firing line shift, and a head next to Tawil's exploded.

Bai Liu breathed a faint sigh of relief. But his concentration was too intense, and the translucent texture of the scope's field of view, which mostly showed bones and ballistics, made it difficult to focus on specific items.

So, Bai Liu didn't notice that the creature had crawled up to his head, ready to swallow him with its "petals" wide open.

In the next instant, Tang Erda appeared out of nowhere in front of Bai Liu, holding the meter-long gun in his left hand, the muzzle aimed at the monster's head. Tang Erda's back was to the creature as he jammed his other hand into Bai Liu's shoulder, flipping him over and shielding him with his body. The rose magazine around the gun continued to make the sound of bullets loading with a "da da da da."

The muzzle of the gun aimed at the monster's head flashed red.

"Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang-bang-bang!!!"

The massive monster slowly fell backward, collapsing onto the dusty ground amidst the constant barrage of gunfire.

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Tang Erda for killing the S-rank monster - (Generation Factory Manager)!]

A clean, concentrated onslaught of fire that killed the monster in seconds.

After the monster fell, Tang Erda quickly stepped back, distancing himself from Bai Liu. He shook his fist uncomfortably, as if displeased with his subconscious act of protecting Bai Liu. Then, he looked up,

slightly stern, as if remembering something, and reprimanded Bai Liu, "Didn't I tell you to watch out for the monsters around you? I thought I told you to be aware of your surroundings."

"How can you play in a league when all you focus on is the goal?"

"You're adapting to the idea of playing in a league with us pretty quickly." Bai Liu looked at Tang Erda thoughtfully. "Did I recruit you in other timelines?"

Tang Erda, crouching and searching through the corpse of the creature for its head, froze for a moment. It was as if he'd remembered something deeply unpleasant, his eyes flickering with sudden violence.

"Hmm," he exhaled, sneering slightly. "But not in the gentle way you're doing now."

Gentle?

Bai Liu didn't feel that he'd recruited Tang Erda gently.

He had exploited Tang Erda's weaknesses, almost entirely breaching his physical and psychological defenses. Bai Liu had used words and persuasion to reshape how Tang Erda saw him, all during a time when the man's sanity was fragile.

Bai Liu had also played on Tang Erda's empathy, exploiting the nature of the righteous public official, making him relive painful experiences that mirrored his own. The goal was to create a psychological connection, a sense of belonging to Bai Liu—something the essentially good captain had offered.

It was the instinct of any socially aware human to gravitate toward a familiar group, a place that accepted them. Tang Erda, a captain who had been ostracized and possibly isolated from his former team, the Heretics' Bureau, was in desperate need of connection.

He couldn't approach others to establish normal, stable relationships because his moral code prevented him from involving innocent people in the "game"—the bad luck he carried with him. Any connections he formed with groups like the major gaming guilds were superficial, using him and ingratiating themselves, but never understanding his idealism.

For a long time, Tang Erda had wandered alone in the endless darkness of time, yearning for group contact.

Now, he was almost guilt-free about it—his wandering circus provided him with some level of understanding, despite their long-standing

hostility. Bai Liu's cold, yet considerate, acknowledgment of Tang Erda's feelings had made him feel that this wandering circus was, in fact, a good choice for him.

The challenge was turning Tang Erda's hatred of the circus into empathy. The strategy Bai Liu used was simple: [We are not so different, you and I.]

[We are both abandoned by fate, condemned to wander alone.]

For people who had been isolated for so long, this recognition was often a lifeline.

The transformation was not gentle for Tang Erda; it was more like a death sentence.

But Tang Erda thought it was gentle? This intrigued Bai Liu.

Tang Erda's small TV, constantly tuned to a pay-per-view service, muted every conversation between the two, which allowed Bai Liu to speak openly and directly without fear.

Bai Liu knelt down, pretending to search for Tawil among the bodies of the monsters torn apart by Tang Erda's gunfire. Casual as ever, he asked, "Can I ask what Bai Six in the other timelines did to you?"

Bai Liu quickly added with a note of guilt, "Of course, you don't have to answer if it's too painful. I'm sorry you've had to go through this because of me."

Tang Erda paused for a moment, his hand still, before he resumed searching. "You don't have to apologize. Those things have nothing to do with you."

"In that timeline, Joker wasn't meeting Bai Six's expectations. He wanted to find someone else for the league." Tang Erda's voice was heavy. "Then Bai Six saw my little TV and took a liking to me. He tried many ways to get close, but I was very hostile."

Tang Erda inhaled sharply. "At that time, Bai Six had a prop. He used it to lure me, and that's when he discovered that the most important person in my life was Su Yang."

"Bai Six tried to use Su Yang to get me on the team, but Joker, who felt abandoned by Bai Six, hated me. He thought I was the reason Bai Six dropped him."

"When Su Yang went abroad, Bai Six ordered his kidnapping and used him as leverage to get me to join. I still refused, and Su Yang wouldn't let me join an organization like that."

"But after two rounds of negotiations, Bai Six lost patience. He gave up on me and moved on to other players."

Tang Erda's voice was thick with disdain. "Bai Six threw the useless Su Yang to Joker."

"You saw what happened next in the mirror."

Bai Liu fell silent for a moment, then placed a reassuring hand on Tang Erda's shoulder, sensing that the captain needed it.

Tang Erda snapped, his eyes flashing. Just before Bai Liu's hand touched him, Tang Erda grabbed it fiercely and hissed, "Don't touch me!"

For a moment, Bai Liu thought he saw a wolf baring its teeth, preparing to strike.

Tang Erda's chest rose and fell as he tried to regain control of his breathing. He opened his mouth, as though about to speak, but in the end, he said nothing. Without another word, he turned back to his search, continuing to look for the head Bai Liu had requested.

Bai Liu briefly assessed the situation—clearly, this was a case of severe post-traumatic stress. He had gotten the information he wanted, so he withdrew his hand without any sign of embarrassment, smoothly shifting the subject.

"Captain Tang," Bai Liu asked, "You could see Tawil's head during the fight without a scope. Why give me one?"

Tang Erda paused for a moment before answering, "The view for attacking is different from the one needed to locate something. When I'm using my skill gun to speed-attack an object, I don't focus on the heads rolling inside."

"I need a sidekick to help with positioning," Tang Erda continued, pausing again. "That head is to you what Su Yang is to me. It's much safer for you to use the scope and avoid injury."

Bai Liu smiled. "Yes, he's very important to me. Thank you for thinking of me, Captain Tang."

Tang Erda's hand tightened at Bai Liu's gratitude, shaking slightly as he swallowed hard. After a deep breath, he muttered, "Sorry."

Bai Liu didn't mind. He smiled gently and placed his hand on Tang Erda's tense shoulder, his voice soft. "I understand, Captain. It's not your fault. Anyone would be furious if someone important to them was hurt. I would feel the same."

Tang Erda's posture, previously as stiff as steel, melted under Bai Liu's touch. He felt an unexplainable relief.

Tang Erda looked at Bai Liu's face, captivated, as the other man continued searching through the bodies.

— Bai Liu said he understood how he felt.

Bai Six... could actually get angry too...

In all the timelines, Tang Erda had never seen Bai Liu lose control. He was always calm, seemingly invincible because he had no weaknesses.

But just now, Bai Liu had been so focused on finding Tawil's head that he nearly got eaten by a monster. Before that, Bai Liu had approached him, smiling, calling him Captain Tang—Tang Erda now saw that smile differently, like a child trying to protect someone important to them.

Tang Erda watched Bai Liu sift through the bodies, his face streaked with mud and blood, yet unbothered.

— This was Bai Liu, with emotions and weaknesses. Not Bai Six.

"Found it!" Bai Liu gently moved a pile of skulls, revealing a sleeping head beneath the bones and roses.

Bai Liu's breathing slowed as he carefully cradled the head, his body curving protectively around it. Rose petals clung to his lashes, and mud dripped from his chin as he bent his body into a tender arc, sheltering the head in his arms.

"Found you," he whispered, his eyes lighting up as he gazed down at the skull with a pure, joyful smile.

Tang Erda stared in disbelief at the smile on Bai Liu's face, feeling a strange warmth in his chest. But the smile was so infectious that Tang Erda couldn't help but relax, leaning back against the pile of bones,

letting out a soft laugh.

"It’s good you found him."

"Intact, found him intact."

The Rose Factory

Outside the factory.

Liu Jiayi drags the long pliers holding the cart in one hand, while cautiously carrying the poison in the other as she pulls the cart forward.

Surrounded by a swarm of Rose staff monsters and weighed down by the cart, Liu Jiayi finds herself outnumbered on all sides.

However, two other members of the King's Guild emerge from the factory to help her, with Qi Yifang using his wide-ranging skills to control the battlefield, effectively balancing the attacks on the scattered monsters.

"Bai Liu, this person is really..." Liu Jiayi leans back behind her cover, exhausted, to catch her breath. She raises her elbow to wipe the sweat dripping down her face, glancing over at the cart separated from her by the long pliers. She groans, "Isn't this something very important to you?"

"...You gave it to me so easily. If it's not protected, you're going to blackmail me about it later, aren't you?"

Suddenly, a monster lunges from behind Liu Jiayi, and she instinctively steps in front of the cart, swatting at the poison. "Get out of the way!"

The black poison splashes into the monster's open petals, causing it to melt and deform with a decaying sound, turning into a pool of blood.

The surprise attack causes Liu Jiayi, already exhausted from fighting, to forget to maintain her distance from the cart in her rush, and the contents of the cart make her mental strength drop even further.

Shaking her head twice, Liu Jiayi reaches for the rose perfume in her pocket to restore her strength, only to discover that the bottle is empty.

More monsters, drawn by the scent of the poisoned corpses, start to surround her, gradually narrowing the circle and pushing her closer to the cart. The presence of the godlike NPCs in the cart makes her feel increasingly dizzy, forcing her to cling to the long pliers to stay upright.

A divine NPC, now split, may have been exposed internally, affecting the player more than before—much like at the orphanage!

Liu Jiayi can't help but release her grip on the pliers, continuing to guard the cart with poison in both hands, gritting her teeth.

"Little witch! You're almost out of perfume, aren't you? Take it!"

"Over here! Take it!"

"Here!"

Voices from three directions shout, and three bottles of perfume come flying from the King's Guild reserves—her former teammates.

Liu Jiayi looks up at the three bottles slowly falling toward her. She purses her lips and pulls her hand back, unwilling to owe too many favors.

In the past, their collaborations could be described as everyone fighting together to survive, but now, with a constant stream of monsters, no one's perfume is being freely given away.

...Bai Liu is someone she'll likely encounter in the league in the future. Given what she knows about herself, these unpaid debts will make her hesitate, which is not ideal.

But if she doesn't take the perfume, she won't last much longer.

"Jiayi!" Qi Yifang calls out, seeing that Liu Jiayi is still hesitating. "Take it! Your spirit level is below 40!"

Just as the perfume was about to land in front of Liu Jiayi, a man crashes through the factory wall she's leaning against, snatches the bottle out of the air, and tosses it back in her direction.

Qi Yifang and two other men, now slightly panicked, manage to catch the perfume.

"Thank you all for your interest and help with my little witch," Bai Liu says lightly, landing like a leaf. He casually takes the cart from Liu Jiayi's hand and moves it in front of her, tossing her a bottle of perfume at the same time. He then turns and strikes out with a whip, sending the approaching monsters flying backward in a semi-circular vacuum.

He slowly raises his gaze, looking away from them, and smiles with a

false, courteous bow. "But we might all be enemies in the future, so it's better not to be too friendly, don't you think, Jiayi?"

Liu Jiayi feels relieved.

Out of instinct, she quickly scans Bai Liu's body to make sure he's not injured before responding with a slight sneer, clutching her chest. "I thought you were going to keep all three bottles for yourself."

"I would've liked to," Bai Liu smirks, turning to her. "But I suppose you don't really want me taking them all, or maybe you don't want to owe them, which is why you haven't picked them up."

Liu Jiayi sprays the perfume on herself, takes a deep breath, and glares at Bai Liu. "You talk too much!"

Once her mental strength is restored, Liu Jiayi looks around. "Where's Captain Tang?"

Bai Liu whips away more approaching monsters, replying as he does, "I told him to send me out to support you first, then to clear the monsters inside the factory."

"When he finishes clearing the factory, he'll come back out and join us."

"Finished?" Liu Jiayi frowns. "Most of the monsters are still inside the factory. He can clear it alone... Finished?"

Liu Jiayi is about to question Bai Liu's faith in Captain Tang, who only recently joined them, when—

A man suddenly propped himself up against the high wall next to Liu Jiayi and tumbled out in a smooth, practiced motion.

At the same time, the man flung a meter-long, oddly shaped silver revolver with great force, pressing it under his shoulder to ease the recoil from constant firing. His posture remained strong and steady as he cleared the wall.

The wind lifted the hair from his forehead and the hem of his coat, revealing a pair of intensely focused, dark blue eyes.

As soon as the man landed, he began firing indiscriminately at the monsters closing in on Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi.

"Bang - da da da da da da da!!!"

The barrage of gunfire and smoke created an impenetrable cordon in front of them, deterring any monsters from approaching.

The dense mass of monsters that had overwhelmed Liu Jiayi was obliterated in the blink of an eye. Tang Erda landed on one knee, his movement fluid and controlled, before rising with a stony expression.

The peculiar long-stemmed revolver in his hand folded with a metallic clatter, transforming into a standard-sized pistol in an instant. He ejected the magazine, discharged the cartridge, replaced it, and turned to Bai Liu, his gaze calm and asking what more needed to be done.

"Wow, that was faster than I thought," Bai Liu raised an eyebrow at Tang Erda. "You've cleared the factory of monsters already?"

Tang Erda, his face expressionless, responded simply: "Hmm."

As if that wasn't enough, Tang Erda added with a frown, "The factory workers and those above couldn't access the workshops without a key, so the Rose Factory wasn't fully cleared. The rest has been dealt with."

Bai Liu smiled in satisfaction. "Well done."

"Well done?" Liu Jiayi stared in disbelief at the bullet-riddled ground in front of her, then looked up at Tang Erda.

The three members of the King's Guild outside stood frozen, staring at the gun in Tang Erda's hand, their minds struggling to comprehend.

—This is a Level 3 game!

It was outrageous how casually he dispatched the monsters with such firepower.

Liu Jiayi had watched many small TV clips of league players over the past two years to learn, but she had never witnessed such devastating skills, except for Spades.

This was far beyond anything that could be summed up with four simple words.

She scanned Tang Erda up and down for the first time since entering the game, quickly calculating his stats in her mind:

—One shot from him could easily take down an S-rank monster. His attack value is definitely in the tens of thousands.

Well-trained muscles, excellent combat awareness, fast execution, timely defense, and effective team protection—his actions were like the communication of frontline data to a strategist.

Liu Jiayi was taken aback. This guy was a top league attacker who had seen hundreds of battles.

His attacking stats and fighting quality were even more impressive than many top team attackers. Liu Jiayi knew that the King's Guild's attackers would probably be helpless in front of Tang Erda.

How had Bai Liu managed to recruit such a powerhouse?

And now it seemed like Bai Liu had taken this terrifying figure under his wing!

Tang Erda's sheer presence made Liu Jiayi, who had been somewhat hostile towards him, instinctively step back and stand behind Bai Liu.

Her eyes shifted to the shortened revolver in his hand, and she asked tentatively, "Why did you change weapons after joining us outside the factory? That weapon had significantly higher attack power."

Tang Erda glanced at her indifferently. "If there's no need to clear the area quickly, a pistol is enough."

Liu Jiayi almost exploded in her mind. —That's not reasonable! The attack value of a simple A-class weapon should still be over 10,000!

No wonder this man could clear a Level 3 dungeon alone. With his strength, he could walk through the entire game.

She thought back to their earlier encounter, where she had been up against him... Liu Jiayi let out a silent sigh, glancing at Bai Liu, who was still standing confidently in front of her, smiling. Her expression shifted again to one of disbelief.

In every sense of the word, Bai Liu was an extraordinary person—unbelievably lucky to have survived an encounter with such a formidable opponent.

But with people like this on his team...

Liu Jiayi took a deep breath.

—Given the bizarre course of events in Bai Liu's case, maybe this team could actually win the league?

Having mostly cleared the factory of monsters, Bai Liu unwrapped a cloth from the trolley and placed Tawil's head gently on it.

Snow-white skin spread rapidly along the neck, and the once lifeless face began to show signs of life. Long silver eyelashes fluttered slightly, and a strange silver-blue sheen stretched down the long, curled hair, which fell to the ground. The chest, once still, began to expand gently as though a heartbeat was stirring within.

Bai Liu lowered his eyes, gazing at Tawil lying motionless on his lap. He remained still for a minute.

Then, without warning, he reached into Tawil's empty chest, as if playing a game, clenching his fist and retracting it to mimic a heartbeat, his face twisted into an eerie smile.

"Bang bang—bang bang—"

[If I cut out your heart, will it continue to beat in my hands?]

At the same time, Bai Liu's face was very close to Tawil's, mimicking the sound of a heartbeat with his mouth.

[Thump, thump, thump—like this? Is your heart beating in my palm like this?]

[If you're curious...] Tawil suddenly grabbed Bai Liu's hand and placed it over his own chest, looking up at him softly. [Touch it, and you'll know how my heart beats.]

Tawil's hand covered the back of Bai Liu's hand, and Bai Liu could feel his heartbeat.

The two stayed like that for a long time, neither pulling away, their heartbeats gradually syncing with one another.

Finally, Tawil whispered, [Is it like this?]

[It's not...] Bai Liu's throat tightened as he spoke, his voice raspy. [It's thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump...]

[Is it abnormal for me to feel like this?] Tawil asked softly.

Bai Liu turned away, trying to pull his hand back. [I don't know.]

But Tawil didn't let go. He placed his hand on Bai Liu's chest as if feeling his heartbeat, and then a soft, almost imperceptible laugh

escaped Tawil. [It seems normal.]

[Your heart beats like mine.]

“What’s he doing?” Liu Jiayi watched in confusion as Bai Liu knelt on the ground, clutching the god-ranked NPC, his head bowed, making strange noises. "Even if he’s the least affected by the god-ranked NPC, he can’t keep holding it like that!"

Liu Jiayi moved forward, trying to interrupt Bai Liu’s actions. "Even if the effect is small, it's still not negligible! Tell Bai Liu to put it down and move on!"

Tang Erda held out a hand to stop her. "Wait a minute."

Liu Jiayi froze, her poison raised, ready to confront him. "What for? Are you going to drive Bai Liu crazy by holding it like that...?"

Before she could finish, she noticed the shocked expression on Tang Erda’s face.

He looked utterly stunned, staring at the scene in disbelief, repeatedly confirming what he saw before speaking in a daze.

"...It’s a mechanical repetition of actions triggered by trauma..." Tang Erda’s voice wavered, almost losing his balance. "This is a typical symptom of post-traumatic stress."

Bai Liu... had the same severe post-traumatic stress as he did.

And he hadn’t noticed at all.

The Rose Factory

Bai Liu did not linger long, soon he wrapped Tawil's body as if nothing had happened and placed it on the trolley, turned to the group behind him, with that false smile on his face that was immediately apparent to Mu Sicheng, Muke, Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda, and then whispered.

"Now, let's overthrow this sinful rose factory."

Game Hall, Graveyard Bounce Area.

No matter how hard Muke and the others tried to hold on, or how desperately they pleaded with passing spectators to give Bai Liu a like or a favorite, Bai Liu's small TV inevitably fell into the graveyard bounce area under the relentless siege of foreign guilds.

Muke, born into a privileged family, and Mu Sicheng, who had never been looked down upon, whether in real life or in-game, now abandoned their pride and faces. One by one, they tried to pull in the audience to buy time for Bai Liu.

Both men breathed a sigh of relief when the game on Bai Liu's small TV finally came to an end.

— This tug-of-war against an opponent like the King's Guild was too much for them.

But for now, they could let Bai Liu fall out of the cell once, pay the ransom, and get him back. That should be enough time for Bai Liu to make it through.

"... Empress, at this rate, Bai Liu might actually make it through..." someone muttered, their grimace pressed against the Empress's shoulder. "It's support season, two sieges and no block... this is... too much of a loss of face. Our guild's battle support will be affected..."

"It's not going to fail." Hearts crossed their arms, sweeping their gaze slowly across Bai Liu's small television. "This siege will be over soon."

The man next to him froze.

Soon, someone with excitement clearly written on their face jogged

over, stopping in front of Hearts, bowing respectfully, and saying, “Empress! Our team’s [Shield] has just cleared the game and is out of the pool! Should I send him over now?”

Hearts nodded slightly. “Let him come.”

The previously worried team member’s expression changed dramatically, and he looked at Hearts incredulously before turning to the one who had brought the news, asking again, his face beaming, “Is it an official team member, [Shield] coming over?”

The player’s joy was barely contained as he nodded repeatedly. “Yes! They’re heading this way as soon as they’re out of the pool! We’re on our way!”

“When [Shield] arrives, this siege will be over immediately!”

Mu Sicheng furrowed his brow at the King’s Guild members who were starting to stir in the small TV area. “What are they shouting about? Are they losing it because they can’t stop Bai Liu?”

“I don’t think so.” Muke felt an ominous foreboding. “... They’re all laughing.”

Before Muke could ask what they were laughing at, he quickly opened the system panel and scrolled through the forum, searching for the information he needed.

Soon, a post caught his attention.

— [The King's Guild’s (Shield) has left the pool and seems to be joining the siege, Hearts has gone too far this time!]

“What is... [Shield]?” Muke asked, frowning.

Mu Sicheng also opened the forum, his expression darkening as soon as he saw the title. He quickly explained to Muke, “It’s a title within the team.”

“The regular functional roles in a league’s five-man teams are [Attack], [Shield], [Roving], [Control], and [Tactician].”

“I haven’t seen the King’s Guild play, but I’ve heard their team has a double [Control] setup. Two [Control] players, both extremely skilled —one is Hearts, and the other this year is said to be Little Witch.”

“Good [offensive] players are hard to find, and Hearts hasn’t been

able to find the right rotation. The quality of [offensive] players in their squad is poor—"

Mu Sicheng raised his eyes, his gaze dark with concern. "—But to compensate, their [Shield] group is extremely strong."

The sound of heavy footsteps reached them from a distance. Muke turned, his breath momentarily catching in his throat.

A towering figure emerged, his height seemingly endless. He wore heavy brass armor on his hands and feet, with spiked anklets around his wrists that clashed and rang as he walked, making it feel as though the very dimensional space was shaking with each step.

The man had long arms and legs, effortlessly swatting aside spectators and crowds, clearing a path with the ease of brushing away small grass along a country road.

He slowly approached Hearts, who stood at the center of the small TV area. He bowed his head and placed his left hand over his heart in a salute, then dropped to one knee with a booming sound that echoed like a cannonball, causing others to kneel in response.

"Queen, Τιτν (Titan) is here."

Hearts lifted the hem of her skirt and bowed slightly in return, placing her hand on Titan's massive fingers, allowing him to kiss it awkwardly.

"Τιτν, do me a favor." Hearts turned toward Muke, who stood at the edge, and smiled faintly, eyes downcast. "Beat them, as usual."

In that moment, her smile bore an uncanny resemblance to Bai Liu's on the small TV.

Titan rose and turned to face Muke and the others. He stretched out a hand the size of a grown man's head and looked down at the retreating, wary Muke and Mu Sicheng, who stood frozen.

"Yes, my queen," Titan replied.

System Alert: Player Titan uses his personal skill (Dimensional Shield) on the entire Bai Liu small TV space area.

System Message: After using this skill, different spaces will be cut off into different time-space dimensions. Neither living nor non-living

beings will be able to enter another space. Light and sound will no longer propagate, and the spaces where the skill is implemented will no longer merge under the same multidimensional space (including the game lobby).

Limitation: One Dimensional Clock.

In an instant, the entire area in front of Muke, where Bai Liu's TV had been, vanished, leaving only a dark, inaccessible orb.

The orb, pure black in color, was the size of the viewing area and filled with tiny, twinkling star-like particles, spinning as though it were a corner of the universe itself.

Muke staggered back two steps, a look of desperation hidden on his face. One Dimensional Clock, without their outside support, meant that Bai Liu would fall straight into no-man's land!

Unless Bai Liu made it through... there was nothing more they could do.

Gamblers' Club Guild, President's Office.

With his eyes closed, Charles reclined in a large, luxurious boss's chair. His hands rested loosely on the leather armrests, and his right index finger, adorned with a large, shiny diamond ring, idly tapped the armrest in a steady, dull rhythm, as though deep in thought.

Across from him, Wang Shun sat rigidly, his hands resting on his knees, leaning slightly forward—his posture a clear sign of someone in a vulnerable, pleading position.

Charles, on the other hand, seemed completely at ease. His relaxed posture alone suggested he was not taking Wang Shun's request seriously.

"President Charles," Wang Shun said, his voice rising slightly in an attempt to wake up the seemingly dozing president. "I've just shown you a few videos of Bai Liu's games. He has potential, he's strong, and he fits your criteria for a dark horse. Please, think about it!"

Charles lazily opened one eye, a flirtatious smile spreading across his face. "He does seem to fit my preferences. If you had come to me ten minutes ago, I might have been convinced. But now...?"

He sat up straight, shaking his finger from side to side. "No, no. I like dark horses, but I don't like betting on ones that have already been targeted."

The term "concealed stakes" implied that someone had already interfered with the horse before the race began—like inserting small nails into the horseshoes to sabotage its performance.

In this context, Charles saw Bai Liu as a horse with concealed stakes, thanks to the King's Guild.

Charles sifted through the information Wang Shun had given him about Bai Liu, lightly caressing the young man's face on the paper before tossing it into the trash beneath his desk.

"I won't tell your boss, Hearts, that one of her inner circle came to me promoting a newcomer," Charles said with a smirk. "But you've wasted... what, thirty-dimensional minutes trying to convince me to take on a player who's already on a downward spiral?"

He checked his diamond-encrusted watch and continued, "My time is precious, and you've spent it rather freely. You'll have to pay a price for that."

Raising his eyes to Wang Shun, Charles grabbed the civilized cane resting by the leg of his chair and stood up unsteadily. He walked up behind Wang Shun, who was hunched at the waist, and placed his gloved hands on the man's shoulders, sliding them down his back in a way that was both unsettling and ambiguous.

"No one comes to me and leaves empty-handed," Charles said, his tone teasing. "Give me some information, my lovely Mr. Pepsi."

The staff of civilization, now wrapped around Wang Shun's neck, was gradually constricting, causing Wang Shun to feel the pressure building in his windpipe. Despite the urge to tear at the cane, he controlled himself. He knew if he reacted violently, this would be his last day alive.

Charles hated when people touched his prized accessories—diamond watches, rings, and especially his custom-made civilized cane, crafted from rare wood.

Wang Shun's face reddened as he struggled for breath, his eyes starting to bulge. He leaned back in his chair, trying to alleviate the pressure on his throat.

"You won’t regret investing in Bai Liu..." Wang Shun gasped. "I know the prophecy of the Adversary of the Cross regarding Bai Liu—"

Suddenly, the staff of civilization was jerked away, and Wang Shun gasped for air, clutching his throat as he coughed violently.

Charles took a silk scarf from his pocket, delicately wiped the staff, and tossed it aside. He turned his gaze to Wang Shun, now more thoughtful.

"The Reverse God? The guy who was third in the overall standings? His original name was..." Charles mused.

"[Judge against the Gods]," Wang Shun interjected. "He changed his name to [Reverse God] after transferring from the sixth guild, [Deer Hunter], to the first guild, [Killer Sequence], this year."

Charles gave a brief, nonchalant look at Wang Shun. "His skill is [Prophecy], right?"

Wang Shun nodded. "More specifically, it's called [Listening to Only the Words of God]. I managed to scope out a prophecy about Bai Liu earlier."

Charles gestured toward Wang Shun with his civilized staff, its tip resting gently over his chest as he smiled innocently. "I’d love to hear more."

The Rose Factory

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Wang Shun shifted his chair back slightly, putting some distance between his heart and the tip of Charles' civilizing staff. He spoke carefully, "I see a fragmented psalm."

"Scattered psalms?" Charles raised an eyebrow subtly. "That's not really the prophetic style of the concise [Reverse God]. What kind of poem is it?"

Wang Shun took a deep breath, cleared his throat, and began.

"The evil god boasts that there will be people drifting in his shadow,
The Man in the Shadows is fourteen years old.
Then the evil god gave him the spine, the heart, and the emblem of the gods.
It boasts that this person will be its only believer,
The man in the shadow is twenty-four years old.
Then the evil gods fell on the snowy plains, and the souls of the faithful drifted into the deep.
The spine, the heart, and the divine emblem are all broken,
The changing of the evil gods.
The man in the shadow is thirty years old.
He wanders, he wanders, and the clown crouches before him and asks the shadowed man, with a smile, where he has returned.
The man in the shadow says that when the sun is three-quarters gone, someone from the past will come looking for me, cold and stiff.
If you are already stiff and dead, says the Joker, I will crush your soul and let you fall in the snow with the gods.
The man in the shadow is forty-one years old.
God dies, and he lives, for evil lives forever."

After finishing, Wang Shun swallowed nervously and glanced at Charles with anxious eyes. "You can test me with the scales; I'm not making this up. Some of the Earth Fang Ke energy is a little hazy, but this is what I saw from the [Inquisitor of the Reverse God]."

"I don't doubt you," Charles replied, retracting his civilizing staff and glancing at Wang Shun. "I do suspect, however, that this prophecy you speak of is about Bai Liu. Such vague poetry can be interpreted in many ways, and I could just as easily claim it refers to someone else."

Charles leaned back, eyes narrowing slightly. "You say this prophecy is about Bai Liu—do you have any other proof?"

Wang Shun fell silent for a long moment, letting out a helpless sigh. "No... there's nothing more."

"So, you can't actually tell if this prophecy is about Bai Liu, can you?" Charles said, casually sitting down at his desk and crossing his legs. "So, you lied to me to convince me to invest in Bai Liu?"

Wang Shun opened his mouth and admitted, "Yes."

Charles gave a sly smile. "It's not very wise to lie in front of me, Mr. Pepsi, especially to a gambler who's ten times better at it than you are." He raised Wang Shun's bowed head with his civilizing cane, clearly satisfied. "But I did like the lie you just told—it sounds like something that could have fooled a whole lot of ignorant and impulsive gamblers into betting on Bai Liu. A rather gambler-worthy lie."

Wang Shun looked at Charles in dismay.

"Bai Liu? I'm invested," Charles said nonchalantly, pulling his civilizing staff down into a bouquet of roses and handing it to the still-dazed Wang Shun.

Wang Shun took the flowers with a confused look. "So, President Charles, what do we do now?"

Charles jumped off the table, adjusting his lapel. "Now?" He smiled brightly. "We get into full regalia for our dark horse, who's running toward the finish line in a field of roses."

Charles looked at Wang Shun in his chair, shook his head in slight disapproval, then pulled the civilizing staff, now a rose, from his chest. With a swift movement, he turned it back into a wooden stick, now only about thirty centimeters long—almost resembling a magic wand.

"You look a bit too plain for a future publicity spokesman and oracle for the Bai Liu Warriors, Mr. Pepsi," Charles commented, nudging his "wand" at Wang Shun's plaid shirt and jeans—typical programmer attire.

"It's hard to convince people with a look like that—especially when you come from a championship team."

Wang Shun still hadn't responded. "What propaganda spokesman and oracle?"

Charles explained politely, "Simply put, you're a tool who'll trick people into betting and voting for the Bai Liu Warriors." He waved his wand, and suddenly, Wang Shun vanished.

Charles eyed Wang Shun, now covering his bottom half, and whistled, raising an eyebrow. "Nice body."

"Why are you able to change my appearance settings at will?!" Wang Shun was dumbfounded, still too afraid to remove his hand from his key area.

With another flick of his wand, Wang Shun spun in place, his outfit changing entirely. He now wore a delicate polka dot bow tie, a three-piece suit with a waistcoat, taupe trousers with suspenders, his hair slicked back, and brown leather shoes with exactly five centimeters of white cotton socks showing.

"This set is for your reference. I prefer a retro style, I hope you like it." Charles put away his staff and gestured for Wang Shun to follow him. "Now, go and build up the momentum for our new battle group."

Wang Shun scrambled to catch up. The clothes, despite fitting, were a bit tight for him, and he struggled to move comfortably in them. "How do we build momentum? Bai Liu seems stuck in dimensional space by the King's Guild, who sent out a [shield] and trapped him in [No Man's Land]. He won't be able to escape!"

"If he falls into [No Man's Land], it'll be tough for Bai Liu to gain the general audience's vote—he won't even be able to sign up."

Charles thought for a moment, then said, "If Bai Liu falls into [No Man's Land], he may struggle to escape." His face darkened. "But I don't see falling into [No Man's Land] as a bad thing."

A meaningful smile curled Charles' lips. "I seem to remember Bai Liu has just won a small guild, only around five hundred members."

Wang Shun's face fell. "President Charles, even you can't do anything?"

"But I don't think it's a bad thing," Charles said, his voice more thoughtful. "I remember the Masons of Paradise. The association of all beggars, built on players who escaped from [No Man's Land]."

Wang Shun's eyes widened in realization, horror creeping into his expression. "You don't think you want to... But that would cost tens of millions of points!"

Charles gave a light chuckle. "I'm not short on money. I'm the richest player in this game." His smile deepened. "It's the thrill of gambling that excites me. And what better way to gamble than in the system's once-a-year league?"

"Besides, I'm not going to let the guild I'm betting on be as poor as the Paradise Masons. A few tens of millions of points is nothing for a bold upfront investment in a dark horse." Charles said carelessly.

"A few tens of millions of points..." Wang Shun staggered, still trying to process what Charles had just said.

In-game.

The stragglers trailed Bai Liu as he led them deeper into the Rose Factory.

They found themselves stuck at the door of a room that resembled Heretic 0001. This room also served as the access point to the processing site inside the factory.

A violent breakthrough was possible for Tang Erda, but given that Tawil's heart was hanging from a pipe attached to the wall, there was a high risk of tearing it apart. As a result, Tang Erda halted at the door, refraining from pushing further.

However, the key to the door was in the hands of a factory worker hiding inside, and there was no way to open it without forcing their way through.

Tang Erda looked at Bai Liu. "How do we get in?"

Bai Liu smiled, holding up a bottle of the original perfume. "It's simple—remember that test?" He dripped the perfume onto the door. "Let the heart open the door for me."

During the test, Tawil's heart had reacted violently to just a drop of the original perfume, shaking the suspended glass cabinet. Now, Bai Liu poured the entire bottle.

—In less than a second, the entire room began to tremble and roar.

The sound of mechanical pipes breaking and tearing was accompanied by panicked voices and frantic footsteps from within, spilling out through the door.

"The heart's beating too fast!!!"
"Open the floodgates—!!!"
"It's too late—the whole glass cabinet blew up!!!"
"Ahhh..."

After the glass shattered, Bai Liu closed his eyes, holding his breath against the cold steel door amidst the chaos.

—Then he heard it. The violent pounding of a heart.

Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang-bang-bang-bang—!

It was the same heartbeat as Bai Liu’s.

The light pink rose liquid seeped through the door, and the door began to bulge, distorting outward from the excess liquid and gas. The locking ring shook and twisted, finally collapsing with a loud crash.

A tsunami of raw liquid and scent flooded out of the room.

Bai Liu, standing closest to the door, was drenched from head to toe in the blood-like liquid. He lifted his wet lashes, gazing into the room.

Leaking, crumbling cooling pipes sprayed blood in all directions. Glass shards lay on the floor, soaked in the pink-tinted gas and translucent liquid. A nuisance of purple-blue sparks crackled along nearby pipes, close to an electric switch.

Amidst the chaos, the heart hung in the center of the room like a long-awaited, ripe, bright red fruit, beating steadily—thump, thump, thump, thump—as if reminding Bai Liu that if he didn't take it now, it would explode when the time came.

Bai Liu stepped forward, tilting his head, and plucked the heart from its place. The wet, pulsing organ throbbed in his hand as though it might escape.

The heart's beat quickened, doubling in speed with the drop of the original liquid.

Bai Liu tightened his grip, holding the heart firmly, a smile tugging at

his lips.

—So, this is what it feels like to hold Xie Ta's heart in your hands.

Very—very wonderful.

What is it like to place a heart back into a person’s chest?

Tang Erda had never witnessed such a bizarre, unfathomable scene—whether in reality or in the game.

And then there was Bai Liu, the mastermind behind it all, wearing that peculiar smile that made Tang Erda want to pull out his gun and arrest him on the spot.

It was as if the heart had been dug out by Bai Liu’s own hands.

The ribs were pressed inward, the heart shielded by the lobes of the lungs, the pectoralis major muscle sealed tightly at the point of attachment. Finally, the skin was perfectly smooth—white and healthy—as if nothing had ever happened to the body lying before Bai Liu. The chest rose and fell slightly.

The lashes fluttered ever so slightly.

"Let’s go," Bai Liu said, having successfully reassembled Tawil. Liu Jiayi took several cautious steps back. "It’s going to wake up soon, and it’ll be worse for us if we stay."

The group exited the room in the same practiced manner as they had entered, thoughtfully closing the door behind them, leaving space for Bai Liu and the soon-to-awaken Tawil.

Bai Liu leaned against the broken frame of the glass cabinet and, in an unusual moment of calm, opened his system panel. After paying for the mute service on his small TV, he turned to face Tawil, locking eyes with him as he began speaking to himself.

"I know you’re awake, Xie Ta."

Tawil’s eyelashes fluttered twice but still didn’t open.

Bracing his arms on either side of Tawil, Bai Liu crouched down closer. His eyes stayed fixed on Tawil’s face, the two of them nearing nose-to-nose.

"You can even pretend like that, can you?" Bai Liu placed one hand at the back of Tawil's neck, lifting it slightly. He lowered his gaze to Tawil's pale, lustreless lips, a gesture as if he were about to kiss them.

"Pretend again, and I'll have to do something even worse to you," Bai Liu whispered.

Just before he leaned in to kiss, Tawil finally raised his hand to cover Bai Liu's lips. He lifted his eyes, meeting Bai Liu's familiar silvery-blue ones, his expression calm as he returned the question.

"Didn't you ask me to do this to you when we first reunited?"

"Is this too much?" Tawil sat up straight and moved closer to Bai Liu.

Bai Liu immediately distanced himself, turning his face to the side. He took two deep breaths before turning back to question Tawil calmly, "You remember me, then why did you pretend not to know me when we first met?"

Thinking back to when he had asked Xie Ta to kiss him upon their reunion, Bai Liu pinched his palm, forcing a shameless facade to remain intact.

Was there anything more awkward than not remembering your best friend and, when you finally meet, asking them to kiss you like you were drunk?

And here he was, standing before a fully naked Xie Ta.

Bai Liu struggled to keep his focus on Tawil's face.

Tawil stared back, seemingly unaware of any wrongdoing. "You didn't remember me, so I politely introduced myself, and we got reacquainted."

"Then why did you pretend you weren't awake?" Bai Liu pretended to absentmindedly remove his protective suit to cover Tawil's lower half. His tone returned to normal, calm but pressing. "What are you so vain about?"

Tawil paused in silence before responding earnestly, "I'm not sure why, but I sense that you're angry."

Bai Liu smirked, crossing his arms over his chest, and gave Tawil a sideways glance. "Do you? I don't think so."

Tawil: "....."

"I’m sorry." Tawil apologized quickly.

Just as Bai Liu was about to tell him there was no need to apologize, Tawil leaned in, embraced him, and whispered softly in his ear, "Maybe you're really angry now. It’s a little out of place, but I'm really happy."

"You’ve finally remembered me," Tawil said. "I thought you had forgotten me on purpose because you were afraid."

Bai Liu’s shoulders slumped slightly as he lazily whispered, "So what exactly do you have to fear from me?"

"Everything—my rotting right hand and tail, bound in a church as a blood-sucking prayer symbol, my dismembered body, and my disembodied heart that kept beating even after I left it." Tawil’s voice was icy and clear, but it fell on Bai Liu’s ears like water—soft and warm. "I’m glad you're not afraid of me, even if you don’t remember me."

"I’ve missed you."

Tawil buried his face deep into Bai Liu’s shoulder and hugged him tightly, his voice reverent. "Every time I wake up, you’re the first person I see, and slumber isn’t scary anymore."

Bai Liu’s pupils contracted slightly when Tawil said [I miss you].

His hands opened slowly, placing them gently on Tawil’s shoulders, returning the embrace in kind.

Bai Liu wasn’t used to such intimacy, but Xie Ta was an exception. They had shared a long history together—so familiar that they were indistinguishable, two monsters pretending to be human, surviving on the fragile emotional bond they shared.

But it had been too long since they had truly known each other. Ten years since Bai Liu lost his memories, and countless cycles of unbearable torment for Tawil.

Since their separation, distance had irrevocably alienated them, and they never recovered that familiarity.

Time—those long, painful years—was worse than distance, worse than

life and death. It made every reunion feel more distant than the first time they met.

One party forgot, the other condoned it, leaving them strangers.

If Bai Liu's memories of Xie Ta's death haunted him, Tawil wished to be the only one to remember forever. Even if it meant starting over each time they met, he felt no pain in doing so.

But when Bai Liu saw Xie Ta's silvery-blue eyes, the past returned like a bird finding its way home, resting on Tawil's shoulder. The old connection, the friend Bai Liu had finally pieced back together, settled into his heart, bringing with it that familiar warmth.

The next moment, Bai Liu stood before him. Xie Ta gazed at him in silent stillness, his silver-blue eyes spilling moonlight.

The look was light, ethereal, beautiful—like a god seeing another god descend.

—And that was the look Tawil had just given him.

Bai Liu parted his lips, his voice soft and almost breathless.

"I… miss you too."

Bai Liu closed his eyes, allowing himself to be consumed by the intoxicating scent of roses that radiated from Tawil. He took Tawil's hand in his, his voice tinged with a distinct smile.

"I've been thinking about you since the moment I remembered you."

Chapter End Notes

I love them so much!!!!!!

Tawil closed his eyes. "Me too."

"You have a choice to make." In an unexpected turn of events, Tawil released Bai Liu, resting his forehead against him, and asked softly, "Antidote or poison?"

Bai Liu's hand curled in defeat.

Tawil looked at him calmly, his silver-blue eyes like a mirror placed beneath water, reflecting Bai Liu's emotionless face as ripples shimmered on the surface.

He spoke again, "You should know what the antidote is. Make your choice."

Bai Liu's eyes momentarily seemed empty, his thoughts drifting far away as his gaze met Tawil's.

In the old orphanage library, oil-stained old poems were spread across Xie Ta's lap on a summer afternoon. Sunlight streamed through his hair, casting a grid-like pattern through the dense branches of a tree, illuminating the yellowed, worn pages of a book.

The air was dusty and hot. The library's bay window was half-open, offering a view of the untouched green grass, while the pond glistened like fish scales under the scorching sun, a million diamonds reflecting on the water.

Bai Liu, uninterested in reading, drowsily covered his face with a book and slouched on his hands, his collar damp with sweat from the oppressive heat.

He couldn't quite recall what offense had led them here, but they were tasked with cleaning the library—something common to both Bai Liu and Xie Ta.

Fortunately, it was a small library, and Xie Ta wasn't in a hurry. He sat quietly by the window sill, flipping through dusty old books and reading softly.

"How can I compare you to summer?

You are not only cuter and gentler than he is...

But your long summer will never fade...

Or death boasts that you are adrift in his shadow.

As you grow with the times in immortal poetry.

As long as there are human beings, or people with eyes, for one day

The gods will endure and give you life."

Bai Liu was finally roused by Xie Ta's chanting. He removed the book from his face, but his eyes didn't open lazily. "Stop reading and tampering with other people's poems."

"The original line is [this poem will live on and give you life]," Xie Ta said without irritation, meeting Bai Liu's gaze with a look that seemed to take him in. "I'm not very good at writing poetry, but I see you in this poem."

"This poem suits you."

Bai Liu mentally processed the love poem, pretending to roll over and avoid looking at Xie Ta. After a moment, he spoke again.

"Don't just pick a random poem and flirt with me."

"No random poem," Xie Ta said unhurriedly. "Your long summer will never fade. This is the poem that describes your future. Someone will tell you."

"My future? What about you?" Bai Liu rolled onto his back and raised an eyebrow in a prickly manner. "So only my long summer will never fade, huh?"

It was a joke, but that day Xie Ta fell silent for a long time before looking up at him, his voice soft as a falling leaf.

"I don't have a summer."

He exhaled gently. "I just... secretly shared your summer."

Xie Ta gazed out the window at the lush summer landscape. "This summer is indeed lovely and gentle, the most beautiful summer I've ever seen, but these... they're not for me."

"I will always leave."

At the end of that summer, Xie Ta disappeared into the depths of the pool.

And at the Rose Factory, at the beginning of summer, the roses bloomed in May, just in time for their first round of flowering.

The moment Tawil let go, Bai Liu sensed something. He instinctively grabbed Tawil's wrist and looked at him calmly. "You're leaving again, aren't you?"

"We will be reunited." Tawil gently lifted his other hand to stroke Bai Liu's eyelids and face. "This is not your summer and roses. I will not stay here, and neither should you."

Tawil's cold hands seemed to touch Bai Liu's skin like snow on his face.

"When the sun is three-quarters gone, the deceased will come to seek the cold and stiff; fear not the separation that death brings, fear not the broken reverse cross in the snowy plain."

"Don't fear living, or dying because of me." Tawil took Bai Liu's head in his arms and leaned down to kiss his wet, rose-scented, broken hair. "Don't fear me leaving you for the summer."

"I am a fallen god without a summer, but I have a whole winter waiting for you."

"Now make your choice, antidote or poison." Tawil lowered his slender, snow-colored eyelashes as he held Bai Liu, who remained still, burying his head in Tawil's arms. Tawil gently stroked the dripping ends of Bai Liu's hair. "Whatever choice you make—"

"You're all going to leave, aren't you?" Bai Liu asked in a muffled voice.

Tawil was quiet, answering truthfully, "Yes."

Bai Liu froze, but Tawil felt Bai Liu's hands tighten around his waist and stomach—it was exactly the same as when he was a child.

Tawil suddenly wanted to laugh.

When faced with a situation he didn't want to confront—when he was angry with another child or a teacher, or when he refused to acknowledge a difference—fourteen-year-old Bai Liu would feign

indifference, even making sarcastic remarks.

But when no one was looking, the thin Bai Liu would sneak back and hug the long, patchy, ghostly figure of a doll, burying himself in it and releasing his emotions—just like this position now.

"But no matter what choice you have to make..." Tawil stroked away the strands of hair pressed against Bai Liu's ear, lowering his head close to whisper in his ear. "You will always be the most important to me."

"Whatever I have to go through, I will definitely, definitely come to see you."

Bai Liu slowly propped himself up from Tawil's arms and sat up, staring at him—finally recalling why he had avoided looking people directly in the eye until he was fourteen, but only since then.

Because Xie Ta had said: [Don't look at me directly, I have scary eyes.]

Bai Liu teased him wistfully: [But how would you know I'm talking to you if I don't look at you? What if I'm talking to someone else, and you think I'm talking to you? Wouldn't that be awkward for you?]

Xie Ta had been silent for a moment, then replied: [But then I can pretend that, when you're talking to everyone else, I can tell myself that you're talking to me, no matter who you're looking at.]

Bai Liu remembered Xie Ta saying this to him as he lowered his head, shielding his eyes, his lips pressed together.

—Just like now.

"Don't say things like that while you're leaving." Bai Liu stroked Tawil's hair from his forehead and smiled, almost complaining. "While giving me that look, as if you're more reluctant to leave than I am."

Bai Liu, ten years ago, had said: [You don't have to pretend anymore. Essentially, you're the only one I talk to, and you're the only one who actually listens to every word I say.]

[So, whoever I'm talking to is actually talking to you, and I'll always look you in the eye when I speak.]

[I don't think you're scary.]

Ten years later, Bai Liu said: "I won't fear your death anymore; after all, death is the worst thing that can happen to a human."

"And you're not going to die, no matter who gives you this—whether it's a god or a demon, whether people see you as a monster god or something else—to me, you're just Xie Ta, and I'm glad you're going to stay alive."

"I don't think you're scary."

Bai Liu paused for a moment before continuing calmly, "The poison is the dried leaf rose that grows from your body, and the antidote is the blood lingzhi that flows through your veins, right?"

Bai Liu had realized what the antidote was when he saw that the diary was linked to the orphanage.

The Blood Reiki item was described as stopping all negative effects, likely including the addictive state caused by the dried leaf rose. And since the factory owner had purchased the idol from the orphanage, it was possible Tawil's body still contained the essence of Blood Reiki within him.

However, it had been fragmented, preventing the formation of connected blood vessels and organs, so it couldn't produce the blood needed to sustain the blood lingzhi.

The factory manager should have known this, but he was beyond control.

It was clear that the [poison], more concentrated and addictive—rose perfume—was far more appealing to Tawil than the [antidote] that would save him from himself.

His inability to stop craving the rose perfume, let alone reintegrate the heart and restore Tawil to his full form, had ultimately doomed him.

The game's principle was clear—after discovering the core secrets of the Rose Factory, two paths lay before the player.

One was to continue using Tawil to cultivate dried leaf roses for the production of rose perfume.

The other was to feed on Tawil's blood, as those investors in the third copy had done, allowing the thorny blood primrose to grow through his body, offering salvation for everyone.

The smooth, thornless roots of the dried leaf rose complemented the thorny, rose-like branches of the blood primrose—two plants, created as a complementary, mutually restraining pair.

"You're running away, aren't you?" Tawil asked Bai Liu. "Because you don't want to choose either path."

"But there's no escaping it—you must realize that this game has been designed from the start, and you're forced to choose between these two paths."

"The man is pushing you to choose—save the world by torturing me, or make me feel better by letting the world suffer."

Bai Liu knew.

He'd known from the moment he entered the game—someone was forcing Tawil to be tortured by Bai Liu.

The Rose Factory

Someone was forcing Bai Liu to do to Tawil what the investors, the factory manager, had done to him—and then forcing him to become the person he was supposed to be.

Bai Liu didn't want to do it, but he had no choice. He needed to take a gamble.

But this was something Tawil would never allow.

The moment this solution crossed Bai Liu's mind, he quickly bowed his head.

Tawil knew him too well. Bai Liu could hardly hide his thoughts from this man. All he could do was furrow his brow and pretend to think, before giving the only answer he could: "...The antidote. I have no other choice. I've already made a deal with someone else."

"Then only my blood will do." Tawil held out his hand. A tiny, thorny vine, blood-streaked, threaded its way through the green veins beneath his pale wrist, and the bright red blood immediately began to spill down the sides of his wrist.

The vine greedily wrapped itself around the path where the blood had flowed, growing wildly. It spread inward in bundles over Tawil's arm, sharp black thorns piercing his porcelain-white skin, and soon, more blood poured from the hole-like wounds.

Tawil's face grew pale as the vines twisted around him, and his breath slowed from the blood loss, which dripped from his fingertips as he held Bai Liu.

"I... need a container for the blood," Tawil said haltingly, his eyelids drooping. "Like a baptismal font."

Bai Liu's eyes scanned the room, settling on a glass display case with an opening at the top.

Tawil moved toward it, consciously sliding into the replacement glass cabinet the factory workers had prepared for his heart—still intact, unbroken, and about as long as Tawil was tall enough to lie in.

The blood silently seeped out, soon soaking the backs of Tawil's hands on either side of the glass case.

The scene mirrored that of Xie Ta lying in the baptismal font in the church.

Bai Liu instinctively turned his face away, standing up and turning his back to the scene.

His breathing quickened involuntarily, his hands fidgeting as he grew closer to Tawil. The aroma overwhelmed him, causing his mental state to dip, bringing him to the edge of hallucination.

Many mixed voices began to flood his mind.

[He's in pain! Can't you see he's in pain? Are you a monster? Don't you have any feelings? Stop it!]

[Do you know how much pain he's in? Why are you torturing him? Can someone like you ever have someone who matters most?]

[Are you incapable of empathizing with others?]

[He really is a monster, isn't he?]

[Bai Liu, your mental state isn't right. You need to see a psychiatrist...]

[Severe traumatic stress syndrome. Subconsciously repeating stereotypical actions when encountering a traumatic scene...]

[Bai Liu, why are you afraid of the water? You're not afraid of the water at all. You're afraid of seeing the body in the water. Do you remember who he is?]

[Really, Xie Ta died for you!]

[Some people with PTSD aren't experiencing the hurt themselves but are so empathic they imagine the pain in others to alleviate their guilt...]

[If only I were the one being tortured, the one hurting, the one dying... If only I could replace Su Yang...]

Everything in Bai Liu's head went haywire.

Through a narrow slit in the curtain, he saw Xie Ta, submerged in the baptismal pool, drops of blood hanging from the hair framing his face.

From start to finish, Bai Liu's childhood fantasies had always been

about Xie Ta—being called a monster by children, being rejected and punished by teachers, being baptized and locked up alone in church, drowned again and again in the baptismal font, unable to escape the orphanage. All of them, Xie Ta. Not Bai Liu. Xie Ta.

Why had Bai Liu become the one experiencing this in his lost memories?

Bai Liu's breath caught, a tingling sensation spreading across his skin, as though some vine had burrowed beneath it.

He pressed a hand to his neck, feeling a sharp pain in his veins, like thorns piercing him—yet nothing was there.

Tawil's neck was pierced by a thick vine, and his breath slowed. His long hair hung in the blood, tangled with the vine.

Bai Liu began to feel unsteady on his feet, as if every bone in his body were sprouting spikes, with each breath causing sharp pain as his muscles contracted and were sliced open. He swayed, almost collapsing.

But in reality, there was nothing wrong with Bai Liu's body. It was all just an illusion, a vivid and overwhelming illusion.

These illusions, created by Bai Liu's subconscious, were causing him and Tawil to experience the same pain.

Tawil's voice broke through the haze: "Are you leaving?"

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

Tawil's calm voice helped steady Bai Liu.

Bai Liu clutched the cooling pipe and took two deep breaths, trying to clear his muddled thoughts, before replying: "Tell the others I found [the antidote]."

"Lying." Tawil's voice was soft. "Bai Liu, you never look me in the face when you lie."

His tone was gentle, as it had been when they first met in the church: "Would you like to tell me what you're leaving me to do?"

-- [Would you like to read a book with me?]

Like a malfunctioning robot, Bai Liu's body was controlled by some

unknown consciousness. He turned around stiffly to face Tawil, who was sitting up in the pool of blood.

Tawil was covered in thorns, but still focused, his eyes not meeting Bai Liu's. He had pin-sized wounds all over his body, yet wore a faint smile.

Bai Liu's pupils constricted before widening.

...It was the body of Xie Ta, covered in pinholes, beside the pond, with an exhausted Bai Liu kneeling next to him, unable to perform CPR after who knows how long.

Bai Liu's eyes glazed over in confusion, and he leaned in close to Xie Ta's lifeless body. Clenching his fist against Xie Ta's chest, he gently opened and closed it, mimicking the sound of a heartbeat.

"Bang... bang... bang..."

"Doesn't it make your heart beat faster? Why isn't it even skipping a beat now..."

"Dance for me..."

The words of the psychiatrist who had seen Bai Liu several times echoed in his mind.

[...By your friend's words, you're severely PTSD, sort of a visual scar type. You need to self-regulate...]

[But your personality is so extreme that if you encounter a similar scenario again, your reaction will be overwhelming—you'll do everything to prevent it from happening again, even substituting yourself for the other person...]

"What are you going to do, Bai Liu?" Tawil's silvery blue eyes locked onto him.

Bai Liu's fingers twitched, summoning a deck of cards—the A of Hearts.

He opened his mouth, finally speaking: "I'm going to look for a mirror."

[Liu Jiayi, can this A of Hearts completely transform a person into another, including their blood and everything?]

[Why are you asking this? If you can find the presence of the other person in your heart and get close to them, a skill card like blood composition for a basic transformation is doable.]

[What about characteristics? Blood regeneration, death tolerance?]

[What is this? Who are you going to turn into? Who has someone this important to them? Blood regeneration, death tolerance... sounds like...]

[It's like a monster.]

"What's the point of looking for a mirror?" Tawil asked.

"Let me see myself." Bai Liu replied.

[Yes, who has someone this important to them, to turn into such a monster?]

[Wow, Bai Liu, you look disgusting! You just laughed so strangely!]

"Why do you want to see yourself?" Tawil asked.

Bai Liu dropped his head and calmly looked at his reflection in the puddle on the ground, mesmerized by the ripples like roses on the water's surface, his face devoid of emotion.

A long silence passed while the heart at the center of the A of Hearts card he held spun rapidly.

The person in the heart soon shifted from Su Yang to someone else.

Bai Liu's hair grew longer, his limbs became sculpted and perfect, his body covered in pinholes, his neck pierced with thorns. He was bathed in blood, his long silver-blue eyelashes falling, light pink rose liquid mixed with blood dripping from his jaws. His eyelashes and curly hair cascaded down his back.

"Because this time... I want to be the monster being tortured." Bai Liu said.

The Rose Factory

Liu Jiayi and her party stood outside the closed door.

She frowned as she watched the raw rose liquid dripping from the doorway. The color darkened gradually, eventually taking on a blood-like brilliance.

Liu Jiayi wrinkled her nose. Beneath the light rose aroma of the liquid, she could detect an unpleasant scent—one of blood and mushrooms. It reminded her of the last instance she had encountered.

...The last instance. In a flash of realization, Liu Jiayi thought of the Blood Lingzhi, the monster book reward from The Loving Welfare Institute.

She hadn't been able to obtain the monster book reward for the orphanage herself, so there had been no Blood Lingzhi.

Liu Jiayi hadn't considered the Blood Lingzhi before; it seemed too outrageous. But as soon as she smelled it, she understood what Bai Liu had meant when he referred to an antidote.

—It's the Blood Lingzhi.

Then there were the strange questions Bai Liu had asked her about the Hearts A skill card... she couldn't even begin to imagine what he intended to do.

Liu Jiayi sighed deeply, feeling the headache of a war party member who typically dealt with fools. She swatted away the stragglers in front of her, sprayed herself with enough rose perfume to dull her senses, and removed her visualization prop before heading toward the door.

—The greatest strength of the God-level NPC's alienation attack was his eyes. If she couldn't see them, she hoped it would slow the effect of the alienation.

But as soon as Liu Jiayi lifted her foot to move, countless thorny vines spilled out of the doorway, as though they had been waiting for her.

The vines, like creepers, rapidly spread along the narrow corridor of the Rose Factory, transforming the tunnel into a dense, primeval jungle. The vines stretched as far as the eye could see, their thick

spikes growing in clusters like the teeth of a vampire still feeding, sucking the blood-colored liquid from the ground and rapidly growing larger.

Dark red fluorescent dots gathered around the spikes, pulsing like a heartbeat, as if ready to explode at any moment.

"What's going on?" Tang Erda asked, her voice tense. She pulled out her gun and aimed at the expanding spikes. "This isn't a dry leaf rose plant. What did Bai Liu do?"

Liu Jiayi placed the visualization prop back on her head and glanced up at the closed door. "He did what he always wanted to do."

Tang Erda froze.

The tightly closed door burst open with a surge of vines, and Tang Erda turned to look inside.

At the center of the room, her breath caught as she saw the core of the growing and spreading canes.

In the transparent display case filled with blood, two figures lay intertwined, leaning against one another. Spiked canes protruded from their bodies in a steady stream, yet they embraced as if they felt no pain. They seemed at peace, immersed in the warm blood, as if frozen in a moment of eternal sleep.

A red-stained Hearts A playing card floated atop the blood.

The spikes burst brilliantly, their dark red points of light drifting away, floating through the deep, dark corridors and towards the distant daylight—towards the 16,000 acres of flower fields, where old friends were buried.

The rose's inner trousseau was devoid of nourishment, and the dreamy pale pink sky withered as the gods departed. The sixteen thousand thoughts, shredded and hidden, briefly reappeared as the sun reached the threshold of summer. Then, like petals falling into dust, they dissipated.

The gale trampled the delicate stamens of early summer. The period of summer lease was not too short, and the sun burned with the intensity of an eye left by the gods.

The 16,000 acres of roses, which had once turned the world upside

down, began to fade. But your long summer would never fade.

—It was a summer even the gods had praised for its beauty.

---------- ----

In the game lobby, a small TV area that had been left vacant by Titan's skill flickered twice before suddenly reappearing.

Mu Sicheng and Muke, who had been waiting nearby, jumped to their feet. Mu Sicheng checked the time—far from a dimensional clock, but it seemed this King's Guild player was out...

He and Muke shared a growing sense of foreboding.

Titan emerged from the small TV area with a ground-shaking stride. His lanky arms were flattened, and a lazy, lip-smacking, yawning Hearts rested on his shoulder.

Seeing Muke and Mu Sicheng in her path, Hearts closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them, swinging her gaze between the two. She suddenly flashed a soft, knowing smile.

"Staring at me with hatred isn't going to help," she said, her smile still warm, her eyes soft. "Now, go rummage around in no-man's land. You might even find your boss."

"Of course," she continued, her grin deepening, "if you can’t find him, and if Bai Liu doesn’t make it out alive... and you don’t know where Fang Ke went..." Hearts lazily extended a hand to Muke, "The doors of the King's Guild are always open to promising players like you."

Muke quickly pulled Mu Sicheng, who was about to lash out, back and took a deep breath to steady his emotions.

Muke's face had gone completely white the moment he heard the words, "Bai Liu won't make it out alive," as though all color had drained from him. He looked like a porcelain doll about to break.

Though he knew Hearts was probably fishing with her comments, Muke couldn't ignore the sinking feeling in his chest. The disappearance of Bai Liu made his mind race, and he knew panic would only make things worse. If he panicked now, everything they had done to help Bai Liu would be lost.

Muke pulled Mu Sicheng, whose eyes were red and filled with anger,

by the back of the neck. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and turned to face the guild members behind him. With a perfect smile, he spoke calmly.

"Gentlemen, we've just scored a stage victory."

The anxious team members and Mu Sicheng both looked at him, confused and questioning. Muke smiled demurely, still maintaining his composure, and continued.

"Is Bai Liu the most important person in this guild? No, the most important person is you. Bai Liu is just an agent—it's optional. Anyone can take his place. The real strength of this guild lies with you. You are the core, the heart of the guild. You are the most important."

Muke's tone remained calm as he recounted, "And now, you've proven your power. With Bai Liu's unimportant presence, you've managed to shake the King's Guild and force them to send one of their strongest players to stop you. Isn't that a victory? Isn't that a win?"

The guild members exchanged uncertain glances, unsure about Muke's logic but finding themselves drawn in by the force of his words.

"All we have to do now is never give up and ride it out," Muke added, his smile radiating calm confidence. "We've already won half the battle. All we need to do is find Bai Liu in no-man's land, and we'll have won!"

Finding someone in No Man's Land seemed impossible, but Muke made it sound achievable with just a little more time and effort.

Mu Sicheng leaned in close to Muke's ear and, in a low voice, reminded him, "There's no telling how many small, scrapped TVs there are in No Man's Land. With all of us together, we wouldn't be able to find them in ten years."

"Then we'll look for twenty years," Muke replied quietly, his smile never faltering. He glanced at Mu Sicheng with a fiery look. "If they die in the game, I'll recruit new members. We will find Bai Liu. I'm not giving up."

Muke lifted his chin slightly, his expression one of quiet arrogance. "You can leave if you want. I'll be more useful to Bai Liu than you."

Mu Sicheng froze.

Ignoring him, Muke turned back to the guild members, raising his voice. "Now, we're heading into No Man's Land!"

Hearts, sitting on Titan's shoulder, raised an eyebrow at the sight. This Muke guy was a smooth talker.

She shifted her heels, and the team members below looked up at her, their hearts somehow in alignment with her words. "What can I do for you, Empress?"

Hearts' eyes lingered on Muke's back. "Tell Wang Shun to check out this new guy named Muke."

Before she could finish, someone started clapping.

"Clap, clap, clap!" Charles applauded, laughing as he sidestepped Wang Shun, who was following him. "Wang Shun, I've found someone better than you to promote Bai Liu's team."

Wang Shun, fully dressed, stood still, his hands pressed nervously against his trouser legs, too afraid to look at Hearts. His voice was barely above a whisper: "Empress…"

Charles bounced lightly on his heels, took off his high hat, and flipped it twice in his hands, bowing with a dramatic flourish before raising his hand in a mock salute. "Good afternoon, my beautiful queen."

All the smiles faded from Hearts' face as she glanced between Wang Shun and Charles, her expression cold and calculating. "Charles, I thought it was a convention between guilds not to interfere with each other's members?"

"That's true for the larger guilds," Charles replied, flipping his hat back onto his head and straightening up. He looked at Hearts with a playful smile. "But there should be some special allowance made for newcomer guilds, right?"

"If by 'newbie guild' you mean the Scavengers guild," Hearts said, leaning toward Titan with a smile that didn't reach her eyes, "I regret to inform you, Charles, that about three dimensional minutes ago, the president of that guild—Bai Liu—fell into No Man's Land."

"That's unfortunate news," Charles said, folding his hands over his heart as though mourning. But the sorrow lasted only a second before his smile shifted into something more sly. "Maybe it wasn't such a bad outcome."

Hearts finally realized what Charles was up to and sat up straighter, her expression darkening. "Charles, the support season has just started. You have plenty of better options. No need to waste your time on a newcomer."

"But I fell in love with him at first sight," Charles said dramatically, leaning on his staff with a mock-swoon gesture. "I could never look at another player again."

Charles smirked, cynically playful. "Queen, gambling is like falling in love. You have to be single-minded when you're immersed in it. A horse I like to bet on is worth throwing my money away for."

"Even if he's only played three games, dropped into No Man's Land, and has only a raggedy guild?" Hearts asked, her tone bland but piercing. "And you don't change who you bet on?"

Charles shrugged. "You know, Queen, for a gambler like me, picking a horse is as irrational as falling in love with someone."

He looked up at Hearts, his teasing smile now flirtatious. "I would think that Her Majesty, having had her heart deeply broken by a man, would understand the feeling of being overwhelmed by someone—even when you know it's wrong, wouldn't you?"

The Rose Factory

Muke moved quietly behind Charles.

Though he didn't know the identity of the sudden appearance of Charles, Muke could sense that Bai Liu was being helped by Charles in a situation that had become explosive.

"I don't think it's the same thing to be obsessed with a man as it is to fall head over heels for a gambling horse every year," Hearts said, her scowl deeply concealed. Her burgundy eyes darkened. "Don't compare your animal nature to mine, Charles."

"Then I apologize for my indiscretion," Charles replied, leaning back with a widening smile. "But to me, 'animalistic' is a positive word. I admire people who are animalistic."

Hearts was silent for a moment, realizing that Charles had to get Bai Liu out — a man with a gambling streak no one could control.

Without hesitation, Hearts turned to Titan. "Titan, surround them."

A massive black orb descended from the sky like a black hole, threatening to swallow Charles and the group behind him, including Wang Shun and Muke.

However, Charles remained calm, raising his staff of civilization to counter the falling orb.

As the black orb made its way along the staff, about to touch the tip of Charles' nose, he removed his black top hat and dragged it back to the end of the staff. With a flip, he pressed the hat against the orb.

As if by magic, the orb shrank under the brim of the hat, compressing into a black bouncing ball in Charles' gloved hand.

[System Alert: Player Charles uses skill (Phantom Devourer)]

[This skill swallows the opponent's skill the instant it attacks and transforms it into a magic item for storage.]

"It's useless to use your skills on me, Queen," Charles said, waving the bouncing ball in his hand with amusement. He then removed his gloves, wrapping them around the ball and slipping them into Wang Shun's pocket. "It's dirty. You can have it."

Wang Shun: "????"

He had heard that Charles was eccentric, but this was beyond anything he imagined—just casually bouncing the orb on a clean floor and then dismissing it.

Charles, now sporting a new pair of white gloves, saluted Titan and Hearts with a reserved smile. "May I be excused, Empress?"

With that, Charles turned, nudged Wang Shun's elbow, slightly lifted his chin in a polite gesture, and tapped his index finger twice on his elbow.

Wang Shun, confused at first, quickly realized Charles wanted him to support him.

...This is really a lot of personnel...

Despite a few snide remarks, Wang Shun took Charles' hand, and Charles, satisfied, proceeded.

He walked up to Muke and smiled. "I believe you've seen my sincerity towards Bai Liu. Would you mind coming with us to [No Man's Land]?"

Muke, who had been waiting for the President's signal, took a steady breath. Rather than panicking, he offered his hand and thanked Charles sincerely. "I don't mind at all."

"You're very welcome to join us."

No Man's Land

After Charles' intervention, the regular spectators, who had previously been too afraid to watch under the siege of foreign guilds, leaned in.

Thanks to the constant flipping of the [Siege Bai Liu] situation, the topic had reached a boiling point on the forums, leading to massive discussions. Now, most of the regular players were curious about what was happening.

A crowd of spectators followed Muke and the others, pretending to pass by as they made their way to No Man's Land.

They couldn't be too flamboyant because the King's Guild members were following them, and the onlookers didn't want to draw attention.

The two camps faced each other at the entrance to No Man's Land, a place where no ghosts dared to tread, with Charles and Hearts standing before their guild members, ready for battle.

The crowd, awed and silent, could only watch. The league hadn't even started, and yet supporters were already indulging in endless gossip.

Inside the unoccupied area, flickering snowflakes and static noise emanated from stacks of old TV sets. Occasionally, a distorted human figure appeared under the flickering black-and-white stripes of the screen, most of them pleading for help.

A hoarse, desperate voice stretched from the broken speakers, producing an eerie tune that had an unsettling quality.

The players trapped in No Man's Land flickered intermittently on the screens like ghosts, using the distorted footage to remember their lives after death.

The No Man's Land was surrounded by blinding white walls, with mountains of old FM TVs stacked as far as the eye could see.

No one knew if there was an end to No Man's Land—no one had ever reached it.

The full name of [No Man's Land] might suggest emptiness, but it was a graveyard, filled with those who had lost their names in the game and had become monsters, forgotten by time and surrounded by the nuisance of old television.

It was Muke's first time here, and he felt a deep shock. Wang Shun sighed as he explained, "A lot of players who enter here are newcomers to the game. They don't get recognition or reward points from the audience, so they can't afford props. It's very hard for them to survive."

Wang Shun's eyes reflected deep sympathy. "They end up here quickly, and all they can do is stall for time, gradually being alienated until they eventually just try to survive for as long as they can."

"They don't see any hope. They just struggle through the game, waiting for someone to rescue them."

Muke stared at the mountain of TVs, his voice barely above a whisper. "Is... this like Siren's Town?"

"Yes," Wang Shun said. "If Bai Liu hadn't saved you then, this place would have been your grave."

"There's not much they need—just a little encouragement. That's enough to bring them back to life and help them crawl out of this graveyard-like No Man's Land."

Wang Shun sighed, turning to Muke. "But sadly, few people in this game have such kindness."

"Not everyone is as lucky as you, to have Bai Liu force his way through dimensions to save you." Wang Shun finally managed a small smile. "But perhaps many people will be saved because of him."

The onlookers whispered, speculating about what Charles and Hearts were up to.

Hearts glanced sideways at the mountain of TVs and turned to look at Charles, who was smiling. "Are you sure you want to waste so many points on Bai Liu just to get him out of this dump?"

"It's not a waste," Charles replied with a grin. "Anything I can spend to please me is reasonable entertainment. Bai Liu is amusing, isn't he?"

Hearts was silent. "You're an unbelievable man."

Charles bent to the task. "Thank you for your kind words."

"How many points are you going to spend before you stop?" Hearts asked.

Charles straightened, gazing out at the blinding white landscape of No Man's Land, adjusting the diamond ring on his thumb. He narrowed his eyes. "Until I see Bai Liu reappear in front of me."

Muke took a deep breath, standing in front of the guild members. He gave the order on Charles' behalf. "Charles will transfer a million points to each of you, but there are restrictions on how these points can be used."

"The only purpose of these credits is to charge the small TVs in No Man's Land with 5 to 10 points each and collect likes until the TV turns off."

"Mark the locations of the TVs that reach 10 points but don't turn off, send them to me, and we'll run a secondary analysis of the players

inside. If we determine that Bai Liu is among them, we'll conduct further actions."

Muke stepped to the left, introducing Wang Shun. "This is Wang Shun, our union's data analyst. He'll handle all the data from the small TVs you collect."

"And this is God Mu, fourth on our prestigious Rising Star list." Muke glanced at Mu Sicheng, who had been silent, head lowered. "He'll guard the gates of No Man's Land to protect our operations from the King's Guild."

Mu Sicheng raised his head, locking eyes with Muke, a fire in his gaze.

He took a deep, annoyed breath and tsked, not responding verbally. Instead, he got up and stood at the entrance of No Man's Land, chin raised, facing the foreign guild members.

Mu Sicheng felt Muke's hostility and it bothered him. But even more than that, he was frustrated by how organized Muke was.

Muke scanned the guild members. "Is there anything else you don't understand?"

The guild members were still in shock.

They had never seen a million points in all their time with the Scavenging Guild. Now, they were expected to spend it on saving someone they hadn't even met. It was an exciting thought they never could have imagined, leaving them dizzy with disbelief.

The onlookers couldn't believe it either. They looked at Charles, who was calmly wiping his cane as if nothing had happened. His eyes glazed over, fixed on the vast mountain of TVs in No Man's Land.

— Charles is joking, right?!

To find one person among this sea of TVs would cost tens of millions of points at the very least!

But as they soon realized, Charles wasn't joking.

The guild members approached Charles warily, raised their system panels, and waited for the transfer. Once it was done, they moved forward.

Tens of millions of points were transferred, and Charles never lost his

smile.

He gently patted the guild members on the shoulder. "Now, go find your hidden president."

Shrine

In the middle of the table lies a card that has been suddenly flipped over. The figure on the card is a mysterious magician, gently pulling his hat down to cover his smiling face.

The man with the hood over his face taps his fingers thoughtfully on the card and, with a smile, says, "Interesting. A magician card has appeared, one that belongs neither to the werewolf camp nor the gods' camp. The tables have turned."

"Do you still want to reveal the cards, prophet?" he asks with a playful smile.

The prophet falls silent for a moment before responding, "Not yet."

"This scene is already a mess..." The man's eyes flicker over the Hunter card, which has transformed into a werewolf, the Witch standing nearby, the Rose card flickering and on the brink of disappearing, and the newly appeared Magician card. He smiles lightly, a touch more chaotic now. "More chaos, then."

A new card materializes between his forefinger and middle finger. He places it to the right of the werewolf card.

The prophet’s eyes change imperceptibly at the sight of it.

This card is unlike any other. It defies the rules. As soon as it touches the table, the character on the card comes to life, floating like a 3D projection. The character is holding a flashy, toy-like flare gun, shooting it across the table.

The figure wears overstuffed pom-pom-spiked boots, bright red turnip pants, and a puffy-sleeved top with a lace-covered neckline wrapped around its neck. A two-horned, two-colored hat with a bell at the tip jingles as it moves.

Its face and neck are covered in thick white oil paint, its mouth outlined in bright red, while its eyes are painted black with turquoise

pupils hidden beneath. Small golden curls glimmer on top of its head.

This, clearly, is a clown.

The clown shoots its flare gun across the table, laughing loudly and eerily, hitting the faces of various characters on the cards. It makes a chaotic mess before stopping in front of the werewolf card—the only character card it hasn't destroyed.

"King!" the Joker exclaims with delight, its bright green eyes shining under its forked hat. It plops down on the werewolf card, curling up against it, pressing its face into the card and chanting playfully, "King! Find my king!"

"What did you do to the Joker?" The prophet's tone turns rare and strained. "This is not how the character cards normally behave when they first appear. The Joker seems to remember Bai Liu, but in this timeline, the Joker and Bai Liu haven't even met yet."

The man sitting across from him folds his hands on the table, his smile widening. "Are you afraid? Afraid that the clown's influence over Bai Liu will turn him into Bai Six?"

The prophet retorts coldly, "You're breaking the rules of the game."

"I never break the rules of the game," the man responds casually, uncrossing his hands and smiling unabashedly. "I just delegated the Joker card early and kept it from making an appearance."

The prophet opens his mouth to speak, "What... does that mean?"

Before he can finish his sentence, he pauses, incredulous. "You... put him in no man's land?!"

"Yes," the man says casually. "The first single game I had the Joker log into was a Level 3 game. Naturally, he got trapped in it and couldn't get out. Soon, the audience lost interest in the poor, unskilled Joker, leaving him stranded in No Man's Land." He speaks with a hint of pity.

The prophet's voice shakes. "How long has he been in the game? How long?"

"He's been living with those monsters... for almost ten years, I think. I wouldn't really let him die, but he's definitely out of his mind by now."

The prophet straightens, his eyes narrowing as he looks across the table. "Why would the Joker remember Bai Liu?"

The man leans forward, eyes gleaming with dark amusement. "Because I gave him hope to keep him going in that horrible, torturous third-level game that was pushing him to the brink of suicide. I made him dream every night."

"In his dreams, the clown saw a man called Bai Six come to his rescue, like a god. Bai Six took him on a killing spree, invincible and victorious."

"The man understood him completely, agreed with him, appreciated him. He was the only one who allowed the clown to follow him. The clown became his most loyal servant. He was his KING."

The man glances down at the clown on the table. "That beautiful dream has kept him going all this time."

The prophet closes his eyes, his breathing shallow. "You made the Joker dream of the rest of the timeline... but now this timeline has gone completely awry, and Bai Liu was never meant to save him..."

"The Joker waits alone in the game for Bai Liu, who will never come. Ten years of waiting..."

"Congratulations," the man says, his smile widening, "he's going to finally stop waiting, isn't he? Bai Liu will soon be in No Man's Land to rescue him."

"Have you ever heard of a fairy tale?" The man abruptly changes the subject, but his interest is clear. Without waiting for the prophet to answer, he continues, "It's called 'The Fisherman and the Devil.'"

"A long, long time ago, a clownish demon was sealed by God in a bottle. He suffered greatly, but no one could see his pain. He survived only through visions in his dreams."

"So, he made a wish in his heart. If someone freed him in the first year, he would give them more wealth than they could ever spend in a lifetime."

"Unfortunately, that man never showed up. In the third year, the Joker thought that if the man freed him now, he would join him, entering his service."

"Still, the man didn’t appear. In the sixth year, the Joker thought that if the man freed him now, he would become his loyal servant, selling his soul."

"But the man still didn’t come."

The man looks at the prophet, his smile unchanging. "After waiting ten years, when the Joker finally meets the one he’s been waiting for, what do you think he’ll do to Bai Liu, the King he’s waited for?"

The prophet opens his eyes, his voice steady. "He will kill Bai Liu."

The Rose Factory

May Rose Festival
The piazza of the Rose Factory was adorned with thorny rose canes and dried flowers. None of the employees had roses in their eyes as they came and went, happily hauling unwanted perfume-making equipment out the door.

Bai Liu sat pale beside a field of fading flowers, still recovering from the sacrificial ritual that had drained so much of his blood.

Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda stood behind him, flanking him on either side.

"I didn't think you'd be so self-sacrificing as to get involved yourself," Liu Jiayi sighed, swaying on her feet before dropping down beside Bai Liu. "So many blood lingzhi have grown, and now you've come up with the idea of turning them into a perfume spray—it could save so many more people."

"But not all," Tang Erda interrupted stiffly.

Liu Jiayi rolled her eyes, about to retort, when Bai Liu spoke up with a faint smile, his gaze distant.

"I've given them the solution. They've chosen [the poison] themselves. If they want to go back to the path of [the antidote], they'll have to pay the price."

"You're going to let them cultivate the blood lingzhi themselves?" Tang Erda quickly grasped Bai Liu's implication. Kneeling down, he frowned. "But the way blood lingzhi is cultivated—it's too dangerous. It requires the blood of special children to grow—"

"If there were no dried leaf roses, then yes," Bai Liu said, curling one leg in a half-bend and lazily resting his chin on his knee. "But the dried leaf rose and the blood lingzhi are companion plants. Those contaminated by the dried leaf rose— their blood is remarkably effective for nourishing the blood lingzhi."

Tang Erda narrowed his eyes. "How do you know that?"

Bai Liu squinted in satisfaction as a soft breeze ruffled the flowers. "Haven't you noticed? When blood lingzhi grows, it absorbs the essence of the rose as well. And it thrives."

"The game's implication is clear enough." Bai Liu turned to Tang Erda, lifting his chin and meeting his eyes. "Like Tawil, the poison grows from these people's desires. But the antidote is hidden in their own bodies as well."

"It all comes down to choice." Bai Liu turned his head away again, voice faint. "To see if they have the courage to walk the path of the [antidote], to endure thorns digging into their bones and piercing their hearts in order to save themselves."

Liu Jiayi helped Bai Liu to his feet, brushing the mud and grass from his trousers.

"Good or bad, people always pay for their choices." Bai Liu turned to a baffled Tang Erda and smiled. "It's just that they never had a choice before. Now, I'm giving them one more. But in the end, neither you nor I decide how the world goes."

Bai Liu looked past Tang Erda, toward the people running toward him, faces lit with joy.

"It's them. They decide."

"Mr. Bai—!!!"

"Mr. Bai, we've finished setting up the May Rose Festival display!"

"Slow down, Mr. Bai! You're still not fully recovered!"

Having witnessed Bai Liu spill his own blood to save them, these people now held him in high esteem, fussing over him whenever he moved.

"As you ordered, we've held the May Rose Festival and destroyed all the perfumes in the factory," one of them reported eagerly. "Only those meant to be auctioned at the Extravaganza remain."

"The people attending this year are all the wealthiest figures profiting from the dried leaf rose industry. Every year, they come to bid on a bottle or two of the special perfume for their own pleasure—"

"Now, they're all waiting in the piazza for you to appear."

Tang Erda took a step closer to Bai Liu, still unable to understand him. "You've already destroyed most of the roses and perfumes. Why keep these special ones?"

Bai Liu adjusted his shirt, then turned to Tang Erda with a knowing smile, voice light and scattered.

"Because it’s only fair to give everyone the same choice."

A man at the front led Bai Liu around the factory, opening a back door to a small flight of steps. Reverently, he bowed his head and pulled back the curtain, gesturing for Bai Liu to step onto the stage.

"They're waiting for you, sir."

Without hesitation, Bai Liu ascended the dais. Sunlight poured over his face, pale to the point of translucence from blood loss.

Before him stood a simple wooden lectern, custom-made for him. A microphone stood upright at his mouth, and below, a crowd of well-dressed elites shifted impatiently.

Bai Liu smiled, lowering his eyes as he stepped toward the microphone. His voice, a little hoarse, echoed through the piazza’s speakers.

"Thank you for your patience, distinguished guests."

"I am the new agent for the Rose Factory. Bai Liu."

After a brief introduction, Bai Liu raised a hand and gestured to his left. Upon a wooden board lay small mother blood lingzhi branches, cut into 1-2 cm lengths, their thorns still sharp and full of life.

"This," Bai Liu said smoothly, "is a new product we’ve developed—a by-product of rose perfume, so to speak. A fresh branch, cut and dried, its thorns still thriving."

His gaze swept across the room. "I’m sure you’re all wondering why I’m presenting a mere thorn. Let me tell you what it’s worth—this little section of thorn can undo the addictive effects of rose perfume on the human body."

A murmur rippled through the audience.

In the front row, a man raised his hand sharply. "Agent, I’m willing to buy the patent for this thorn. You must not allow it to be mass-produced!"

"Yes, yes! If this gets out, the perfume industry will collapse—"

"I've just secured a high-ranking official with my perfume, and now—"

"There's no need to panic, gentlemen." Bai Liu interrupted, smiling. "This thorn must be used under strict conditions, and the side effects are severe. One must swallow it and endure the pain of the thorn growing inside them, feeding on their blood, draining their strength—only then can they produce the antidote that purges the drug."

"And because the thorn requires blood compatibility, much like an organ transplant, only your own blood can cultivate the medicine that detoxifies you."

"So, anyone who wishes to purchase the Thorn Antidote must be prepared to suffer. Perhaps even die from the pain."

The crowd fell silent.

Behind the curtain, Liu Jiayi peeked out, lifting a small corner of fabric. A giggle escaped her.

"Bai Liu, this guy… he's so unethical."

Though she was scolding him, amusement shone on her face. "Blood lingzhi—once used by investors to exploit children—is now a tool for self-torture, all thanks to Bai Liu and his blood purity requirement."

"Thorns. He actually thought of using thorns to grow inside people." She sighed in admiration. "He's a sadistic genius."

Tang Erda stared at Bai Liu, increasingly unable to understand him.

"What the hell is he planning?"

Liu Jiayi shot him a look of exasperation. "Can't you see it?"

Tang Erda frowned. "...See what?"

Liu Jiayi smirked, pressing closer to the slit behind the curtain.

"He's taking the choices the man behind the curtain forced on him—and passing them on to others."

"He's making them choose for themselves."

Bai Liu swings again, this time to his right.

On the display table beside him, mountains of exquisite perfumes are

neatly stacked, their diamond-shaped glass bottles glistening under the sunlight. Inside, the pale pink liquid swirls like a dream.

"As is customary, we have prepared a special perfume for the auction," Bai Liu announces. "This time, I crafted it myself—a highly concentrated, unique blend."

He gestures left and right simultaneously, then smiles. "Antidote or poison—what will you bid for?"

A frenzied auction erupts.

Some swallow the thorns, others inhale the dark fragrance, and soon they are transformed. On the piazza floor, bodies twist and contort—thorns pierce hearts and spines, roses ignite their sanity and pain.

People become monsters beyond their own control.

The first of them hisses and lunges toward Bai Liu, who stands motionless on the stage. A silver bullet cuts through the air, lodging into the monster's brow. Bai Liu lifts his gaze from the writhing mass of bodies to Tang Erda, who stands panting at the factory entrance, gun raised.

One dead monster wouldn't leave Tang Erda breathless. What unsettles him is the sight before him—the once-pristine elite of society, now writhing in agony, impaled by thorns or intoxicated by the perfume's effects.

Ten minutes ago, they were symbols of power and wealth. Now, they grovel at Bai Liu's feet, stripped of dignity.

And Bai Liu didn't even force them.

Tang Erda clenches his jaw, wanting to say—You could have saved them. Then—If this was punishment, you could have just killed them.

But instead, what comes out is:

You're torturing them. Why?

Bai Liu seems to read the question in his eyes. He tilts his head and smiles.

"Torture? Not exactly. They knew the risks—I warned them to beware the roses, both the thorns and the flowers."

He steps down from the stage, moving unhurriedly through the bloodstained wreckage. "I simply let them choose. And now, they pay the price." His voice lowers. "It's a trade-off—between you and me."

Bai Liu stops in front of Tang Erda and meets his gaze. There is no light in his dark eyes. No roses.

"—Like someone did to me. To Tawil."

He absently taps Tang Erda's shoulder as he brushes past him, not looking back. "Clean up for me, will you?"

Tang Erda remains silent. He wants to say something—but in the end, he only grips his gun and starts firing.

Killing the monsters Bai Liu created.

Or rather, the monsters who chose to become monsters.

Even after such a grotesque spectacle, Bai Liu simply drifts toward a field of withered flowers, directly opposite Tang Erda. He walks among them as if admiring the view.

Liu Jiayi follows behind, walking backward with her hands clasped behind her back, chattering away. Whatever she says makes Bai Liu curl his eyes and smile.

If not for the pile of monster limbs in front of him, Tang Erda might have thought Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi had never passed through this carnage at all.

For a brief moment, Tang Erda is stunned—distracted just long enough for a monster to slip past him. It lunges for Bai Liu. Tang Erda reacts instantly, stepping forward and shooting it down.

Bai Liu glances up at him, expression light. "Finished cleaning?"

"It's over." Tang Erda exhales, gripping his gun. He mutters, almost without thinking, "You didn't have to."

"Torture?" Bai Liu immediately picks up on the implication. His gaze sharpens, amusement flickering in his eyes—a look that sends a chill down Tang Erda's spine.

"I've always found something curious about that," Bai Liu muses. "You accuse me of torture—but I see someone else who shares my... preferences. One of your own teammates."

Tang Erda stiffens.

"You hate me," Bai Liu continues, smiling. "But you're more lenient with Joker. Why?"

Tang Erda's grip on his gun tightens. His voice is hoarse. "I don't know where you got the idea that I forgive him. I hate him."

"But it's different, isn't it?" Bai Liu tilts his head. "Your hatred for Joker is secondary. An accessory to the crime. But your hatred for me?" He touches his chin in thought. "I'm the main culprit, aren't I?"

Tang Erda glares at him. "You manipulate everyone into committing crimes—"

"Interesting." Bai Liu's gaze sharpens. "That clown—does he have some special relationship with me?"

Tang Erda opens his mouth to deny it—but hesitates. His brow furrows as old memories surface.

"...We had suspicions," he admits.

"Joker's loyalty to you is absolute," Tang Erda continues, voice measured. "He obeys only you. He excludes the rest of the Wandering Circus."

"In one of our attempts to capture you—" He takes a breath, as if recalling something unpleasant. "He shot Mu Sicheng without warning. Left him bleeding on our doorstep and told us to kill him."

"Our research—his psychological profile—indicates he doesn't see the others in your circus as comrades. He resents them." Tang Erda's gaze is piercing. "Because he thinks they share you."

"He's your one-man clown."

Bai Liu raises an eyebrow. "That level of loyalty—" He hums. "It takes years to cultivate."

"It's not cultivation," Tang Erda snaps. "It's domestication."

Bai Liu accepts the correction with good grace. "And intense domestication at that. Starting from childhood, I'd guess." His expression darkens. "How old is he?"

Tang Erda hesitates. "...Our best guess? He was fourteen when he first

met you. You were twenty-one."

Bai Liu's smile fades.

"The following year, his father died," Tang Erda continues. "That was when you made contact with him in reality—helped him seize his father's inheritance. A massive smuggling operation, arms and more."

"He idolizes you. Calls himself your sole believer. The first member of your circus."

Tang Erda watches Bai Liu carefully. "He calls you 'King' most of the time. But sometimes—he calls you something else." His voice drops. "We believe that after his father's death... you became his godfather."

Bai Liu exhales softly. "I'm twenty-four now." His voice is distant. "So, if he's still alive, that means—"

Tang Erda meets his gaze. "The day before you entered The Rose Factory was his seventeenth birthday."

He hesitates, then adds, "In other timelines, Bai Liu always throws him huge birthday parties."

His eyes narrow. "You coddle him."

No Man's Land
A steady stream of small TVs flickered off and drifted away as players cautiously ventured deeper into No Man's Land. They navigated around the towering mountain of screens, their fingers constantly tapping to charge their favorites, exhaling in relief each time one dimmed.

Messengers ran back and forth between the different divisions, spreading updates on whether the latest darkened screen belonged to Bai Liu.

Meanwhile, a flood of unfamiliar players' small TVs filled the general section. Dazed viewers sensed that something significant was happening. A quick glance at the forums confirmed their suspicions, and soon, a crowd gathered at No Man's Land to witness the unfolding chaos.

At the same time, some players—those who had received financial

backing—had finally cleared the game. The number of people boarding the exit steadily increased. These players, who had endured untold struggles alone in the game, collapsed upon stepping out, releasing anguished cries.

Most were newcomers. Their initial outbursts of rage gave way to stunned aimlessness. The game had drained them of all emotions and motivation, leaving behind nothing but hollow shells of flesh and blood.

It was only when they noticed the murmurs around them—whispers tinged with awe—that they lifted their heads.

“They actually made it out?”

“Bai Liu saved so many people this time…”

“Damn, I don’t get the way the rich play this game. Cleaning up No Man’s Land for Bai Liu is insane.”

One of the rescued players, his face still streaked with tears, hesitated before stepping forward. “Excuse me… this comrade Bai Liu—did he just save us?”

The older player he addressed wore a conflicted expression. “Can’t say he ‘saved’ you exactly,” he admitted. “But if not for him, you wouldn’t have made it out.”

The man’s eyes lit up with an almost desperate fervor, as if he had found his long-lost anchor. “Then… where can I find him?”

The older player sighed. “No Man’s Land. Right where you came from.”

The Rose Factory

No Man's Land
Players emerging from the boarding exit slowly gathered in the once-deserted area.

Weary and dazed, they looked up at the stark white zone that had once imprisoned them. The endless emptiness, now seen from the outside, left them with a lingering sense of detachment.

The space, once lifeless, was now teeming with all sorts of people, all searching for something.

One by one, they dismantled the obsolete TVs, their hands moving anxiously as they charged and checked the small snowy screens. The moment a screen flickered off, they let out long, relieved breaths before turning toward the exit and calling out:

"Wang Shun! One of the small TVs here just went out!"

"There's one over here too!"

"Brother Wang, three this way!"

At the entrance, Wang Shun stood with a thick virtual notepad, his pen leaving behind faint sparks of data as he scribbled.

Once he had logged nearly a hundred extinguished TVs, he tore off the data and handed it to a few of the members guarding him, issuing clear, precise instructions.

"Based on my calculations, the TVs rising from No Man's Land are being promoted in either the multiplayer or single-player sections, as well as along the edges of the central hall. Head there and see if you spot any Bai Liu TVs."

The men took their assignments with a nod and sprinted toward their designated areas.

Just then, the last scouting team returned, panting from their search through the sub-district. One of them shook his head at Wang Shun.

"Brother Wang, no sign of Bai Liu in this batch of TVs."

For a brief moment, disappointment flickered across Wang Shun's

face. But almost instantly, he composed himself and waved them off. “That’s normal. Take a break and get ready for the next rotation.”

The entire operation ran like a well-oiled machine—a fast-moving assembly line.

The newly freed players from No Man’s Land stood in stunned silence.

Before them, stretching endlessly, was a mountain of TVs, and among them, ordinary players worked tirelessly, dismantling old screens one by one. Watching the effort unfold, the newcomers felt an odd sense of disbelief.

This is how we were pulled out of that place of despair.

—All for a man named Bai Liu.

Like them, Bai Liu was trapped in No Man’s Land.

But he hadn’t given up on himself. And the people who had fought to save him believed, with unwavering certainty, that he never would.

That belief was what had given them, those who had been lost in hopelessness, the chance to step back into the light.

A surge of newfound determination filled their hollow chests, a sensation like I, too, can change reality.

They clenched their fists, then, unable to suppress their agitation any longer, stepped forward. With careful, sincere voices, they approached Wang Shun, the clear leader among them.

“Excuse me… can we join the search for Bai Liu?”

“We were saved because of him. We want to do something for him.”

Wang Shun glanced toward Muke, who had been watching from the sidelines.

Muke stepped forward with a warm smile, placing a firm hand on their backs as he guided them inside. “Of course you can. We need your help…”

“But we… we don’t have many points,” one of them added hesitantly, face flushing. “…Apart from the game pass, the only reason we even had enough was because you mistakenly charged us while pulling Bai Liu out…”

Muke's smile deepened, turning gentle. "How could that be a mistake?"

"Your presence alone has made those points worth a hundred times more."

"You survived. And now, you're here to help Bai Liu. That's exactly what we hoped for when we charged those points."

"You can help by liking and favoriting each small TV—it may not seem like much, but it helps more than you think…"

As Wang Shun watched the new volunteers be guided away, he turned back to Charles, who had been observing with clear amusement.

"This was your plan all along," Wang Shun muttered. "You knew the surviving No Man's Land players would return. The members' favorites are nearly full, and without more people to help with the likes, the cost of fishing Bai Liu out is only going to rise."

Charles raised an eyebrow, lips curling into a smirk. "Of course they'd come back. How else did the Heavenly Masons get here?"

His gaze lingered on the backs of the rescued players. "People who survive disasters have a stronger sense of empathy. They want to help those who have suffered the same way. It makes them easier to rally."

"Especially when they've just escaped and learn that the person who saved them is now trapped in the same situation," Wang Shun murmured, rubbing his forehead. "That overwhelming feeling of powerlessness pushes them to act. They go from helpless victims to determined fighters—because now, Bai Liu isn't just a person to them. He's part of their identity."

Charles chuckled. "Exactly. They'll feel a stronger connection to Bai Liu than they ever did to me, the person who actually paid to save them."

His tone was light, even amused, as if the realization didn't bother him in the slightest.

"If this works, they'll relive their own salvation through Bai Liu's rescue. They'll feel their strength, their ability to fight fate. And when that happens—"

"Bai Liu will become a complete symbol of their spirit," Wang Shun

finished, voice heavy.

“They’ll be his most loyal followers.”

Wang Shun’s brow furrowed in discomfort. “You’re manipulating their emotions.”

Charles only spread his hands with a shrug. “Maybe. But I doubt they’d mind. Even if I told them my reasons, it wouldn’t change how they feel about Bai Liu.”

His voice was calm, certain.

“They chose to follow Bai Liu of their own free will.”

“And honestly?” He smiled. “It’s probably what’s best for them. With Bai Liu, at least they won’t die so easily.”

Wang Shun let out a quiet sigh, shoulders slumping.

He didn’t like it. But Charles had a point.

In a game this ruthless, this cruel… Maybe this really was the best outcome for these ordinary people—people who still had enough heart left to care.

Just like him. Just like his own choice—to follow Bai Liu.

In-game.

Bai Liu stepped onto the stage for the ribbon-cutting ceremony of the new factory, a pair of scissors in hand.

On the sidelines, Liu Jiayi clapped while whispering to Tang Erda beside her, "Don't you think Bai Liu is basically a construction foreman at this point? Running factories all day long?"

She paused, then added dryly, "Is this even still a horror game? Did we take a wrong turn somewhere?"

Tang Erda reflexively defended him. "He’s just trying to clear the game," he said. "If he wants everyone to make it out, he has to run at least six factories."

Beyond their quiet commentary, the rest of the audience applauded

enthusiastically, their eyes shining as they watched Bai Liu in his crisp suit. They had once been exiles, but now, thanks to the rose perfume, they had been cured.

Standing at the podium, Bai Liu adjusted the microphone, swept his gaze over the crowd, cleared his throat, and began speaking in a composed, unhurried tone:

"With golden autumn in full bloom and the fragrance of laurel in the air, we gather here today to celebrate the fruits of our hard work as we launch our sixth Thorn Factory—"

"Ah! What a joyous occasion!"

Liu Jiayi choked. "Pfft—!!!"

Tang Erda: "..."

Liu Jiayi groaned. "Oh, come on! He's using the same speech again? Where the hell did he even get it from?! He's said this six times already! How does he not feel embarrassed?"

Bai Liu, utterly unfazed, continued reading his opening remarks, reciting them word for word from the speech his old boss used to give.

"Though we come from all corners of the world, today, here and now, we stand as one—"

Liu Jiayi clutched her head and wailed, "Somebody stop him!"

Meanwhile, in No Man's Land.

The exhausted diggers glanced back at the "TV mountain" towering behind them. For a fleeting moment, they marveled at how much they had cleared. Then, reality hit—they turned back again, only to be overwhelmed by how much still remained.

Wang Shun was lightheaded with exhaustion. He had long since lost track of time, his body running on autopilot. It wasn't until Charles reminded him that he realized he needed a break. Reluctantly, he found someone with a sharp eye for numbers to take over.

Without Wang Shun, their efficiency dropped even further.

Muke remained tense, overseeing the work. Mu Sicheng rotated in and

out, his high-speed movement allowing him to cover for an entire shift on his own, freeing up more people to continue the search for Bai Liu.

Charles, leaning casually on his "Staff of Civilization," stood in front of the remaining King's Guild members, barely putting in effort. With Hearts gone with Titan, his only job was to hold down the fort—it was, by far, the easiest task.

Mu Sicheng sprinted between the different mini-TV divisions. During a rare pause, he gulped down a stamina potion and slumped onto a small TV, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he caught his breath.

Without a word, Muke sat down beside him and took a swig from his own potion.

His voice was cold when he finally spoke. "Did you think about giving up on Bai Liu when he fell into No Man's Land?"

He didn't look at Mu Sicheng, but Mu Sicheng knew the question was directed at him.

Mu Sicheng tilted his head back and drank another bottle. He didn't deny it.

A heavy silence stretched between them before Mu Sicheng, in a rare moment of thoughtfulness, muttered, "Honestly... I think Bai Liu is probably safer in No Man's Land."

Muke's expression darkened. His voice dropped even lower. "You don't have to dress up 'giving up' to make it sound noble."

He stood abruptly, as if to walk away.

Mu Sicheng scoffed, watching him from the corner of his eye. "What, is the idea of giving up a sore spot for you?" His tone turned pointed. "Who abandoned you? A brother? A girlfriend? Your parents?"

At the word parents, Muke stiffened. His grip tightened around the potion bottle.

Mu Sicheng arched a brow. "My advice? Stop projecting your own issues onto Bai Liu. Don't start thinking of him as some replacement for your 'parents' or whatever."

He stretched, crumpled the empty bottle in his hand, and flicked it toward a trash bin in a lazy arc.

Muke didn’t move.

Mu Sicheng shoved his hands into his pockets and walked past him. "The guy’s too reckless to stay out there. He gets targeted by everyone. Rushing to be his 'kid' is a losing game," he muttered. "He’s better off with someone crazier watching his back."

Muke said nothing, head bowed. The empty bottle in his hand had been crushed into an unrecognizable tangle of plastic.

Their standoff lasted only seconds before a runner came sprinting back, drenched in sweat, panting heavily.

He dropped to his knees, gasping for air, then shouted with all his might—

"I—I found Bai Liu’s little TV!"

Both Muke and Mu Sicheng snapped to attention.

The Rose Factory

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"In the middle, on the edge of the central hall!" The man pointed toward the far side. "Bottom row!"

Before he could finish, Mu Sicheng was already sprinting away.

Muke took a deep breath, crushed the twisted plastic bottle in his grip, and ran after him.

On the sidelines, Wang Shun, who had been resting, watched the two disappear into the distance and sighed, reluctantly getting up to handle the chaos they left behind.

"Gentlemen, your hard work has paid off," he said with a smile. "Now go see the president we just dug up."

For a moment, the crowd climbing the TV hill was stunned into silence. Then, as the words sank in, they erupted into cheers, hands raised in victory.

Tears streamed down some of their faces as they scrambled down, rushing toward the messenger. After confirming the news again and again, they finally let out a collective breath and roared:

"The President is out!!!"

"He's back!!!"

Central Hall, Outer Fringe
Mu Sicheng, the first to arrive, skidded to a stop in front of the small TV. He took a step back, scanning the screen, searching for a familiar figure.

His gaze locked onto the bottom corner. He stared for a moment, then exhaled sharply, a smile tugging at his lips.

Wang Shun, arriving later, would understand that smile instantly—Bai Liu was in the exact same spot where he had first met Mu Sicheng in the Central Hall.

"What a hell of a life," Mu Sicheng muttered, crossing his arms as he

took in Bai Liu's appearance. "Looks like he's in pretty good spirits."

Muke, right behind him, froze. For a long moment, he simply stared at Bai Liu, safe and unharmed on the screen.

Since learning that Bai Liu had entered a Level 3 game, Muke had been terrified, though he kept it to himself. He had a job to do, a promise to fulfill. But now that he could finally see Bai Liu, the emotions he had been suppressing surged up. His breath hitched, his eyes burned, and despite himself, he sniffled, blinking rapidly to keep the tears at bay.

If Bai Liu were standing in front of him now, Muke might have broken down entirely.

Wang Shun, leading the group, caught sight of Bai Liu's small TV and stilled. Then, relief spread across his face, and he broke into a wide smile.

"It's good that he's okay."

The others—players who had been rescued from No Man's Land because of Bai Liu—stared at the screen with a mix of awe, curiosity, and emotions too tangled to name.

On the narrow, outward-curved display, Bai Liu stood in a crisp white shirt and suit trousers, holding a stack of papers, reading calmly. Occasionally, he glanced to the side and smiled.

He didn't look like a player stuck in a Level 3 game.

—This was Bai Liu.

What the hell was he doing?

Unable to resist, the crowd pressed closer, stepping into the viewing area of Bai Liu's little TV. As soon as they did, his voice became clear.

Bai Liu, eyes lowered to his speech, spoke in an even, measured tone:

"…We have all endured our darkest moments—trapped in a place where no light reaches, struggling to survive, exploited, discarded, locked away the moment we were drained of value…"

The alias for [No Man's Land] was the Game's prison.

A ripple of unease passed through the crowd. Murmurs spread as

players exchanged glances.

"…Does President Bai know what's happening outside?"

"Isn't he in the game? Why does it feel like he's talking to us?"

On the small TV, Bai Liu suddenly lifted his gaze. His eyes swept across the screen, and then, unexpectedly, he smiled.

"Lift your heads and look straight at me. You are the ones who have fought beside me. I am not your leader. I am not your savior. I am one of you. Do not bow your heads when facing me."

A shiver ran through the crowd.

People instinctively glanced around, confused. Then, hesitantly, as if compelled by some invisible force, they looked up at Bai Liu on the screen.

Mu Sicheng's skin prickled. His muscles tensed. Something about this felt… off.

Leaning toward Wang Shun, he whispered, "Shit. What the hell? Bai Liu acts like he knows exactly what's happening outside!"

Wang Shun sighed helplessly. "How should I know? Do you think I can figure out what Bai Liu is thinking?"

Charles, on the other hand, looked utterly fascinated. He stepped closer to the screen, tilting his head as he studied Bai Liu. "This is the first time I've seen a player whose actions align so perfectly with the outside world," he mused. "He's more my style than I expected."

A slow, appreciative grin spread across Charles' face. "Beautiful. In both looks and actions."

On the small TV, Bai Liu lowered his gaze, his expression composed as he continued reading.

"It is an unfair world," he said. "There are those who see us as nothing more than ants, who build their kingdoms atop our suffering, indulging in their pleasures at our expense. They hoard power and resources, binding us, forcing us to survive under their rules."

"No matter how hard we resist, there comes a time when they succeed."

He looked up then, meeting the eyes of the tearful exiles watching him.

"We have paid a heavy price."

The players outside the screen fell silent.

The bottom-rank players. The exiles of No Man's Land.

They realized, all at once—

Bai Liu was speaking to them. Because that was exactly where they stood.

"There is no shame in losing. There is no shame in being defeated by those who oppress you. The only shame is in giving up, in refusing to fight because you're afraid of losing."

"Anyone can lose—the good and the bad alike." Bai Liu's gaze swept over the stragglers before him. "I can lose, too."

The stragglers couldn't help but protest. "Mr. Bai, you won't lose!"

Bai Liu let out a soft laugh. "I appreciate the sentiment. But right now, in a place I can't reach, I've already lost everything."

"I fell into a place where only the dead remain. A place darker than your prisons, filled with ruins and wreckage. No one has ever walked out of there alive."

Bai Liu's voice was calm. "And I won't either."

Silence fell over the stragglers.

Beyond the screen, the audience stared at Bai Liu's face in a daze.

They knew what he was talking about—about being surrounded by the full force of the Grand Council and falling into No Man's Land.

He really knows!

"We, as individuals, are powerless against forces greater than us. Even if they take our property, our lives, our very souls—even if their actions defy morality, the law, or the natural order—" Bai Liu's voice remained steady. "—as a collective, we are not powerless."

"I couldn't escape that place alone. But I knew there were people who

would find a way to pull me out. People who would grow in number and strength. A new group that would rise and reshape the old order."

"You will change the world. Save yourselves. And save others."

Bai Liu's expression didn't waver. "The order we believe in doesn't always win. More often than not, the logic of the wicked is more destructive than that of the just."

"Good doesn't always triumph over evil. And every one of you who has suffered at the hands of injustice knows this all too well."

"But as long as even one good person remains, justice survives in the heart of the collective."

"You may lose. But as long as one of you keeps fighting, you will never be erased."

Bai Liu unfolded a long document.

"So I've made a decision. I am granting each of you a share in the six newly established Thorn factories. Each of you will take on a portion of the responsibilities of a factory manager."

"And what comes next—" Bai Liu straightened his papers, gave a slight bow, and stepped back from the podium. "—is up to you."

A long silence fell over both the game and the outside world.

Those who had escaped No Man's Land, along with others drawn in behind them and Bai Liu's guild members, lowered their heads in thought. One by one, they wordlessly pulled up their system panels.

They had spent every last point collecting player channels in an effort to bring Bai Liu back.

It felt like they had done nothing at all, yet at the same time, like they had accomplished something incredible.

Only now, with Bai Liu's speech, did they fully realize the weight of what they had achieved.

—They had pulled a new player out from under the King's Guild's siege.

If they could unite like this every time, then wouldn't the big guilds lose their ability to crush them at will?

—Could such a collective exist?

—In this ruthless game, could a guild exist where power was truly shared among all members?

Whispers spread about Bai Liu's guild. More and more people began asking Muke how to join, and one by one, their small TV collections began to include Bai Liu.

Charles smirked at Wang Shun, who looked utterly baffled. "Looks like our dark horse—or perhaps white horse—knows exactly how to handle things in his own way. No need for me to manipulate emotions with points."

Wang Shun, unable to hold back a grin, threw up his hands and laughed. "Yes!"

More and more people gathered around Bai Liu's small TV.

The influx of inquiries overwhelmed Muke to the point that his memory panel nearly overheated, but Wang Shun quickly stepped in to help manage the chaos.

Bai Liu's small TV numbers skyrocketed.

The moment he exited No Man's Land, it was as if his TV had been strapped to a rocket. His promotion rank soared, skipping multiple tiers in seconds until he reached the Central Lobby's core promotions.

Within ten dimensional seconds, the audience watched in stunned silence as Bai Liu's small TV shot past the Nightmare Nova Room, securing the number-one spot in under three seconds with insane stats.

Mu Sicheng stared, dumbfounded. "I knew this guy wasn't normal, but does this even make sense?"

"Not really," Wang Shun admitted. "In all my years tracking players, I've never seen a small TV reach these numbers on a fourth game."

"Even Spades couldn't get this many people to follow him so wholeheartedly in a single game."

He turned to look at the flood of players clamoring to join Bai Liu's guild and murmured, "……It's like he was made for this game."

And then—

The system announced the game's completion.

Bai Liu's small TV screen went dark as the settlement began.

The final stats were incomprehensible.

A ten-million-point figure.

Even Wang Shun, meticulously taking notes, started to wonder if he had misremembered the numbers flashing on his screen.

—That was an order of magnitude only Spades had ever reached. Could Bai Liu, a newcomer with no foundation, truly pull it off?

But then the system delivered its final tally, dispelling any doubts.

[8064673 people liked Bai Liu's TV. 307700 people favorited Bai Liu's TV. 1256171 people charged Bai Liu's TV. Player Bai Liu has gained 2,789,651 points.]

[Player Bai Liu has received over 5 million likes in one minute and gained over 2.5 million points in charges! You are adored by the audience!]

[Congratulations to Player Bai Liu for securing the final promotion spot—]

A massive virtual salute flared to life around the small TV, followed by a grand crown logo appearing at the center. The system's jubilant voice echoed:

[Unbelievable—Player Bai Liu has ranked first in the entire region in overall small TV stats and secured the top spot in the central screen King promotion! You are the king today!!!]

[Player Bai Liu's small TV views are skyrocketing...]

[Congratulations to Bai Liu for unlocking all main quests and clearing The Rose Factory]

[System: Player has reached the true ending—"The Factory Where Roses Fall Forever"]

If there is a world that forbids the cultivation of roses and the production of perfume, where only thorn-covered stems remain—forced upon the people to consume—this is that world.

At first glance, the people who live here seem poor and unfortunate, having lost their right to roses. But in their eyes, their world has never been more beautiful—it was their choice.

A heart weighs 250g, a rose weighs 2g. Would you trade a heart for a hundred roses or a hundred roses for a heart?

The Rose Factory is waiting for your choice.

The Rose Factory True Ending Rewards :
Completion Bonus: 300,000 points
Attribute Points: 500 (can be allocated as needed)
Monster Book Rewards:
- Dried Leaf Addict Page Collection → Prop: Tentacle Cage (one-time use, captures moving objects)
- Rose Staff Page Set → Prop: Reversed Right Eye (lowers mental value, enhances evil tendencies, reveals hidden scenes, single-use per instance, Transcendent-tier)
- Idol Pages Set → Prop: A Rose Without Bloom (Quality: Unknown, Status Attribute: Unknown)

[System: Player Bai Liu's overall small TV rating]

With a combined statistic surpassing 20 million credits, Bai Liu's gameplay video, The Rose Factory, has been awarded the Diamond and Crown Badge.

The system's algorithm assigned a 214:13 like-to-downgrade ratio, leading to a final rating of Gold Crown Badge level. As a result, Bai Liu's video is now eligible for the VIP Library.

Access Conditions:
Players must be VIP members to watch Bai Liu's The Rose Factory gameplay.
Each viewing costs 10,000 points, with profits split 50/50 between Bai Liu and the system.

[Achievements Earned]

#1 on the King's List
Seventeenth player to achieve a small TV view count exceeding 10 million

---

Game Exit

Due to Charles' extravagant move of flooding No Man's Land with money, a surge of players were logging out simultaneously. The typically balanced system space now felt cramped and overcrowded.

From the exit gates, the King's promotion screen was faintly visible, towering over the central hall.

Positioned in the very center of the lobby, the King's Seat was the most prominent display—a massive screen announcing top-ranked players across all divisions. It was the ultimate publicity for any rising contender.

As soon as players stepped through the boarding gates, they were greeted by Bai Liu's small TV speech playing on the King's List. The system's loudspeaker blasted its cheerful announcement:

[Unbelievable—Player Bai Liu has ranked first in the entire region in overall small TV stats and secured the top spot in the central screen King promotion! You are the king today!!!]

Whether out of curiosity or sheer fascination with Bai Liu, most players instinctively flooded toward the Central Hall upon exiting.

However, not all players joined the crowd. Some had urgent matters—like senior guild members being summoned for emergency discussions about Bai Liu's unexpected rise.

Charles' interference, coupled with Bai Liu's growing reputation, had thrown this support season into chaos. Even if Bai Liu wouldn't be competing until next year, his presence was already fracturing alliances this season.

"This guy always makes an entrance..."

"But this time, it's on another level."

With the league on high alert, Bai Liu had managed to steal nearly all the attention.

The Unseen Consequences
While some players rushed to their guilds, others were in a far worse state.

Many had suffered severe injuries in the game, and upon logging out,

they collapsed—unable to move.

Under normal circumstances, in-game wounds would not carry over. But for those whose sanity had been completely eroded, where the lines between game and reality had blurred, their injuries became real.

Because their minds were convinced the wounds existed, their bodies complied.

At the boarding exit, a scattered mass of players lay motionless. Some were being stepped over by the crowd. While no one deliberately trampled them, few spared them a second glance.

Even after regaining slight mobility, most of them didn't move. They lay on their backs, eyes empty—lifeless husks, indistinguishable from corpses.

But among them, one 'corpse' moved.

He looked like he had crawled out of a sea of blood.

His entire body was soaked—whether in his own blood or someone else's, it was impossible to tell.

His features were delicate, youthful—suggesting mixed heritage. His golden-blond curls were now dyed a deep orange-red, matted against his face. Beneath the tangled mess, fresh apple-green eyes flickered.

From his slumped position against the exit wall, his gaze was locked on the giant screen.

He did not blink.

Not when minutes passed.
Not when blood dripped into his eyes.
Not even when his vision turned red.

He tilted his head, staring at the image of Bai Liu on the screen.

Then, slowly—painfully—he dragged himself forward.

With shattered limbs and fractured fingers, he crawled.

Each agonizing movement pulled him closer to the massive display where Bai Liu's speech played:

"..... I did my best to save each and every one of you, as promised ....."

"Each and every one of you is worthy of being saved ....."

His climbing hand froze.

His battered body convulsed, limbs twitching like a broken puppet, barely stitched back together.

He wrapped his arms around himself, hunching inward—a defensive posture.

Yet, beneath his fingers, his lips twisted.

If he removed his hands, the expression beneath would be monstrous.

An eerie, soundless tremor ran through him.

Then—

He laughed.

A hoarse, rasping laugh.

A sound that belonged to something that had crawled out of the abyss.

"Bugiardo." (Liar.)

His voice was a whisper.

"Padre, mi hai mentito." (Father, you lied to me.)

Chapter End Notes

The end of another arc!!!!!! ❤

Reality

The audience gathered under the King's screen in the central hall, eagerly watching the playback, but soon it ended.

Unable to contain their excitement, the crowd began chanting.

"Go to the exit to meet President Bai, who has passed the game!"

With that, the people made their way toward the exit in a frenzy.

Normally, the exit functioned smoothly, but now it was jam-packed with not only those who had come to greet Bai Liu but also onlookers and other guilds curious about him.

Fortunately, the crowd was divided by dimensions, or else a stampede would have been inevitable.

The boarding gate was bustling with people, everyone straining to catch their first glimpse of Bai Liu as he emerged from the exit.

Amidst the bustling crowd, Bai Liu stepped out.

Though there were countless players coming and going, the moment Bai Liu appeared, anyone who glanced in that direction immediately recognized the man in a plain white shirt, suit trousers, and an eerily calm demeanor.

"Bai Liu!!!"

"He really made it through Level 3!!!"

The crowd, which had left a narrow aisle, suddenly swelled, forming an impenetrable semicircle around Bai Liu. Everyone wanted to see up close the man who had reached the top of the King's List despite falling into no man's land.

But it was the members brought by Muke and Mu Sicheng who cleared a path, pushing the crowd back to give Bai Liu some space.

Bai Liu was followed by Tang Erda and Liu Jiayi, who had come through the boarding gate with him, along with Muke and Mu Sicheng, who were visibly relieved.

Amidst the cheers and shouts, a man, lying bloodied on the ground, caught sight of Bai Liu and whispered something to Tang Erda

through the throng of legs.

Bai Liu stood in the center of the crowd, overshadowed by the masses, yet undeniably at the center of it all.

He knew that a single glance from him would silence the crowd and command their obedience.

He had dreamed of this moment three thousand seven hundred and forty-one times.

His apple-green eyes reflected Bai Liu, separated by countless shadows, and the people around him—Tang Erda standing behind Bai Liu's left shoulder, Liu Jiayi barely reaching Bai Liu's waist, Muke, who was on the verge of tears as he neared Bai Liu, and Mu Sicheng, grinning with his elbow on Bai Liu’s right shoulder.

In this dream, the person closest to Bai Liu had always been him.

He would always stand sixteen inches behind Bai Liu, in a protective position where he could defend against anyone except Bai Liu. He would stand there, waiting for Bai Liu to turn around, reach out, and pat his head, spine, or shoulder, saying with a smile, "Daniel, good job."

As Bai Liu came closer, he suddenly moved.

Daniel dragged his injured limbs across the soles of the crowd’s feet, being trampled, but he didn’t mind. His eyes stayed fixed on Bai Liu’s face, and inch by inch, he crawled forward, leaving a bloody trail behind him.

Finally, he reached the spot he had dreamed of—sixteen inches away from Bai Liu.

He stayed still, quiet, and motionless, trampled by the crowd, his trembling arms supporting his small, bony frame like an injured animal hiding in the grass.

He raised his head slightly, prostrated at the feet of the crowd, and peered through the gaps to gaze at Bai Liu. The faint light glimmered in his eyes, the blood dripping from his jaw onto his trembling hands.

Daniel waited for Bai Liu to turn back to him—and he would. Bai Liu always turned to check for him whenever they left the boarding exit, and if Daniel wasn’t there, Bai Liu would wait for him to appear.

[Daniel is my most important child].

Bai Liu always said this, teasing him with a smile.

Bai Liu stopped abruptly, and Daniel looked up, his breath halting. A circle of light fell over his head, and Bai Liu's emotionless face appeared, godlike after a horrific game.

Just as in his dream.

Bai Liu turned around with that smile Daniel could draw with his eyes closed. He clapped his hand on Muke's head and said, "Why are you crying? You did a good job, Muke."

The gods, in the presence of his suffering, bestowed blessings on other children.

—Simply because that child was crying with happiness.

Muke was fine, but after being comforted by Bai Liu, he nearly had a heart attack.

Bai Liu didn't waste time with Muke, simply giving the order, "Stop, there's something to do."

Muke's tears stopped immediately. He looked up at Bai Liu, trying to appear professional. "What's up?"

While they were talking, a small, bloody hand suddenly reached out from the crowd, grabbing Bai Liu's ankle, trying to stop him from leaving.

Startled, Muke instinctively stepped forward to block the hand.

He kicked the hand away, and it fell limply to the ground, quickly swallowed by the crowd.

"What's wrong?" Bai Liu turned to Muke.

"Nothing... looks like someone's playing a prank," Muke replied, looking suspiciously through the crowd to find the culprit.

Bai Liu had made many enemies, and some guilds wanted to target him, but it was odd to do it in a game lobby—players couldn't attack each other there, and a bloody hand like that seemed more like a horror game prop.

Muke assumed it was just a prank.

Still, he wanted to find the person responsible, but after searching twice and failing to identify them, he gave up. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

The moment Muke turned, his shoulder blocked Bai Liu's view of the crowd.

They wouldn't know that beneath the cheering crowd, in the darkness, bloodstained green eyes watched, unwavering and desperate, as Bai Liu seemed to walk away.

—Watching everyone around Bai Liu, saved by him and graced by his presence.

"Muke, do you remember the address of the factory under investigation?" Bai Liu asked, looking at Muke. "That factory is about to explode. We need to log out quickly and get there."

Everyone paused, confused.

Tang Erda, still processing, looked at Bai Liu incredulously. "Are you going to blow up the factory?!"

His mind was still stuck on the time when Su Yang had told him Bai Liu had blown up a factory. He assumed if he stayed close enough to Bai Liu, the explosion wouldn't happen.

"I didn't blow up the factory," Bai Liu said quickly. "If I'm not mistaken, it's part of the game's process when logging into reality—the factory directors at the Rose Factory started the explosion."

Bai Liu didn't wait for Tang Erda to respond and turned his attention to Muke.

After a moment of shock, Muke quickly caught up with Bai Liu's train of thought. After a brief search in his mind, he confirmed, "I remember the address of the factory."

"Great. Now check for the closest logout point to the factory for any of us." Bai Liu glanced at the group. "Has anyone logged in or out near there? A car would be best."

Everyone lowered their heads to check their logout locations.

Tang Erda, still uneasy, was reassured when Bai Liu patted his

shoulder and said calmly, "Relax, whatever happens, I have a solution."

Whenever Bai Liu said that, Tang Erda felt a shiver run down his spine. But today, those words were strangely comforting.

Tang Erda exhaled, settled himself, and quickly checked his logout position.

"I have a boarding place only 5km from there." Mu Sicheng raised his hand quickly. "I rented a flat near campus, and I have my car here. It only fits two, though, so we'll need to find another car…"

Bai Liu interrupted him, "Two people is fine. What kind of car is it? Is it fast enough?"

Mu Sicheng twitched a smile. "Fast enough to be a heavy-duty motorbike."

At four in the morning, the streets of the neighboring suburbs were eerily quiet.

It was clearly a disruption to tear through such a peaceful street on a roaring motorbike, but it was obvious that the two men couldn't care less about that at the moment.

Instead of sitting normally, Bai Liu arched his back, pressing himself against Mu Sicheng, who was riding in front of him without a helmet. Bai Liu's hands gripped Mu Sicheng's waist tightly, and his white shirt fluttered in the night breeze.

Any traffic cop who saw the two of them in this position would surely have been forced to blow their whistle.

"…I told you this bike is mine. I don't usually carry passengers. It's a single-seater," Mu Sicheng muttered, his voice muffled by the oversized helmet. His hands gripped the handlebars, steadying the bike to keep Bai Liu from falling off.

He continued to complain, his voice tinged with frustration. "There's only one helmet, and you still have to climb up here with me! And now I have to drive at full speed!"

"Over four hundred at full speed! If you get thrown off, you'll end up

splattered all over the place!" Mu Sicheng snapped.

"I trust you won't let me die like this," Bai Liu replied coolly, unfazed. He glanced at the time on Mu Sicheng's wheel, then calmly added, "Go full speed, or it'll be too late to stop the game from landing."

"Fuck!" Mu Sicheng cursed as he tightened his grip on the handlebars. The engine of the motorbike roared in response, signaling its sudden acceleration. "Hold on tight! If you get thrown off, I'll be fully responsible when the traffic cops get to you!"

Reality

In the dead of night, a massive motorbike with tawny trim zoomed past, kicking up a cloud of dust.

They were drawing closer to the factory, which was on the verge of exploding.

The factory, where the rose perfume had been secretly produced, was located on the outskirts of the city—right at the moment when Su Yang and his team had come to investigate.

Su Yang held the special gun of the Bureau of Heresy against his side, cautiously peering around with his back against the factory door.

After scanning both sides, Su Yang stepped out, lifted his collar, and spoke into the small microphone pinned to him.

“No one. Safe.”

At the same time, a voice crackled through his headset.

“Captain Su, all clear on our side too. Safe.”

“Zone 2 is also clear.”

“...Zone 3 is safe too, Captain Su. This is strange...” The voice in the headset faltered for a moment. “It doesn’t even look like anyone’s been here. The ground is all dusty, and the most recent footprints are all ours.”

“The last time we inspected this factory, it wasn’t like this. It’s like it’s been abandoned for years...”

Su Yang’s eyes remained calm and clear. “Don’t panic. It’s possible a new heresy has emerged with the dry leaf rose, or perhaps this new heresy is the source of the dry leaf rose.”

“That would mean the heretic has some kind of ability.”

Su Yang continued his search, stepping over the piazza littered with withered leaves. He reached the processing clerk’s dormitory, where he eyed the old, warped door. Without hesitation, he kicked at the gap at the bottom of the door where dampness had caused it to buckle.

Inside, the corpses lying on the dormitory beds stirred, their twisted

limbs rising as they stumbled to their feet. Their rotting eyes turned toward the door, which was about to be kicked open, and moved slowly towards it, their skeletal bodies dragging along.

Meanwhile, on the ground floor of the factory...

The team held their noses as they moved through the foul-smelling replica of a prison. They scanned the neatly arranged iron cages one by one, while a team member behind them carefully filmed the structure with a night camera.

The greenish glow from the camera cast an eerie light over the dimly lit underground.

"...These cages were built to hold something," one of the team members remarked, furrowing his brows as he stepped further inside. "When we seized this factory a month ago, it wasn't like this at all."

"Yeah," another team member agreed. "And we've had people monitoring the place closely. This factory hasn't been operational. I don't know what they've been using to produce and ship the perfume."

As they spoke, they moved deeper into the factory.

At the far end of the basement, a massive, three-meter-high cylindrical glass tank stood, with an opening at the top emitting rosy smoke. Inside, the brightly colored liquid made from the dried leaf rose was swirling.

On the glass case, a countdown timer ticked down, showing less than ten minutes remaining.

If Bai Liu had been there, he would have estimated that the amount of perfumed liquid inside the case could easily pay for the entire staff of the Rose Factory in the game for a year.

Dried leaf rose gas is a highly flammable and explosive substance. A portion of it could explode, sending the fragrance of the rose throughout the nearby city, still asleep in its peaceful night.

Even if Bai Liu had figured out how to neutralize the dried leaf rose using blood lucerne branches, there would still be many dried leaf roses that would have wilted in the early days of the disaster before any kind of order was established.

For example, mothers still breastfeeding and newborns just a month old.

The players carefully approached the end of the cage when one of them suddenly sniffed the air and frowned. "...I smell a very strong rose scent."

The words instantly put the team on high alert. They raised their torches and searched the dungeon, walking past the glass tank filled with the fragrant liquid.

But something odd happened. It was as if they couldn't see the glass tank at all. They even seemed to be able to walk straight through it, as if they were in two different dimensions from the object that was about to explode.

"...This is strange. I can smell it, but why can't I see anything?" The team stared at the empty last cell, their brows knit in confusion. But eventually, they chose to turn away.

The team moved toward the exit on the ground floor and switched on their comms to broadcast to Su Yang. "Captain Su, we can smell the roses on the ground floor, but there's nothing here."

Behind them, the countdown timer skipped a second, dropping from 9:00 to 8:59.

On the ground floor of the factory, outside the dormitory, Su Yang kicked open the door.

Su Yang stepped onto the dusty dormitory floor, gun in hand, scanning the room warily. He finally tucked the weapon into the back of his waist.

He frowned at the empty dormitory, then lifted his collar to inform his team. "I didn't find anything on this floor either. But I did smell a strong odor of decomposing bodies..."

"I thought I'd find the dozen missing employees here after a month, but there's no sign of them..." Su Yang sighed and then perked up. "No news could also be good news. Maybe they're still alive."

"Let's stay alert. In addition to searching for the equipment used to secretly produce rose perfume, we also need to look for those dozen employees who were listed as missing when we last searched the factory a month ago..."

“Most of them are high-risk individuals who travel abroad for work. No one would notice if they went missing. They might still be alive. Have the team ready to rescue them at any time...”

As he spoke, Su Yang stepped outside.

In the space behind him, a dozen pairs of rotting, maggot-ridden eyes stared at him without moving.

Eight minutes and forty-seven seconds remained until the explosion.

“Eight minutes and forty-seven seconds to go,” Bai Liu calmly informed.

"It's going as fast as it can!" Mu Sicheng gritted his teeth, his motorbike tires nearly sparking on the cold ground as they spun at high speed. He cursed in frustration, "Damn it! If the explosion in the game is really that big, it must take a massive container of perfume. So why can't the people who went to check it out see anything?"

"It’s impossible not to see." Bai Liu replied coolly. "To minimize the danger from the rose perfume, the Heresy Handling Bureau investigation has crossed into a territory that's preventing them from seeing what’s happening."

"Normally, not even a single rose seed would be missed, let alone an entire bottle of perfume."

Mu Sicheng paused, stunned. "Then why...?"

"Because the entity that planned the Rose Factory game has a level of authority above theirs," Bai Liu said, his voice steady as the night wind tousled his hair. He raised his eyes toward the factory in the distance. "It’s like how ordinary people can’t hear anything about the game world in reality."

"These people, who are trying to protect others, can’t see or touch anything related to the game world."

"The game designers created a fabricated ‘inner world’ for the factory manager, which hides the real Rose Factory. This allows the factory to continue running in ‘reality,’ undetected."

Mu Sicheng exhaled sharply. "It’s the same design as the Rose Factory game, isn’t it?"

"Exactly." Bai Liu squinted against the harsh night wind. "From what I understand, Tang Erda and his team are monitoring these factories 24/7 for potential perfume production, yet this one continues to produce it for export. That's illogical in itself."

"Unless they're making the perfume in the inner world and then flipping it to sell in reality, making it completely untraceable." Mu Sicheng spoke, more rhetorically than expecting an answer.

"That's right," Bai Liu confirmed.

He continued, "Not only that, the in-game newspapers report that before the explosion, the Bureau of Heresy Processing had repeatedly searched the factory, yet instead of issuing an urgent evacuation notice for the city, they stayed put until the bomb detonated."

"It shows they didn't detect anything dangerous."

"Most likely." Bai Liu turned his gaze back to the approaching factory. "They probably just saw an empty factory, set up as a decoy."

"There won't be anything inside."

"Captain Su, it's an empty factory," the team reported over the comms after searching the entire building. "There's nothing here."

Su Yang frowned as he looked up at the weathered factory, his unease growing. He turned toward the car to retrieve some special night-vision equipment for another search. But the moment he opened the door, a hand reached out to him, as if expecting him.

Su Yang looked at the person sitting in the car, surprised. "What are you doing here? I thought I told you to stay at the Heresy Bureau and get some rest?"

Lu Yizhan, seated in the back, scratched his head sheepishly and gave a bitter smile. "Captain Su, I thought about it. This is related to Bai Liu. If he really did it, as a public official near him, I can't just ignore it. So, after reconsidering, I came along."

Lu Yizhan raised his eyes, exhaling deeply as he looked at Su Yang. "Please, Captain Su, let me search with you!"

Su Yang hesitated for a moment, then, defeated by the earnestness in Lu Yizhan's eyes, nodded. "It's an empty factory. There's no danger. If you want to come, you can."

Lu Yizhan breathed a sigh of relief, got out of the car, and followed Su Yang into the factory for the second search.

6 minutes and 31 seconds until the explosion.

The motorbike came to a halt with a steady, sideways skid in front of the factory.

A quick glance at Bai Liu revealed several vehicles with the Dangerous Heresy Bureau insignia parked outside.

Bai Liu had ridden in one of those cars on his way to the Heresy Bureau and had been unsettled by the creepy octopus emblem.

Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng quickly found a spot to hide as they got out of the car. The Heretics were patrolling outside, and since they were both escaped heretics and criminals, they were wanted by the Bureau and would be arrested on sight if spotted.

Getting arrested was not a big deal, Tang Erda could help with that, but dealing with it would waste valuable time.

"How do we get in? Break in?" Mu Sicheng asked, looking at Bai Liu, who glanced at his electronic watch, grimacing. "Only six minutes left!"

Bai Liu's gaze remained fixed on the factory. "We walk right in."

He touched the reverse cross and the system coin returned by Tang Erda, which was pinned to his collar.

[System Warning: Props not related to core desires are prohibited in reality - Zilla Zilla - Ban - Stop - -]

The rebellious electric zing of the warning faded.

[System Alert: Does player Bai Liu use the Transcendental Prop (Reversing Eye)?]

[This item provides a glimpse of the hidden evil truth.]

[OK.]

Bai Liu retrieved a glass marble-shaped eye with a rose floating in the center and held it between Mu Sicheng and himself.

"Close your left eye and look into this eye. It will allow us to enter the

inner world of the factory."

Before Mu Sicheng could question Bai Liu's intention, he instinctively closed his left eye in compliance.

The rose in the eye bloomed slowly, dazzling them both. The surrounding lush landscape withered rapidly as the sounds of rotting corpses and the skulls of unknown creatures appeared beneath their feet.

Mu Sicheng took a deep breath, covering his head, pushing the eye away, and stepping back.

Though he had raced for so long without feeling any discomfort, just looking at the eye for a second made him nauseous—he felt a mental contamination from it.

They had entered a dark, realistic [inner world].

Bai Liu seemed unaffected as he gathered his composure, turning to look at the factory behind him. The once empty and silent building was now alive, bathed in dim light. Shadows—both human and spectral—moved around, carrying dustpans to deliver roses.

It was exactly the same scene as in The Rose Factory.

Bai Liu grabbed Mu Sicheng's wrist and pulled him forward. "Let's go."

"Wait! Do you even know where the bombs and the perfume are kept?!" Mu Sicheng tried to pull Bai Liu back. "We need to locate them first, or this will be a gamble."

"I'm guessing it's the cage at the far end of the dungeon, ground floor." Bai Liu glanced back briefly as they ran. "Someone told me."

Mu Sicheng was dumbfounded. "Who told you?"

Bai Liu's expression remained neutral. "Lu Yizhan. The fool."

"Hey! Wait a minute. When did he tell you that? Was it when the Hearts were blocked? Come on, tell me, Bai Liu!"

Bai Liu said nothing, not bothering with Mu Sicheng's questions as he pulled him toward the factory.

In the game The Rose Factory, Lu Yizhan, serving as a scent tester, had been locked in the last cage of the prison on the ground floor.

And Lu Yizhan, the fool, if caught with a group after the bombing, would have volunteered to be detained in the most perfume-contaminated, aroma-infused part of the factory to protect others and endure the worst of the torture.

— Was there a more polluted place in the entire Rose Factory than the spot where the explosion occurred ten years ago?

Bai Liu didn't think so. And he figured Lu Yizhan didn't think so either.

— So, the fool was locked in the very place where the explosion took place, for ten long years.

Bai Liu bypassed the factory guards and entered through the back door. As they passed a hallway, Mu Sicheng swiftly dealt with a few shambling corpses before turning the corner toward the basement entrance.

Mu Sicheng turned on his phone's flashlight and illuminated the way as they descended to the last cage.

A large glass vessel continued to emit a light pink smoke, and the entire cage was filled with the scent of roses.

The countdown on the glass container read four minutes.

"What do we do with it?" Mu Sicheng covered his mouth and nose and asked in a strained voice. "Do we move it? Or smash it?"

Bai Liu stared at the vessel for a second before responding calmly, "It's too late."

"What's too late?!" Mu Sicheng's mind raced as he looked at the countdown on the bomb. "There's still more than four minutes left!"

Bai Liu's gaze moved to the bomb beneath the glass container. "Smashing it won't help. The real bomb isn't this timed one. This one is just a lighter, and the real bomb is the perfume liquid—the gas bubbling out of it."

"Dry leaf rose gas. These perfumes are some kind of liquid-gas hybrid. Even if we smash this glass jar or remove this bomb, as long as the liquid remains, the explosion can still happen. Any spark could set it off."

"If the game designer planned for the factory to explode tonight, anyone in the factory could trigger it, just using the massive amounts of perfume liquid stored here. We can’t prevent that."

Bai Liu remained calm. "Unless the perfume stored here is used up all at once, they can still cause an explosion in the inner world and then transfer it to the real world when it happens."

Mu Sicheng dropped his hand from his face, his expression tense. "What now?"

"Evacuate the people." Bai Liu lifted his gaze. "Then we preemptively blow up the factory."

Tang Erda had commandeered a passing high-end private car, with Muke driving it at full speed toward the factory.

Muke and Liu Jiayi were in the back seat. The owner of the requisitioned car had been reluctant to lend it, but Muke handed over a credit card with a balance of over three million dollars, buying the car outright so they could make a quick trip.

"Still can't get through?" Muke glanced anxiously in the rearview mirror.

Tang Erda responded quietly, "I don't think we’ll get through. They always switch off their phones when they're on a mission. If we want to contact them, we'll have to go back to the Directorate headquarters and use the FM radio to intervene."

"It’s too late." Liu Jiayi shot back immediately. "Bai Liu should already be there. Call him and ask for an update."

As if on cue, Bai Liu’s call came through.

He called Tang Erda. "Captain Tang, is there any way to evacuate the citizens in the blast radius quickly?"

"A city-wide air-raid alert." Tang Erda replied quickly, but his expression tightened. "But that requires strong evidence of an imminent risk, and my privileges only allow me to deal with heretics in the Bureau. I can’t activate that alert."

"But we can’t prove it," Bai Liu responded rhetorically. "How can we explain to these people, who aren’t in the game, that the factory’s about to explode? It’s all in-game content, and we’ll be silenced if we

try to warn them, right?"

Tang Erda leaned back against the seat helplessly. "Yes... they're completely deaf to it."

"The explosion..." Tang Erda's voice was hoarse as he rubbed his eyes. "It's still going to happen, isn't it?"

Bai Liu answered frankly, "Yes."

"But maybe it's just an explosion." His tone remained steady, without a hint of panic. "Earlier, you said that if someone could prove that something as dangerous as a rose gas explosion would happen, the alarm could be activated, right?"

Tang Erda sat up straighter, realizing that Bai Liu had come up with some plan, but he couldn't figure it out.

"Yes," Tang Erda said, breathing heavily. "But no matter the method, they won't believe it. They'll just think we're crazy if we tell people to run."

"How do you plan to prove that such a terrible thing could actually happen?" Tang Erda asked.

Bai Liu's voice took on a lazy, amused tone. "Captain Tang, don't forget your privileges. Remember to bail me out."

Then he hung up, leaving a confused Tang Erda behind.

The wind hunts through the night as dawn approaches.

Bai Liu adjusts his black trench coat, which doesn't quite fit him.

After smashing the glass jar and tossing the time bomb far enough to explode, they, the two outsiders, were indeed spotted by the Rose Factory employees in the inner world.

Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng were discovered and chased by the staff, who were also frantically preparing a second explosion using a stockpile of rose perfume—just as Bai Liu had predicted.

To buy time, Bai Liu left the fast-moving Mu Sicheng in the inner world to disrupt the staff preparing for the second blast, while he logged out to handle evacuating the city's population from the blast

zone.

Before leaving the inner world, Mu Sicheng had asked Bai Liu and Tang Erda the same question: How would they convince the people in the real world that an explosion was imminent?

How could they convince ordinary people, who weren't part of the game, that their world was a brutal game full of monsters?

Especially since Bai Liu had been banned.

The real world felt a little cold, so Bai Liu wore the trench coat he had taken from the inner world to protect himself.

He stepped out from the hidden stairwell at the back of the factory, heading for the top floor of the Rose Factory. A large red-and-white plastic loudspeaker, which seemed to be used for staff training, was strapped to his wrist—just as it had been in the inner world.

As soon as he reached the top floor, the team below, who were closely inspecting the factory, spotted him.

"There's someone on the roof!"

"Is that the factory manager trying to escape? Hit the high beams and see who it is!"

"Level 1 alert!"

Two unmistakable beams of high-powered light swiveled toward him, illuminating the figure on the rooftop. Bai Liu squinted against the glare but didn't move, remaining still atop the highest point of the building.

The cold night breeze ruffled his hair and tugged at the hem of his ill-fitting trench coat. Morning dew lingered around him, and the scent of roses brushed his feet.

Below, the people recognized him.

"It's Bai Liu!!!"

"How did he get here?! Alert the Processing Bureau! The fleeing heretic 0006 has appeared at the factory!"

"Captain Tang says he's extremely dangerous! He can control all the heretics! What's he doing here?!"

Su Yang and Lu Yizhan stared up in disbelief at Bai Liu, who appeared to have descended from the sky.

Bai Liu, with his usual smile, raised the loudspeaker to his lips. "Good morning, everyone."

"Well, before I escaped, I decided to do something fitting for my status —" Bai Liu's smile widened, and the wind picked up around him. "—as a laid-off worker branded as antisocial. How could I not get back at society?"

"I lost my job, my friends, everything I had for no reason. I couldn't find anyone to hold responsible, and I was branded a monster and locked in a cage by you."

"How could I not retaliate?" Bai Liu's grin deepened, and he whispered, "I've decided to show you what it feels like to become a monster too."

"I'm going to blow up this entire factory, fill the world with dried leaf rose gas, and make all of you my slaves."

For a few seconds, there was stunned silence, before someone shouted urgently, "Contact the city! Sound the air-raid siren and evacuate all residents from the blast zone!!!"

"Someone is intentionally spreading the gas addictive substance!!!"

Su Yang watched Bai Liu creepily, standing on the top floor with one hand in his trench coat pocket.

The man was smiling at him, amused, through the morning breeze and the fading night. He spoke casually, his lips moving languidly, "Do you like the scent of roses, Captain Su?"

Reality

"Immediate apprehension of Heretic 0006, Bai Liu!"

Su Yang pulled out his walkie-talkie and issued a stern order, "HQ is sending in a large number of gas masks and extractors. The rest of the team will take the perimeter and use the extractors to secure the entire factory."

"Make sure to control the aroma from the explosion!"

The team members saluted and quickly moved out.

The only ones left in the clearing in front of the factory were a few team members with their guns trained on Bai Liu, and Su Yang and Lu Yizhan, who still hadn't recovered. Lu Yizhan stared at Bai Liu in disbelief, his clothes fluttering in the cold night wind.

Bai Liu, showing no sign of guilt or urgency, casually waved at him, unfazed by the fact that he was committing a mortal sin and should be fleeing immediately. With a smile, he addressed Lu Yizhan: "Remember to buy me thirty years of hotpot, Lu Yizhan."

For a moment, Lu Yizhan's mind was distracted by Bai Liu's words, and he almost asked, "Wasn't it ten years of hotpot? How did it suddenly go up to thirty?"

But before he could speak, Bai Liu raised his hands in surrender, as though he could sense the team members approaching behind him to arrest him, fully prepared to give in.

The team was momentarily stunned but quickly reacted, moving to pin Bai Liu's hands behind his back and cuffing him with the strongest, tightest handcuffs they had.

At that moment, Su Yang's stern voice came through a communicator on one of the team members: "Be careful not to engage him! Captain Tang said he has a strong verbal compulsion on strangers! He's very good at manipulating people to do things for him!"

"Is that so, Captain Su?" Bai Liu approached the team member's communicator slowly and methodically, tapping the answer button with his chin before the team member could react. He smiled into the device and said, "If I told you I have a solution to the rose perfume issue, would I be allowed to speak?"

All the team members focused their attention on Bai Liu for a moment. One couldn't resist stepping forward, grabbing Bai Liu by the neck, and demanding to know the solution.

This, they thought, was the way to save Captain Su and the 1,000 ordinary people from the Heretic's Bureau.

Su Yang's breath hitched for a moment before he coldly ordered, "Put him in mouth shackles and forbid anyone from making contact with him until HQ takes over!"

"Of course," Su Yang's tone softened slightly, a common psychological tactic in their interrogations, "If you're willing to share the location of your explosion, I could get you to talk."

Bai Liu sighed and replied nonchalantly, "I really tried to stop it, but the explosion was what solved everything."

Su Yang paused for less than a second before issuing a new order: "Withhold his ability to speak, forbid him to communicate with anyone, and don't let him influence anyone."

The team affixed a large ring shackle to Bai Liu's molars, forcing his mouth open—this tool, usually used to prevent heretics from biting during transport, resembled a dentist's mouthpiece but looked far more sinister.

Bai Liu was escorted down from the roof, his mouth forced open, unable to speak. As he passed Lu Yizhan, he glanced sidelong at him, his hands cuffed behind his back, and silently made the gesture for thirty.

Lu Yizhan stood, dumbfounded, watching as Bai Liu was led away to the car.

For a moment, his knees went weak. He took two deep breaths to steady himself and turned to Su Yang, who had followed the car. "What... what are you taking Bai Liu for?"

"Interrogation," Su Yang replied, placing one foot on the car and glancing back at Lu Yizhan. "Leave it to the professionals. We'll interrogate him like a heretic."

With that, he shut the door.

The last time Lu Yizhan saw Bai Liu, the man looked up at him, his

gaze calm and unwavering.

—It was as if he had expected all of this.

The car, speeding toward the factory, suddenly swerved under Muke's driving, veering onto another road and leaving blackened tire marks behind.

"Bai Liu's phone is out of order, right?" Muke kept his eyes on the road but leaned his whole body toward the back seat, his voice dripping with venom. "When Bai Liu made that declaration, Captain Tang, do you know what that meant for you?"

"He should've been taken by your Heretic Authority. You'd better throw in the towel and get him out of there." Muke's eyes were cold with intensity. "If anything happens to Bai Liu, I won't spare any of you in the Heresy Authority."

"That includes you, Captain Tang." Muke glanced at the rearview mirror, his expression turning grim.

Sitting in the backseat, Tang Erda's mind was as muddled as ever. Bai Liu's comment had stirred him into confusion—it was clearly the same as in the other timelines, but with an entirely different purpose.

This made Tang Erda wonder: was the Bai Liu from the other timeline also there to save the day?

But Tang Erda quickly dismissed the thought. Bai Liu wasn't there to save anyone. His purpose at the factory was to spectate, or rather, to enjoy the explosion as the world fell apart around him.

Bai Liu knew when the factory manager would detonate the factory and deliberately directed an entire third detachment to the Rose Factory at that precise moment. Then, he positioned himself on the top floor, with the best view, to witness the disaster unfold up close.

But Bai Liu was different from his other selves—he found inspiration in chaos and used it to achieve what he hadn't been able to do before. He used a completely irreversible approach to accomplish his goal.

Tang Erda never imagined that someone would so directly threaten others into following their lead, but this was exactly how Bai Liu operated.

The process was harrowing, the methods extreme, and the consequences costly. It was beyond what any normal person could have come up with.

But Bai Liu had achieved his goal.

The sirens wailed relentlessly in the sky, their shrill echo reverberating over the city. Tang Erda watched as the lights in the houses along the street flickered on. People rushed out of their homes in panic, some in their pajamas, hastily driving toward the outskirts of the city in response to the sirens.

Meanwhile, a large number of heavily armed police officers arrived, following the sound of the alarm. Tang Erda observed some team members joining the scene.

Dressed in full protective gear—face masks, gloves, and tightly wrapped from head to toe—the officers wielded shield-sized electric fan-like extractors. They formed a reverse exhaust defense line, positioned five kilometers from the factory.

The quiet streets, once still, were now filled with activity.

Tang Erda tried to maintain his composure, struggling to make sense of the chaotic situation.

"Bai Liu's phone is off, so he's probably under the control of the team," he muttered. "Mu Sicheng's phone is out of service, and we still don't know what's going on. If Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng are both in the custody of the Heresy Processing Bureau—two high-risk heretics—then they'll likely be transferred to the Directorate for interrogation."

Tang Erda sighed deeply. "If Bai Liu covered for Mu Sicheng and was arrested alone, I know the Bureau of Heresy has a stronghold three kilometers from here."

"It's specifically for pre-processing heretics before they enter the Directorate. Now that the explosion hasn't happened, they'll need to extract information about it. Bai Liu will most likely be transferred there for interrogation."

"What if Bai Liu stays silent during the interrogation and continues pretending to be the mastermind behind the bombing to ensure the citywide retreat happens?" Muke asked, his tone calm but rhetorical.

Tang Erda's voice took on a sharp edge. "... We could use some of that

on him, specifically for heretic interrogation..."

Muke's grip on the steering wheel tightened. "Like the Murphy Mirror, right?"

Tang Erda closed his eyes, the weight of the situation heavy on him. "… Yes."

Muke gritted his teeth and slammed his foot down on the accelerator.

Bai Liu was led into an interrogation room draped with a black cloth, which was only removed from his face after he was seated.

Looking across the table, Bai Liu raised an eyebrow in mild surprise.

Su Yang's gaze was heavy as he focused on the ring that was lodged in Bai Liu's molars. With a subtle flick of his fingers, the shackle that prevented Bai Liu from speaking was removed with a soft click.

The pressure on his gums had caused blood to seep from the corner of Bai Liu's mouth the moment the yoke was removed.

He absently licked the cold, metallic blood from his lips, then looked directly at Su Yang with a smirk. "I didn't think Captain Su would be interested in questioning me a second time."

"Isn't that what you wanted to see?" Su Yang didn't flinch, returning his gaze with equal intensity. "You named me as the poisoner of the rose perfume and used that to lure my team. If they were the ones to interrogate you, their fear of me would make them easy prey for you, catching them off guard."

Bai Liu leaned back in his seat, his hands cuffed behind his back, but the smile on his face only grew. "So, you chose to come yourself to protect your team from me, Captain Su. You're a good captain."

His smile widened as he added, "—reminds me of another not-so-popular captain."

"Compared to you." Bai Liu lifted his gaze, still smiling as he looked at Su Yang. "He's been treated so poorly by the players, no one even cares where he is after such a big event."

Su Yang's heart sank at the thought of Tang Erda, who had been so determined to capture Bai Liu, only to be questioned. His hands

clenched in his lap, but he quickly forced himself to calm down, refusing to be distracted by Bai Liu. He remained focused, maintaining a cool demeanor.

The captain was right—Bai Liu was skilled at manipulating emotions, almost like a heretic himself.

“You wanted me to interrogate you, and now you’ve got what you wanted,” Su Yang said, locking eyes with Bai Liu. “So, are you willing to tell me where the blast site is?”

“No, I don’t want to,” Bai Liu responded softly.

Su Yang stared at him, trying to maintain control. “Why are you doing this? If you have an agenda, you can tell us. The Heresy Bureau can help you achieve it in a more reasonable way.”

“There’s no reason for that,” Bai Liu replied, amusement dancing in his eyes as he met Su Yang’s gaze. “If I must say, I’m just trying to show the world that there’s a third spellbinding pastime besides cigarettes and alcohol.”

Bai Liu leaned forward, his voice dropping to a whisper as he got close to Su Yang’s ear, his smile soft and unsettling. “They should try the rose,” he murmured. “Because it’s really wonderful.”

“I’m sure your captain would agree with me too.”

Su Yang’s pupils contracted slightly.

Reality

Muke drove the car as if it were taking off, reaching the stronghold Tang Erda had mentioned in less than three minutes.

Tang Erda got out of the car, adjusting his uniform and ID badge, and shut the door behind him. She blocked Muke from exiting, warning him sternly, “You and Liu Jiayi are still on the Heresy Authority’s wanted list, so stay in the car. If you insist on coming in with me, you’ll only delay saving him.”

Muke paused, his hand still on the door handle.

“I promise I’ll bring Bai Liu out unharmed,” Tang Erda assured him, his eyes locked on Muke’s. “He’s kept his word to me, and I’ll keep mine to him.”

“Do whatever it takes to get him out,” Muke said, pulling his gun from his back as he hurried toward the stronghold.

The Heresy Bureau’s base looked like an ordinary convenience store, but in the midst of the city’s panic, it seemed odd that the store was still running smoothly, with people calmly shopping.

As soon as Tang Erda walked in, the staff noticed him, then happily led him to the warehouse.

Watching Tang Erda disappear into the store, Muke took a deep breath, finally releasing his grip on the door.

“Do you think he’ll do everything he can to get Bai Liu out?” Muke asked uncertainly, glancing at Liu Jiayi, who had remained silent in the backseat.

Liu Jiayi, wearing sunglasses to hide her unusual eyes, showed no sign of panic. After Tang Erda left, she stretched, claiming the entire back seat and settling in as though ready for a nap.

“You’re asking me?” Liu Jiayi turned her head toward Muke, pulling down her magic mirror to reveal her gray eyes. “I think you should ask the question differently.”

Muke was slightly startled by Liu Jiayi’s relaxed demeanor but quickly responded, “...What question should I ask?”

“It’s not about when Captain Tang or whatever his title is will get Bai Liu out,” Liu Jiayi said, pushing the magic mirror back with a finger and slouching comfortably. “It’s about when Bai Liu thinks Captain Tang is qualified—and willing—to get him out.”

Muke frowned. “What do you mean…?”

Liu Jiayi whispered, “You’re not an idiot. Why are you still so confused about Bai Liu? Can’t you see? Bai Liu let himself be caught by the Dangerous Heresy Authority on purpose.”

Muke froze. “…On purpose?!”

“Right.” Liu Jiayi’s tone was unflappable. “If not, Bai Liu could’ve achieved his goal after making that explosive declaration. He forced the city into alert mode—he could’ve used his eye flip to go into the ‘inner world’ to hide, not stay put and wait to be caught.”

“But he got caught anyway.” Liu Jiayi shrugged. “That can only mean one thing—he let himself be caught on purpose.”

“Then why did Bai Liu let himself get caught?” Muke jolted, suddenly staring at the convenience store. “Is he trying to trick Tang Erda?”

“I think you’re right about one of his goals.” Liu Jiayi shifted in her seat, continuing, “Bai Liu allowed Tang Erda to join, so now Tang Erda is part of our group. The guy is so controlling, he won’t let Tang Erda feel a sense of belonging to anyone but us.”

“Bai Liu probably wanted to use this incident to force Tang Erda to make a choice—to cut himself off from the Heresy Authority and be completely controlled by him. Tang Erda’s the type to be easily manipulated out of guilt, and Bai Liu’s taking advantage of that.”

Liu Jiayi glanced sideways at Muke. “If I’m right, Bai Liu would have had the person in the Heresy Bureau who’s closest to Captain Tang interrogate him, even inducing him to be punished…”

“-If seeing Bai Liu punished by those closest to him would make Tang Erda feel more guilt and voluntarily cut himself off from the Heresy Bureau to make amends for Bai Liu…” Muke muttered, finishing her thought.

Liu Jiayi snapped her fingers. “Bingo!”

Muke exhaled. “So Bai Liu did this for the league, right?”

“Exactly.” Liu Jiayi nodded. “Tang Erda, as a committed main attacker who was loyal to his original team’s tactician, wasn’t submissive to his new team. Bai Liu, as the new tactician taking over, needed to break him psychologically to ensure his absolute loyalty.”

“This kind of treatment is usually a way of severing the psychological connection between someone and those closest to them.”

“-Just like Hearts did to me,” Liu Jiayi added after a moment of silence. “It was brutal, but necessary for a life-or-death tournament.”

“On the field, we can’t have the slightest doubt about the tactician’s orders—they must be absolute. Tang Erda clearly still has some rejection and doubts about Bai Liu, and that’s a fatal flaw for a starter of his caliber.”

“So Bai Liu set him up like this.” Muke relaxed, reassured that Bai Liu would be fine. “You said this was just one of Bai Liu’s goals. What about the rest?”

Liu Jiayi took off her sunglasses and gazed out the window at the convenience store’s sign.

The sign featured a small Q-shaped octopus—the logo of the Bureau of Dangerous Heresy.

“My guess is that Bai Liu used his status as a bomber to work with the Dangerous Heresy Authority, with Tang Erda acting as a third-party coordinator.”

Muke was stunned. “Cooperation?”

“With everything going on, the Heresy Bureau should be desperate to take down Bai Liu. And this is still cooperation?”

“What did you do to the captain?!” Su Yang’s tone finally shifted, his fingers tightening on the tabletop as he struggled to hold back his rising anger.

Bai Liu leaned back on the bench, which creaked under his weight. Crossing his legs, he lifted his chin slightly, flashing an almost contemptuous smile. “I compelled him with rose perfume and made him completely loyal to me.”

“He was abandoned by you, so I picked him up, trained him to be loyal to me, and to betray you.” Bai Liu smiled wider. “What’s wrong with that?”

“We didn’t abandon the captain!” Su Yang slammed his hand onto the tabletop, his breath shaky as he tried to steady himself, to regain control. He needed to change the subject, which Bai Liu had deftly deflected. “Where was the explosion?”

Bai Liu smiled, unfazed. “At the factory. Didn’t Captain Su know?”

Su Yang pressed further. “Where in the factory?”

“Oh yes, Captain Su still doesn’t know why the explosion site was chosen at this particular factory, does he?” Bai Liu’s smile grew more pleasant. “I know Captain Su’s home is within five kilometers of it.”

Su Yang’s breath caught in his throat for a moment.

“Captain Su has seen the videos of the deaths of people who tried to escape, right?” Bai Liu leaned back, resting his head on his shoulder as he looked at Su Yang. “Let me tell you something you didn’t see in those videos.”

“The blast’s impact creates a fragrance strong enough, within five kilometers, to send newborns and mothers into a state of heavy addiction,” Bai Liu’s voice was light, almost casual. “If they don’t get a high concentration of perfume within thirty minutes, they begin to wilt.”

“Captain Su hasn’t seen the wilting process of a heavy addict, has he? I’ve seen it many times.”

“The baby’s arms and eyes start to crack open like dry skin. The pain makes them cry, begging you for perfume as if it were milk.”

“And you, as a father, knowing exactly what they want, can only watch as your child screams in agony, turning into a corpse in your arms—broken into pieces…”

Su Yang’s eyes were bloodshot as he forced out the words. “Where was the explosion inside the factory?”

Bai Liu looked directly at him, then abruptly curled his lips into a smile, his tone now turning more conciliatory. “Why do you think I know so much about the wilting process of a newborn under the

influence of the perfume?”

“Because I’ve experienced it myself, of course,” Bai Liu said, his voice softening. “A poor child withered in my arms, his mother kneeling at my feet, helplessly begging me to save him.”

Bai Liu sighed, a sad, almost nostalgic look crossing his face. “But I could do nothing but watch him wither, and his father wasn’t even around.”

Su Yang tried to maintain his composure, but his mind raced, his fears growing like a black hole inside him. No... An An and the baby were fine before he left...

His gaze instinctively shifted toward the door of the interrogation room, where a team member outside held up a scale, his face grim.

This is heresy [1076]—the judge's scales, a tool used to detect lies.

When Bai Liu lies, the scales tip to the [no] side. Throughout the interrogation, the needle had pointed to the [yes] direction.

This meant that Bai Liu hadn’t lied about a single word.

Su Yang’s mind went blank.

Bai Liu’s voice dropped to a whisper, his eyes downcast. “Captain Su, you know bombers often pick small, relatively close locations to test their explosions before carrying out the actual plan, right?”

“Guess where the pre-test site for tonight’s explosion was?”

Bai Liu’s eyes gleamed with a smile, his lips curling at the corners. It was a smile Su Yang had seen on countless deranged and tainted faces —a completely dehumanizing smile, lighter on Bai Liu’s face, but more disturbing than ever.

Bai Liu smiled, his voice soft yet cold. “How did you think we got your ID card?”

“Maybe you could ask your wife how she’s doing tonight?”

Reality

Su Yang emerged from the interrogation room, his face ashen, appearing more like the one being interrogated than Bai Liu. He almost collapsed as he stepped out.

His team members quickly rushed to support him.

The interrogation had taken place in a one-way glass room, and the conversation could be heard by everyone outside. Everyone understood the implications of Bai Liu's words.

"Captain! Use other heretics to interrogate him! Like that Eye of the Spring! Captain Tang said 0006's weakness is water!" one of the team members urged.

"No!" Su Yang snapped, coming to his senses, gripping the team member's hand to stop him. "There's no direct evidence that Bai Liu is really a heretic. We can't use that on him."

"If he's just a common criminal, it's against the rules. We can't do this to him. It's unfair..." the team member's voice shook with frustration. "A common criminal who put the whole city at risk with a dry leaf rose explosion?!"

"Captain," the team member continued, his voice growing more intense, "I know what you're trying to do. You're trying to treat Bai Liu like a human, not a heretic. But does he deserve that?"

Su Yang stared at him, his pale face resolute. "He's worthy."

The team member was momentarily stunned by Su Yang's unwavering response. His chest heaved as he struggled to regain his composure. "Even if your loved ones—your children, your parents—could have been tortured to death in that explosive pre-experiment, you still insist he shouldn't be treated as a heretic?"

"Yes, I insist." Su Yang didn't hesitate. "If Bai Liu is a human being, then he shouldn't be treated like a monster."

The team member took a deep breath. "Captain Su, the second team is coming to take over Bai Liu. If you don't get something out of him before then, they won't leave him for us to deal with. They'll go straight to the spring, just like Captain Tang did."

"I know." Su Yang waved them off, taking a sip of water before pushing himself to his feet. "I'll try again."

Su Yang reentered the interrogation room.

He hadn't slept for days, and the toll of the dry leaf rose had left him haggard. Yet, he did his best to remain calm, sitting across from Bai Liu— the man who had likely done something to his wife and daughter.

Su Yang poured Bai Liu a glass of water, setting it before him. "I really want to help you. If you tell me where the explosion was set, I'll do my best to help you get leniency."

Bai Liu's eyes flicked briefly to the glass of water, but he didn't reach for it.

Su Yang's voice remained steady, but his mind raced. "Is there someone preventing you from talking? Someone else involved in the bombing? If you're afraid of retaliation after leaving here, we can protect you..."

Bai Liu interrupted him, his expression shifting. He glanced at Su Yang with a hint of pity in his voice. "It's not that I don't want to tell you. It's that I can't. Even if I do, you won't be able to understand. You won't be able to see, hear, or remember it."

Su Yang was taken aback. Bai Liu continued, his tone calm and almost detached. "Your captain fought tooth and nail to get you... and these people behind that glass will never see the truth."

Bai Liu turned his gaze to Su Yang, his smile almost melancholic. "It's foolish, but if that's what he wants, if you can't carry the burden of his foolishness, I might have to... cut you apart."

Su Yang's heart skipped a beat. "What do you mean?"

Before he could get an answer, his communicator rang.

"Captain Su! Captain Tang is here!" came the voice over the intercom.

"Captain Su, the second branch is here too!" another voice added urgently.

Su Yang's face flushed. He stood up, heading for the door, but Bai Liu's gaze met his unflinchingly, as if waiting for him to answer his

question.

"Captain Su, when you spend time with your wife and daughter, do you ever feel like your protectiveness will one day suffocate them?" Bai Liu's voice was soft, but heavy with meaning.

Su Yang froze for a moment, uncertainty creeping into his thoughts.

Bai Liu's words lingered in the air. "Your captain feels the same way."

Bai Liu turned his attention to the glass, his expression unreadable, as if peering through it to something beyond. Su Yang knew it was impossible—unless Bai Liu wore special contact lenses, he couldn't see what was on the other side.

Su Yang stepped out of the interrogation room, his mind clouded by Bai Liu's cryptic words. There was something unsettlingly gentle in Bai Liu's coldness, as if he had chosen to leave something cruel for Captain Tang to face instead of finishing it himself.

Out in the hallway, Su Yang walked into a heated confrontation.

The second detachment, known for its ruthless and decisive methods, had a much more brutal reputation than the third detachment. Their leader, Cen Buming, was a man of severe authority, and under his command, there would be no hesitation to use extreme measures against a suspected heretic.

However, the third detachment had one trump card: Tang Erda.

Tang Erda's authority was unmatched, delegated to him by the former head of the first detachment. Even Cen Buming was bound by this higher authority.

As soon as Su Yang emerged, he saw Tang Erda confronting Cen Buming.

Cen Buming's appearance was imposing. His left eye was covered by an eyepatch, and two deep scars ran from his jaw to his collarbone. His uniform was loosely draped over his shoulders, with bloodstains still visible on his cuffs. The ID card hanging from his jacket read:

[Second Detachment Leader: Cen Buming].

It was common knowledge that Cen Buming had lost his left eye during the arrest of a heretic. He had never appointed a vice-captain,

preferring to wield all the power himself.

"Captain Tang, Heretic 0006 should have been transferred to Detachment 2," Cen Buming said, his tone cold. "The explosion was imminent, and after 13 minutes with Team 3, no information was obtained. It's logical to move on to the next phase of interrogation. But your vice-captain—"

Cen Buming's piercing gaze focused on Su Yang, his eye bulging like a hawk's as he continued, "—Su Yang, has been inaction. This delay is a major dereliction of duty."

Tang Erda stepped forward, standing between Su Yang and Cen Buming. "I gave the order. Bai Liu is not yet confirmed as a heretic, and cannot be subjected to that kind of torture."

Cen Buming sneered, his gaze shifting to Tang Erda. "Captain Tang, if I remember correctly, you used more than three types of heresy on Heretic 0006 during the torture 25 hours ago. And in his escape, he unleashed heretics throughout headquarters, injuring 67 members, 17 of whom are still in critical condition."

Cen Buming's voice dropped into an icy sneer. "And now you're telling me he's not a heretic?"

He ripped his jacket off and tossed it aside, pulling out a file from the team member behind him. He handed it to Tang Erda, who flipped it open and froze at the number on the file: 0006.

The document confirmed Bai Liu had already been classified as a heretic by the Bureau of Heresy.

Tang Erda's eyes scanned the report with a stony expression. The file included disturbing details about Bai Liu's abilities—his manipulation of other heretics, his hostile nature, and his capacity for extreme cruelty. The report also noted his resistance to water, making him an especially dangerous target.

The final line of the report left no room for doubt:

Danger Class: Unknown (Extremely High, Classification Pending).

Reality

"Everything here, Captain Tang, is something you personally testified to in front of everyone. There's no turning your head and disowning it."

Cen Buming stepped forward, forcefully trying to enter the room where Bai Liu was being held.

But just as he reached the door, a loud bang echoed overhead. After the ground shook for a moment, someone stumbled through the exit, their face pale. They looked up at the group and spoke in a strained voice.

"Report! ... The factory exploded—it's gone up in flames!"

Su Yang, visibly anxious, immediately asked, "Have all the people within a five-kilometre radius been evacuated? Not just the citizens, but even the homeless on the streets—have they been informed?"

The man hastily swallowed before responding, "Everyone's been swept out and notified. Not a single cat was left behind. The smoke is still spreading, but we're setting up a second extraction line. It should contain the contamination within 28km of the factory."

"But the members of the first line of defense..." His voice faltered with sadness. "They're all tainted."

Tang Erda closed his eyes. The worries and fears he had been holding onto for so long relaxed in an instant. Every muscle in his body collapsed as he fell back onto a bench, his arms and legs dangling loosely over the edge, his head tilted back, staring at the blinding incandescent lights on the ceiling.

For a few seconds, he couldn't hear the voices around him. All he could hear was the ringing in his ears, punctuated by Bai Liu's calm voice—[Captain Tang, leave it to me. I have the solution.]

—This was the least amount of casualties and the most manageable outcome Tang Erda had ever experienced across all the worlds he'd known.

It felt unreal, like a dream granted by divine mercy.

Tang Erda raised a hand to his face and laughed aloud, breaking the

tense silence. His sudden laughter startled the players around him.

They turned their heads in shock, staring at Captain Tang, who was sitting on the bench, half-covering his face while laughing. For a moment, they wondered if their captain had lost his composure, overwhelmed by the bad news.

Cen Buming raised an eyebrow at him. "If Captain Tang is still drunk, I'll take the heretic 0006 who caused two major group accidents."

Tang Erda lowered his hand and stood up, his gaze darkening as he fixed it on Cen Buming. "You can't take him."

"I'm using my [Prophet] authority for the last time." Tang Erda took off his ID card and placed it on the table, sliding it in front of Cen Buming with four fingers. "I pledge as Captain to extract Heretic [0006] as my personal responsibility bound to him."

"If Bai Liu has done something wrong, I will take full responsibility for him." Tang Erda looked up steadily at Cen Buming. "If you want to torture him or kill him, then you'll have to torture and kill me too."

A long silence followed.

Su Yang stared at Tang Erda in disbelief. "Captain?!"

Tang Erda didn't blink as he locked eyes with Cen Buming.

Cen Buming remained silent for a few seconds before slowly reaching out and taking the Captain's ID card from the table. He raised his eyes to meet Tang Erda's gaze. "Captain Tang, once you bind this Heretic, you will no longer be able to return to the Heretic Authority, and you'll cease to be the 'shiny' captain you are."

"You must take responsibility for guarding the heretic for the rest of your life. If the heretic does anything wrong, you'll be guilty alongside it. And if you can no longer control the heretic, you'll have to take your own life and bring the heretic back..."

"You'll exist only to allow this heretic to move about in the world like a human. You'll be nothing but a cage, a safety pin to keep the heretic contained." Cen Buming asked, his voice low, "Even so, are you sure you want to release Heretic 0006?"

Tang Erda's gaze never wavered. "Yes."

"Even if, like the captain of a detachment, you lose your sanity and kill yourself because you're bound to Heretic 0001—do you still have no regrets?" Cen Buming's eyes bored into Tang Erda's.

"No regrets," Tang Erda replied firmly.

The [Prophet] permission within the Heretic Authority grants special privileges to the captain of the first detachment, and among these privileges is one that allows the captain to bind a heretic and release it into the human world, taking full responsibility for the heretic's actions.

This permission was an anomaly, running counter to the primary goal of the entire Heretics Directorate.

Whereas capturing heretics for the [Bureau for the Treatment of Dangerous Heretics] is a process of dehumanizing these dangerous individuals and treating them as nothing more than monsters, this authority instead attempts to restore human rights to these heretics and reintroduce them into society.

Naturally, this process is fraught with peril.

So when the original leader of the first detachment proposed this permission, a poignant question arose—[Who is responsible for the heretics released back into society?]

[What if these heretics continue to kill and harm others? Who will bear the consequences?]

Thus, the captain of the first detachment introduced the concept of [lifetime responsibility], or [parental responsibility authority].

Anyone advocating for a heretic's release assumes full responsibility for their actions—becoming the heretic's guardian, educator, and protector, taking on the role of a parent.

But as a parent of such a dangerous "child," constant surveillance is mandatory.

The player chosen to bear this responsibility essentially ceases to be a part of the Heretic Bureau and becomes the heretic's lifelong guardian.

No one wanted this responsibility. No team member willingly accepted it. They couldn't understand why the [Prophet] thought

these evil, dangerous heretics could somehow become human, deserving the compassion of parents and the hope of being reformed.

In the eyes of most team members, a heretic is a monster—a being fundamentally separate from humanity, born evil and deserving of eradication.

But the [Prophet] could see more of the future than they could, and so, in the end, this authority passed. The first experimental case was Heretic 0001.

But the experiment failed. The heretic went mad, killed the captain, and destroyed the records, leaving them sealed deep underground, never to be spoken of again.

Despite the failure, the authority still existed. It was a part of the strange permissions passed to Tang Erda by the [Prophet].

If Tang Erda used this [parental authority] on Bai Liu, he would have to step down as captain, guard Bai Liu at all times, and take full responsibility for everything Bai Liu did—including the recent explosion at the Rose Factory.

Cen Buming threw the ID card back onto the table. "How can you be responsible for this when nearly two thousand people are infected, including half our team?"

"Bai Liu has a solution," Tang Erda responded quickly.

Cen Buming scoffed. "A bomber, and you think that will fix things?"

Tang Erda took a deep breath but didn't engage with Cen Buming's taunt. Instead, he asked, "Can I speak with Bai Liu inside first?"

"If you insist on binding this dangerous heretic," Cen Buming, who had stepped back to the doorway, gave Tang Erda a meaningful look, his tone light, "You certainly have the right to talk to your 'child.'"

Tang Erda pushed open the door and walked in.

Bai Liu, chin propped on his hand, glanced up boredly at Tang Erda.

His eyes lingered briefly on the empty spot on Tang Erda's right breast where the ID card used to be before he smirked. "Wow, Captain Tang must be making quite the sacrifice to get me out of here."

Tang Erda turned and sat upright in a chair, hands neatly clasped on

the table, head bowed in silence. He looked more like someone being reprimanded than Bai Liu, who had a casual, relaxed posture.

"I'm sorry," Tang Erda said quietly. "Thank you."

The apology was for everything he had done before, and the gratitude was for Bai Liu's willingness to help despite it all.

"It's fine, no need to thank me," Bai Liu said with a smile.

Bai Liu glanced at the glass, then asked, "How many people were affected by the explosion?"

"The current count is nearly a thousand, mostly team members," Tang Erda sighed. "But the spread is under control, so it could be worse."

"So, you came in because someone wants to save those thousand team members?" Bai Liu dropped his hand from his chin and rested his head on the table, cocking it to one side, his voice tinged with amusement. "Not really, but I have one condition."

Tang Erda leaned in, intrigued. "What's the condition?"

Bai Liu's eyes were still fixed on the one-way glass as he smiled faintly. "I never make a deal without something in return."

"If you want to work with me and let me save lives, show me something that can impress me."

Tang Erda stepped out the door and addressed the team. "You all heard Bai Liu's conditions."

The team members exchanged complex and mixed glances, overwhelmed by Bai Liu's request, with the exception of Cen Buming, whose expression remained unreadable.

The captain, however, seemed intrigued, his gaze fixed on Bai Liu, who was still lounging behind the glass, seemingly asleep.

"Interesting," Cen Buming remarked with a smirk. "I thought he was going to ask for money, but it turns out he wants us to open the door to Heresy 0001."

Reality

Headquarters of the Bureau for the Treatment of Dangerous Heresies

Bai Liu was escorted here under heavy guard. This time, he was ushered through the gates with a formal reception.

On either side of the main entrance, people stood in line, their eyes filled with fear, hatred, and disbelief as they stared at the heretic who had escaped last night and voluntarily returned this morning.

The massive glowing white sphere slowly rotated, opening its entrance to him.

Bai Liu entered without a glance, flanked by his second detachment leader, Cen Buming, on his left, and Tang Erda on his right, with a large contingent following behind them.

If his hands weren't still cuffed behind his back, he would've looked like the leader of both teams—the former captain of the first detachment.

But in reality, he was just a fugitive who had been pursued by two detachments before being captured and brought back.

Bai Liu was led to the elevator. Cen Buming swiped his card and pressed the operation button, while Tang Erda stepped forward, took a deep breath, and pressed the bottom button.

The elevator descended, plunging deeper into the ground.

At some point, the smell of the sea began to permeate the narrow lift.

"I'm surprised you agreed to my terms so quickly," Bai Liu said, glancing at Cen Buming, who stood behind him on his left. "After all, Heretic 0001 seems very important to you."

Cen Buming glanced at him. "Not more important than two thousand lives. It's more significant to the first detachment captain—its guardian, and the one who decided to seal it, a heresy we don't even know much about."

He paused. "And you just said you'd take a look. It's not our problem." Cen Buming sharply tapped the back of Bai Liu's head, forcing it forward with a click. "Look ahead and don't look at me. The dossier

says your eyes have a... compelling effect on people."

Bai Liu, caught off guard by the tap, said nothing.

Tang Erda, who had provided the information for the file, remained silent.

The elevator stopped, and the doors opened smoothly. Bai Liu stepped out.

Stepping once again into the depths of the Dangerous Heresy Bureau, the atmosphere was drastically different from last time, but the scene remained the same—a long, dark tunnel, completely devoid of light, with the scent of seawater drifting in from an unknown source. At the end, a door stood silently, forever sealed.

"Just to be clear," Cen Buming spoke as they walked, "we're not opening this door for you. After all, we don't know how dangerous Heretic 0001 is." He glanced at Bai Liu. "We promised you could use Heretic 7061, the Mirror of Perspective, to see what's behind the door."

"One minute. That's all."

Cen Buming held up a black box marked with [7061] and waved a strangely shaped watch in front of Bai Liu's eyes. "If you confirm, I'll unlock the cuffs, give you the Mirror of Perspective, and start the clock."

Bai Liu turned to Cen Buming, accepting the uncuffing without objection.

Cen Buming unlocked the cuffs, but added, "As far as I know, everyone who's seen Heretic 0001 has gone mad and committed suicide."

He paused. "Including my former captain, the greatest captain of the Heresy Bureau, [Prophet]. It's not too late to back out."

As soon as the cuffs were removed, Cen Buming pressed a gun to Bai Liu's head.

Bai Liu raised his hands in a casual manner to show he was unarmed, then rubbed his wrists, which were bruised from the cuffs. He turned his head to face Cen Buming, who stood with the gun still pointed at him, and asked with interest, "And this great captain, did he say

anything else about Heretic 0001?"

Tang Erda, standing nearby, shook his head. "Most of the information is sealed in top-secret files, and no one has access to it."

"But there's a small part I know." Cen Buming looked at Bai Liu. "[The Prophet] said everyone would be so terrified of what Heretic 0001 reveals that they'd go mad upon seeing it."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "Like Murphy's Magic Mirror?"

"No," Cen Buming replied, moving closer to Bai Liu with the gun pressed against his forehead, his eyes as cold as the muzzle. "Murphy's mirror is fake. What Heretic 0001 shows you is real." He leaned in closer. "All heretics have names. Do you know what Heretic 0001's name is?"

Bai Liu asked, "What is it?"

"[The Future]."

Bai Liu glanced at Tang Erda, who seemed just as disoriented as he was. He, too, was hearing the name Heretic 0001 for the first time.

"[The Future]? Why does it drive so many people mad with fear?" Bai Liu turned his attention to Cen Buming, whose demeanor suggested he was harboring many secrets.

"Maybe the very existence of [The Future] is to make people afraid and drive them mad," Cen Buming answered coolly, pressing the gun to the back of Bai Liu's head as he guided him forward. "Fear comes from the unknown. Is there anything more unknowable, more frightening, than [The Future]?"

Bai Liu raised his hands and walked forward. "Sounds like Captain Cen has seen his [future]."

"I haven't," Cen Buming said, his tone unnervingly calm. "But the known [future] would strip away both my fear and my motivation to chase it." He paused, then added, "But you're about to decide whether you want to see your [future]."

Bai Liu looked up and saw the massive, welded-shut door of Heretic 0001 before him.

The door was tall, cold, and impregnable. It stood like an immovable

wall between Bai Liu and the scent of Xie Ta that lingered in the [future].

Bai Liu inhaled deeply, sensing Xie Ta in the [future] that awaited him.

"Thinking?" Cen Buming asked, eyeing Bai Liu. "Do you want to see your scary [future]?"

"Maybe sometimes [The Future] isn't so scary," Bai Liu replied softly. "When you know there's someone in your [future]."

Without turning around, Bai Liu calmly extended his hand to Cen Buming, who, after a moment of hesitation, placed the box containing Heretic 7061 in Bai Liu's palm and unlocked it with his fingerprint.

The heavy stainless steel box unfolded in all directions, revealing a pair of finely crafted, old-fashioned spectacles, wrapped in velvet cloth.

"Hold it up until it's flat against the line of your pupil position, like when a doctor measures your prescription for nearsightedness," Tang Erda directed in a hushed voice. "Adjust it until the iron door in front of you becomes transparent."

At the same time, Cen Buming pressed a button on his watch, starting the countdown.

As the second hand ticked, Bai Liu saw through the old, scratched lenses of the monocle. The iron door slowly faded away, revealing an empty, silent, white void.

The pure white light spread endlessly inward, as if no matter how much one looked, all that could be seen were these emotionless lights.

Then, as Bai Liu’s vision began to blur, a small television with a static-filled screen appeared in the distance.

It flickered twice, then changed to a black-and-white screen with a blinking dot and a large row of subtitles:

[Last World Line Game]
[Player: Bai Liu and his friends (?) We]
[Set Mode: Very Hard Mode (Hell Mode)]
[Setting the main game part 1 - The tragedy of parting love]

The image blurred as if viewed through a haze, reminiscent of a horror game from the 80s or 90s.

On the screen, Bai Liu saw bobbing water, floating ice, and bubbles rising from his mouth and nose. He appeared to have fallen into the water, struggling weakly. Judging by the floating limbs, he had been drowning for over four minutes, yet seemed to be diving deeper instead of swimming toward the surface, as if reaching for something that had sunk below.

As the perspective shifted, Bai Liu saw what he was reaching for: a heart, still beating, sinking into the ocean floor.

Just as he was about to grasp it, a hand reached through his chest and grabbed the heart first, crushing it as it was pulled away, the blood misting out into the water.

Bai Liu watched himself slowly turn, his body stiffening and sinking, his eyelids closing as the waters turned red and blue, the screen flickering and turning black.

But in that fleeting moment, he saw the man who had crushed his heart—his face identical to Tawil's.

The figure, holding the still-beating heart, watched from above as Bai Liu froze in the icy water, the cold dark sea consuming him.

The image faded out, and new captions appeared:

[Setting up the main game part 2 - Ten-year-old friends who went their separate ways]

The small TV screen trembled violently, as if someone was shaking Bai Liu, shouting at him in desperation:

"Bai Liu! You can't go on any further! You've done enough to win!"

Bai Liu recognized the voice.

He also recognized the man who was shaking him on the screen—his face bruised, tears streaming down, a look of desperation in his eyes. It was the first time in ten years that Bai Liu had seen this expression.

Lu Yizhan stood before him, gripping his shoulders, wrestling him to the ground repeatedly.

Bai Liu's body was drenched in blood, bruises covering his limbs,

while Lu Yizhan, though less wounded, seemed to be on the brink of tears. He wiped his eyes, his face a bloody mess, before looking up and choking out, "Bai Liu, what is the meaning of your existence?"

"- Just to be the monster standing opposite me?"

"Aren't you alone?"

Reality

Lu Yizhan's screen fades to black, and a new line of captions appears on the small TV.

[Setting the Game's Main Line, Part 3 – The Fractured Intimate Team]

The scene fades in from a distant view, revealing a full sun over the sea, shrouded in a gentle, misty haze. As the camera draws inwards, it focuses on a vast, majestic temple, mysterious and beautiful, hidden within the blue sea mist and the light of the day.

Yet, it seems the temple has just endured a fierce battle. Black craters mark the ground from fallen fire and stone, with unmistakable fusion marks: Liu Jiayi's poison, Mu Sicheng's claw scratches, Tang Erda's bullet holes, and Muke's dagger cuts.

The men should have been here, but strangely, Bai Liu is the only one present. It's also odd that Bai Liu hasn't found any traces of his own attacks.

The marks from the fishbone whip are distinct, but Bai Liu searches the footage several times and finds nothing. The signs of attack from the other four men, however, are everywhere.

It feels as though Bai Liu had never been there or that his presence no longer mattered in a team battle where everyone fought fiercely.

As Bai Liu presses on, through the charred jungle shrubs and scattered grey stones, he finally finds the trail of the four men.

Or perhaps "trail" isn't the right word—it should be "corpses."

Liu Jiayi, with a bullet hole in her forehead, lies on her back, her grey eyes wide open. The poison from her hand spills onto the ground, where Muke slumps.

Muke’s eyes are dazed. The dagger in his hand clings to one of its blades, while the other is lodged deep in Mu Sicheng's chest. Mu Sicheng is pinned to a tree by this dagger, slumped against it, his claws hanging limply at his side, blood dripping steadily down.

The blood belongs to Tang Erda, who leans against a rock, his head tilted and eyes closed. His throat is scratched and bloody, and his hand still grips a gun—but the gun is nowhere to be found.

Bai Liu now understands why there are no signs of his own attack. This was a team civil war that he hadn't participated in, and one that, for all its brutality, had not yet ended.

At that moment, Bai Liu hears a voice, faint and distant, drifting through the clouds with an eerie laugh that echoes across the mountains and forests:

"It's game over for this world line, Bai Liu."

"You lose."

The screen fades out, and the text on the small TV turns black:

[Set Game Mainline DLC - Game Archive for Other World Lines]

The noisy static on the TV clears up, revealing a plain white room identical to Heretic 0001. In the center of the room sits a long table, with five earthy-yellow file folders neatly arranged.

Behind the table, a man in the uniform of the Bureau of Heresy Processing is sorting through the files. The image is framed at his chest, obscuring his face, but an ID card clipped to his breast pocket reads [Captain of the First Detachment].

The name on the back is coded, making it impossible for Bai Liu to decipher.

The Captain flips open the first folder.

[Heresy 0004: Mu Sicheng]

Spiritual Degradation: After witnessing the accidental death of his classmate Yuan Qingqing in 200X, Mu Sicheng’s descent began. Encouraged by his college roommate Liu Huai, he entered the game. Later, he became enraged upon seeing Liu Huai's betrayal and killed him, ultimately joining a wandering circus...

Archived Ending in World 0237: Assassinated by Liu Jiayi, the Little Witch.

Archived Ending in World 0412: Abandoned by Bai Liu after three years of incapacitation, shot by Joker in a chase.

World 0045: Taken in by the Heretic Authority, transformed from a heretic to a normal human through spiritual ascension. Later integrated into society.

Formed a new team with Bai Liu in the current world line (Serial number 0658), mentally stable, no signs of further descent into monstrosity.

The Captain moves to the next folder.

[Heresy 0601: Liu Jiayi]

Spiritual Degradation: Born blind, Liu Jiayi endured severe abuse before the age of six due to her father's actions. After being kidnapped and sold into prostitution, she was saved by Liu Huai but later triggered a violent outburst, joining the game.

Archived Ending in World 0261: Shot dead by authorities after resisting arrest while abusing her father.

World 0068: Taken in by the Heretic Authority and integrated into society after spiritual ascension.

The Captain swiftly flips through the next files.

[Heresy 0005: Daniel Cinchimani]

Spiritual Degradation: Born into a family of arms smugglers, Daniel was raised in gangs, indifferent to death. At age fourteen, he led a gang in an arms smuggling operation involving Bai Liu's heretical goods. He later killed his father and brought his family to Bai Liu.

Archived Ending in World 0107: Killed while on a mission after slaughtering seven team members and releasing 108 heretics.

Daniel is highly domesticated by Bai Liu, making him extremely difficult to capture.

The Captain hesitates for a moment, sensing something unusual, before picking up another file.

[Heresy 0002: Tang Erda]

Spiritual Degradation: Originally a member of the first team, now the leader of the third team. His spiritual stability began to decline after he became a hunter in World 0317. Tang Erda, chosen by Bai Liu in World 0325, continued to descend through multiple world lines until he fully transformed into a heretic in World 0642.

Under observation by the Heretic Authority, Tang Erda is now mentally stable, with no further signs of degradation.

Bai Liu's gaze lingers on the final file, marked [Heresy 0006: Bai Liu].

Spiritual Degradation: Unknown, spiritual descension seems to have been complete from birth.

In every world line except the current one, Bai Liu has successfully contaminated the world, resulting in game over. In World 0407, his contamination successfully disrupted the timeline.

Bai Liu requests a game of Heretic Contamination against the Heretic Authority, with the outcome determining whether the world line is fully contaminated or not. If Bai Liu wins, the Heretic Authority will continue to exist in every world line as a hostile force.

The ending of this world line remains undetermined.

The images on the small TV fade to black as Bai Liu's lens is removed by Cen Buming, standing before a thick metal door.

Cen Buming raises an eyebrow. "Time's up. What did you see that you haven't seen enough of?"

"I saw the truth of the world," Bai Liu responds.

Cen Buming looks at him. "That sounds even scarier than [the future]."

Bai Liu smiles. "I agree with you on that one."

"So, what's the truth?" Cen Buming asks.

Bai Liu says softly, "The truth is that our reality is a game that can be constantly restarted."

Reality

Cen Buming covered his ears, frowning for a moment before quickly letting go. "What did you say? My ears were ringing, and I didn't hear you."

"Nothing." Bai Liu changed the subject. "I've seen what's behind the door, and in return, I'm going to give you a way to free these two thousand people."

"- There's something that can painlessly eliminate the contamination caused by dried leaf roses."

Cen Buming held his breath. "What is it?"

"Blood Lingzhi." Bai Liu shrugged. "If I remember correctly, you've preserved the raw material for the cure — or, in your words, 'housed' it — by taking the strain from the few children who survived the orphanage."

Cen Buming stared at Bai Liu, his gun now raised to Bai Liu's forehead. "Blood Lingzhi can only be cultivated using the blood of certain children. Yet, there are nearly two thousand adults waiting for rescue. Are you suggesting we use young children's blood to illegally breed heretics?"

Bai Liu smiled. "Isn't it often said that the antidote is hidden within five steps of the poison? Perhaps you could try using the blood of the two thousand infected to cultivate the Blood Lingzhi."

Cen Buming froze.

Bai Liu brushed past Cen Buming's shoulder as if he didn't notice the gun aimed at him and walked toward the outside lift entrance.

Tang Erda placed a hand on the gun Cen Buming still aimed at Bai Liu, locking eyes with him before shaking his head in warning.

Cen Buming lowered his gun, shooting a quick glance at Tang Erda before looking at Bai Liu's retreating back. He narrowed his eyes at Bai Liu's intact right eye, then firmly wiped his gun and tucked it back into his waist.

"You know, Captain Tang," Cen Buming said coldly, "this isn't the first time I've used the Mirror of Perspective on someone. But it's the first

time I've seen someone use the lens with their left eye — especially when that person is right-handed, which doesn't align with their usual habits."

"I was almost starting to think your ward was mocking the fact that I only have one right eye."

Bai Liu was indeed the kind of person to have that kind of malicious wit.

Tang Erda noticed Bai Liu deliberately switching hands when holding and positioning the lenses. He raised an eyebrow and glanced slowly at Cen Buming's left eye.

Bai Liu was a man with a score to settle, and when Cen Buming teased him, though Bai Liu rarely spoke about it directly, he didn't shy away from subtle ways to provoke him.

Cen Buming shot Tang Erda a cold, stern look. "Are you sure you want to let such a clever heretic go free?"

"I owe him." Tang Erda replied before running toward Bai Liu.

It took a long time before Cen Buming finally emerged from the shadows. One hand stroked the blindfold on his left eye, his right eye fixed on Bai Liu and Tang Erda as they walked away. He muttered in a grim tone.

"No one owes the monster. It's the monster that owes us."

Tang Erda dropped Bai Liu off at the door of the Heretic's Bureau and winced as he saw a group of Third Squad members standing there, eyeing Bai Liu with hostility.

— These are the debts he owes.

Many of the team members who had stayed behind last night had battled the heretics Bai Liu summoned, and since the truth couldn't be revealed, their hostility toward him would likely linger for some time.

Unless... those resentments were redirected toward him.

As Tang Erda stood there, lost in thought, a sudden shout broke through. "Captain!!!"

Tang Erda's pupils flickered, and he stopped, slowly turning around.

Su Yang stood in the doorway, looking at him intensely. He held his uniform in his hands, his eyes red, and behind him stood almost the entire third detachment.

They looked at their former captain as though they had been abandoned, watching the confused and fleeing hunter.

"Captain, do you really have to go?"

Tang Erda froze, unable to move. His fists clenched.

— These people. These players. These eyes.

The smallest moments of happiness and beauty he had known in over three hundred meaningless reincarnations were tied to these faces—faces that smiled, faces that slept peacefully.

The faces of these men remained as vivid in his memory as the image of the soundly drunken hunter, curled up exhausted in a pile of monsters with his gun as his pillow.

— It was his duty. His mission. His destiny. His inescapable fate when these men died for him.

Bai Liu, also halted in his tracks, glanced back at the scene. Not at all surprised, he patted Tang Erda's shoulder in a reassuring gesture and gave him a gentle push forward.

"Say your goodbyes to your crew. I'll see you outside."

Bai Liu said, then waved lazily and turned away, walking off without looking back.

Tang Erda stumbled forward at the push, looking down at his worn-out Heretics Authority uniform, at his hands, thick with calluses from battling monsters and living heretics. Then, he looked up—deeply, confusedly, and in disbelief—at Su Yang and the team standing across the room.

— Su Yang.

Suddenly, it dawned on him that he had almost lost track of himself—and of them.

Tang Erda only remembered the bad, the broken, the images of blood

and hatred carved into each of their faces like small knives, slowly shaping his memory into something disfigured and bloody.

He couldn't remember the last time he and Su Yang shared a drink from a chipped beer mug, or when they celebrated with the others. He couldn't recall the time Su Yang had leaned over his shoulder, curling his eyes and saying, "I'll be waiting for you in the background."

It had all been so important, so precious—these memories had kept him going. But now, they felt so distant, so faded, as if they belonged to a different third detachment leader altogether. Not the Tang Erda he had become—a monster.

The more he tried to return to the past, the further he was pushed away from it.

"Captain, please don't go!!!"

Su Yang held Tang Erda's uniform flat in his hands, his back straight, and gave him a solemn 90-degree bow. His voice was strained, but still filled with emotion.

"Captain, please don't go!!!"

Led by Su Yang, the entire third detachment of players bowed their heads in unison, shouting for him to stay. Some of them even had tears streaming down their faces, dripping onto the ground.

Tang Erda finally took a step forward, slowing his pace as he moved toward Su Yang and the others. He silently accepted his uniform from Su Yang.

Su Yang looked up in surprise. "Captain?!"

Meanwhile, at the other end of the area...

Muke and Liu Jiayi had received a text message from Tang Erda and immediately drove to wait outside the Heretics Authority.

When they saw Bai Liu emerge unharmed, Muke, who was in the driver's seat, let out a long breath and slumped back in his chair.

Liu Jiayi, who had gotten out of the car to stretch, leaned against the door and, hearing footsteps, looked up in surprise.

After a few moments of listening, she asked incredulously, "You're the only one with footsteps, and you left that big guy at the Heretic's

Authority?!"

"Aren't you afraid he'll stay there?" Liu Jiayi crossed her arms and, eyeing the direction of Bai Liu's footsteps, added, "I don't believe you haven't noticed that he has a stronger sense of belonging to the Heretics Bureau as a group. Leaving him there, expecting him to cut his psychological ties to the Third Branch... that's like sending a sheep into a tiger's mouth."

"He won't develop a sense of belonging to our side." Liu Jiayi shook her head, saying with certainty, "I can feel that he's repelled by us—he even harbors some hostility."

Liu Jiayi raised an eyebrow, criticizing Bai Liu. "Aren't you going in circles to control Tang Erda? What's going on? You're not the type to drop the ball at the last moment."

Bai Liu turned to face Liu Jiayi, unbothered by her confrontation. He leaned against the car door, took a sip from a bottle of water he grabbed through the driver's side window, then answered her question.

"I'm just curious to see what choice Captain Tang would make if I didn't intervene."

"What's up with you all of a sudden?!" Liu Jiayi stamped her foot. "The league's in two months! If you don't control your team soon—and with someone like Tang Erda—you'll lose him like Hearts did!"

Bai Liu looked down at Liu Jiayi. "So, you want me to control Tang Erda the way Hearts controls you? Tear him away from the people closest to him?"

Liu Jiayi froze.

"I had planned to do the same," Bai Liu admitted unapologetically.

He put the cap back on his water bottle, casually pocketed his other hand, and gazed out over the massive white circular building. The morning breeze and the dew from the sun ruffled his hair and made the hem of his untucked shirt flutter in the wind.

The dazzling sunlight bathed Bai Liu in its glow, casting a pale smile on his face as the dawn faded away.

"But sometimes," Bai Liu murmured, "I think it feels good to connect

hearts and minds... in a Lu Yizhan kind of way."

The glittering daylight pierced through the foggy morning mist, splitting into countless bright rays that merged into one another, tinting the sky and casting light across the barren, monster-ridden ground. The huge round metal buildings and the octopus-shaped uniforms gleamed in a brilliant gold as the beams reflected off them.

Tang Erda looked down at the sunlit octopus badge on the team shirt, which had followed him for centuries. He stared at it for a long time, then let out a long, deep breath, followed by a soft laugh.

"Captain?" Su Yang asked carefully.

"Do you remember when we first trained as reservists in the Heretic Authority?" Tang Erda asked, bringing up an unexpected topic.

Su Yang was stunned but answered seriously, "I remember. We all started as reserves for the first team and trained hard."

"It was hard to stop me from being reckless, wasn't it?" Tang Erda mused. "I was the most impulsive person in the whole detachment back then. Whenever I saw heretics killing people, I couldn't hold my temper—I had to fight back. Every time, the first detachment leader would stop me, teaching us so much."

"Yes, back then Cen Buming was still the vice-captain of the first detachment, and he was very strict with us, but also kind, calling the first detachment captain 'senior,'" Su Yang recalled.

Tang Erda seemed lost in thought. "Did I really fight with Cen Buming?"

"It was over twenty years ago, so it's normal if you don't remember," Su Yang smiled. "Why bring this up all of a sudden?"

"I just... suddenly remembered something the first detachment captain once said to me." Tang Erda lowered his eyes, staring at the squad badge, clenching it as he whispered, "There are no two identical leaves in this world, nor are there two identical timelines—"

"When you're chosen by time, no matter how many things or people you encounter that you want to stop for, you know they are no longer the real ones. The ones you wanted to stop for—they've long passed. You can't look back. You can only move forward."

"This is the future that belongs to you."

Tang Erda raised his head and glanced around at all the players before speaking in a deep voice.

"I became the Guardian and Binder of Heretic 0006. The accidents caused by Heretic 0006 last night and this morning were the result of my misjudgment, which led to the intensification of the situation—"

His dark blue eyes were clear and resolute. "I am solely responsible."

"Heretic 0006, who is not a wounded-type heretic, controlled himself during two violent riots and didn't kill anyone. He made amends afterward to avoid the consequences. But I misjudged him and used various methods to force him into causing the accident, for which—"

In front of the stunned team, Tang Erda bent deeply and bowed.

"I am deeply sorry."

"I will do my best to compensate the 67 players injured last night, and the explosion at the Rose Factory has been resolved as punishment—" Tang Erda gripped the team badge and pulled it off with a firm tug.

Su Yang snapped, "Captain!!!"

But it was too late.

The team insignia was torn off intact, and Tang Erda took a deep breath. "I resign as the leader of the third detachment and, as the Binder of Heresy 0006, I will never return to the Heresy Management Processing Authority until it is fully integrated into society."

Su Yang closed his eyes, his jaw trembling with clenched teeth.

Tang Erda straightened up, smiling as if he had let go of everything. His eyes were red, and he held the team badge trembling in his hand. He shook off his uniform and draped it over Su Yang's shoulders, patting him on the back and gently placing the captain's badge in Su Yang's hand.

Su Yang stared at him, dismayed.

Tang Erda's voice was soft. "I hereby appoint Vice-Captain Su Yang as the new Captain of the Third Detachment, transferring all permissions to him except the Prophet permission."

"I order you, Lieutenant Su, to pick up the badge!" Tang Erda's tone was firm.

Su Yang held back the tears that streamed down his face, clenching his teeth as he took the team badge from Tang Erda. "Yes, Captain."

Tang Erda smiled, his voice quiet. "You'll make a better captain than I ever did, Su Yang."

Su Yang held the badge and uniform, crying uncontrollably.

For over twenty years, Su Yang had never imagined the day Tang Erda would no longer be his captain, or in such a self-punishing way.

Su Yang understood the significance of the Heretic's Bureau to Tang Erda, and how terrifying it must be for him to give it up.

Su Yang had thought of countless ways for Tang Erda to leave the Heresy Authority—whether through being killed by heretics, dying by contamination, or even perishing as a heretic's caretaker. But he never imagined it would end like this. To Su Yang and every team member, the idea of Tang Erda leaving the Heretic's Bureau alive was unthinkable—it was worse than death.

Tang Erda had led them into battle. He was the ever-present, righteous, and brave captain—impetuous at times, but always present in life-and-death battles, never afraid of a heretical "game" that never returned.

But when did they begin to drift apart?

Su Yang watched tearfully as Tang Erda walked away in the early morning sunlight. He waved, resigned, yet his dress trousers and shoes, tailored by the Heretic's Authority, were worn and ragged. They still clung to him as if the old uniform had become part of him.

But the crest that had "grown" on his heart had been ripped away by his own hand.

Bai Liu leaned against the car, waiting. Liu Jiayi couldn't resist making a sarcastic comment about Tang Erda, still inside. "Bai Liu, you'll regret your weakness. Our captain doesn't look like someone who can leave the team without a fight. He'll turn his back on the team..."

No sooner had Liu Jiayi spoken than a dark figure appeared under the circular building, heading toward them.

It was Tang Erda. His team shirt was torn and tattered, but he was walking toward them.

Liu Jiayi's words trailed off as she looked incredulously toward the source of the footsteps.

Tang Erda approached, and Bai Liu appraised him from head to toe, his eyes lingering on the tattered team shirt. With a teasing smile, he said, "I thought you'd leave the team logo with Su Yang, along with the shirt."

Tang Erda, no longer surprised by Bai Liu's insight, nodded and spoke in a husky voice. "That was the plan—the uniform and the badge were for him..."

Bai Liu's gaze settled on the shirt Tang Erda was wearing. "So?"

"But Su Yang insisted on leaving me the uniform," Tang Erda murmured. "He said the badge was always meant for me for a while, and that he would always wait for me to return."

He fell silent for a long moment before continuing, "But I can't go back. That's not the future that belongs to me."

"I just have to keep moving forward."

The Game Pool

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the car on the way back, Bai Liu, sitting in the passenger seat, briefly shared his ideas for the league.

"You guys want to compete this year?" Tang Erda frowned.

"I think it's too soon," Liu Jiayi slumped back in his seat, exhausted. "Only two months left, and Bai Liu and Muke are both still 48 and 49 entries short for the league games. I think you'll have trouble signing up for both."

Bai Liu turned slightly to Tang Erda, who was sitting directly behind him. "Captain Tang, do you have any suggestions? If you were leading us, what would be the fastest way to get through a copy?"

Tang Erda's frown deepened. "I don't know your situation well enough to predict..."

Bai Liu quickly changed the question. "If it were you, what would be your fastest time through a Level 3 copy, measured by real-world time?"

Without hesitation, Tang Erda replied, "31 minutes."

Liu Jiayi, who had been drinking water in the back seat, choked, and Muke, who was driving, nearly swerved off the road.

They both asked in unison, "How did you do it that fast?!"

"31 minutes to clear a Level 3 game... What kind of monster is this guy?"

Tang Erda explained calmly, "Time in the game dimension is converted to real time through two separate conversions: first to the dimensional time in the system lobby, then to real-world time from the system's dimensional time."

"In-game time is converted into dimensional time in the system lobby, but it's not based on the duration inside the game. It's calculated through three possible game endings."

Tang Erda continued, "For example, a game can end in three ways: [bad end], [normal end], and [true end]."

"[Bad end] results in invalid dimensional time. If a player hits a bad end, dies, or becomes a monster in the game, their time becomes frozen and cannot convert to either dimensional or real time."

"As for you, Bai Liu, the dimensional time you typically achieve through [true end] is the longest a game can last. Converting that into system time takes around 3.5 to 5.5 dimensional hours, which then converts to 21 to 27 real-world hours."

Bai Liu stroked his chin, deep in thought. "Is there a fixed ratio for converting dimensional time to real time?"

Tang Erda shook his head. "No, there seems to be a pattern, but it's not fixed. It can remain consistent for a while, then change later. I haven't figured out a stable ratio yet, so I can only estimate."

Bai Liu narrowed his eyes. "The fluid, indeterminate time conversion rules... isn't that similar to the time conversion between a game copy and the system lobby?"

Combining what he had seen in [Future], Bai Liu was almost certain that [Reality] was also a kind of game copy dimension.

If [reality] is another copy within the system, then the time conversion between [reality] and the system should follow a different "end" path.

The system and [reality] seem to have some kind of time conversion rule, where players follow a fixed "end" path during this period. When they change paths, the time conversion rules shift as well.

—So, what “end” of the game path is he following in this copy of [reality]?

[True end], [normal end], or [bad end]?

"The fastest way to clear is to follow the [normal end] path," Tang Erda continued. "Without exploring any monster books or searching for clues, just kill the big boss and meet the quest conditions to rush through. My fastest record for a Level 2 copy was 17 minutes."

Liu Jiayi slumped into his seat, stunned.

"Seventeen minutes for a secondary copy..." he muttered.

At this speed, even if they took on four copies at a time, two months would be more than enough to enter the league.

The league is fierce—and terrifying.

"But two months is still too short," Tang Erda warned seriously. "Even if you qualify, you're so far behind in player quality that training will be more important than qualifying."

"Once you register, you'll need to train in the game pool at least sixty times and become familiar with the league's game copies and rules before you can join."

Liu Jiayi raised his hand and added, "And popularity matters a lot. You need to gather support outside the game to boost your votes. Players who rank in the top 100 for popularity during the support season get a [get-out-of-jail-free card] for the league."

Muke, still feeling a bit lost, asked, "What are the game pool and the get-out-of-jail-free card?"

As a newbie, Muke had just gotten the basics of the lobby and wasn’t as familiar with the league’s specific rules as Tang Erda and Liu Jiayi were.

Liu Jiayi sighed, realizing Muke was still catching up. "Right, I forgot you're both new. The [Game Pool] is a special division that only players who’ve successfully registered for the league can access. It’s mainly for internal training for league players."

Tang Erda nodded in agreement. "The game pool has a separate game selection screen, login and logout portals. Games played in this division aren't shown to the public—this is the [non-small TV section]."

"In the game pool, players can exit a game at any time," Liu Jiayi added seriously, raising a finger. "This is a key feature: the system offers protection for league-registered players. If their life or mental value drops to a dangerous level, they can exit the game by spending some points."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "So, the league is really important to the system."

—it even has this training area that sacrifices harvesting players' souls, just to make sure they can participate without issue.

"Don’t underestimate it," Tang Erda warned quietly. "The reason the game pool exists is that the games there are Level 3 copies directly tied to the league. Many people die before they can log out."

Liu Jiayi nodded eagerly. "That's right. From what Hearts said, the league matchups are drawn randomly from the game pool. It's hard to ensure familiarity with these copies. After each league, big guilds would immediately grind 52 copies to train in the game pool."

"Is that why we don't see many big guild players out there?" Muke asked.

"The only people you'll see in the [small TV area] are star players put on display by the guilds for business purposes. The really strong players spend all year training in the [game pool]," Tang Erda explained.

Liu Jiayi countered, "But that doesn't mean star players are weak. Most of them are actually very strong."

Muke was puzzled. "Star players?"

Bai Liu pulled out a pen and paper from the front seat drawer, quickly jotting down a few key terms. He circled one of them: [Death-Free Gold Medal]. "Does the existence of star players have something to do with death-free gold medals?"

Tang Erda paused for a moment before answering, "Yes."

"While you can log out anytime in the game pool, you can’t log out of league games until a winner is decided. That means the losing side is basically wiped out."

Bai Liu tapped the paper with his pen twice, his gaze focused as he murmured, "But this is a league, and if the losing team is wiped out, one team will disappear entirely from the game. The game couldn't continue otherwise, and they couldn't manipulate audience emotions to maximize league interest."

"That’s where the [Exemption Gold] comes in," he continued. "To preserve more popular and valuable players, the league created this prop."

Liu Jiayi sighed. "That's probably correct. If a player is awarded a [Death-Free Gold], the system will automatically log them out when their life or mental value reaches a dangerous level during a match."

"[Exemption Gold] is awarded based on popularity value—the audience's support. This is why the support season is so important. Two months before the league starts, major guilds aggressively promote their teams, pushing their star players for business."

"If a team has one or two star players, the rest of the team doesn't need to worry about [Exemption Gold] because the star players' fans will vote to ensure the whole team stays in the league."

Liu Jiayi raised two fingers. "For example, Hearts from the King's Guild, Spades from the Slayer Sequence, Charles from the Gamblers' Alliance, Georgia from Golden Dawn, and the Deer Hunter's Reverse God Inquisitor—he transferred to the Slayer Sequence this year."

Liu Jiayi held up two fingers next to Bai Liu. "So, this year, the Slayer Sequence has two star players, and their guild's support season is practically set."

"But," Liu Jiayi's expression turned sour, "I'm the only half-star player in our guild. It'll be tough for you to get a [Death-Free Gold], so we'll need to figure out how to help with your support..."

"It doesn't matter whether others help or not. The league judges your strength," Tang Erda cut in coldly.

Liu Jiayi's eyes widened, and she put on a pair of goggles, giving Tang Erda a once-over with an exaggeratedly judgmental look.

She snorted. "With your looks, I can understand your jealousy over not becoming a star player and getting an exemption."

At the moment, Tang Erda wasn't exactly an appealing sight—bearded, ragged, his eyes bloodshot, and a strange, nauseating mixture of rose and blood clinging to him. Disheveled and unkempt, he sat stiffly in the back seat of the car, resembling a large dog Bai Liu might have picked up off the street after it had been wandering for over six months.

Tang Erda opened his mouth, seemingly about to say something, but when his eyes flicked to Liu Jiayi, who was seated at a height just above his waist, he felt as if he were arguing with a little girl. So, he turned his head away, coldly staring out of the car window, refusing

to engage with Liu Jiayi's words any longer.

Liu Jiayi huffed in victory, settling back into her seat behind Bai Liu and resuming her chatter. "Don't listen to him, Bai Liu. The [get-out-of-jail-free card] is really important. Hearts showed me the league's fatality summary report, and teams with star players have a higher survival rate than others."

Tang Erda, his hand subconsciously grasping at empty air as Liu Jiayi spoke of survival rates, furrowed his brows, his expression growing serious. He seemed lost in thought—perhaps Liu Jiayi was right after all.

At first, he'd insisted that strength was all that mattered, avoiding any sort of business or popularity push, and focused solely on intense game pool training. But when it came time to face Bai Liu's team, the result was disastrous—his whole team had been wiped out, leaving only him alive. Ironically, he was the one with the immunity card.

Bai Liu scribbled the words [star player] on a small notepad and circled them with a question mark.

"I understand the importance of a star player," Bai Liu said, glancing at Liu Jiayi who was leaning over the back of his chair. "But it's not easy to make one, is it?"

He continued, his gaze sharp. "I assume most star players rise to prominence because they've done exceptionally well in league matches, right? Simply by being in the [small TV section], I think it's tough to build a star player with a huge fanbase—just like you, Jiayi."

Bai Liu's eyes followed Liu Jiayi's features as he continued to speak, assessing her with calm precision. "You have a pleasant face, a highly specific skill set, and a top-tier guild pouring all their efforts into building your profile. You even have a second-ranked star player helping you along the way."

"You've built up the perfect setup for a player who hasn't even competed in the league yet. But can you really be sure you'll get a free pass once you're in the league?"

Liu Jiayi blinked, stunned by the question.

Bai Liu tilted his head slightly, his voice unwavering. "You can't, can you?"

"I agree with Captain Tang," Bai Liu continued. "For our mostly new team, it makes more sense to focus on something we can control—like strength—rather than relying on something given to us from the outside, like popularity. The league is essentially about strength, not fame, so for the next two months, our priority should be training in the game pool."

Bai Liu flashed a chilling smile, glancing at Liu Jiayi, still dazed by the shock, and then at Tang Erda, who sat motionless, a look of relief slowly creeping into his expression.

"But that doesn't mean we're giving up on attracting an audience," Bai Liu added. "We still have nearly 50 more games in the [small TV area] before we even get to the game pool."

"We're going to use these 50 games to draw in as much support as we can."

Bai Liu's gaze lingered briefly on Tang Erda's hair, which was still tangled and frozen in place. "Let's start by making Captain Tang look presentable for business."

Tang Erda: "……?????"

Mu Sicheng choked and coughed as he sprinted out of the factory's back door. Once he made sure the Heretic Authority team had fully taken over the RI factory and had secured the generation director, who was trying to escape, he slipped out the side and sped off on his motorbike.

With a helmet on and a single-ear Bluetooth headset in place, Mu Sicheng dialed Bai Liu's number as the wind howled around him, urgency in his voice.

Bai Liu… This guy is going out and claiming he's the bomber, leaving him in the relative safety of the inner world to stall for time.

Who knows what the deranged crew will do to Bai Liu once he's under the Heretic Authority's control?

The last time Bai Liu went in, it felt like he lost half his life!

Although Bai Liu keeps saying he has a way to deal with it, he's just an ordinary guy in the real world. How much can he really do against

such a large organization?

Mu Sicheng took a deep breath, impatience mounting as he waited for the call to connect. When Bai Liu finally answered, Mu Sicheng immediately asked, "Bai Liu, are you all right? Where are you?"

"I'm fine." Bai Liu's voice wavered slightly, as if unsteady. "I'm at..."

Before Bai Liu could finish his sentence, a hysterical scream echoed in the background: "Get away from me! What are you doing to me?! I'm not doing this!!!"

Mu Sicheng frowned, hearing the voice of Tang Erda in the chaos. He slowed his motorbike and asked hesitantly, "You got Tang Erda out of the Heresy Bureau and took control of him?"

Bai Liu held the phone up to Tang Erda, who was strapped to a hair-washing seat, struggling against a mass of foam. "You could interpret it that way."

"Let me go!!!" Tang Erda stared at the beautician, who was holding up a black duct-tape-like object, her expression eerie. "Put me down!"

Mu Sicheng, a mix of gloating and concern, couldn't help but ask, "What are you doing to him? Torture? This is the real world, Bai Liu, don't go too far."

Bai Liu tried to explain, "I'm not torturing Tang Erda."

A muffled grunt of pain from the background made Mu Sicheng stop his motorbike, unconvinced. "So, what are you doing to him?"

"Full-body hairdressing." Bai Liu glanced at Tang Erda's legs, which were covered in hair-removal tape. "To be specific, I'm removing his leg hair."

With a grimace, the beautician grabbed the end of the tape and ripped it off in one swift motion.

Tang Erda clenched his fists, letting out another stifled grunt. He looked at Bai Liu almost pleadingly, tears hidden in his eyes. "Why do I have to do this?!"

"I don't know," Bai Liu shrugged. "Ask Muke. He's the one who brought us to this beauty shop and got you this top-of-the-line grooming package."

Tang Erda turned his gaze to Muke.

Muke, grinning like a spring breeze, replied, "This is the best celebrity grooming shop I know in the industry. A lot of popular stars come here for styling and grooming. I thought it might be a good fit for you, Captain Tang. Plus, it's a good business move."

The beautician chimed in, "Yes, yes! Zhao Muchi, the star of the show, has been coming here for years! Two hit dramas this year!"

With that, she tore off another strip of tape with ease.

Tang Erda sucked in a cold breath, groaning, "It didn't have to go this far. I don't even show my legs on TV..."

"I think it's necessary," Muke said, stepping forward with a friendly smile. "Who can say? Maybe someday you'll show your legs on TV to attract viewers."

The beautician, tearing off another strip, looked at Tang Erda's toned body and wore a strange expression.

Muke glanced back to ensure Bai Liu was turned away, still on the phone with Mu Sicheng, and then leaned in close to whisper in Tang Erda's ear, his smile never faltering. "Did you think it was unnecessary when you drowned Bai Liu?"

Tang Erda flinched, a barely noticeable jolt.

Bai Liu, still on the phone with Mu Sicheng, turned around sharply after hearing that sentence.

Muke quickly pulled back and, with a gentle look, glanced at Tang Erda's legs, now covered in tape. "I ordered the best package for you. No need to thank me. I'll cover all the costs. I specifically got you a full-body, semi-permanent manual hair removal. It's a bit painful, but it works."

Muke smiled, patting Tang Erda's red, torn leg. "Be a good businessman for our team once you're a big, handsome man, Captain Tang."

Tang Erda, whose entire body was aching, could only let out a small, defeated sound.

The beautician, grabbing the tape near Tang Erda's inner thigh, tore it

off just as Muke was speaking.

Looking at Tang Erda, who was starting to slump in the chair, Bai Liu gave Mu Sicheng the location of the salon with a sympathetic expression.

Mu Sicheng, now with a wooden face, removed his headphones, which were still echoing with muffled grunts of pain.

Chapter End Notes

Mu Ke has a mean streak.

The Game Pool

Shave, hydrating mask, hair care package, muscle sculpting, massage, jaw stretching face relaxation…

Tang Erda was tossed around so much that his eyes gradually lost their usual spark.

There was an orthopedic procedure scheduled, but the orthopedic specialist said Tang Erda's bones were already in the correct position and that doing it again would be overkill. Muke reluctantly abandoned the idea—he'd heard it would be painful, too.

To save time, Muke insisted on multitasking as much as possible. While Tang Erda's hair was being worked on, the beautician also trimmed his eyebrows and stretched his facial muscles.

To accommodate Tang Erda's hair lying down, the male makeup artist almost straddled his body. The more he did, the redder his face became.

Captain Tang, lying down with his eyes closed as his hair was washed, remained blissfully unaware of the awkwardness.

Having spent his life immersed in games and the Heresy Bureau, Tang Erda had no idea that places like Fang Ke could be a high-risk area for gays.

Bai Liu, sitting on the sofa nearby, casually flipping through a magazine, caught the scene and smiled slightly.

Liu Jiayi, wearing goggles, noticed the faintest expression on Bai Liu's face. Following his gaze, she couldn't help but twitch the corners of her mouth.

Bai Liu set the magazine down, rose gracefully, and sat next to Tang Erda. He glanced up at the male makeup artist.

As if sensing a warning in Bai Liu's eyes, the makeup artist panicked. He hastily finished trimming Tang Erda's eyebrows before rushing away.

Liu Jiayi, following him, couldn't help but whisper next to Bai Liu, "Why did you come over to protect him like that? Why not let the big guy get bullied a little more?"

Bai Liu looked over at Tang Erda, who had finished getting his hair washed and sat up. His voice softened as he turned sideways, "I don't like seeing my property taken advantage of by others."

"Especially when it doesn't serve my greater good."

Bai Liu reached up and stroked Liu Jiayi's head soothingly. "If anyone bullied you, I'd be angry too."

Liu Jiayi suppressed her words and looked away from Bai Liu, sulking a little because of his attitude toward Tang Erda.

This man had shot her, and she hadn't forgotten.

"And what if I want to bully him?" Liu Jiayi asked, feigning fierceness.

Bai Liu smiled. "As you wish, I don't mind the mutual 'engulfment' of my property—as long as you don't hurt each other too much and reduce its total value."

Liu Jiayi, now reassured, looked up at Tang Erda, ready to find a spot to strike, but she froze when she saw his face.

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow and leaned in close to Liu Jiayi's ear, whispering, "Try not to damage his face during your bullying. It seems to be worth a lot."

Tang Erda, now fully tidied up, stood up uncomfortably, rubbing the back of his neck and touching his chin. He glanced over at Liu Jiayi and Bai Liu, who hadn't said a word, and grew increasingly restless.

He pursed his lips, reluctantly adopting an imposing captain's stance. "I told you all this was useless on me. It won't make me more appealing to the audience…"

"No." Bai Liu swept his gaze over Tang Erda, his smile deepening. "At least, from an aesthetic perspective, your appeal to me has definitely increased."

The makeup artist had just trimmed Tang Erda's eyebrows and lightly shaped his sideburns, bringing out the sharpness of his jawline and the intensity of his haunting blue eyes. His bony, angular frame, cold expression, and broad, athletic build made him seem poised for action, exuding an aura of danger and restraint.

Liu Jiayi circled Tang Erda for a moment before admitting, frustrated,

"This guy is exactly what the audience will love, looks-wise."

Tang Erda didn't just outshine others due to his strength; his appearance also played a part in securing his "get-out-of-jail-free" card.

Of course, he didn't realize it himself.

Or rather, Tang Erda had no clear perception of human appearance, thanks to his long association with heretical monsters.

He thought of himself as average-looking and believed Su Yang's gentle, affectionate appearance was the true standard of beauty.

When Captain Tang saw Bai Liu smiling and complimenting him, his first thought was that Bai Liu was flirting with him again.

So, Captain Tang grew more uncomfortable, furrowing his brow and taking on a stern look. He raised his hand to mess up his newly styled hair. "I told you it's no use! Don't try to use that kind of force on me!"

The makeup artist beside Tang Erda tried to salvage his work, and he screamed as he clung to his arm. "I won't allow you to insult yourself like that! It's cool! If you wear a couple of better outfits, scouts will be lining up outside my door!"

"If you debut…" he trailed off, gently stroking Tang Erda's lean arm, his little face flushing, "I'll be a fan of your wife."

"What?"

Tang Erda, who had only heard of wife cakes but not "wife powder," pulled his arm out of the makeup artist's grasp with a confused expression.

Bai Liu looked away. "Go choose two outfits that will suit him."

"Are custom shops okay?" Muke asked. "I know two ready-to-wear custom shops. Otherwise, he won't be able to find clothes in regular shops that fit him."

"Yes." Bai Liu raised his phone. "I'll let Mu Sicheng know that the location has changed."

Inside the ready-to-wear bespoke shop.

The sign was in French, which Bai Liu couldn't understand, and most

of the staff were foreigners. However, Muke communicated fluently in French, so Bai Liu sat back and watched.

Muke certainly had an eye for style. Tang Erda was measured by the tailor at 6'2", and finding men's clothing to suit him would have been a challenge—his options would likely be limited to sports shops.

Even in the ready-to-wear store, Tang Erda's clothing choices were scarce. The bearded tailor waved his hands in disbelief at Muke, who insisted on measuring the overall circumference before making any decisions.

Tang Erda was then ushered into a white-curtained fitting area and stripped down to his top for measurements, while Bai Liu and Muke entered to help him choose clothes.

Liu Jiayi, however, was forced to stay outside.

By this time, Mu Sicheng had arrived. After hearing the story from Liu Jiayi, he rolled up his sleeves, grinning mischievously.

Could there be a better moment to get back at Captain Tang?

When he saw a topless Tang Erda later, he'd be sure to humiliate him! He'd say Tang Erda didn't look good in anything!

What kind of handsome guy could Tang Erda be after sleeping on the street for six months?

Mu Sicheng had no doubts—there was no way Tang Erda could be more handsome than him. So, he straightened his hair, lifted the curtain dramatically, and stepped inside.

Tang Erda, topless, lifted his eyes and looked over with a mischievous glint.

His old uniform hung loosely around his waist, and his chest and back were covered with large and small scars, including gunshot wounds. His muscles, exposed without their usual protective layer, were taut and stretched from his spine all the way to his mid-back, creating an incredibly powerful, smooth, and undulating curve.

His short, neat hair, clean-cut square jaw, and piercing dark blue eyes created a stark, aggressive look. He stared at the person who lifted the curtain, made sure it was a harmless teammate, and then coldly looked away again, reaching out to the tailor to measure his hand

length.

The bruises, though faint, made the tailor, who was measuring Tang Erda, nervous. He measured cautiously, not daring to breathe.

Mu Sicheng lowered the curtain with an expressionless face, then silently pounded his chest in a brief, exaggerated silent howl.

One look, and he was done! Damn, he looked so cool! What a body!

After hesitating for a moment, Mu Sicheng gritted his teeth, took off his tracksuit jacket again, and prepared to enter, now wearing only a T-shirt.

Damn, he had been working out too, and wasn't in bad shape!

Liu Jiayi, who had seen it all, pitied him. "You can't win against Tang Erda. His pecs are bigger than yours. I think his chest is over 110."

Inside the fitting area, Muke's voice came through, confirming: "A 115-inch bust, is that right? Are you sure that's a normal chest size? Is he not overdeveloped or something?"

The tailor, responding in broken Chinese, said, "Very, standard, PERFECT!"

Muke, with a bust just over ninety: "..."

Mu Sicheng, with a bust of less than a hundred: "..."

They were doomed.

Mu Sicheng silently put his sweatshirt jacket back on, zipped it up to cover himself, and adjusted his expression before lifting the curtain again to step inside.

Tang Erda was getting dressed, and he was clearly uncomfortable with the lack of protection as he was measured. With his face now tense and his tone sour, he asked, "Do you want to keep going?"

"No!" The tailor waved his hands excitedly, gesturing as he compared Tang Erda's chest, waist, stomach, and buttocks, giving him a thumbs up in English with a peculiar accent. "—Beautiful!"

Tang Erda pulled away from the tailor with a scowl.

Mu Sicheng and Muke, watching nearby, exchanged hidden jealous

glances as they stared at Tang Erda's chest, then looked down at their own with dissatisfaction.

Mu Sicheng even raised his hand to compare his chest to Tang Erda's, then exaggerated the difference by roughly 5 cm, feeling increasingly miserable. If you're cool and handsome with such a big chest, why didn't you show it earlier? Why keep it hidden just to humiliate me now?

After measuring Tang Erda, the tailor spoke to Muke, looking at Tang Erda with his chin propped up, which made Tang Erda's skin crawl.

Muke translated for Bai Liu: "He just asked me about Tang Erda's background. Generally, few people at this height have such a standard build, so I told him Tang Erda went through professional military training but is now retired."

"So he recommended some uniform styles," Muke continued. "Military and police uniforms have strict rules, but there are versions of clothes we can try."

As he spoke, the tailor took a dark gray jacket off the rack and handed it to Tang Erda to try on.

A minute or two later, Tang Erda emerged, dressed.

His broad shoulders filled the stylized jacket perfectly. The shirt underneath, slimmer than Bai Liu's social animal shirt, had a black double-breasted vest that accentuated his chest, while black shoulder straps flared from the back down to his waist.

The trousers were loose at the waist but tightly gathered around his hips, with a dark leather pistol holster clipped to the back of his waist.

The tailor nodded in satisfaction and spoke to Muke.

Muke translated: "He said it's a reference to an FBI-style uniform, and it suits someone like Tang Erda—trained and with such a standard build."

Tang Erda was still fiddling with his collar, clearly uncomfortable in the tight clothing. His brow furrowed.

"Well?" Bai Liu asked. "Does this outfit hinder your movement?"

Tang Erda hesitated for a moment, moved his arm through the air,

and then replied honestly, "No."

"Then this one," Bai Liu clapped his hands. "Wrap it up and let's move on to other things."

Forty-seven minutes later

Tang Erda, who had finished buying his tie, shoes, socks, and other accessories, stood in Bai Liu's small rented room with a cold expression. His eyebrows furrowed as he raised his hand to unbutton his shirt—it was too tight, and he wasn't used to it.

Inside the room, Bai Liu was on the phone with the leader. "Muke is here with me. Come and get him."

After hanging up, Bai Liu called the Xiang Chunhua couple. "Jiayi is with me. Come and get her."

Closing the phone, Bai Liu turned to Mu Sicheng. "Can you go back on your own?"

Mu Sicheng nodded.

Having taken care of all the team members, Bai Liu addressed them: "Thanks to Captain Tang's support, registration is no longer an issue, and we have more time to plan."

Bai Liu's gaze met Tang Erda, who was standing at the end of the room. "Captain Tang told me that besides training, it's important for the players to recuperate. It's almost 11 p.m., so go back and rest for the afternoon. Get yourself in shape. We'll meet at the hot pot restaurant in front of my place at 5:30 p.m. I'll treat you all to dinner. We'll log into the game at 6:30 p.m. to officially start league training. Any objections?"

Everyone shook their heads.

"Alright," Bai Liu nodded, ready to continue when the doorbell rang.

Tang Erda, who was standing by the door, opened it, startling the leader, who had rushed over in response to the call.

Tang Erda's towering height and disheveled uniform—after all the mess he'd been through—caught the leader off guard. His freshly done hair was slightly tousled from discomfort. A few slash scars were faintly visible under his open collar, and his body carried the scent of

freshly showered shampoo. The ends of his hair still dripped water, making him look wild, as if he'd just rolled out of bed.

While Bai Liu was still explaining things inside, Tang Erda blocked the leader from entering and looked down at him condescendingly. "What can I do for you?"

The leader, fearful, stammered, "I... I'm here to see Muke."

"Wait a little longer," Tang Erda said. "Bai Liu is still inside, finishing up... whatever he's doing."

The leader, incredulous, interrupted. "Bai Liu's not done yet? Didn't you finish with him already?"

The leader's question was odd, but Tang Erda didn't pick up on it. He frowned and replied, "Bai Liu has only finished with me, not the other two yet."

Liu Jiayi could handle things on her own, so Bai Liu didn't need to worry about that.

The leader, still dizzy, braced himself against the wall and asked shakily, "Bai Liu's still handling the others... while you're out here?"

Tang Erda frowned in confusion. "What's wrong with that?"

The leader, shaken by Tang Erda's question, managed to stand and glance at the bruise on Tang Erda's collar. "Those bruises... they weren't caused by Bai Liu, were they?"

Tang Erda's expression changed quickly. He tightened his collar and grabbed the leader's hands, slamming him against the wall. "How do you know? Have you played the game too?"

"I'm not playing that dirty, evil game with Bai Liu!" The leader growled, "Get off me!"

The leader's jealousy and suspicion towards Bai Liu's group made him angry. Just thinking that Tang Erda might have been involved with Bai Liu made him want to arrest and kill him.

Just then, Bai Liu opened the door and gestured for Tang Erda to release the leader with a subtle lift of his chin. "He's not a player. Let him go."

Tang Erda, still in disbelief, released the leader.

The leader, now free, looked back at Bai Liu as he stepped out of the room. Bai Liu's face was pale, with dark circles under his eyes, as if he had been awake for days.

The leader caught a glimpse of Bai Liu's open collar and noticed a small, round burn mark on the side of his neck—similar to the one Tang Erda had. The leader quickly went to pick up Muke.

When the leader picked up Muke yesterday, he hadn't noticed this wound on Bai Liu.

In just one night, the game had been so intense!

The leader, feeling uneasy, grabbed Muke's hand and quickly fled.

Once outside, the leader couldn't help but gossip. "Did Bai Liu get his neck burned by the guy at the door with a cigarette while playing a game?"

Muke, sounding eerily curious, asked, "How do you know?"

The leader sighed, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it. He gazed into the distance, exhaling a cloud of smoke. "These eyes of mine have seen too much filth in this world..."

The Game Pool

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

5:30 PM, outside the hotpot restaurant.

Bai Liu sat at the edge of a boiling pot, next to a confused Lu Yizhan, who was holding up a menu just after finishing work.

It was a rare moment when Lu Yizhan didn't have to work overtime. The previous day's unprecedented explosion had allowed the Heretic Authority to temporarily take over Lu Yizhan's department, giving the regular staff a break from their duties.

So, Bai Liu invited him for hotpot, and Lu Yizhan had come without hesitation.

But there was more to it. Lu Yizhan had come to find out what really happened that day.

He didn't understand why the Bureau was so consumed by the bombing, and why the events were being broadcast everywhere. Meanwhile, Bai Liu—the one responsible for it—sat beside him, sipping barley tea from the hotpot restaurant's complimentary cup and shamelessly asking the waiter for another shrimp slider.

Lu Yizhan grabbed the menu and glared at Bai Liu, irritated.

Bai Liu took a slow sip from his tea and glanced at him, "What? Are you going to ask me about the other day?"

"No!" Lu Yizhan responded firmly, "You can't order more food even if it's on me! There's enough here to feed six people!"

Bai Liu stared at him, speechless.

This guy's brain really works differently.

Lu Yizhan hadn't mentioned the explosion since they met, and he remained as calm as ever.

If Bai Liu hadn't been sure that Lu Yizhan had seen him that day, he might have thought that Lu Yizhan didn't even know he was the bomber.

"Aren't you curious how I could have blown up the Rose Factory—and still made it out alive to sit here eating hotpot with you?" Bai Liu asked, glancing sideways at him.

Lu Yizhan nodded, "Curious, but I stand corrected."

"Corrected?" Bai Liu raised an eyebrow.

Lu Yizhan continued, "I don't think you were the one who blew up that factory."

"Why not me?" Bai Liu asked, a hint of sarcasm in his voice. "You saw it with your own eyes, didn't you?"

"It's because I saw it that I don't think it was you," Lu Yizhan said, taking a sip of his drink and exhaling slowly. "Emotionally, I'm sure you wouldn't have broken ties with me after our deal. Logically, the thing you value most is money."

Lu Yizhan turned to face Bai Liu. "To set off a factory like that, I get the impression you have no personal stake in it. The factory's owner does. So, I'm guessing the bomber was the arrested factory director, and you were just a scapegoat."

"I don't understand why you volunteered to take the blame, but I won't ask why. You have your reasons."

Lu Yizhan's guess was spot on, and Bai Liu had to admit it.

Bai Liu had known from a young age that Lu Yizhan was extremely sharp.

Highly accomplished, decisive, and determined, Lu Yizhan was never one to hesitate when he set his mind on something. His perseverance was unmatched.

Though Bai Liu had been winning in their various games, he knew it was only because Lu Yizhan wasn't taking them seriously.

Lu Yizhan didn't care about winning or losing; his focus was on being a good person. That's why people who didn't know him well often thought he was naïve or foolish.

But Lu Yizhan wasn't naïve at all. He was, in fact, very pragmatic—otherwise, he wouldn't have accepted Bai Liu's trading terms so easily.

It takes someone emotionally mature to accept that a friend is paid to

give them something.

But Lu Yizhan didn't mind at all, which meant he fully accepted Bai Liu's idea of trading.

Bai Liu idly twirled the pencil he was holding, clearly bored. "Wanna play Gomoku?"

Lu Yizhan sighed, his mind elsewhere. "Now's not the time for games."

"If you win three in a row, I'll tell you more about the factory explosion you're so curious about," Bai Liu said, drawing a cross on the menu with his pencil. "If you win five in a row, I'll help you out with this situation."

Having already solved the explosion issue, Bai Liu wasn't worried about making Lu Yizhan think he was fooling him.

"Deal!" Lu Yizhan quickly accepted, placing his glass down and grabbing the pen Bai Liu handed him. After a moment of thought, he cautiously drew a circle on the paper.

They played Gomoku at a fast pace, each move so swift it was almost instantaneous. The games didn't drag on for long—within a minute, the winner would tear up the sheet and toss it in the trash.

By the time Tang Erda arrived, the trash bin beside them was already full of crumpled paper.

Lu Yizhan was so focused on the game that he barely noticed the others arriving, his eyes following Bai Liu's hand as it moved swiftly over the paper.

The game continued until Bai Liu closed the paper, signaling a break. "Time's up. We'll eat first. You haven't won a game in a row yet."

Lu Yizhan looked up, regret on his face, and nearly toppled his chair in shock when he saw the group of people watching them.

"Let me introduce my new colleague," Bai Liu said, holding up four fingers as he gestured to the group. "Tang Erda, Mu Sicheng, Muke—the kid you know, Liu Jiayi—and everyone else, meet my hairdresser, Lu Yizhan."

Muke nodded casually. "Hello, Mr. Lu."

Mu Sicheng scratched his head awkwardly. "Uh... hello."

Tang Erda gave a serious nod. "Hello."

Liu Jiayi, sitting with her legs swinging, smiled sweetly at Lu Yizhan, resting her face in her hands. "Hello, Uncle Lu!"

Lu Yizhan stared at Liu Jiayi, dumbfounded. "No way. Bai Liu, what kind of company do you work for? Why are you employing child labor?"

Bai Liu smirked, taking a moment to think. "If I had to say... a major star-making company?"

Lu Yizhan swallowed nervously as he looked at the brightly cleaned group around him, then asked shakily, "Is that... legal?"

Bai Liu smiled, "It's legal."

Lu Yizhan was about to ask more, but seeing that the group had started eating, he swallowed his doubts, his flesh aching at the thought.

No wonder Bai Liu had ordered so much.

But soon, Lu Yizhan's attention shifted when Bai Liu began to distract him with Gomoku while eating his hotpot.

Liu Jiayi had a small appetite and quickly finished most of her food. She moved a small bench and sat next to them, watching the game closely.

She wore a contact lens prop to help her see, but Lu Yizhan, focused on the game, didn't notice it at first.

As Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan played faster and faster, Liu Jiayi's serious expression matched their intensity. Her eyes widened in disbelief as she watched the game.

She looked up at Lu Yizhan, incredulous. This guy looks like a good old boy, but his reflexes are just as sharp as Bai Liu's?! And the winning margin is getting bigger?!

Muke, intrigued by the matchup, joined her to watch.

Mu Sicheng, still not full but curious about what Bai Liu was up to, wandered over with a small bowl of vegetables to take a look.

But Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan's speed was overwhelming, and Mu Sicheng

was left in the dust, unable to keep up.

He turned to Muke, asking, "What kind of game are they playing?"

"Gomoku," Muke replied.

Mu Sicheng frowned, more confused. "I think it's like a quintuplet, but I only see them playing three moves in a row before they tear the paper up and start again..."

"Because it's already a dead game," Muke explained, his eyes fixed on the paper. "They've played this game so many times that they know it well enough to recognize when it's over."

By now, Bai Liu had lost two games in a row.

Mu Sicheng's eyes widened. "Bai Liu can actually lose?!"

Muke took a deep breath. "A simple game like five-in-a-row relies on quick thinking and reaction time. Bai Liu's intelligence is high, so he's usually dominant. But Lu Yizhan—he's improving with every move."

Mu Sicheng looked at the paper in disbelief. "You mean Lu Yizhan is now the one with the upper hand? Bai Liu's the one losing?"

Bai Liu, who was typically associated with never losing, was now, astonishingly, struggling.

Bai Liu stopped writing and crossed his fingers on the table, staring at Lu Yizhan without expression.

Lu Yizhan, still immersed in the game, looked up at him, confused. "Why aren't you continuing?"

"I can't win if I keep playing," Bai Liu admitted, standing up and moving behind Liu Jiayi, letting her take his place. "Jiayi will play for me. If you can win three games in a row against her, our deal stands."

Lu Yizhan frowned. "This little girl can't see—don't make jokes like that..."

"Uncle Lu, I can see," Liu Jiayi said, pointing to her eyes. "I wear contact lenses that Uncle Bai Liu bought for me to help with my vision."

Liu Jiayi gave a hopeful smile. "Uncle Lu, I think it's fun watching you play. Can I play too?"

"...Fine, as long as it doesn't strain your eyes." Lu Yizhan hesitated before agreeing.

Liu Jiayi shed her innocent look, grabbed the pencil Bai Liu handed her, and carefully drew the first cross on the paper.

Mu Sicheng, now utterly confused, asked, "What's going on here?"

"Liu Jiayi's intelligence is higher than Bai Liu's," Muke explained, eyes locked on the paper. "She has the upper hand in a game like this. Bai Liu's testing Lu Yizhan's game intelligence."

Liu Jiayi's pace quickened, and she quickly started dominating the game, while Lu Yizhan, who had once been in control, struggled to win.

But soon, Liu Jiayi's expression soured as she slowed down, and Lu Yizhan remained fast and focused.

Muke nodded. "Liu Jiayi can't hold out any longer."

Half an hour later, everyone left the hotpot restaurant. Lu Yizhan, tears in his eyes, paid for the meal and the two books they'd used up while playing backgammon, then waved goodbye to Bai Liu and the others.

After Liu Jiayi sweetly said goodbye to Uncle Lu, Lu Yizhan's face darkened as soon as he turned around. "Bai Liu, this friend of yours isn't right."

"What's wrong?" Bai Liu asked, casually breaking open three paper balls in his hands, revealing the last three games played between Liu Jiayi and Lu Yizhan.

--And Liu Jiayi had lost all three games.

"A simple game like Five Pieces is the easiest way to measure someone's intelligence," Liu Jiayi said, looking up at Bai Liu. "For someone with a high intelligence value, there's no catch-up period, or at most, a very short one. But for someone with a low intelligence value, they'll just keep losing in this game."

"There's no such thing as being bad at first and then getting better…" Liu Jiayi frowned, recalling the game he'd just played, scratching his head in frustration. "…Especially since Lu Yizhan keeps getting better as the player's intelligence rises. It's like the person you're playing

against keeps surpassing you, like their intelligence is increasing without limits—”

“—Isn’t that the case?” Bai Liu squinted at Liu Jiayi, then glanced at Lu Yizhan’s back. “I often felt the same way when I played games with him.”

“But as soon as I started feeling like that, he would let me win.”

Liu Jiayi was stunned. “Why didn’t he let you win today?”

“Maybe I put something he wanted right in front of him.” Bai Liu shrugged casually and popped a mint from the fondue place into his mouth. “So he decided to get serious about the game.”

Chapter End Notes

> Gomoku, also called Five in a Row, is an abstract strategy board game. It is traditionally played with Go pieces (black and white stones) on a 15×15 Go board while in the past a 19×19 board was standard. Because pieces are typically not moved or removed from the board, gomoku may also be played as a paper-and-pencil game.

The Game Pool

Game Lobby.

Bai Liu led the way in and went straight to Charles. Muke had already explained what had happened, but Bai Liu felt the need to meet the extraordinary Fifth Guild leader in person.

Inside the Gamblers' Guild.

Charles, seated across the desk, raised an eyebrow in mild surprise. He motioned for the servant to stop pouring Bai Liu's tea and repeated, intrigued, "You want to join the league this year?"

"Isn't that what you're planning to do, President Charles?" Bai Liu replied calmly.

"Of course not." Charles waved it off without a second thought. "Although I've chosen you as my [betting horse], normally, [betting horses] go through a year of preparation before they get on the track."

Charles gave Bai Liu a scrutinizing top-to-bottom look, then regretted the gesture. "Bai Liu, you're not at the top of your game. It would be better to keep you in the dark for now."

"Feeding?" Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "So that's why the charge point collection mechanism exists? To build up momentum for the big gamble of [the league]?"

Charles nodded appreciatively. "Yes, you're very clever, Bai Liu."

He stood, grabbing his staff, and moved behind Bai Liu. "All players in the game exist to earn more points. In our [Gamblers' Guild], there are two ways to earn points: [Gamblers] and [Horse Racing]."

"Betting on horses means being bet on. You rely on training in the game, being charged by us, and playing in the leagues for points. It's a simple way to gain labor, but there's a more exciting, risky, and rewarding method of investing in the game—"

Charles flashed a sly smile, flipping his fingers. A peculiar chip appeared between his index and middle fingers, which he leaned down to place in Bai Liu's hands.

"—a method we call [gambling]."

“As [gamblers], we’ve chosen you as our [gambling horse]. We’ve invested in you, trained you, made you famous, and when the annual league comes, we bet our whole fortune on you—”

Charles’s gaze became intense as he looked down at Bai Liu. “If you win, we double our investment and make a profit. If you lose, we lose everything. That’s the relationship between [gamblers] and [betting on horses].”

Bai Liu tilted his head back slightly to put some distance between himself and Charles. He looked down at the chip in his hand—a gold-rimmed piece with a dark green background and a value of six.

He recalled that real casinos didn’t use chips with this kind of value. This chip was unique to the game.

“Essentially, what makes this gamble in the league so attractive for you [gamblers] is the money both players bet,” Bai Liu mused. “A game with stakes this high wouldn’t reach such widespread popularity otherwise. The odds are too risky.” He paused. “So someone must be sitting on the base handicap, right?”

“Yes.” Charles replied, a grin spreading across his face.

“The person who sits at the bank is the system. When the league bets against each team, the system places a base fund in the gambling pool for each team. This base fund is the sum of the charge points for each person on the Double Fang Team—” Charles held up five fingers. “—five times.”

“In other words, the higher the sum of charge points for both our team and the enemy, the higher the base fund in the Double Captain Fang Wu’s gambling pool,” Bai Liu pondered. “So if our team beats a strong team, the players who bet on us to recharge are more likely to double their winnings.”

“And this base fund doesn’t include points for additional bets. The points in the final loser's gambling pool are distributed to the winner in proportion to the bets placed,” Charles clarified.

He gave a simple example. “Let’s say your team is playing the Kings Guild, and the Kings Guild has 10 million charge points while your team has 1 million charge points. The base handicap in both gambling pools would be 5 million.”

“On top of that, if the Kings Guild bets 50 million points and your

team only 100,000, their pool grows to 150 million, while yours only has 55.1 million."

"If the Kings Guild wins against you, the players who bet on them will share the points in your gambling pool, according to their bet amounts."

"For example, if I bet 25 million out of the total 50 million, that's 50%. I would then receive 50% of the 55.1 million in your gambling pool, which is 27.55 million, a 110% profit."

"That's a high profit margin," Bai Liu commented, his tone neutral.

Charles smirked, eyes glittering. "Yes, it's a good deal, but it's not a gamble."

Bai Liu looked up, and Charles continued, "Let's turn it around. What if you won against the Kings Guild and the 100,000-point bet in your gambling pool was all mine?"

"Then I could win 150 million from my 100,000 bet, a 1,500% profit margin."

Charles spread his hands, flashing a smile at Bai Liu. "That's gambling, baby."

"Welcome to the Gamblers' Club."

Bai Liu, unfazed, considered the implications. "So, according to this, the more risky and controversial our team is, the more attention it gets, and the higher the profit margin. Wouldn't it be the perfect time to enter this year's league?"

Charles paused, then looked at Bai Liu with an impressed, almost amused, expression. "Looks like I've met a crazier gambler than myself."

He spun back to his seat, tapping his staff sharply twice before knocking it off the table with excitement. "I like your offer. You're at the peak of your gimmick, and I don't have to keep the discussion going for a year to maintain it until the next league."

Charles locked eyes with Bai Liu. "You're in the spotlight now. If you lose badly in this league, you'll be worthless in the future. Are you sure you want to play this year? If so, I'll handle all the support and logistics for you."

Bai Liu nodded. “I’m sure.”

Charles flirtatiously took Bai Liu’s hand and kissed it in the air. “As you wish, my Prince Charming.”

Bai Liu blinked, slightly disturbed. “…”

His investors were, to put it mildly, disgusting.

But it didn’t matter. He was an adult, and he could tolerate this for the sake of money.

Bai Liu walked away from the Gamblers' Club and made his way straight to the Scavengers' Guild.

Charles had reminded him to be prepared for business if he was going to play in the league—things like player appearances, guild names, team formation, and even the guild icon all needed careful attention.

Once Bai Liu arrived at the guild and consulted with the members, the guild name was quickly and simply changed to Wandering Circus.

Then came the bombshell: they were going to participate in the league this year.

There was an outcry.

But Bai Liu didn’t force them to turn in props for the league, participate in high-risk games to find advanced equipment, or even require them to recharge their accounts to expand their teams like other guilds did. All of that was handled by Charles—who might be a bit of a badass, but was an excellent resource.

The players for the company's war party had already been selected.

Normally, it would be a huge deal for a guild to enter a tournament, requiring the efforts of the entire guild. But Bai Liu managed everything on his own and simply informed the members of the decision.

The guild members were initially overwhelmed and worried. However, Bai Liu’s calm demeanor and the twists and turns he had navigated so far helped settle them down.

If it’s President Bai, maybe winning isn’t so impossible after all...

At that moment, they gained a new understanding of this incredible guild.

It really seemed like they didn't have to give anything to this guild. Even for major events like participating in the league, their president never asked them to worry about it. Instead, they were left to grow in the community without concern.

"Is there anything we can do for you, President Bai?" someone asked cautiously. "It's support season. Do you need us to support you or something?"

— It was honestly a little strange that the members didn't have to do anything for something as big as the guild's participation in the league!

"Of course, we need support. Please help spread the word that I'm going to play in the league," Bai Liu smiled. "Then, sing my praises and claim that I'll never win, exposing all the faults of our team. Or better yet, say that you guys don't support my participation at all, but I'm bent on doing it myself. That's about it, please."

The members: "..."

The members: "????"

What kind of support is this?

Wang Shun, who had been with the King's Guild for several leagues, was dumbfounded when he heard about Bai Liu's unusual way of rallying support.

He had never seen such a response before!

"…No, Bai Liu, what are you doing?!" Wang Shun's eyes glazed over as he hurried to catch up with Bai Liu. "What do you want them to sing your praises for? Player support will directly impact whether or not you get the get-out-of-jail-free card…"

"I'm probably not going to get it before the tournament." Bai Liu casually made his decision. "It's more cost-effective for me to run a negative campaign before the tournament and then consolidate my support during the official matches to secure the free pass."

Wang Shun was stunned. "What kind of profit are you anticipating from that?"

Bai Liu smiled, his eyes glinting with mischief. "I'm going to raise the odds and place a bet on [Wandering Circus]. I just realized there's a [table] play hidden in this game. It's so interesting."

Wang Shun: "!!!!"

Wang Shun put a hand to his forehead in exasperation. "Did you talk to Charles?"

He knew something like this would happen when he put these two troublemakers together!

Wang Shun felt helpless, trying to stop Bai Liu. “There’s no such thing as playing in the league and gambling on it.”

“Do the rules allow it?” Bai Liu shot Wang Shun a sidelong glance.

Wang Shun hesitated. “The rules allow it.”

But he quickly added, “But the players that participated rarely survive the preparation season. Controlling the gamble requires a lot of resources and manpower, and also puts a huge amount of psychological pressure on the players. They'll get hammered by the crazed gamblers if they lose!”

“Then we’ll just keep winning.” Bai Liu responded simply.

He cut off Wang Shun, who was about to argue further. “The guild is in your hands now. The next move shouldn’t be too obvious—be careful not to draw attention from the other guilds.”

“—Or we’ll get beaten up by them.” Wang Shun mumbled.

“...Why would you get beaten up?” Before Wang Shun could respond, Bai Liu lazily waved him off and headed toward the group waiting outside the circus.

Soon, Wang Shun understood why Bai Liu had said that the next move shouldn’t be too obvious.

“Mr. Wang Shun, there’s a commotion on the forum!” Someone rushed in to report, nervously glancing around. “Where’s President Bai? Someone is impersonating him and making posts on the forum!”

Wang Shun opened the system panel, his face quickly turning pale.

At the top of the forum, dozens of red posts had appeared, all posted by someone using Bai Liu’s real name. In these posts, he mocked the top ten guilds while praising his own, the Wandering Circus. Most provocatively, he sent a letter of challenge to Spades, the number one player in the rankings:

[— I’m not thrilled about having Spades right before me, but I sure enjoy seeing my name right behind his.]

Wang Shun staggered back, nearly dropping to his knees.

It was the height of the support season, and any spark between fan groups could escalate into chaos. Guild teams took great care to avoid giving their opponents any advantage.

Now that Bai Liu had dropped so many "atomic bombs," all the attention on the forum was focused on him, and the situation had exploded into a full-blown brawl.

Angry fans had already begun surrounding Bai Liu, eager to vent their frustrations by taking him down.

Wang Shun, left to clean up the mess Bai Liu had made, slumped in his chair, bitterly laughing with vacant eyes. “You’re a real bastard, Bai Liu...”

On the other end, instead of feeling guilty, Bai Liu grew more arrogant. He pulled on a pair of exaggerated sunglasses and strutted to the game registration portal, flanked by his circus members. Tilting his head, he began selecting the game he wanted to log into.

Mu Sicheng looked around, puzzled. “Is it just me, or does it feel like a lot of people are really hostile towards us...?”

“It’s not your fault.” Muke clicked on the forums, frowning. “The forums are full of discussions about us, but it’s all negative... someone using Bai Liu’s name has been posting a lot of provocative stuff about other guilds.”

Liu Jiayi approached, reading the posts. After skimming them, her expression soured.

It was clear that Bai Liu had masterminded this chaotic stunt.

—This reverse-marketing tactic is extreme, and while it’s gotten them plenty of attention, Wang Shun is probably going to have a major headache.

After all, if the fans can't vent their anger directly at Bai Liu, they'll likely take it out on the guild instead...

As they discussed this, angry players continued to approach Bai Liu and his team.

In his posts, Bai Liu had gone into detail about the entire Wandering

Circus, even describing the type of sunglasses he was wearing. These players recognized him immediately.

Once Bai Liu finished selecting his game, he turned and flicked his sunglasses down slightly, revealing a pair of smiling black eyes as he faced the approaching players.

He seemed to find the scene amusing.

But then Bai Liu quickly turned back to his team. “Get in the game. We plan to play at least ten games a day. If anyone can’t keep up, take a break and come back later.”

The five of them disappeared into the crowd.

In the corner, a pair of apple-green eyes watched the scene before shifting to a secondary game.

Inside the Gamblers’ Guild, Charles pulled a silk scarf from his chest. The golden threads of fate embroidered a crown on the scarf, and Bai Liu’s face flickered in and out of view. With a smile, Charles pocketed the scarf and raised his red wine glass, clinking it into the void.

“To victory and money given by fate, here's to it.”

Inside the King's Guild, Hearts shook a bottle of Psyche's tears, which Liu Jiayi had returned to her.

Hearts' gaze drifted far off, staring through the teardrop-shaped bottle as if remembering some long-lost soul. But her reverie was interrupted by a soft knock on her door.

Someone entered uneasily, whispering, “Empress, Bai Liu seems to be entering the league this year…”

“Then let him enter.” Hearts put away the bottle and replied flatly. “We’ve done all we can to stop him. This outcome... it’s probably the best we could’ve hoped for.”

Hearts glanced at the photo on her desk—a group picture taken after a major clearance. Guild leaders, like all people in power, needed these ritualistic images to solidify their authority.

In the photo, Liu Jiayi lifted a corner of her witch’s veil, offering a rare innocent smile on her typically cold face. She looked trustingly at Hearts, who stood beside her in a treacherous fog—the perfect

backdrop for their dangerous game.

But the danger seemed to fade when Liu Jiayi's pure smile shone through.

Behind them, a goofy Liu Ji stood, while a wounded Qi Yifang crouched at Liu Jiayi's feet, smiling widely. In the background, the massive Titan knelt silently, his chin captured by the camera, his head lowered in an attempt to stay out of sight.

Hearts stood at the center of the group, Liu Jiayi cradled in her arms —the twin core of this year's team, encircled by everyone.

Her gaze lingered on the photograph for a moment before she reached out and covered it with her hand.

Silently, she placed the glass jar in the deepest drawer, then looked up. "Spread the word—The Little Witch has defected from the King's Guild."

The reporter flinched, his back stiffening as he lifted his reddened eyes. "Empress, the Little Witch… she really isn't coming back, is she?"

Hearts continued giving orders, her expression void of emotion.

"…Activate our original secret rotation player, [Sister], to replace the Little Witch. Have her enter the game pool today—I will begin her special training as a full team member."

The debriefer lowered his head in defeat. "...Yes, Empress."

As he turned to leave, Hearts suddenly called out.

"Wait."

He turned back, surprised to find the ever-composed Empress now resting her forehead against her hand, gaze unfocused on the photograph she had just hidden away.

For some reason, she had stood it up again.

The debriefer hesitated before asking, "Is there anything else, Empress?"

Hearts' eyes lowered as her pale fingertips traced Liu Jiayi's image in the photo. She let out a soft sigh, as if in quiet despair, then closed her eyes wearily and tossed two small boxes onto the desk.

"—These were originally meant for the Little Witch," she said evenly. "One contains a pair of contact lenses that grant permanent vision—no environment can impair their function." She paused before continuing, voice quieter now. "The other is a potion that restores sight permanently."

She looked up, her expression unreadable. "Take them to her for me."

Then, more softly: "And give her a message—next time we meet, it'll be on the battlefield."

"Tell her… whatever she chooses—whether it's the future, betrayal, or doubt—she must not regret running away. She must watch it all unfold with her own eyes."

"That is the last thing I'll teach her."

The reporter stood still for a long moment before bowing deeply. "Yes, Empress."

When he was gone, Hearts remained in the darkness, staring at the photograph in silence. Eventually, she placed it inside the same drawer that held Psyche's Tears.

In the deepest recess of that drawer, barely visible, lay a much older photograph—a young Hearts sitting on the lap of a faceless man, her tiny arms wrapped around his waist as she laughed, carefree.

Hearts locked the drawer. She rose, left the room without looking back.

Golden Dawn Guild.

Despite its radiant name, the third-ranked guild's headquarters was located in one of the game's darker districts. From the outside, the building was dull and unassuming—much like the guild itself: quiet, efficient, and understated.

Inside, however, it was as bright as a summer morning. System panels flickered with streams of data, their analyses displayed before players moving with focused determination. The atmosphere was more akin to a high-tech research lab than a guildhall.

Golden Dawn was an enigma. Unlike open guilds that saw frequent

player turnover, it operated in secrecy, much like the Killer Sequence. Few entered, fewer left.

Most outside guilds shared the same impression of Golden Dawn as Wang Shun did—it seemed to be almost exclusively foreign.

And, as Wang Shun recalled, its president was a foreigner as well.

A sharp knock interrupted the silence of the office.

"Captain Georgia, I have a report."

"Come in."

The door eased open, revealing a tall, slender man seated behind the desk. His long, dark brown hair was neatly tied back, his dark eyes calm yet piercing.

Captain Georgia had a sharp but elegant profile—high cheekbones, a regal nose. Fans often described him as possessing an otherworldly refinement, as if he were dawn itself streaked with gold. Or, more simply, he looked expensive.

The moment he debuted in the league, fervent supporters had voted him into the safety rankings, earning him a coveted gold medal—a medal infamously awarded more for his looks than his performance. Currently, he ranked third in popularity, just below Hearts, largely due to his reclusive nature.

At first glance, he seemed approachable. But the instant he turned to face you, that illusion vanished.

Georgia’s gaze was intense, unwavering. It gave people the eerie impression that they were important to him—until they realized he was merely assessing whether they were a threat.

As meticulous as his demeanor, his sleek dark hair was bound into a high bundle, yet his complexion was unnaturally pale. A faint coldness lingered around the edges of his lips, betraying his otherwise composed appearance.

The man who had entered stiffened upon seeing Georgia bracing himself against the desk. Instantly, he moved to steady him.

"Captain, you're still recovering from the contamination wounds from the Heretical attack! Please, just sit and listen to my report!"

Georgia clenched his fist, coughing lightly before murmuring an apology and taking his seat.

His subordinate exhaled in relief before continuing.

"Captain, the Heresy Authority in District One has recently taken in two heretical entities. One is called Rose Perfume, classified as Extra Class 1 Red. The other… appears to be a mass of corpses related to Rose Perfume—highly dangerous. The current classification system can't even properly categorize it."

"The issue is, these remains have the ability to trigger evolution in other heretics. Keeping them in District One—where the most heretics are concentrated—is too risky. They're considering transferring them abroad."

"Currently, the leading proposal is to relocate them to our division, Sector Three." He handed over a system panel. "District One has given us clearance to prepare a stronghold to contain this unidentified heretic. If you approve, we'll log out of the game and begin preparations."

Georgia skimmed the document but frowned at the signature.

"…Why is Captain Cen Buming from the Second Detachment handling this? Normally, the Third Detachment captain would submit a request for an Extra Class Red transfer."

The subordinate hesitated, glancing away before finally surrendering under Georgia's sharp stare.

"I heard… the Third Detachment's captain left the team."

"Left?" Georgia blinked, momentarily caught off guard. "Why? I thought they loved the job."

The man shrugged. "Captain, not everyone is like you. Unlike you, some people actually take their vacations instead of working through injuries. The Heresy Authority is exhausting, and it doesn't pay as well as gaming does. I completely understand why they quit."

Georgia's expression remained unreadable. "It's a sacred duty."

The subordinate wisely shut his mouth, miming a zipper across his lips.

Georgia approved the transfer, handing the system panel back. But instead of leaving, his subordinate hesitated.

Then, in a softer voice, he asked, "...Georgia, is your brother still mad at you for leaving him behind on that mission? For getting hurt without him there?"

The shift in tone was clear. Instead of Captain, he had called him by name. A personal question.

Georgia's grip on his pen tightened. He didn't look up.

The subordinate studied him carefully. "Or… are you still angry that he hid his gaming from you for a whole year? That he secretly joined our guild and trained for the league—only for you to shut it all down?"

Georgia remained silent.

The team member couldn't help but chatter, "Young people are reckless and impulsive. He did it because he was worried about you. Maybe you could talk to him—you're the last family he has. You know you're not well after being affected by that heretic, and you're always getting injured. He just wanted to protect you..."

"He's the last of my family too." Georgia looked up, cutting the player off. "If he had considered my feelings, he wouldn't have done this behind my back."

A faint flush appeared on Georgia's usually composed face as his emotions surged. His breathing quickened, and he abruptly looked down, covering his mouth as he choked violently.

"Okay! Okay! I'll stop!" The player stepped back, hands raised in surrender. "Just take a deep breath, Georgia!"

Georgia raised a hand, his expression cold. "Please leave."

The team member hesitated before finally turning toward the door. Pausing, he murmured one last thing before stepping out, "Georgia, I heard that the leader of the third detachment quit the team for a man named Bai Liu."

"It's said he made the rose perfume. Somehow, District One let him go, and the captain of the third detachment ran off with him. Some say he followed Bai Liu because he fell in love with him—otherwise, there's

no reasonable explanation."

The player shrugged. "Sounds ridiculous, right? I think so too. Just gossip, so don't take it too seriously."

With that, he quickly shut the door behind him and fled before Georgia, the old curmudgeon, could scold him for spreading rumors.

Inside the room, Georgia remained seated, lost in thought. "...Bai Liu?"

On the other end, Bai Liu and his group emerged from the game lobby, having completed their tenth game in a row.

Bai Liu's shirt and trousers were completely soaked, as if he'd been fished out of the water—but it was all sweat. Muke collapsed onto the ground the moment they stepped out, while Liu Jiayi fell onto his back, panting heavily.

Mu Sicheng fared slightly better, leaning against the wall and downing a stamina rejuvenator, sweat dripping from the ends of his hair.

Tang Erda, of course, was in the best shape. Apart from a damp patch on his back, he looked as composed as he had before entering the game.

The players who had tried to mess with Bai Liu's group in the login area had long gone numb—this was the tenth time they'd seen these lunatics appear here.

This group of freaks... They could clear a Level 2 or even Level 3 dungeon in less than half an hour. One after another, games on the screen were being devoured by them.

The mini-TV section's audience was just as dumbfounded. Even with their screens set to 32x speed, some couldn't even tell what the game was about before Bai Liu's team had already moved on to the next one.

The forums had been flooded with accusations of Bai Liu being ungrateful, but now? Silence. No one dared to say a word.

Tang Erda was an absolute powerhouse. A one-man wrecking machine.

Where did Bai Liu even find such a terrifying main attacker? How high was this guy’s attack stat? And how the hell were the others

managing to keep up with his speed? Could they even see his attacks?

With the sheer amount of attention they were drawing, the discussion around Bai Liu quickly shifted, dominated by speculation about Tang Erda's overwhelming strength.

Bai Liu, still sprawled on the floor, ran a hand through his wet hair, pushing the damp strands back. He let out a relaxed breath before glancing at Tang Erda with a teasing smile.

"You racked up the highest charge points in those ten games. Looks like the spectators love your strength. And your looks, of course."

"..." Tang Erda wasn't particularly skilled at handling conversations about his own attractiveness. He changed the subject bluntly. "That's enough training for today. Log out—we need to gather intel on your future opponents."

"Ugh, why is there more...?" Mu Sicheng let out a dramatic groan and slumped over lifelessly.

Bai Liu made an OK gesture.

Inside Bai Liu's rented house.

Bai Liu pulled out a whiteboard and markers from somewhere, setting them up for Tang Erda to use. The rest of the team sat cross-legged on the bed across from the board, all lined up and waiting for Mr. Tang's lecture.

Tang Erda felt... uncomfortable. Being stared at so intently by a former enemy eager to learn from him was unnerving. But he suppressed the feeling, cleared his throat, and picked up a red marker.

"The top ten guilds in the game are your primary enemies. You need to be ready to fight any of them. As the saying goes, know your enemy and win a hundred battles. I'll go over each major battle group in order of guild ranking..."

Tang Erda's gaze swept over the room before he continued.

"I'm not particularly familiar with the Slayer Sequence warbands, and you all already have extensive knowledge of the King's Guild. So today, we'll focus on the third-ranked guild—"

He turned back to the board and wrote:

Golden Dawn Guild.

Once the lecture was over, the others packed up and left, either heading home or back to school. Bai Liu lingered, watching as Tang Erda sat in front of the whiteboard, still staring at the words Golden Dawn.

Bai Liu poured a glass of water and placed it beside him. "You know their president, don't you?"

Tang Erda hesitated for a fraction of a second before responding. "...I'm not even going to ask how you know that anymore."

Bai Liu smirked. "I figured as much."

Tang Erda remained silent.

"You're deliberately avoiding explaining his skills," Bai Liu observed. "That's usually how people act when they know someone personally. So, tell me—who is Georgia, the president?"

Tang Erda pulled out a cigarette and held it up. "Do you mind?"

Bai Liu chuckled. "You know I don't like the smell of smoke. But go ahead if you want."

Tang Erda lit the cigarette and took a slow, deep drag. "...I don't actually know him well. We were colleagues. He worked at the Heresy Processing Bureau in Zone 3, handling high-risk heretics."

"To be precise, the one person who really knows him—" Tang Erda exhaled a long, deliberate stream of smoke before looking Bai Liu dead in the eyes.

"—is you, Bai Liu."

Bai Liu's expression didn't change. "What happened between me and him in the other timeline?"

Tang Erda leaned back slightly, his voice calm but laced with something unreadable.

"Your man, Mu Sicheng, was smuggling heretics overseas when he ran into Georgia on patrol. He captured him and handed him over to you. And after you... did something to Georgia—used some kind of

heretical contamination, maybe—you released him the next day."

"But when Georgia returned, his body deteriorated rapidly. Day by day, it was as if he was suffering some kind of violent, unseen torture. He became delirious—so much so that he couldn't even say what exactly you had done to him that night. Sometimes, he even exhibited suicidal tendencies."

Tang Erda exhaled another slow breath of smoke.

"Later, Georgia's brother, Armand, ambushed the smuggling line Mu Sicheng was running, trying to avenge him." His voice dropped slightly. "...He died with him."

Bai Liu simply remarked, "That does sound like something I'd do in any timeline."

Tang Erda studied him for a moment. "If that were all, it would just be one of your many crimes."

He paused. "But if that were all, I wouldn't still remember it now."

Bai Liu turned his head slightly. "What else happened?"

Tang Erda exhaled. "After Armand's death, Georgia recovered physically—but emotionally, he was shattered all over again. The fact that Armand had died avenging him destroyed him. He tried to go back to work, but he wasn't himself. The Bureau of Heresy had to force him into an extended leave."

"After that, he locked himself in Armand's room and stayed there for days. I visited him a few times, tried to talk to him, tried to ask what Bai Six had done to him. But he barely acknowledged me, just mumbled to himself like he wasn't even there—"

"This isn't how it was supposed to be. This isn't the future I saw. It should have been me. It should have been the rest of the world. Not Armand."

Tang Erda fell silent for a moment, biting his cigarette as he looked up at the words [Golden Dawn] scrawled on the whiteboard.

"Later, I asked one of his colleagues if Georgia had ever said what Bai Six did to him. They told me Georgia said Bai Six just… showed him the future."

"No one knows exactly what he saw. But what happened afterward was beyond my expectations."

Tang Erda turned his gaze to Bai Liu. "Bai Six destroyed six of the Heresy Bureau's secret facilities in rapid succession, taking many high-risk heretics with him. We managed to kill the Joker he sent to break them out, but we still suffered heavy losses."

"But that wasn't the terrifying part," Tang Erda continued, voice dropping. "What truly frightened us was how Bai Six even knew where those bases were. The locations of the high-risk containment sites

were buried under layers of encrypted security, hidden through torturous means, protected by every safeguard imaginable. Only one person in the Bureau had full access to that information."

"Georgia."

Tang Erda let out a slow sigh. "None of us wanted to believe he would betray the Bureau, let alone for Bai Six. But we had to be sure, so we started investigating him in secret."

"Georgia passed 127 rounds of interrogation." Tang Erda's jaw tightened. "He loathes Bai Six. He would never willingly betray the Bureau. That much, we confirmed. In the end, higher-ups let him keep his position, but the investigation continued—just underground."

"The external investigation hit a dead end. But inside the game… I started noticing something."

Tang Erda's eyes darkened. "A masked player had suddenly joined Bai Six's team. A powerful attacker. Cold, decisive—a killing machine. Same height as Georgia, similar build. But what made me really suspicious was his skill."

Tang Erda took a slow drag from his cigarette before exhaling. "He wielded a bow and arrow—the Bow of Retrospection. It rewinds a person's body back in time… exactly three hours."

He looked at Bai Liu.

"The time between Armand's death and the discovery of his body was exactly three hours."

Tang Erda took another deep breath. "I found Georgia and asked if that masked player was him." His fingers clenched around the cigarette. "He admitted it."

"I don't understand why he joined you," Tang Erda said hoarsely. "He passed the Bureau's tests. I know he despises Bai Six. I know he believes in peace and justice. But for some reason… he still chose to become a weapon in your hands."

"So I asked him why," Tang Erda continued. "And Georgia told me—"

"No matter how hard I tried, it never led to peace. Never to justice. Never to a future where Armand existed."

"I have to correct the future. And Bai Six is the only one who can do it."

Tang Erda's voice was quiet. "He told me that no matter how much he hated Bai Six, no matter how much innocent blood he had to spill, it was worth it if it meant setting the future right. And the moment Armand was brought back—"

"I'll die for my sins."

"That is the right future."

Silence settled between them. Bai Liu handed over an ashtray and met Tang Erda's gaze as he abruptly stopped speaking.

"Where does Georgia end up in this world?" Bai Liu asked.

Tang Erda wordlessly stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray. Then, he exhaled one last ring of smoke and let it drift straight into Bai Liu's face.

"He won the league after you," Tang Erda said finally. "Got a wish." His voice was unreadable. "I don't know what he wished for. But he killed himself the next day."

"Same place Armand died."

"We found his body three hours later."

"I hope Armand will be resurrected in the right future."

In his sleep, Georgia saw himself—bloodstained and kneeling before a mass of light, its outline indistinct. A long, rusted silver bow lay at his side, its sleek shape betraying its age.

He was vaguely aware of the extraordinary presence within the light —something divine.

God asked him, "Do you not wish to live in the right future?"

Georgia watched himself shake his head. "I don't deserve that future. I made the wrong choice, and I must take responsibility for it. Death is the future that awaits me."

God asked again, "You are a righteous victor. Do you not wish for

others to exist in the right future as well?"

Again, Georgia shook his head. "A broken future is the result of every decision made by every person in this world. Just as I must bear the weight of my own injustice, so must everyone else. They, too, must suffer the consequences of their indulgent desires."

Then, God said, "And yet, you spare Armand. You indulge his mistakes, gifting him the right future despite his wrong choices."

"This is your selfishness, Georgia. This is your injustice."

Georgia closed his eyes, his head hanging low. Blood dripped from his lashes, falling to the ground like self-pitying tears.

"Yes," he admitted. "It is my selfishness as a brother. I know he was wrong, and that he must answer for it. I only wished for all the guilt to be mine alone—not Armand's."

"But I know that's not possible."

God's voice remained unwavering. "Both you and Armand must pay for your selfishness and injustice."

"As punishment, you will forever lose the future in which Armand exists, and Armand will never exist in a world where you are his brother."

"The moment of birth will be erased, and you will walk eternally on opposite roads."

Georgia tried to wake from this fevered dream, but the harder he struggled, the more the dream fragmented—warping, twisting into something darker.

He saw himself again, head bowed, kneeling before a figure hidden in shadow. The bare skin of his neck was laced with deep red welts, the marks of a whip.

A long, black whip uncoiled in the man's hand. He tilted Georgia's chin up—not with his fingers, but with the toe of his polished leather shoe.

For the first time, Georgia saw his captor's face.

A man lounged in a wide leather chair, his smile warm and harmless. His features were sharply handsome—an Asian face adorned with a

friendly expression that did nothing to soften the weight of his presence.

"Georgia, I'm very pleased with you."

His voice was light, almost conversational.

"I know you didn't mean to submit to me, but your performance is just too good."

Bai Six lowered his gaze, replacing his shoe with the handle of his whip, forcing Georgia's jaw higher and higher.

Georgia's throat bobbed in silent restraint, his long, pale neck stretched near its breaking point. The fresh welts on his collarbone stood out in stark relief against his skin.

"One game," Bai Six mused, almost in admiration. "And you killed a dozen players without hesitation. You gave me the locations of six secret strongholds with a single breath. You handed me hundreds of names without so much as blinking an eye."

He exhaled, a sigh of appreciation. "You are perfect—like a machine. In both execution and beauty."

"They called you a cold, unfeeling elf in the game." Bai Six's thumb brushed across Georgia's expressionless face. "And I have to agree. You look nothing like the righteous, noble Captain Georgia anymore."

He paused, studying him.

"It's fascinating, isn't it? How the death of someone dear to you can change you so completely."

Bai Six withdrew his hand, tightening his grip on the whip in thought.

"I've been through the same thing," he murmured, "but the only thing it changed in me... was my ability to control my anger when I see your face."

"You look too much like your brother."

His tone remained lazy, almost indifferent—so much so that when he struck, it was unexpected.

The whip cracked against Georgia's body.

Georgia barely flinched. He had long since learned that Bai Six would strike him without warning. After a single shudder, he lowered his head again, waiting.

"Tell me," Bai Six said, tapping the whip thoughtfully against his palm. "During the last game, when you shot those innocent players—where did you aim?"

Georgia's lashes trembled.

"I remember." His voice was quiet.

Bai Six's eyes half-lidded. "Then you know what must be done. Strip."

Georgia stood, removing his clothing with practiced obedience. His body was littered with crisscrossing welts—wounds that had not yet faded, curling around his waist and thighs like coiled vipers.

Each mark, he realized, represented a life he had taken.

The breath caught in his throat.

Bai Six had never needed to inflict suffering through physical pain alone. Georgia felt nothing from the whip.

But Bai Six knew that.

Instead, he made Georgia name every victim, recall every fatal wound he had inflicted. Then he traced the strikes across Georgia's body—marking each life with deliberate cruelty.

"What I do to you," Bai Six had once said, "is not even a fraction of what you have done to them."

After the punishment was over, Georgia dressed in silence, bowing respectfully before exiting Bai Six's quarters. His uniform was zipped high, collar stiff against his jawline.

He moved through the corridors without pause, his steps unwavering.

Then, as soon as he reached his room, he rushed to the toilet and vomited.

He clawed at the welts across his skin, as though trying to carve something out of himself—something rotten, something unclean. But he could only bring up clear water, and soon, his body convulsed from the strain.

He tortured himself in every way he could.

Digging his nails into his wounds. Pressing a blade to his own skin, deepening the marks Bai Six had left.

His breath came in ragged gasps. Silent, ceaseless tears streamed down his face.

At last, Georgia collapsed onto the bed, curling into himself.

In his hands, he clutched a pocket watch.

He wanted to open it—to look inside.

But in the end, he only pressed his lips to the surface, closed his tear-stained eyes, and drifted into unconsciousness.

He knew what was inside.

A single photograph.

Him and Armand, frozen in time.

Bai Liu escorted Tang Erda out of the room, and they chatted as they walked down the street.

"I'm curious," Bai Liu said, glancing sideways at Tang Erda. "You must have reported Georgia's betrayal to the Heretic Council as soon as you found out. What did they do with him?"

Tang Erda shrugged, pulling on his jacket as he turned around. "First, Georgia was stripped of his position. Then, they launched an investigation into the reasons behind his defection—but by the time the investigation started, he had already gone rogue."

"There were two main theories within the Heretic Authority at the time. The first suggested that Georgia had been contaminated by some kind of heresy through Bai Six and had suffered spiritual corruption, making him fall under Bai Six's control."

"But that theory didn't explain everything—especially the fact that Georgia revealed the location of the secret stronghold to Bai Six. Even if he had lost his mind, Bai Six wouldn't have been able to extract that information unless Georgia trusted him completely. No amount of insanity alone could have accounted for such an action."

Tang Erda hesitated for a moment, his expression twisting slightly. "Then there was another theory... Some speculated that Georgia had developed feelings for you. That, due to a Stockholm Syndrome effect, he fell in love with you—and that's why you had complete control over him."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "District 1 is surprisingly gossipy."

"It's not gossip," Tang Erda argued stiffly. "To uncover the truth, we had to consider every angle." Then, after a brief pause, he added in a more subdued tone, "Another reason why that theory gained traction was... Georgia often had unexplained whip marks on his body. And your—well, Bai Six's—weapon just so happened to be a long whip."

Bai Liu: "..."

Had he really played that rough in other timelines?

The Game Pool

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Armand jolted awake, sitting on the edge of his bed, drenched in sweat. His head hung low as he tried to catch his breath, the remnants of his nightmare still clinging to him.

Or rather, a reprieve from the nightmarish reality.

He flexed his cold, clammy fingers, but the last image from his dream refused to fade—a bleeding Mu Sicheng, his head on the ground, pupils blown wide.

The other man's blood had spread across the floor, merging seamlessly with the pool beneath him.

Armand sat in a daze, staring at nothing as he thought back to his dream—or rather, his past life.

His older brother, Georgia, had been the head captain of the Heretic Authority's Zone 3 for as long as Armand could remember. The job was dangerous, and Georgia had always been fiercely protective, going so far as to dictate Armand's every move. He had a strict plan for everything Armand did, ensuring his safety at all costs.

For example, Georgia had outright forbidden him from joining the Heresy Authority or engaging in anything related to heretics.

But Armand had never been one to listen. The more Georgia resisted, the more determined he became. To him, the Bureau of Heresy wasn't just a job—it was the fantasy of saving the world.

As a child, Armand idolized his older brother and, in turn, became fascinated by the Heretic Council. By adolescence, his rebellious streak had reached its peak, and he defied Georgia completely by enlisting in the Heretic Authority's training camp.

It led to their first real fight. Armand threw a fit, stubbornly refusing to back down, until eventually, he got what he wanted.

Georgia had only looked at him coldly and said, "Armand, you're soft-hearted and cowardly. You lack the cruelty necessary to face your

enemies, and if you stay this way, fate will punish you severely."

Looking back now, Georgia had been right. Georgia was always right.

Back then, Armand had yet to be punished. He still clung to naive illusions about fate's mercy.

Despite being accepted into the Heresy Authority, he had been placed in the safest possible role—handling paperwork in the heresy control department. It was Georgia's way of keeping him out of harm's reach.

Bored and frustrated, Armand spent his days cataloging heretics, always looking for an opportunity to move to the front lines. But every time, Georgia caught wind of it and tightened his leash, keeping him firmly confined within Zone 3 headquarters.

It left Armand feeling a strange, suffocating solitude.

All his life, Georgia had built an impenetrable wall around him, shielding him from the horrors of heretics. Inside that wall, there was nothing—just Armand, alone. Even Georgia remained outside, distancing himself, taking every precaution not to contaminate him.

And so, Armand grew up within that fortress, still isolated, still alone, with no one to talk to.

Until that night.

Zone 3, Georgia's jurisdiction, was a high-risk storage area for some of the most dangerous and valuable heretics. Its strongholds were located in secret places, nearly impossible to breach.

But for Zone 3's greatest adversary—Mu Sicheng—those barriers meant nothing.

Mu Sicheng was the district's worst nightmare. Every time the arrogant thief made an appearance, the entire division scrambled, desperately analyzing his weaknesses in a never-ending effort to capture him.

Yet, after all that research, the best they had managed was barely scratching the surface.

Armand sighed, stuffing his mouth with bread as his teammates once again started discussing Mu Sicheng's background.

"Mu Sicheng… his best friend died… he refuses to work with anyone

now, completely withdrawn and solitary…"

"He takes it pretty hard. Loses control when it's brought up… maybe we can use that…"

Armand, still chewing, mumbled through a mouthful of food, "How is a dead friend considered a weakness?"

He playfully thumped his own chest. "Unless you make him a living friend. Now that'd be a weakness. I'd make a great spy as the thief's new best friend."

His teammates laughed at the absurdity. Since Armand was Georgia's brother, they humored him. "Do you even know how his last friend died?"

Armand shook his head.

They grinned. "Mu Sicheng killed him. If you befriend him, you might end up the same way."

Armand choked on his bread.

That night, Zone 3's red alert blared.

He woke in a daze to Georgia's voice over the radio:

"All districts on high alert! Mu Sicheng has been shot in the waist after stealing three heavy Level 2 Red Heretics and is now incapacitated but attempting to escape! All teams, commence search!"

"—Shoot on sight if necessary!"

The entire sector was thrown into a frenzy. The search parties were practically celebrating, thrilled at the thought of capturing the infamous thief at last. Armand, sneaking among them, found himself ignored—his status as Georgia's brother meant they turned a blind eye to his presence.

Excitedly, he joined the search.

He was caught, of course. Georgia spotted him within two searches, scolded him harshly, and sent him back to his room in disgrace.

But when Armand returned, something felt… off.

The room appeared untouched, but there was a scent in the air that

didn’t belong.

Blood.

His heartbeat spiked.

Armand knew he wasn’t capable of handling an intruder alone, so he turned to leave, intending to alert the others.

But before he could take another step, sharp claws hooked around his throat. A low, ragged breath brushed against his ear, followed by a chuckle.

"You're sharp, aren't you? Your nose is as good as mine. You smelled my blood, didn't you?"

Armand stiffened, raising his hands in surrender. Before he could reply, the weight on his shoulder suddenly slid away.

He turned, stunned.

Lying weakly in a pool of blood was a young man his age, monkey headphones resting on his head, his breathing shallow and labored.

Mu Sicheng.

He was on the verge of shock from blood loss, Armand realized, staring at the wounded thief. Despite his condition, Mu Sicheng clutched the three stolen heretic boxes as if they were his lifeline.

Memories of all the intelligence reports on him flooded Armand’s mind.

[No friends… always alone… seems lonely… only ever speaks with a presence behind him.]

[Everything he steals, every move he makes—it’s all to impress someone in the shadows, to earn their approval.]

Armand had imagined some sinister, middle-aged figure pulling the strings. He hadn’t expected… this.

Blood pooled beneath Mu Sicheng, but he made no effort to tend to his wounds—only to protect what he had stolen.

Armand pressed his lips into a thin line. His fingers hovered over the gun at his waist.

Then, he gritted his teeth and drew it.

But no matter how much he steeled himself—he couldn’t pull the trigger.

Georgia had been right.

Even knowing Mu Sicheng was a criminal, even knowing he was dangerous, Armand couldn't bring himself to shoot.

Because in Mu Sicheng’s fading eyes, he saw the same thing he had always longed for—

A desperate, quiet yearning to be understood.

A knock on the door shattered the moment.

Armand startled, then, without thinking, yanked Mu Sicheng under the bed. He hastily wiped the blood from the floor, sprayed an excessive amount of air freshener, and flopped onto the mattress, feigning sleep.

The visitor asked, "Have you seen any suspicious activity?"

Armand blurted out, "No! The air freshener is because I just took a really nasty shit, so I had to spray a lot!"

A long pause.

"…You didn’t have to tell me that."

The visitor left, muttering complaints about the overpowering smell.

Armand exhaled, collapsing onto the bed. After a long moment, he hesitantly placed a healing potion and a roll of bandages under it.

A while later, a pair of monkey paws snatched them away.

Then, a quiet voice drawled, "Hey. What's your name?"

Armand answered honestly. "Armand."

A scoff. "Sounds awful. You look just like the guy who shot me. Who is he?"

"…My brother."

A long silence. Then, the inevitable question: "Why did you save me?"

Armand sighed. "I don't know. I just… couldn't help it."

A raspy laugh. Then, a low, amused murmur.

"Idiot."

Armand: "....."

Although he thought it was pretty ridiculous too, wasn't it still wrong for him to say that?

When Armand woke early the next morning, Mu Sicheng was gone. He felt relieved—but at the same time, he wondered if he had lost his mind, working himself into a frenzy just to succeed. Maybe that was why he'd dreamed of chasing Mu Sicheng.

But why had his dream self saved him—only to let him go?

Armand gave up trying to make sense of it.

Not long after, however, the notorious thief made another appearance at the Heretic's Authority. This time, he didn't take anything. Instead, he left something behind.

Like every arrogant, over-the-top eccentric thief in history, he had the audacity to send a teaser letter—naming three districts in advance.

[- Coming Wednesday to steal something. What? Don't know yet. Watch and find out. And tell your captain's brother—the one with the ugly name—to clean up and wait for me at the door!]

Georgia lifted his gaze and tossed the letter onto a stunned Armand's desk.

"Explain why Mu Sicheng is targeting you."

"..... I don't know....." Armand was nearly in tears. He really, truly regretted everything.

Georgia let out a long breath, fixing Armand with a sharp stare before delivering his judgment.

"Whatever happened between you and Mu Sicheng, Armand, you need to understand this: that man is a demon. And he will get you in the end."

"But if you need a firsthand lesson in reality, I'll give it to you."

Georgia assessed Armand's faint-hearted expression before handing down the final verdict.

"Take a gun and join the raid on Wednesday."

Come Wednesday, Armand stood at the front of the team, gun in hand, wary.

Then the thief arrived.

For the first time, Armand saw Mu Sicheng in action—stealing and running.

Mu Sicheng moved like the wind, as fast and free as a passing storm. He laughed, a blur to the naked eye, and in the span of a heartbeat, he brushed past Armand—grabbing his wrist and yanking him along.

Gunfire rang out. Shouts echoed through the streets.

And yet, in the chaos of the Heretic's Authority scrambling after them, the infamous thief and his accidental accomplice sprinted off like two kids caught pulling a prank.

Armand snapped out of his daze, jerking his arm to break free. But by then, Mu Sicheng was already glancing back at him with a mischievous grin.

"Isn't it fun watching them fail to catch us?"

Armand instinctively turned back to look at his own team—their faces twisted in frustration as they sprinted full-speed after them, only to be utterly outmatched by Mu Sicheng's impossible speed.

It was... kind of funny.

Despite himself, Armand laughed.

Mu Sicheng ran faster, dragging Armand along.

These dangerous heresies—items so carefully measured, contained, and guarded by the Heretic's Authority—meant nothing in Mu Sicheng's hands.

They weren't threats. They were toys.

This wasn't a criminal act against the world.

To Mu Sicheng, this was just a game.

With a smirk, Mu Sicheng tossed one of the heresies to Armand.

"Know what this does?"

Armand squinted at the item, brain scrambling for the statistics he had memorized.

"Number 8035… I think this one is… um…"

Wind.

Butterflies.

They could summon hurricanes.

Mu Sicheng didn't wait for him to finish. He impatiently flipped open the box.

A swarm of multicolored butterflies burst into the air, their wings fanning out fierce winds. Within seconds, the gusts whipped through the chamber, strong enough to push Armand clean off his feet.

Caught off guard, Armand was sent flying.

Mu Sicheng caught him by the ankle before he could be blown away entirely, laughing as he kept him anchored.

"You've been guarding this place for so long, and your brother never even let you play with these?"

"Is this a game?!" Armand yelled, voice breaking. "Shut it down! It's causing extreme climate shifts!"

"No."

Mu Sicheng effortlessly balanced himself in the raging wind, floating just above Armand. He steadied Armand's shoulders and leaned in, voice low and amused.

"That's stupid. Your brother never taught you this, did he? Watch—every heresy has a weakness."

Guiding Armand's fingers, Mu Sicheng made him grab the tail of one

of the butterflies.

Whispering close to Armand's ear, he murmured:

"The moment you find it, the heretic is yours."

Armand watched, stunned, as the butterfly stilled at his fingertips.

Mu Sicheng grinned. "Right?"

Then—just to be a menace—he let go, flicking the butterfly's tail feathers.

The wind roared to life.

Armand barely had time to panic before Mu Sicheng seized him by the back of the neck, dragging him backwards into the storm.

Laughing wildly, Mu Sicheng shot a gleeful two-fingered salute at the Heretic's Authority as they came rushing after them.

"I'll be borrowing your captain's brother for fun!"

And just like that, they disappeared into the howling wind.

The storm didn't carry them far before Mu Sicheng abruptly stopped.

Somewhere along the way, he had picked up a call.

His previously exuberant expression instantly sobered. His voice, usually light and teasing, turned measured and serious.

"……Yeah, I got it. I'll bring the goods back. No issues on security along the smuggling line."

As soon as the call ended, Mu Sicheng turned and took one look at Armand—

And burst out laughing.

Armand, still reeling from everything, was a sight to behold.

He had Georgia's face—ninety-nine percent identical.

But right now, after experiencing high-speed pursuit and a literal hurricane for the first time, his brown hair was windswept into an absolute disaster. His entire expression was frozen in bewildered,

shell-shocked idiocy.

He was on all fours. Not because he wanted to be—he just hadn't regained his balance.

Mu Sicheng crouched in front of him, smirking.

"I thought the big kook's brother would be a little kook." He let out an exaggerated sigh. "Didn't expect a little idiot."

Armand glared. "Say that again."

Still grinning, Mu Sicheng stuffed his hands into his pockets, casually pulling out a few heresy boxes and tossing them to Armand.

"Well, I had my fun for today. See you next time. Bye."

With that, he turned on his heel and sauntered off, exuding effortless swagger.

Armand looked at the boxes in front of him—

And was suddenly struck by a thought.

Not only had Mu Sicheng stolen boxes today, but he had also returned the three he had taken before—ones Armand had recovered after Mu Sicheng's last injury.

"Mu Sicheng—" Armand hesitated, then called out, "You gave back what you stole last time, too."

Mu Sicheng raised an eyebrow, pivoting on one foot. "What, is returning them not good enough for you?"

Armand answered honestly, "You were just having fun today. The ones you took were all low-tier, level-one red heretics. But these three —" he gestured at the boxes— "they're all high-risk, level-three red. They should've been your real targets. I appreciate you giving them back, but honestly? I'm more worried you'll just come back and steal them again."

Mu Sicheng smirked. "They were my targets." His tone was light, almost amused. "But last time, you caught me. I failed. And if I fail, it doesn't count as my prize."

With a casual wave, he turned away, his voice carrying a grin as he left.

“Of course I’ll steal again. Try to catch me if you don’t want to lose, Armand.”

Armand stared at the boxes for a long time, lost in thought.

That day, after finally recovering stolen heretics, he officially earned his place on the front lines.

From then on, Mu Sicheng would send him teaser letters from time to time. And Armand—who had once hesitated, who had once second-guessed himself—grew up overnight. He became composed, relentless in his pursuit of Mu Sicheng.

Whenever the thief appeared, Armand was the first to move, fast enough to nearly match him.

But he never shot Mu Sicheng.

Over time, he became the best in the department at retrieving stolen goods from Mu Sicheng’s hands.

Chasing him, Armand matured. He became steadier, more capable, more responsible.

He became Georgia’s second-in-command.

One evening, after dinner, Armand returned to his dorm to log the heretics he had recovered. But before he could sit down, he spotted something by his bed—a teaser letter.

[Lieutenant, no more chase games. Want a drink?]

Armand’s lips curled into a faint smile.

After carefully ensuring his brother wasn’t around, he slipped out through the back door of the Heretic’s Authority.

He knew where to go.

It was the clearing where Mu Sicheng had once swept him up in the wind. They had met there often—though neither of them could quite explain why. It had simply happened. Unspoken, understood.

The ground was barren, but if you looked up, the sky was dazzling.

When Armand arrived, Mu Sicheng was sitting atop a small hill, staring at the stars.

“Here.” Mu Sicheng greeted him lazily, tossing him a bottle of wine.

Armand caught it easily—habit, at this point. Then, as he glanced up at Mu Sicheng, he suddenly felt something was off.

His instincts screamed at him.

Something wasn’t right.

“…What’s wrong?” Armand asked, sitting beside him.

Mu Sicheng tilted his head back, taking a sip before exhaling heavily.

“That guy put me in charge of the smuggling line,” he muttered. “No more stealing.”

A silence stretched between them.

Then Mu Sicheng spoke again, as if brushing the moment aside.

“The next time we meet, we’ll both be shooting.” He glanced at Armand. “So ditch that fake gun of yours.”

Armand said nothing.

—Because if it had only been theft, it could’ve been a game.

But smuggling?

That wasn’t a game anymore.

It was life or death.

For countless people.

Armand rarely drank. But at that moment, he took a long, hard swig, wiped his mouth, and said, “I will.”

Mu Sicheng looked back up at the stars.

“I’ve played a lot of games. Some cruel, some horrifying. And one…” His voice softened.

“…One I’ll never forget.”

He lowered his gaze, not looking at Armand as he held out a hand.

“Thanks. For sparing me. And for keeping me company.”

Armand clasped his hand, serious. “It’s okay. We’re friends.”

Mu Sicheng froze.

For a long moment, he didn’t speak.

Then, finally, he snorted. “You know how my last friend died?”

“Killed by your own hand.”

Armand’s grip on Mu Sicheng’s hand tightened. His dark brown eyes burned with quiet resolve.

“But I believe you won’t kill me.” His voice was firm. “Or rather—I’ll make sure I’m strong enough that you can’t. I won’t let you die, and I won’t let myself die, either.”

He clenched his fist. “I’ll be strong enough to stop you.”

Mu Sicheng withdrew his hand, looking away with a squirming, reluctant expression—yet a small, stifled smile played on his lips.

“...Stupid brat,” he muttered. “Don’t get cocky just because you’ve caught me a few times.”

But perhaps neither of them could have imagined—

That would be the last time they ever looked at each other and smiled.

Three months later.

When Bai Six arrived to deliver a shipment, Mu Sicheng was spotted by Georgia during the handover.

The cargo was high-risk. A smuggled heretic shipment. If it hit the market, the consequences would be severe.

Georgia acted instantly.

His attack was relentless.

Mu Sicheng, left behind, struggled to hold his ground. Then Bai Six—who had already left—doubled back, returning to the port.

With Bai Six’s intervention, the outcome was sealed.

Mu Sicheng captured the captain of Zone Three on the spot.

And when he finally saw Georgia's face—

His pupils shrank.

Bai Six, lounging in his seat, didn't miss the shift in Mu Sicheng's expression.

His gaze flicked to Georgia, half-kneeling before him, unreadable.

"You know this captain?" Bai Six asked.

Mu Sicheng hesitated. "…I used to steal from his jurisdiction."

Bai Six turned to him, unimpressed.

"I don't like being lied to." His voice was calm, but cutting. "You know I meant more than that. You have feelings for him?"

"No!" Mu Sicheng denied it too quickly.

Bai Six observed him for a moment, then turned back to Georgia.

"Your reaction wasn't because of him," he mused. "It was because of someone who looks like him."

He crouched, tilting Georgia's face up. Examining his features.

"A relative? Immediate family?" Bai Six's gaze sharpened. "A male, similar in age."

Mu Sicheng's breath hitched.

His fists clenched.

Bai Six smiled slightly.

"—His brother, isn't he?"

Mu Sicheng's silence was answer enough.

Bai Six leaned back, folding his hands. "This kind of bond, built on opposing sides—"

His eyes met Mu Sicheng's.

"Was it fun?"

Mu Sicheng's hands trembled. His eyes burned red.

And then—he exhaled.

Lowered his head.

Knelt.

“…Please.” His voice was quiet, strained. “Let Georgia go.”

Bai Six’s expression didn’t change.

Mu Sicheng swallowed hard, forcing his words out. “I got carried away. I won’t let it happen again. Killing him now would disrupt the balance in Zone Three—complicate our plans—”

He faltered.

And then he fell silent, motionless.

Bai Six lowered his eyes.

“…Out of respect for you, and for the importance of our work this time,” he said finally. “I’ll let him go.”

Mu Sicheng looked up, stunned.

"Not next time." Bai Six cast a fleeting glance at Georgia. "But before that, there's something I need to show this Captain of Sector 3—just to ensure he won’t remember our smuggling routes."

Mu Sicheng exhaled sharply, relief washing over him. "A memory-erasing prop?"

"No," Bai Six murmured. "Something new I recently acquired—[Future]."

Georgia took one look at the object and went deathly still, as if his very soul had been drained. When it was over, Bai Six abandoned him in a barren wasteland—the same secret spot where Mu Sicheng and Armand used to drink together.

Mu Sicheng sent a quiet message, summoning Armand to retrieve his brother.

Armand arrived in a panic, gathering up Georgia’s lifeless form and carrying him away.

That was the beginning of the nightmare.

For a month, Georgia remained silent, lost in despair, teetering on the edge of suicide. Desperate and out of options, Armand finally snapped —he logged into the game.

He fought his way through the brutal trials, inching toward death with every step, until, in his last moments, he saw something on the massive arena screen—something that shattered him.

Mu Sicheng.

But not the one he knew.

On the screen, Mu Sicheng grinned wildly, drenched in sweat and blood, slaughtering without hesitation, treating human lives like disposable playthings. He wasn't alone. He followed another man, his movements precise, his hands deadly—no longer just a thief, but a weapon honed to perfection, a blade made for killing.

Armand stood frozen in the roaring crowd, watching the spectacle unfold.

So this is what Mu Sicheng meant by "the game"…

Was this…?

Mu Sicheng wiped blood from his jaw with the hem of his shirt, waving off the deafening cheers as he stepped off the field.

Bai Six, watching him closely, suddenly asked, "So, which game was more fun? This one, or that little 'game of friendship' with the lieutenant from the third district?"

Mu Sicheng’s pupils dilated, his bloodlust still simmering, his sharp teeth flashing in a wicked grin. "Is that even a question?"

"Of course, this game."

Armand felt like the world had gone silent.

As Bai Six’s entourage paraded through the arena, the crowd erupted into applause. Mu Sicheng, the highest-scoring killer of the match, trailed behind Bai Six, walking with careless arrogance—so carelessly that he bumped straight into Armand.

He didn’t even notice.

Armand, shoved to the ground, stared up at Mu Sicheng’s retreating

figure.

Mu Sicheng glanced back briefly, meeting Armand's eyes—but there was no recognition, no flicker of familiarity. Just a fleeting look of contempt before he turned away.

Armand sat there, dazed, as Bai Six passed by.

Then Bai Six smiled, tilting his head slightly. His lips moved, forming a silent message.

"It's just a game."

—All of it. Just a game.

Armand barely remembered how he logged out. He stumbled back to his dorm at the Heresy Bureau, dug through his drawers, and found them—Mu Sicheng's old letters.

The teasing letters.

He tore them apart, shredded them into pieces, then burned them.

The drinks they had shared, the stolen heretics they had played with, the fake bullets in his empty gun—he erased it all.

Lying on his bed, he closed his eyes. But behind his lids, the memories wouldn't fade. He could still hear Mu Sicheng's quiet laughter, still see that endless, star-filled sky over the wasteland where they once sat together.

When he finally opened his eyes, they were empty.

Without hesitation, Armand replaced the blanks in his pistol with live rounds and sent Mu Sicheng a message.

He didn't know if Mu Sicheng would come.

He could only hope that, for once, the thief had enough patience to play their game to the very end.

Mu Sicheng showed up.

So Armand ended it.

With tears streaming down his face, he gritted his teeth and pulled the trigger.

The bullet tore through Mu Sicheng's throat.

Mu Sicheng staggered, his eyes wide with disbelief—as if he couldn't fathom that Armand had actually shot him.

As he collapsed to the ground, his body twisted, his arms shifting into the clawed form of a monkey's paw. He dragged himself forward, inching toward Armand.

Armand, thinking he was still trying to attack, fired again.

The shot hit his temple.

Mu Sicheng let out a ragged breath, his claws seizing Armand's wrist in a feeble grip. He wheezed, voice raw and broken—

"…Caught your brother. I'm sorry."

His trembling hand covered Armand's, as if he wanted to shake it.

His eyes, usually brimming with mischief, were clouded with something far heavier.

Even in death, he didn't ask why.

He just apologized.

For Georgia.

Armand's breath hitched.

Tears blurred his vision as he tried to speak—but no sound came.

His throat burned.

Only then did he realize—Mu Sicheng's claws had ripped through his vocal cords. He couldn't speak anymore.

His body grew cold. His heartbeat slowed.

The last thing he saw was a pair of black leather shoes stepping toward him.

A whip dragging against the ground.

A figure kneeling beside Mu Sicheng's body, cradling the thief's lifeless form with eerie gentleness.

With gloved hands, the man carefully shut Mu Sicheng's vacant eyes.

Then, in a voice barely above a whisper, he murmured:

"If this was your chosen game… then this is your [end]."

"But death is merely a long sleep for you. Your soul will always belong to me."

"And when you wake, we will meet again."

His tone was soft. Patient. Almost… fatherly.

Like a parent soothing a restless child to sleep.

Armand tried to lift his gaze, tried to see the man's face—but his body was shutting down.

His eyelids were too heavy.

The stranger's words felt like a lullaby, dragging him under.

Before his vision went dark, a stray thought crossed Armand's fading mind—

If Georgia were here, he'd scold him for being so reckless. He'd make him write a three-thousand-word report on his foolish attachment to an enemy. He'd demand it on his desk by morning.

A single tear slipped from the corner of Armand's eye.

His soul, like a butterfly caught in the wind, finally surrendered to the long sleep called death.

And within the enclosed battlefield, the storm finally ceased.

Chapter End Notes

> The author had to note down at the end of Armand's debut chapters that Mu Sicheng and Armand are not a canon couple in the novel.
> Like What!!! They have so much chemistry together.

The Game Pool

When Armand opened his eyes again, it was as if time had rewound to before the accident.

Or rather, it wasn't as simple as returning to the past. It felt more like he'd fallen into a parallel timeline—one eerily similar to his own, yet subtly different in ways that were almost imperceptible.

The Bureau of Heresy still existed.
The game was still there.
And most importantly—his brother, Georgia, was alive.

Armand could hardly believe it. His brother was safe. He hadn't been captured, hadn't been tortured into madness by Mu Sicheng. In fact, there was no trace of Mu Sicheng at all—no notorious monkey thief running a massive smuggling operation, no chaos wreaked upon the Third District. Armand had spent a month confirming it, over and over again, until the certainty left him breathless with relief.

And yet—beneath that relief, something gnawed at him. A strange, lingering emptiness.

For the first time in a long while, his world was peaceful. No one came to disturb him.

But why?

Had he truly returned to the past, or was this some cruel illusion crafted by hell to ensnare lost souls?

Armand's hand unconsciously drifted to his throat—the same throat that Mu Sicheng had gutted. But here, there were no scars. No evidence of what had happened. It was as if some unseen force had granted him a second chance, allowing him to rewind his life and attempt a more "perfect" future line.

But if even death could be undone—if his sins and mistakes could be erased like words on a page—then what was the meaning of his existence?

Armand didn't have an answer. He was too young to think about such things.

And young people—especially ones like him, who had spent most of

their twenty years fighting a thief—weren't good at contemplating the nature of life.

Yet in a world where Mu Sicheng didn't exist, everything felt almost... absurd.

A bitter laugh escaped him as he recalled something Mu Sicheng had once said, disdainfully dismissing the world itself:

"It’s just a game—what’s the big deal?"

Armand had never understood how Mu Sicheng could so easily detach himself from reality, watching everything from above, treating lives like playthings.

And yet—after all the wanton destruction, the theft, the chaos—Mu Sicheng had once lain beside him on the wasteland, staring up at the endless sky, and murmured softly:

"Armand, the game’s no fun without friends."

He had said it so quietly, with his elbow over his eyes, that for a moment, Armand had felt as if the thief might start crying.

Mu Sicheng had been the one who chose to play.
He had been the one who refused to stop.
And yet, in the end, he was the one who seemed the most lost.

Armand took a deep breath, pushing the memory aside.

It didn’t matter what kind of world this was. Whether it was a second chance or a cruel trick, he knew one thing for certain—he had to protect Georgia.

He would not let his brother suffer again.

Armand brushed his long hair over his shoulder, tucking the golden-winged emblem of the Golden Dawn guild behind his ear. Georgia always nagged him to keep it neat—said he looked too unruly otherwise.

Unlike his brother, who always tied his hair back, Armand preferred to wear his loose. He hated the tightness. But because Georgia insisted, he kept it well-groomed.

He was heading to the play pool to train.

Georgia had forbidden him from entering the small TV area, claiming it was too dangerous—players couldn't log out at will. So Armand had never stepped foot there since waking up. He had no idea what was happening inside.

His knowledge of the game was still limited. He had spent most of his time after waking up training in the pool, fighting against other players.

If it weren't for the fact that he had secretly joined Golden Dawn behind Georgia's back, his brother might have tried to keep him out of the league entirely. Georgia always wanted to keep him in the safest place possible.

But Armand had signed up.

And not just that—he was good. Good enough that even Georgia couldn't ignore him. As the former vice-captain, he was too skilled to be sidelined.

Even so, Georgia hadn't forgiven him for it. The two were still locked in a cold war.

Which is why, when Armand stepped out of his dormitory and saw Georgia standing at his door—he was stunned.

Georgia met his gaze, his expression unreadable.

"Armand, I dreamt about you," he said.

His voice was distant, as if recalling something unpleasant.

"I don't remember the details. Just that you died… with a man. To protect me."

Armand's hands clenched involuntarily. He lowered his head, lips pressed together in silence.

Georgia sighed and reached out, ruffling his hair. His fingers ghosted over the corner of Armand's eye in an oddly tender motion.

"Sometimes, I wish you'd never grown up."

Armand froze.

"But you have," Georgia murmured, his gaze dropping to Armand's shoulder. A butterfly rested there, its wings gently fluttering.

"Your skill has changed. It used to be a bow—like mine. Now, it's a butterfly. That means your core desire has shifted."

"But no matter how many times I ask, you never tell me why."

Georgia's voice was quiet.

"Ever since we were kids, I could always tell what you were thinking. We even had the same dreams. You used to love that connection between us."

"But now… even when I dream of you, I can't understand what you're thinking."

"You have secrets, Armand."

Armand parted his lips, as if to speak—but in the end, he said nothing.

Georgia watched him for a moment, then exhaled softly, lowering his gaze.

"I can't keep you locked away in a safe place anymore."

His voice was heavy.

"A butterfly can't survive in a cage."

Armand looked up in shock.

Georgia met his gaze evenly.

"The team is patrolling the small TV area today. We're doing an exhibition match for the players who support us. If you're serious about playing in the league…"

"Then take it seriously."

"Pack your things and meet us there."

With that, Georgia turned on his heel and walked away.

Armand stood frozen in place, his mind blank.

Then, slowly, he reached up, touching the spot where Georgia had ruffled his hair. His fingers trembled.

A soft, breathless laugh escaped him, his eyes turning slightly red.

"Yes, Captain!" Armand called after him, voice steady and clear.

The butterfly on his shoulder fluttered its wings.

Small TV Area

Bai Liu's group rested against the side of the central hall, taking a break mid-training. No one dared to approach them, especially because of Tang Erda, and everyone watched in awe at these five players who had won thirteen games in two days.

Bai Liu squinted and pulled his sweaty hair back with his fingers as Mu Sicheng sat next to him, head bowed, panting.

Tang Erda crossed his arms and scolded them, "Three games and you can't last? Didn't you manage ten in a row yesterday?"

"It's because I managed ten games in a row yesterday that my body aches today," Bai Liu replied seriously. "It's too intense, Captain Tang, I can't keep up in an office like this."

Mu Sicheng exhaled a hot breath. "I can keep going, but the other two who didn't call out aren't holding up."

Tang Erda looked over at Liu Jiayi and Muke, both pale and out of breath. He had subconsciously expected everyone in the group to match the standards of future players, forgetting that Muke and Liu Jiayi—slightly weaker than the others—were struggling with the intensity of the training.

Despite their exhaustion, neither had asked to stop, gritting their teeth and enduring.

Mu Sicheng added, "The games you've picked are all quick monster-fighting rounds that don't even require decryption, and some of them we've already cleared. Of course, they're going fast for you, but we're struggling to keep up."

"Take it easy on yourselves, Captain Tang," Bai Liu said with a smile.

Tang Erda paused for a moment and then relented, "Rest for half a dimensional hour."

Bai Liu turned to Liu Jiayi. "Are you close to qualifying for the league based on the number of games you've played?"

Liu Jiayi tapped on the system panel to check and nodded. "Yes, two

more to go."

"If you sign up for the league under our guild's name, you're officially quitting the King's Guild, right?" Bai Liu asked.

Liu Jiayi went quiet for a moment. "Yes."

Bai Liu met her gaze. "No regrets?"

Liu Jiayi rolled her eyes. "Did you give me a chance to regret? Now's the time to ask? Ridiculous."

"That's not true," Bai Liu admitted shamelessly, grinning. "But have you ever regretted it?"

"Yes," Liu Jiayi admitted without hesitation, but after a brief pause, she added softly, "... But, well, when you said outside the Heretics Authority that you wouldn't use Hearts' method, that made me feel a little less regretful."

Before she could say more, a commotion erupted at the front, drawing the attention of the crowd.

Bai Liu's group stood up and stepped back. Tang Erda, the tallest with the best view, glanced away from the crowd and frowned. "There's a guild war party out on patrol."

"What guild is this big?" Mu Sicheng asked, raising an eyebrow. "Top three, right?"

Tang Erda turned to Bai Liu and said quietly, "Golden Dawn."

Bai Liu's gaze shifted sideways to the approaching Golden Dawn team.

The Golden Dawn members, in full force, separated the spectators with ease, creating a clear path for the players to walk through. The crowd of onlookers, including many Golden Dawn fans and bettors, watched eagerly. They cheered loudly as they spotted two almost identical faces at the forefront of the team, both shining with excitement.

"… Who's this new player? Georgia's brother?!"

"The twins! This year's pairs will be a treat!"

"Golden Dawn's been keeping this quiet. Are they hiding a killer? What's the skill?"

“Gee, that face is going to cause a frenzy on the field. Georgia didn’t get a free pass on his face again, did he?”

The chatter grew louder, drowning out all attention on Bai Liu and his group.

Golden Dawn’s arrival overshadowed them, and occasionally, spectators would glance at Bai Liu with contempt, muttering insults.

“That’s just the regular team, nothing special… The big guild’s team still can’t compare.”

“Look at their rookie players.”

Of course, they wouldn’t dare insult Bai Liu directly, especially with Tang Erda standing right there. Everyone was too scared to provoke him.

Bai Liu, unfazed by the comments, had long grown accustomed to being mocked. But Mu Sicheng, already on edge from Tang Erda’s pressure about the training, couldn’t hold back. Now, these people were getting under his skin.

With a grim expression, Mu Sicheng rolled up his sleeves, ready to teach them a lesson.

When the players saw Mu Sicheng approaching, they didn’t expect a competitor to react so aggressively. Once Mu Sicheng grabbed one of them, the players were so frightened they nearly screamed. Only after Bai Liu intervened did Mu Sicheng finally release them, though they kept begging for mercy as they fled.

Mu Sicheng was still furious. He and Bai Liu stood in the inner circle, facing the approaching Golden Dawn team. As he turned, his eyes fixed on the players who had tried to pull him down. He glared at them, preparing to see who this newcomer was that had the crowd in such a frenzy.

At the head of the Golden Dawn team stood a man with a waist-high brown ponytail and striking brown eyes. His uniform—a silver and white ceremonial suit with gold-stitched boots—was impeccably groomed. Two shiny gold winged badges adorned either side of his ponytail.

Behind him, slightly to the right, was a player who looked almost identical, though slightly shorter, with darker brown eyes. His

shoulder-length hair was pinned back by a gold winged crest, and a butterfly rested motionlessly on his right shoulder, as if a decorative accessory.

Though he looked young, there was a quiet majesty about him, like a leader who had been at the helm for a long time.

It really was like a big curmudgeon with a little curmudgeon.

Mu Sicheng's eyes narrowed mischievously as he focused on the newcomer, Armand. He rested his gaze on the winged crest behind Armand's ear, an itch forming in his fingers.

He hadn't stolen anything in a while.

The butterfly on Armand's shoulder suddenly fluttered its wings. As Armand walked by, Mu Sicheng—quick as a monkey—reached out with his "monkey paw" and poked Armand behind the ear.

Armand quickly turned, evading the poke with ease. But Mu Sicheng, quicker still, flicked the badge off the back of his head with a sharp motion.

With his long brown hair flowing behind him, Armand turned, his face half-covered. Only his dark brown eyes were visible, but they were clear and unamused.

The badge clattered to the ground with a crisp 'ding'.

Mu Sicheng bent down, scooping the badge up with his fingers, spinning it absently on his nails. He looked up at Armand with a mocking smile. "Is this the alertness of Golden Dawn's ace recruit? See?"

Armand's eyes reflected Mu Sicheng's smug face. His pupils tightened slightly as he stared back.

The butterfly on Armand's shoulder flapped its wings again, and suddenly, a gust of wind swept through, sending Mu Sicheng flying back. The onlookers scattered in fear, and Armand's freshly groomed hair was tousled by the wind.

Standing calmly, Armand retrieved his badge from the ground and pinned it back on his head, turning away without a glance, as if the wind itself was following his every step.

The storm had passed.

The Game Pool

When Armand returned to the group, Mu Sicheng, who had been knocked down by the wind, scrambled to his feet and tried to push forward again—only for Bai Liu to hold him back.

Bai Liu glanced across the crowd, locking eyes with Georgia in the distance.

Georgia's gaze lingered on the frustrated Mu Sicheng for barely a second before shifting to Bai Liu. The Golden Dawn captain studied him intently, his expression serious, as if he were trying to burn a hole through Bai Liu's face with his stare.

"Wow." Bai Liu smiled. "This Captain Georgia looks like he knows me."

Tang Erda's expression darkened. "…He shouldn't. If he remembered what you did, he'd be attacking by now."

"Georgia's the type to act first and ask questions later."

"Then why does Captain Georgia keep staring at me?" Bai Liu squinted up at Tang Erda. "Don't tell me he fell in love with me at first sight?"

Tang Erda blurted out, almost reflexively, "It's not impossible. He only met you once before he ran off with you, too…"

Bai Liu: "….."

Fortunately, Georgia didn't stare at Bai Liu for long. As soon as Armand rejoined him, he withdrew his gaze and led his team forward, acting as if Bai Liu had never existed.

The wind had thrown the onlookers into a brief panic, but their fear quickly gave way to cheers and excited screams—they had interpreted the chaos as part of a dramatic duel.

Armand was the clear winner of that exchange, and the fact that the striking newcomer had proven his combat prowess only fueled the enthusiasm of Golden Dawn's supporters.

As the gold-clad team passed Bai Liu and the others, the crowd's cheers hit a fever pitch, almost taunting in their intensity.

Mu Sicheng scowled. "Shit, so my skills are banned. If we could

actually fight it out in a game—"

"Enough." Bai Liu cast him a lazy glance. "You've already given them plenty of free publicity today. Don't hand them any more—train."

"…Yeah." Mu Sicheng clenched his fist, realizing his own impulsiveness. His fingers shifted from clawed monkey paws back to human hands, and he fell silent.

Without another word, they turned and headed toward the boarding gate to begin the next round of training.

Two games later, Liu Jiayi's system panel lit up amid the swamp and the toxic fog, displaying a message:

[System Alert: Player Liu Jiayi has reached the required number of games to register for the league. Do you wish to register?]

Liu Jiayi glanced up at Bai Liu. Seeing the unwavering certainty in his eyes, she took a deep breath.

[OK.]

[Registration Guild Choice: Killer Sequence, King's Guild... Wandering Circus...]

Her gaze lingered momentarily on the King's Guild crown logo before she selected Wandering Circus.

[System Alert: You have officially registered as a player for the (Wandering Circus) Guild League. Please find your remaining four teammates as soon as possible...]

The moment her registration was confirmed, an image of her appeared at the bottom of the popularity poll announcement—a shot taken at an odd angle, capturing Liu Jiayi mid-battle. Her veil was half-blown by the wind, her stance decisive as she unleashed poison upon a towering creature. A faint, almost childlike smirk curved her lips, playful yet chilling in its innocence.

This wasn't a screenshot from a small TV; it was too close, not from a broadcast perspective. Someone had taken this photo while standing near her—too near.

Liu Jiayi froze, staring at the image. She remembered this angle. The

person standing behind her during that game, covering her defense, had been... Hearts.

She recalled the moment clearly—after she had killed the monster, Hearts had smiled at her. Then, without hesitation, she had drawn a playing card and slashed forward. Liu Jiayi, caught off guard, felt the veil torn from her face, a sharp sting left behind where the edge had scraped her skin.

Shocked, she had looked up at Hearts, bewildered.

Hearts had crouched down to meet her gaze, smiling.

"This is your first lesson about the league," she had murmured. "Never trust your teammates so easily, even if they're standing behind you."

Lowering her eyes, she whispered, "You never know when the people around you will lose control. When they do, they'll betray you and attack."

"Teammates aren't reliable. The only person you can trust as a tactician is yourself—and your absolute control over your team. Even if they go mad, they must still be nothing more than weapons in your hands."

Liu Jiayi hesitated, then replaced the photo before stepping out of the boarding area, her head held high.

As her name lit up on the system's popularity bulletin board, electronic fireworks burst across her panel.

[System Alert: Player Liu Jiayi has joined the Wandering Circus team!]
[System Announcement: Player Liu Jiayi has permanently withdrawn from the King's Guild!]

Through the falling digital confetti, Liu Jiayi spotted a familiar figure standing near the exit.

Qi Yifang.

He was holding two boxes, his eyes red and puffy—he'd clearly been crying. But the moment he saw Liu Jiayi, he forced a smile, trying to put on a brave front like an older brother should.

"Congratulations, Little Witch, on making it to the league!"

Liu Jiayi halted mid-step.

Behind her, Bai Liu gave her a gentle push. "Go on. Say goodbye properly."

Slowly, she walked forward. Qi Yifang's smile trembled, and before he could stop himself, tears spilled down his face again.

"Ooooh, Jiayi, you're amazing, I'm so happy for you..."

He crouched down, wiping at his face with his sleeve. "I—I got into the official team, Jiayi."

Liu Jiayi gave him a look. "Isn't that a good thing?"

"Not at all, wooooh—" Qi Yifang sniffled loudly. "We've been training with a nun's player, and she's so strong. Liu Ji and I can barely keep up. The Queen calls me a loser every day. And now, when I think about having to go up against you later, I—"** His voice cracked. "I'm terrified."

His words tumbled out in a miserable wail. "What if we win?! The Queen said she won't go easy on you!"

Liu Jiayi couldn't help but laugh, crossing her arms and tilting her chin up proudly. "Don't underestimate my new team. It's not certain who'll win."

"Stop crying!" She sighed. "Aren't you embarrassed wailing like that?"

Qi Yifang sniffled again, shoving the boxes into her arms. "It was supposed to be the new guild information officer delivering these, but he saw the system message that you joined the league and had a breakdown. He's crying worse than I am—everyone else is bawling in their dorms. I was the only one who could hold it together, so they sent me instead."

Liu Jiayi accepted the boxes in silence. Then Qi Yifang suddenly pulled out a pair of skates.

A very pink pair of skates.

There was a doodle of a doll and a tiny witch awkwardly holding hands on one side—clearly added later.

Liu Jiayi's eyes widened. "[Super Speed Ice Skates]? Where did you get these? I haven't seen a Level 3 dungeon drop these in ages."

Qi Yifang hesitated. "They're in the game pool, but the monster book requirements are insane. It took a whole team of us over half a month to farm this pair. Liu Ji got hurt grinding for them, but—he improved a lot from it. That's how he made it onto the official team."

The smile faded from Liu Jiayi's face.

Qi Yifang went on, "We wanted to get you a gift for when you made it to the league. You're not the fastest runner, and these will help. They'll keep you safe."

He gently pushed the skates into her hands. "Take them."

Liu Jiayi studied him for a long moment. Then, in a low voice, she said, "Half a month ago, I was part of the King's Guild. Now I'm not. I didn't join the league for you, so this isn't something I should—"

"But we are!"

Qi Yifang lunged forward, wrapping his arms around her in a fierce hug.

"We joined the team so we could protect you!"

Liu Jiayi inhaled sharply.

Qi Yifang choked out, "No matter which team you're on, we just want you to be safe."

His grip tightened. "The Queen said the league is brutal and fair. She said you're smart enough to know that if we held back to let you live, it would only make things worse. It would mess with your decisions, make you hesitate—and that hesitation would make you more vulnerable in the tournament."

Liu Jiayi clenched her fists.

Qi Yifang closed his eyes. "We're not as smart as you. We didn't know what else to do. After thinking about it for a long time, this was the only way we could protect you."

His voice hardened. "We'll fight you with everything we have, Jiayi. And you—you fight us with everything you have. If we come after you —run."

"Run as far as you can! Run until we can't catch up! Run until the game ends!"

"Just live!"

Liu Jiayi let out a quiet laugh, eyes misty. She pulled him into a firm hug. "Don’t make me sound like such a loser."

"Who’s running? We’re going to win!"

Qi Yifang wiped his tears and smiled through them. "So are we!"

Bai Liu watched as Liu Jiayi returned, two boxes and a pair of skates in hand.

Behind her, Qi Yifang turned to leave. But he didn’t make it far before breaking into another fit of crying as he ran.

Liu Jiayi picked up her pace, then broke into a run—throwing herself into Bai Liu’s arms, burying her face.

"Bai Liu, can we really... win?"

Bai Liu stroked her hair. "We will."

Her voice softened. "And the price?"

Bai Liu glanced toward Qi Yifang’s retreating figure.

"You’ve already paid your price. The cost of victory belongs to me."

The number [0] below Liu Jiayi's poster suddenly changes a little in the system's popularity voting panel.

[League player Liu Jiayi gets one vote.]

[League player Liu Jiayi gains access to the game pool].

The Game Pool

Three days later.

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng has cleared the game "Urban Strange Tales."]
[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng has qualified for the league.]

Mu Sicheng glided effortlessly through the fire and smoke, seizing an invisible rope mid-air. He whistled on cue, his lips curling into a smirk.

Deafening, high-tempo music blasted in his headphones, and the flickering firelight cast an eerie glow on his exhilarated expression.

[OK.]

The moment Mu Sicheng's small TV flickered off, a new poster appeared at the tail end of the system's league registration. It depicted Mu Sicheng, one arm twisted into a monkey’s paw, his eyes unfocused, an ominous grin on his face. Behind him, a train teetered on the brink of explosion—a frozen moment from that game, the exact scene where Bai Liu had driven him to the edge of a mental breakdown.

A man stood before Mu Sicheng’s television, his gaze fixed on the screen. The butterfly on his shoulder fluttered its wings almost imperceptibly, and the breeze swept his long hair over his shoulder.

On the small TV, Mu Sicheng announced proudly to Bai Liu, "We made it. Now, we wait to win the league."

Armand lowered his gaze, his long lashes casting deep shadows over his face. A faint smile ghosted his lips as he turned away.

"Mu Sicheng, whatever game you're playing this time—"

"I'll be there for all of it, just like before."

"In our last life, we played half and half. We ended up in the same place."

"If you think beating me will be easy—"

"Think again."

The third-ranked player on the Nightmare Nova list, just behind Armand, was a figure in a crude, self-painted clown mask. Laughing shrilly, he fired indiscriminately at both monsters and players with a half-meter toy flare gun. Blood and minced flesh splattered across his mask.

In front of his small television, the audience was frozen in stunned silence.

"Holy shit. Is this guy crazy? He's still a rookie, right? How is he grinding so aggressively? This is the seventh time I've seen him on the Rising Stars list in the past two days—does he not sleep?"

"……I even saw someone from the Kabbalah Guild try to recruit him yesterday, but he killed them outright……"

"Weren't they hunting him today? He wiped them out instead……"

"What kind of skill is that? One shot and the Kabbalah Guild's reserve team couldn't even fight back. He's a newbie—how the hell does he have an attack damage value over 10,000?!"

Daniel emerged from the entrance of the boarding house, drenched in blood.

The players around him recoiled instinctively, making way for him in horror. He was the only survivor from the game.

It wasn't that the game had a low survival rate. It was that he had killed everyone else. Nearly beaten them to a pulp.

But Daniel remained unfazed by their fear.

From the first time he logged out of a game like this, he had fallen in love with the feeling—warm blood soaking his skin, wrapping around him. It made him feel alive.

Alive—before he met Bai Liu.
Before his dreams became nightmares.

Daniel crushed the bloodstained homemade mask in his hand and tossed it aside. As he turned, he found himself face-to-face with a man.

Half of the man's face was obscured by metallic armor, but his exposed eye was sharp, unwavering—watching him. Clearly, he had

been looking for Daniel.

If this were a game, Daniel would have already pulled the trigger. But this was the game lobby. Instead, he started walking past the man, feigning indifference.

The man caught his arm with practiced ease.

"Want to join my guild?" he asked.

Daniel's lips twisted into an exaggerated grin, but his eyes remained cold. "The last guy who asked me that ended up as a bloodstain on my mask."

The man didn't flinch. He scoffed. "If I told you I could get Bai Liu to take you on, would you be interested?"

Daniel studied him for a long moment before finally asking, "What's the name of your guild?"

The man, as if expecting Daniel's eventual compromise, answered, "The Sixth Guild. The Deer Hunters."

Daniel scoffed. "I don't work with cowards who hide their faces." He gestured to the man's armor. "Take off the mask. Then I'll decide if you're worth my time."

The man remained unfazed, his voice turning sharp. "I thought you might prefer your masked counterpart. After all, there's no monster more afraid to face its own existence than you, Daniel."

He didn't wait for Daniel's reaction. Instead, he reached up and slowly removed the metallic covering.

A dusky hawk-like eye locked onto Daniel. The left side of his face, once hidden, was a black void—a hollow, gaping darkness that sent a chill down the spine.

"Cen Buming. President of Guild 6."

Six days later.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu and Player Muke have cleared the game "Daughter of the Mire."]
[System Alert: Player Bai Liu and Player Muke have qualified for league registration.]
[System Alert: The Wandering Circus team has gathered all five core

players and has officially entered the league selection process. We wish you success in the league……]

Tang Erda scanned the team and nodded. "Looks good. Basic panel values are over 8,000. Let's get in the game pool."

The doors to the game pool slowly swung open. The dazzling colors of the screens reflected on their faces.

As the doors shut behind them, the number one player on the Nightmare Rising Stars list flashed onto a small TV—Daniel, wearing a wide clown grin.

"I'm off to play in the league, everyone. Please support me."

He bowed politely, lifting one hand in a perfect stage gesture. Then he looked up, revealing clear, apple-green eyes that crinkled with amusement.

"Otherwise—" he added with a laugh, "—I'll just have to kill any audience that doesn't."

At the same time, an announcement from the Deer Hunters' Guild flashed across the system—

[The player at the top of this Rising Stars list is one of our official guild members this year.]

In the real world, at the headquarters of the Bureau of Heresy Processing.

Cen Buming strode past Tang Erda's abandoned office, his uniform pristine. He slowed, glancing inside. His gaze lingered on the empty desk, then on the gun resting on its surface.

He was silent for a long moment. Then he snorted.

"So, is it a hunter's fate to be forsaken by the prophets?"

"No matter if it's the first generation or the second, the end result is the same—you become a monster for others to observe."

"……How pathetic."

He hooked the door shut with his toe and walked away without a backward glance.

On the desk, next to a transparent monocle, lay a classified file.

It seemed that before leaving, Tang Erda had hesitated—he had considered using the monocle to peek inside.

But in the end, he hadn’t.

A gust of wind flipped the monocle over, revealing the file’s title through its convex lens—

Heresy No. 0009
Heresy Name: First Generation Hunter—Cen Buming.

[..... Former deputy captain of the first detachment. Assumed prophet authority following the 0006 world line and carried out hunter tasks. With the complete degradation of the 0317 world line's spirit, the first riot broke out. Hunter status revoked. Prophet authority outlawed. Transferred to second detachment captain, then reassigned to the third detachment captain—the second-generation hunter, Tang Erda.....]

[..... No current intention to harm others. Signs of recovery. Remains on duty under observation.....]

Inside the Game Pool

The atmosphere here was entirely different from the small TV area outside. A massive screen was projected onto the ground, resembling an enormous pool, with a half-metre-high embankment enclosing its edges.

A strange, psychedelic glow bathed the entire area, shifting in shadowy, colored lights—evoking the feel of an underground dance hall from the 1980s.

The screen displayed countless game covers in a dazzling, rapid rotation, swirling like a school of carp bobbing in a pond. Players leapt in and out, adding to the surreal spectacle.

"The lights here... are so bright..." Muke murmured, rubbing his eyes. "I get dizzy just looking at them for too long."

"Obviously," Liu Jiayi shrugged. "The game pool’s lighting has a mental value-draining effect—it’s also a form of power-up."

Mu Sicheng shot her a glance. "Wait. Isn't this your first time here? How do you know all this?"

Liu Jiayi hesitated, then admitted, "Hearts had me use her skill card to impersonate her so I could train safely inside the game pool. The training here is way more intense, so I spent most of my time inside."

"No wonder I barely see you on the rankings outside." Mu Sicheng clapped his hands in realization. "I thought you'd died in some game and just hadn't shown up for ages."

Liu Jiayi: "....."

She decided to ignore him. This fool never thought before speaking.

Standing beside the massive floor screen, Bai Liu observed the shifting covers. "These fast-moving game posters—they're part of the training, aren't they? A test of dynamic vision and information intake?"

Tang Erda nodded. "Yes. Choosing the right game is crucial for newbie teams like ours. Some of the big guilds monopolize certain games for training. If we're not careful, we might end up running into them too early, and—"

Before he could finish, a wave of players burst out of the game pool all at once.

It wasn't unusual for players to log out, but these ones clawed their way out like they'd seen a ghost—faces pale, gasping in terror, cursing under their breath.

"What kind of rotten luck is this?! Randomly pick a game and step on a landmine!"

"Damn good thing I ran fast—otherwise, I'd have been whipped to death!"

"Wasn't the Assassin Sequence training in the Snowbound copy lately?! Why the hell are they suddenly in the Ice Age copy today?!"

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow at the drenched, trembling players dragging themselves out of the pool, then glanced at Tang Erda. "-That's what happens, isn't it?"

As he spoke, a long, pale, bony hand emerged from the pool's edge, gripping it tightly and pushing down. A man surfaced like a fish

breaking the water—his upper body rising slowly into view.

He wore a simple black shirt and loose work trousers with multiple pockets. In his other hand, he gripped a long black whip that trailed across the ground.

Water dripped from his soaked hair, streaming over his eyes and down his legs. The temperature radiating from him was frigid—just as the fleeing player had said, he must have just emerged from an ice-field copy. The sheer cold kept others at a wary distance.

With one leg hooked over the pool's edge, the man vaulted out with a single fluid motion, landing smoothly in front of Bai Liu.

His gaze flicked over Bai Liu with the same indifferent glance he'd given the dozens of terrified players before him. Then, without another look, he strode forward, brushing past Bai Liu's shoulder.

At the moment they passed, Bai Liu abruptly reached out and seized his wrist. It was ice-cold—almost deathly so.

The Game Pool

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As Bai Liu grasped Spades' wrist, the surrounding players—those who had just fled moments ago—stared in stunned silence.

Mu Sicheng and Liu Jiayi choked mid-breath, while Muke, who had never officially met Spades, remained oblivious but instinctively sensed that the man before him was not someone to be trifled with. Meanwhile, standing beside Bai Liu, Tang Erda's forehead twitched twice before he wordlessly reached out, attempting to pry Bai Liu’s grip off Spades.

At that moment, everyone was thinking the same thing: Why are you provoking him?

But before Tang Erda could intervene, Bai Liu released Spades' wrist, casually shaking out his hand behind his back. He took a small step backward, widening the distance between them, and smiled, composed and courteous. "Apologies for pulling you in so suddenly. I just wanted to introduce myself."

Spades turned slightly toward him, water trailing from his soaked hair down to his pale lips. He parted them slightly, his voice low and steady. "Spades."

"Bai Liu," he introduced himself in return.

Spades, his eyes obscured by damp strands of hair, seemed to assess him for a moment. Then, with a slight nod, he said, "I know you. You said on the forum that you wanted to put your name on me."

Bai Liu: "....."

He had completely forgotten about that.

An awkward silence settled over the scene. Bai Liu pursed his lips before asking evenly, "And? What do you think?"

"Just win against me." Spades’ tone was light, almost elegant. "I don’t mind your name. It sounds nice."

A collective gasp came from the onlookers.

Where the hell is this conversation going?!

Bai Liu's breath caught for just a second. The hand behind his back curled slightly, fingers clenching, though his face remained unreadable. He forced the conversation forward with a smile. "Can I put it anywhere on your body?"

Spades, unfazed, met his gaze with complete sincerity. "Anywhere. If you have a particular preference for any part of my body, you can let me know in advance."

Bai Liu: "....."

Onlookers: "....."

HELP!!! Should we really be listening to this?!

"All of that assumes you can beat me." Spades continued calmly. "But you don't have the strength to do that right now."

Bai Liu's eyes flickered, avoiding direct contact with Spades' unwavering gaze. He blinked once, then stated, "I'm going to beat you in this game."

Spades gave the smallest nod. "Then you can put your name on me all you want."

Bai Liu: "....."

He's really not built for this...

With that, Spades gathered his whip and walked away without a second glance. The players standing in his path instinctively stepped aside, making way for the cold and formidable presence that had just so effortlessly met Bai Liu's bold confrontation with what could only be described as... harmonious.

Liu Jiayi silently sidled up to Bai Liu, glancing at his face, then at his ears—pitying him. "You couldn't resist, could you? The moment Spades actually responded to you, you had to keep talking."

"That guy has no human common sense whatsoever. He's immune to provocations, flirtations, and any kind of sentimental theatrics. He doesn't even realize he's bouncing them back unconsciously—just look at you, getting completely reverse flirted by him..."

Bai Liu reached out and pushed Liu Jiayi's head down. "What did you

just say?"

Liu Jiayi quickly corrected herself. "I meant—Spades totally broke out in a cold sweat at your provocation! You were amazing!"

Mu Sicheng couldn’t hold back any longer. "Seriously, why did you mess with him?"

Bai Liu looked in the direction Spades had disappeared. "To confirm something."

Muke hesitated. "And? Did you confirm it?"

Bai Liu suddenly smiled, easy and relaxed. "Sort of."

Apart from that person, there was likely no one else in this world who could shake him like that on their first meeting.

Why Spades didn’t remember him—that part wasn’t clear yet.

But that was fine.

Some memories... weren’t meant to be shared.

Bai Liu withdrew his gaze and turned back to the glowing game pool, the swirling lights reflecting in his dark eyes.

"Let the training begin."

"Yes!"

Day 7 of Training.

Charles sat down, folded his arms on the table, and leaned forward. "We're getting closer to the tournament. Your guild members and I are handling the support for now, so you don't need to worry about that. But I called you here today because there are two important things you need to decide personally."

He held up two fingers with a smile. "Team badges and weapon modifications. You’ll need a collective team badge, just like every other battle group."

He started listing them off. "The top-ranked guilds all have theirs. The first guild, Killer Sequence, uses a Reverse Cross. The second, King’s

Guild, has a Crown. The third, Golden Dawn, has Seven Strings with Wings. The fourth, Kabbalah, is marked by the Leaves of Life. And the fifth—my own Gamblers Club—bears a Chip."

Charles flicked his fingers, and a silver-rimmed chip badge appeared in his palm. He placed it on the table, smiling as he continued.

"The Deer Hunters, ranked sixth, use a Deer Head. The Masons of Paradise, ranked seventh, have a Folding Cloak, and so on."

He glanced at Bai Liu. "Your guild's original badge was a Zombie Tusk, but let's be real—that doesn't fit your group anymore. So, after a week of discussion with the design team I hired, we've come up with something new."

Charles pulled a small valuables box from a nearby drawer, flicked it open with a gloved hand, and pushed it toward Bai Liu. "Take a look."

Inside, a gleaming circular medallion rested on dark velvet. A diamond-encrusted platinum hexagram framed a half-opened Werewolf's Eye, with a blood-red gemstone the size of a pigeon's egg set in the center.

Bai Liu studied it for a long moment before speaking. "The Hexagram is a symbol of Satan, and the Werewolf's Eye is commonly seen in Werewolf Kill game cards. It represents the Werewolf Card."

He lifted his gaze to Charles. "My team is called the Wandering Circus. Neither of those things have anything to do with us, do they?"

Charles chuckled, his smile deepening as his eyes flickered toward the Reverse Cross hanging from Bai Liu's collarbone. "You're good at uncovering hidden connections. But there was a better symbol for you—the Reverse Cross. Unfortunately, that's already the badge of Killer Sequence, so we had to pick something else."

Bai Liu's gaze lingered on Charles before dropping back to the glowing red badge.

"If you choose to accept this design," Charles continued, "it'll cost you 10,000 points—which translates to about—"

"—10 million," Bai Liu finished smoothly. He picked up the badge with a light smile. "Thank you, Mr. Charles. This will be the badge for the Wandering Circus."

Mu Sicheng, Muke, Liu Jiayi, and Tang Erda: "....."

You could have just refused! 10 million points, and you folded?!

Without missing a beat, Bai Liu gestured for Charles to continue.

"And," Charles steered the conversation back, "more important than the badge—weapon modifications."

He leaned back in his chair and snapped his fingers. A system screen unfolded in midair, void-projected. But, of course, that didn't suit Charles' taste, so he had the projection cast onto a deep wooden panel instead.

Liu Jiayi stared at the ridiculous setup. This guy even added a gold frame to the projection?!

On the panel, three-dimensional models of various weapons rotated—whips, playing cards, guns, bows—each one belonging to a major guild leader.

"There are two ways to modify your weapon in this game," Charles explained. "The first is through a change in one's core desire—like Muke's dagger."

His gaze flickered toward Muke before shifting to Liu Jiayi, his lips curling into a smirk.

"And the second—through someone else's skill."

He turned to Liu Jiayi. "Hearts gave you a skill-storing playing card. That's my ability at work. I can store someone else's skill into a physical object, allowing others to use it."

Liu Jiayi's head snapped up in surprise. She knew Charles' skill, Phantom Devourer, allowed him to store abilities—but she'd never realized that was how her playing cards had been created.

Because Hearts and Charles never got along. She wouldn't have willingly worked with him.

"My skill is well-suited for weapon modifications," Charles continued, "so you could say I'm something of a… subtle weapon craftsman. Let me show you."

He rose from his chair and walked over to Bai Liu, bending slightly as if performing a magic trick for an audience. With an easy smile, he

extended a hand.

"For example—Mr. Bai Liu, may I borrow your skill weapon for a moment? Your old wallet?"

Bai Liu arched a brow but pulled out the battered wallet from his system panel and handed it over.

Charles bowed theatrically, took the wallet, wrapped his hands together—and flipped them over.

In an instant, the wallet had transformed into a pair of aged, yellowed leather gloves. Holding them between his thumb and forefinger, Charles presented them to Bai Liu.

"Wallet gloves," he explained. "Your soul notes are encased inside. They're more discreet than carrying a wallet and much easier for you to use in trade." He opened the glove's inner compartment to show Bai Liu. "Your primary weapon is a long whip. Gloves are a better match—they'll protect your hands during combat."

He placed the gloves back in Bai Liu's palm in an inviting gesture. "Try them."

Bai Liu slid them on. They fit perfectly—neither too tight nor too loose. Testing them, he easily pulled out a soul note and a points coin.

With a flick of his fingers, he hooked a coin from the inner compartment, making it appear as if by magic. And when he moved his hand, the gloves made handling the whip feel effortless.

Mu Sicheng and Muke watched in fascination—it was their first time witnessing a live weapon modification.

Liu Jiayi remained silent.

Tang Erda, however, stared at the gloves with complicated emotions. His gaze then shifted to Bai Liu's face.

He had seen this before.

Bai Six—from another timeline—had also used gloves made from a wallet. But his were different. Expensive. Polished black leather, sleek and refined. The Wandering Circus Guild spent millions of points each year maintaining them…

Bai Liu flexed his fingers, glancing at Charles. "I don't have to pay for

this modification, do I?"

For a split second, Charles' smile faltered. But he quickly recovered. "For my chosen betting horse? Consider it a gift."

His gaze lingered on Bai Liu's battered gloves. With a sigh, he pointed out, "But—you really should take better care of your skill weapon. I've never seen one more worn than yours."

Bai Liu blinked. "How much does maintenance cost?"

Charles straightened. "It varies by guild leader, but the average for the top ten is around 630,000 points per year. The most expensive? Spades' Lizard Bone Whip. That one cost 1.26 million points last year alone."

Bai Liu paused. Then, incredulously—

"Is he seriously that much of a big spender...?"

Chapter End Notes

10 million = 10 000 points

"It's true that Spades' weapon is expensive to maintain." Charles, oblivious to Bai Liu's subtle shift in expression, continued, "But he's also a first-class fighter, and his weapons are well worth the cost. If it were me, I'd have no hesitation spending that many points on him."

Bai Liu glanced at Charles and replied nonchalantly, "Oh? Is that so."

Charles, failing to notice Bai Liu's cool gaze, went on, "Bai Liu, I can make minor modifications to your skills and weapons myself. But your whip, and your team's weapons—"

His eyes traced a slow circle around the whips, guns, monkey claws, and daggers. "—these heavy weapon types require a professional reformer. You'll also need a face-to-face meeting with them to discuss your combat habits and attack styles. They'll modify the weapons based on your input."

Liu Jiayi raised an eyebrow. "Weapon modifiers are rare in the game. The good ones are all hoarded by the big guilds. Where exactly are you planning to find one willing to work with us one-on-one?"

Charles leaned back in his chair and smiled at Liu Jiayi. "It's common knowledge that the best weapon modifiers and appraisers belong to the King's Guild. But, little witch, you and I both know that's just a gimmick Hearts cooked up. The appraisers in the King's Guild are indeed top-notch, but their weapon modifiers? Not so much."

Liu Jiayi fell silent.

Charles smirked. "But you're right—good weapon modifiers are usually controlled by major guilds. That's why the best ones in this game are actually with the Deer Hunter's Guild."

Liu Jiayi's eyes flicked up. "Guild rules forbid their weapon modifiers from working on external players' weapons."

Charles shrugged, absently twisting the ring on his finger. "Rules can change."

"As long as someone enters this game driven by desire, they'll always be willing to trade something for it. And I," Charles tapped his temple, "am very good at figuring out what they want."

Then, glancing at his watch, he said, "But I suggest you all get a good night's rest before meeting the weapon modifier. If you're not in the right mindset, it'll be difficult to get the best results. This is a rare opportunity—cherish it."

He waved a hand in dismissal. "That's it for today. Rest up, and come see me tomorrow before training. I'll introduce you then."

Bai Liu dipped his head slightly in farewell. "Thank you, Mr. Charles, for going through all this trouble for us."

Outside Charles' Office
As they left, Bai Liu glanced down at a tense Liu Jiayi. "What's wrong with the weapon modifier Charles found for us?"

Liu Jiayi hesitated, shaking her head. "Nothing, really. He's right—the best weapon modifiers aren't in the King's Guild. And for players like us, whose skills are already exposed, getting our weapons modified before the tournament is a good idea. It's just that..."

Bai Liu remained calm. "Just what?"

Liu Jiayi bit her lip. "I just don't know how he did it." Her unease was obvious. "Maybe I'm overthinking, but every guild guards their weapon modifiers fiercely. These people know every detail about their battle teams' skills."

She took a breath before continuing. "The Deer Hunter is a massive guild. Usually, only the president has the authority to lend out a weapon modifier. If Charles managed to pull this off, it can only mean one thing—"

Bai Liu picked up where she left off. "—the president of the Deer Hunter's Guild volunteered to let Charles use their weapon modifier on us."

Liu Jiayi nodded gravely. "But why? Lending out a weapon modifier is a huge risk. I have no idea what Charles offered the Deer Hunter's president in return..."

She trailed off, then added, "But that man always has ways to get what he wants. Just like how I still don't know when he started working with Hearts..."

Bai Liu pondered aloud, "So, while this weapon modification is beneficial to us, it also comes with potential risks. Is there a way to

mitigate those risks?"

Liu Jiayi tilted her head. "The better the appraiser, the more likely they are to detect any issues in a modified weapon."

Bai Liu recalled something. "Charles mentioned earlier that the best appraisers are in the King's Guild."

"Yes." Liu Jiayi raked a hand through her hair in frustration. "Back when I was in the King's Guild, I had full access to them. Not anymore."

Muke hesitated before asking, "Isn't there a difference between a weapon modifier and an appraiser? Appraisers only identify modifications; they don't understand the internal structure of a weapon. Since the guilds aren't as strict with appraisers, aren't they allowed to take external commissions?"

Liu Jiayi stilled.

Bai Liu's eyes glinted knowingly. "—But only if Hearts is willing to let an appraiser take our request, even after we stole her right-hand woman."

Liu Jiayi rubbed her temples with a sigh.

After Logging Out of the Game
Bai Liu instructed the others to rest up before tomorrow's modifications. Risks aside, this was still an opportunity worth taking.

Later, Charles suggested he customize some team accessories based on the badge logo Bai Liu had designed—hairpins, brooches, headpieces—something flashy enough to make the audience remember them.

Based on Charles' logic, Bai Liu should have gone for gold-plated hairpieces or diamond-encrusted brooches. But those were far too expensive. Instead, lying on his bed, Bai Liu casually opened Poundland on his phone, filtering search results from lowest to highest price.

Thirteen minutes later—

A new group chat popped up. Bai Liu had pulled in Tang Erda, Mu Sicheng, and Muke.

[Music (Mu Sicheng)]: ?

[Music] changed the group name to [Stupid Bai Liu What's Going On Again?].

[Muke] changed the name to [Wandering Circus Without Monkeys].

[Music]: Shit??? Muke, you can't be serious!

[Tang Erda, leader of the third detachment] tapped [Music].

[Tang Erda]: Don't swear in the group.

[Muke]: @Bai Liu, what do you need?

[Bai Liu]: [Shared link to Poundland – Stainless Steel Dog Tag – Help me chop the price!]

[Music]: Bai Liu, why are you buying dog tags?? For a dollar and a quarter, are you getting a dog??

[Bai Liu]: No. They're for you guys to wear.

[Tang Erda]: ?

[Muke]: ?

[Music]: ???????? Say that again.

[Bai Liu]: This one can be laser-engraved. I'll wear it too.

[Tang Erda]: … This doesn't seem appropriate.

[Muke]: Yeah… I think we should reconsider…

[Music]: Bai Liu, please, have some basic human decency. Who the hell wears dog tags?! At least pick something a little classier!

[Bai Liu]: [Shared link – High-Grade Aluminum Dog Tag – 2.1 per piece]

[Bai Liu]: What about this one?

[Music]: THAT'S STILL A DOG TAG!!!

[Bai Liu]: It's 70 cents more expensive. Much classier.

The Next Day in the Game

Mu Sicheng stood in line, wearing his dog tag, staring blankly at the others. "…Why am I the only one wearing this?"

Bai Liu blinked innocently. "I was just joking last night to lighten the mood. You actually took it seriously?"

Mu Sicheng turned to Muke and Tang Erda, who both averted their gazes, barely holding back laughter.

Tang Erda coughed into his fist, his other hand quietly gripping the dog tag in his pocket.

He had genuinely thought they were going to wear them… so he'd planned to put his on later.

In the end, Mu Sicheng was the only one left in utter humiliation.

With a roar of frustration, he ripped the dog tag from his neck.

"YOU BASTARDS!!!"

The Game Pool

Finally, at Mu Sicheng's insistence, the matter of the badge was left for Bai Liu to handle on their own.

The highlight of this year's event was the weapons renovation.

Charles led them to an eccentric-looking weapons modifier. His unkempt, half-long hair was matted into clumps by dark machine oil, hanging in greasy locks around his disheveled beard. His face was so smudged with grime that it was impossible to guess his age.

The workshop walls were covered with knives, crosshairs, saw blades, and other oddly shaped tools and semi-finished products. The air was thick with the acrid stench of smoke and petrol.

In the center of the room sat a massive furnace, bubbling with molten lava. The modifier pulled down a welder's mask over his head and dipped a long hook into the lava, holding a weapon that had been burned beyond recognition.

A sizzling hiss filled the air as thick black smoke rose from the molten surface.

Two seconds later, the modifier pulled the hook back out—the weapon was gone, completely melted away.

"Tch." He grunted in displeasure. "Who the hell threw in a skill weapon with such a low melting point? It's gone in a single dip!"

The apprentice standing beside him looked at the lava pit, eyes welling up with tears as he jumped up in alarm.

"Master, you could've at least measured the melting point first! How are we supposed to get our weapons out of the pot now?"

"If you can't get it out, then forget it." The modifier tossed the hook aside with a snort. "If it can't even withstand the stone slurry boiled by my Samadhi fire, it's worthless. Utter trash."

Muke couldn't help but stare at the bubbling lava, gulping as they instinctively tightened their grip on their weapon.

The modifier, dressed in an old-fashioned worker's uniform from the '80s or '90s and wearing a thick felt apron, pushed his greasy hair

back. He set a glowing welding gun against the wall before turning to Bai Liu.

“So, you’re the ones here for modifications?”

Charles barely resisted the urge to leave immediately but still nodded haughtily. “It’s them.”

He gestured toward Bai Liu.

“This is the best weapon modifier in the game—General Hua Gan.”

Hua Gan’s eyes, hidden beneath layers of grime and tangled hair, swept over them with sharp scrutiny. Without a word, he suddenly reached out, snatching Bai Liu’s gloves right off their hands before anyone could react.

“This is your skill weapon, isn’t it?” he asked, though he didn’t bother looking at Bai Liu for confirmation. Instead, he grabbed a pen-style spotlight magnifying glass from a nearby drawer, securing it over his left eye, while in his other hand, he deftly wielded a sharp-edged knife.

Without hesitation, he slashed it across the surface of the glove.

A hole appeared instantly.

“Hey! Don’t just start cutting things up!” Mu Sicheng shouted in alarm.

Hua Gan ignored him completely. His knife moved faster and faster, stripping the glove down in a few quick strokes. Then, he plucked a needle and thread from his tangled hair, licked the thread twice, and swiftly stitched the glove back together.

A few moments later, he tossed it back to Bai Liu, wiping his hands on a rag.

“Try it again.”

Bai Liu slipped the glove back on, raising an eyebrow. “It fits much better than before.”

The leather had been rolled inward at the knuckles, and a new slit extended from the glove’s end, neatly wrapping around the wrist—far more comfortable than the crude modifications Charles had done before.

“Worthy of being the best,” Bai Liu remarked, genuinely impressed.

Charles removed his hat and gave a theatrical bow, smiling as he stepped back. “Then I’ll leave it to you, Mr. Hua Gan.”

Hua Gan waved a hand dismissively.

Once Charles had left, the burly modifier got down to business.

“My skill is this furnace fire,” he said. “It’s called Samadhi.”

The apprentice muttered under his breath, “It’s called dissolving forging paste, Master.”

Hua Gan smacked him on the back of the head. “If I say it’s called Samadhi, it’s called Samadhi! I like ‘Samadhi,’ don’t I?”

The apprentice sighed. “...Fine.”

“Anyway,” Hua Gan continued, “weapon transformation has two stages. The first is shaping—that’s what I just did to your glove. After shaping, if you’re satisfied, we move to the forge fire to set and strengthen it.”

He leveled a serious gaze at Bai Liu.

“Only skill weapons that survive the forge fire intact can maintain their modified state and remain usable in the tournament.”

“However, during the forging process, you can incorporate rare materials to enhance your weapon’s attributes—boost attack, increase durability, that kind of thing.”

He gestured to Bai Liu’s gloves.

“For example, I could shape them with a layer of metallic satin on top and embed green goat sheepskin inside. That would add about 2,700 to their defense value.”

“But in exchange, they’d weigh 120kg—meaning you’d basically be carrying a 200-pound man at all times.”

Bai Liu: “...I think I’ll pass.”

Hua Gan shrugged.

“So, it’s up to you. Whether to add enhancements, what materials to

use—it's your call. Charles already covered your forging fees, and I have all the materials you'll need."

With that, he held out a hand.

"Give me the gloves. It's time to cross the lava."

Bai Liu handed them over but hesitated.

"What happens if they don't pass and just melt away like that last weapon?"

Hua Gan smirked.

"Skill weapons are born from desire. The purer the desire, the greater their potential—and the stronger they become after being tempered by fire."

He secured the gloves onto a long hook.

"Weapons of low grade dissolve. That's all there is to it."

Bai Liu murmured under his breath, "If I give you my wallet, would you give everything—your skill, your soul—to forge my weapon?"

"You're my client," Hua Gan said, "and as long as your weapon holds up, I'll forge it to your satisfaction."

A faint smirk tugged at Bai Liu's lips.

Without hesitation, Hua Gan plunged Bai Liu's worn, frayed gloves into the burning, molten lava.

A sharp, crackling hiss filled the air.

As the gloves burned, faint traces of banknotes inside them ignited.

The others—Muke, Mu Sicheng, Liu Jiayi, and Tang Erda—slowly turned to stare at Bai Liu.

Liu Jiayi calmly reminded him, "Did you forget to take something out?"

Bai Liu blinked, then smiled guilelessly. "Oops. I forgot to take your money out."

He was definitely lying.

Mu Sicheng gritted his teeth, ready to throttle him, but Tang Erda held him back. Liu Jiayi covered her face while Muke stared, dumbfounded, at the lava pit.

Bai Liu's dark pupils reflected the cauldron's glow. Wisps of smoke curled from the surface, the scent thick and suffocating—like a soul burning away under the weight of desire.

His soul note was inside that wallet, too.

Something inside him was evaporating, impurities melting away, replaced by something more raw, more frenzied.

Hua Gan raised the hook.

And the gloves…

They had transformed.

Where the fabric had been frayed and torn, it was now smooth, pristine black leather. A ring of metal encircled the wrist, and on the back of the hand, a massive hexagonal groove held a molten, blood-red gem.

And the lava pot—

Was now nearly empty.

The apprentice gawked, stunned.

"Master... the lava... How did it—?"

Hua Gan sucked in a sharp breath, his face twisting in disbelief as he turned to Bai Liu.

"What the hell did you do?"

He had sensed something was off.

He hadn't been particularly wary of Bai Liu's team—after all, no one was allowed to use attack skills in the lobby, and Hua Gan's own abilities were overwhelmingly dominant.

But he had never imagined Bai Liu would go so far as to set him up during a crucial skill weapon modification.

Bai Liu rose unsteadily to his feet, retrieving his gloves from the hook

and sliding them back onto his hands. Though they had just been submerged in molten lava, they were only faintly warm—completely intact, with not even a hint of damage.

As if the searing heat of the forge was powerless against a weapon born from Bai Liu's desire.

"A soul note is also a coin."

Bai Liu pulled a fresh soul note from the inner lining of his glove, holding it loosely between his index and middle fingers.

Printed on its surface was the unmistakable, furious face of General Hua Gan.

Bai Liu smiled. "The moment you took my wallet, Mr. Hua Gan, our deal was sealed."

Hua Gan's chest heaved with barely contained fury. His teeth clenched as he spat, "I've never seen a greedier skill weapon. Sooner or later, you'll be consumed by your own desire."

"Maybe," Bai Liu admitted easily, stepping closer. His gloved hand hooked Hua Gan's own away, then forcefully pushed him down into his chair, leaning in until their gazes locked.

"But before that, Mr. Hua Gan… tell me—what exactly did the President of the Deer Hunters offer you?

What kind of task was so important that it made the high and mighty master weapon modifier—who only ever served those within the guild—lower himself to accommodate me?"

Bai Liu lifted his gaze, shifting to the trembling apprentice. Mu Sicheng's claws tightened around the boy's throat in a suffocating grip.

"You can lie," Bai Liu murmured, voice deceptively calm. "But I imagine a good master wouldn't want to see his apprentice suffer the consequences of lying on his behalf. Wouldn't you agree?"

Hua Gan's pupils shrank to pinpricks.

In an instant, the roles of hunter and prey had reversed.

"You said the Deer Hunter brought in a newcomer that day to modify his weapon and planned to let him join the team—"

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow, a trace of surprise flickering across his face. "—but this newcomer claimed he could join the Deer Hunter team, on one condition: that you modify my weapon for me?"

General Hua Gan wiped the corner of his mouth. "Yes. This newcomer knew I was the best weapon reformer in the game and demanded that I modify your weapon—personally. He wanted it tailored to you, to drastically enhance your combat and defense abilities."

His gaze dropped to Bai Liu's hands. "The idea of turning your purse into gloves came from him."

"He wanted you to have a pair of black leather gloves—perfectly fitted, suited for the whip, and allowing easy access to your notes without risking injury."

"To recruit this newcomer, our president agreed to his outrageous demand."****"

As he spoke, anger flickered across his face, but he quickly suppressed it.

"The president negotiated with your investor, Charles, to fulfill the newcomer's request."

"This was a disgrace to the guild. A betrayal of the weapon reformers who have always served it exclusively!"

Bai Liu released his grip on General Hua Gan, stepping back. "But you still said yes."

Hua Gan let out a heavy breath, as if Bai Liu's words had pressed the air from his lungs. His head bowed in frustration. "……Yes. I cannot disobey the president's orders."

After a pause, he added in a low voice, "Even if you hold my soul, I will serve no one but the Deer Hunter's Guild."

Bai Liu glanced at Liu Jiayi, who sighed and shook his head—signaling that there was no point in pushing further.

—Just as General Hua Gan said, he would rather die than betray his guild.

Unlike the countless reserve team members or someone like Wang Shun, who worked with various players, the guild held a firm grip on its reformers. Even with his soul in Bai Liu's hands, breaking this iron-willed, single-minded man would be no easy feat.

Unlike players with ever-shifting desires, these reformers had long since refined theirs, forging them into something unbreakable. They didn't communicate with people—they communicated with weapons, red-hot and forged in the fire of their own longing. To them, weapons were more than tools. Weapons were everything.

And the guild was the only place where they could create their finest work. It wasn't just an organization—it was their forge, their purpose. That was why reformers like Hua Gan never betrayed it.

They would never betray the weapon.
And they would never betray the guild.

General Hua Gan, the best reformer of them all, was also the most unyielding.

If Mu Sicheng hadn't restrained his apprentice from the beginning, Hua Gan wouldn't have spoken a single word.

Receiving Liu Jiayi's signal, Bai Liu calmly shifted his approach. "I won't ask you to serve us. We just want to know why."

"You have to protect your guild. I have to protect my guild's players." Bai Liu smiled. "Can you give me some useful information? Like the identity of the newcomer who asked you to modify my weapon?"

This question didn't touch the guild's deepest secrets. After all, sooner or later, this player would have to reveal himself.

General Hua Gan hesitated for a long moment before finally speaking. "I don't know exactly who he was. When the president brought him here, he was wearing a mask—completely covered in blood."

"But his skill weapon was a very long, green plastic toy gun."

Bai Liu absently toyed with the long hook by the boiler. "Mr. Hua, that's hardly enough to send us off."

Hua Gan gritted his teeth and continued, "I won't tell you what his skill is, but I will tell you what happened during the modification."

"The gun was… strange. It looked like a cheap plastic flare gun, but the moment it touched the lava, it dissolved instantly."

Hua Gan frowned, recalling the moment. "I've modified countless weapons, but I've never seen anything like that. And the owner… he just sat there, completely unbothered. Humming."

"I kept feeding materials into the lava, trying to saturate it so the gun would precipitate out. I even sacrificed pieces of skill weapons to force a reaction."

His expression twisted. "Half the warehouse's materials were used up, and the lava still didn't react. That's when I realized something was wrong."

"The materials weren't dissolving." His voice lowered. "They were being devoured."

"No matter how much I threw in, the gun absorbed everything like a black hole—endless, insatiable. In the end, the president had to turn to Charles for more materials, and that's how they struck their deal."

Hua Gan exhaled. "Charles promised a massive supply of materials—for free. In return, I was ordered to modify weapons for your entire team."

His gaze darkened. "That day, I bet material after material into the lava, even using pieces of high-tier weapons. But that gun never surfaced."

"It just kept devouring. Desire. Souls. Everything."

His eyes drifted to the glowing red boiler, lost in thought. "I've never seen a weapon so… greedy."

Finally, he looked up at Bai Liu, his voice dry. "In the end, the president gave me a scrap of dirty leather from Charles—apparently a remnant of your original weapon."

"I cast it in."

"The lava boiled."

"And then, I saw it—"

"The dissolved remains of the gun gathering around the leather, stacking up like crystal formations in a saturated solution."

Hua Gan gazed at Bai Liu, voice hoarse. "The lava was on the verge of burning dry when a sniper rifle finally emerged from the bottom of the pot."

"That's when I saw it. And that's when I began to fear it."

"Forging your gloves made me feel controlled." His fingers twitched. "But forging that gun—"

"It felt like looking into an abyss so deep that just one glance would swallow my soul whole."

A sharp breath was drawn from the side.

Tang Erda, who had been silent until now, finally reacted.

Bai Liu dropped the long hook, running two fingers over the metal ring at the base of his glove. His eyes narrowed slightly.

General Hua Gan caught his gaze and sighed. "Looks like you figured it out."

"Yes. That metal ring on your glove—it came from that gun."

"And it's not just a residual scrap."

"It's the core material."

Bai Liu remained silent for a moment, then rose to his feet. "Mr. Hua Gan, I swear as Bai Liu that I will not use your soul for anything that violates your original intent. In return, I hope you will give your best efforts in modifying my team's weapons."

At his gesture, Mu Sicheng hesitated but finally released his grip on the apprentice.

The young man collapsed, curling into himself in fear.

Hua Gan, however, simply stared at Bai Liu in astonishment. After a long pause, he snorted. "Take a man's money, be loyal to him. Men are guilty—"

"Weapons are not."

His expression hardened. "Whatever you've done, your weapons are innocent. I won't take it out on them."

"I'll do my job."

Bai Liu nodded approvingly, then smiled. "Apart from that, I have another request."

"I want you to place an external order—to the King's Guild appraiser."

Hua Gan raised an eyebrow. "What do you want appraised?"

Bai Liu laced his fingers together, his gaze obscure. "These gloves."

A beat of silence.

Hua Gan understood immediately. "—And every weapon I've ever modified, correct?"

He shrugged. "Fine. I'll place the orders."

AWith that, as if nothing had happened, Hua Gan dusted himself off, helped his apprentice to his feet, and turned back to his work—completely unfazed.

Tang Erda, watching Bai Liu, murmured in a hoarse voice,
"…A clown."

Bai Liu exhaled. "I figured as much, but I don't understand why he's doing this for me. The clown shouldn't know me yet."

"But again, every move he makes feels like he knows me specifically…" Bai Liu half-closed his eyes. "If the Joker knows what my skills are and what I'd do, then his decision to have this reformer take the initiative to transform my actions seems like he's wrapped up this transformer as a gift for me."

Tang Erda spoke quietly, "The Joker knows you can use your skills to control this reformer."

Bai Liu tugged at the edge of his glove and pulled it off. He stared thoughtfully at the metal ring on the side of the glove. "And this material too... he took it upon himself to fuse the best materials to correct the situation, then just waited for me to come and receive it."

"I understand what he did," Bai Liu continued, "but the real question is why did he do it?"

Tang Erda replied, "If it were any other world line, I could see why the Joker would do it."

Bai Liu looked up.

"The best material, the best reformer…" Tang Erda sighed with mixed feelings. "In another world line, the Joker always offers you the best because, in his eyes, only the best is worthy of you."

The Game Pool

During the exchange between Bai Liu and Tang Erda, General Hua took out a measuring tape and carefully measured Mu Sicheng, starting from the tip of his left paw to the tip of the other paw, and then across the two shoulder crests.

"The arms are 2.17 meters long, the toes are 9 centimeters, the shoulders are 46 centimeters wide, and the upper limbs are about 77 centimeters long."

As his apprentice took notes, General Hua pressed down on Mu Sicheng's scapular bulge, then turned to say, "The upper limbs and height could be longer—let's make it 85 centimeters."

Mu Sicheng shifted uncomfortably.

The apprentice, looking at Mu Sicheng with some disbelief, muttered under his breath, slightly envious, "The hands are so long, it's like a monkey..."

Mu Sicheng shot the apprentice a fierce glare. "I'll grow! I'm still young! I can grow all over, even my chest can grow more!"

Apprentice: "..... = =....."

General Hua interrupted Mu Sicheng’s banter with the apprentice. "He’s complimenting you. Long hands are a good thing."

Mu Sicheng looked at him in disbelief.

General Hua continued, "Considering your build, you must have played a lot of sports, right? In sports like basketball, volleyball, and even table tennis, the longer the arms, the more desirable the athlete."

"You’ve been dominant in sports since you were a kid, haven't you?" Hua Gan gestured with a sweep of his arm.

Mu Sicheng hesitated and nodded.

"Longer arms give you a wider range of attack and defense. I’ve seen the footage Charles sent me of your games. Your reflexes are quick, and your dynamic vision is among the best I’ve seen. 90% of attacks that come within your range are neutralized before they even reach you."

General Hua put away the measuring tape and raised his eyes. "Do you know what that means?"

Mu Sicheng was still pondering, but Hua Gan didn't expect an answer from him. He turned around, put the tape away, and continued, "Your team lacks a player who can act as a [shield]."

"Your high movement speed and sneak attack skills make you more of a [roamer] or [attacker], but your arm length extends your defense range, meaning you could be a strong [shield] at arm's length."

Hua Gan sidled up to Mu Sicheng. "You cover your team's defensive weaknesses while also playing as a [rover] and secondary attacker."

"Having this versatile role allows tacticians to use you as a flexible point in their strategy, expanding their offensive capabilities and reducing risk."

Hua Gan then picked up a piece of armor and tried it on Mu Sicheng's body before handing it to him casually, as though instructing him to wash his hands. "Now hold this piece of iron and put your hand in the lava."

Mu Sicheng, caught up in the praise, was puzzled. "Okay... wait, what?! Why are you reaching in!?"

General Hua gave him an odd look. "Your weapon is a monkey's claw, of course you need to put your hand in the lava to temper it."

Mu Sicheng looked at the bubbling, fiery lava where the apprentice had just placed a glittering diamond. Within seconds, the diamond melted into nothing but smoke.

"Has the temperature of the lava increased again?" the apprentice slapped his forehead in distress. "Diamonds with a melting point of 4,000 degrees only make a base now. The cost of transformation just went up again..."

Mu Sicheng: "....."

This guy's arms would shrink to one meter in an instant if he touched the lava!

Mu Sicheng steeled himself, but Hua Gan turned dryly to Bai Liu. "Hey, your team members are resisting the transformation."

Bai Liu, who was talking to Tang Erda, poked his head out from the side. "What's wrong?"

General Hua pointed to Mu Sicheng, who had his hands behind his back. "I just told him to put his hands in the lava, but he refuses for some reason."

Mu Sicheng's eyes widened as he protested, "What do you mean 'just'? Try it yourself, damn it!"

Bai Liu raised his chin at Tang Erda. "Go help him."

Seeing Tang Erda approach, Mu Sicheng instinctively covered his chest and screamed in horror, "Hey! What are you doing? Don't come any closer!!! Ah—!"

Mu Sicheng froze as Tang Erda grabbed him by the back of the neck and forced his hands into the lava. "Eh, it doesn't hurt."

The lava gently licked at his monkey paws, and the metal in his claws melted like butter on an iron plate, slipping through his fingers and swimming slowly around the edges of his toe plating.

Not only was it not too hot, it was almost... comfortable.

Mu Sicheng regained his composure, proudly dipping his arm into the lava again. He glanced back at Tang Erda, kicking him away. "Get out of here. I can handle it myself..."

Before he finished his sentence, the lava splashed onto his pants leg, burning a large hole in it in an instant. The flames crept upward along the hole, making Mu Sicheng jump back.

Liu Jiayi, quick on her feet, doused the flames with a fire extinguisher.

She couldn't help but look at the large hole in Mu Sicheng's pants, just under 20 centimeters from his navel, with a pitying look. "This is lava. It's a bit special when quenching your weapons, but that temperature can burn you and your clothes too."

Mu Sicheng hung his head, a blanket over his legs (because Bai Liu insisted it was inappropriate to show his thighs in front of a little girl, so Mu Sicheng had to cover up).

He sat by the boiler, looking like a chastised bride, not daring to make a move, while tearfully washing his hands in lava.

The transformations of Liu Jiayi and Muke were much smoother than Mu Sicheng's chaotic process.

"I'm assuming the [control] aspect, but I'd like to expand it," Liu Jiayi said, pulling out a vial of poison and antidote. "The fragile glass container limits my potential. I need something more compact with a quicker interval, preferably with some offensive properties."

General Hua pondered for a moment. "There is a container that might work for you, but I'm not sure if it will fuse smoothly with your vial."

Liu Jiayi raised an eyebrow. "What container?"

"Wait here, I'll find it," Hua Gan said, burying himself in a pile of what looked like junk. He occasionally scratched his butt. "...Ah, I remember it being here! Found it!"

Liu Jiayi looked down at the two rusty cans in his hands, his mouth twitching. "A mace bottle?"

General Hua dusted off his hands. "I didn't say I'd use it for you, just offering it as a reference. This spray paint-like bottle could store atomized poisons and antidotes, maximizing their effect and extending the range."

"With this spray bottle, you can use your skills without worrying about cooldowns, as long as you calculate the proper dosage of the poison or antidote."

Liu Jiayi weighed the pepper spray bottle in his hand before tossing it back to General Hua. "If I use this, what's the maximum control range?"

General Hua took the bottle, "I can modify the nozzle to a range of 30 meters, but at that distance, the drug's effect will be minimal, basically just acting as a deterrent."

Liu Jiayi nodded. She understood—spray containers lose effectiveness with distance.

Hua Gan donned his welding helmet, pulled out a welding torch, and pointed it at the spray bottle, glancing at Liu Jiayi with a questioning look. "If you're certain about this container, I can make several nozzles for you with varying potencies. For example, a fifteen-meter nozzle for the highest concentration of the drug, then twenty-five meters and thirty meters for the weaker concentrations."

“Is it possible to make spray nozzles with different concentrations?” Liu Jiayi asked. “Like one with a needle-like stream for a high concentration, and another with a wider spray for more diffusion?”

General Hua Gan nodded sharply. “A small thing.”

Liu Jiayi simply replied, “Then that’s the one.”

The apprentice placed Hua Gan's modified spray bottle and Liu Jiayi's glass container into a funnel and submerged it into the lava.

Mu Sicheng, still washing his hands in the lava, peered in curiosity as he saw Liu Jiayi’s glass bottle slowly melt into liquid in the funnel. The molten liquid climbed, bit by bit, up the spray paint bottle at the other end.

Hua Gan casually tossed a pair of black daggers into the air and caught them with his index finger. He turned to Muke. “This isn’t your skill weapon. There’s no connection between you and these daggers.”

Muke responded honestly, “Yes, they were given to me by someone else.”

“Light, fast, and sharp,” Hua Gan said, running his thumb along the blade. He clicked his tongue, unimpressed, as blood appeared on his finger. He smacked the blade, momentarily lost in thought. “These are top-tier assassin’s daggers, though their only flaw is that they’re difficult to wound.”

Hua Gan lifted his gaze and scanned Muke. “This isn’t quite your style, is it?”

He continued, “You’re not outwardly aggressive, but your aggression is strong. The dagger you seek to create will be ruthless and venomous. Seemingly harmless, but deadly, just like this dagger whose blade remains closed.”

Muke smiled amiably, agreeing with Hua Gan’s assessment. “Is that so?”

“This isn’t your original weapon, so the alteration process is more complicated,” Hua Gan continued, “but I can handle it. The biggest issue, however, is whether you’ll still be able to establish a soul connection with the daggers after the modification.”

Muke raised an eyebrow. “What happens if it doesn’t work?”

“If it doesn’t, you’ll explode along with the dagger,” Hua Gan explained, flexing his fingers and tapping the dagger. “The safest way to alter it is to leave it untouched. If it’s safe, you’re safe.”

Muke lowered his long, slender eyelashes, exuding an air of fragile elegance. He looked like something precious, a delicate object meant for decoration.

“If it were before,” Muke mused, “I probably would’ve chosen the safer option.” He looked up with a faint smile, his eyes locking with Hua Gan’s before lazily drifting to Bai Liu, who was leaning against the wall.

Bai Liu watched Muke calmly, as though he already knew what choice Muke would make.

Muke turned his gaze back to Hua Gan. “Is there a way to make this dagger’s attack power reach its maximum in a single strike? Something that can kill in one blow?”

“I want to be the best assassin,” Muke continued, “and when I enter the enemy’s camp, I want to take out their tactician.”

Hua Gan nodded slowly. “Yes.”

“But,” he added, “assassins are best suited for [roaming]. But the destiny of an assassin is sacrifice. Saying you’ll take down the tactician in one hit—are you ready to sacrifice yourself for that?”

Muke didn’t hesitate. “I’m ready.”

Hua Gan stared at him for a moment, then turned his gaze to the daggers on the table. After a deep breath, he said, “You’re not suited for a short weapon like these daggers. They’re too small, too bloodless.”

“You’re better suited for a long weapon, something like a katana that sacrifices itself for its master.”

Muke didn’t take issue with Hua Gan’s words. He bowed politely. “Thank you, Mr. Hua Gan.”

Meanwhile, Mu Sicheng was still washing his hands in the lava when the apprentice approached with another funnel containing two daggers and a long, bloodstained knife. He hung it over the boiler and walked toward Bai Liu and Tang Erda.

The apprentice cast them a timid glance. “It’s your turn.”

Bai Liu and Tang Erda exchanged looks before walking over. Tang Erda drew his gun, laid it flat on the table, and pushed it toward Hua Gan.

General Hua Gan observed the weapon for a long while before removing a magnifying glass from around his neck and studying the gun closely. He turned to Tang Erda. “Your weapon doesn’t need any modification.”

He wiped the gun clean and returned it to Tang Erda. “This weapon suits you perfectly. Your desire has remained the same since you first entered the game. This may be the only weapon that doesn’t need fine-tuning.”

He glanced at the rose brand on the hilt and added, “It’s time to get a new brand for your weapon.”

Hua Gan gave Tang Erda a deep, knowing look. “It’s like giving your soul a new place to belong.”

Tang Erda was stunned, his fingers tightening around the gun. The rose brand on the handle pressed into his palm—cold, familiar—a mark that had followed him through countless world lines.

It was like Su Yang's gentle smile waiting for him, and the captain's call.

But the captain was now Su Yang, and he no longer had to wait for the evasive, irresponsible man who once led him.

Tang Erda gazed down at the gun for a long time, contemplating. Finally, a low laugh escaped him, and with a sense of relief, he muttered, "Change it."

The apprentice took another funnel, placed the gun and one of Bai Liu's gloves into it, and submerged it in the lava, hanging it next to the boiler.

Mu Sicheng, still curious, asked, "Wasn't Bai Liu's weapon modification already done? Why bring it back?"

The apprentice didn’t even glance back. "It's not to modify Mr. Bai Liu's weapon. It's to use it to change the branding on Mr. Tang Erda's gun."

"You're the last one left," Hua Gan remarked, eyeing the bone whip Bai Liu had put up. He raised an eyebrow, adding, "Don't you understand the rules of a reformer? Weapon modifications don’t apply to bone whips."

Bai Liu, hearing this for the first time, asked with amusement, "Why not?"

Hua Gan pushed Bai Liu’s bone whip back. "Because, in this game, the perfect weapon is the bone whip. Any reformer who has seen Spades use it knows no attack weapon can rival it." He paused as though recalling something, then added, "And I've seen it many times."

"I thought to myself that I couldn’t create a better weapon than the bone whip, so I made a rule to never modify one."

With an impatient wave, General Hua Gan declared, "Get your perfect weapon out of my sight!"

Bai Liu complied, taking the bone whip.

The renovation proceeded.

Liu Jiayi had asked the reformer to mark her contact lenses (Hearts had given her the pair) with the brand of the wandering circus. Meanwhile, Mu Sicheng carefully pulled his hand from the lava as the apprentice retrieved the funnels hanging from the boiler.

The dark brown flowing metal armor on the monkey's paws felt like animal leather—soft, tough, and cold. Mu Sicheng extended his long nails, their silver sheen catching the light. With a casual scratch, he tore through materials with a defense value of four thousand or less as if they were tofu.

"Whaaaat?!" Mu Sicheng jumped to his feet, eyes wide. "The attack value just skyrocketed!"

Muke drew his own long samurai sword from the funnel. Contrary to his appearance, the blade was a simple, short katana, about forty centimeters long. Its cold, snowy blade reflected Muke’s stoic face.

The two daggers in the middle broke apart, their hilts detaching and magnetically reattaching, transforming back into a long knife.

Muke stared at the knife silently. His breathing was shallow, his presence still as a deep, stagnant pool—no wind, no ripples. Even as

the knife became part of him, his expression remained unreadable.

He gripped the hilt, his gaze snapping, and without warning, he swung hard at a diamond sitting on the table.

The diamond remained untouched.

Muke sheathed his sword and turned away, calm as ever.

A dozen seconds later, tiny cracks appeared at the center of the diamond, growing larger and more interlocking until the stone shattered into a puddle of fragments.

Liu Jiayi's glass bottles had been transformed into two paint cans—one purple, one white. They were light and handy, each about the size of an adult's hand, with a dozen spray nozzles of varying range and dispersion. Liu Jiayi tried them out, eyes lighting up as she used the poison to create an abstract design on the wall.

Tang Erda, however, remained more subdued. He examined his weapon—the hexagram and werewolf's eye symbol on the handle—fingers tracing it absentmindedly.

"I said…" Hua Gan interrupted the murmuring group, his voice tinged with frustration. "Enough. You can't use offensive skills on people in the system lobby. Try them out on objects, but remember: dead things and real people are not the same. Use them in the game."

Bai Liu gathered the excited group and thanked General Hua.

He was shooed away impatiently. "Out, out!"

Bai Liu led the team outside.

Mu Sicheng's headset now bore the six-man star and werewolf markings engraved by Hua Gan, though the design was mostly obscured by his hooked lips.

Liu Jiayi, perched on Tang Erda's shoulder, wore the contact lenses given to her by Hearts. Her pupils reflected a pattern of six stars and a werewolf's eye—the same ones she had requested General Hua to mark on them.

General Hua Gan had wanted to engrave the team's emblem on Muke's short sword, but Muke refused with a shake of his head. As an assassin, the lower his profile, the better—such a conspicuous emblem

would only hinder his ability to blend in.

Muke raised his eyes and gazed, reverently and intently, at Bai Liu, walking ahead. His breath was barely a whisper.

He no longer needed an emblem on the outside. His life, his memory, and even his soul were already marked.

After adjusting the edges of his gloves and letting his hands fall naturally at his sides, the six-manifold symbol of flowing lava glowed on the back of his hands. Bai Liu lifted his eyes and took his first step forward.

"League match-up training officially starts tomorrow," Bai Liu announced. "We're looking for games with league players to train with."

"Yes!!!" Mu Sicheng answered eagerly, his voice full of determination. "We'll beat anyone we can tomorrow!"

Bai Liu turned back, smiling. "The killer sequence."

Mu Sicheng blinked in confusion. "?! What? Which guild?!"

"We're going to solo a copy of the ice field with Spades in it tomorrow," Bai Liu said, absently shaking the fishbone whip in his hand, his grin deepening. "To see the rumored perfect weapon for ourselves."

The Ice Age

8:00 PM, Real World - Heresy Authority

The uniformed team members methodically loaded each 40 cm x 40 cm box onto the transport truck, while Su Yang stood at attention, his gun gripped tightly, his focus unwavering.

Tonight, these Extraordinary Red Heretics were being shipped by plane to Zone 3 for secure confinement.

It was a routine, yet dangerous operation, but one particular heretic made this transport especially high-stakes.

Su Yang shifted his gaze to the end of the transport line.

The boxes at the far end were made of darker metal and appeared considerably heavier. Several team members struggled under the weight, their backs bent as they carried the boxes with careful precision.

Su Yang stepped forward to offer his assistance and asked, “Are you sure all the body parts we recovered from the Rose Factory are accounted for?”

The team member, pausing to catch his breath, nodded. “Captain Su, we’ve done the count. Everything’s here.”

Su Yang gave a curt nod, his expression serious. “These corpses are unlike the other heretics. They can’t be transported with the rest. They need to be handled separately.”

As the team carefully loaded the last boxes onto the truck, one of the members, now leaning against the side of the vehicle to rest, remarked, “Captain Su is being extra cautious this time. He even applied for a special transport route for this batch.”

A fellow team member, also taking a break, added, “You don’t know how dangerous this batch of corpse heretics is. The team members who went to excavate the bodies at the factory—they all came back mentally broken. Some are still undergoing treatment. I don’t know if they’ll ever recover.”

The first team member rubbed his hands together, incredulous. “It’s really that bad?”

The second team member rolled his eyes. “Why do you think Captain Su is taking such extreme precautions? If this batch somehow influences the other heretics… a whole plane could be wiped out in an instant.”

“But it’s still dangerous to send this heretic by itself, isn’t it?” the first member asked, looking concerned.

“Of course, it’s dangerous,” the second member replied with a mockingly casual shake of his head. “But when’s it ever safe in our line of work? The real question is why Captain Su is splitting this batch off. They’re trying to avoid a disaster, that’s all.”

The topic shifted with a sigh, the first member asking, “I get why Captain Su requested a special transport vehicle and plane, but a separate route too?”

It wasn’t unheard of for the Heresy Authority to escort highly dangerous heretics, like Bai Liu, but this was the first time they had gone to such lengths, including planning an entirely separate route.

The second member lowered his voice, glancing around to make sure no one was listening. “Su Yang’s application said this heretic couldn’t be stored in Zone 3 or anywhere near a populated area. Something would go wrong. This heretic has too much influence—it could cause widespread fatalities.”

“Finally, the Bureau approved the request yesterday,” he continued. “They’ve contacted a polar research station in Antarctica. The plan is to make an ice core of the heretic and bury it beneath the ice cap, where it will be kept under 24/7 guard for the next 365 days. It’s going to be the first heretic to receive this level of containment.”

The first member whistled. “365 days of constant supervision... That’s a big deal.”

“Big deal?” The second member shrugged. “Have you forgotten Bai Liu? Tang Erda used to take care of things like this, but now it’s all about guarding.”

The first member grimaced at the mention of Team Tang’s absence. “Right… so, where exactly in Antarctica are they sending this heretic?”

The second member paused, furrowing his brow. “I’m not sure… but I heard something about Ice Dome A, the highest point on the Antarctic

ice cap. It's isolated, cold enough, and thick enough to keep this heretic contained."

11:30 PM, Out to Sea Port

The soldiers carrying another batch of heretics headed straight for the airport, while the vehicle transporting the body parts arrived at the port. The items were transferred onto a small cargo ship for further transportation.

The freighter would first dock at another port, where a special plane awaited to escort the heretics to Antarctica.

Five escorts were assigned to the transport—a minimum number Su Yang had calculated.

Su Yang stood on the shore, watching as the boxes were loaded onto the freighter, the gangway retracted, and the ship was tugged into the water, disappearing into the night.

The five escorts on the hatch cover saluted Su Yang before waving goodbye.

Su Yang stood there, watching the ship sail away, a growing unease settling in his chest as the mist thickened around him.

When the freighter finally vanished from sight, an overwhelming sense of dread washed over him. His breath caught in his throat, and for a fleeting moment, he envisioned the snow-covered bodies of his team members—five lifeless forms strewn across the ice.

After the Rose perfume incident and the excavation of the bodies at the factory, Su Yang had begun experiencing signs of mental degradation. Hallucinations had become more frequent, and his mind often wandered to dark places.

Su Yang, more than anyone, understood the danger these body parts posed. When he first laid eyes on the corpses, he, a man known for his stoicism and steadiness, was shaken to his core. Had he not held his composure and taken control, the team members who unearthed the bodies might have fought over them.

These corpses weren't just dangerous—they were catalysts for a spiritual decay that amplified one's darkest desires, eventually erasing the boundaries of human morality.

Realizing this, Su Yang insisted that the body parts be moved far from any crowded zones. He knew that if they remained near a populated area, something catastrophic—worse than the Rose perfume incident—would inevitably happen.

In the end, it was decided that the body would be sealed beneath Ice Dome A, the coldest and most inaccessible part of Antarctica, 4,083 meters above sea level and untouched by human hands.

It was the safest place Su Yang could think of.

But he also knows that...

Su Yang's light-colored eyes reflected the swaying waves of the sea. A heavy weight pressed on his chest, stacking layer by layer from the lapping harbor to his heart. He closed his eyes, feeling the long-awaited pang of powerlessness.

He knew, without a doubt, that there was no promised land in this world where one could escape their desires.

He simply hoped no more innocent people would die in the process.

But how could that be possible?

Human desire, whether good or bad, becomes a destructive force when taken to its extremes.

After Tang Erda left, Su Yang began to understand, just a little, what Bai Liu had said to him in the interrogation room that day.

The clean, fresh-faced young man had looked up at him with dark eyes that seemed to hold the weight of the universe, and softly spoken, "Team Su, the desire to be too close and protective can kill you."

Su Yang gripped the solid octopus-shaped team crest on his right chest. With what seemed like a sigh, he turned away into the icy night air.

The small cargo ship behind them sounded a clear whistle of departure and moved out into the darker night.

Game Pool

Bai Liu and his team had observed the Spades team a few times and figured out some of their routine. They usually visited certain subgroups regularly, but occasionally Spades would break away from the group and go off alone to work in one of the ice fields, much like Bai Liu had done during his last visit to the game pool.

Spades seemed to have a particular affection for this ice field, as if it had become his home—like a creature returning to its lair, bound to its biological rhythm of rest.

Bai Liu's target was this very ice field.

He wasn't so arrogant as to think that the Wandering Circus could take on the entire Killer Sequence battle group by itself. But with no lives at stake, Bai Liu believed they could attempt to team up and challenge a star player.

It was a risky move, but one with clear advantages.

For one, they could gather information about the star player, improve their own team, and if they were lucky enough to win, the victory would create a stir.

Shameless, but useful.

Bai Liu decided to test the waters with Spades first, driven by a curious instinct. He kept a close eye on the players coming and going from the pool, and when he spotted someone quietly entering—someone who had scared off a circle of players—he couldn't help but smile.

Spades walked over to the game pool, whip in hand, organizing the regulation bundle.

As the players around them realized it was Spades, they held their breath and backed away, not daring to enter the game for fear of picking the same one as this feared figure.

But Spades didn't seem to care about his surroundings. After a brief observation of the rotating posters in the pool, he simply selected one and dove in.

In that instant, Bai Liu wasted no time in hooking the whip around Spades' waist, pulling him and his team into the game behind Spades.

Spades cast him a cold glance—one as icy as water under thick ice—

and was quickly swallowed by the game pool.

By the time the pool settled, the surrounding players stood in stunned silence, too shocked by what they'd just witnessed to approach the front for a long time.

It took a while before someone finally asked, “What... what just happened?”

Snow and Ice

Snow and ice filled the sky, and the wind howled.

Bai Liu choked and coughed as he came to his senses. Instinctively, he curled up, his skin quickly freezing until it went numb, leaving him on the verge of unconsciousness in minutes.

It wasn’t until a voice came from behind him that Bai Liu realized he wasn’t on the ground but in someone’s arms.

“You shouldn’t have come into this game with me,” Spades said, holding Bai Liu, whose skin trembled under his touch. “You’re scared of the cold.”

Bai Liu turned around.

Spades was so close that Bai Liu could almost feel the tip of his nose brush against his. The proximity made Bai Liu pause, his breath catching for a moment before he instinctively pulled away.

Spades seemed unfazed by the closeness. He stood up, lifting Bai Liu effortlessly, and expertly pulled a jumper from the wall, zipped it up, and handed it to him.

Once they were both fully armed, Spades opened the door and stepped out.

Bai Liu, with narrowed eyes, took the punching bag in his hands. “Aren’t you going to ask why I came in with you?”

He had his reasons for dealing with the situation—perhaps to rub the first star player’s nose in the heat of things, or for other purposes.

Spades, facing the powerful wind and snow, pushed open the door. His hair whipped across his forehead, but his eyes—black, pure, and

emotionless—met Bai Liu's.

"You came in here with me to play games and try to win me over, didn't you Bai Liu?"

Spades pulled down his goggles and stepped out into the blizzard, his voice carrying strangely over the howling winds.

"Don't lie to me or to yourself. If you want to play a game with me, then play it well—and do your best to win, Bai Liu."

With those words, Spades closed the door. By the time Bai Liu opened it again, he had disappeared into the snow.

... This is probably meant to be a fair fight with him?

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow, closed the door, squeezed his frozen fingertips, gathered his rashers, and turned to see Tang Erda and the others.

Tang Erda, also dressed in a heavy rash jacket, exhaled a puff of white air as he spoke. “The power’s off in the house. We need to turn on the insulation system, or we’ll freeze to death.”

“Do you know how to fix it?” Bai Liu asked.

Tang Erda nodded. “I’ve trained in similar extreme conditions, and I can handle all the basic equipment. But I’ll need to go outside to check it. It’s so windy here that I’ll need someone to hold my safety rope, or I’ll get blown away.”

“I’ll go with you.” Mu Sicheng draped himself in protective clothing, his tone dry.

The two men quickly tightened their safety ropes around their waists, opened the door, and braved the fierce wind and snow, struggling to close the door against the gusts. Finally, they made their way outside.

A short while later, Mu Sicheng and Tang Erda returned with their safety ropes. Bai Liu, who had been guarding the door, immediately shut it behind them.

Mu Sicheng’s teeth chattered as he tried to remove the safety rope from the hook beside the door, but his hands were too cold to manage it. Muke helped him.

“It’s... so painfully cold!” Mu Sicheng exclaimed, shivering, his feet jumping, and he huffed into his hands in an attempt to warm up.

Bai Liu noticed that Mu Sicheng had been outside for less than ten minutes, yet his hands were already frozen, red and purple. His knuckles couldn’t bend, looking like gangrenous flesh.

Only when the lights came back on in the room could Bai Liu truly see

their surroundings.

In front of them was a narrow, low ventilation tunnel. The walls were made of sturdy, assembly shed panels—typically used to build temporary accommodations on construction sites. Bright incandescent bulbs hung overhead, and the windows on either side of the walls were sealed around the perimeter. Through the half-frozen windows, they could see the howling snowstorm outside.

At the end of the tunnel, a sign was pinned to a crooked wall. It read: "Edmund South Pole Station."

Bai Liu stared at the sign for a few moments before lowering his gaze to open his system panel, where he found a sliver of notifications he hadn't checked yet.

[System Alert: Welcome players to the game Ice Age.]

[System Alert: Player has obtained the main game quest - Global Warming.]

[Game Background Tip: A year ago, a sudden and never-ending snowstorm swept across the globe from Antarctica, accompanied by lower temperatures, shifting ocean currents, and thickening cloud cover. Everywhere began to freeze over...]

[... The Antarctic ice cap seems to have turned into a pervasive force, spreading around the world. Meteorologists claim that humanity has been forced into a new ice age since the Fourth Ice Age, with massive food shortages and excessive cold weather causing large-scale fatalities...]

[All scientific research on Antarctica was suspended, and you, an explorer with insider knowledge, are told that everything is connected to a shady scientific campaign in the region. Eager to explore, you gather your team, funded by the United Antarctic Glacier Company, and travel to Antarctica to uncover the cold secrets hidden beneath the ice.]

[You arrive at the South Pole by plane but get lost in a blizzard. In an emergency, you find an abandoned observatory in the snow and force your way inside to escape the storm.]

[- Remember, players: You are great explorers! Be brave enough to discover the truth and warm the globe once more!]

[Current progress on main quest: 0%]

[Player's current location: Edmund Antarctic Polar Observatory Scientific Research Station.]

By the time Mu Sicheng finished reading the game's introduction, he couldn't help but comment, "What is this? Isn't the real world dealing with global warming? What's with this ice age?"

Liu Jiayi, more sensitive to the temperature than Bai Liu, had already wrapped herself in layers of clothing, looking like a ball.

She read through the game description and frowned, warning, "Bai Liu, the game pool simulates a league. In the game pool, the shop trading system is closed, so we can't buy anything. If this is the game's background, food and warm clothing should be our first priorities."

"Otherwise, we won't last more than a few days before we're forced to quit the game voluntarily."

Bai Liu couldn't agree more with Liu Jiayi. He nodded and issued the order. "Muke, search the warehouse for food stocks. Tang Erda and Mu Sicheng will overhaul the building and set up our base for the expedition. Jiayi and I will head to the control room to see if there's a black box or a diary to explain what happened here a year ago."

"Got it!" everyone responded in unison.

After giving the orders, Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi made their way to the base's control room. Fortunately, the base wasn't large, and they quickly found it.

However, the door to the control room was open, and snow had piled inside. The warm air system had just been restored, and the snow was slowly beginning to melt.

Liu Jiayi rubbed her hands together as she surveyed the frosty console. She sighed, "Looks like we'll have to wait for Tang Erda and the others to come check it out before we can get the black box working."

Bai Liu crouched down, put on his gloves, and took a chisel to pry open the drawers, which had frozen solid. The ice wasn't too thick in these areas, so after two chisels, the ice cracked and fell away.

Bai Liu pulled open the drawer, which wasn't covered in dust but in a

thin layer of condensed snow. As he brushed the snow aside, he found several black notebooks.

Instinctively, Bai Liu knew that in horror games, such books usually contain important plot information. He was certain there was a diary or some other critical document among them.

But as he flipped it over, the book was sealed shut.

Liu Jiayi, who had been checking other drawers, noticed Bai Liu standing still with the book in his hands. She leaned over, curious. "This book seems interesting. What's inside? Why are you so quiet?"

As soon as Liu Jiayi saw the contents of the book, she paused too.

The book was neat and legible, printed entirely in English.

Bai Liu, accustomed to reading simple English in horror games, was faced with a challenge now. This was dense, professional research language, mixed with a lot of technical jargon.

He closed the book with a straight face. "Show it to Muke later. I can't read it."

Liu Jiayi, unable to read it either, simply nodded, though she found it odd. She understood that intelligence and language skills aren't the same, but there was something strange about it.

The Edmond Observatory wasn't large, with only four floors.

The ground floor housed the reserve area, where fuel, food, fresh water, and gear were stored in different rooms, all wrapped in plastic sheeting. The two helicopter hangars were exposed outside, simply sheltered by a shed.

The first floor was the living area, containing a sauna, a dining room, an office area, and a few old computers.

The third and fourth floors were dormitories, cramped with barely five square meters per room, two bunk beds squeezed into each space. The warmth from the body heat was the only comfort in the crush.

Judging by the accommodations, the base had once held around eighty to a hundred people. It must have been crowded, but now it was eerily empty.

Liu Jiayi's gaze swept over the frozen noodles on the table, the half-

cut, moldy potatoes on the counter, and the gas switch, turned up to high heat.

"The people here must have left in a hurry," she concluded.

Bai Liu rounded the corner from the third floor, offering a correction. "Or they were tied up and had to leave in a hurry."

Liu Jiayi looked up, confused.

Bai Liu held up a pair of pants and socks. "I found these by the bed in the dormitory. No one would panic and run outdoors without even wearing these in this cold weather."

Liu Jiayi asked skeptically, "Is it possible these people were frightened by something and ran off without even getting dressed?"

"Not likely." Muke, who had finished checking the warehouse, approached from the ground floor and gave a glance to Liu Jiayi. "I just saw their showroom. The Edmond Observatory is staffed by professional mountaineers, firefighters, and well-trained scientific researchers, people who've been tested in extreme scenarios. It's hard to imagine something could scare them all into running."

He glanced at the half-moved food, shaking his head. "They would know that running out of here without taking anything would be a death sentence."

Mu Sicheng and Tang Erda came down from the fourth-floor rooftop, where they'd been overhauling the radio equipment.

Mu Sicheng was so cold that his cheeks had turned blue. When he came downstairs, he found a dormitory, huddled under the blankets, and began shaking uncontrollably.

Tang Erda looked slightly better, but when he removed his gloves, Bai Liu saw a bloody patch of skin stuck to his palm. The wound was exposed to the air, yet no blood had escaped—it had frozen instantly due to the cold.

Tang Erda noticed Bai Liu's gaze and explained, "The setup table was too cold, and I couldn't adjust the tight equipment through my gloves, so I had to take them off."

"—And then the skin stuck to the metal?" Bai Liu finished the sentence for him.

Liu Jiayi sprayed the antidote on Tang Erda's hand. The wound slowly began to heal, but Mu Sicheng, still shivering in bed, didn't show any improvement. He seemed more out than in.

The antidote healed the wound, but it couldn't fix the cold.

"I saw the thermometer outside," Tang Erda said, shaking his healed hand. He looked at Bai Liu, his expression hardening. "Fifty degrees below zero. We can't stay much longer in this extreme weather. We'll freeze to death soon. We need to exit quickly... this game..."

Just then, Muke, still holding the black leather book Bai Liu had handed him, turned pale and interrupted Tang Erda, his voice trembling. "This Edmond Observatory studies body parts sent by the Bureau of Heresy."

Tang Erda's heart skipped a beat, and he immediately denied it. "No way. The Heresy Authority's items are regulated by convention. No country can use them for research—only for internment! They wouldn't let anyone else handle Heretic Authority material!"

Muke exhaled a long breath, the vapor clouding his vision. His voice was soft and unreadable. "What if I told you the plane carrying the corpse heretics crashed on arrival at the South Pole, and all five of the escorts on board died violently on the spot?"

The Ice Age

Muke spread the black book for everyone to see, with a fax report clearly taped to its left side.

He pointed to the numbered code in the bottom left corner. "The number here represents the year, month, and day—a date you should be familiar with."

"0807," Liu Jiayi read aloud. Then, as if realizing something, she glanced at Bai Liu. "This is the date we entered the game."

Liu Jiayi, already vaguely familiar with this kind of formula, recalled the design of the last game and became even more certain of what Bai Liu had told her:

-- The designers behind the game are intentionally targeting Bai Liu, specifically by having copies of him log into the real world after he enters the game, or targeting the people around him.

The sense of being betrayed... Liu Jiayi pursed her lips in displeasure.

Bai Liu's gaze shifted to the fax report from a year ago. The English words on it were simple enough for him to understand.

The fax had been sent from another base called Tai Shan—clearly a Chinese name—so it must have come from a domestic observatory, directed to the Edmond base.

The content of the fax was roughly as follows:

"[I regret that this unfortunate incident occurred when our plane landed at an ice airport while transporting dangerous goods... The five escorts on board died instantly...]"

"[The outcome was tragic but not entirely unexpected. Surviving in the snow and ice has been a nightmare for everyone.]"

"[The only reason we exist here is to study past and future weather trajectories, to slow down the rate of global warming, and to fight for humanity's better harmony with nature until we die. That is the purpose of each and every Antarctic researcher...]"

"[During the search for the plane, the entire observatory was involved. However, when we took inventory, we found three sealed boxes

missing from the plane's cargo, which didn't match the original count. Although I hate to speculate, in Antarctica, dark metal boxes disappearing in the vast whiteness without human intervention is no easy task...]"

"[I know that researchers in Antarctica, trapped in this endless isolation, often become curious about mysterious foreign objects. You always want to explore and analyze everything, thinking there's a key that can save humanity or slow global warming...]"

"[Edmond, I must seriously warn you that those boxes are dangerous, and I can't tell you anything more about them. It's classified, but all I can say is that they were supposed to be buried under the 'untouchable pole' and left alone...]"

"[Some things in this world are simply too dangerous to touch and study, no matter how much curiosity you have. Not everything is as obviously damaging as the weather...]"

"[If you find any trace of those three missing boxes, please let me know. I need to seal them up under Ice Dome A immediately.]"

The letter was signed, "Your friend, Tarzan Observatory."

Bai Liu scanned the contents and concluded, "This fax was sent to all observatories, not just Edmond. The three boxes must have been secretly hidden by researchers from other bases."

He continued, looking around at the group, "According to the main thread of this game, we're supposed to find these boxes first, then figure out what's causing global cooling based on them. The Edmond observatory is likely hiding one of them."

Bai Liu turned to Xiang Muke. "Muke, you and Liu Jiayi stay here at the original station and search for any other clues. Meanwhile, Tang Erda, Mu Sicheng, and I will gather supplies and head to nearby observatories to look for other boxes."

Everyone nodded in agreement and scattered.

Bai Liu then met Tang Erda's silent gaze. "Captain Tang, could you come here for a moment? I need to speak with you privately."

Tang Erda, about to turn away, hesitated before following Bai Liu into one of the cabins.

Bai Liu shut the door behind them.

In the small, five-square-meter cabin, there was an uncomfortable silence. Bai Liu, arms crossed, waited without speaking, clearly expecting Tang Erda to speak first.

Finally, Tang Erda broke the silence, his voice hoarse and his expression heavy. "I'm sorry for my poor judgment. I shouldn't have let you hand over the body parts to the Heretic Authority. I didn't think it would..."

Bai Liu took a moment before responding, his tone unhurried. "It's not entirely your fault. I made the decision myself."

Though Bai Liu acknowledged the inevitability of someone being behind the situation, he couldn't help but feel a little dissatisfied upon learning of Xie Ta's deteriorating condition.

Originally, Bai Liu had planned to keep Xie Ta's body for himself in the real world, but given the impact of the body and his own lack of proper housing, he and Tang Erda had ultimately compromised, leaving the body with the Heretic Authority.

It was a subtle form of Bai Liu selling out Tang Erda.

He hadn't expected it to backfire so quickly.

Tang Erda, clearly worried about the five escorts in reality, seemed to be regretting his decision. He muttered, "It's my fault. If I hadn't let you give them the body parts, the five escorts wouldn't have died..."

Bai Liu calmly interrupted him, "They're not necessarily dead yet."

Tang Erda's head snapped up, his eyes widening. "You have an idea?"

Bai Liu noticed the slight twitch of Tang Erda's ears and tail, a reminder of his canine nature.

It was easy to forget, given Tang Erda's stern demeanor during training, that Bai Liu himself had a similar animalistic edge.

Tang Erda, his fist clenched in shame, said, "It's fine. If you don't have a plan, I'll try logging out of the game to stop the plane from taking off..."

Bai Liu gently tapped the panel Tang Erda had opened, stopping him. "The plane has already mostly taken off. Logging out now will only

speed up time. It's better to play through this route and figure out what's happening, then find a way to undo it."

Tang Erda slowly let the panel drop. "You have a plan?"

Bai Liu nodded. "Yes, but we're still missing some key information. The game seems to be based on a realistic setting, and you mentioned that you trained in Antarctica. You must have a solid understanding of this environment. Tell us what you know."

"Where should I start?" Tang Erda asked.

Bai Liu looked at him thoughtfully. "Start from the beginning. Why were you here for training?"

Tang Erda took a deep breath. "I came here for a year of duty and spent some time flying helicopters for the Zone 4 Project."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "The Zone 4 Project?"

Tang Erda explained, "It was a project to assess whether Antarctica could be used for a new heresy containment zone. The location was ideal—isolated and perfect for containing particularly dangerous heretics."

Bai Liu's tone was casual. "So why was it abandoned?"

Tang Erda sighed. "The scale of construction here was too large to keep hidden from foreign observers. Domestic authorities knew a bit about the project, but foreign ones didn't know about heresy. With over 5,000 residents in Antarctica during the summer, we couldn't risk revealing the existence of the heresy, so the project was abandoned."

Bai Liu asked, "Then why did the body parts make you restart the program?"

Tang Erda responded, "The data from the Zone 4 Project showed that this was the safest place to seal a dangerous psychotropic heretic."

Bai Liu shifted the topic. "Do you have any impressions of this Edmond Observatory?"

Tang Erda paused before answering. "No, there's no observatory by that name in the real world."

Bai Liu continued, "What about the Tarzan Observatory?"

Tang Erda shook his head. "That name doesn't match any observatory I know of."

Bai Liu nodded, recognizing the pattern. "It's similar to what happened in Bursting Last Train. They referenced reality but didn't fully follow it."

He then asked, "Do you remember any observatories near the poles?"

Tang Erda thought for a moment. "Yes, there's one from Country A, located here."

Bai Liu followed up, "Do you know what research they're currently doing?"

Tang Erda hesitated before answering. "Not exactly. From what I heard, they're studying the impact of special cryogenic animals on climate recovery. I was told these animals are both alive and dead..."

Before Bai Liu could respond, Mu Sicheng burst into the room, breathless, holding a book. "Bai Liu—look at this!" he exclaimed, thrusting the object into Bai Liu's hands.

Bai Liu glanced down at the package in his arms—a tarpaulin-wrapped object with a waterproof label attached.

The label reads in English: [Special Cryogenic Animal Remnant Sections (Cells Still Active) and Ground Temperature Change Study Fact Sheet].

The Ice Age

Bai Liu retrieved a cutter from a drawer in the dormitory, warming it in his hand for a few moments before smoothly snapping out the blade. He used it to cut through the tarp, revealing what was wrapped inside.

It was a stack of neatly divided lab report sheets.

The pages were filled with technical abbreviations, measurements, graphs, and the occasional black-and-white or color-stained section—complex and difficult to read for anyone without the proper knowledge.

Bai Liu flipped through the stack briefly, then looked up at Mu Sicheng. “Where did you find this?”

Mu Sicheng took a breath before responding. “In the basement. When I went to check the helicopter hangar, I discovered a sliding cellar door hidden beneath the docking bay. It led to a two-story basement full of experimental equipment, along with some pickled cabbage and radishes.”

“Were there any logs of experimental records or related papers in the basement?” Bai Liu asked.

The experimental reports were raw material, and Bai Liu needed at least some basic understanding to make sense of the data.

Mu Sicheng shook his head. “I didn’t look thoroughly. This bag was on the table, and I thought it was important, so I took it and brought it up here to show you first.”

Bai Liu nodded. “Get Muke over here. You follow Liu Jiayi and check the food supplies on the ground floor, prepare our share for the night. Muke and I will go down to the basement.”

Mu Sicheng turned to Muke, while Bai Liu glanced sideways at Tang Erda, handing him the document. “Can you read this?”

“I can make out some of it.” Tang Erda flipped through the pages briefly, then paused at a particular chart. “This chart... it’s made using dual-frequency radar echoes to measure the thickness of the ice beneath the surface, allowing for the detection of topography under the ice. It’s helpful for drilling through without hitting rocks or other

obstacles."

Bai Liu noticed the change in Tang Erda's expression. "Is something wrong with this chart?"

Tang Erda hesitated, then pointed to a note on the chart. "This is a typical ice-sounding chart from the polar regions, but this one is from Dome A, or Ice Dome A."

"There are only domestic observatories near Ice Dome A. This is the domain of our research institutions," Tang Erda continued. "Although the relationship between the national observatories in Antarctica is relatively peaceful, their research areas are well-defined. Edmond Observatory has neither the capacity nor the authority to study Ice Dome A. In other words, it's impossible for Edmond Observatory to have any first-hand data on Ice Dome A."

Tang Erda furrowed his brow, flipping through more pages of the data. "But here they have numerous reports on ice soundings and ice core studies from Dome A. That's not normal."

"One observatory has classified research data from another," Bai Liu observed, scanning the information in Tang Erda's hand. "There are two possibilities."

Tang Erda looked over, waiting for Bai Liu to continue.

"One possibility," Bai Liu said, "is that the domestic observatory—Tarzan Station—shared its first-hand data with Edmond Observatory."

Tang Erda frowned. "That's impossible. It's a serious data breach."

Bai Liu smiled slightly. "Seems like Captain Tang prefers the second possibility—Edmond Observatory somehow managed to force its way into Ice Dome A's research data."

Tang Erda nodded reluctantly. "Or worse, Edmond Observatory might have eliminated the team at Tarzan Station and taken over their research."

Liu Jiayi appeared at the door, leaning against the frame with her arms folded. "I found Edmond's cabin. I have a feeling this guy wasn't just any scientist. Based on the remnants in his cabin, he seems pretty aggressive."

"Show us the way." Bai Liu stepped forward and took Liu Jiayi's hand,

casually swapping his warmed gloves with her empty ones.

The researchers at Edmond Station were all tall, and their clothing was oversized for Bai Liu, let alone Liu Jiayi. Though she had layered herself with clothes, there were still gaps, especially in her gloves.

Liu Jiayi didn't like being taken care of, but the cold had left her hands almost frozen. She said nothing, nor did she show any signs of discomfort.

Bai Liu's glove swap was so natural, as if it was something he had always done, that the others didn't even react.

Liu Jiayi just shook her hand out of Bai Liu's, covering her face to exhale a breath of vapor. She looked calmer now, though still silently displeased. Despite her irritation, she didn't know why, but she accepted Bai Liu's actions without question.

She led Bai Liu around the corner to a small room, where the wind blew through a crack in the window seal, stealing all warmth from the room.

The seal was lined with drips of condensed, ice-prism-thin formations that glowed faintly in the dim light.

Liu Jiayi tucked her gloves into her pocket. "At first, I didn't realize this was Edmond's cabin because it was at the windward end. It would be the first to be hit by any storm, and it seemed too dangerous for a base manager to live here. He'd probably freeze to death in his sleep."

She kicked open the frozen door, which clicked and creaked as it slammed shut against the wind. On iron hooks inside the room hung a neat row of modified rifles, each around 70 cm long, their muzzles also covered in ice.

"I didn't find any signs of gunfire in the other rooms—mostly just books, computers, and supplies. But this room had guns and plenty of spare ammo," Liu Jiayi said, her tone colder.

She pulled a box from under the bed with a forceful tug and stomped on the neatly arranged rounds inside. "At first, I thought this stuff belonged to some military person. But under the box, I found purchase invoices in Edmond's name. So, this must have been his personal living space."

Tang Erda frowned. "The Antarctic Convention forbids firearms at the

observatories, and the storage of such items is strictly prohibited."

Liu Jiayi shrugged. "But he used them. The invoices show the guns were bought after Edmond arrived in Antarctica, probably from the helicopter transport team under the guise of 'self-defense.'"

She added, "He lived alone here. There's no sign of anyone else. I suspect no one but Edmond knew about the gun."

Bai Liu glanced at the rifles and then stood at the room's entrance, holding an invisible gun in an empty pose. He half-squinted as if looking through a sniper sight.

"So, this Edmond," Bai Liu mused, lowering the 'gun,' "bought a rifle and bullets for 'self-defense,' chose to live in this cold, isolated room, and every day raised his gun. The only people he could point it at were the other residents of this cloister…"

Bai Liu's smile deepened. "It seems this Dr. Edmond, fearing some threat from others at the Observatory, grew so paranoid that he bought a gun to protect himself."

At that moment, Muke and Mu Sicheng arrived from the third floor, both with grim expressions. Muke handed over a stack of papers, explaining, "When we were preparing the food for your trip, we noticed a lot of fresh food rotting in the warehouse, and a lot of canned food sitting untouched. The seals hadn't been broken."

Muke paused, then continued, "We checked the consumption logs for food and medication here…"

He sighed, "It turns out the food listed wasn't actual food—it was mostly drugs. For example, 'bread' was actually lithium carbonate."

Bai Liu's expression hardened. Muke's voice grew more serious. "The people at Edmond Observatory are being fed drugs, not real food. Someone is forcing them to take these drugs daily."

Bai Liu asked, "Do you know what kind of drugs?"

Muke didn't hesitate. "Lorazepam, diazepam, chlorpromazine, olanzapine… mostly psychotherapeutic drugs for severe depression, anxiety, and manic disorders."

Muke swallowed. "The people here are taking so many of these drugs that they hardly eat real food anymore. If that's true, this place is

more like an asylum, and the people here are still physically fit—just dangerously aggressive when they snap."

Bai Liu's gaze shifted to the box of cold bullets on the floor.

"I think I understand why Dr. Edmond bought the gun and bullets now," Bai Liu said softly. "He needed a way to control these dangerous patients."

"Muke and Liu Jiayi head to the infirmary on the first floor and check if there are any relevant medical records to explain why this group of people is ingesting such large quantities of drugs," Bai Liu ordered.

Bai Liu's eyes were deep with thought. "These people should have been in sound mind when they arrived in Antarctica. We need to find out what exactly caused their mental imbalance."

Muke nodded and led Liu Jiayi downstairs. Before they left, Bai Liu tossed them two guns and several boxes of ammunition. "Be careful."

Muke took the gun and bullets with practiced precision, loading them expertly and securing the weapon at his side.

Liu Jiayi struggled a little with the weapon, still adjusting to the modified gun. Though it had been shortened, it was still too long for her to handle comfortably, forcing her to lift her arm awkwardly to hold it. Still, she did her best to maintain a confident posture.

They had all grown proficient with firearms after the trials they'd faced. They weren't quite as skilled as Tang Erda, the sharpshooter, but at least they had mastered the basics.

Even Liu Jiayi, despite her smaller frame, had learned to handle automatic and semi-automatic firearms, though she preferred to avoid them due to their powerful recoil. But in this situation, there was no choice. The harsh cold made it better to rely on weapons and supplies than to waste precious energy.

Bai Liu, accompanied by Mu Sicheng and Tang Erda, gathered their own weapons before heading downstairs to check the basement under the helicopter hangar outside the observatory.

The two teams split at the first floor.

Bai Liu approached the front door and noticed the frost that had formed in just the past hour. A frosty white foam clung to the lock handle, giving it a hard, cold texture.

The temperatures were so low that the snow quickly solidified, nearly as hard as ice in his hand.

Bai Liu glanced at the wind gauge mounted next to the door, which

displayed the temperature and wind speed outside.

[-55.8°C, wind speed 119 km/h, force 12, Category 1 hurricane. No going out.]

Mu Sicheng, who grew up in the south, had never experienced such extreme cold. The realization that they were in -50°C made him shudder. It felt as if a cold breeze had seeped into his very bones.

Although he wasn't used to low temperatures, Mu Sicheng knew a thing or two about typhoons. Looking at the Category 1 hurricane on the gauge, he muttered, "Is it really that windy? Here, on the coast, even trees that weigh tens of kilograms can be blown over..."

Tang Erda grimaced. "You can't fly a helicopter in this weather. It'll get blown off course and crash. If we need to go to another observation post, we'll have to use snowmobiles."

Bai Liu didn't comment on the weather and calmly pushed the door open.

The wind howled, sweeping in, and the outside world was pitch dark, obscured by dense snow. The faint shimmer of light far above was barely visible, swallowed by the storm.

The door rattled violently in the wind, and a thick layer of snow had already built up at the threshold, knee-high. The gusts were so strong that Tang Erda had to raise a hand to shield his eyes as the wind pushed him back.

"Put on your goggles and sledges!" Tang Erda shouted over the gale. "Tie your safety lines around your waist! Don't get blown away! Watch out for ice cracks beneath your feet! Don't fall in!"

Antarctic winds can reach speeds of up to 35 meters per second, strong enough to blow away objects as heavy as ten Tang Erdas. But what was truly terrifying weren't the winds.

The real danger was the ice crevasses. No one who had survived in Antarctica would be unaware of them.

The ice here wasn't flat. As temperatures fluctuated, the melting and reshaping process created crevasses, some over a hundred meters deep. Snow often covered these crevasses, making them invisible and hard to spot.

This meant it was easy to step off solid ground and fall into an unseen chasm.

Tang Erda remembered a story he'd heard while stationed here about a Japanese observer who went out to check some equipment. On his way back, a gust of wind blew him away, and he vanished. Four days later, the crew found him in a shallow crevasse, less than three meters from the entrance.

The man had been frozen alive, his face frozen with snow, his eyes wide open in despair as he stared up at the exit. His fingers were broken, nails frozen, and blood smeared where he had clawed at the ice. His teeth were half-broken from gnawing, his mouth filled with blood, and the ice was stained with the remnants of his desperate struggle.

The snow covering the crevasse hadn't been thick enough to prevent him from escaping, but the observatory crew had repeatedly compacted the snow with snowmobiles during their search, trapping him further.

The man had tried to claw his way out, but the snow and ice closed in around him, and he froze to death, trapped by those who came to rescue him.

From then on, the observatory crew reported hearing strange sounds near the crevasse—sounds of someone desperately pleading for help, the frantic scraping of nails, and the gnawing of teeth. Some crew members, feeling unsettled, claimed they heard something moving beneath the snow, and they couldn't shake the feeling that something was coming for them.

After several more disappearances, the Japanese team moved their base to a different observation post.

Tang Erda wasn't sure if he believed the story, but the memory of those ice crevasses had stayed with him, so he shared it with Mu Sicheng and Bai Liu as a warning.

After hearing this, Mu Sicheng grumbled, "Forget it, I don't want to go. You two should go."

Bai Liu calmly dismissed him.

The three men staggered through the hurricane, safety ropes tied around their waists, until they reached the helicopter hangar.

Fortunately, it wasn't far. Tang Erda pulled open the flap door, and they entered the basement.

Mu Sicheng, shaking off the snow, muttered, "Damn, the weather changed so fast. It wasn't this windy the last time I was here!"

Bai Liu glanced at him. "If you stayed outside a little longer without any safety gear, the wind would have blown you away. You might have ended up stuck in an ice crevasse."

Mu Sicheng sighed. "Ugh..."

"But this is a game pool. I can quit the game if I want!" Mu Sicheng retorted.

Tang Erda, his tone heavy with concern, added, "Not necessarily. If you tried to leave like before, it wouldn't work in this environment. The ice chasm here is over 100 meters deep, and temperatures can reach -89°C. You'd freeze unconscious in seconds—and you might not even get the chance to quit before you're frozen solid."

Mu Sicheng sighed, "What kind of game is this?!"

The basement had two levels. The upper level was used for light experimentation, with basic equipment like sensors and hydraulic hammers stacked around the room, and two vats of pickled cabbage in the corner.

Tang Erda lifted the cover of one vat and was immediately hit with a foul smell. "This stinks like rotten sauerkraut."

Mu Sicheng grimaced. "Yeah, it smells just like my grandma's failed sauerkraut."

Tang Erda set the cover down and glanced at Bai Liu with a thoughtful expression. "This sauerkraut is made Chinese style. The people at Edmond's Observatory wouldn't have known how to make it properly, so it must have gone bad."

"But they must have been guided by someone to store food like this," Bai Liu mused. "It suggests the relationship between Tarzan Station and Edmond Observatory might not be as strained as we thought."

He circled the vats, looking for something.

Mu Sicheng, confused, asked, "What are you looking for? It's just two

vats of sauerkraut."

"I'm looking for a production date," Bai Liu answered quietly.

"Why would anyone write a date on sauerkraut?" Mu Sicheng asked, puzzled.

Bai Liu crouched next to the vat, wiping his hand over a dark spot. Beneath the grime, he uncovered a lab label: [10/8, 12.14kg radish].

Mu Sicheng's eyes widened. "How did you know it had a date on it?!"

Bai Liu stood up slowly. "This is a lab. Edmond is a scientist, and he's not someone who would just make sauerkraut for fun. He was conducting an experiment on the fermentation process. And like any scientist, he would have documented the experiment—like the date."

Tang Erda crouched by the other vat and found a similar label. "The date is also August 10th. But the crash happened on August 7th, and the fax from Tarzan Station about Edmond stealing body parts was sent on the 8th... But Edmond—"

"Doesn't it seem strange to make sauerkraut on August 10th?" Bai Liu interrupted gently.

Tang Erda frowned, but before he could respond, Bai Liu walked toward the sliding doors leading to the second basement level.

The second basement was separated from the first by another sliding door, which Mu Sicheng had cut open earlier. When Bai Liu opened it, a thick, rancid stench rushed out, followed by a cloud of dust and smoke.

Between the first and second basement levels, there was also a sliding door, which appeared to be frozen. However, Mu Sicheng had cut through it earlier when he came down.

The moment Bai Liu opened the door, he immediately understood why Mu Sicheng had grabbed the information and fled.

A thick, pungent stench, strong enough to seem as if it could overturn the sky, rushed out. It was accompanied by a cloud of dust and light smoke that poured through the air.

As the heating returned, the ice prisms at the top of the second basement began to melt. Drips of murky liquid fell from them like

stalactites, flooding the floor in dark grey mud and water. On its surface floated slides of unknown creatures and some plastic sealing material.

All in all, it was an unpleasant sight.

Mu Sicheng saw Bai Liu descending without saying a word and urgently warned him, "There's water down there! There are rubber boots and gloves by the stairs. Get changed before you go down!"

Bai Liu changed into the rubber boots, pulled on the gloves, grabbed a plastic file bag to protect his head, and walked deeper into the second basement.

As he descended, the eerie stench intensified, like the foul odor of fish freshly hauled from the ocean's depths—slippery, slimy, like a sea serpent swimming around Bai Liu in the dim, dusty air.

The water on the floor was shallow enough to reach the soles of his shoes. Bai Liu moved through it with ripples, bending down to collect some slides and materials floating on the surface.

He vaguely recognized a few slides—killer whales, lesser theropods, and several penguin species.

These slides were essentially fat and epidermal pressings of the polar animals, and most of the floating materials documented research findings on these creatures.

At the center of the basement was a wide, heavy desk, cluttered with four microscopes, a box of overturned slides, and two small test tube racks.

Inside the racks, small test tubes were neatly arranged, their surfaces slightly frozen from the cold but slowly thawing as the temperature returned. The biological tissue inside the tubes had taken on a peculiar pink color after staining.

As they warmed, the edges of the tissue grew darker, and some of it began to writhe, as if coming to life.

Bai Liu examined the labels on the tubes. Each one read: [Penguin (killer whale, etc.) + unknown organism X free cell mix culture].

Amid the writhing, darkening flesh, Bai Liu noticed a piece of tissue that remained still. Before and after thawing, it retained the bright red

color of freshly cut flesh.

He could even see the capillaries on the slices, oozing blood and dissipating into the fixative.

He walked over, gently lifted a test tube from the rack using two fingers, and noted that this one had a different label: [Unknown Creature: X].

As soon as he removed the test tube, the tissue inside the other tubes seemed to react. The mouth of one tube erupted with sharp vapors, and the formaldehyde liquid evaporated instantly.

The pieces of flesh inside the test tubes began to divide and grow in an unknown direction. They crawled out, sticking together, and in the blink of an eye, formed a basketball-sized, tentacle-covered, slimy black ball of flesh.

The ball had the smooth skin of a penguin or killer whale, sharp carnivorous teeth, and newborn tentacles tumbling over fleshy wings on either side, pulsing as they grew.

The tentacles twisted together, sinking into the body and soon diverging into new tissue—fishtail-like webbed feet.

The grotesque ball of flesh screamed and hurled its tentacles at Bai Liu. Tang Erda, standing at the entrance, quickly leaned back and raised his rifle to his shoulder, aiming and firing.

"Bang! Bang!"

Two clean shots, and the ball of flesh lay motionless in the muddy water.

Tang Erda lowered his rifle, breathing heavily, and gravely warned, "I triggered the monster book. This is one of the creatures in this copy, called Unknown Creature X Contaminant. This is likely a biochemically contaminated area, so be careful not to run into the source of contamination."

"Okay," Bai Liu replied softly, slipping the small test tube into his fanny pack.

Bai Liu finally found what he was looking for in a locked safe. He had Tang Erda break the lock with his gun.

Inside, there was a chronological diary of experiments.

After obtaining it, Bai Liu emerged from the underground lab and followed Mu Sicheng, who was reluctant to go down.

Behind them, unseen by them, the pile of creatures Tang Erda had 'killed' began to shift. Like molten asphalt, their grotesque, inhuman forms fused together, reshaping and twisting. Slowly, faces emerged—features taking shape, limbs reforming—until they resembled something disturbingly human.

The creature seemed to be adjusting its appearance, constantly shifting between three different forms. At one moment, it had a slightly more robust human body; at another, it appeared elegant and clean; at another, it sported a shape reminiscent of a monkey's headphones. Occasionally, eyes emerged from the "asphalt," looking on in pure curiosity.

Eventually, it seemed to settle on a form, shedding its snake-like black shell in the muddy water. Its thin white arms and legs exploded out of the shell.

A naked Bai Liu stumbled to his knees in the water, his eyes wide with clarity, letting out a high-pitched, whale-like cry, calling for a companion.

Scattered across the water, the photocopies Bai Liu hadn't taken with him were filled with the following notes:

"Cetacean tissues after mixed suspension culture of unknown organism X cells exhibit plant-like recombinant regenerative properties with minimal regression of differentiation, which can be induced to re-differentiate..."
"Cells possess high levels of intelligence for individual species, and the differentiated 'basketball tentacle-like lower organisms' (later referred to as basketballs) exhibit differentiation across biological categories, including humans, birds, fish, and even ferns and ancient microbes..."
"Whale cells begin to play a dominant role, producing whale-like habits, growing a smooth epidermal layer around the 'basketball.' Cell differentiation gradually returns to normal, but after a week, the cells begin to die..."
"Whale-like habits emerge before death, leading to molting. After molting... my god! It reborn! It shows learning traits! It begins to control its differentiation... Oh my god! After multiple molts, it started

to differentiate toward a human form!!!"
"No! I must stop the experiment! This is ethically unacceptable filth, and it will contaminate the human genome!"

The Ice Age

Bai Liu handed Muke the diary as he stepped out.

The Joint Experiment Data Report, a series of texts retrieved by the Observatory, and a basic textbook Muke had taken from one of the graduate students' cabins—all of these were essential for understanding the rest of the material.

Bai Liu asked, "How long will it take you to finish?"

Muke looked at the thick pile of books and the various specialized materials in front of him. It was essentially asking him to study an entire subject from scratch. After assessing the workload, he answered seriously, "About three or four days."

Bai Liu nodded knowingly. "How much food is left at this observatory?"

Muke replied, "After discarding the expired and spoiled supplies, there are about seventy kilograms left. At an estimated consumption rate of one kilogram per person per day, that's around fifteen days' worth of food for one person."

"Then we'll have to leave before you finish translating." Bai Liu thought for a moment before deciding, "We can't take a snowmobile—the speed is too slow. Tarzan Station is over a thousand kilometers away, and a snowmobile averages only thirty to forty kilometers per hour. A round trip would take over thirty days, which we can't afford in terms of food and fuel. A helicopter is our best option."

Tang Erda frowned. "But flying a helicopter in these conditions is dangerous."

"I know." Bai Liu cast a glance at him. "Don't forget, our game identities are [avid explorers]. We're not supposed to choose the safest way—especially if it wears us out more."

Tang Erda paused, falling silent. His instincts were more pragmatic, fitting for an observer rather than an explorer. But this was a game.

Reality didn't matter here.

Bai Liu scanned the room. "Any objections?"

No one spoke.

"Good." Bai Liu gave his orders efficiently. "Mu Sicheng, load food and fuel onto the plane. Tang Erda, repair the helicopter and the snowmobile. Muke and Liu Jiayi, prepare a week's worth of food for the observation post and store it near the cabin. Also, stock a week's worth of supplies in the snowmobile. If we're not back within a week, drive to the nearest observation post. Keep your guns in the car and the cabin."

He paused, then added, "If things go south… escape."

"We'll bring a satellite phone and keep in contact," Bai Liu continued, shaking the device in his hand. "But given the way these games usually go, there's a ninety-five percent chance we'll lose it. So we need separate contingency plans for different scenarios before and after we're cut off."

One hour later.
Bundled in thick winter gear—down liner, waist and knee pads, and spiked shoes for traction on ice—Bai Liu leaned over the edge of the helicopter, waving to Liu Jiayi and Muke below before shutting the outer door.

Tang Erda sat in the pilot's seat, adjusting the dashboard instruments. Food parcels were stacked high in the back, where Mu Sicheng, wedged between them, struggled to stretch his limbs. He had to use his firearm just to carve out a little space for himself.

The rotor blades whirred to life, the engine roaring against the silence of the snowfields. Bai Liu withdrew his gaze from outside, flexing his cold-stiffened fingers and exhaling a frosty breath.

"Put on dark goggles," Tang Erda warned from the front. "Snow blindness is a real risk. And if any part of your body goes numb from the cold, cover it immediately. Otherwise, the prolonged exposure could cause blood clots, leading to limb stiffness and—if it gets bad—amputation."

Mu Sicheng shivered violently, rubbing his hands together in desperation. "Wait—didn't I bring Liu Jiayi's antidote? Can't she cure frostbite?"

Liu Jiayi had, in fact, prepared a bottle of antidote for each of them.

"She can," Bai Liu acknowledged. "But only after your vitality has

dropped from the cold enough for the antidote to take effect. By then, you'd likely be unconscious."

Mu Sicheng's face twisted in horror. "I hate Antarctica."

The plane was forced to land twice in the middle of an endless stretch of snow due to the strong winds.

Fortunately, Tang Erda had the foresight to replace the helicopter's landing gear with a sled-type system, reducing the risks of landing and taking off in such conditions.

But the greatest challenge with helicopter landings and take-offs wasn't the landing gear—or even the wind. The real danger lay in the ice.
Crevasses were the biggest threat.

If the helicopter had stopped atop an ice crevasse, the risk of fatalities would have been high. Yet, strangely, Bai Liu's luck held—neither of their landing sites had any visible crevasses. Thanks to that stroke of luck, they made it within half a day's reach of Tarzan Station.

With only a dozen kilometers left, Bai Liu requested a third landing. Once again, no ice crevasses were found—not even after Bai Liu personally stepped out, walking around at random to check.

Tang Erda had previously assured him that ice crevasses weren't so common that one could just stumble into them. However, there was one crucial factor he had overlooked—this was a game, and Bai Liu was a player with a zero luck stat.

By all logic, ice crevasses should have been everywhere for someone like him.

Yet, since entering the game, he hadn't encountered a single one.

Bai Liu tilted his head, raising his binoculars. Through them, he could see Tarzan Station perched far ahead, its silhouette rising above the shimmering, snow-covered horizon. Faint lights flickered through the observatory windows, while wisps of smoke and heat curled from the few chimneys on the roof.

He narrowed his eyes.
"There's someone at Tarzan Station."

Tang Erda glanced at him. "Is that why you decided to land here?" He

asked, waiting for further instructions. "Should we go straight in, or —?"

"No. First, check for ice crevasses around here—especially the places I walked over." Bai Liu lowered the binoculars and looked down at the snow beneath his feet. The reflection in his goggles darkened.
"Captain Tang, if there were originally crevasses in these areas, is there any way to make them disappear?"

Tang Erda blinked in surprise. "If it was done artificially, you could fill them with snow and then pour water on top to solidify it into ice. But the process is extremely labor-intensive. Filling a 20-meter-deep crack would take hours, and in these freezing conditions, people wouldn't survive outside that long. Not to mention the wind—no one would even attempt it—"

"What if the thing filling these crevasses isn't affected by the cold at all?" Bai Liu asked casually, crouching and pressing his fingers lightly against the ice. "We brought sensors that can map hundreds or even thousands of meters beneath the ice, right?"

Mu Sicheng and Tang Erda retrieved the hydraulic hammer and sensors from the helicopter. Following the translated instructions Muke had provided, they set the equipment in place several hundred meters around the landing site.

The sensors began beeping softly. Slowly, images of the ice's cross-section materialized on the visual display, growing deeper with each scan—until suddenly, an alarm shrieked.

The next image sent a chill down Mu Sicheng's spine.

Scattered throughout the ice were human silhouettes—twisted into grotesque, unnatural positions.

Some had limbs broken and bent backward. Others had their heads and necks crooked at impossible angles. Their torsos were folded in on themselves, twisted nearly 180 degrees—like dissected frogs pinned open for experimentation, their spines severed and splayed apart.

These people had been thrown into the ice crevasses—discarded like failed experiments. The chasm beneath them wasn't just a natural formation. It was a mass grave.

Even without clear images of their faces, Mu Sicheng could imagine their expressions of agony.

Among them, several bodies were relatively intact. Their silhouettes suggested they had still been alive when they were thrown in—arms and legs frozen in climbing positions, as if they had desperately tried to claw their way out.

But they never made it.

Fifteen meters from the surface, their struggles had ended. They had frozen to death mid-climb.

Mu Sicheng shivered and instinctively pulled his jacket tighter around himself, shifting closer to Bai Liu.
"...Do you think these were the Taishan Observatory crew?"

Bai Liu's gaze remained on the display.
"Not necessarily."

"What do you mean?" Mu Sicheng asked uneasily.

Bai Liu gestured toward the screen. "The numbers don't add up."

He nodded at the distorted silhouettes. "There are over a hundred bodies here—far more than the entire crew of Tarzan Station."

For a moment, he studied Mu Sicheng's expression before continuing,
"And there are still people inside Tarzan Station. That leaves us with two possibilities—"

"The first possibility," Bai Liu said calmly, "is that, much like at Edmond Observatory, a scientist with a gun and extreme paranoia decided that the others had become mentally unstable and dangerous. They might have executed the rest of the crew—along with anyone who later came to Tarzan Station seeking help—and disposed of the bodies here."

Mu Sicheng swallowed hard. "And the second possibility?"

Bai Liu's eyes flicked back to the dashboard.

"The other possibility is that everyone in Tarzan Station is already dead." His voice was steady, almost indifferent. "That some thing—some kind of monster—conducted gruesome experiments on them, then discarded their remains here. And that those monsters are still inside Tarzan Station, running it in their place."

Mu Sicheng inhaled sharply. "But if there are over a hundred bodies

here, didn't you say that's more than the entire crew? What about the extras? Who were they?"

Bai Liu's answer was immediate.
"The monsters themselves, of course."

Mu Sicheng froze. His mind took a full two seconds to register the implication before a deep, creeping horror settled in.
"…Wait, you mean—"

"Yes," Bai Liu interrupted smoothly, "these monsters can turn into people."

Mu Sicheng felt his skin prickle as he stared at Bai Liu.

Bai Liu, on the other hand, simply observed the readout with detached curiosity.
"It seems the creatures we're facing this time are not only highly adaptive, capable of learning and differentiating between their environment, but also cunning enough to mimic humans—to deceive and trap their prey."

A slow smile curved his lips.

"And they even have a tendency toward superiority and self-destruction…"

His voice carried a note of amusement.

"How fascinating. It almost sounds like an evolved version of humanity."

The Ice Age

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mu Sicheng was nearly dumbfounded—he couldn't handle this kind of biohazard horror at all!

Tang Erda, however, remained calm. "Do we go straight in now, or should we call Muke and the others first?"

"The phone stopped working as soon as we landed." Bai Liu turned on the satellite phone and showed Tang Erda the screen—it displayed a weak signal and couldn't make calls.

Tang Erda frowned.

The entire way here, no matter how bad the weather got, the satellite phone had always maintained a stable connection. Why was it suddenly malfunctioning now that they had reached Taishan Station?

"This must be an important spot in the game," Bai Liu remarked, tilting his chin toward the aircraft. "Grab your weapons—we're going straight in."

Tang Erda took off and glided forward, sending a signal to Taishan Station to indicate their approach. Shortly after, the station responded with its own signal—flashing lights confirming their landing request.

"Something at Taishan Station knows how to communicate with us using this kind of technology..." Mu Sicheng muttered, suspicion creeping into his voice. He elbowed Bai Liu. "That means it's probably a person, right?"

"Or maybe the monsters have learned enough to use this method to lure us in," Bai Liu said casually.

Mu Sicheng shivered, rubbing his arms as goosebumps rose on his skin. He wisely chose to shut up—there was no point trying to get reassurance out of Bai Liu. That guy loved scaring him.

As the aircraft hovered above the station, Tang Erda glanced down. A figure stood below, waving a red flag—a signal that the landing area was clear. He turned to Bai Liu for approval, and when Bai Liu gave a

slight nod, Tang Erda began steering the aircraft down.

The helicopter touched down, its sled-style landing gear settling into the grooves of the snow.

Through the transparent side door, Bai Liu and the others caught a glimpse of the man waving the red flag. He was dressed in an orange penguin ski suit, stabilizing himself in the fierce wind with ski poles planted firmly in the ground. Most of his face was hidden beneath a thick woolen hat, but even from a distance, his excitement was evident as he gestured toward them.

His enthusiasm sent a shiver down Mu Sicheng's spine. He shrank behind Bai Liu's shoulder. "Shit… is he a monster or a human…?"

"We'll find out once we get down there," Bai Liu said. Without hesitation, he pushed open the helicopter door and hopped down.

The man stepped forward instinctively, as if to catch Bai Liu, but Tang Erda—who had jumped down from the other side—quickly waved him off. "I got it. Thanks."

The man pushed his hat up, revealing a face reddened from the cold. His breath came out in visible puffs as he spoke, his Mandarin fluent and tinged with relief.

"I'm from the Taishan Observatory—I've been stranded here! You're from the outside, aren't you? Oh my god!" His voice shook with emotion, his body bouncing slightly as he spoke. "This is the first time in a year I've seen anyone from home besides the people at the observatory! You definitely haven't been parasitized! You must be human!"

"Get inside!" he urged, glancing around warily. He clutched a gun, sweeping it over their surroundings as if expecting something to emerge from the snow at any moment.

Bai Liu and Tang Erda exchanged a glance but remained silent. They followed the nervous man toward the station.

As they neared the entrance, several other personnel stood at attention, dressed in the same penguin ski suits. Rifles rested at their feet, their posture rigid, as if they were standing guard.

The 'sentries' eyed Bai Liu's group coldly. When they got a good look at their faces—clearly domestic-looking—their tension eased slightly.

But just as quickly, their wariness returned, and they reached for their weapons again.

The man leading them hurriedly introduced himself. "I'm Fang Xiaoxiao, a meteorology graduate student. I went out to guide the helicopter in. They're from outside Antarctica—can I take them inside?"

The sentries remained unmoved. One of them spoke coldly. "Everyone—including you—must undergo a cellular activity test before re-entering the station."

Fang Xiaoxiao turned back to Bai Liu with an apologetic smile. "You probably don’t know yet, since you just arrived in Antarctica. Every time someone leaves, we have to check their cellular activity before letting them back in. It’s for everyone’s safety."

A sentry pulled on gloves and carefully scraped a small sample of mucous membrane from Fang Xiaoxiao’s mouth with a cotton swab, placing it in a test tube.

Then, three new swabs were taken out, and a sentry gestured for Bai Liu’s group to open their mouths.

Mu Sicheng tensed, his fingers twitching toward his gun. But Bai Liu subtly pressed down on his arm, stopping him. Without protest, Bai Liu removed his hat, stepped forward, and opened his mouth slightly. The sentry scraped a sample from the inside of his cheek.

Mu Sicheng and Tang Erda followed suit, though Mu Sicheng’s grip remained tight on his weapon.

Fang Xiaoxiao reassured them, "The test doesn’t take long. If everything checks out, you’ll be allowed inside within ten minutes. Just hold on a little longer."

Bai Liu, ever calm, asked, "What exactly happened here that made everyone so wary?"

Fang Xiaoxiao sighed, his breath misting in the cold air. "It started about a year and a half ago… around August. It was during the summer shift at the poles…"

"Summer shift?" Bai Liu asks.

Fang Xiaoxiao explains, "The crew at the polar observatory rotates

annually because of Antarctica's extreme conditions. The four-month-long polar night, from April to October, can severely impact mental health, leading to T3 syndrome, which causes paranoia, hallucinations, and violent outbursts. To prevent this, the crew stationed here over the winter departs in the summer when an icebreaker brings in a new team to take over."

He gives a bitter smile. "But we've been here for three winters now."

Bai Liu raises an eyebrow.

"We were supposed to be rotated out the summer before last," Fang Xiaoxiao continues, "but no one ever came. No replacements. No supply drop. We were running out of food..."

His voice falters, the weight of an unspeakable truth tightening his throat.

Bai Liu takes the moment to speak, his tone neutral. "You managed to survive on a year's worth of supplies for this long. That’s impressive."

Fang Xiaoxiao closes his eyes, and a single tear leaks from the corner. The two sentries beside him grow solemn, one clapping him lightly on the shoulder.

"Survival," one mutters.

Just then, the cell test results return—normal.

Fang Xiaoxiao exhales in relief, his energy lifting slightly. "Come on, I'll show you to your accommodations. You must be exhausted from your journey. Get some rest first."

As he leads them deeper into the station, Bai Liu notes something—Fang Xiaoxiao assumes they’re the long-awaited relief crew. Instead of correcting him, Bai Liu plays along.

"You’re stranded here. Why didn’t you try contacting the outside world?" he asks.

Fang Xiaoxiao's bitter smile returns. "We tried. For a year and a half, we tried everything—radio, satellite phones, internet. But the signals never got through. The outside receiving stations stopped responding completely. We've been waiting... and waiting… and nothing."

His voice turns distant. "We even attempted to fly out ourselves,

sending biplanes and helicopters. But as soon as they left Antarctica's range, the radar jammed. The magnetic field interference made navigation impossible. Every aircraft crashed on the glaciers."

Fang Xiaoxiao's hands clench. His gaze is unfocused. "If you hadn't arrived, I don't think we'd ever reintegrate into society. Another polar night and we'd all go insane..."

Mu Sicheng, watching Fang Xiaoxiao's haunted expression, leans in to whisper in Bai Liu's ear. "This NPC's got it rough… He doesn't even know the whole world's frozen over. He thinks the receiving station just stopped working, but… let's be real, those people are probably long dead."

Bai Liu says nothing, merely observing. He has no intention of telling this fragile NPC that the "outside world" he's waiting for has long since turned into an endless, frozen wasteland.

His eyes flick to Fang Xiaoxiao's open jacket pocket—two small vials of medication. Bai Liu recognizes them immediately. Antipsychotics. The same drugs Muke mentioned. Medications for severe mania and depression.

"How did you stretch one year's worth of supplies into two and a half?" Bai Liu asks, his voice light, but laced with curiosity.

Fang Xiaoxiao hesitates, rubbing his temple. "Solar reserves are just enough if we conserve energy. Fuel was the real issue..."

He exhales shakily. "I know the Antarctic Convention forbids harming wildlife, but… the krill population exploded last year. The Ross Sea turned orange in October from their sheer numbers."

"The penguins, seals, whales—everything that feeds on krill—reproduced at unnatural rates. Their populations doubled within a year. And… they're all rich in oil."

Fang Xiaoxiao swallows hard. His face twists in something between guilt and justification. "You know, the early Antarctic explorers… when they ran out of food, they hunted penguins and seals to survive..."

Mu Sicheng, unimpressed, claps him on the shoulder. "You had to survive. Eating animals when there's no food is normal."

But the moment the word food leaves his mouth, Fang Xiaoxiao

visibly flinches. His expression turns pallid, his body going rigid.

Bai Liu, watching closely, speaks flatly. "You didn't eat them, did you?"

Fang Xiaoxiao's breath catches.

Bai Liu continues, tone even. "In early Antarctic expeditions, seals and penguins weren't primarily food sources. Their bodies were burned as fuel." His eyes bore into Fang Xiaoxiao. "You weren't hunting for sustenance. You were harvesting oil to keep the observatory running, weren't you?"

A strangled noise escapes Fang Xiaoxiao's throat. He bites his lower lip. "The oil… can't be used directly, but with modifications, it can be burned for electricity..."

His voice cracks. "We didn't have a choice."

"Yet, food and fuel don't seem to be in short supply anymore." Bai Liu remarks.

Fang Xiaoxiao's eyes flicker with desperation. He steps forward suddenly, gripping Bai Liu's wrist tightly. "We're running out of psychiatric meds. Everyone here has T3 syndrome. They're losing their grip on reality. They can't control themselves. If we don't get more medicine—"

His grip trembles.

Bai Liu stays perfectly still. His voice remains cold. "So if you didn't eat the seals and penguins… where does your food come from?"

Fang Xiaoxiao freezes. The color drains from his face. His hands snap back as if burned. His breath turns shallow.

Bai Liu watches him carefully. "Let me guess—your food is stored outside. Frozen in the ice crevasses."

Fang Xiaoxiao's pupils shrink.

"After experimenting on the bio-monsters that evolved from humans, you discarded the failed ones. But with no food left, you decided to make use of them. You repurposed your waste. Kept them preserved in the natural freezer outside."

A pause. Then, softly—

"Your food is human, isn’t it?"

Fang Xiaoxiao's entire body convulses. He stumbles back, eyes wild, and lets out a raw, broken scream.

"THEY'RE NOT HUMAN!" he shrieks, voice cracking with hysteria. "They're monsters! They're animals! THEY'RE NOT PEOPLE!!!"

Chapter End Notes

> Polar T3 syndrome is a condition found in polar explorers, caused by a decrease in levels of the thyroid hormone T3. Its effects include forgetfulness, cognitive impairment, and mood disturbances. It can exhibit itself in a fugue state known as the Antarctic stare.
> Dissociative fugue, referred to as a fugue state or psychogenic fugue, is a rare psychiatric condition characterized by reversible amnesia regarding one’s identity, often accompanied by unexpected travel or wandering. In some cases, individuals may assume a new identity and be unable to recall personal information from before the onset of symptoms.

The Ice Age

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After screaming, Fang Xiaoxiao seemed to realize he had lost control. He took two unsteady steps back, slumped against the wall, and shoved a handful of pills into his mouth, swallowing them mechanically.

A few moments later, his breathing steadied, but his body remained tense. Hot tears slipped down his numb, cold face as he muttered, "They're not human. They're really not. I didn't eat them..."

His shoulders trembled as he buried his face in his knees, muffling his choked sobs.

"Sorry... sorry..."

Bai Liu crouched down and held out a soft cloth napkin.

Fang Xiaoxiao took it without a word and wiped his face.

Bai Liu's voice softened. "What kind of monsters are they?"

Fang Xiaoxiao gripped the wall and pulled himself to his feet, his voice hoarse. "...Highly intelligent monsters."

"When they first appeared, we were terrified. They looked exactly like the dead members of the observatory crew. We thought they were ghosts. But later, we discovered they were biochemicals—anomalies from the Edmond Observatory."

"They observe their surroundings and mimic the most adaptable species. At first, they just watched us, learning how we survived. Then, they must have realized how much we mourned our lost team members... so they took on their appearances, thinking it would help them blend in."

His breath hitched. "But that only terrified the sentries. They shot them on sight, dragged the bodies back to base, and started researching them."

"During the study... they molted a second time. And this time, they became even more human-like."

"They were incredible learners. By listening to us and watching our habits, they perfected their imitation. After that second molt, they spoke like us, moved like us... aside from a few missing memories, it was as if the dead had come back to life." His voice trembled. "It was horrifying. So we killed them again. This time with knives."

Fang Xiaoxiao's eyelashes fluttered. Teardrops fell onto the scarf clenched in his hands.

"No matter how we killed them... their cells were too active. As long as one survived, it would differentiate on its own—forming embryonic stem cells, then growing into another human."

His voice dropped to a whisper. "...The only way to stop them was to burn their bodies first, to char the epidermis and halt cell regeneration. Then we had to soak them in strong acid or alkaline chemicals to destroy them completely. But the observatory didn't have enough fuel. Or chemicals. Or options."

"At first, we had no way to deal with them properly. Even knowing how dangerous they were, we could only cut them open and freeze them in the ice chasms to keep them from regenerating. But soon... very soon..."

Fang Xiaoxiao's voice caught. His throat moved, but no sound came out—only silent tears.

Bai Liu finished for him, his tone unnervingly calm.

"But soon, you realized that fire and acid—used to neutralize them—are the same processes humans use to cook and digest food."

He tilted his head slightly.

"And it just so happened that you were starving."

His words lingered in the air, quiet but merciless.

"Consuming them would both dispose of the bodies and keep you alive. Why not kill two birds with one stone?"

Fang Xiaoxiao's hollow eyes flickered. His chest rose and fell sharply. Then, as if the weight of those words had physically struck him, he staggered back, turned away, and clamped a trembling hand over his mouth.

"I—I'm not feeling well," he choked out. "You should rest first."

Without waiting for a response, he fled.

Bai Liu watched him go, then turned and stepped into the cabin. Mu Sicheng and Tang Erda followed in silence.

Tang Erda locked the door and pressed his ear against it, listening for a long moment before turning to Bai Liu. "The soundproofing is good. You can't hear footsteps even at close range. Say whatever you need to."

Mu Sicheng, still reeling from what he had just heard from Fang Xiaoxiao and Bai Liu, sat stiffly on the edge of the bed. A chill crept down his spine as he turned to Bai Liu.

"What the hell is going on? Are you saying the people at the observatory ate the monsters?"

"Not necessarily," Bai Liu said, lounging lazily against the bed, resting his chin on his hand. "The most likely scenario is what I said earlier—either there are real humans here, or all of them are anthropomorphic monsters trying to deceive us."

Mu Sicheng frowned. "That doesn’t make sense. If they’re monsters, why go through all this trouble to deceive us? What’s the point? If they wanted to kill us, they could just attack. You heard what Fang Xiaoxiao said—these things are practically immortal. They could fight us head-on!"

"Why would they voluntarily tell us their own weaknesses?"

Tang Erda nodded. "I just updated my monster book with the weak points, and what Fang Xiaoxiao said checks out. Blazing fire combined with chemical corrosion is their confirmed weakness."

Bai Liu smiled and suddenly changed the topic. "Have you heard of the Turing Test?"

Both Mu Sicheng and Tang Erda nodded.

Mu Sicheng hesitated. "What does that have to do with this? Isn’t the Turing Test used to determine if an AI has human intelligence?"

"There are parallels," Bai Liu said smoothly. "AI and the monsters here are both artificial beings. If we compare these creatures to AI, how do

you think they would test whether they truly possess human intelligence?" He turned his gaze to Mu Sicheng. "Remember the famous hypothesis from the Turing Test?"

Mu Sicheng's breath hitched as realization dawned on him.

"—If an AI truly has human intelligence, wouldn't it try to deceive humans in order to pass the test?"

Bai Liu's voice remained calm. "Now, assume that the people here are actually monsters—monsters that have worked relentlessly to imitate humans. If they've developed intelligence on par with the scientific crew, wouldn't it be entirely possible that they would conduct their own Turing Test? To see if their performance is convincing enough, if they can truly integrate among us?"

His gaze darkened. "And we, a group of outsiders, are the perfect test subjects to determine whether their deception is successful. Everything [Fang Xiaoxiao] just told us could simply be a simulation —something they crafted based on their knowledge of human behavior, designed to make us believe they are human."

A heavy silence filled the room. Tang Erda said nothing. Mu Sicheng curled his fingers into his palm, a cold sweat creeping down his back.

"Of course," Bai Liu continued, his tone light, "this is just my theory. It's entirely possible that the people here are human and I'm just being paranoid."

Tang Erda's expression remained unreadable as he asked, "Then how do you plan to verify your theory?"

Bai Liu spread his hands and smiled.

"Simple. Tonight, when they're all asleep, we go to the ice chasm and see if the [bodies] inside can still come back to life."

Midnight.
In February, the Antarctic sun lingers long into the night. By the time darkness finally falls, it's already early morning. Inside the observatory, most of the personnel are asleep, leaving only two sentries posted at the entrance. But avoiding them is simple enough—no one expects anyone to willingly go outside in Antarctica.

The observatory maintains strict entry and exit protocols, but movement within the station itself is more lenient. After all, in a place like this, who in their right mind would risk stepping into the frozen wasteland voluntarily?

Bai Liu and his group slipped out through the back door of the first-floor kitchen, where the station's garbage was disposed of. From there, they circled around to the helicopter landing site, gathering the drilling equipment stored inside.

Thanks to the relentless Antarctic winds, which reduced visibility to no more than thirty meters, they moved unseen. Snow and darkness swallowed them whole, their figures blurred in the storm as they pulled the heavy equipment behind them.

Under Tang Erda's leadership, they hauled several hundred kilograms of gear on sleds to a location they had previously scouted—more than ten kilometers away from the station.

By the time they arrived, Mu Sicheng was drenched in sweat, panting hard. Bai Liu, as usual, seemed unaffected, mostly because Tang Erda had carried the brunt of the load himself.

Sweat glistened on Tang Erda's skin, running from his face to his collarbone. His taut, muscular frame flexed under the strain, but his breathing remained controlled, only slightly heavier.

Mu Sicheng, on the other hand, was gasping like a donkey. His eyes were glazed over as he stared at Tang Erda in disbelief.

Shit! What the hell is Tang Erda? A sled dog? How is he pulling this much weight like it's nothing?!

Oblivious to Mu Sicheng's envious glare, Tang Erda set down the sled and immediately got to work. Following Bai Liu's instructions, he positioned the drill over the area where they had previously detected a figure beneath the ice.

Layer by layer, heat and pressure melted through the frozen surface. As they neared their target depth, Bai Liu raised a hand, signaling Tang Erda to stop. Tang Erda shut off the drill and carefully extracted the ice core.

Inside the two-meter-long, one-meter-thick prism of ice was a small, narrow figure. Limbless.

It was exactly why Bai Liu had chosen this site.

The human trapped in the ice had a frozen expression of terror, as if they had died mid-scream. Their limbs had been severed with clinical precision—no signs of decay, no jagged edges—just clean, surgical cuts, as if made by an impossibly sharp blade.

Bai Liu methodically poured fuel and hot water over the ice core, watching as the solid mass began to thaw.

Tang Erda, observing the rate of melting, frowned. "This isn't natural ice. It’s filled snow," he concluded. "Real ice wouldn’t melt this fast or this cleanly."

Before long, the ice had fully dissolved, leaving the corpse lying motionless on the frozen ground.

Mu Sicheng, already chilled to his core, instinctively took a step back.

Then, before their eyes, the body began to change.

From the cleanly severed stumps, flesh started sprouting—weak, trembling at first, then writhing like worms. The grotesque growth twisted and coiled, regenerating lost limbs in mere moments.

Slowly, the figure rose to its knees.

It was no longer a question.

This thing they had unearthed—it was a monster.

Tang Erda reacted instantly. Before anyone could blink, he had kicked the creature back and pressed the muzzle of his gun against its throat. His expression was cold, merciless, ready to fire.

Bai Liu stopped him just in time, stepping between them. "Wait."

Tang Erda’s jaw tightened, but after a moment, he lowered his weapon slightly.

The creature trembled. Then, in a broken, hoarse voice, it spoke.

"I... I am the real Fang Xiaoxiao."

Tears spilled from his eyes the moment he uttered the words. He collapsed into a kowtow before Bai Liu, his voice cracking.

"The real personnel of the Tarzan Observatory—they're all buried down there. Please save them!"

Bai Liu helped him up, his voice calm, almost soothing. "We will. But first, tell us what happened."

Fang Xiaoxiao shivered violently as Bai Liu guided him to sit on the sled.

"You've seen the monsters in the observatory, haven't you?" His voice was hollow.

Mu Sicheng, frowning, boiled a cup of hot water and handed it to him. Fang Xiaoxiao hesitated before shaking his head with a bitter smile.

"Thank you, but… I don't need warmth anymore." His fingers twitched as he stared at the steaming cup. "I still have a human conditioned response to cold, so I shiver… but my body doesn't actually need heat."

Bai Liu placed the cup firmly in Fang Xiaoxiao's lap.

"If you still have a human reflex to the cold," Bai Liu said softly, "then you're still a person who needs warmth. That means you do need this. So take it."

For reasons even he couldn't understand, Fang Xiaoxiao's shoulders trembled. A moment later, silent tears streamed down his face.

Tears welled in Fang Xiaoxiao's eyes as he looked at Bai Liu. Finally, he took the cup of hot water, his voice choking with emotion. "Thank you, comrade… for reminding me that I'm still human."

He took a few sips, steadying himself before speaking.

"A year and a half ago, in August, we received instructions to store a highly dangerous biochemical corpse here in Antarctica. At first, the head of Taishan Station refused—according to the Antarctic Treaty, no contaminated research material should be brought here."

"But after extensive discussions, the station chief finally agreed. We never knew what was said in those negotiations, but when he returned, he was deeply troubled. He told us… that the last untainted land on Earth would no longer remain clean."

"To protect the outside world, to preserve a civilization driven by

endless desire, even this final pure land was to be defiled."

Fang Xiaoxiao exhaled deeply. Bai Liu noticed something unsettling—there was no condensation in his breath.

"We were supposed to retrieve a plane carrying the remains, but something went wrong. While flying over the Ross Sea, it crashed—not near our observatory, but by Archibald Station, on the southern coast of Ross Island. That's where Country A's research base is."

"We launched an immediate search, but three of the cargo containers were missing. All five escorts on the plane were dead. We repeatedly tried to contact Archibald Station, pleading for the return of the crates. That night, we even approached their station chief directly."

"But soon after, they stopped answering our calls. They shut their doors, refused our visits. Then, in the dead of night, we spotted a helicopter flying from Archibald Station to Edmond Station, transporting something in secrecy. We strongly suspected it was the missing cargo."

Fang Xiaoxiao's fingers clenched around his cup, his teeth chattering slightly.

"Edmond Station is another research base of theirs, located near the South Pole. It's heavily guarded, nearly inaccessible, and equipped with military-grade security. They ignored all our calls, forcing us to communicate through fax instead."

"The head of Edmond Station is Professor Edmond Allen. He's been in Antarctica for over 30 years—an honorable man, always willing to share his research with us. The observatory was even named after him." Fang Xiaoxiao's voice faltered, his expression twisting in pain.

"Eventually, after much persuasion, Professor Edmond relented. He wanted to smuggle the crates back to us, take all the blame himself."

Tears slipped down Fang Xiaoxiao's face. "But the politicians and military of Country A wouldn't allow it. When they discovered his intentions, they persecuted him—subjected him to psychological torment, medical experiments, and mind-altering drugs. They drove him insane…"

His voice broke. The formal "Professor" became the more intimate "Teacher."

“They mutilated a great man! They used the corpses to conduct biological experiments on him!”

“They forced him onto this twisted path…”

“With those remains, Teacher began breeding new lifeforms—hybrids of human tissue and low-temperature-adapted Antarctic creatures. Predators, engineered for survival in these extreme conditions. And all those who tormented him… were devoured.”

Fang Xiaoxiao trembled violently, covering his head with his hands, his voice slipping into a haunted whisper.

“But then… it spiraled out of control.”

“These creatures… they became intelligent. Teacher raised them, so they absorbed his curiosity, his drive for scientific discovery. They began imitating human behavior.”

“They started experimenting—on us.”

Fang Xiaoxiao let out a bitter, almost hysterical laugh. “They dissected us. Dismembered us. Preserved us like biological specimens, sorted us by gender, geography, and function. But the station wasn’t stocked with enough food to last the winter, and soon, we were all starving.”

“They didn’t want us to die of simple malnutrition, so they forced us to eat. Seals, penguins… and their own flesh.”

“Their flesh fused with ours. It was like grafting new branches onto a tree—foreign parts embedding themselves into our bodies in grotesque ways. Eventually, we transformed. We became just like them. Impervious to the cold. Stronger. Less… human.”

A tear slid down Fang Xiaoxiao’s face, his expression dazed.

“But once they had fully unraveled the secrets of our flesh, we were no longer useful. The failures, the rejected experiments, were sealed beneath the ice. And then… they moved on to the next phase.”

“They wanted to study human cognition. Communication. Psychological manipulation.”

“They needed fresh subjects. But no new humans had come to Antarctica for a long time.”

“So… they simulated human survival scenarios. They recreated

conflicts. They staged betrayals. And then, they would 'kill' each other, freezing the bodies of the fallen."

Fang Xiaoxiao's lips curled into a chilling, lifeless smile. "Of course… those 'bodies' weren't actually dead. They were just playing their parts, pretending to be victims of some desperate struggle. Frozen beside us, waiting."

Silence fell.

Bai Liu patted Fang Xiaoxiao's shoulder. "Rest. We'll get everyone out of Taishan Station." He turned back to his equipment, resuming the drilling.

Tang Erda remained behind with Fang Xiaoxiao.

Mu Sicheng, still rattled, edged closer to Bai Liu. "Shit… you were right. The monsters at the observatory are really running a Turing test! The real station members are trapped under the ice!"

Bai Liu adjusted the instrument, his expression unreadable. "How do you know that these 'people' in the ice aren't just another stage of the test? A scenario these creatures constructed to manipulate us?"

Mu Sicheng's breath hitched. "Wait… you're saying this Fang Xiaoxiao could be one of them? That he's testing us?!"

Bai Liu's gaze darkened. "Not necessarily. He could be human."

"But who said a Turing test only has one variable? Social experiments like these are usually conducted across an entire system."

His eyes swept over the frozen wasteland. "For all we know, this entire Antarctic region is part of their experiment."

Mu Sicheng's blood ran cold. "You mean… we're the test subjects?"

Bai Liu smirked. "Think of it like this: if you wanted to study an alien monkey's intelligence, you wouldn't just observe it in isolation. You'd place it in a controlled environment—one filled with both real and artificial monkeys. Then, you'd analyze how it interacts. Who does it trust? Who does it follow?"

His eyes flicked to Fang Xiaoxiao. "For example… what happens if you cut off the alien monkey's limbs? Does it seek help?"

Mu Sicheng's skin crawled. Without thinking, he removed his monkey-

shaped headphones.

Bai Liu shrugged. “That’s how humans study other species.”

Chapter End Notes

The psychological warfare is making my head hurt.

The Ice Age

Over by the sled, Tang Erda was speaking with Fang Xiaoxiao.

As the former head of the Heresy Bureau, Tang Erda had a natural wariness of suspicious NPCs like Fang Xiaoxiao—or monsters, for that matter. His tone was sharp, interrogative.

"How did you know we went to the observatory and saw another Fang Xiaoxiao?" Tang Erda asked coldly. "You seem awfully good at being dug up."

Fang Xiaoxiao didn't appear surprised by the interrogation. Instead, he let out a bitter smile. "Because this isn't the first time I've been unearthed. These monsters don’t just test alien humans—they also test how we react to others of our own kind."

"In the early days, when we were first thrown into the ice chasm, the snow hadn't yet buried us."

"They were running an experiment on human survival in extreme conditions with limited resources. They told us that within three days, they would begin gradually filling the chasm with snow. Anyone who managed to fight for resources and escape in that time would be released. Those who couldn’t… would be frozen here forever."

As he spoke, Fang Xiaoxiao closed his eyes, his breath shuddering. Tears slid down his face.

"In an attempt to mislead the monsters, to make them believe that humans naturally turned on one another and were doomed to extinction, we staged a brutal battle for resources, pretending to kill each other."

His hands trembled as he raised his cup and took a sip of hot water. Tang Erda noticed the dried blood stains between his teeth—jagged remnants of something far more sinister than mere survival.

"We... gathered what little we had and gave it to the youngest members of our team, letting them escape. Three days later, the snow buried the rest of us alive."

His face twisted suddenly, his voice breaking into a hoarse, wounded roar.

"We thought that was the end! That the experiment was over!" He sucked in a sharp breath, shaking. "But we didn't expect them to have marked the ones who escaped. They had been monitoring them all along. And when those kids couldn't control their emotions and turned back to save us, the monsters found a new research angle."

"They manipulated them... led them to dig up another ice chasm."

Fang Xiaoxiao shuddered violently.

"They set up a controlled experiment. Two monsters took on the appearances of the young crew members who had escaped and began digging us out. Meanwhile, the real young crew members were tricked into digging out another ice chasm—one filled with creatures that had taken on our forms."

"Their goal was simple: to determine whether human survivors were more likely to believe the 'defeated' people they saved were real humans, or whether the 'defeated' were more likely to trust the 'victors' who rescued them."

Tang Erda hesitated. Seeing Fang Xiaoxiao's vacant expression, he softened his voice.

"...And what was the result?"

Fang Xiaoxiao didn't answer right away. When he finally spoke, his tone was eerily detached, his lips curled into an ugly, rigid smile. Tears streamed silently from his empty eyes.

"We, the ones who were rescued, identified the [victors] who saved us. But the children... they didn't recognize the [losers] they had dug out."

"They lived with the monsters they saved for two months. Two of them even… had intimate relationships with them." His breath hitched, voice cracking. "Then, one day, the monsters revealed the truth."

"The kids went mad. They doused themselves in fuel, set themselves on fire… and then threw themselves into acid to end it."

His body trembled. "And I know—one of the monsters that deceived them… took on my face."

For a long moment, Tang Erda said nothing. Then, his voice was quiet,

measured.

"How can you be sure that we—the ones who dug you up—aren't monsters?"

Fang Xiaoxiao's gaze flickered, dull and empty. After a long silence, he murmured, "Because these creatures can only mimic humans they've already seen. They can't generate completely new ones. I've never seen you before in Antarctica."

"And... they've already tested this scenario. They won't repeat it. If they were the ones digging us out, they wouldn't bother taking human form anymore. They'd just come as they are."

Not far away, Bai Liu, who had been working on excavation, waved his hand, signaling for Tang Erda to come over.

Tang Erda lingered for a moment, staring at the motionless figure sitting on the sled. Even though he knew this graduate student was just an NPC, something in him hesitated.

Finally, with a reluctant sigh, he reached out and patted Fang Xiaoxiao's shoulder.

"Rest here. And don't wander off."

With that, he turned and jogged over to Bai Liu, ready to report everything he had just heard.

Mu Sicheng couldn't stop the goosebumps from rising on his skin and rubbed his arms vigorously.

Bai Liu paused for a moment, then smiled in a way that sent chills down Mu Sicheng's spine. "Looks like this is a bit more complicated and interesting than we thought. I think I know what Mr. Edmond is up to, but I'll need to check with Muke to see if he's found anything, like the old professor's diary, to back up my suspicions."

Mu Sicheng looked confused. "So... are we still digging?"

"Dig," Bai Liu ordered flatly, a faint smile on his lips. "Dig it all up and bring it back to Tarzan Station. We'll face it together and see who the real monster is."

Mu Sicheng: "!!!"

Edmond Observatory

Muke and Liu Jiayi went through almost every book and piece of material in the Observatory, carefully sorting them by name. Liu Jiayi handled the lighter reading, while Muke focused on the specialized texts, which he would then pass on to Liu Jiayi for consolidation and translation.

Fortunately, the graduate students lived at the Edmond Observatory, and there were numerous primers in the dormitories. This made it slightly easier for Muke to navigate the experiment data and use the available toolkit for research.

"Mostly, it's books on meteorology and biology, along with quite a few on sociology," Muke said, rummaging through the bookshelves he had dragged out of Edmond's cabin. He skimmed through the books quickly, mainly looking for annotations.

He suddenly paused, brows furrowing as he thought for a moment, then spoke again. "It seems Professor Edmond is quite critical of the politics and authorities in Country A. He wrote some rather damning remarks in their book on recent history, praising the emancipation of human rights."

Liu Jiayi leaned over to read aloud: "—The parallel exploitation of labor is the primary human right of capital. (Note 1)."

Muke flipped through the pages again. "Here it is, right next to an account of the Bachata War, which Country A waged based on another side's private development of biological and chemical weapons."

Liu Jiayi read slowly, word by word: "—Order without freedom, and freedom without order, are equally destructive. (Note 2)."

Muke continued searching throughout the Observatory and eventually found a criminal records file in the archives. Inside was a private fax correspondence between Edmond and the Tarzan Observatory, sealed with a yellow "forbidden" stamp reading: [Copy of Edmond's Evidence of Treason].

Muke and Liu Jiayi exchanged glances and, without hesitation, tore open the envelope.

The fax records were dated and straightforward.

1 October
"You were right, my friend. I've tested these corpses, and it's true—they cannot be used in any scientific research. They are ethically

wrong, spiritually contaminated, and go against my fundamental ethical code as a human scientist.
I understand why it was sealed here. It really shouldn't be out there, and I'll try to convince the 'robbers' who took your boxes to return them to you intact (well, maybe not intact).
You've done something dangerous and great. In a hundred years, humanity should honor you with a Jie Fang tablet! (Wasn't your warrior's honor roll called the Jie Fang monument last time we spoke?)
Congratulations on your founding!"

7 October
"I'm sorry, but I may not be able to return your boxes for a while.
It's a bit strange to say this, but this is the first time I've been forced to implement my own research on myself.
Now, it feels like I've lost all sense of taste or warmth. I find myself stumbling and falling over for no reason—my cerebellum has been modified. (Though, before the modification, I was always clumsy as an old man.) Other than that, it's fine. It feels like I'm turning into a small warm whale. Maybe I should go to the sea and have a 'face-to-face kiss' with a real one?
After all, I'm no longer afraid of the cold, and I'm no longer human. Being a whale in the deep sea might not be such a bad option.
I rather enjoy how they rub against the rocks while molting. It's just like when I, as an old man, can't reach my back and rub against the wardrobe.
Don't worry about the box. They still need me for research, and I'll find a way to return it to you."

17 October
"Oh my God, am I scaring you guys?
The boy named Xiaoxiao Fang, who I remembered from his meteorology studies (I even supervised his thesis), was crying his eyes out as he hugged my broken leg.
I have to say, it was a really bad paper—the images didn't even have units in many places, and the formatting for citations was a mess. I don't know how this kid got into grad school and ended up in Antarctica (no offense to his supervisor).
They dragged me through the snow with a snowmobile, chained to my neck, as punishment for another failed attempt to steal the box—or perhaps just as another test of my ability to withstand their experiments. After all, I'm their most successful transformation and a criminal; I'm now their most exciting subject for experimentation. It's a tradition in our country.
Though my limbs ended up rolling off like a rusty pencil, it was

painless. The cold and stiffness made it bearable enough to stop the boy from crying.
The look on his face as he howled while chasing my scattered limbs really made me sad. He called me ‘teacher,’ and God, that was the happiest thing I’d heard in a month.
It’s been so long since anyone called me teacher after I was branded a criminal.
Don’t worry about me. I’ll figure out what to do with the box. The fax contact is still discreet, and the paper material makes them think I won’t be so bold. I’ll let you know if there’s any progress."

17 December

"It seems they've discovered that I've been secretly faxing you, so I had to suspend it for the last two months.
Perhaps I was too arrogant and underestimated the intelligence of this group. The fax, indeed, wasn’t safe.
This may be the last time I maintain the will to send you a fax, my friends. So, please allow this old soul to ramble on about my life. I hope you won't grow tired of me, as I truly can't find anyone else to talk to.
I came to Antarctica thirty-three years ago, before the place was called Edmond Observatory. I don’t remember what it was called back then, but it wasn’t as well-known as it is now.
The man who put me on the icebreaker Polaris was a veteran of the Peninsular War (though he wasn’t really old at that time, he looked ancient to me, and I always teased him about it). He was one of the few friends I had.
After all, a nerd like me couldn't really find anyone else willing to talk to me in those adventurous gold rush days.
Fifteen years after I arrived in Antarctica, he left me forever, a victim of the disabilities and hardships caused by the war. Before he died, he returned every penny of the money I sent him each year to live on (he insisted it was a loan).
The doctor told me he had voluntarily given up treatment because, after the war, he was constantly tormented by pain and haunted by memories of bloodshed, which is common for many soldiers.
But I know it wasn’t just that. My friend died because of another war.
The only reason he entered the war was to end it.
He had been taught, deceived, and used by public opinion and politics. He went to war believing it was just, thinking that every knife he stabbed and every shot he fired was to save more innocent people held hostage and suffering because of the war.
But he eventually realized that the people he had killed were as innocent as he was. The pain was unbearable. The only thing that kept

him going was the slogan of the time—“Let this be the last war we experience. Let us end this chaotic and unjust world.”
He believed that would be the end, but wars continued, and it seemed like the world he hoped for would never come.
It wasn’t until the war fifteen years ago—a brutal act of aggression initiated by a country he had trusted—that he was utterly destroyed. He knew then that he had been doing something unjust all along.
It was disgusting, filthy—the very thing he had always despised.
He realized that he had become nothing more than a politician’s whitewashed executioner, and he couldn’t live with that. So, he told me he couldn’t go on any longer.
I didn’t know how to respond. I had always been the one to read, never the one to act. The only brave thing I had ever done in my life was to run away from everything and come to Antarctica.
Many people in Antarctica protested against the war in the bitter cold (Note 3). I stood among the crowd, my hands trembling as I held a "No War" sign, staring up at the approaching polar night, the cold snow almost burying me.
All we could do was protest. Of course, it didn’t help in the end.
As I read through his last letter, I came across what he wrote to me: “It must be nice in Antarctica, although it's bitterly cold and never sunny, there must be no war there. It is a pure land. I hope you will not bring your memories of me, an ugly war criminal, to this pure land to pollute it.”
But it wasn’t really like that. Antarctica was as cold as he thought, but not as pure as he imagined.
Everyone who comes to this pristine land has grand ideals of saving humanity and alleviating the global crisis.
We’ve carefully recorded data, tagged whale skins, and marked penguin anklets, only to watch as their populations have dwindled to less than half of what they once were. We've observed a thousand feet of glacier melting into the sea in an hour and spoken at every meeting, raising alarms like a scheduled alarm clock: Harsh climate, global warming, human crisis.
But they always listen carelessly, half-asleep, then go on to raise flags in righteous pride, while continuing to ambitiously plot wars that will pollute on a massive scale.
Inside and outside, it’s never about right or wrong—only about their tenure and personal interests.
I can guarantee that none of them could even name the rise in global temperatures from last year.
You, my friend, are probably tired of reading and think I’m a long-winded old man. But please, allow me to continue, weary as I am.
I was born in a country known for its individual freedom and

democracy, where everyone's freedom of action was supposedly respected.
Making sacrifices for the group is what individual heroes do; most people just spend their lives chasing personal self-interest.
But, my friend, I know, as well as you do, that humanity continues as a species, as a group. No species can pursue freedom in isolation, and freedom means nothing when the group doesn't exist.
We are the only "heroes" who can't.
The values we seek are not recognized by society, much like the lone whale that strays from the herd. It sees an impending volcanic eruption, a tsunami, but can only warn the others with a strange frequency that they don't understand and don't care to heed.
They are chasing after fish, a clump of krill, while volcanoes and tsunamis don't matter to them. That's for the heroes to worry about.
It feels like I'm living in Sarto (Note 4), a land of absurdity, where entertainment leads to death, narrow-mindedness thrives, and disintegration is inevitable.
The Observatory's funding faced the possibility of another budget cut last year, simply because our current leaders refuse to believe in global warming and the greenhouse effect."

....

"Many times, I've found myself in a trance, questioning whether what I'm doing is some grand act of saving humanity or just another piece in the political game—just like my friend.
I envy you, my friends. You are not alone in this fight. Your community understands the responsibility you've taken on and has not hesitated to share it with you.
You are not heroes, but vanguards.
Every young man at Tarzan Station who sought my guidance had a bright, shining vision of their country, and I envied them for it. How beautiful that vision was. The snow in Antarctica wasn't even as pure as that. It reminded me of my friend, the one who sent me aboard after watching Titanic. He was smiling and waving, yelling, "Don't hit the iceberg! Watch out for my Ruth on the boat!" His eyes were just as bright.
Species eventually go extinct, and humans, too, will perish. My friend, I am certain that we both know, beyond any doubt, that this is the fate of all living things, just as all humans will eventually die.
But it is up to us to decide when, where, and how we will meet our end.
I would like to envision a future where we die together, frozen in each other's arms in the cold, or where the last two people on Earth drive spears into each other's hearts in a desolate wasteland, fighting over

their prey.
Forgive me, my friends, for choosing you in my despair, for doing to you what the arrogant God has done to mankind.
The body holds energy capable of turning the world upside down. It's as though it was created for my desires, and when broken down into particles, it can have an unprecedented impact on the climate and biological systems. Rather than let it fall into the hands of others, I will write the endgame myself.
For the first time, I've used my knowledge in such a sinister way—to turn the globe cold and extinguish the human race.
I might truly be mad.
Still, I've left a margin for my madness by researching creatures capable of adapting to this environment. I selected you, added your genes to theirs, and allowed them to test you to see if you could be the ones to carry on the Starfire.
Feel free to resent me, my friends. I took up my rifle as somberly as if I were raising a glass of vodka, and I drove those paralyzed by my commands into the ice and snow, ordering them not to take any clothing or food with them.
It's ironic, but despite all the inhumane torture I've endured, my request for the freedom to defend myself with a gun was respected. In the eyes of the guards, asking for a gun wasn't a big deal. They didn't think I, a weak scientist, would have the courage to resist, so they granted me the right to defend myself.
This is perhaps the only good thing freedom has granted me, though it has broken the rules of Antarctica.
I held my gun, and the creatures I had taught crouched next to me in the snow, silently waiting with me for these humans to succumb to the cold, as I knew they would.
Now, I return to my room to write this fax to you, to place the final nail in the coffin of this dreadful plan I've been plotting since August 10.
Soon, the creatures will reach your territory…"

(Addendum: I made sauerkraut the way you taught me, but it failed. God, your cooking is harder than a biochemistry experiment! I was hoping to prepare a strategic winter reserve for you, but I wouldn't recommend taking the two vats of sauerkraut for safety reasons.)

Your friend,
Edmond

The Ice Age

After reading all the faxes and lab reports, Muke's expression grew increasingly serious. He turned to Liu Jiayi and asked, "Is it possible they can't be reached by satellite phone?"

"I couldn't get in touch with them," Liu Jiayi replied, her expression grim but calm. "With Mu Sicheng and Tang Erda with him, it won't be easy for Bai Liu to encounter those monsters. You stay here and keep watch, I'll go outside to deal with the monster in the basement."

The lab report indicated that this monster couldn't be killed with a gun, so the one in the basement must still be alive.

Bai Liu had left a barrel of fuel by the basement, and she had her own corrosive poison. She wondered if combining the two would do the trick.

Muke nodded, "Once we deal with it, we head for Tarzan Station. They need to be informed."

As the door opened, three weathered men hurried in from outside. Mu Sicheng exhaled heavily, stamping his feet to shake off the cold. Tang Erda removed his gun and placed it by the door, and Bai Liu walked in front, snowflakes clinging to his eyelashes, his gaze scanning the room.

"We're back," Bai Liu said.

Without hesitation, Muke raised his gun, and Liu Jiayi brandished her poison, eyeing the sudden return of their teammates with suspicion. They stepped back, maintaining some distance as they whispered, "What are you doing back here?"

Bai Liu shifted slightly to make room for a ragged group of Tarzan Station members behind him—freshly dug out from an ice crevice.

The group had been walking through the snow for so long, uncovered and shivering, that they should have frozen to death. Yet, they were only blue in color, their vital signs stable but their faces dull and lifeless, as if they had endured some unspeakable ordeal, their souls seemingly drained.

"We found this group of Tarzan Station crew members buried in the ice crevice," Bai Liu explained. "We were planning to take them

straight to Tarzan Station to confront the crew, but we found that their mental states were in question. They couldn't communicate properly. One of them was slightly more mentally sound—this one, Fang Xiaoxiao."

A man stepped forward from behind Bai Liu, offering a strained smile. "Hello, I'm Fang Xiaoxiao."

"He told me these team members needed psychiatric medication, so he took them back first to retrieve it," Bai Liu continued, glancing at Muke. "That's why we're here."

Muke's blackened gun was pointed directly at Bai Liu, his voice cold. "I don't believe you. Pull up your system panel and show me."

"You can't see my system panel," Bai Liu replied calmly. "That was a clever verbal trap, though."

Due to the league format in use, players' system panels were not only missing the shop function, but they were also kept secret from each other. This meant that even if one player displayed their system panel, the other could not see it.

Muke gave Liu Jiayi a suspicious look, but at her subtle gesture, he lowered the gun, though he kept his fingers near the handle, ready to raise it at a moment's notice.

They stepped aside, and Liu Jiayi tucked her poison away, her voice soft. "Come in, first."

The Other End

Bai Liu led the ragged crew, recently dug out of the ice crevasse, toward Tarzan Station.

Less than five hundred meters away, they spotted another helicopter parked in the hangar beside their own. Its markings matched theirs exactly.

"It's another helicopter from the Edmond Observatory," Tang Erda recognized it immediately, his brow furrowing. "How did it get here? Muke, are they coming?"

Bai Liu glanced at the aircraft, narrowed his eyes at something, and

then turned to Fang Xiaoxiao behind him. "You guys stay outside and find a place to hide while we handle some team business."

Once the team had obediently moved out of the way, Bai Liu exchanged a look with Mu Sicheng and Tang Erda. Both raised their guns in silent agreement.

Mu Sicheng's grip on his gun faltered slightly as he swallowed nervously. "Holy shit! They're not monsters, are they? Where are they? The monsters didn't take over their homes, did they?"

Tang Erda, walking behind Bai Liu with his gun in hand, kept his eyes on their surroundings. Bai Liu, however, walked as if at the entrance to Tarzan Station, without a gun, his posture calm.

The sentry at the gate let them through after a brief extraction of their oral mucosa. Although they were questioned about their whereabouts the previous night, Bai Liu easily muddled their responses.

Though the sentries were aware of his evasiveness, they didn't press further. There were more pressing and exciting matters for Bai Liu to address.

As they turned down a ventilation shaft, the high-pitched, excited voice of Fang Xiaoxiao from Tarzan Station reached them from the cabin where Bai Liu and the others had briefly stayed the previous night.

"Oh my God! How did you find all this information on Mr. Edmond?"

"With this first-hand information about the climate anomalies and those creatures, we can work on a solution to the dilemma at hand!"

Bai Liu opened the cabin door to find Fang Xiaoxiao sitting cross-legged on a bunk bed, tearfully holding a paper document. He read it aloud in a choked voice.

The document header read [fax record], a term Bai Liu recognized.

Liu Jiayi stood close to the door, smiling politely. Muke was sitting on the top bunk, his eyes flickering with recognition when he saw Bai Liu, but his expression quickly cooled. He jumped down from the bunk, moving swiftly to stand behind Liu Jiayi, gun ready.

The two team members seemed to have suffered from the cold, with frostbite still visible on the tips of their noses and lips, though it had

mostly healed, likely due to Liu Jiayi's antidote.

When Fang Xiaoxiao saw Bai Liu and the others enter, her face shifted slightly. He reluctantly put down the fax. "The person you're looking for is back. Let's talk first, and we can discuss the information afterward."

Once Fang Xiaoxiao had left, Tang Erda, Mu Sicheng, Muke, and Liu Jiayi exchanged a brief, intense gaze before drawing their guns toward each other's vital points.

Bai Liu remained seated, calm, in a small blank compartment surrounded by the two teams, all aiming guns at each other.

Both sides tacitly avoided him, allowing him to comment on the scene. "Seems like we suspect each other of being monsters and not real people."

"Why don't we see which one of us can convince the other first?" Bai Liu turned slightly to look at Liu Jiayi. "Why did you bring Muke here?"

Liu Jiayi pursed her lips. "Because Edmond Station was overrun by monsters."

"We rummaged through Edmond Station and found fax records that I'm sure are important game clues. But since the satellite phone can't reach you, and the system panel is blocked between players in the game pool, we decided to bring the fax records to you at Tarzan Station after we burn the monsters in the basement."

Tang Erda frowned at the flaw in Liu Jiayi's story. "But you and Muke don't know how to fly a helicopter. I'm the only one on the team who does."

Liu Jiayi met his gaze. "We don't, but we knew you would."

Bai Liu gave a small, meaningful smile. "Nice plan. You're holding his clone hostage?"

"Exactly." Muke took a deep breath and added, "But when Jiayi was about to go out and burn the monster in the basement with fuel and poison, the door opened. You came back with a team from Tarzan Station, saying you wanted to pick up medicine. We suspected it was your duplicate, so we made a false move on them."

"But the mistake was that both Muke and I were underpowered, while these three imitators of you were half as strong and even managed to imitate your skills."

Liu Jiayi's face darkened. "After killing [Mu Sicheng] with fuel and poison, we tried everything to kill [Bai Liu]. It was so cunning that we had to settle for the next best thing. We used poison to force [Tang Erda] into a helicopter, making him escape and leave the base to them."

Mu Sicheng's hair stood on end as he heard the words. "What about Tang Erda?"

Liu Jiayi shrugged. "After we reached Tarzan Station, I shot him dead in the pilot seat of the helicopter and doused him with fuel-burning poison to prevent him from scamming us. That's the creature's weakness. My monster book lit up."

Tang Erda's eyes narrowed as he noticed the bloodstains on Liu Jiayi's vest from wiping.

At the Edmond Observatory

Once inside the observation post, Tang Erda and Mu Sicheng quickly drew their guns, aiming at Liu Jiayi and Muke, who armed themselves with poison and firearms in response.

Bai Liu walked leisurely to the center of the standoff, observing the four men comparing weapons. "Wow, looks like we've recreated the scene from Tarzan Station. You suspect us of being monsters too?"

His dark eyes locked onto Muke and Liu Jiayi. "I suspect you as well. That little trick you pulled to win my trust by using the game's hidden settings was clever."

"Unfortunately, you've already used it once at Tarzan Station, Muke."

Muke raised an eyebrow. "What are you talking about?"

Mu Sicheng spat out a mouthful of blood, blood still oozing from his gums as he grimly turned to look at Muke and Liu Jiayi, baring his teeth in a bloodied grin. "I fucking hate this copy."

"We already encountered [Liu Jiayi] and [Muke] at Tarzan Station,"

Bai Liu continued. "They said they were there to deliver information to me and had already fought the monster at Edmond Observatory, holding the monster Tang Erda hostage before escaping."

Bai Liu smiled coldly. "But we found out they were nothing but simulations meant to deceive us. That's why we flew back with the remaining Tarzan Station crew in the Tarzan Station helicopter after killing them, to see what was going on here—and—"

He raised his eyes, his tone dropping to a chilling softness, his gaze empty and deep as the night.

"—Where the hell did my real team members go?"

He lowered his eyes, his fingers moving with deliberate slowness, and ordered in a tone that betrayed no emotion. "Strike and kill."

Mu Sicheng and Tang Erda raised their guns with expressionless faces, the bright red of the bullets faintly visible in the chamber, ready to fire.

The Ice Age

Tarzan Observatory

In the small space surrounded by four guns, Bai Liu's demeanor was relaxed as he looked at Liu Jiayi. "So, you took the clone of Tang Erda hostage and chose to meet us at Tarzan Station, but then decided to strike first because you weren't sure if we were monsters?"

Bai Liu leaned back in his chair, lifted his gaze, and smiled softly. "Now that you've got us under control, what's next? How do you plan to distinguish between us—monsters or your real teammates?"

Liu Jiayi's lips were pressed into a thin line as she twirled the gun in her hand. The oversized gloves, which had once been warm from Bai Liu's touch, now felt cold, and her fingertips tingled from the chill.

"I have a way to tell the difference between you and the monsters." Liu Jiayi's breath formed a white mist in the air.

The young girl's grey eyes shot up to meet Bai Liu's gaze through the hazel goggles. There was a harshness in her expression, forced upon her, but it softened when her eyes locked with his calm ones.

She seemed unable to name the cruel solution she had in mind, even though she had used it successfully twice before.

Bai Liu kindly spoke up, "Monsters have a weakness, and you can use it to tell the difference. Earlier, at Edmond Observatory, you used fuel and poison to burn [Mu Sicheng], and after determining that it was their weakness, you used the same method to hold [Tang Erda] hostage."

"[Tang Erda] is a monster, afraid of these things. So it was held hostage just as you intended." Bai Liu looked straight at Liu Jiayi. "But [Bai Liu], I suppose it wasn't because it was cunning that it was let go, was it?"

Bai Liu said this while holding Liu Jiayi's gun with his gloved hand, his chest pressed against the muzzle as he slowly stood up. He took a few steps back from her, looking down at her with a pitying expression. "Jiayi, you can't do anything to [Bai Liu]."

Liu Jiayi had no way to test Bai Liu's authenticity in such a cruel manner, so she let the [Bai Liu] go, even though she knew there was a

99% chance it was a monster.

But what if it wasn't?

She didn't want to kill him, or resort to this method.

Not to mention Muke, a man who could slice through the skin of any monster with a Bai Liu face and still scream first.

Liu Jiayi's lips turned blue as she stared at Bai Liu for ten seconds before taking a deep, dry breath. She holstered her gun and pulled out her poison. "Yes, that's what you said last time, so fuck off. I'm going to identify the other two."

"There's no need to test; we're both real," Bai Liu smiled. "I'm sure I'm the real Bai Liu, so you must be the real Liu Jiayi."

Liu Jiayi looked up in disbelief. "How did you recognize me?!"

Bai Liu patted her on the head. "It's a controlled experiment. We've heard the observatory version."

Liu Jiayi frowned. "What experiment?"

Bai Liu explained the experiment the monsters had conducted on them, smiling with growing interest.

"Don't you think it's similar to our current situation? It's a group of people who know each other well. One of them leaves and then turns back halfway, while the other waits to be rescued. Then, they have to identify each other as human or not in the experiment?"

As Bai Liu spoke, Mu Sicheng rubbed his chin, put down his gun, and thought deeply. "Hmm, seems like it."

Then, he suddenly reacted, as if struck by a realization. "Wait a minute, according to this experiment, someone from our side should be real, and someone should be fake too!"

"No, no, no." Bai Liu stopped the alert Mu Sicheng, who had raised his gun to Liu Jiayi's forehead. He smiled as he explained. "This time, it's an experiment where one side is all real, and the other is all fake."

Mu Sicheng was confused. "Why?!"

Liu Jiayi couldn't help but roll her eyes, muttering under her breath, "Stupid, or maybe just college students."

Muke lowered his gun, leaned back against the top bunk with a long, exhausted sigh, and turned to Mu Sicheng to explain.

"If, as Bai Liu says, it's a low-reproducibility social experiment, then the experiment conducted earlier couldn't be replicated because they already had results from Fang Xiaoxiao's situation. So Fang Xiaoxiao's situation isn't going to be repeated with us. We've become part of another experiment."

Bai Liu raised a finger, his smile deepening. "In short, we're the control group for Fang Xiaoxiao's experiment. By extension, we can conclude that because we're real, Muke and the others who came to us must also be real."

Mu Sicheng's eyes glazed over. "What... What does all this even mean? Why are we jumping to this conclusion?"

Liu Jiayi tilted her head, gave Mu Sicheng an exasperated look, and then yawned as she climbed into the bunk. She took off her bloodstained coat, curled up, and declared, "I'm going to sleep."

Soon, Liu Jiayi's breathing evened out, her hands clutching Bai Liu's gloves, like a cub finding its nest, and she fell asleep.

Muke stepped in front of the bed, his voice soft. "Jiayi's been using poison to deal with monsters all the way here. Although she has a stamina restorer, she's still mentally exhausted, like a child."

Tang Erda glanced at the blood splattered across Muke's body and his tired, weathered expression. He could tell Muke had spent a lot of time reading and processing his memories, then forced Liu Jiayi to fight through a pile of monsters.

"You should rest too," Tang Erda said, offering comfort.

Muke nodded, removed his clothes, climbed into the top bunk, and soon fell asleep, his hands hanging over the side.

Tang Erda sighed, gently tucking Muke's hand back in. "Looks like they've been through hell to deliver our message. Tough on them."

Mu Sicheng scratched his head and circled around Bai Liu, lowering his voice. "How on earth can you be sure these two aren't monsters?"

They hadn't been burned or doused with strong acid, and none of the weaknesses used to distinguish players from monsters had been tested.

What's going on with Bai Liu? What's he hiding?

Bai Liu smiled. "Really curious, huh?"

Mu Sicheng nodded vigorously.

Bai Liu pulled out a piece of paper and a pen, placing them on a small desk in the middle of the cabin. He bent over to explain to Mu Sicheng.

"Remember the experiment Fang Xiaoxiao told you about earlier?"

"Yeah," Mu Sicheng shuddered at the memory. "That was when a group of them let a few escape the ice chasm outside Tarzan Station. Then, the others tried to rescue them, but they ended up running into fake versions of them."

Bai Liu lowered his gaze. "What do you think the purpose of that experiment was?"

Mu Sicheng froze, then began to think hard. "I think it was... trying to find out how humans in the same group can tell the difference between monsters and humans in extreme conditions?"

He remembered Fang Xiaoxiao saying this to him.

"Exactly. It's an experiment to explore how well humans in a group can distinguish between what's real and what's fake." Bai Liu wrote the four labels—[A1], [A2], [B1], and [B2]—on the page and continued.

"Imagine we're the monsters, A is the human group, A1 and A2 are two separate groups within A that we've forced apart, and B is the monster group. [B1] and [B2] are mirror-image hybrid creatures created by the monsters to mimic [A1] and [A2]."

Bai Liu set these four labels in a 2x2 table. "So, based on this experimental purpose, there are four exploratory experiments: A1 meets B2, A2 meets B1—those are the experiments Fang Xiaoxiao and the others conducted."

"Since group A1 has a memory of the experiment and group A2 couldn't bear the results and died, we can't replicate the experiment with them again. We need a completely new group of humans to complete the remaining two experiments."

Bai Liu looked up slowly, locking eyes with Mu Sicheng. "That means A1 meets A2, and B1 meets B2—two control experiments. That's the experiment we're conducting."

"So, if we're real, then Muke must be real."

"Of course," Bai Liu added with a flat tone, "we can't rule out the possibility that we're all fakes. But if both sides are fake, it doesn't matter to me what's real."

Mu Sicheng stepped back, looking warily at the experiments on the paper. A chill spread through him, deeper than the freezing temperatures outside—this feeling stripped away his sense of self, reducing him to a mere collection of bones and flesh, powerless against something greater.

As humans do to other creatures, life had become meaningless, reduced to symbols on paper—A1, A2, B1, B2.

Mu Sicheng's lips trembled as he faced Bai Liu, uncertainty clouding his mind. "What if we're fake?"

Bai Liu looked at him flatly. "Then we kill the real one and take its place."

The Ice Age

After letting Muke and Liu Jiayi rest for two or three hours, both of them woke up with a strong sense of self-management.

Liu Jiayi sat on the edge of the bed, rubbing her eyes as she put on her shoes. Meanwhile, Bai Liu adjusted her new rash guard, a better-fitting one since her previous outfit had been soiled with blood.

Liu Jiayi slipped her right arm through the sleeve of Bai Liu's shirt, while her other hand tossed back the long strands of hair pinned at the back of her neck. She then jumped off the bed, jacket in hand, landing firmly on the ground.

Bai Liu released his grip on her jacket, his eyes scanning the consolidated fax record Muke handed him, quickly skimming the lines.

His gaze paused for a moment on the five words Muke had highlighted in the translation before he continued reading as though nothing unusual had caught his eye.

"It looks like the boss we're dealing with this time is a scientist named Edmond," Bai Liu said, handing the file to Tang Erda beside him. He then turned to Muke. "What about the lab reports and diaries? Did you filter out anything valuable?"

Muke's face flushed with embarrassment. "I'm sorry. I've only managed to get a rough understanding of the contents, but I'm not sure what it all means yet."

"It’s fine," Bai Liu reassured him. "What does the lab report say?"

Muke looked up, his expression a mix of frustration and fatigue. "The main part of the report is split into two sections. The first covers temperature measurements—daily data from various Antarctic surface sites and marine zones, all recorded up to the last month."

He rubbed his forehead in discomfort. "The data is massive, and I don't know what’s useful right now."

Bai Liu flipped through the temperature statistics, filled with dense numbers, histograms, pie charts, and graphs that went on endlessly. The sheer volume was overwhelming.

Muke stared helplessly at the thick stack of charts.

Even with a strong memory, he struggled with the complexity of the scientific material. After reading non-stop for an entire day and night, he felt as though his mental faculties had dropped significantly.

"Edmond Observatory has launched numerous weather balloons throughout the Antarctic interior to monitor temperatures," Muke continued. "They've also deployed positioning buoys in surrounding waters to measure sea temperatures."

He exhaled deeply. "Since Edmond specializes in building weather models from temperature data, the experimental data is extensive. They've set up nearly six hundred sites across Antarctica for temperature measurements."

"Edmond believes these six hundred sites are crucial for understanding the region's shifting climate. They reflect the effects of ocean currents, solar radiation, stratosphere, and even tectonic movements on the temperature. These need to be monitored and updated constantly, so each site has been measured three to five times a day for the last thirty-three years, up until about a year and a half ago."

Muke glanced at the massive pile of reports in Bai Liu's hands, his frustration clear. "It's just too much... I haven't finished reading it all."

Mu Sicheng, listening from the sidelines, was astonished.

Thirty-three years' worth of data—only someone as stubborn as Muke would have tried to read it all in a single day.

Give Mu Sicheng thirty-three years, and he still wouldn't manage to finish it.

Bai Liu ignored the comment and asked, "What about the second section of Edmond's lab report?"

Muke straightened up. "The second section contains biochemical experimental data on an unknown creature X. The experiment ran from August 7th of last year to December. There was a brief gap in the records during the first two weeks of October, but things picked up again after that."

Muke leaned forward and helped Bai Liu turn to the section in the lab diary from early October.

"The temperature records are normal, but the biological experiment logs are blank," Muke explained. "The media wasn't photographed, and the cultures weren't incubated at a constant temperature. The growth status of the biological tissues wasn't recorded—they were essentially abandoned during this time."

He pointed to one section of the report. "But by November, the number of cultures had skyrocketed from ten to three hundred. Cells from other organisms, like emperor penguins, seals, and whales, were being mixed into the cultures."

"And—" Muke's finger hovered over a particular column in the table, his eyes darkening, "—67 human cells."

Bai Liu's gaze lingered on the column. "These would be the cells of the researchers at Tarzan Station."

Muke nodded, his expression tight. He slid his thumbnail across the report and began explaining the details in a clear, structured way, translating the findings from the English text.

"Yes, Edmond used these monsters, grown from human cells, to conduct basic exploratory experiments—such as cell division and reproduction, tissue cutting and reculturing, as well as testing their resilience to death and destruction," Muke explained.

His sharp eyes scanned the notes. "Once Edmond established that these monsters exhibited strong learning capabilities and began diverging from humans, he reported this to the Observatory's political and military leaders in early October, demanding that the research be halted on ethical grounds."

"But the authorities, citing military interests, insisted that he continue. They ordered him to find a way to mass-produce and control these creatures, giving Edmond a new research direction: undead soldiers who would be fully controllable and highly effective in combat."

"Edmond strongly resisted and denounced the idea, even resorting to going on strike."

"On October 3rd, Edmond was caught trying to steal equipment for the first time. His superiors punished him severely, dismissing his concerns about the experiment's dangers. They mocked him, saying, 'If you fear this experiment so much, prove to us that it could lead to humanity's extinction.'"

Muke paused, taking a deep breath. "The following day, they forced Edmond to consume the biological tissue he had cultivated himself. By then, these tissues had differentiated into a human form—specifically, that of an infant."

"Edmond suffered severe psychological trauma after this, and I found him in the infirmary, repeatedly requesting antidepressant medication. His doctor's records show that Edmond developed symptoms of drug dependency as his experiments progressed, fueled by increasing doses of medication."

"On October 15th, Edmond attempted to steal the case again, but this time, one of his own colleagues betrayed him."

"Once again, he was caught and brutally punished by the sentries. His superiors deemed him less than human and ordered, 'There's no need to show mercy to someone like him. Torture him using the same biological experiments he's so fond of!'"

Muke spoke rapidly, his voice tinged with bitterness. "The torment seemed to have driven him further. On October 28th, Edmond was 'acquitted' after two weeks of brutal torture."

"On October 29th, after a long and closed-door discussion with his superiors, Edmond's antidepressant dosage increased significantly."

"According to the infirmary's diagnosis, Edmond began showing symptoms of schizophrenia and multiple personality disorder. He would occasionally slip into delusional fantasies, claiming to be from Tarzan Station, and beg for someone to rescue him. He even cursed the Observatory, saying he didn't belong in such a 'sinful place' named after him."

"But it seems he came to a grim realization and started obeying his superiors. He began to devise a way to make these creatures obey commands, while also ensuring they were brave enough to charge into battle."

Muke tapped a file marked with a bright red, double-stamped "Top Secret" header. "This is the result of Edmond's research: the memory hypnosis experiment."

He turned to Bai Liu. "Take a look—this experiment is the most valuable information I've found."

Bai Liu glanced down at the document Muke was pointing to.

The memory hypnosis experiment stemmed from one of Edmond's earlier hypotheses: What distinguishes humans from other humanoid intelligent species?

In the long, 300 million-year history of human evolution, why have humans developed to their current scale, while other species with similar developmental potential have not? Why did those species go extinct, and what allowed humans to survive?

And, if there is a species that has not gone extinct, one with intelligence equal to or surpassing that of humans, which has developed in the shadows, what sets them apart from us?

Edmond's conclusion was that humans have an inherent tendency toward civilization and community.

"It is the fear and reverence we feel for those who have passed in our tribe, the compassion we share with those struggling alongside us, and the ability to support one another that has allowed us to survive to this day. We have been endowed with the subconscious urge to create civilization as part of our survival instinct."

This theory had been the basis of an older paper by Edmond. In his later research, he added a second conclusion:

"I apologize for my earlier rash conclusion that our survival instincts also contain the subconscious drive to destroy civilization. Unfortunately, this awareness is far stronger than the other."

"I will use hypnosis to give these newborn creatures both subconscious minds."

"But if these two subconscious existences are not framed within a rational, realistic memory structure, these newborns will go mad from the self-contradiction. They are 'born' to create and destroy, and no creature but humans has such a conflicting purpose."

"My superiors told me that if I could produce the soldiers they wanted, they would meet all my demands. This included allowing me to implant the memories of a person's entire life into the brains of these monsters, then using this information to make them believe they were humans fighting for a cause, defending their country, and living and dying for justice."

"This reminds me of my friend..."

It was then that Edmond realized: the friend he had lost, who had died in pain and repentance, had been one of the subjects of these high-ranking officials' experiments. Edmond was about to become what his friend had despised most—leading innocent beings who thought they were creating the future, only to lead them to the abyss of destruction.

The back of the experimental report described how the memories of humans were implanted into the creatures' brains. Most importantly—
"These monsters don't realize they're monsters," Muke said with a bitter smile. "That's why we can't be sure if we're truly monsters ourselves."

Mu Sicheng wrapped his arms around his shivering body. "No, how did they get our memories?!"

"Mental suggestion and hypnosis," Bai Liu said, flexing his fingers and tapping the paper. He lowered his gaze, his eyes growing distant. "It's likely that when we came into contact with this monster, Edmond, we unconsciously absorbed memories from him. This is probably one of his abilities."

Mu Sicheng looked confused. "But we've never met this Edmond monster, have we? My monster book didn't even light up a new page —"

"Wait—when did it light up?!" Mu Sicheng exclaimed, suddenly stunned. "I swear I just saw it still dark! How is it lit now when I open it?"

Muke quickly opened his own monster book and blushed upon seeing it. "Mine just lit up with a new page too, and its skills are... mental suggestion and hypnosis."

"I guess we'll have to realize it ourselves to break free from this hypnosis," Bai Liu said, casting a faint glance at Mu Sicheng. "And while it's true we haven't met this mysterious Edmond, did you forget that the monsters here can shape-shift?"

Mu Sicheng froze, muttering, "Right, they can transform... but who would he become?"

Bai Liu, still looking at the document in his hand, scratched the tip of his pen on the paper thoughtfully.

"There's another odd detail in this experiment," he continued. "The human cell suspension X cells started to be cultured in November. By

that time, Edmond was imprisoned in the basement, working on experiments, with very limited access to the outside. How did he manage to get these cells from the Tarzan Station team and bring them back for his experiments?"

Muke didn't hesitate. "Could it be that someone at Tarzan Station was secretly meeting with Edmond and stealing the cells for him?"

Bai Liu shook his head, deep in thought. "There must have been someone on Tarzan Station helping him, but I don't think it's likely that cells were simply stolen."

"A group marked by betrayal would seem like a stained white cloth to Edmond—something that doesn't fit with his ideal of mutual trust and cooperation."

"If there was indeed someone at Tarzan Station stealing cells for him, Edmond might have just killed everyone there instead of sparing them as a 'spark of human continuity,'" Bai Liu added.

Muke frowned. "But how could Edmond have taken the cells from everyone at Tarzan Station without help from someone on his side?"

"Could it be that Edmond transformed into someone from Tarzan Station, infiltrated the Observatory, and used the opportunity to steal the cells?" Liu Jiayi suggested.

"I considered that," Bai Liu said, his expression contemplative. "But by that time, the Tarzan Station team had been isolated in the polar regions for a year and a half, facing each other daily in a confined space. They were so familiar with each other that even a small difference—like missing a day of shaving—would be noticed."

"Even if Edmond transformed into one of them, without the daily memories of the team, he wouldn't have been able to pass himself off as one of them, especially since the team knew Edmond was conducting bionic human experiments," Bai Liu continued.

He paused, then added softly, "Unless he had fused memories, a perfect 'Tarzan Station crew,' to help him blend in back in November."

Liu Jiayi's expression hardened. Bai Liu was right.

She frowned and retorted, "But the timing doesn't add up. According to the lab report, it takes at least a month to grow a mature body. Edmond made his first completed body with human memories in

December, and all the experiments before October had been destroyed."

Bai Liu flipped through the lab report, his eyes settling on a specific page. "There's still one monster he hasn't destroyed."

Muke, thinking he had missed something, asked reflexively, "Which one?"

Bai Liu looked up. "Himself."

"I suspect Edmond started fusing his own memories in early October," Bai Liu mused. "This is likely when his mental issues began. By November, when the fusion was nearly complete, his psychotic symptoms worsened. That's when the doctors diagnosed him with multiple personality disorder."

"But it wasn't multiple personalities—two sets of memories were just fighting for dominance in his mind. He couldn't tell who he truly was," Bai Liu explained calmly. "And Edmond used these fused memories to transform into someone from Tarzan Station. He infiltrated the station and stole the cells from the rest of the team."

"He used these stolen cells to manipulate us, hiding in the body of this team member, silently engaging with us, hypnotizing us, taking away our memories, and swiftly continuing his experiments."

"What a highly capable researcher," Bai Liu muttered.

Mu Sicheng swallowed nervously. "So, who did he turn into?"

Bai Liu gave him a sharp look. "Isn't the answer obvious? There's only one person at Tarzan Station who's been in contact with both you and us."

Liu Jiayi suddenly remembered the overly enthusiastic graduate student who had greeted them upon arrival. "Fang Xiaoxiao?"

Outside Tarzan Station, amidst a fierce snowstorm.

Fang Xiaoxiao's face bore the marks of age and change. He glanced away from the brightly lit observation room, and in the next moment, his expression smoothed back into an untroubled one.

He turned, looking behind him at the battered Tarzan Station crew,

their faces muddy, their bodies aching. Tears welled up in his eyes as he led the weary test subjects deeper into the ice fields.

The polar night was closing in.

The Ice Age

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bai Liu left Tai Shan Station and headed to the site where they had been stationed, only to find that Fang Xiaoxiao—whom they had rescued from the ice crevice—had disappeared.

"Fang Xiaoxiao took the rest of the team with him," Tang Erda said grimly.

Mu Sicheng looked at Bai Liu. "So, are we going to find them next? Where could they have gone?"

Bai Liu exhaled a cloud of white breath, his gaze fixed on the sparse snow stretching toward the edge of the Antarctic continent, shimmering under the gray sunlight. "I think I know why Edmond left and where they're headed."

He gave a relaxed, almost teasing smile. "It seems the other player put a lot of pressure on Professor Edmond—the boss at the bottom of the level—to abandon his experiments on us and leave to deal with this player instead."

Liu Jiayi, always quick to react, turned to Bai Liu. "Was it Spades? What did he do?"

"He's going after the game's main quest," Bai Liu replied, looking back at her with a slight, plaintive expression. "To make the globe warmer."

Pure white stretched out next to the Ross Ice Shelf.

In the waters around Leah Land, the salinity is so high that the freezing point of the water dips below zero.

It is the coldest time of the year when the Antarctic waters meet the warmest currents before the polar night. In these frigid waters, it only takes fifteen minutes for a person to succumb to hypothermia if they fall in.

And yet, the sight of a human body sinking like a whale in the fluid ebb and flow of the ocean is undeniably captivating.

A tent-like structure made from stacked snow blocks stands haphazardly on the shore, containing tins of food, rashers, neatly arranged socks, and a sled car.

A drying rack is propped up on top of the sled, with a pair of oversized boxer briefs hanging in regular intervals, drying over two burning solid alcohol lamps.

It appears they didn't want to wear the underwear they found in the observatory, so they decided to dry their boxers out and reuse them instead.

On top of the snow 'tent,' a small red flag flutters violently in the sea breeze. The material glows faintly with a peculiar fluorescent light, standing out against the coming night.

The man in the sea floats and sinks twice, swimming at an unnaturally fast pace—faster than even the seals and orcas, which are feeding heavily in preparation for winter.

As the two predators tentatively approach him, he barely moves, effortlessly turning in the water and darting under their jaws in the blink of an eye.

Bubbles of air spill from his lips—the only indication that this is a strange human, not some cold, humanoid creature born in the icy depths of the sea.

Even the seal that attempted to hunt him likely wondered, internally, why this prey didn't radiate any heat.

Like ice. Even colder than ice.

Before they could puzzle over this, the elusive 'prey' swept past their fangs again, kicking his legs and opening his eyes slightly as he dove deeper into the invisible sea.

Ten minutes later, Spades emerged, dragging a tide gauge weighing several hundred kilos to the surface.

He strode barefoot across the ice, his left hand dragging the large orange-framed instrument, leaving a long trail in the snow. The water on his eyelashes and hair froze before it dripped down, which he wiped away with his right hand.

This is dangerous—easily capable of causing severe frostbite and eye

injuries.

But the damage seemed to have no effect on Spades.

To him, such damage and temperatures—deadly to normal humans—were so insignificant that he didn't even bother to remove the shards of ice stuck in his eyelashes and hair.

Like small, unpolished diamonds, the fine ice fragments hung loosely on his smooth, tight body, refracting light at certain angles, glistening against his cool skin.

He wasn’t overly muscular, but he was lean, and when his shoulder blades tensed, it became clear that his bone structure—from shoulders to waist, stomach to ankles—was perfectly proportioned. His muscles, thin yet strong, covered each bone and joint with calculated precision, creating a form of both strength and proportion.

His skin, rather than being green from seawater exposure, had a glazed, polished marble-like glow—a translucent white.

It was as though a sculpture had been refined seven billion times and was still not perfect. It would likely drive sculptors mad trying to perfect such a half-naked masterpiece.

The only flaw was that most of his face was covered by hair, leaving only a jawline that seemed to fit flawlessly with the rest of his sculpted form.

Spades dragged the heavy equipment forward with steady steps, as though he couldn’t feel the cold, the glistening ice, or the gravel beneath his feet, slowly melting them with his body heat and gaze.

And so, this brilliant light vanished into the blizzard, unnoticed by anyone in the storm.

Spades casually slammed the several hundred-pound apparatus aside with one hand, knelt on top of it, bent forward, and found the inner lining. Without hesitation, he pulled out a whip, gripping its handle backhandedly as though it were a dagger, and stabbed it into the equipment.

Only after he had stabbed it did he realize something was wrong and slowly opened his mouth. "Ahh."

[This is a whip, not a dagger!!! Not a long knife!!! Nor is it an awl or a

crutch! It can only be thrown! You can't stab, stomp, or slash with it!]

Spades reflexively recalled the new teammate who had just joined, with the Inquisitor against God's voice breaking down in his ears.

[Use the whip properly! Stop trying to use every strange method with it! Show some respect for the weapon you're using! Do you know how many points the guild spent last year maintaining your whip?]

The teammate had accused him bitterly.

[Stabbing around with the handle of the whip without care, doesn't it bother your conscience? Do you know how expensive the material is that's inlaid on it!?]

It's true—Spades didn't know. He just won the game and never cared about anything other than winning.

He remembered how he had answered the new teammate when they returned to the Slayer sequence.

-- [It's okay to win.]

He seems to be highly skilled with various weapon forms, and it's unclear why the weapon form fixed at the end of his personal skills is a whip.

Spades wasn't particularly fond of the whip. He preferred a short blade or awl, but he made do with the whip. Although he uses it, he can also employ it to deliver a powerful attack with other weapons if needed.

In the end, the whip often serves his core goal: to win the game. He never really cared much about the specifics, but his league teammate this time, the Inquisitor of the Reverse God, was deeply concerned about it.

No matter how many times the Inquisitor warned him tearfully, Spades continued to use the whip in his own way. So, the Inquisitor unleashed his skills and prophesied Spades' future, wickedly threatening, "Spades, if you don't master the whip, you'll lose the league to a player who's even better with it than you!"

Spades, interested in winning, finally took a moment to listen.

Since entering the game, Spades had been a moderately skilled whip

user—not flawless, but not terrible either. However, when the moment came, he managed to poke the liner of the tide gauge straight through with the whip's handle.

The annoying new team member wasn't there to witness the scene, so Spades only paused briefly before continuing to pry open the steel casing of the instrument with the whip and digging out a thermometer wrapped in waterproof plastic.

He tore away the tarp to reveal a small metal box inside, vibrating erratically with high-frequency irregularities. In Spades' hands, the box emitted a sharp, high-frequency sound that could shatter bones just by holding it.

Spades closed his fingers around it, leaving a clear fingerprint on the metal surface. He crushed the box instantly, pressed his thumb against its side, and flexed his fingers, creating a hole in it.

Pressing his fingertips against the hole, Spades turned and took the box back to the snow block tent.

Despite the dust inside the box pressing against his fingers and the blood congestion in his nails, Spades felt no pain—nothing more than a slight discomfort.

He bent down to unhook the dried boxer briefs and rummaged around the tent with one hand. He found a bottle of strong acid in a glass bottle and held the box over an alcohol lamp.

His eyes remained fixed on the alcohol flame, his breathing light as the warmth of the fire reflected in his gaze. The rigid cold of his skin began to thaw under the heat.

The metal box in Spades' hand grew warmer, heating to such an extreme that its outer surface faintly reddened. As it did, the sound of evaporating ice filled the air, but Spades didn't seem to feel the heat at all—he continued to hold it without concern.

The dust inside the box vibrated faster as it was exposed to the heat, causing Spades' entire arm to shake uncontrollably.

After an uncertain amount of time, Spades' arm slowly stopped trembling, as if the particles inside had been burnt out by the heat. He then opened the hole in the box that he had been holding down and poured the strong acid from the bottle into it without hesitation.

The acid reacted violently, and gas spilled from the hole in the box, while the surface of the box reacted with a dark oxide film.

Spades glanced down at the box just as his system announced:

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Spades for destroying the Particle Weather Reactor (521/600)]

[The game is nearing its end, so please keep up the good work!]

Chapter End Notes

Is Spades naked

The Ice Age

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Spades placed the metal box filled with strong acid over the alcohol lamp, loosening his thumb from the pressed hole.

Inside the box, the particles corroded, turning into a viscous black liquid that flowed down his fingers like dark blood.

The "blood" dripped onto the outer flame of the alcohol lamp, reigniting it and creating a peculiar, flame-colored reaction.

The original orange-red hue of the flame shifted to an unsettling greenish-purple, flickering restlessly as the liquid dripped from the box.

The dull green light from the fire cast Spades' shadow on the tent, which danced unnervingly, as if a monstrous spirit was lurking within him, ready to burst out during the burning of these particles.

The liquid extinguished the alcohol lamp three times as it dripped, but Spades simply relit it each time, waiting until he was sure all the liquid had been burned out of the box. Once satisfied, he took the burning solid alcohol block in his hand and extinguished it.

After packing the remaining alcohol and acid into the package, Spades changed his clothes, knelt down to lace up his snow boots, casually gathered his jacket, and stood up to gather the rest of the supplies: mostly leftover acid, fuel, solid alcohol, and some food.

—These supplies were purchased by Spades from an outside shop.

The shop system was disabled in the game pool, but Spades typically didn't need to carry food or a change of clothes. He was always a quickie; in the words of his new teammate, the Inquisitor of the Gods, Spades preferred to finish the game violently—effective but also problematic, as it often disrupted the integrity of the game.

Usually, when Spades entered a game, the monsters barely had time to wait for him to eat before he had already won.

This is why, in the later stages of the training process, the judges of

the Revolt Gods were becoming increasingly anxious.

The Killer Sequence, last year's championship team, had an undeniably strong individual fighting force. They were a dark horse, and it was clear none of the five players were easy to beat, especially not Spades, whose skills shattered all expectations.

The long whip he wielded swept through the air in all directions.

Even the deer hunter, a high-minded reformer, had to admit—gritting his teeth—that Spades didn't need any weapon modifications.

The weapon was merely an accessory for Spades, an optional tool. Regardless of what weapon he wielded, Spades himself was the most formidable force on the league field.

No reformer had the audacity to claim they could improve Spades' weaponry.

Because Spades was already the best.

This was common knowledge among all players in the game—an unshakable truth, as fundamental as the fact that the Earth is round and revolves around the sun.

However, the Killer Sequence, despite their success, had a significant weakness: all five players were main attackers.

No shield, no control, no roaming abilities, and most alarmingly, no tactician.

Last year's victory was due to Spades' sudden and overwhelming performance, which caught the other teams off guard.

But after a year, this one-man strategy had become less effective in group battles, as other guilds began to counter it more effectively.

Because while Spades was perfect, his teammates were not.

After a year of study and research, nearly every guild team had developed tactical strategies based on the skills of Spades and his teammates, as well as each player's habits.

The Hearts of the King's Guild openly revealed their strategy against Spades—backup nurses plus double control.

This tactic wouldn't defeat Spades outright, but it was enough to make

life difficult for the other four.

Just as all the guilds were gearing up to challenge the newly determined Killer Sequence in the next tournament, Spades pulled off a move that once again stunned everyone—he poached the Deer Hunter's tactician, Inquisitor of the Gods.

The game's forums erupted in chaos for an entire week, with players everywhere questioning the announcement of the Killer Sequence's acceptance of the Inquisitor of the Gods.

What kind of player was Spades?

Anyone who had seen him play understood his "uniqueness." He was the quintessential main attacker: setting traps, sweeping lines, pushing bosses, and defeating opponents with lightning speed—boasting an outrageous 1 against 5 record in the semi-finals.

Without a tactician, Spades was the heart of the team.

But despite being the centerpiece, Spades was notably distant—barely communicating with his teammates during games. When other guilds analyzed his replays, they couldn't help but admit that Spades seemed to need little interaction with his teammates.

When he did communicate, his teammates often failed to follow his lead. So, he simply stopped trying.

Here was a man who, during a 32-to-16 match, would ignore a teammate's desperate cry for help, shoot them a look, strike them with his whip, then apologize without sincerity before rushing off to hunt monsters. And this man, who could act with such disregard, decided to poach someone else's tactician?!

Despite the disbelief, Inquisitor of the Gods officially joined the Killer Sequence as the team's only non-main attacker—a tactician—in this outlandish combination.

For the other guilds, this was the last thing they wanted to see.

They knew just how much the addition of Inquisitor of the Gods would strengthen a team already boasting players like Spades.

The skill of Inquisitor of the Gods was prophecy, and he was the best tactician in the game.

The powerful synergy between the best tactician and the best main attacker made all the guilds desperate.

But soon, this despair began to dissipate.

They were delighted to discover that, together, the two best players didn't mesh well at all.

After Inquisitor of the Gods joined, a new training program was quickly developed. So far, it was... working... sort of.

It wasn't all bad—more like a shambles.

Inquisitor of the Gods instructed Spades to follow his commands and refrain from attacking monsters or opponents until given the order. Spades appeared to listen, so the tactician, relieved, carelessly threw him into the game pool.

Spades was like a fish out of water. The moment the game began, he vanished in the blink of an eye.

Inquisitor of the Gods spent half a day searching, convinced Spades had fallen for the game's trap.

In the end, he found Spades amidst a bloody battlefield.

Spades, whip taut in hand, strangled a monster's head, then dropped it and casually hid it behind him. Turning to face the tactician, he said with an unfazed expression, "Sorry, I saw the monster, and my body acted on its own. I killed it—didn't affect your training plan, right?"

Meanwhile, the other four teammates received a system notification:

[System notification: Congratulations to player Spades for leading the team through the game! Game over!]

Spades, relaxing, muttered, "Ah, so that's a win?"

The other three teammates: "..."

"Are you laughing right now? You're laughing because you won, aren't you?!"

"Do you want to win all by yourself?! Show some team spirit!"

Over the next few months, as they trained in the game pool, Inquisitor of the Gods was repeatedly frustrated by Spades' definition of group

play.

Spades in a group fight was like chaos incarnate.

He fought monsters, walked the main game line, and every second, any time his teammates looked away—he was gone!

By the time the group scrambled to find him, there was usually a system announcement that the game had been cleared.

Inquisitor of the Gods was tormented to the point of exhaustion.

Most of his efforts in the game were spent not predicting opponents' movements or focusing on the main game line, but rather searching for Spades.

Spades was like a child whose attention was always wandering—a child who fought like a champion, moved with speed, and was fiercely competitive yet outwardly obedient.

And Inquisitor of the Gods was the exhausted parent, unable to control the child, spending sleepless nights searching for him like a cheap GPS locator, broadcasting through the game:

"[Spades! Spades, where are you?]"

"[Spades, come out! I won't make you work with your teammates this time! I didn't consider your feelings as the main attacker wanting to win on your own! You're a great attacker, it's all my fault!]

"[Come out! We're going home! Let's stop playing games, okay?]"

After many such moments, Inquisitor of the Gods weakly declared that he needed a break and left Spades to wander—or rather, to train outside. He took the other three players to train first, leaving Spades as the lone "wanderer" to cool off.

It was disconcerting to see such an invincible ace benched by his new tactician, but Spades took it well, and actually listened this time, training alone.

Spades was known for his intuition as a main attacker, a fact recognized by the audience, his teammates, and even the tactician.

And the personal training ground Spades chose to hone his instincts was the Ice Age dungeon.

Spades had a vague sense that something in this dungeon called to him, as if some deep mission was embedded in his being, urging him to bring total destruction to the evil forces hidden within this icy world.

Chapter End Notes

> Okay, so, here are all the names for the same person :
> Inquisitor of the Gods
> Inquisitor of the Reverse God - Also The Reverse God
> Judge against the Gods - Also The Judge
>
> The author likes to change it in the novel, so be warned.

The Ice Age

Killer Sequence Guild, Lounge

The Inquisitor of the Gods slumped on the sofa, guzzling water like a maniac, while next to him sat a man who looked completely drained, surrounded by a pile of empty bottles—mineral water, stamina restorers, and mental boosters scattered around his feet.

"It's really hot in the desert," said a man sitting on the far left. His cheeks were flushed from the heat, and his eyes were glazed over as he hugged a bottle to his chest. "The game pool banned shops, so we couldn't even buy water. I thought I was going to die of thirst in that instance too."

"We were careless," the Inquisitor of the Gods muttered, rubbing his brow. "I didn't expect to get trapped. We didn't coordinate well enough, and we didn't bring enough supplies."

The man suddenly sat up straight, glancing around with a puzzled expression. "Where's Spades? He's usually here in the lounge by the time we finish the game. Why isn't he back today?"

"Bought a bunch of strong acid fuel and went into the Ice Age instance," the Inquisitor of the Gods replied, smiling slightly. "He's going for the [true end] line."

The man immediately understood, slumping back down and sighing long and dramatically. "How many times has this happened? He still hasn't given up?"

The Inquisitor of the Gods shook his head, a hint of amusement on his face. "I don't know. It's happened a lot. Every time we'd get a poster for Ice Age before entering the game pool, Spades would glance at it twice. It felt like if anyone missed it, Spades would just jump in and leave us behind."

"He's already hit the [normal end] of Ice Age," the man said, confused. "Doesn't Spades stop paying attention to games he's already won?"

"What is it about this [true end] line that keeps pulling him in? It's not just about collecting corpses—why does he insist on fighting through it every time, running aimlessly?"

The Inquisitor of the Gods opened another bottle of water, tipping it

over his head and letting out a long, satisfied breath as if he'd been revitalized. "I remember that Spades' corpse collection mission in Ice Age always lacked one piece. I recall the piece I was missing was the heart piece. I searched for it countless times but never found it."

"Well, you know how Spades is. If he can't find something, he won't stop searching for it," the Inquisitor of the Gods continued with a smile. "Let him be. It's good for his mindset."

The man's expression turned contemplative as he absentmindedly chewed on the bottle's mouthpiece. "Spades still has a lot to refine in his mind. Don't you think it's time to send him back to the furnace for a reset?"

The Inquisitor of the Gods gripped his bottle tightly and didn't answer.

The man fell silent as well.

That comment had crossed a line. The Inquisitor of the Gods was the tactician, the one who controlled the team's strategy. It wasn't a player's place to question his decisions.

Perhaps it was because the man had only been with the team for a short time, and his temperament wasn't as sharp as the other tacticians. He was less extreme, blending well with the group, which often made the players forget his position as the tactician.

But a tactician is still a tactician, and they wouldn't tolerate players questioning their authority.

The man nervously spoke, "I'm sorry."

"It's nothing," the Inquisitor of the Gods waved it off, smiling broadly and shifting the conversation. "You've been working with Spades for a year now. Can you tell me which match left the biggest impression on you?"

This wasn't the first time the Inquisitor of the Gods had pulled a teammate aside for such a conversation, asking their thoughts on Spades' performance after he failed to mesh with the team.

The man thought for a moment, holding the bottle in his hands like a contemplative bear. "I remember every game, but the one against Russell Cemetery was the most memorable."

The Inquisitor of the Gods nodded as the memory hit him. "Ah, that

one. It was a disaster."

The man chuckled ruefully. "More than miserable. It was the worst game of last year. I honestly thought I was going to die at the end."

The Russell Cemetery vs. Killer Sequence match ended with a 16-8 score.

By that time, Spades' strength had become undeniable, and many guilds were curious about the new player. The most prominent among them was Russell Cemetery, which made it their mission to uncover Spades' secrets and exploit his weaknesses.

Russell Cemetery was ranked 12th the previous year, but unlike other infamous guilds, they didn't have any standout players. They had constant roster turnover, and their new members often seemed timid. Nothing about the team stuck out.

The one thing Russell Cemetery was known for was forfeiting matches, even in singles and doubles. The name "Russell Cemetery" had come to symbolize their habit of entering matches and surrendering twice to ruin the field.

Yet, this team had a surprisingly solid style of play, capable of hitting the ground running in some games, winning decisively and even taking down star teams.

Last year, Killer Sequence nearly lost to Russell Cemetery.

Spades almost died in that game. Russell Cemetery's tactician had tailored a strategy specifically to counter Spades, using a player with skills designed to limit him, and temporarily took on the role of tactician for that match.

It was a brutal strategy.

As soon as the game started, Russell Cemetery's team took aggressive action, sacrificing one of their own players to activate a powerful skill.

The tactic involved turning the ground beneath Spades into a massive mud puddle. This skill could nullify all of a player's attacks and slowly devour them, a tried-and-true move with the only drawback being that it required a teammate's sacrifice to activate.

The stronger the player being consumed, the slower the mire's effect.

Spades lasted seven days in that mud, unable to attack and forced to switch from [Attack] to [Shield], grinding his opponent down until they were cornered in a game shock map.

But eventually, the mire began to swallow Spades whole.

Half of his face was stuck in the mud, and his teammates did everything they could to free him—digging with their bare hands, fighting off enemies as they tried to pull him out.

The scene was so grim that it stayed with the audience for a long time.

Grimaces, fury, fear, and dread mixed on the faces of the Killer Sequence team, their expressions contorted with emotions that words couldn’t capture. Muddy tears streaked their faces, and a low, desperate hiss emerged from their throats—pure, unadulterated terror at the impending death.

They all knew that if Spades died there, they would definitely lose the game.

But Spades wasn’t afraid. He simply looked calmly at his teammates, the mire swallowing him bit by bit, and said, "You can run."

Still, no one ran. Some of them tore themselves apart in desperation, fighting like madmen to hold off their opponents and save Spades.

In the end, Spades won that game.

The team's collective surge of fear pushed back Russell's advancing line. After one of their members broke free and severed the opposing tactician's arms, disarming him and rendering him incapable of using his staff, the mire skill trapping Spades was finally lifted.

Once Spades was able to attack, victory was inevitable.

The crowd erupted in cheers as Spades emerged from the bottomless swamp, whip in hand, covered in mud and blood. Standing tall, he became the demon who had clawed his way out of the abyss.

From head to toe, Spades was drenched in filth, his body marked by the grueling seven-day struggle. Horrific wounds and broken bones jutted out, sharp against his skin, while blood and clotted mud solidified on his exposed bones.

Despite his battered appearance, no one doubted that the final victory

would belong to this relentless figure.

Ten minutes later, Spades stood before the defeated Russell Cemetery team. His face was gaunt, his bloodied whip hanging loosely in one hand, the game's central prop—a symbol of his triumph—clutched in his right hand, mud dripping from his jaw and knuckles.

The Russell Cemetery team trembled before him, begging incoherently for mercy, their voices quivering.

Spades, also a newcomer, watched them silently from the distance that separated victor and vanquished, from the gap between life and death.

It was a game of life and death, and they had resorted to desperate measures to backstab Spades, fully aware that he could kill them for revenge.

The crowd roared with excitement, some shouting, "Kill them!"

"Kill them!"

The Russell Cemetery team shut their eyes in despair, having sacrificed their teammates for victory, only to now face the same fate themselves.

They believed they were doomed. Everyone thought they were doomed.

Finally, Spades spoke.

His mud-covered forehead hid his eyes, but his voice rang clear: "You inflict death on your teammates, and our teammates avoid my death out of fear of their own."

"But when you place your lives on the backs of others," Spades continued, his gaze sweeping over them, "don't you see that your fates are tied together?"

The team stared at him, wide-eyed, unable to comprehend.

Spades waited for a response.

The tactician with both arms severed finally spoke, his voice strained: "That's not how it works. One death, and we all survive. It's our tactic, and it works. Didn't you get stuck at the beginning, even with Spades?"

He continued, tearfully and fervently explaining, unsure whether he was trying to convince them or himself. "This was done to protect the team! One death will save so many!"

When he finished, Spades nodded slowly, as if accepting his answer. "I see," he said calmly. "You cannot see your own fate."

"I will not kill you," he added, his voice devoid of emotion. "Your death is not mine to give. You will die in your own mud."

The tactician watched Spades, who had already turned away in quiet dismay, tears welling in his eyes.

Spades didn't kill them. But soon after, the Russell Cemetery team attempted their deadly tactic again, sacrificing a teammate in their next league match. This time, they were killed by the enemy captain, Fang Wu.

The tactician drowned in the mire skill he had sought to unleash.

The man sighed as he recalled the match. "I couldn't understand what was going through Spades' mind then. I would've killed them out of pure rage."

"But I think it's because of this," the man said, turning to the Inquisitor of the Counter-God, his voice earnest. "Spades finally understood the importance of the team, which is why he recruited you this year."

The Inquisitor of the Counter-God thought for a moment before replying, "I actually asked Spades why he chose me to be your tactician."

The man, curious, asked, "How did he answer?"

The Inquisitor of the Counter-God smiled. "He said that he saw my fate—I'd be your tactician and then die on the field."

The man was taken aback. "He said that directly to your face? That's... too blunt."

"Threatening death in front of a prophet like that... True to form, Spades!" he chuckled.

"Actually, my skill isn't prophecy," the Inquisitor corrected with a shrug. "It's called [Listening to God's Only Words]. Sometimes, I can't even tell if I'm the prophet or if Spades is. His intuition is so accurate

it’s almost like prophecy."

"For example, the [Ice Age] copy—we've all been there, and that unknown creature X’s derivative, the one that turns into a human, is particularly troublesome. Even I have trouble distinguishing who’s real and who’s a monster. We couldn’t even move in that copy because we couldn’t find the target of our attacks."

The Inquisitor of the Counter-God looked across at his team member. "But do you remember how Spades handled that copy?"

The team member paused in thought. "He killed all the replicas except for us once he entered...”

The Inquisitor nodded. "Yes. Once Spades was inside, he quickly identified Edmond hiding in Fang Xiaoxiao’s body, killed him, stopped his plan to use a particle device to affect the global climate, and completed the main global warming quest."

"That’s the [NORMAL END] of the game," he continued, spreading his hands. "From the moment we entered to the point we found Spades standing beside a pile of replicant corpses, he cleared the game in less than thirty minutes."

"Isn’t that curious? How does Spades always know who’s human and who’s a monster so easily? The monster anthropomorphism in that game is so convincing that even we couldn’t tell who was real."

The man rubbed his chin in contemplation. "Yeah, how did Spades do that?"

The Inquisitor of the Counter-God sighed, a hint of helplessness in his tone. "I asked him."

The man leaned in. "And what did he say?"

The Inquisitor let out a deep breath. "He said it was just intuition—he recognizes them purely by instinct."

"As much as I hate to admit it, Spades’ instincts are spot on. He never lies," the Inquisitor said, rubbing his forehead. "But that makes it harder. If Spades is going to fit in with the team, he’ll need to trust my tactics over his instincts."

"His instincts are so accurate, though. I don’t know how to convince him to follow my tactical plans instead."

The man furrowed his brow. "Is there a way for us to work with Spades' instincts?"

The Inquisitor of the Counter-God took a deep breath, pondering. "I thought about it, but there's no way. Spades can't even articulate his instincts to us. It's a split-second feeling he acts on, and by the time we react, he's already miles away."

The man grimaced, recalling the exhausting chase after Spades in-game, and slumped on the table. "He just leaves us searching in circles."

"Yeah, it's mostly a communication issue. Spades can barely say more than a few words before he's off again. I can't even get his attention with a gong," the Inquisitor lamented, propping his head in his hands, eyes distant. "Is there anyone who can teach Spades how to communicate with us?"

Inside the game, by the Ross Ice Shelf,

Spades gathered his belongings and strapped his walking gear to his sled board, tying the safety rope around his waist before dragging it forward. He looked down, removing the map from the lining of his punching bag. The fierce wind had crumpled it, but he scanned it quickly, confirming his next destination.

After visiting the buoy point in the Ross Sea, Spades had checked dozens more off his list. Now, only a few locations remained.

His eyes skimmed over the map, landing on the inland point of the South Pole. He exhaled a slow, white breath.

Edmond Observatory.

He remembered that this had been the location where the player Bai Liu had logged in with him.

Having identified his target, Spades drew his whip from behind his waist, adjusted the skis fixed to his feet, and leaned forward, knees slightly bent. He gazed across the unrelenting blizzard, locked onto a direction, and flung his arms to either side, sending his whip crashing into the ground.

The whip slammed into the snow, raising a thick layer around him.

Spades used the whip like a snowball, leveraging the tremendous reaction force from the quick swing to glide across the snow—almost like an orange-red bolt of lightning against the white landscape.

If the Inquisitors of the Gods were present, he would no doubt hiss at Spades for using such an expensive whip as a sled dog to propel himself forward.

But he wasn't there.

So Spades, his black goggles on, bent forward and swung his whip from side to side, gliding smoothly. Soon, he disappeared into the swirling snow and wind.

Tarzan Station.

Bai Liu had only stopped briefly at Tarzan Station before taking advantage of the situation. In a quick, decisive move, he and his team hijacked a helicopter parked outside and flew off before the Tarzan Station crowd even noticed.

The wind howled outside the helicopter, and flying in such weather, with visibility barely reaching thirty meters, was like dancing on the edge of death. The threat of disaster was ever-present.

But Tang Erda, the pilot, knew better than to disobey Bai Liu. Their tactician’s eyes gleamed with the excitement of an imminent, multi-million-dollar find. Even his breathing quickened, and his slender fingers tightened, whitening as he gripped the backrest of his seat.

"Where to?" Tang Erda hissed.

Bai Liu answered, "Edmond’s Observatory."

The Ice Age

The helicopter stumbled over the long white snowfields, forced to make two emergency landings due to gusty winds.

By the time Tang Erda's group arrived at the Edmond Observatory, it was nearly early morning on the third day.

The helicopter landed several kilometers from the Observatory.

With the wind and snow now calm, the Edmond Observatory appeared to be buried under a thick blanket of snow from a distance. However, oddly, the ground at the entrance had been cleared, revealing an open space beneath, and the door was half ajar.

Tang Erda immediately sensed something was wrong. "Someone's inside."

"Shit!" Mu Sicheng rubbed his arms, grimacing. "It's not our clones still holed up in there, is it?"

Bai Liu crouched by the flap door to the basement opening, beside the helicopter hangar.

A pungent smell of cold ash and strong acid wafted out from the basement's flap door.

The snow had been cleared from the door, which stood wide open. The two barrels of petrol Bai Liu had left before leaving were gone, and the basement inside was dark, with a little warm air spilling out.

From Bai Liu's perspective, the walls were covered in soot from incomplete fuel combustion, and the steps were slick with liquid and snow, showing that the fire had been recent and hadn't had time to freeze over.

Liu Jiayi, noticing the anomaly, crouched down beside Bai Liu. "It looks like after we left, the clones burned the monsters in the basement and poured strong acid to corrode them."

As she spoke, her gaze swept over the liquid covering the basement floor. She frowned in disbelief. "But I cleared out Edmond Observatory's supplies with Muke before we left, and I don't recall this much acid being stockpiled here."

Strong acids were a rare commodity, even in research stations. Liu Jiayi had been meticulous, taking care to clear out the acid before they left. Even then, she had to be cautious and calculating to deal with the monsters and make their escape.

Liu Jiayi crouched down, pulling out a piece of metal to catch two drops of acid dripping down the steps.

The metal quickly began corroding, and she frowned. "This guy's been pouring acid into the basement in buckets. Where did he get all this acid?"

The person who had cleared the basement had used the acid recklessly, spreading it across the walls and steps with a sense of wastefulness, as if they had no appreciation for the scarce resource it was.

"Then there's only one possibility." Bai Liu's eyes fixed on the slowly freezing acid.

Liu Jiayi snapped to attention. "Someone who played this game brought the acid themselves—Spades was here?!"

Just then, Mu Sicheng shouted from the first floor of the Observatory, "Shit! What the hell's going on?!"

Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi exchanged a look before drawing their weapons and heading for the door.

When they entered the observation post and ascended to the first floor, Liu Jiayi stayed alert, walking in front of Bai Liu with her gun ready. "What's wrong?"

Mu Sicheng turned toward them, his face streaked with blue and white. His trembling hand pointed toward the restaurant, his voice shaky with terror. "You... you guys, see for yourselves..."

Bai Liu moved past Mu Sicheng, looking toward the restaurant, then raised an eyebrow slightly.

He understood the horror on Mu Sicheng's face.

The seats in the dining room had been roughly shoved aside, and broken tables and benches were piled in scattered corners, leaving a large, open space in the center.

This clearing had been smashed by something, leaving behind a square-shaped hole.

The hole penetrated directly through the first-floor dining room floor, exposing the ground floor below.

A dense ring of bloody handprints marked the floor around the edge of the hole, indicating that a group of people had tried to climb their way up from below.

On the ground floor, directly beneath the hole, was a huge glass tank of water, which appeared to have fallen from the roof. It was now filled with thick acid so viscous that it barely flowed, gurgling and bubbling in reaction.

The tank contained various charred and broken bodies, as if they had been discarded like trash.

Most of these bodies were still reacting in the acid, their bloodied, writhing forms making strange, corrosive bubbling noises as they slapped their palms against the pool, occasionally shaking off their half-dissolved eyeballs.

What made Mu Sicheng shriek was the appearance of the bodies.

The people who disposed of the bodies had been crude, careless, and several faces had not been fully burned by the fuel, leaving them clearly identifiable.

These bodies had the faces of Bai Liu, Mu Sicheng, Tang Erda, Liu Jiayi, and Muke.

A group of charred corpses, bearing their own faces, struggled painfully in the thick acid, their skin, muscles, and bones slowly being devoured by the corrosive liquid.

Even knowing these were not people, but monsters, it was hard not to feel a shudder of empathetic discomfort.

Mu Sicheng took two steps back, distancing himself from the bloodstained hole. He swallowed nervously and spoke in a raspy voice. "Someone killed all the monsters that turned into us at Edmond Station."

"And they did it fast." Tang Erda crouched at the edge of the hole, touching the lingering bloodstains with two fingers. He looked up

with a stony expression. "The blood hasn't even clotted yet."

Bai Liu's gaze shifted from the bloodstains to Muke's face. "I thought you said these monsters, the ones that turned into us, had skills?"

"Yes." Muke looked shocked. His pupils were slightly constricted, and he seemed to struggle for a moment before answering Bai Liu's question. "We confronted these monsters before we left, and we almost got held hostage by them."

"But they weren't as strong as us. I think it's because they're still developing. Their abilities are only about half of ours." Liu Jiayi added, looking down with a heavy sigh.

"But there's not just one version of us here at Edmond Station," she continued. "There's a whole bunch of them."

"They took control of a group of monsters with abilities roughly similar to ours and subdued them quickly," she explained. "Then they smashed the floor with a whip, made an acid pool, and disposed of the bodies there."

Liu Jiayi's face hardened. "Spades' ability... it's too strong. He's even stronger than he was last year."

"We can't win against him, even as a group. So what do we do now?" She tilted her head, looking at Bai Liu, awaiting his thoughts.

Bai Liu crouched on one knee at the edge of the cave, staring for a moment at the [Bai Liu] submerged and dissolving in the acid pool below.

As the charred corpses with their own faces disintegrated into bones and then into bubbling particles and debris, Bai Liu stood, withdrawing his gaze and turning to the others.

"Search the entire observatory to figure out why Spades is here."

Half an hour later, the group had reconvened on the ground floor.

Muke, who specialized in memorizing and searching maps, was the first to report his findings.

"I've searched a lot of places, but it looks like they were searching for something specific. However, the searches were sketchy—not like they were looking for written information or small objects."

"Spades hasn't been found to have taken anything so far, so whatever he's looking for isn't here yet."

"He didn't even touch the rifles and bullets scattered around the fourth floor," Tang Erda added. "They're in the same condition as when we left."

Bai Liu sat down at the table and pulled out a piece of paper. Calmly, he summarized the situation. "First, we can be sure of one thing: Spades has repeatedly entered the game searching for something. It's most likely related to the main game line."

"Spades and I logged in together at Edmond Observatory at the beginning, but instead of searching the place, he left and went outside. From that, we can infer that at that time, Spades didn't think Edmond Observatory held what he was looking for."

Bai Liu paused for a moment, tapping the tip of his pen on the paper. "But now he's back."

Liu Jiayi soon realized why. "Spades didn't find what he was looking for outside, so he came back to Edmond Observatory to try his luck. He must have come across the replicas we left here, killed them, searched again, and still didn't find anything, so he left again."

Bai Liu's eyes narrowed, his pen thoughtfully tapping on the paper. "The real question is: What is Spades looking for, that he keeps coming back for it?"

"The main quest of this game is global warming, and Spades is probably looking for something related to that," Muke mused. "Is it possible that the boss at the end of the level is Edmond? According to the general design of the game, if you defeat the boss at the bottom of the level, you can clear the game and reach the [normal end]."

"I don't think Spades would be interested in just reaching the [normal end], given his abilities and how many times he's been in the game," Bai Liu countered.

The tip of his pen paused twice on the paper before he wrote the word [corpse].

Bai Liu looked up. "I think Spades is probably looking for a particle weather device made from a [corpse]. He's likely aiming for the [true end] of the game, to eliminate the possibility of global cooling at its source."

"In Edmond's method, he likely placed the particle weather device at one of the six hundred locations where he believed the Antarctic had an impact on the world's climate."

Muke was puzzled. "But the six hundred locations were marked on the map. If Spades wanted to find them, he could have just followed the map. There was no need to come to Edmond Observatory—there's no particle weather device here."

Bai Liu wrote down [600] and [Experimental Sample Preservation] on the paper, placing a question mark next to them.

He looked up at Muke. "That means Spades isn't looking for body parts among the six hundred particle devices. He's looking outside of them."

Muke repeated softly, "The corpse beyond these six hundred particle devices..."

As realization dawned on him, his eyes widened. "It's Edmond who hasn't done the experiment to turn it into a particle device corpse, right?!"

Bai Liu nodded lightly. "Edmond is an experienced researcher. He doesn't consume all the experimental material at once. He usually keeps some as samples. That's what Spades is after."

"Look through the lab report. Which of Edmond's preliminary pieces was left untouched?"

Muke quickly flipped through the report, his fingertips tracing the obscure entries until he found a word.

"Found it!"

"Among the three body parts Edmond acquired in the early days were the left hand, the hind ankle, and a whole heart with preserved arterial vessels and veins derived from it."

Muke looked up, excitement in his voice. "I found records of experiments on the left hand and hind ankle, but nothing about the heart. Edmond most likely kept it as a sample reserve!"

Bai Liu donned his gloves and hat, pushing open the door. "This heart is what Spades is looking for. It's the key to unlocking the [true end] of the game. Let's go."

The wind and snow swallowed Bai Liu's dark, deep eyes, carrying his calm voice into the dusk.

"We have to beat Spades to it by finding the heart before he destroys it."

The tide rises and falls along the ice-strewn shore, and the brown earth and white snow stretching inland are marked by a little Mu house of great age.

The house, an old-looking Little Mu cottage, has peeling paint on the door frame and floor rails, leaving leper-like stains on the exterior. Its roof is stacked precariously on decaying, load-bearing walls, held in place by planks arranged horizontally.

In front of the entrance, a sign resembling a tourist location plaque reads: [Scott's Cottage], followed by [Built in 1912].

This century-old cottage, now a heritage site, emanates warmth from within, as though someone is resting inside, roasting by the fire.

The fire crackles under the mantelpiece as an old man sits squinting on a wooden bench nearby.

He wears a pair of faded, gold-rimmed glasses, humming a song off-key, tapping his feet in time with the rhythm. His arms and legs are hunched, as if he's endured much over the years.

The firelight reflects off his pale, wrinkled face, casting shifting shadows against the walls.

From the dark shadows, Spades steps forward, standing at the edge of the firelight, his long whip in hand, his long eyelashes and hair dusted with snow that hasn't yet melted.

He looks at the old man, his voice clear and slow: "Edmond."

The old man opens one eye slightly, gazing over at Spades with a touch of helpless amusement. "There you go again, young man. You seem to enjoy coming to my place."

Edmond smiles amiably. "You've killed me many times... for that heart you can't always find?"

"Is that important to you?"

Spades opens his mouth to speak but instead answers the question,

"You shouldn’t remember that I killed you."

Edmond removes his glasses and looks at Spades with a soft smile. "Because I’m just an evil NPC in a game where every time this copy is supposed to start over with your departure, and I forget everything, right?"

Spades nods.

Edmond smiles. "Maybe I’ve lived too long and done things so cruelly that God won’t forgive me for remembering what I’ve done. I do remember you killing me so many times. You’re the most frequent visitor in this game. I almost want to be friends with you."

His gaze lingers on Spades' dripping whip for a moment. "Surely it would be nice if you didn’t strangle me with it as soon as you enter the game. The choking is always painful. I'd rather be burned, if you’ll let me choose how I die."

Spades agrees without hesitation. "Yes."

Edmond laughs loudly. "Son, I believe you really can't understand people's jokes anymore."

"That group of your teammates has been having a headache over you, right? That guy called [Inquisitor of the Reverse God] has been so distressed he couldn't resist pouring out his troubles to an NPC of mine. He said he didn't know what to do with you."

Edmond surveys Spades playfully. "He looked so sad he almost cried. It's a funny and troubling thing to have a friend like you."

Spades doesn’t judge others' definitions of him; he always speaks and acts straightforwardly. "Are you still not going to tell me where the heart is this time?"

Edmond's eyes reflect the firelight. Though he’s an old man, his eyes remain clear, almost as pure as the snow that fell 30,000 years ago beneath the Antarctic ice, a pale blue that is nearly icy.

"I can't, my boy." Edmond’s expression becomes distant, and he shakes his head. "You can kill me again, but I will never tell you where I hid the heart."

"That is my original sin, and only God knows where it hides."

Spades purses his lips into a straight line, clearly unhappy with the result. A subtle depression forms in the movement of his fingers, snapping the whip.

Edmond looks at him with the same friendly smile, a knowing look in his eyes. "You found all six hundred of my particle devices this time, too. I rarely see a player find them all without freezing to death. You're good."

"But there is one device that is ineffective." Spades looks at Edmond. "The device under Ice Dome A isn't filled with corpse particles, and I can't gather all six hundred corpse particles."

"But you've already won this game, haven't you?" Edmond shakes his head fervently, raising a finger for emphasis. "Your friend, the Reverse God, tells me you only care about winning and losing. You've got what you want, so why not let my secret remain just a secret forever?"

Edmond looks at Spades with a smile on his lips and his ice-shattered, light blue eyes glinting in the dusky campfire light. "Why are you so attached to a heart that doesn't belong to you? It's not romantic."

Spades pauses briefly—it seems he doesn't know the exact answer to this question, either.

"Intuition. I had to destroy the heart and all the body parts."

Spades raises his eyes. "Every man has his predetermined destiny, and I can see that the destiny of this heart is linked to me. It should be destroyed by me."

"Neither it nor I should exist in this world."

Edmond's smile fades, and he mutters, "You're self-destructing, son..."

"Hmm," Spades replies calmly, then asks, "What was the original sin you were trying to hide?"

Edmond's face loses its smile, showing the weariness that comes with age. He holds his forehead, letting out a long sigh, unable to hide the tired trance in his movements. "My original sin was the one thing I never realized I should repent for."

"I resented the things that persecuted me, hated the students who betrayed me, and pitied the friends I once aspired to." Edmond takes a deep, slow breath, exhaling like he's smoking, his gaze far away

through the fire at his feet. "I've never done a single thing worth repentance, but there is one thing that made me realize that there's more to my ugliness than that."

Edmond's hands tremble as they rest on the side of his chair. He closes his eyes, tears falling into the deep lines of his face, his voice hoarse and heavy. "Those are the body parts."

"That's not some corpse; that's the dismembered limb of a living creature—one who is conscious, who feels, who knows what I'm doing to him."

Edmond opens his eyes. His clear ones finally cloud, and he chokes out, "And I didn't know what I'd done until I saw the heart that kept beating."

"I'm abusing a living person."

Edmond turns his head to look at Spades, who seems to have aged in an instant.

"The plot of the game you speak of is, perhaps, my destiny. I'm drawn by this fate, by the unseen gods' threads, towards the abyss of self-destruction, forming a cycle that supplies the entertainment of others who come and go. I thought I could escape this terrible game myself."

"But after escaping, I found that I was only in a larger cycle of destiny again, always a toy in the hands of the gods who set my fate. Humans are always destined for self-destruction because of uncontrolled desires—a fate the gods gave us. They wanted to see this."

Edmond's eyes shake with tears. "All of us deserve to be punished for the cruelty we've been given by fate, but I know that in the eyes of the unseen god, the undue punishment I inflicted out of anger was just one piece of his calculated destiny."

"Everything I do is just... games."

Spades looks at him without a ripple of emotion. "But you can decide how you die this time."

"I will burn you as I wish, and it will be no game for you, nor for me."

Edmond smiles through his tears. "I know."

"It's... the victory you want, and the fate I want."

The other end.

Bai Liu was on the ground in a helicopter, having passed three points marked on the map—one of the six hundred locations.

But none of the results had been as promising as hoped.

The buoys on the surface had all been pulled out and destroyed. They didn't even need to sink to find them; the remains of the apparatus lay directly on the edge of the shore. The metal box had been casually dropped in the device, and the particles inside had been destroyed cleanly.

The particle devices on the ground had been released into the sky, tied to weather balloons.

Bai Liu's team had already seen several punctured balloons buried in the snow on the ground—just like those on the coast. The particles in the metal box had been destroyed.

The further they ventured toward the locations marked on the maps, the worse things became.

At the sight of the hollowed-out device next to Ice Dome A, Bai Liu gave the order to abort. "All six hundred devices should have been checked by Spades. Edmond wouldn't have hidden the heart in any of these six hundred locations."

"And where could he have hidden it?" Muke shouted over the gale so Bai Liu could hear him, "These six hundred locations include all the significant places to Edmond—Ice Dome A, the South Pole, Tarzan Station, Scott's hut. Could he have hidden the heart anywhere else?"

"There is." Bai Liu turned to Muke. "Do you remember what the main quest of this copy is?"

Muke nodded. "Global warming."

"If global cooling was Edmond's punishment for everyone—including himself—when their desires got out of hand, then global warming is an opportunity for him to transform." Bai Liu's breath turned to frost in the cold air.

As they spoke, Tang Erda steered the helicopter toward a new landing

site.

Bai Liu stepped out onto an open snowfield, the helicopter landing steadily behind him.

This was a new, untouched site—no footprints, no traces left behind. There were no devices placed here, no signs of anyone visiting. It was far from any observatories, and it didn’t even have a unique geographical name.

A strange, featureless location, no matter how you looked at it.

It was the spot Bai Liu had chosen for Tang Erda to land.

Muke jogged after Bai Liu, breathing heavily. "Bai Liu, do you think this is where Edmond hid his heart?"

He almost asked why Bai Liu thought this was the place, but Muke, having blind faith in him, thought he'd first dig in on his own.

However, someone else asked, and Mu Sicheng turned to Bai Liu, puzzled. "Why would Edmond hide his heart here? I don’t even know where this place is, and I haven’t seen it in any of Edmond's faxes or lab reports."

Bai Liu put on his anti-friction gloves and started helping Tang Erda carry the equipment for the ice excavation.

Mu Sicheng stepped forward to take over, watching Bai Liu with curious eyes.

Bai Liu leaned over, pulling a pile of lab reports from the back seat of the helicopter and handing them to Mu Sicheng. "Read and explain as you go—just as I said earlier, global cooling is Edmond’s punishment for humanity in his anger, but before that, global warming was also a punishment—a punishment mankind brought upon itself."

Mu Sicheng couldn't help but exclaim, "What have I done wrong? Why am I being punished for both the cold and the heat?"

Bai Liu chuckled softly. "Yes, it’s a Christian idea—being born with original sin and living is the process of atonement. If you view Edmond’s whole process as him asking humanity to atone for their sins, it becomes much clearer."

"He felt others were guilty, so he punished them. He thought Tarzan

Station was sinless, but even this sinlessness was a sin in a sinful environment, inviting bullying. So, Edmond was determined to sharpen Tarzan Station so they could survive as humans on Noah's Ark."

"Deep down, Edmond knew what he was doing was wrong and sinful. His own process of atonement," Bai Liu's eyes grew deep, "was to hide the heart that he himself had never touched—to protect the first innocent person he was forced to mutilate under various oppressive circumstances. He saved the heart both to preserve the experimental samples and to preserve his own 'original sin.'"

Bai Liu looked at Mu Sicheng. "What do you think—why would Edmond keep his original sin?"

Mu Sicheng shook his head honestly.

Bai Liu smiled. "The day he made up his mind to commit his crime, of course. And it took effect."

Mu Sicheng's eyes widened with questions. "What day was that again?"

"The tenth of August—the day he began pickling sauerkraut for the men of Tarzan Station." Bai Liu looked at the empty space in front of him, a smile curling on his lips. "And this location is the coldest place in the Antarctic on August 10th, according to Edmond's accumulated thirty-three years of temperature records."

"There is no better place to store a beating heart than this."

The Ice Age

Mu Sicheng looked down, flipping through the thick pile of temperature records Bai Liu had handed him from the past thirty-three years. He found the coldest spot on the tenth of August the previous year.

The records clearly indicated the latitude and longitude of this location—it was exactly where Bai Liu and his team were now.

Tang Erda moved the radar detector onto the ice, exhaled a hot breath, then straightened up and turned to Bai Liu. "The usual—probe first, then drill?"

Bai Liu nodded.

Tang Erda moved the weighing hydraulic hammer onto the ice. After carefully checking that there were no ice crevices in the vicinity, he climbed into the helicopter and began operating the instrument.

Liu Jiayi followed him back to the helicopter.

The wind was so fierce in this part of the world that it almost felt like it could flatten her, forcing her to return to the helicopter.

Liu Jiayi leaned her hands on the driver's seat, her feet perched awkwardly, straining to see the radar screen on the dashboard.

The instrument scanned layer by layer, and finally, at over a thousand meters, it detected a regular metal object. This discovery made her frown. "That deep? How long will it take to dig?"

"A conservative estimate is over six hours," Tang Erda replied, rubbing her frozen hands from carrying the instruments. "It’s a bit of a problem. It's so cold here that even if we work in shifts, the others won't be able to warm up. The fuel is running low too."

"It would be dangerous to force the excavation."

Liu Jiayi glanced at the thermometer hanging near Tang Erda’s hand and looked up at him, asking, "But it’s not that cold here. It’s only about -30°C. Haven't you worked in -50°C conditions at Taishan Station before? Why is it more dangerous to work here?"

"Because of the wind," Tang Erda explained, his tone stony. "In

Antarctica, the wind is colder than the snow."

"Cold temperatures only slowly take away heat from a person. But high-speed winds can strip away body temperature much more quickly. If we're working in this kind of wind with imperfect equipment and warmth, we'll lose heat far too quickly and risk freezing to death from the wind."

Tang Erda glanced over at Bai Liu and the others outside the helicopter, stabilizing the equipment.

Within minutes, Mu Sicheng and Muke had turned purple from the cold. They kept moving lightly on the snow to stay warm. Tang Erda showed rare concern. "I'll go down and replace them."

"But you won't last long in these gales. You'll freeze just like the rest," Liu Jiayi said sharply. "Even if we take turns digging and forcing our hearts to continue, it's just a matter of time before we freeze to death. We're out of supplies to warm up, and the fuel is nearly gone, right?"

Liu Jiayi paused, struggling to hold back her words, but eventually spoke out.

"We don't need to keep playing Spades for now. We can't win against him at this stage. We should convince Bai Liu to log out first."

"Both this task of excavating a heart a kilometer down and beating Spades are too much bravado for us!"

Liu Jiayi was clinging to the side of the helicopter, her eyes red with faint tears. Her voice, almost lost in the snow and wind, sounded like that of a helpless little girl.

"Spades... he's really terrifying. I saw Hearts face him, and she asked me if I could save her from Spades. I didn't answer her then."

"But I can tell you the answer now—it's no. I can't save any of my teammates from Spades." Liu Jiayi stifled a sob, her thin white fingers clutching the side of the helicopter. "I don't want to see Spades kill Bai Liu, like when he threw [Bai Liu] into the pool of strong acid before."

"He's bound to lose, and I can't save him."

Liu Jiayi cried softly. "But I'm not sure I can persuade Bai Liu to leave the game. He trusts you more—can you help me convince him?"

Tang Erda looked back at the little girl, her eyes glistening with tears. There was a fragile, pleading look in her face, one that made him realize—this little witch, who had once been bloody, cruel, and incredibly clever, was also afraid.

The scene she witnessed at Edmond Station earlier still haunted her.

Despite the fact that the frightened girl had shown no sign of it since boarding the plane, she had remained so calm, waiting for Bai Liu to leave before attempting to conspire against him.

Tang Erda paused slightly as he stepped outside, then turned back to the helicopter, tilting his head toward Liu Jiayi at the door. The wind blew the animal fleece around the edge of his hat.

Liu Jiayi was right, but Bai Liu was the tactician.

This was an unquestionable fact.

"Are you questioning the tactician's decision?" Tang Erda asked in a hushed voice.

Liu Jiayi bit her lower lip, silent.

"Never question the tactician's decisions," Tang Erda said firmly, looking straight at Liu Jiayi. "The moment he made the decision, he was ready to give his life for victory. Bai Liu understands the consequences of all this better than you do."

"But for the tactician, winning the game is all that matters. Your job, as his player, is to execute his decisions and win the game."

Liu Jiayi's voice was hoarse. "Even if Bai Liu dies for this victory, it doesn't matter, does it?"

Tang Erda replied calmly, "Yes, it doesn't matter."

"Because that's what he wants."

Tang Erda finished and turned to leave, making heavy footprints in the snow.

Liu Jiayi stood by the door, staring down at the footprints for a moment. She took a deep breath, rubbed the tears from her eyes, then turned back to the door and began rummaging through the boxes for maps and information.

She gritted her teeth, her thoughts hardening. Let's survive. Let's get through this and retrieve the heart first.

We can't freeze to death here!

By the time Bai Liu and his team were rotated back in by Tang Erda with the drill, Liu Jiayi had expertly set up camp in the snow and brought out heating equipment to keep the three men warm.

Mu Sicheng, shivering with a cup of hot water in his hands, could barely speak through his chattering teeth: "Shit—ah—it's—too—cold!"

Liu Jiayi handed Bai Liu a small plush blanket. He took it and wiped the ends of his hair. "Thank you."

"We're running out of fuel," Liu Jiayi said calmly once the group had settled down. She then outlined their dilemma. "There's just enough fuel for the helicopter to fly, but not enough to last for six hours."

Bai Liu thought for a moment before offering a solution. "Are there any other observation posts nearby? We can check the map and see if there's fuel and supplies to replenish."

"Yes, I thought the same thing," Liu Jiayi said, pulling out a map and laying it between them. "But after checking it carefully, I found only one place where there might be a stockpile of supplies."

She pointed to a small symbol on the map. "This is the Scott Hut, a relic left by early explorers who came over in 1912."

Muke poked his head around, breathing into his palms. "But would a historic building like this, made of wood and highly flammable, really have a large reserve of fuel?"

"Yes," Liu Jiayi replied, nodding confidently. "I looked through Edmond's books, and there's a tourist brochure that mentions this Scott Hut. The Little Mu house is still maintained and refurbished, and people live near it, so there's a fuel reserve."

Bai Liu nodded. "It's not far from here. We can head straight to the Scott Hut first."

He gave his orders. "Muke, Mu Sicheng, and Jiayi, come with me. Take a small amount of fuel and supplies, but leave most of the rest for Captain Tang. He's hardy, has helicopter piloting skills, and knows Antarctica better, so he should focus on drilling and digging here."

"We'll give him a satellite call once we reach the hut. If there's fuel, have him come over to refuel. If not, we'll keep him where he is."

Bai Liu looked around the room. "Any objections?"

Muke and Mu Sicheng answered in unison: "No."

Liu Jiayi pursed her lips, remaining silent.

Bai Liu studied her quietly.

After a moment, Liu Jiayi raised her red eyes to meet his. "Do you really have to win against Spades?"

Bai Liu smiled. "I have to."

Although she had expected this answer, Liu Jiayi couldn't help but scold him. "Does it not matter to you if you die?"

Bai Liu smiled again as he stood up. He patted Liu Jiayi's head, then gently wiped away the tears she was holding back with his thumb before pulling her into a hug. "I promise I'll beat him before I die."

The group left Tang Erda behind and set off toward Scott's Hut with their sleds.

Scott's Hut was indeed close, and they walked for only a short while before seeing the nostalgic building on the coast.

A faint light glowed from the Little Mu room, and a warm heat greeted the group after their journey through the snow and wind. The warmth was so comforting that Mu Sicheng couldn't help but relax, his shoulders easing as the cold left him.

Bai Liu set aside his sled, removed his snow boots, grabbed his whip, and entered Scott's Hut.

Inside, an old man sat on a creaking wooden stool, his eyes half-closed as he warmed himself by the fireplace. He was dozing, his arms crossed over his belly, his beard twitching as small snorts escaped the corner of his mouth in his sleep.

The sound of Bai Liu's footsteps entering and the wind chill breaking in through the door woke him. He blinked his sleepy eyes, then saw Bai Liu standing just a few meters away.

The old man didn't seem distressed by the unexpected visitor. Instead,

he raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Look what we have here."

Edmond's gaze fell on the whip in Bai Liu’s hand, and he smiled. "Another new guest who likes to use the whip."

"The other guest with the whip left for the time being, saying he'd give me the death I wanted when he found the heart."

Edmond gazed at Bai Liu calmly, almost peacefully, a smile playing on his lips as though he had been expecting this moment. "But I know he won't find it. It's not his heart; it's yours. You found where I hid it, didn't you?"

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow, turning a wooden stool around to sit, his gaze fixed on Edmond with mild interest. "You don't seem like a simple NPC. How do you know?"

Edmond removed the charming glasses hanging from his ears. Beneath them, his eyes, cold and encased in floating crushed ice, seemed to hold an endless depth of sorrow.

In a trance, he gently touched Bai Liu's hand with his withered knuckles. "I've seen you, in someone's prophetic dream."

Bai Liu frowned. "Who's in the prophecy?"

"[The Judge Against God]," Edmond murmured softly, his eyes lidding lazily, "a man who betrayed God. I absorbed his memories, so I saw the truth of everything—everything about the future and the prophecy concerning you."

"I was awakened by it," he continued, a faraway look in his eyes. "I could no longer forget what happened, nor could I fade into death, because it wasn't real. I knew I would come back to life."

"In the end, I had to punish myself, over and over, at the hands of players like you, just to keep myself from vanishing."

"Only God—only God can completely erase my sins and destroy the existence of this game-like, evil world."

Edmond's unfocused eyes met Bai Liu's as his lips trembled. "I saw in the prophecy that you could do all of this."

"It was a prophecy of both hope and despair, a destiny that belongs to you—and to God."

Edmond's voice took on a distant, almost holy tone as he recited the

prophecy.

"The evil god boasts that there will be those who drift in his shadow. The man in the shadow is fourteen years old. Then the evil god gave this man a spine, a heart, and a divine emblem. It boasts that this person will be its only believer. The man in the shadow is twenty-four years old. Then the evil gods fell in the snowy plains, and the dead faithful drifted into the deep."

"The backbone, the heart, the divine emblem—shattered."

Edmond's gaze fixed on Bai Liu, his words like a curse. "The evil gods change, the gods die because of you—because evil lives forever."

As he finished, Edmond arched his back and coughed violently, as if struck by some irresistible curse. He quickly pulled a bloodstained silk scarf from his pocket and covered his mouth, coughing up blood with a hoarse, rasping sound.

He tilted his head as if he could barely breathe, his face twisted in pain as he gasped for air, clutching Bai Liu's hand with a death grip.

"Only the game that God has tread upon is real," Edmond gasped, his voice thin and strained. "Only the game that God has rejected is destroyable. Only the monster that God has slain will never exist again."

"Bai Liu," he choked, his bloodshot eyes staring at him intensely, "the moment you enter this game, it is real in every dimension."

"If Spades truly destroyed those corpses, Tawil would no longer exist in any place, at any point in time."

"It would crack, weaken, like all the monsters you've faced before. It would disappear completely, forever—erased from all the worlds that can perceive it, leaving no trace that it ever existed."

"It is not invincible, my son. The death you've dealt is its only weakness."

Edmond's face turned a suffocating shade of pale, his voice barely audible as his eyes welled up with tears, as though an invisible hand was throttling his throat, preventing him from speaking further. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"I know it's important to you, but my son, no one can escape their fate

—not even God."

"The price for defying fate is more than you can imagine."

When Edmond released his grip on Bai Liu's hand, it felt as though the invisible grip around his throat loosened as well.

He staggered off the stool, gasping and coughing weakly, before pulling a small tin bottle of vodka from his fanny pack. He tilted his head back, taking two quick swigs to catch his breath.

Bai Liu's face remained expressionless, his hands still resting on the table in Edmond's firm grasp. His dark eyes were unwavering as he stared across the table at the older man.

"Since there's a price for defying fate," Bai Liu said calmly, "it's simply a trade."

Edmond's cheeks flushed red as he met his gaze. "It was indeed a bargain, but the price was too steep. The god who bargained with us for our fate was too greedy—a man no one could redeem from his hand."

Bai Liu's tone remained even. "Since we can't trade, let's kill him and make someone else a god."

With those words, he stood and casually pushed away from the table, as though nothing had transpired. Edmond shook his head and waved his hand in resignation.

"I know what you're here for," he muttered, his voice still hoarse. "The fuel is at the back of the house. You can take it."

He took another sip of the vodka, muttering to himself, "Just save a barrel for me... I'll use it to burn myself."

"Everything... is almost over."

Without a word, Bai Liu turned and left.

The group took the fuel and headed back. Edmond seemed to have known they were coming, already strapping the fuel to the sleds. There was no need to call Tang Erda to fly a helicopter over to pull the load.

Everything was going smoothly, but the mood on the way back was unexpectedly heavy. Silence fell over them, and the atmosphere was

filled with a sense of unease.

Mu Sicheng wanted to ask about the prophecy, but the overwhelmed look on Liu Jiayi's face stopped him from speaking up.

Bai Liu handed over the fuel to Tang Erda with an air of calm, then returned to the helicopter to record the data. He sent the others to the tent to warm up before preparing for Tang Erda's turn later.

Everything seemed to be running without a hitch, but instead of going into the tent to warm up as Bai Liu had hoped, Liu Jiayi climbed into the helicopter.

Shivering with cold, her grey eyes red from the wind, she spoke in a hoarse voice, struggling to hold back her emotions. "Bai Liu, what do you want?"

Bai Liu, sitting in the driver's seat, didn't turn around to answer her. It was a rare occurrence for him to remain silent.

Though he appeared authoritarian, ever since Liu Jiayi had spoken to him, Bai Liu had been asking everyone's opinion before making decisions. He wasn't the typical hard-nosed tactician, but rather someone who listened and never shied away from talking to his players about their concerns.

Liu Jiayi's hesitation was unexpected, as it was a challenge to Bai Liu's usual style. Yet, his silence confirmed her suspicions.

Bai Liu… was really going to do something out of the ordinary.

Liu Jiayi asked again, her voice trembling, "Bai Liu, can you look me in the eye and tell me what was going through your mind when Edmond said Tawil would disappear?"

Bai Liu still didn't turn around but finally spoke, "I'm trying to figure out how to beat Spades."

"Without destroying Tawil's heart, right?!" Liu Jiayi's voice was almost shrill now.

She struggled to remain calm. "Bai Liu, wake up! Spades already played the [true end] line. Most of Tawil's corpses have been destroyed by him. You have to destroy the heart if you want to pass the game."

"Even if you can beat Spades and force him out of the game, if you protect Tawil from destruction and prevent this game from ending, then you'll have to stay here forever—"

"- With this heart, in this snowfield," Bai Liu finished her sentence in a flat tone. "As long as there's one player trapped in the game, it will never end. The game's ending can't be loaded into reality; time will stand still. Tawil will always exist, even with just one heart left."

Liu Jiayi burst into tears, her voice shaking as she cursed, "What the hell, Bai Liu! You're crazy! You'll freeze to death out here!"

She tried to stay composed, but the words came out harshly. "Bai Liu, the system shop and warehouse in the game pool are closed. We can't put any game into the pool for reincarnation until the game ends. If you stay here and force us out, no one will ever find you again. Even if you use soul notes, you won't be able to contact us."

"You'll be left here alone, watching your supplies dwindle, until you starve and freeze to death!"

Liu Jiayi could already guess what Bai Liu would do next. He would force them out. She knew him too well.

But Bai Liu didn't deny it. Instead, he smiled at her. "I won't. I can eat the flesh of monsters, become a monster, and survive..."

Before he could finish, Liu Jiayi, in a moment of frustration, stepped forward and raised her hand to slap him.

Bai Liu deflected the blow with ease.

"You're a beast, Bai Liu." Liu Jiayi's voice trembled with tears as she glared at him, her cheeks flushed from crying. "What happened to you? You need to tell me what the hell is going on with you."

Knowing what Bai Liu was going to do, knowing that he'd always done things his way, that he was unstoppable and determined—Liu Jiayi couldn't stop him. She could only guess his actions and watch him carry them out.

Unable to hold back any longer, Liu Jiayi's tears flowed freely as she cursed, "Bai Liu, you're a real piece of work. I must be blind to be on your team."

Bai Liu lowered his gaze, feeling the sting of her slap, a small five-

finger mark on his face. "I’m sorry."

Liu Jiayi turned away, her shoulders shaking as she sniffled.

Since joining the team, Bai Liu had never apologized to anyone. Yet, here he was, apologizing to her twice. But it didn't change anything. He still cared more about others than himself, always focused on the bigger picture.

Who cared if he apologized? He just didn’t understand. He didn’t know...

Liu Jiayi’s mind was in turmoil again, and she wanted to slap him once more. But in the end, she simply collapsed back into her seat, exhausted. The seat felt too wide for her, and she hugged herself, curling into a ball.

In a soft, disoriented voice, she asked, "Is Tawil really that important to you?"

Bai Liu, looking out the window of the helicopter, didn’t answer right away.

The snow and wind outside had stopped, and the rare Antarctic daylight shone brightly across the snowy surface. The light refracted through the glass, casting a soft, pale glow on Bai Liu’s face.

He was smiling—gently, almost like the snow melting on his face.

"Yes." Bai Liu turned to Liu Jiayi, his voice the softest it had ever been.

His brow arched slightly as he repeated, "Yes."

"He’s very, very important."

The Ice Age

"So, what are you going to do with... us?" Liu Jiayi shrank back into her seat, burying her head in her knees. "You're going to throw us out of the game, and then what?"

"I'm not going to throw you out of the game. You still have things to do for me," Bai Liu replied, looking at Liu Jiayi.

Liu Jiayi raised her head slightly, her eyes red as she met his gaze. "What is it?"

"Because no one has cleared Ice Age yet, no [end] line has appeared. That means the game's counterpart to reality is stagnant. The subplot hasn't been loaded into reality, so there's still room for things to change in reality."

Bai Liu continued, "I need you to leave the game and stop that plane from crashing in the Antarctic."

Liu Jiayi sat up, realizing there was still a chance to act. She frowned and asked, "But the way this game loads into reality, the plane is probably already over the Antarctic. As soon as we log out, time will start flowing normally in reality, and it won't be long before it crashes."

"We can't stop a plane that's about to crash, especially not in the Antarctic."

Bai Liu smiled. "No, someone can."

Liu Jiayi tilted her head in confusion. "Who?"

Bai Liu replied, "Du Sanying."

Just then, Tang Erda knocked on the helicopter's hatch. "I can already faintly see the outline of the metal box."

He exhaled a white breath, frost hanging from his brow and hair. But his scowl was even more chilling than the cold. "It's a box from the Bureau of Heresy."

Reality, over the Antarctic.

The five escorts aboard the biplane sensed something was wrong as it neared landing. They hadn't received the long-dialed communication signal.

Exchanging uneasy glances, a sense of foreboding settled over them.

"Aircraft—zzzz—calling ground comms—zzzz—encountering heavy cloud and turbulence, come in..."

The radio remained silent. The air currents, now stronger and bumpier, hit both wings, causing the escorts to take a deep breath, bracing for the worst.

"What's up ahead?"

"The Ross Sea."

"Prepare for a forced landing."

Antarctica, open area in front of the observatory near Ice Dome A.

A group of observers in bright red rash suits rubbed their hands and stomped their feet as they anxiously looked up at the sky, whispering among themselves.

"I thought we were supposed to line up the ice fissures to facilitate the plane’s landing today. Why aren't we there yet?"

"I don't know. I just came out of the observatory. The liaison officer inside said they hadn’t been able to contact the pilot for a while. The satellite phone's been used every way possible, but there's no signal..."

"Nothing’s going to happen, is it?"

Bureau of Heresy Handling, Region I.

Su Yang, looking exhausted and tense, walked through the long, dimly lit corridors in a captain’s uniform that was slightly too big for him. He rounded a corner and entered a mechanical room.

The room was cluttered—coffee cups were strewn across tables, and several ground communicators, haggard with exhaustion, stared at the big screen.

These men, with black and blue eyes, looked as though they could collapse at any moment.

Captain Su's high-priority task of transporting body parts had kept everyone on edge.

Since the escort had left port and crossed the Antarctic, the ground communicators had been working non-stop, doing overtime for days without rest.

But even with such vigilance, just as the plane was about to reach the South Pole, something went terribly wrong.

By some means, they could no longer establish contact with the five escorts on the plane.

One of the communicators turned to Su Yang with a grimace. "Captain Su, what should we do?"

Su Yang hadn't closed his eyes since sending off the escort. He stared at the pure white surface of the Antarctic snow displayed on the big screen, his mind momentarily blank, overwhelmed by the blinding color.

A wave of helplessness washed over him. No matter what they did, it felt like nothing could stop the inevitable.

"Is that why [the prophet] has supreme authority in the Heresy Bureau?" Cen Buming appeared beside the disoriented Su Yang.

Su Yang, still in a daze, turned to him. "Captain Cen..."

Cen Buming crossed his arms, his hawk-like yellow eyes scanning the snow before he turned to Su Yang. "Because [seeing] is far more important than [doing]."

"Fate has its own path, and we, the men of the cards, can only obey."

Without another word, Cen Buming brushed past Su Yang, his footsteps resolute. "Prepare to collect the bodies of the five escorts."

"Captain Su, what should we do?"

"Captain Su, are we still in touch?"

"Captain Su..."

"Captain Su..."

Su Yang closed his eyes, leaning heavily on the edge of the table. His

voice was hoarse, but firm. "Live and let die. Tell the Antarctic team to prepare search and rescue crews... and body bags."

"Bring me back the man, no matter what."

In-game.

Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng took over from Tang Erda to continue the work. The wind had calmed down, replaced by the harsh, direct rays of the sun and intense UV light.

Mu Sicheng, sweating, felt the temperature on the ice rise, creeping uncomfortably closer to his core.

"Tch, what's going on?" Mu Sicheng muttered, adjusting his collar as heat and sweat rose together. "Why is it suddenly getting so hot? Could it get any more miserable here?"

Bai Liu crouched down, inspecting the ice, which was visibly starting to melt. "It’s not that the weather has suddenly gotten warmer," he explained. "It’s because we have to dig out the heart and complete the main quest, so the globe is beginning to warm up."

Tang Erda peeked out from the helicopter and shouted, "Bai Liu, the temperature is rising abnormally. It's above zero now!"

He jumped out of the helicopter, walking up to Bai Liu. "At this rate, the ice will melt quickly."

Bai Liu shook his head. "I don't think it’s just a rapid melt. The heart is likely the core part of Edmond’s device for global cooling, and it’s the final piece in the [true end] line."

"If it's taken out, I suspect this global warming will cause the entire Antarctic ice cap to melt."

Tang Erda frowned. "Wouldn't that turn Antarctica into a vast ocean?"

Bai Liu looked up at him. "There's more trouble than that."

"If the ice cap melts completely, the size of Antarctica would shrink drastically. The loss of ice and snow would lead to dramatic climate changes, and the extreme weather—like blizzards—would subside, making it easier for us to be tracked on such a map."

Bai Liu paused, then added, "It will increase the speed at which Spades finds us."

His meaning was clear: if they didn't hide the heart, it was only a matter of time before Spades came looking for it.

Tang Erda frowned. "But where can we hide it? Spades is fast and has incredible movement speed. He can scout all of Antarctica at any time, anywhere. You can't just hide the heart somewhere safe."

He sighed sharply. "Apart from his lack of skill in decryption, this guy is the perfect lead attacker."

Bai Liu smiled. "That’s exactly it. Let’s make a puzzle for him."

Tang Erda blinked. "A puzzle?"

Bai Liu grinned. "Hide the wood in the forest."

Scott Cottage.

With the rapidly rising temperatures, the snow around the hut melted, revealing a muddy mess that stained the wooden boards.

When Bai Liu arrived again, Edmond was stunned. "You’ve dug up the heart?"

"Yes," Bai Liu replied, handing Edmond the metal box. "There’s something I need you to do for me."

Edmond took the box, growing increasingly suspicious. "Is this the box for the heart? Why are you giving it to me?"

Bai Liu smiled. "Please, Professor, do me a favor and hide this heart from Spades."

Edmond let out a bitter laugh. "Son, Spades is the most frequent player here. He probably knows the terrain better than I do. I’m not sure I can find a place to hide the heart in Antarctica where Spades won’t find it."

Bai Liu remained calm. "Maybe I have a place in mind where Fang Ke can hide it. Of course, it’s not perfect and there's a chance it could be found. But for now, in the Ice Age game, it’s the strangest place for Spades to look."

Edmond raised an eyebrow. "What place?"

Bai Liu locked eyes with him. "In my body."

Edmond chuckled, teasing, "How can you hide another heart inside you when you already have one? You can't use two hearts when it comes to love."

Bai Liu replied, completely unfazed, "Just cut out my heart, and there it is."

Edmond froze, realizing Bai Liu wasn't joking.

He stared back and forth between Bai Liu and the box in his hands, incredulity creeping across his face.

"Are you crazy? You want me to take your heart and put this one in its place?!" Edmond sputtered.

"You'll turn into a monster!" Edmond's voice was filled with disbelief as he held up the box with the heart. "You're a real person, with a real life. You're nothing like the product of a game like me."

"Do you understand what this means?!" Edmond hissed, trembling. "If I put the heart inside you and it merges with you, you'll become... a complete monster!"

Bai Liu tilted his head slightly, glancing at the box in Edmond's hand before lowering his gaze to meet his eyes.

"I've always been a monster."

Edmond staggered back a couple of steps, staring at Bai Liu for a long, silent moment. He then collapsed back into his chair, clearly exhausted.

"But even if you hide the heart in your body, it's not enough," Edmond finally said, looking up. "Spades might still find it. After all, he's good at everything, except decryption..."

Bai Liu nodded. "I know. That's why I have a puzzle for him."

"Professor, is there any way you can create a large number of [Bai Liu]s and perform the same heart surgery on each one, inputting my memories from before the surgery and then hiding me among them?"

Edmond looked at Bai Liu, wide-eyed. "Are you trying to... create a multiple-choice question for Spades about hiding wood in the forest?"

"Exactly." Bai Liu lowered his gaze. "And it’s a multiple-choice question with no answer."

"Every [Bai Liu] will think they’re the real one, and they’ll believe the hidden heart is the real heart. Even I won’t know if I’m real or not, and I won’t know who the mystery is."

Bai Liu met Edmond’s eyes. "Just keep making [Bai Liu]s. You’ll dilute Spades’ chances of finding the right one. It’s a puzzle no one can solve."

"We’ll grind it out until he quits the game, and I win."

Edmond sat quietly on the wooden bench, deep in thought.

"Do you know what I see on your face?" he whispered. "I see the me before the experiment—the frenzied madness of doing whatever it takes to save what I love."

Edmond looked up, tears in his eyes. "I’ll help you, son... even if it’s wrong."

Bai Liu nodded, sincerely grateful. "Thank you, Professor Edmond."

The coastline rose higher, and the ice melted smoother under the sun’s rays, continuing to soften until the last sliver of daylight disappeared over the horizon.

Yet, the temperature kept rising.

"It's almost ten degrees." Tang Erda removed his rash guard, scanning the surroundings with a furrowed brow. "Why hasn't Bai Liu returned yet? Didn't he say he'd take the heart to Edmond's to unlock the final episode and destroy it to clear the game and leave?"

Tang Erda hadn't gone with Bai Liu to Little Mu House, so he didn’t know what Edmond had said to him. He also didn’t know the outcome of destroying the heart.

Liu Jiayi pursed her lips, remaining silent, while Muke glanced at her.

Mu Sicheng echoed Tang Erda’s concern: "Yeah, how long has it been?"

"If he doesn't come back soon, the water level is going to rise over us."

Tang Erda looked at the ice floes, now in tatters. "Get on the helicopter—NOW!"

Before Tang Erda could finish his sentence, a jet-black whip shot through the air with unstoppable force, wrapping around the helicopter's landing gear and pulling it back. The sudden motion sent Tang Erda tumbling off his feet.

"Shit! It's Spades!"

Mu Sicheng reacted instinctively, using his skills to open his hands like claws, trying to catch the black whip.

The whip, light yet vicious, struck his palm, and a searing pain shot through his hand, as if every bone had been shattered. Before he could warn the others, the whip flung him beneath the thick ice.

Blood welled up in his mouth as his chest caved in from the impact.

Without hesitation, Tang Erda drew his gun and fired rapidly at Spades, who emerged from the mist, whip in hand. Spades moved with a cold, unflinching expression, flicking his wrist and sending the whip dancing in front of him in an impenetrable streak. The sound of bullets striking the whip rang out in sharp cracks.

Tang Erda's aim was precise—he shot at Spades' shoulder and the hand holding the whip. His intent was clear: disarm Spades.

Though Spades was wounded, blood dripping from his shoulder, he didn't stop. Instead, he continued to close the distance.

Tang Erda backed up, an overwhelming sense of pressure mounting. He shifted into his monster form, [Rose Hunter], and switched to his extended revolver, firing faster.

Spades took several more shots, blood soaking into his clothes, but still, he didn't stop. His focus wasn't on the group—it was on the helicopter.

With relentless precision, Spades smashed the helicopter several times, using his whip to drag its wreckage across the ice, as if searching for something.

When he didn't find what he was looking for, he dropped his whip and turned toward Tang Erda. "Don't you have the heart?"

It dawned on Tang Erda then: Spades wasn't interested in attacking them. He fired two more shots, testing Spades' reaction, pretending that his gun couldn't fire.

Spades was struck, but instead of retaliating, he simply looked at Tang Erda, waiting for an answer.

"The heart isn't with us," Tang Erda replied.

Spades nodded and, without hesitation, lashed out with his whip twice. He looked up, a cold glint in his eyes. "I knew you could've stopped earlier. Here's your two shots back."

Tang Erda: "..."

Spades turned away and walked off, seemingly satisfied.

Mu Sicheng, helped to his feet, spat blood in confusion. "He just came to ask questions? Why'd he hit me?"

Had Spades been present to hear that, he might've simply thought: better to deal with Mu Sicheng first, or he'd get annoying later.

But since Spades wasn't there to explain, Mu Sicheng was left to wonder.

Muke gazed anxiously at Spades' retreating figure. "He's probably gone to find Bai Liu."

"Bai Liu will be fine," Liu Jiayi said, her voice steady. "All he has to do is destroy the heart, and then we're done. We need to exit the game before he clears it so time freezes in reality and we can go fix things."

Tang Erda's eyes snapped to Liu Jiayi. "Bai Liu told you how to fix things in reality?"

"He did," Liu Jiayi responded.

Tang Erda exhaled in relief, a rare smile forming. "He always has a plan. Let's log out of the game."

Mu Sicheng relaxed and scolded with a grin, "Why didn't you tell me sooner? You scared the hell out of me. I thought something had happened to him."

"Honestly, what could happen to Bai Liu, the dog, in the game?" he added, chuckling.

Liu Jiayi clenched her fist, a quiet resolve in her eyes.

No one questioned Bai Liu's decisions, and no one doubted his abilities.

He was always omnipotent—he could do no wrong, had no weaknesses.

That's what Liu Jiayi believed, and that's why she always... wanted to wait a little longer.

Maybe Bai Liu would pop back in, smile, say everything was handled, and they'd all log out of the game.

But with Spades' appearance, the illusion of peace shattered. Immediate plans needed to be made.

She had to prepare for Bai Liu's defeat and get the team out of the game before Spades returned.

Bai Liu's smile, fake yet warm, appeared in her mind.

"[Jiayi, you're a smart girl. You know what to do. I'll leave the team to you for now, while I'm away.]"

"[You were always meant to fill the second tactician position, and now I see you've got what it takes.]"

He smiled, praising her: "[Because no one is more suited for this than you, Jiayi.]"

Liu Jiayi gritted her teeth and, with steely determination, ordered, "Log out of the game. Now."

Scott's hut had been completely submerged, and Spades, who had arrived on an ice floe, looked down at the abandoned structure bobbing beneath the water.

Spades unzipped his heavy punching suit and spiked shoes, then leaped into the water. He swam toward the Little Mu House, weaving through the submerged area until something unfamiliar caught his attention. Instinctively, he veered his head to the side, and a pure white bone whip stabbed out from behind his ear.

Bai Liu, dressed in a white shirt and trousers, looked up at him from

underwater with a smile, delivering a second jab without hesitation.

Spades flung his hand open, noticing blood oozing from Bai Liu's chest. Without thinking, Spades reached up, grabbed the collar of Bai Liu's shirt, and yanked it open. The buttons burst in the water, suspended in all directions. Bai Liu's pale chest revealed a long, fresh scar running along the entire right side, still bleeding as though it had only just been made.

Spades stared at the scar for a moment, then glanced up at Bai Liu. As Spades approached, he grabbed Bai Liu by the neck, squeezing with lethal force.

The [body] sank downward.

Spades opened his mouth, bubbles spilling from the corners of his lips as he muttered, "Poor quality."

He emerged from the water, tumbling onto the shore, and frowned in frustration. "What a pain in the ass…"

This Bai Liu had multiple replicas hidden beneath the water. These imitations were difficult to kill, especially in a map like this, where the Antarctic was rapidly melting and the environment was flooded. Killing the weaknesses of these monsters, whether through fire or strong acid, was nearly impossible.

To make matters worse, Bai Liu had hidden his heart within one of these bodies. But as soon as one Bai Liu was defeated, another would quickly resurface. Even if the real Bai Liu were captured among the many, with all the replicas possessing the same memories, it was unlikely Bai Liu would even be able to identify which one contained the true heart.

It was a game designed to be unsolvable.

Spades didn't like this game of whack-a-mole, so he sat on the ice, water dripping off his chin, empty eyes staring out into the distance. He wasn't good at dealing with situations like this, just as he wasn't good at handling tacticians.

This Bai Liu had been a pretty good tactician, the first to actually trap him using his own body. Usually, it was the tactician who struggled with Spades, both in and out of the game.

Spades sat for a long while before standing, his gaze lingering on the

calm waters for a while longer.

There is no such thing as an unsolvable game in this world.

A voice whispered in his ear, a chuckle accompanying the words. The speaker leaned over his shoulder, his dark eyes filled with both malice and innocence.

But Spades couldn't remember what the person looked like, or who they were. He only remembered the words spoken to him.

A game is designed, then deliberately presented to someone, hoping they can solve it. That's why there's no such thing as an unsolvable game in this world.

You're bound to win my game, and no one else is playing it except you. You're the only player I have.

In other words, my game is designed to give you victory.

Spades plunged into the water, pulled by some primal instinct. He dove deeper and deeper into the cold, murky depths of the sea, where the bodies of Bai Liu's replicas were scattered and sunk.

Occasionally, one of the Bai Liu replicas would resurface, but it would soon sink again, suffocating. These Bai Liu's seemed to have an aversion to the water, their movements awkward as they surfaced and dove.

Finding the right one among so many identical versions felt like searching for a [needle in a haystack].

Spades swam through the icy waters, dodging and being chased by the replicas, until his eyes finally settled on one Bai Liu buried beneath layers of other bodies.

This Bai Liu hadn't attacked him.

It lay peacefully at the bottom of the sea, its eyes closed, the wound on its chest visible through the torn shirt.

There was something strange about this Bai Liu—a hybrid of monster and human, as if it were a transitional form in the process of transformation.

Spades felt a strong, inexplicable gut instinct. This Bai Liu was hiding a heart.

He quickly snorkeled down and, as his fingers brushed against the body, Bai Liu's eyes snapped open.

Bai Liu exhaled bubbles from his lips, then swam swiftly through the water. A swarm of other Bai Liu replicas surrounded him, encircling him in a chaotic mass. The one Spades had targeted vanished among the crowd in mere moments.

But Spades soon locked onto Bai Liu once more.

It was as if he had a device to track Bai Liu, allowing him to find the one he recognized, despite the indistinguishability of the others, and chase after him without hesitation.

Shifting waves of blue water glistened under the melting remains of the world's largest ice shelf. Ice floes drifted in large chunks away from the land, with the lower sections of icebergs resembling islands suspended in the sky above the water.

Spades and Bai Liu danced around each other, dodging and chasing across the cold, white islands.

No matter how Bai Liu tried to escape, how he covered his tracks, or used every trick in the book, Spades always found him among the millions of identical Bai Liu replicas in this icy, hellish underwater world.

Under the melting Ice Dome A, at the bottom of the darkest sea, Spades finally caught Bai Liu.

Spades gently slid his hand into Bai Liu's unhealed wound.

The blood vessels twitched in response to the heart, warm blood spilling over Spades' fingers as he gripped the cold heart beating out of place in the warmth of Bai Liu's body. He looked down at Bai Liu, now fully under his control.

For a brief moment, Spades experienced a feeling of déjà vu. He recalled the tactician who had almost trapped him long ago—Bai Liu, gazing up at him from beneath the water with calm, resigned eyes. It was as if Bai Liu hated him, binding his rotting ankles and burying his body beneath the water, trapping himself in the process.

Spades slowly closed his palm around the heart. As it shattered at his fingertips, he bent his body around Bai Liu, resting his jaw on Bai Liu's shoulder and whispering the word, sorry.

Bai Liu's eyes fluttered closed as a great mist of blood burst around him, his consciousness drifting into nothingness.

Tawil, Xie Ta...

Do not be afraid of the dead me, or the living me.

I will always stay in the winter where I belong and wait for you.

No matter what choice I make, you'll leave me, won't you?

Yes.

The Ice Age

The moment Spades' hand passed through Bai Liu's chest, the heart Bai Liu had secured to his veins slipped out of his back.

Bai Liu's eyes were half-closed. He knew it was pointless, but he couldn't stop himself from reaching for the heart that had disappeared into the deep blue-black sea.

His slender fingers opened and closed weakly in the cold seawater.

Spades grabbed Bai Liu by the ribs and lifted him upward for a moment before turning and chasing after him into the depths, clearly intent on retrieving the heart and destroying it.

Bai Liu spread his limbs in a dazed manner, passively floating upwards under the force of Spades' lift, toward the surface where a fine phosphorescent glow glimmered.

The sun hung silently below the horizon, its faint, silvery frame gilding the edges of the vast, endless waters.

Glaciers and ice floes—remnants of a planet that had both cooled and warmed, or rather, wreckage—grazed the perimeter of Bai Liu's suspended form, carried away by the currents.

Above him, the pure black sky remained cloudless, the stars flowing through it like jewels, glowing with a mesmerizing brilliance—dazzling, almost like crushed diamonds or strings of pearls scattered across velvet.

This beauty, like all precious things, broke apart in an instant—blossoming into heartbreak and wild, mad beauty.

But that beauty was soon overshadowed by the green glow of the aurora borealis, shimmering from the southeastern sky, its fluorescent hues floating like a cheap curtain in the early stages of a dream.

Bai Liu's eyes were half-open, his vitality waning so much that the sound of Edmond's mournful voice seemed to echo in his ears.

"[Child, never test your beloved with truth or falsity. I did that too, and though I endured that experiment, the only conclusion I reached was—]"

"[They can tell the difference.]"

"[Even if they have the same memories, the same body, the same structure, like another version of us in parallel time and space—they are still not us in the eyes of those who love us.]"

"[What exactly separates them from us?]"

"[The experiment I initially wanted to conduct was to explore whether these creatures could become indistinguishable from humans by passing the Turing test, and how they differ from us.]"

"[If we are the same, are we truly human?]"

"[Perhaps we're just another type of monster placed on this planet, in this game, carrying memories injected into us by others—creatures bred for war and self-destruction, just as my superiors intended with these monsters.]"

"[I understand all the misfortune that has followed me, my friends, and everyone around us. It's because we're born this way, subject to a higher power—perhaps 'God'—who has determined that the fate of the world must be this cruel.]"

"[If we are different, where do these differences come from, when our bodies, cores, and memories are all the same? And how can anyone recognize the real us, when we can't even tell the real from the fake?]"

"[The people at Tarzan Station gave me the answer, and in you, I've confirmed it once again. But I still don't understand why.]"

"[Where does this difference come from?]"

"[Before you arrived here, there were many guests whom I experimented on. Some left in the middle of the process, while others stayed forever. Beneath every ice fissure here lies the 'corpses' of those guests' failed experiments.]"

"[Time and time again, the people at Tarzan Station erased their memories, reviewed their files, and restarted the process, but they still recognized each other no matter who the guests were. And sometimes, the guests themselves could recognize each other.]"

"[But why?]"

"[Why can some people recognize each other, and others cannot? Why

is it that the people at Tarzan Station are always recognizable, yet the guests who come here can't seem to recognize each other with such certainty?]"

"[I couldn't figure out what was affecting the results, so no matter how many times I ran the experiment, the results remained elusive—until I met Spades.]"

"[He was the fastest guest I've ever seen to identify a teammate; he was willing to talk to me and gave me the answer—intuition.]"

"[That's the strangest experimental variable I've ever heard of. If my student had handed me a lab report with those two words on it, I would have made him jump into the Ross Sea in shame.]"

"[I saw you, Bai Liu, in the memories of Spades' friend, the Reverse God. And you would make an experiment a thousand times more extreme and insane than anything I've done so far—creating an insurmountable game with thousands of copies of yourself, just to test another person's perception of you.]"

"[I know you would, and I'm sure you know the consequences, but you want to see it again, as I do, to verify that result once more—]"

"[These Bai Liu copies have the same appearance, memories, and core as you. You've even become one of these monsters yourself—so can Spades still find you?]"

"[Thank you for finally answering this unsolved puzzle.]"

"[I always thought that it was the human side that identified the monster side, but it wasn't quite like that. It was the monster side that couldn't return the special emotions that the human side wanted.]"

"[Though you are a monster, you love him, Bai Liu.]"

"[So you can't hide Tawil's heart in another 'Bai Liu' body, because it's a heart that belongs to you.]"

"[Your response reveals you.]"

"[Love turns you from a monster to a human. Love gives you a weakness, makes you clutch his heart and float in the deep. Love makes you stand out from the millions of monsters, making you the most special one for Spades.]"

"[So he found you.]"

"[But do not grieve, child. It is not fate that leads you to your destiny; it is love.]"

"[Love has kept you apart, but it will bring you back together in the end.]"

The ice melts away in large chunks, and the pale, frozen "body" of the monster drifts across the surface, mixing with the broken ice as it floats past Bai Liu. His eyelashes are coated with fine ice particles, glowing fluorescent green under the aurora borealis, while the water rushes through the empty cavity of his chest.

Someone emerges from the water, and Spades wraps his arms around Bai Liu's waist and knees, lifting him—seemingly unconscious—toward the shore. In his hands, he holds two hearts.

One is crushed and torn, but still faintly beating, while the other is frozen in a block of ice, so fresh it looks as though it was just removed from a chest. This heart, Spades reveals, was taken from a [Bai Liu].

Spades moves carefully to thaw the heart.

"This is your real heart," he murmurs, looking down at the motionless Bai Liu. He places the newly thawed heart inside Bai Liu's body. "Back to you."

Bai Liu's body, altered by Edmond, rapidly reacts. His heart's pulses unite with the new one, and the muscle and skin of his chest heal instantly. A faint beat begins to emerge in his otherwise cold and stiff chest.

Spades turns away, retrieves fuel and acid from his supplies, and without hesitation, begins to work on the second heart—the one still faintly beating in his hands.

The heart is consumed by flames and the corrosive hiss of acid.

Bai Liu's frozen fingers twitch slightly, his dark eyes reflecting the beautiful night sky and nothing else.

His chest, which had resumed its slow rise and fall, stalls briefly as the second heart is processed. Finally, it stops beating altogether.

It's as if his heartbeat ceased with the final destruction of the other

heart.

[System Alert: Player Spades has destroyed the last corpse, achieved the true end line achievement. All players have passed the game. The copy will close soon...]

As the snowfield collapses behind him, Bai Liu's system panel vanishes, and Spades sinks to his knees beside the ashes, glancing up at the melting ice world.

Only when Bai Liu disappears in a puff of light at his side does Spades stand up, preparing to exit the game. He understands now why he had to wait for Bai Liu to leave before he did.

It feels like a deeply ingrained, intuitive habit.

Spades senses as if he's watched this man exit the game countless times, as a point of light, only to fall into a long darkness, waiting to see him again at the start of the next game. So, he does the same this time.

It's like a subconscious instinct: a need to destroy all the corpses.

Spades has a vague feeling that whoever designed the game intended to trap Bai Liu forever, leaving him cold and alone in the snowy plains as a monster for the rest of his life.

This is a highly likely scenario, and Liu Jiayi even feels relieved that Spades is the one they entered the game with.

Because no one else could stop Bai Liu from going mad.

If Bai Liu had logged in with another player, and discovered that the main quest was to destroy the corpse, the [true end] line would trigger as soon as a player found and destroyed the corpse.

Even if they killed the other players and Edmond, the game would not end.

The game would continue on the [true end] line until the final act—destroying all the corpses.

Bai Liu could quit the game, but that would only trigger the game in reality.

Upon exiting Ice Age, Bai Liu would enter a real-world copy of the game, essentially the same as staying inside.

And once in the real world, with the method of destroying the body parts known, it would be inevitable that the particle weather devices would be destroyed.

The body parts would face their end—completely destroyed—and countless people would strive to make this happen by any means necessary.

Bai Liu knew he couldn't be an enemy of the world forever, which is why he chose to stay in the game.

In this way, he prevented the game from reaching its true end and being brought into the real world.

The game was a trap from the very beginning. The moment Bai Liu stepped into it, he had only two choices:

— either remain a monster forever, trapped in the snowy plains.

— or destroy Tawil's heart, erase the only emotion—love—and weakness in his psyche, and become ruthless, cruel, calculating, and unscrupulous, to pass the game as a winner.

To transform from Bai Liu into Bai Six.

This was the ultimate aim of the ones behind the curtain.

Liu Jiayi felt a deep sense of gratitude that the player they encountered in this game was Spades.

Other players couldn't have stopped Bai Liu from doing whatever he wanted, but Spades had the ability to defeat him. And as long as he won, Bai Liu wouldn't need to choose.

As soon as Spades destroyed the heart, Bai Liu would have to emerge from the snowfields.

Liu Jiayi wonders where Spades' obsession and instinct to destroy this heart originated, and who gave it to him.

Though Spades' intuition was cruel to Bai Liu, destroying the heart of the person who mattered to him, he had saved him in the end.

By obliterating Bai Liu's only weakness, the man behind the game would no longer be able to exploit it.

Reality

Reality

Liu Jiayi took Tang Erda out of the game as soon as they logged out and had him call Su Yang to ask about the plane.

"Contact was lost while crossing the sea over the Antarctic," Su Yang's voice tightened. "Captain, you've... seen it again, haven't you?"

It was a question of whether Tang Erda, like before, had foreseen this future.

"Sort of," Tang Erda replied, rubbing his brow in exhaustion. "But this time, when I saw it, it was too late. Sorry."

"You don’t need to apologize to me, Captain." Su Yang’s voice carried a bitter smile. "It's my fault."

Liu Jiayi jumped up, grabbed Tang Erda's phone, and spoke into it urgently. "Captain Su, things may not be turning around."

Su Yang’s voice suddenly became sharp. "Is there anything I can do?"

Liu Jiayi spoke quickly, "Help us find out if there is a Du Sanying, or the parrot in Mirror City."

"Okay, that's a rare name. Don’t hang up, I’ll check right away."

The sound of Su Yang's hurried footsteps echoed, and he soon returned, panting. "There’s no Du Sanying in Mirror City. Should I widen the search?"

Liu Jiayi frowned. She realized that Du Sanying had likely changed his name in the game.

Finding a player who didn’t know his original name was like looking for a needle in a haystack in the real world.

Su Yang understood this as well, and his voice grew more urgent. "Is there any other special information about this person? We'll do everything we can to help you."

The plane over the Antarctic could make an emergency landing at any moment. Every second counted, as each moment was as valuable as five lives.

But unfortunately, Liu Jiayi pursed her lips and said, "This man does have special points."

Su Yang pressed, "What special point?"

Liu Jiayi replied, "He's very lucky."

---------- --

Bai Liu left the pool, quickly logging out of the game as soon as he stood up, still wet. He immediately went to meet Liu Jiayi's group, who were searching for Du Sanying.

The meeting place was Bai Liu's house.

Bai Liu appeared as normal as ever, though his shirt had some wrinkled creases on the collar and cuffs. He was in the best condition of the group.

Bai Liu glanced at Liu Jiayi and said with a sudden realization, "He changed his name, didn't he? Then it's going to be troublesome to find him now."

He spoke of the trouble, but there wasn't a trace of concern on his face. His expression remained relaxed and at ease.

And that ease gave Liu Jiayi an indescribable sense of dissonance.

Bai Liu had logged out of the game, which meant that the heart was disposed of...

She knew what that heart meant to Bai Liu—he wasn't normally in this [relaxed and comfortable] state.

But there was no way for her to ask, as Bai Liu soon directed her thoughts elsewhere.

Bai Liu looked at Liu Jiayi. "What's your next plan for finding someone?"

"Find people around us who are relevant." Liu Jiayi's face was stern. "As you said, based on what you know about yourself, that is, [Bai Six], if a character like [Du Sanying] existed with 100 percent luck, you would never let him go."

"He was quite outstanding and valuable."

“Yes,” Bai Liu lifted his eyes and smiled at Tang Erda. “So now, we’ll ask our Captain Tang to patiently remember if there was such a cute and lucky character in a wandering circus in other times and places?”

Tang Erda quickly realized what Bai Liu was getting at. He furrowed his brow in thought, and after a long pause, he spoke.

“The Wandering Circus, for the most part, consisted of you and four others. I rarely saw anyone else outside of those four on the league field or around you.”

“But... there is one, though not exactly part of the Wandering Circus. He was a supernumerary associated with it.”

Bai Liu gave Tang Erda a knowing look, urging him to continue.

Tang Erda thought hard, trying to recall the low-profile character.

“He rarely played, but you... Bai Six, you took him often, but took him...”

What to do?

The image of the boy, who appeared sporadically on the field, sitting on the bench with his head down, was completely blurred in Tang Erda's memory.

It was strange because Bai Six never took people who weren’t valuable, and this boy had left no impression on Tang Erda—mainly because Bai Six never put him on the field.

It was as if Bai Six was deliberately pampering him...

But what value does a reserve player have if not on the field?

Why did Bai Six bring him to every game...?

Suddenly, Tang Erda jolted as a brief moment resurfaced—a memory of the boy standing timidly in front of Bai Six, helping him draw the hostile cards from the box.

Drawing hostile cards was a crucial part of the league.

The league is divided into three segments: pre-season, mid-season, and post-season.

The pre-season is a mixed competition, also known as the rookie

tournament. It features teams that didn't finish in the top thirty-two the previous year, along with new teams registering for the league for the first time. Only two teams emerge from this round, and they gain direct access to the playoffs.

Mid-season games are also called star games. Teams that placed before 32nd in the previous tournament compete here. These teams are strong, and most have star players, making this the most exciting round of the tournament. The eight teams with the highest points advance to the playoffs.

The playoffs are split into a challenge round and the main competition.

The challenge round is for the two winning pre-season teams to randomly challenge two of the eight playoff teams. If they win, they replace the other team in the playoffs. If they lose, their journey ends.

The main event is the single-elimination final for the remaining eight teams. The winner advances, and the loser is eliminated, making this the most thrilling part of the tournament for both players and spectators.

By this point, the crowd is usually wild, and fights often break out after a match.

Card draws are essential in both the pre-season and post-season challenges. In these rounds, teams randomly decide their opponents by drawing cards from a box.

If your team is lucky enough to draw a weaker opponent, it's a huge advantage.

This kind of luck happens often with Bai Six—but this guy is a 0-luck player!

Tang Erda's account confirmed Bai Liu's suspicions.

Since Du Sanying had been seen near Bai Six in other worlds, there must be some connection to Bai Liu in this world.

After all, the entity who wanted to change Bai Liu back to Bai Six—or rather, God—wouldn't give up trying to modify any differences between them.

This god had directly sent Du Sanying to him before, but Bai Liu

didn’t control Du Sanying, likely due to the unique nature of Du Sanying.

With 100 percent luck, it was too easy for this guy to escape Bai Liu, the unlucky one.

But in that case, [God] must have placed Du Sanying somewhere within Bai Liu’s reach, so that Bai Liu could use the reserve team member God had prepared for him at any time.

Over the years, Bai Liu had lived in various places due to work and other reasons, constantly changing rental properties. However, there was one place that remained relatively permanent for him.

But that place had been demolished and rebuilt.

Bai Liu narrowed his eyes. “Have Su Yang check the patients, caregivers, and doctors at the nursing home that was built after my orphanage was knocked down and rebuilt.”

Tang Erda dialed the number, and Su Yang answered. “What kind of person do you need checked?”

Shrine.

The man in the hood opposite the prophet snorted in boredom as he propped his palms on the table, gazing at the werewolf card before him. He shook his head slightly, regret flashing across his face. "What a shame. I thought I'd watch Bai Liu corrupt the heart himself."

The prophet responded, "Bai Liu will not do that."

The man raised his eyes, amused, as he met the seer's gaze. "But my purpose was still achieved, nonetheless."

He continued, "You see, Bai Liu is no longer repelled by water. Now, he dives in willingly, using it to his advantage to deter his opponents. He no longer lingers over a fading heart, and even—"

The prophet interrupted sternly, "That was not his heart!"

The man calmly finished the sentence, "-and he would even offer to take the 'lucky man' I had prepared for him."

He smiled. "What a transformation. Bai Liu’s eyes no longer see those

around him as human. His emotions have been stripped away with the death of that heart, his flesh alienated alongside those corpses. All he sees now is the league and his ultimate desire for money."

He paused. "How beautiful, he's only one win away from Bai Six."

The man's tone shifted slightly, a touch of disappointment. "Although the process wasn't quite what I expected, I had planned to sever his last emotional ties when he turned fourteen, using Xie Ta's death as the catalyst. Unfortunately..." He lowered his gaze, brushing his index finger over the red eyes of the werewolf card. "It doesn't matter. He'll soon become what I want him to be."

The prophet stood motionless, his petrification deepening. His chest rose and fell weakly. "What you do is not the way of God."

The man laughed. "That's right, because I'm an evil god."

"Playing with humans, gaining profit, and enslaving them—this is what I enjoy most."

He casually flicked a card onto the table. "Like this idiot card. I'm not a fan of these 'pure good' cards, ones that wolves can't even use for tempo. But this one seems interesting and valuable for a Bai Six team."

The card depicted a boy in a hospital gown, scowling slightly as if afraid of someone. Freckles dotted both his cheeks and the base of his nose, and he wore a pair of boxy, flat glasses.

The man stared at the card with downcast eyes and folded his hands. "An idiot with 100 percent luck. A nice setup. All the Bai Six in this world line would love him. I'm sure the Bai Six in this world line do too."

The prophet's voice was hoarse. "Because he saved Bai Six."

"Saved?" The man smiled, shaking his head slightly. "I prefer to call this process destiny."

He extended his fingers and casually tapped the idiot card. His gaze drifted as he spoke. "During a conflict with the Heretic Handling Bureau in reality, the mad hunter used a weapon with targeted skills and attacked Bai Six in a suicide attack, leaving him seriously injured."

He continued, his voice almost indifferent, "The Wandering Circus

ringmaster, in his misfortune, had to hide out after a car accident."

"And the only one to survive that crash was Du Sanying, the lucky one."

"He was too lucky to have survived a crash that killed everyone else instantly," the man mused, folding his fingers carelessly. "But his good fortune must be paid for with the misfortune of others. He must invite the misfortune of those around him."

He looked up at the prophet with a smile. "For God is fair. Misfortune and fortune should remain balanced."

The prophet was struck silent, his voice barely a whisper. "Du Sanying's father, mother, sister, and older siblings all died in that crash."

"It was the Quan family's trip to celebrate the end of his senior year. And you let them all die. In front of Du Sanying. Even this young boy knew they died because of his luck."

The man shrugged. "One should always be aware of the price paid for their good fortune, or they won't appreciate it."

He smiled lightly. "It is a blessing from God. And the price I charge will only get higher."

The prophet glared at him. "But he has already paid. You made him save the wounded Bai Six. Isn't that enough?"

"No, no, no," the man shook his head slightly, a smile lingering in his eyes. "I didn't make him save anyone."

"It was Du Sanying who chose to save him."

"Du Sanying's life was surrounded by people who paid for his good fortune, and he seemed incredibly fortunate to have a good family and brothers."

"But Du Sanying couldn't stop the tragic fate of anyone connected to him—even if he caused it."

The prophet's voice was cold. "It was caused by you."

"One could say the same." The man raised his eyes, smirking. "And Bai Six, a man with a luck value of zero, is the only one whose misfortune wasn't caused by Du Sanying."

"Bai Six's misfortune is innate. It has nothing to do with Du Sanying, whose presence will only bring him luck. So, Bai Six is the only person in the world that Du Sanying can protect with his luck, preventing his misfortune."

The man under the hood smiled, his voice dark with amusement. "So, Du Sanying will undoubtedly put his life on the line to help Bai Liu, to save him, and even become the most obedient pawn, without needing to trade souls."

"Du Sanying is desperate to protect the Bai Six he meets at the center of the crash in every world because he no longer knows the meaning of his existence beyond protecting the Bai Six he can save."

The prophet interrupted, "Provided Du Sanying remembers what has happened to him."

"He'll remember soon enough," the man lowered his eyes to the idiot card on the table, a grim satisfaction settling over him. "His destiny has come."

Within five minutes, Su Yang returned the call, speaking rapidly.

"We should have found the person you're looking for—his original name is Du Ying. He's the third child in his family, with an older brother, an older sister, and a younger sister. His family belongs to an ethnic minority, so they're not subject to the family planning restrictions, which means it's a large family."

"The family has always been relatively stable, but strangely unlucky. For instance, Du Ying's father, a lawyer, has often found himself in dangerous situations. However, whenever Du Ying visits him, a major confrontation follows, and Du Ying's father ends up injured, while Du Ying himself remains unharmed."

"Du Ying used to enjoy waiting for his father to finish work, but after realizing the trouble he caused, he stopped going."

"In primary school, Du Ying's class was attacked indiscriminately by vengeful people. All the children sitting in front of and behind him were stabbed to death—except for Du Ying, who miraculously survived."

"After that, no one dared to befriend Du Ying. He ended up sitting

alone in a corner of the classroom, next to the trash bins, with no one sitting beside him."

"When he reached junior high, his class teacher, Mr. Ren, turned out to be a paedophile who had been eyeing Du Ying for some time. But one day, Du Ying's sister volunteered to pick him up from school and was seen by Mr. Ren, which led the teacher to abandon his plans."

Su Yang took a deep breath. "Du Ying's sister was almost sexually assaulted after being stalked for a period, but Du Ying discovered it just in time."

"Du Ying had a heated physical confrontation with the teacher and was forced to transfer to another school. After the transfer, he severed contact with his family, feeling that he was in trouble. He moved out on his own."

"The family, however, felt this was all a lie. They believed Du Ying had saved his sister and didn't want to give up on him. They kept trying to reconnect, even his sister would reach out to him."

"She thought her brother was brave, blaming the teacher, and felt that their father had used the law to get her justice. The incident left her unharmed and spared her brother from disaster."

"It was a fortunate turn of events—I found a text message that his sister had sent to Du Ying."

"Eventually, Du Ying began to reconcile. He moved back home in his senior year and decided to study law, wanting to become a lawyer like his father to bring justice to the misfortunes that had plagued his family."

Su Yang exhaled deeply. "Du Ying excelled in the entrance exams, scoring extremely high marks and ranking number one in the city. However, his grades were usually average, which made the Quan family very happy."

"After completing the application form, the family decided to celebrate Du Ying's success with a graduation trip."

"But on the way there, their car was involved in a series of crashes on the motorway. None of them survived, except Du Ying, who emerged unscathed."

"Du Ying developed a peculiar mental illness called amnesia, which

caused him to only remember the events of the last week, forgetting everything prior to that."

"A year ago, he was unable to live a normal life due to the worsening memory loss, and his doctor recommended hospitalization. Du Ying entered a nursing home, where he now resides in room 906."

"This is all from his medical records."

Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi exchanged glances—this was the same nursing home room where Bai Liu had stayed in Love and Welfare.

It seems that, from that time onward, those behind the scenes had already planned for Du Sanying to take Du Ying’s place.

Reality

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Su Yang arranged for a car from the Bureau of Heresy to take Bai Liu and his group to the sanatorium. He had already spoken with the director, who was waiting for them upon arrival and led them inside.

The building was surrounded on all sides by a well-maintained garden. In the quietest corner of the grounds stood a more upscale structure. Near the main entrance, a small pond with lotus flowers and fish enhanced the building's appeal, making it look more impressive than the others.

"The patients in room 906 are housed in the innermost building," the director explained.

As they walked through the small garden, the director spoke quickly, "We collaborate with two nearby hospitals, and sometimes there aren't enough rooms available. Those hospitals aren't as comfortable or spacious."

"Some patients, particularly those who can afford it and don't want to stay in a ward, choose to transfer here. They cover the cost of nursing home accommodations themselves."

"The patient in room 906 was transferred under such circumstances."

The director continued, "The doctor told me that the patient's condition isn't an emergency. No organic issues were found; it's purely a psychological matter."

"The doctor mentioned that the patient is unwilling to remember the events of the past week, rejecting those memories. The medication isn't very effective, and the patient needs a more relaxed environment to heal. That's why he was referred to us."

The director looked up at the building, hidden among the trees, his expression complicated.

"For this patient, though, it might be a blessing to have forgotten it all," he murmured.

Bai Liu turned to the director. "A long stay here must be quite expensive, right?"

The director nodded. "Yes, the patient in 906 has lost both parents and relatives. He inherited a large estate, enough to stay here for decades."

"He has a dedicated bank card to pay for his expenses here, and we transfer money into it every month."

"And it seems he's involved in some sort of business, though I'm not sure exactly what it is—perhaps online gaming. Every week, there's a significant amount of money deposited into his account. When asked where it comes from, though, he's confused and says he doesn't remember."

The director added, "Because the patient can only remember the past week, he's unsure where the money comes from each time."

Bai Liu nodded, understanding.

Once a week—that money was clearly the points Du Sanying earned in the game, transferred into his account.

The director led them to the elevator. "Since this patient only retains a week's worth of memory and has cognitive issues, he can become frightened by unfamiliar surroundings. Please be quiet and friendly when you meet him to avoid startling him."

When they reached the ninth floor, the director guided them through the corridor, around a corner, and stopped in front of room 906.

From inside the room came an oddly accented flick of the tongue. "Someone's coming! Someone's coming!"

Mu Sicheng frowned. "Is that... a bird call?"

"Oh!" The director exclaimed, tapping her head. She turned to Bai Liu, apologizing, "I almost forgot to mention that the patient in room 906 has a parrot."

"???" Mu Sicheng was baffled. "Why does he have a parrot?!"

The director explained, "Because the patient has only a week's memory, he often tries to record what he did earlier. However, we don't provide sharp objects to mental health patients to avoid self-harm, so he can't use a pen."

"He got a parrot to teach it key phrases as reminders of his activities from a week ago."

Mu Sicheng was still confused. "Why not just provide him with electronic devices, like a phone or something? He could use a memo app."

"We do provide electronic devices," the director spread her hands. "But this patient forgets his phone's unlock code after a week. He won't remember any information."

Mu Sicheng blinked. "..."

The director sighed, looking a bit helpless. "We're a professional nursing home, so we're not allowed to record passwords for patients—it's an invasion of privacy. Also, with a violent restart, all the data on the phone is lost. We've also suggested alternatives like tape recorders or electronic drawing boards, but the patient's reduced cognitive awareness means he doesn't trust those devices. He doesn't believe they contain records of what he did a week ago."

"Patients tend to trust their pets more than electronic devices," the director added with a resigned sigh.

"We weren't allowed to have a parrot either," she continued. "But after consulting with the doctor, who thought having a pet might help improve his cognitive condition, we agreed."

"The parrot is kept outside, on the balcony, so it's fine."

The director knocked softly on the door. "May we come in?"

There was a long pause before the parrot's strange, polite reply came, "Come in."

The director opened the door to an empty ward. The balcony window was open, and the screen billowed in the breeze. The parrot stood proudly on one foot on the bar, but there was no one on the bed or in the open bathroom.

Mu Sicheng spun around, confused. "Where is everyone?!"

Both Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi's eyes were drawn to the edge of the bed.

The director sighed again, kneeling to look under the bed. "Mr. Du Sanying, don't be afraid. We're not bad people; we're just here to see

you."

Mu Sicheng bent down incredulously and, as expected, found Du Sanying hiding under the bed!

The skinny boy cowered in the corner, clutching bedding and pillows. Half of his face was hidden, his knees drawn tightly to his chest, and only one wary eye peeked from the edge of the quilt. His glasses were pushed up to his eyebrows.

"I don't know you guys," Du Sanying said softly.

He shrank further into the corner, making it clear that he wasn't about to come out easily.

The person in charge slapped his forehead, clearly frustrated.

Bai Liu bowed slightly and thanked him. "Please, could we have a moment alone with him?"

The man nodded reluctantly. "Call me if you need anything. Don't scare him too much—his memory was just wiped recently."

Once the person in charge left, Mu Sicheng's eyes lit up. Rolling up his sleeves, he prepared to pull Du Sanying out from under the bed.

Mu Sicheng still held a grudge against Du Sanying for his unbelievable luck in overpowering him, stealing his loot, and constantly playing innocent. Despite feeling a bit sorry for him, Mu Sicheng couldn't resist taking action.

As soon as Mu Sicheng's hand reached under the bed, Du Sanying let out a startled "ahh!" The bed collapsed into the corner, the broken frame pressing against Mu Sicheng's hand.

The IV stand beside the bed tipped over, threatening to plunge directly into Mu Sicheng's throat.

Tang Erda, quick on his feet, steadied the frame just in time.

Mu Sicheng let out a dismayed scream, quickly pulling his hand back. He jumped to his feet, blowing on his bruised palm.

Staring in horror at the broken bed, he exclaimed, "Can this guy break things too?!"

Liu Jiayi, with pity in her eyes, replied, "Du Sanying is 100% lucky.

Do you really think you can just drag him out from under the bed?"

She glanced at the bed. "As long as he doesn't want to come out, Du Sanying will be just fine under there—even if an earthquake hits."

Mu Sicheng shook his injured hand in disbelief. "Why didn't you tell me that earlier?"

Liu Jiayi shot him a sidelong glance. "You had to verify it yourself. You looked so sure."

Mu Sicheng: "..."

Bai Liu crouched down, his hands resting on his knees, level with Du Sanying, who was still trembling under the bed. After a brief pause, Bai Liu gripped the bedrail and leaned in.

"!!!" Du Sanying, startled, scrambled deeper into the bed, screaming, "Don't come any closer! You'll get hurt!"

Bai Liu lay calmly beside him, smiling sideways at Du Sanying. "So, you're not hiding under the bed because you're afraid, but because you're worried that someone nearby will get hurt, aren't you?"

Du Sanying stared blankly into Bai Liu's black eyes. Slowly, he loosened the blanket around himself, as if shaken by something beyond his comprehension. He looked Bai Liu up and down, stammering in disbelief.

"…You're okay?!"

Bai Liu extended a hand with a friendly smile. "Perhaps I should introduce myself first. Bai Liu."

"—A gamer you've met once."

Du Sanying stared at Bai Liu for a moment, as if making sure that being close to him wouldn't cause harm. Tentatively, he extended a finger, lightly tapping Bai Liu's hand before quickly withdrawing it and whispering in response.

"…I'm called Du Ying, according to the patient sign above my bed."

Instead of withdrawing his hand, Bai Liu turned fully toward Du Sanying, moving a little closer. He smiled gently, whispering, "You helped me once. Can we go out and talk?"

Du Sanying looked at Bai Liu suspiciously for a long moment, as if ensuring that nothing bad would happen to Bai Liu by getting too close. Slowly, he placed his hand on Bai Liu's palm.

"Okay... good."

Bai Liu pulled on Du Sanying's hand, helping him out from under the collapsed bed.

Once free, Du Sanying instinctively distanced himself from Bai Liu. He turned his head awkwardly, clasping his hands to his chest, hunched over, and scowled, his entire posture rigid and defensive.

It was clear that he hadn't interacted with anyone in a long time.

Bai Liu took a considerate step back, giving Du Sanying more space, and said, "This isn't our first meeting, but I don't think you remember me. We met in a game, and you helped me a lot."

Du Sanying turned toward Bai Liu, his eyes widening in surprise. "…I helped you?"

Bai Liu smiled. "Yes, you did me a great favor. And now, I've come to ask for your help again."

He gave Du Sanying a nostalgic look, his smile softening. "I hope that, since we've been friends before, you'll lend a hand."

Du Sanying's eyes went wide. "…You're my friend?"

"Of course." Bai Liu smiled lightly, creating a sense of familiarity. "If you hadn't forgotten about me and ignored me back then, I would've chased you all the way to the game."

Bai Liu dropped his gaze, as though lost in thought, and sighed with a hint of regret. "Unfortunately, you forgot about me after a pleasant game, and we never had the chance to meet again."

"We could've been soul-best friends."

Mu Sicheng: "Pfft!!!"

God's! Soulmate!

Du Sanying looked deeply apologetic for forgetting his supposed soulmate. He loosened his arms from his chest, wiped them against the seam of his hospital gown, and glanced at Bai Liu.

"Sorry…" Du Sanying blushed slightly in embarrassment. "Bai Liu, I forgot about you. I don’t even remember what games we played…"

Just then, the parrot on the balcony squawked loudly, having picked up a key phrase. It flapped its wings frantically, repeating, "Bai Liu, Bai Liu, bad guy, bad guy, encounter, run! Run!"

Du Sanying: "…"

Bai Liu: "…"

Tang Erda: "…"

Liu Jiayi: "…"

Mu Sicheng: "Pfft—!!!"

Chapter End Notes

> There's no direct translation for 魂挚友的 in English.
> The phrase "魂挚友的" can be roughly translated as "soul's closest friend" or "soul's dearest friend"
> So I put Soul best friend.
> Because if Du Sanying gives his Soul to Bai Liu, they will be best friends.

Reality

The flush faded from Du Sanying's face as he took two cautious steps back, arching his back and eyeing Bai Liu warily. "Who the hell are you?"

Why did you know so much about me if you're not a friend...?

"I used to use you," Bai Liu said, not hesitating to be blunt. "That's why you didn't want to see me."

Bai Liu looked steadily at Du Sanying. "But I didn't force you. You followed me of your own free will. Your luck and intuition told you to stay with me, so you ended up on my team."

He paused, his eyes narrowing slightly. "So, what about your instincts now?"

Du Sanying froze, slowly straightening up. The man was right. His fortune had led him to trust Bai Liu, which is why he'd been so obedient at first.

But why did the parrot tell him to stay away from this man?

Bai Liu's eyes flicked towards the parrot outside the window with an amused glance. "Do you know why you chose the parrot to record your memories?"

Du Sanying shook his head, unsure.

His mind was clouded, and much of what he did was driven by a lingering sense of fortune-guided instinct. For example, he knew that anyone who got too close to him would meet an unfortunate end—like the parrot’s warnings.

And Bai Liu—he should follow him.

"Because there’s no other way to record your memories in this world," Bai Liu said calmly. "You're in a dangerous game, but you can survive on your own luck—even if that luck sometimes harms others."

"You reject these memories, so you wipe them clean every week. But even then, you have to keep suffering in order to stay alive in this game."

Du Sanying couldn't help but ask, "Why? Can't I leave this game?"

"No," Bai Liu replied flatly. "Because you still have unfulfilled desires."

Bai Liu raised his gaze. "You want to make up for the misfortunes caused by your good fortune. You want to revive your parents, your siblings, your friends—those who died because of you. You want to put an end to this cycle of misfortune and redeem the wrongs you've caused."

"And this game gives you the hope to do that."

Du Sanying's hands shook involuntarily as his head spun. He tried to refute Bai Liu's words, but no sound came out. He couldn't remember anything.

Bai Liu continued, "You can't reveal this game to anyone. Paper can't record its details, and electronics can't store its information. Even if you try to confide in someone, their memory will be wiped after seven seconds."

Du Sanying opened his mouth to argue, "But the parrot remembers the game! It remembers you!"

Bai Liu's eyes shifted to the parrot with a knowing look. "If I'm right, the parrot was a game prop you won, created to fulfill your core desires. You brought it into reality as a vessel for your memories."

Mu Sicheng, standing nearby, suddenly understood. "So that's why the parrot can remember things from the game."

Bai Liu extended a hand to Du Sanying, his dark, mirror-like eyes reflecting Du Sanying's hesitant image.

For a moment, Du Sanying seemed lost in the reflection, his thoughts scattered like leaves on a breeze.

"I may be a bad person," Bai Liu said softly, "but I've never harmed you. And more importantly—"

He took a step closer. "You can't hurt me. My bad luck is my own, far worse than the misfortune you bring. And the luck you despise is something I can only dream of."

Bai Liu gazed up at Du Sanying and stepped closer still.

Du Sanying stood frozen, unable to retreat, as Bai Liu's eyes seemed to

pierce through him. They were like a cold wind, filled with the sting of ice and the smolder of fire. The clarity in those eyes was fleeting, vanishing like smoke in the air.

Between the destruction and chaos in those eyes, Du Sanying saw something—like a fading memory, a broken soul.

It was as if Bai Liu's heart had been shattered, leaving only fragments behind ..... a man with a broken heart.

"I ask you, help me." Bai Liu said softly, "Use your good fortune to save a person who is important to me."

Du Sanying was quiet for a moment before he lowered his head and asked in a whisper, "..... If I go, can I really save people? I won't harm them?"

"No." Bai Liu looked at him and smiled lightly, "When one's life is unfortunate enough, the misfortune you bring may just be a way of presenting luck."

"To me, to the man I am trying to save and for the five escorts on the plane, you won't do any harm to them."

Bai Liu lowered his eyes, "Because they have no more unfortunate ending than this."

Du Sanying gritted his teeth. He took a deep breath and clutched Bai Liu's hand, "Okay, I'll go with you. What do I have to do to save them?"

Bai Liu quickly told Du Sanying about the current situation.

Du Sanying was a bit confused: "The plane is already over the Antarctic and is going to crash, what can I do?"

"You can be teleported to this plane and use your luck to see if you can bring the plane down early to land in the sea instead of on the ground, thus mitigating the extent of the crash and trying to save the people and items on the plane." Bai Liu said.

Du Sanying was horrified: "Teleport me onto a plane that's going to crash?!"

Bai Liu held him down and said calmly, "I'll be with you."

Du Sanying's face was pale with fear, but he managed to maintain his

composure. He grabbed Bai Liu's arm and asked weakly, "How do you teleport?"

Bai Liu's eyes rested on the parrot who was standing on the balcony: "Using game props."

Du Sanying entered the game about a year ago, just as his family was involved in an accident, so it is reasonable to assume that the core desire that spurred Du Sanying to enter the game was related to the accident.

For example, the core desire to instantly teleport the whole family from the scene of a traffic accident.

And the parrot is a game prop that meets Du Sanying's core desires, brought to reality. Coupled with the careful design of the people behind the scenes…

Bai Liu has good reason to suspect that the parrot's true function was a teleportation tool.

Tang Erda caught the parrot off the balcony by pressing down on its wing joints under the direction of Bai Liu.

The parrot hissed loudly with its neck stretched out and its wings fluttering: "Bai Liu! Bad! Bai Liu! Bad!"

Du Sanying, apprehensive and uncomfortable, could not resist adding a weak reminder: "Be gentle, it's not comfortable."

Bai Liu took the parrot from Tang Erda and handed it to Du Sanying.

The parrot quickly climbed onto Du Sanying's shoulder, tilted its head and rubbed against him, blinked its green bean eyes. It moved its claws against Du Sanying's ear, and muttered as if whispering a tip-off: "Bai Liu, bad, run."

Du Sanying didn't know whether to laugh or cry as he raised his hand to touch the parrot's head. He hesitated and covered the parrot's eyes: "…… Using props won't hurt it, will it?"

"No." Bai Liu looked at him, "but it will require you to figure out how to use the prop."

Du Sanying frowned bitterly, "…… But I really don't remember."

"It's obviously a voice-activated prop." Liu Jiayi prompts, "Have you

devised some sort of keyword for the parrot to use it, like Bai Liu or something like that?"

When the parrot heard the word, it twitched its wings again, tilted its neck and called out, "Bai Liu, bad-!!!"

Du Sanying calmly covered the parrot's beak: "Let me think."

"If you and your family were involved in a violent traffic accident, what keyword would you choose to teleport everyone out?" Liu Jiayi says.

Du Sanying looked up hesitantly: "A traffic accident?"

"Yes, a rather serious traffic accident, the remains of which had not been searched for a week. The remains of the passengers were all fused together in an indistinguishable mess of flesh and blood due to the burning of the petrol and the violent impact." Bai Liu recounts in clear terms.

Du Sanying's pupils constricted slightly as he ducked his head evasively and began biting his nails nervously, his voice low: "It sounds …… so serious."

Bai Liu: "You try to separate your family from the others and piece together their remains for a separate burial, but you can't do that, and neither can anyone else. If you must do it, it's going to take a lot of DNA identification."

"…… After the families of the eventual victims deliberated, a mass accident cemetery was set up and everyone was buried together. On the day of the tribute to the victims, you, the only survivor of the accident, became the talk of the town."

Du Sanying's breathing began to quicken.

"The families of the victims who came to the memorial service asked how you survived, some were concerned and comforted you. Many showed their sympathy for you, relieved that you were lucky to have survived, and there were even two families who said they wanted to support you through college – because in their minds, you are also a victim, the only one left."

"But you know you're not, you feel like the perpetrator, and you know their loved one died because of your luck."

“And they want to help you.”

Du Sanying covered his head and kept shaking, his eyes lost in thought, as if he had been transported back to that scene by Bai Liu’s words.

He kept apologizing mechanically, his eyes wide and tearing unconsciously.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to do it……”

Bai Liu took Du Sanying’s hands in his and forced him to look into his eyes as he continued brutally, “- When the mass cemetery burial took place, you disappeared and everyone was so worried about you that they looked for you everywhere. They eventually found out that you had actually buried yourself in the cemetery, but luckily, you were found again.”

“Because a child was playing in a part of the cemetery that hadn’t been built yet, and was killed directly by a falling monument. That’s how everyone found you buried under the cemetery.”

“That child was the child of one of the two families who expressed their desire to help you; his father died in the accident. He liked you very much and called you brother, so his mother became compassionate towards you and wanted to help you, not realizing that she had brought such bad luck for herself.”

“Does he remind you of your own sister?”

Du Sanying began to tremble as he struggled to pull his hand back, tears streaming down his face, almost wailing, “- stop talking!!!”

Bai Liu did not stop, but looked closer at Du Sanying’s tear-filled eyes.

“What were you screaming as you crawled out of the grave to hold the body of that child on your knees, as you held the broken bodies of your dead parents, sister and brother at the scene of the accident?”

“Why did your memory malfunction after that and refuse to remember anything?”

Du Sanying slid to his knees, unable to stop his tears sliding down his face, his head tilted back and his voice full of hoarse despair, as if his heart and liver had been ripped out.

“Help!!! Somebody help them!!!”

“Let me die!!! Let them live!!!”

Du Sanying cried hoarsely, his back arched and his head hung low, tears falling one by one on the floor.

“- I don’t want to be lucky to live, let me die unhappily.”

The parrot’s crown of hair stood upright as it drew out its song, “- Let me die unhappily!!!”

A dazzling white light descended on Du Sanying’s shoulders, enveloping him and Bai Liu.

After the white light, the two men disappeared into the same place.

Reality

Mu Sicheng and the parrot left on the ground stared blankly at each other for a long time before he turned to the other three, spreading his hands: "…..So we've been left here by Bai Liu?"

"It's not just as simple as leaving us here, it's causing us a big problem." Liu Jiayi's ears twitched and she looked towards the door, "The head of the sanatorium is here."

Mu Ke concentrated: "It seems we need to find a good reason to explain to the director why his patient has disappeared."

"Or Bai Liu will have another lawsuit on his hands for abducting a mental patient." Tang Erda rubbed his brow in pain, "He was a bit too impulsive this time."

"He's already under the watch of the Heretic's Authority and if you add in the police station's watch…… the more ordinary people around Bai Liu who monitor him, the more difficult it will be for him to enter the game."

Liu Jiayi sighed: "Yes, so this guy left us to take care of the aftermath."

Mainly because it was useless for them to go to the Antarctic, where the Du Sanying's destructive power was visible to the naked eye and only Bai Liu was spared.

Might as well leave them where they are.

The director pushed open the door and stared in disbelief at the collapsed bed, the mess of duvets on the floor, and the parrot standing next to it.

The parrot jumped and bounced, screaming: "Bai Liu, bad, bad…! He makes the owner cry cry cry!"
It spread its wings wide open and hovered around the roof, flicking its thin tongue, its voice sharp and penetrating.

"They're hugging and going to heaven! Together they go up to the sky and jerk off!"

Director's pupils quaked : "…… what are you shooting?!"

The parrot raised its wings back and stretched its neck to repeat, "-jerk off!"

Liu Jiayi, Mu Sicheng, Mu Ke, Tang Erda: "……"

[Shoot the plane down for a safe landing] should not be reduced to [jerk off] ah!!!

Do you speak human language or not, you parrot!

Tang Erda jumped up, pinched the parrot's wings and pointed beak and at its violent struggle, turned around stiffly, and carried it out onto the balcony, tucking it into its cage to feed it water: "……The parrot hasn't had any water for too long and is squawking nonsense, so I'll take it out on the water to drink some plane ……"

Liu Jiayi snapped her eyes shut in despair.

Tang Erda was so weak that he couldn't even speak clearly.

The hand of the director holding the door handle trembled slightly as he looked at the group in utter horror, "……What have you done to the patient of 906?!"

Mu Sicheng closed the ward door as quickly as possible, blocking the escape route of the director.

Mu Ke took a deep breath and stepped in front of the director, holding his hands calmly, "We can explain."

The director, who had been attacked from both sides, was scared to tears: "I- I- I-, you guys, let me go! I haven't jerked off with a guy in a long time since I graduated from college!"

Miles away, over the Antarctic, in the Ross Sea.

On the deck of the shaking plane, Du Sanying and Bai Liu, who had just landed, were rolling around in the cabin, unable to stand up. Bai Liu grabbed a metal pole and pulled Du Sanying to keep them steady.

Bai Liu kicked the back of the seat and instructed Du Sanying to pull the seat rail down and rummage under the seat to see if the oxygen mask and parachute were still in place.

Du Sanying was so dizzy that he pulled a seat and pressed it, and a parachute and oxygen mask popped out, even with two thick winter suits.

Bai Liu's eyes dropped – He was truly lucky.

Most of the usable equipment on the entire plane should have been plundered by the five escorts at this time and the rest should have not been able to be taken away.

Du Sanying was extremely lucky to get it on the first shot.

Bai Liu raised his chin and told Du Sanying to get his gear on and sit in his seat to secure his harness, before letting Du Sanying hold him in place to put on his gear.

It was only then that Du Sanying caught his breath, covering his oxygen mask and breathing heavily: "- where are the five escorts you said were on the plane?"

Bai Liu covered his face with the oxygen mask and reached for the seatbelt on the seat.

"In an emergency like this, the escorts are either in the cockpit or in the cargo hold."

Bai Liu wrapped a parachute around his head to avoid being hit by a hard object during the bumpy ride, and gestured to Du Sanying's forehead to show him to do the same.

Du Sanying replied loudly from his oxygen mask, his voice muffled, "- I don't need to! The debris can't hit me!"

As he spoke, he reached into the plane's gallery and a spanner flying from the side of a fire hydrant threatened to break Du Sanying's arm, but in the nick of time, the plane lurched up and down in a strange way.

The spanner grazed the back of Du Sanying's hand and crashed into the steel plate, denting it deeply, but leaving Du Sanying's soft forearm unharmed.

"Just watch!" Du Sanying kept speaking very loudly and desperately to make sure Bai Liu could hear him, "It's okay if you hide behind me, you don't have to wrap your head!"

As they spoke, the red warning lights on either side of the end of the aircraft corridor turned on and a loudspeaker above the red lights played a mechanical automatic alarm.

“The aircraft is experiencing unusual weather with unidentified cloud constantly pushing upwards on both wings, causing the aircraft to lurch, please prepare for an emergency landing – zzzzz -“

Soon this mechanical sounding announcement was cut off and turned into a human announcement, spoken in a fast and panicked voice:

“There was a crew member passed out on this side of the freighter bay, knocked out by me. Those five body parts, once exposed, would be so close they would make people mentally descend. It’s impossible to parachute out with the metal box and carry them at all.”

“A direct parachute landing with the body parts won’t work.”

The radio buzzed and buzzed and it wasn’t long before another voice changed, “But those five metal boxes are specially made and are just too heavy, so if landing alone or with us won’t work, we’ll have to consider either dumping them in the sea or crashing with the plane on land.”

Bai Liu and Du Sanying looked at each other – this would be the five escorts’ intra-team communication and radio frequencies linked together to keep each other informed in such extreme situations.

The radio continued to broadcast.

“Definitely not in the sea. The water is so fluid that once the metal box is deposited for too long and corrodes to expose its contents, the body parts can contaminate the world with the help of seawater!”

“But crashing on land can contaminate the Antarctic belt just as much if the box is damaged during landing ……”

“You can wrap it in a cotton woven item like a winter jacket, right?”

“No, have you forgotten the dried rose leaf? This corpse can alienate anything, even plant-based items like cotton. Captain Su has repeatedly warned us not to wrap the holding box in plant-based items.”

“But there simply aren’t many chemical-based fibre cushions on the plane, and there’s no cushioning effect, ah, under such a high airflow impact, unless we make human flesh cushions for the box – a layer of high-density bone and muscle might cushion the impact of a rapid descent……”

“Even if landing on land pollutes the Antarctic, polluting the land is more manageable than polluting the ocean! The population density of the Antarctic is so low, even if they are sacrificed ……”

“SHUT UP!!!”

A stern rebuke interrupted several arguments, and there was a moment of radio silence before saying, “If we take sacrifice as a trade-off and a matter of course, then what’s the point of being a member of the Heretic Authority instead of being ordinary people?”

“We, as members of the Heretic Authority, are here to avoid the sacrifice of any ordinary person.”

There was silence on the radio for a few more seconds, only the sound of zipping electricity.

“How many boxes are there?” The man enquired.

The man in the cargo hold replied, “Captain, eight in all.”

After another moment of silence, the captain said in a mute voice, “All crew, listen to this order. The plane’s forced landing location is Antarctic land, each person is responsible for a metal box. Wrap them in flesh to cushion the box, to avoid it breaking when landing and contaminating the Antarctic, posing a threat to the ordinary people living there.”

There was a long interval before someone returned very softly, “Yes, Captain.”

Someone asked weakly, “Captain, but what about the three other boxes?”

The radio was quiet for a few more seconds before the captain spoke, “Later you will divide me into four pieces and wrap the box with the muscles and bones of my upper limbs, lower limbs, and back.”

“This part of the abdominal cavity has the strongest rib frame cushioning, this part should save one and the other three ……”

The captain paused in exhaustion, the energy in his voice was all gone at this moment, and his tone was as light as if he was muttering to himself: “……We have failed in our duty, we have failed Captain Su and failed to protect…… “

"-boxes and ordinary people."

Reality

Bai Liu walked on the turbulent deck of the plane towards the cockpit, Du Sanying at his side. Objects were flying from the sides of the plane, automatically avoiding them.

In front of the cockpit, Bai Liu knocked on the door and the men inside pushed it open with great effort. They looked at the two extra men on the plane with dismay and almost instantly drew their guns from their sides and pointed them at Bai Liu's head, saying sternly.

"Who are you guys?! Did you follow us here by hiding on the plane?!"

Bai Liu was wearing a thick down hat and an oxygen mask that covered most of his face, so the team member didn't recognise him as the Bai Liu who had caused so much unrest in the Heresy Bureau.

"I was sent here by Tang Erda, former head of the Third Branch of the Bureau of Heresy Handling, to deal with the current situation." Bai Liu exhaled a white breath and raised his eyes to look directly at the team member, "He saw this coming."

The team member retracted his gun: "Are you Bai Liu, the living heretic that Captain Tang is following? Did Captain Tang send you here?"

Bai Liu nodded his head.

The team member gritted his teeth and turned to let Bai Liu into the cockpit: "Come in and talk."

The captain sat in the pilot's seat with bloodshot eyes, his hands flying over the dashboard that kept ticking with alarms, and asked in a cold voice without looking back, "- what can you do?"

"As you know I am a living heretic, so I will not be alienated by the body parts." Bai Liu spoke calmly, "Open the cargo bay door for me so I can take the body parts with me and parachute down alone."
The captain's eyes rolled for a moment as he finally glanced at Bai Liu with his peripheral vision: "- you're asking me to leave a high-risk heretic like the corpse in your custody?"

His attitude was aggressive, even a little harsh: "- what if you run off with the body, or try to do something else with it?"

“A little leak from this heresy can kill thousands of people, do you know how precious human life is?”

“I know that human life is a superficial thing to you, not as valuable as money.” The captain moved his eyes back, his face expressionless, “But it’s not in my eyes, and I can’t afford to take responsibility for so many lives in Antarctica.”

“It’s not as if you don’t have a previous conviction like that on you, and the third detachment of the Rose Factory has yet to settle its score with you.”

“I won’t let you take the body parts.”

The co-captain’s crew could not help but admonish somewhat, “Captain, this is one way to go!”

Another member of the crew followed in anxiety, “Captain! Do you have to let yourself die in four pieces?!”

The captain scolded sternly, interrupting them, “Alright, wait and find parachutes and communication equipment for these two, drop them off and just tell them to get the hell back on their own. No need to waste any more words!”

“My mind is made up!”

Bai Liu exhaled a calm white breath, “The lives of the people you want to save are lives, but the lives of these team members and your own life are not, are they?”

“Who gave you the right to trade your own life, the lives of these team members, for the lives of what you thought were ordinary people?”

“Shut the fuck up!!” The captain clenched his back teeth and tightened his cheeks, his eyes were red and filled with a light layer of tears, “Get off the plane!!!”

Bai Liu continued indifferently, “They are human, but you are not?”

“Or do you feel that you and these members of the team are inherently inferior and should be given priority to sacrifice when it comes to anything, and die so that others can live – aren’t you afraid to die anymore?”

Both the crew and the co-pilot were breathlessly silent.

Bai Liu lowered his eyes, “But I’m not human, I’m a living heretic, a monster who has made mistakes and has no moral compass or human emotion – and you were just right, Captain, human life doesn’t have as much value in my eyes as money does.”

“So there is no need to deal with me as a human being in your eyes.”

“In such a critical situation, it is logical in the human worldview for you to use my life to save the greater good, both for emotional and ethical reasons.”

Bai Liu’s voice was light and steady, “I am the one who should be sacrificed, not you.”

“As for your claim that I would use the body parts, there is no denying that I have a tendency to use everything, but you must have some means of controlling a high-risk heretic like me when you bring high-risk heretics on board, right?”

Even the team member from the Third Branch, who has always hated Bai Liu, couldn’t bear to shake his head at this point, and he decisively refused: “But that one is for remotely monitoring the corpses mental contamination and preventing riots by driving regulatory metal mechanical clasps into the bones of each body part…… “

Bai Liu interrupted him and replied gently, “Just use it on me.”

The team member looked up sharply as he retorted incredulously, “But you’re a living person! Because it’s for a corpse, we don’t have any anaesthetic facilities with us, there are thirty rings in total. You’ll die from the pain if we put them in forcefully!”

“But the corpse uses this too, right?” Bai Liu looked up at the crew member with a very light smile on his face, “I’ve always been the same kind of monster, or rather, heretic, as it is.”

“Isn’t it normal to use the same thing for control?”

The captain snapped, “- even if you are a fucking heretic, I will not approve of this being used on a living person, Bai Liu, get your ass off the plane -“

“Captain.” Bai Liu interrupted calmly, “There is no two ways about this, I get hurt once or you five die, you have to choose one.”

The captain’s back teeth were grinding one at a time, his eyes were

dark underneath. The whites of his eyes were bloodshot, and the muscles on his cheekbones were shaking from the clenching of his teeth.

Bai Liu suddenly stepped forward and half bowed, his tone sincere: “Captain, you have people you want to save and I have a monster I want to save.”

“And I hope you will understand and fulfil this dream of mine.”

The captain rose from the pilot’s place and gave up his own seat to the crew member who was keeping watch beside him. He turned to look at Bai Liu, who still maintained his bowing stance and exhaled a long, deep breath, his fingers opening and closing feebly for a moment from the long hours of manoeuvring.

His gaze moved slowly from the haggard faces of the two crew members still manning the dashboard to the white haze of clouds outside the window and let go for a brief moment.

Then he closed his eyes and said in a hoarse voice.

“…… You come over here, just put four rings on, wrists and ankles to control the limbs.”

Bai Liu got up and thanked the captain sincerely, “Thank you.”

The captain waved his hand wearily, “……If it hurts, say so if you can’t help it.”

Bai Liu was taken to the infirmary, and Du Sanying stood anxiously outside, expecting to hear some sort of scream or, at worst, a little moan – the rings were not anesthetized, and it sounded painful.

But eventually the only sound that came from the infirmary was a click that sounded like a stapler stapling a book, which came four times, followed by Bai Liu’s steady thanks, “Is it done? Thank you, Captain.”

Du Sanying was about to push the door open, but he stopped – he heard the sound of someone kneeling inside, knees hitting the cold floor with a thud.

“You are a heretic, a monster without fear. The Heresy Authority, and we in the Third Branch will certainly monitor you for the rest of your life and will not give you any chance to do evil or harm.” The captain

gritted his teeth in hatred.

Bai Liu gave a steady hmm, “I know, that’s your position, I understand.”

The captain was breathing heavily, he seemed to be crying, his voice choked with sobs, and then there were two heavy, hard, kowtowing sounds, “But this time, I take back all the personal comments I made about you before.”

“Thank you for saving the rest of the team, and thank you for saving me.”

The two men emerged from the infirmary, Bai Liu gently rubbing his wrist, a yellow mark of iodine sterilisation remaining on the back and some odd deformation of the bone protrusion – this must be where the ring clasp was driven in.

The captain, his face still streaked with roughly wiped tears, nodded to Bai Liu, “I’ll open the cargo door for you, go ahead.”

Bai Liu led Du Sanying, who had not yet recovered, all the way to the bottom cargo hold.

Once inside the cargo hold, a glance revealed the metal crates in which the body parts are stored, neatly arranged about two or three metres apart in a circular pattern, with a lot of foam and air cushions stuffed between them to separate them. Some of the air cushions had been punctured during the bumps and were spread out absently on the floor.

Bai Liu told Du Sanying to stand at the door of the cargo hold, not to approach and preferably not to look, to avoid being mentally contaminated, while he went in alone to deal with the body parts in the box.

Du Sanying stayed honest to his word at the door of the cargo hold, his back straight as a sentry.

Actually, Bai Liu didn’t have to tell him to not look at the contents of the boxes – they somehow gave him a very unlucky feeling and gave him the creeps.

Less than ten minutes later, Bai Liu emerged with the body wrapped in cloth and a cold suit, deliberately separated from Du Sanying.

Bai Liu: “Go and contact the captain and tell him to prepare to abandon the plane and try to find a place to land with a parachute.”

–Following the path of the game Ice Age, the odds are that the plane will not be saved and will most likely crash, so run as quickly as you can.

Apart from the captain and co-pilot, who were still in the cockpit, the remaining three members of the crew were already waiting at the cabin door of the aircraft.

They were sent over to show Bai Liu how to skydive, and one of them would jump in to give Bai Liu an aerial demonstration.

To avoid being mentally contaminated, they stood far away from Bai Liu and spoke only by shouting in the gale.

“If landing on the sea, the parachute comes in a matching package with a kayak, which we have enchanted with heretical modifications. It can withstand very low temperatures and can be used as a temporary landing site on the sea after instant expansion. The kayak can not carry much weight, so don’t put anything too heavy on it.”

“Make sure that neither you, nor the corpse ever falls into the water!”

“The water here is so cold that a fall would be life-threatening, and the body parts would cause pollution of the waters and alienate the creatures here.”

“If you land on land, there is a tent and some dry food in the package to last you about a week. Find a safe place and take it with you in the meantime. You have our Heresy Handling Bureau latch on you with a locator system and we will use all our efforts to find you within a week.”

The three players yelled until their voices were dry and pointed at Du Sanying: “And Bai Liu, what is this man you brought up here for?”

“Are you going to take him with you on the jump? Is this man a heretic like you and he won’t be disturbed by the body parts?”

Bai Liu looked over at Du Sanying, who was shivering in the cold wind, and turned his head, “I took him because I’ve always had bad luck and the unexpected happens in everything I do.”

“But this time I didn’t want any surprises, so I took him with me to

avoid any subsequent accidents."

The team wondered, "What unexpected situations?"

Bai Liu raised his eyes, "- like, the body parts falling into someone else's hands."

Three minutes later.

The side and rear doors of the aircraft were finally opened on the captain's instructions.

With the cold wind howling, the team was ready with parachute parcels, oxygen and breathing masks, and cold protection.

The bumps were getting more and more violent, to the point of being out of control. Du Sanying, standing in the wind, was almost blown off his feet and had to hold on to the handles to steady himself as he tried to put on his package.

While dressing, the team instructed Du Sanying on how to follow the jump.

"Normally a tandem jump would be you strapped in with him, but you and Bai Liu are both new so it's unsafe to tandem jump. Besides, he's already got a body strapped to him, so you'll have to jump with him and try to land in the same place as him."

"But the weather on this side of the Antarctic is not suitable for skydiving in all aspects – the only successful jumps I know of over here so far have been spot jumps, not high-altitude jumps."

"Because the view is all white below the high jump and the wind is unpredictable, it's hard to locate and find the landing spot. So don't force it as it's fine for you to find each other after you land."

"I was going to take you on a double jump, to be safer." This team member let out a long sigh, "But you wouldn't agree."

Du Sanying, who was awkwardly adjusting the chest strap, gave a slight, unnoticeable pause and looked up with a forced smile, "I'll be fine on my own, I'm lucky."

–but not necessarily the person who would take me.

Bai Liu is the only one who has survived around him so far.

The team member squarely thanked him, “But whether you are a human being or a living heretic like Bai Liu, please be safe.”

“Thank you so much for saving us.”

With that, the team member was ready to reach out and help Du Sanying adjust the mixed up chest straps.

Du Sanying answered in a whisper, turning his shoulder sideways to avoid this team member, his head lowered almost to the point of his heart, “…… I’ll do it myself, please just stand away from me.”

This crew member jumped first as a demonstration, exited the cabin, glided, opened his arms and in moments disappeared into the dense cloudy haze.

“This visibility is bad.” One team member frowned, “It’s too difficult to follow the jump, best to get someone to follow you.”

“No need.” Du Sanying squeezed the cord of his jump bag and whispered, “…… It’s okay, I’m lucky, I’ll be able to keep up with Bai Liu.”

Parachute jump begins.

Bai Liu leapt from the hatch through thick clouds and icy fog, the cold air slicing through his heart and lungs like a million freshly sharpened blades, freezing his limbs and paralysing him so much that even the wounds from inserting the ring clasp didn’t hurt as much.

He felt like a camera falling down from a height. The clouds, the mist and the sea seemed to fill Bai Liu’s field of vision with a sense of dynamic motion as if he was constantly switching between high frames.

Beautiful and ethereal, like the money-filled CG opening of a big game that cost a fortune.

It gives a trance-like, unrealistic coldness, like the frost on Bai Liu’s face at the moment.

Under Bai Liu’s feet were 14 million square kilometres of ice, in the sky is a plane about to crash, its tail beginning to burn. Embracing his heart is his only friend and his lover, who was now broken into pieces.

Then who will he be in his future?

[Future] didn't tell him the answer, so Bai Liu gave one to himself.

In that narrow orphanage, every child yearned day and night to be taken away by a strange man and woman – just as they yearned for loving parents, caring friends, brothers and sisters to grow up with.

They long for a family that they can only see in fairy tale books.

But Bai Liu was never a part of the process of being selected and taken away.

So Xie Ta asked him: [Don't you want a father?]

Bai Liu said: [No.]

Xie Ta asked: [Don't you want a Mother?]

Bai Liu said: [No.]

Xie Ta said: [Sister or brother, don't you want to have them?]

Bai Liu said: [What's the use of having them?]

Xie Ta, as if confused: [It seems to be a necessary component of family needs].

Bai Liu asked rhetorically: [Is there any use for families?]

Xie Ta thought for a moment and shook his head honestly: [A family seems to be a venue formed after two people have decided to be together, bound by law, morality, and some emotion called love, to be together with each other forever].

[Everyone seems to yearn for family].

Xie Ta asked Bai Liu: [If you had a family without these essential components, is there anything you would like to put into the family?]

Bai Liu didn't answer at the time because he felt he would never need something like [family].

It's too boring for two people to be tied together forever.

But two monsters …… seemed to be okay.

Now Bai Liu and Xie Ta have met all the requirements to start a family, so …… if Bai Liu had a [family], then Xie Ta is his only

family.

He hoped that if there was a future, a future with Xie Ta in it, it would be nice if Xie Ta would love him forever and be Bai Liu's family …….

That's enough.

An unreasonable gust of wind blew violently the moment Bai Liu opened his parachute.

Reality

The colourful rectangular curved parachute swung up and down in the swaying wind, tugging at Bai Liu, who was hanging from the parachute cord below, and throwing him from side to side.

Land was finally close, and below was a base with vaguely flickering lights – the same base from which the body parts were stolen in the game.

Bai Liu had already avoided landing at this base, but a sudden gust of wind pulled him there unreasonably.

–Like a mysterious and inexorable destiny.

Bai Liu glanced around through his goggles, pinpointing an out-of-the-way depot in a part of the base. He reached for the parachute cord, leaned back at the waist and adjusted his landing site.

He calmly adjusted his descent, already thinking of a strategy for when he lands – there was a knife in the package, designed to cut the accidentally tangled parachute cord.

Not long, or very new, but very sharp.

But now, if, as in the game, the body parts were found by the Edmond Observatory and were to be taken by force, Bai Liu felt that the knife would be of some use beyond cutting the parachute cord.

In the context of the game, Bai Liu remembered that the first people to find the body parts and turn them in to the Edmond Observatory were supposedly a group of ordinary Observatory researchers without weapons or attack power.
Bai Liu's mind wavered as he thought – I should be able to kill them all and destroy the bodies.
Although this undermines the legal boundaries that Lu Yizhan has always set for him.

But he can.

The huge base is immersed in the hazy, dim night.

The nights in Antarctica are always long and cold, and few residents have ever gone out into the night, except for cameramen who like to admire the Aurora Borealis.

But the native Antarctic dwellers, who have spent a lonely winter here, were clearly tired of the natural phenomenon of the Aurora Borealis and were now lying quietly under their warm blankets at home, unaware of the colourful parachute that had fallen from the sky.

There were exceptions to this rule, however, as the sheriff on routine patrol, with his lookout lights on, half-awake, saw the parachute landing next to the depot. Instantly awake, he scrambled to inform his superiors at the base, the management of the observatory.

The ground, freshly snowed in, was so white that Bai Liu made heavy footprints on it. He landed in the spacious, open snow next to the warehouse, rolling several times to stop the impact of the landing and the wind.

Bai Liu choked and coughed out the broken snow he had sucked down his throat, and squinted his eyes amid the howling wind at the dim lights of the base in the distance.

That was the only thing he could see clearly about the base.

The blizzard had not yet stopped and visibility was poor, only a vague glimpse of snow piled up in front of a warehouse door not far away. A large drum full of fuel had been blown to the ground at the back door, carrying a skull and crossbones sign next to it – a sign for dangerous chemical products.

This warehouse would most likely contain strong acids and fuel oil.

He can't stay here, these two items could destroy the body parts.

It seems that whoever is behind this is really scheming and trying to put options in front of Bai Liu, constantly urging him to destroy his weaknesses.

— If you don't destroy your weakness, you can be controlled. If you don't want to be controlled, you have to kill the person who wants to control you.

Bai Liu, what will you choose?

God smiled and said, "Bai Liu, whichever way you choose, you will become Bai Six."

In the knee-deep snow, Bai Liu had little ability to move with the body

parts and the pile of stuff, and if his suspicions were right, the investigating scientific team would be coming soon.

Bai Liu only thought for a few moments before taking off his bundle where he stood without hesitation and heading away from the base with the cold body on his back.

Bai Liu found a snow pit and buried the body parts in it.

The snow instantly buried Bai Liu's footprints at the edge of the snow pit.

After hiding the body parts, Bai Liu breathed heavily, pausing to frown and cover his heart – which had been aching vaguely since he quit Ice Age.

This pain is now becoming more intense.

But this pain was quickly held at bay by Bai Liu, who regained his calm demeanour and walked back to where he had taken off his bundle earlier. He rummaged through it and retrieved the knife that had been used to cut through the parachute cord.

Bai Liu gripped the hilt of his knife without a trace of emotion on his face, the clasp on his wrist bone sliding prominently with the movement, a very shallow heat coming from his breath.

Then he stood up, took the knife and walked towards the warehouse and quietly posted himself behind the door, waiting for the right person to come.

Bai Liu chose the second path.

He was determined to prevent everything by killing these ordinary people who knew nothing with his own hands.

The prophet above the pantheon closed his eyes in resignation.

"He could have stopped them without …… killing them," said the prophet, his voice hoarse.

The man hiding under the hood smiled as if he knew this would happen.

He retorted softly, "No, as long as Bai Liu doesn't kill them, and as long as one of them survives and goes back to report this, the body parts will be taken."

“Even though the group didn’t know what was going on or what this corpse had to offer, they just did what they had to do to report this unknown corpse.”

The man under the hood smiled as if in pity as he leaned forward to look closer at the prophet’s expression.

“But tragedies still happen, because there is no end to the desires of man.”

“As long as it is known that such things exist, there will be people who are desperate enough to give everything to get the corpse and fulfil their desires and wishes, to abuse others to satisfy themselves – people live on social superiority.”

“That’s why Bai Liu’s approach to killing them is so clean.” He appreciated Bai Liu’s approach, “- it’s only by killing the first person to discover the gold mine that people will think it doesn’t exist.”

” Bai Liu can monopolise this gold mine.”

The man said with amusement, ” Bai Liu is really clever, he has already guessed my existence. Although there were still many intermediate paths that could be taken without killing anyone, they were high in latent risk, and there is also a me who can interfere with his plans at will, so in the end – “

“- Bai Liu understood what I wanted to see him become, so he showed it to me.”

The werewolf card on the tabletop had a sinister red glow in its eyes. It lurked and moved towards the card representing the civilians on the tabletop, quietly baring its long teeth – a werewolf’s omen to kill.

“This is the first time the werewolf card has killed a civilian in this world line.”

The prophet returned nonchalantly, “Isn’t that what you want to see?”

The man looked up at the seer with a pleasant expression: ” Bai Liu let me have my wish and by doing so prevent me from manipulating fate.”

He took his hand off the tabletop and with a courteous brush of his hand towards the table, he spoke with a smile, “- if Bai Liu is willing to manipulate the world the way Bai Six does, then I would indeed be

happy to cede control of the world to him."

The man beneath the hood gracefully retreats from the tabletop and stands looking at the various character cards he has moved around on the table.

"He is my chosen heir to the evil god, and this is what he deserves."

The man lifted his head, smiled at the seer whose petrification had progressed to his heart, bent slightly and sighed regretfully.

"You've lost again, prophet."

The moment the petrification progressed to the prophet's neck, it abated downwards again in a bizarre manner, and the man raised his eyebrows in slight surprise, looking down at the table.

The moment the character card representing the werewolf bared its fangs, instead of biting into the civilian, its head turned and bit down hard on the [Idiot card]!

"The Idiot werewolf with full luck points cannot be taken away." The man sat back down, all expression on his face quickly disappearing, " Bai Liu What's up?"

Outside the windy and snowy warehouse.

Du Sanying's perfect luck score once again came into play as he landed precisely in a spot not far from Bai Liu.

But visibility was so poor in the snow and wind that he searched for a long time but could not find Bai Liu, only his parachute.

What Du Sanying didn't know was that Bai Liu was already hiding on the other side of the warehouse, waiting for the observation team to come.

Du Sanying's luck came into play when a group of men with torches approached the warehouse and they first found Du Sanying, half frozen to death.

The moment the group tried to rescue Du Sanying, Bai Liu sprang up from behind him and stuck a short knife to his throat, saying sternly, "Don't come any closer! I'll kill anyone who comes near!"

Du Sanying almost went into cardiac arrest due to Bai Liu's performance as a vivid gangster.

So his true expression of panic instantly moved the scientific team members who had come, and they spoke nervously in English to dissuade him.

Finally, someone suggested that the two men looked Asian. They tried again in clumsy Korean, Japanese and Chinese, and then introduced a researcher of Asian descent who stumbled over to communicate with Bai Liu.

“H-Hello.” The team member looked warily at the knife pressed to Du Sanying’s neck and motioned downwards with both hands, “Can you put the knife down first? What are you doing?”

Bai Liu replied in English, “I’ve been laid off and I want revenge on society, so I’m going to blow up the whole of Antarctica, and I want all you high-end talents buried with me!”

When he finished, he also kicked the fuel drum next to him in a manic manner, with a very hostile expression.

Du Sanying was completely baffled as he asked in a small voice, “…… Bai Liu, what are you doing?”

“Distracting the group.” Bai Liu acted like he was sick in the head, but his voice was calm, “-the one behind the curtain has limited influence on the [real world]. He has no way to impose random events like in the game, he can only use external factors like weather, people, and heretics to control this world that is not fully contaminated.”

“And all of these factors play a limited role in the Antarctic, where the weather is inherently extreme, there are no heretics and very few people.”

“In other words, here in Antarctica is not a good map for him. It is indeed a good place to store body parts – and I believe the man behind the scenes understands that, otherwise he wouldn’t have done it during the transportation of the body parts.”

Bai Liu whispered close to Du Sanying’s ear.

“Your luck is 100 percent. Now I’m holding you hostage, and in order for you to be rescued, either the other five escorts land here or the domestic observatory comes and takes over.”

“…… As soon as someone comes along and moves the body parts near the supervisory range Ice Dome A, things are under control.” Bai Liu’s

breath hitched twice from the stabbing pain in his heart, but he quickly squashed it again.

Du Sanying was a bit confused, but vaguely understood what Bai Liu was talking about, so he dutifully played the role of an innocent hostage.

The isolated group of researchers, having seen two Asians killing each other and one Asian about to blow up the base, quickly contacted the domestic observatory after determining the nationality of the two Asians and requesting that someone be sent over to deal with the problem.

–Otherwise, not many people here know Chinese and even communication would be a problem.

What is more urgent than finding out why two unknown men landed here is clearly the situation at hand.

The domestic observatory was rushing over and Du Sanying had just breathed a sigh of relief when he saw a sudden gust of demonic wind on the ground where strong wind was already blowing.

The wind whirled like it was digging into the ground and blew several pale body parts from a distance, spreading them out before the men as if on display.

The body was covered only with a thin winter jacket – Du Sanying recognised it as Bai Liu's winter jacket.

Everyone's breath stopped as the men looked at the body parts without turning their eyes, wearing expressions as if they were bewitched, trying to pick them up.

Bai Liu put the knife to Du Sanying's neck and took a few steps forward, forcing the men back, his voice so cold it was almost frozen: "Get out of here."

As they moved away from the body parts, the men barely regained a glimmer of consciousness. They backed away in fear and asked in a low voice, "What is this? Whose body parts are these? Have you already killed a man?"

There was no emotion in Bai Liu's eyes: "Yes, I killed him."

"I split him up and hid him in the snow, so if you don't want to die,

get out of here. I'm going to blow up the base."

The group was eventually deterred by the sense of threat posed by death. Bai Liu swayed and slid unsteadily on his feet, clinging to Du Sanying's back.

Du Sanying rushed to steady him, and dizzying visions began to appear before his eyes – he was too close to the body parts.

"…… go and open the warehouse door, you can do it." Bai Liu pushed Du Sanying hoarsely, "Let's go in, there's a lot of fuel in there. It's an explosion hazard, they wouldn't dare come in easily."

Du Sanying staggered up to the warehouse door and actually found a key on it that hadn't been pulled off – it was frozen and he had to cover it for a while before he could turn it.

When he opened the warehouse, he turned his head to shout at Bai Liu to come over, but his voice suddenly hit a lump in his throat, becoming smaller.

Du Sanying saw Bai Liu kneeling on the ground, carefully picking up the body parts in the cold-weather suit, patting the snow off them and covering them with his own cold-weather jacket.

Bai Liu wrapped up all the body parts and, clutching them to his belly where it was warmest, staggered to his feet and headed for the warehouse.

The scene was somehow familiar, and Du Sanying felt as if he had been on his knees a long time ago, picking up the body parts of his family and wrapping them in his arms, pretending they were still alive, weeping helplessly.

Once inside the warehouse, Du Sanying immediately locked the door behind him, and Bai Liu sat in the corner with his head hanging, his face pale and his lips dark and bloodless from the cold.

Du Sanying was anxious but afraid to go over – the pile of body parts in Bai Liu's arms was too heavy for him.

He wandered around the house in a hurry and was lucky enough to find the not-yet-abandoned hot air conditioning switch. Du Sanying turned it on with a sigh of relief and sat slumped against the wall, his hands hanging on two large, red-painted cans of chemicals.

Looking at the markings on it, there was fuel, harmful substances and some corrosive liquids such as strong acids.
Bai Liu sits in a corner away from the jars, the bruises from the cold slowly fading from his face.

Everything seems to be looking up.

But ten minutes later there was the sound of a key turning in the door of the warehouse – the group was coming again.

The group who had seen the corpse had gone amiss as they turned the key outside the door while muttering rapidly and in low tones, "-corpse, corpse-"

Du Sanying jumped up in a hurry and leaned against the warehouse door, only to hear a click as the key outside the door broke halfway in the keyhole.

The warehouse door was completely locked.

But before Du Sanying could breathe a sigh of relief, the men outside did not give up, they shifted positions.

The small, high window at the back of the warehouse was wiped clean, and a constant stream of people peered in with wide, unseeing eyes tilted to one side, staring dead at the body in Bai Liu's arms in the corner.

They began to smash the window with hammers, trying to climb in through the window, which was less than the size of a cake box.

Du Sanying climbed breathlessly to the small window and sat with his back against it to block it.

Once again his luck played out and the men outside began to fall as they tried to climb up and push him away.

Du Sanying gritted his teeth and strained to hear the sound of the man outside falling into the snow while he folded his hands in a prayer of apology, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry-"

After the window climbing activity, the people outside subsided slightly for a short while before the sound of louder snowmobiles pushing snow came through.

Du Sanying rushed to look out of the small window.

Not far from the warehouse, a neatly arranged row of snowmobiles shined with their headlights on, the sleds in front of them pushing out. The tyres ploughed and splashed through the snow like a pack of wild dogs ready to attack, with glowing green eyes and saliva ready to strike at the throat of their prey.

–This bunch of psychos actually tried to push the warehouse directly with a snowmobile!!!

Are they crazy!!! The whole warehouse will explode!!!

Du Sanying was so frightened that he tumbled down from the small window and knelt far in front of Bai Liu, shouting at him: ” Bai Liu! Bai Liu! Wake up!!!”

“The warehouse is going to explode!!!”

Bai Liu’s eyes were slightly closed, as if he had fallen into a deep sleep from exhaustion and did not want to wake up.

Du Sanying was so anxious that he wanted to shake Bai Liu awake, but he couldn’t get near him because of the body parts in his arms.

“Bai Liu, wake up!” Du Sanying shouted in a squeaky voice, “I won’t die if the warehouse explodes, but you will! Get up and run!!!”

Du Sanying was so desperate that he threw things from the warehouse at Bai Liu, trying to wake him up.

But Bai Liu was unresponsive, only tilting his head a little, blood slowly seeping from the corners of his mouth and his breathing fading.

Du Sanying was so dazed that he rushed over to the body parts and threw them away, kneeling down dizzily, slapping Bai Liu’s face and crying out in fear.

“Hey! Hey! Don’t you die!!!”

“Didn’t you say that no matter how close you get to me, you won’t die or be affected by me?!”

“Stay alive!!!”

The lights outside the window flashed by, so bright it made you want to shed a tear, and the roar of snowmobiles rang through the wintry night.

Du Sanying bawled and clutched Bai Liu's fallen head: "Help! Someone help him!"

The body parts that Du Sanying had thrown aside with such haste assembled themselves as if they were self-aware, turning into a perfect statue covered in cracks on the ground. Then, the blood flowed through the veins of the statue as they connected to each other.

At last, the statue stood up. Except for its eyes closed and its cracked body, it was like a real human being.

Du Sanying dully stopped crying.

The statue stepped forward and took Bai Liu from Du Sanying's arms and thanked him with his eyes closed and head bowed: "Thank you for taking care of Bai Liu."

The voice was a little broken, like the statue was at the moment, but the sincerity of it could still be heard.

Du Sanying couldn't help but shake his head in alarm and take several steps back before he carefully returned, "No, you're welcome."

After a while, Du Sanying couldn't resist and asked in a low voice, "Are you, like, alive?"

The statue shook its head, "I am a monster."

Du Sanying stole a glance at Bai Liu, who was lying on the monster's shoulder: "Bai Liu and you, what's your relationship?"

The statue was quiet for a moment: "He is someone very important to me."

Du Sanying let out an oh, his mood somehow relaxing, "You can save him, can't you?"

"I am there to save him." The statue lowered his head, and he seemed to want to open his eyes to look at the man in his arms, but suddenly remembered that there were other people there, and said, "Can you please turn your head? You cannot see my eyes, but I would like to see Bai Liu."

Du Sanying inexplicably had the feeling that he was glowing, and with a couple of oohs and aahs, he honestly covered his ears and turned away.

Xie Ta lowered his head, his silvery blue eyes opened and he gazed wholeheartedly at Bai Liu in his arms, wiping the blood stain from the corner of his mouth with his thumb and smiling very lightly.

“You’ve worked hard.”

Xie Ta bowed his head and placed a kiss on Bai Liu’s forehead with great reverence.

“It’s almost over, so forgive me for not daring to meet you in this state, it just doesn’t look good.”

The roar outside the warehouse grew louder and Du Sanying tried to turn around somewhat uneasily, only to turn around and see Xie Ta placing Bai Liu in his arms.

” Bai Liu was injured in the game, please continue to look after him.”

Du Sanying took it in a panic, then asked, “What are you going to do with those people out there?”

“It’s not their fault.” Xie Ta stood in front of the warehouse door that was knocked constantly, his voice and expression as flat as snow, “-it was the fault of the new evil god who used me to lure them to their doom.”

“It was my fault that the old evil god fell.”

“I shouldn’t exist.” Xie Ta says, “Bai Liu will be controlled by him because of me.”

Xie Ta’s hands came up and the fuel poured down the sides. A spark fell from Xie Ta’s pale fingertips and the fire burst into flames along Bai Liu’s winter jacket on his body. Strong acid fell from the side of the window and joined the fire.

Rushing smoke billowed from the warehouse.

An ethereal, unreal voice came out of the fire: “After I am burned, all traces of my existence will be erased, including Bai Liu’s memories, the data from the game, the things I gave to Bai Liu.”

Du Sanying was stunned: “How did this happen ……”

The reverse cross and fish scale hanging from Bai Liu’s neck shattered into powder and the fish bone whip in the system panel dulled and disappeared.

An ear-splitting announcement spanned all areas of the game, and players looked up at the huge aerial announcement that

[System Notification: Data in all areas of god-level wandering NPC has begun to be cleared….]

[System Notification: Data cleanup is complete, God-level NPC bug is fully erased. From now on, please feel free to play the game, no more God-level NPCs roaming around the major game scenes].

The fire was still burning, and the voice inside faded away, as if in a dream.

” Du Sanying, you should understand better than anyone that sometimes not remembering anything is not a bad thing.”

Bai Liu, leaning on Du Sanying’s arm, opened his eyes weakly, his dark eyes reflecting the light of the leaping fire. A tear slid down the corner of his eye to his jaw and dripped to the ground.

“I hate you, Xie Ta .” Bai Liu said to himself, “I hate you.”

From the fire came a very soft voice: “I love you.”

The sparks jumped, then died out as ashes and the remaining smoke cleared away, leaving nothing behind.

Not even the ashes were left behind, disappearing cleanly.

The roar outside the window went on for a while, and then came the sound of people talking in confusion about why they were here, and then they all drove off in their snowmobiles.

Du Sanying also remained confused for a moment, not seeming to react to why he was in this warehouse, and why there was a pile of burn marks in front of him.

Bai Liu, who was leaning on his shoulder, collapsed onto the cold ground, clenching his heart in excruciating pain and vomiting a mouthful of blood. Blood began to pour from his ears, eyes and nose in a frenzy that could not be stopped.

Bai Liu was choking and coughing convulsively, blood clots flying everywhere, and Du Sanying was so frightened that his adrenaline exploded and he grabbed Bai Liu and rushed outside the warehouse, shouting, “Anyone!

“Come to the rescue!!! Someone’s vomiting blood!!!”

Bai Liu’s eyes closed wearily and the last thing he saw were the black marks on the ground from the burning.

Du Sanying, his hands covered in blood, sat stunned outside the ward.

The unconscious Bai Liu was rushed to the nearest hospital, where he was taken to the ICU.

But the doctors came and went with tense expressions, indicating that Bai Liu’s condition was not good.

Du Sanying was so distraught that he had to stop a doctor and ask in broken English, “How is Bai Liu doing in there?”

The doctor said, “It’s okay, out of danger.”

Du Sanying breathes a long sigh of relief.

“It’s a miracle he survived.” The doctor, who looked tired but also somewhat excited, explained to Du Sanying, “This patient, Bai Liu, has traces of his heart having been cut and then dug out, and the connection is still fresh.”

“He should be recuperating from such a serious operation, but his parachuting and strenuous running caused these otherwise incompatible high-precision vascular anastomoses to split and he developed severe internal bleeding.”

The doctor stressed, “Almost no one survives such a bizarre operation. I don’t know who it was that kept Bai Liu’s blood loss very limited for a period of time and kept him going until now.”

“He should be all right now.” The doctor got up, “But he’s not awake yet, so let him rest for a while.”

Dazed and confused, Du Sanying got up and thanked the doctor, then borrowed a satellite phone to call home – Tang Erda had given him his number before he left.

He had lost a bit of memory of what exactly he was doing over here, except that it was on a very important mission – it seemed to be transporting a high-risk heretic.

The satellite phone was quickly picked up and Tang Erda quickly asked, “What’s the status of you and Bai Liu? Where are the five team

members?”

“I’m fine, and the five escorts should be fine too.” Du Sanying stammered and looked towards the ward at the end of the corridor, where Bai Liu was staying.

“But Bai Liu …… is now in the hospital and he is still in a coma.”

” Bai Liu in a hospital?!”

As soon as he heard that Bai Liu had been injured, Mu Sicheng started to grab the phone, furious, “Shit, what’s wrong? Why is Bai Liu in the hospital?”

The call then went to Muke, whose voice was tense: “Did you encounter something during the transport?”

Lastly, Liu Jiayi, who was quick on the uptake: “The five escorts and you are fine, so it’s not something that happened in transit. Was it a problem with the item being transported or was it game related?”

“Both, I guess.” Du Sanying sighs, “The transport items were burned, and Bai Liu’s injuries seem to have been carried over from the game and have little to do with the transport process.”

Mu Sicheng’s voice was suspicious: “Brought out of the game?”

“Bringing an injury out of the game, it’s only if the player feels that the injury is something he actually suffered physically himself. Bai Liu didn’t even drop below 60 mental points in the last game, so how can that illusion arise?”

Du Sanying’s voice was a little confused, he didn’t know much about this: “I don’t know.”

Liu Jiayi pressed, ” What is Bai Liu’s injury?”

Du Sanying recalls: “Heart.”

“The doctor said someone had cut open his heart.”

Reality

The next day, Bai Liu was able to sit up—something the doctors found incredible.

Before they could investigate the cause of his astonishing recovery, however, Bai Liu—bed and all—was taken over by the domestic observatory.

Now, he sat quietly on an observation post bed, gazing sideways out the window at the howling snow and wind. Beside him, Du Sanying dozed fitfully.

A soft knock came at the door.

"Mr. Bai Liu, may we come in?"

Du Sanying jerked awake, hastily wiping the saliva from the corner of his mouth before turning toward Bai Liu.

Bai Liu didn't look away from the window. "Come in."

The door swung open, and five escorts entered, followed by the station chief. They stood at the foot of Bai Liu's hospital bed, their heads slightly bowed.

"You helped us solve the trouble with the heretic that was escorted this time," one of them said.

Bai Liu let out a noncommittal hum. His voice was light. "I didn't do anything."

"Mr. Bai, what you did was invaluable." The station chief lifted his head, his expression tinged with relief.

"I admit, I was somewhat disappointed when I heard that the Heretic Authority had decided to transfer the original dried-leaf rose plant to the Antarctic for preservation. But since no method has been found to destroy it, moving it somewhere sparsely populated was the only option."

He exhaled deeply, as if releasing a long-held tension. "It's fortunate you found a way to destroy it before the other researchers—who had been entranced by the rose—could attempt to claim it."

At that, Bai Liu finally turned his head toward them. Then, unexpectedly, he chuckled. Softly. Slowly.

He repeated the station chief's words, as if savoring them.

"The original plant of the rose was taken to the South Pole?"

The station chief hesitated. "…Yes?"

"So," Bai Liu murmured to himself, "your memories were corrected into a rose plant…"

His voice dropped to a whisper.

"…I'm the only one who remembers him dead. I'm the only one who remembers him alive."

He turned back to the window and nodded to show he understood. Then, he fell silent.

To everyone else, it was nothing more than the fading of an insignificant, fragrant rose.

But Bai Liu knew the truth.

It was his God who had died.

The five escorts exchanged glances before bowing in gratitude. They thanked Bai Liu for saving them from a near-disastrous plane crash, then took their leave, allowing him to rest.

The captain was the last to exit. Before closing the door, he hesitated, glancing back at Bai Liu's pale figure in the hospital bed.

His mind drifted back to the words Bai Liu had spoken to him on the plane:

You have people you want to save. I have monsters I want to save.

In all his years working for the Heretic Authority, the captain had encountered countless high-risk heretics—beings large and small, some barely human. Never had he seen a look like that in a monster's eyes.

And yet, in that moment, Bai Liu's gaze had been utterly sincere.

Perhaps to Bai Liu, that rose had been more than just a heretic.

Perhaps it had been a friend. A lover. A family member.

Something worth saving at all costs.

Yet, in the end, Bai Liu had failed to save the one thing he truly wanted to.

For some reason, the captain felt a deep sense of regret.

After a pause, he spoke.

"I've briefed Captain Su on how you assisted us. He said he'd apply for a review of your risk classification. If approved, you'll be granted greater freedom of movement."

He continued, "All four restraints were removed during your transfer to the domestic observatory. The third detachment won't conduct any surveillance on you until the reassessment is finalized."

A beat of silence. Then, quietly:

"Thank you. For saving us. And the people here."

He hesitated before adding, "…About the rose—I'm sorry."

Bai Liu did not respond.

The captain bowed slightly in farewell and closed the door behind him.

The moment they were gone, Bai Liu tore the IV from the back of his hand.

Du Sanying flinched. "What are you—?!"

"Lock the door," Bai Liu ordered. "Don't let any normal people in. Pack up—we're entering the game."

Blood dripped steadily from Bai Liu's hand. Du Sanying hesitated before whispering, "The doctor said they gave you an anticoagulant to prevent clotting. You're going to keep bleeding if you—"

Bai Liu shot him a look.

Du Sanying swallowed, scowled, and obediently locked the door.

Bai Liu's voice was calm. "Liu Jiayi and the others should be waiting

for me in the game."

Du Sanying frowned. "But… the doctor said—"

"Liu Jiayi has a better treatment for me than anticoagulants," Bai Liu interrupted.

Du Sanying blinked. "…What kind of treatment?"

Bai Liu smiled faintly.

"The antidote."

In-game.

Outside the small guild building of the Wandering Circus, Liu Jiayi paced anxiously, while Mu Sicheng crouched in the doorway, arms resting on his knees, staring into space.

Muke stood motionless against the door, arms crossed, head bowed, his expression unreadable.

Tang Erda leaned against a nearby bin, a lit cigarette between his lips, absentmindedly spinning his gun with practiced ease. The movements —unloading, assembling, removing, and reloading—blurred together in rapid succession, the magazine and chamber clicking softly.

In all the countless world lines he had seen, he never imagined Bai Liu would go out of his way to save the Heresy Handling Bureau.

Dissected, bleeding profusely, collapsing in the freezing snow—held by Du Sanying for over half an hour before help arrived, his clothes soaked in his own blood…

Tang Erda had never seen Bai Liu in such a miserable state.

He had always been omnipotent, omnipresent—the sole chosen believer of the evil gods, moving through the world as if it existed solely for his amusement.

But this time, the gods who had always favored Bai Liu seemed to be punishing him.

Because this time, Bai Liu refused to follow the path designed for him.

Tang Erda was lost in thought when Mu Sicheng suddenly shouted:

“Bai Liu!”

Every head snapped toward the entrance.

Bai Liu approached, draped in an oversized hospital gown, blood still dripping from his hand. He walked straight toward the guild building, followed closely by a nervous-looking Du Sanying, who kept his gaze level with the ground.

Muke lowered his arms. Mu Sicheng jumped to his feet. Liu Jiayi stopped pacing. Tang Erda tucked his gun away.

He looked awful, but after all the waiting and uncertainty, he was finally here.

As soon as Bai Liu stepped inside, Muke wordlessly handed him a bandage.

Bai Liu accepted it and, as he wrapped his arm, began issuing orders:

“You all know my condition from Du Sanying. The wounds aren’t difficult to deal with. We’ll go to the game pool and find a low-difficulty game. Jiayi, you’ll use your skill to heal me once inside.”

Liu Jiayi nodded. “Understood.”

Bai Liu turned to Muke. “Is Wang Shun in the guild?”

Muke nodded.

“Good.” Bai Liu gestured toward Du Sanying, who had been keeping close behind him. “Have Wang Shun give him a crash course on game mechanics. Get a count of his past games, and make sure Wang Shun sets aside time each week to review the basics—Du Sanying will forget.”

Then, as an afterthought, Bai Liu added, “And remind Wang Shun to keep interactions minimal. No emotional involvement.”

He looked at Du Sanying. “Your luck stat will affect him.”

Muke gave a curt nod. “Got it. Come with me.”

Du Sanying hesitated, glancing at Bai Liu. Only after receiving a slight nod of approval did he trot after Muke.

Bai Liu then turned to Mu Sicheng. “I have a job for you.”

Mu Sicheng crossed his arms. “What is it?”

“Because of something Spades did, a number of my weapons and props were wiped out. The league demands replacements, and I need better ones.” Bai Liu’s gaze sharpened. “I think the cost should be covered by the Killer Sequence.”

A smirk pulled at the corners of Mu Sicheng’s lips. “They were last year’s top-ranked guild. Their inventory must be stacked.”

Bai Liu nodded. “Have Charles negotiate first. If they’re willing to sell, we’ll buy. If not…” He glanced down at Mu Sicheng’s monkey paw. “You know what to do.”

Mu Sicheng bared his teeth in a grin, flexing his wrist. “Got it. Just stomp in and terrorize their inventory master, yeah?”

Bai Liu hummed in approval.

With a lazy salute, Mu Sicheng sauntered off.

Next, Bai Liu looked to Tang Erda. “You and Jiayi are coming into the game with me. I’m in no shape to enter alone with Jiayi—I’ll get swarmed. I need strong backup.”

At that, Tang Erda exhaled, some of the tension leaving his posture. “Naturally. Are we heading to the game pool now?”

Bai Liu nodded.

Liu Jiayi, too, relaxed. She had been afraid Bai Liu would try to act tough and go in alone with her.

He looked too weak for that.

And yet… despite his haggard appearance, the moment Bai Liu stepped into the guild, everything fell into motion. Orders were given, people mobilized, and an unspoken weight lifted.

What a natural tactician.

Liu Jiayi studied him from the corner of her eye. Even now, calmly orchestrating the guild’s movements, Bai Liu showed no sign of the trauma he had endured. He was so composed, so effortlessly in control, it was almost as if…

As if he had dragged himself out of the wreckage and back into the game purely by instinct.

Who the hell could break Bai Liu's heart like this?

The only person capable of hurting him in the last round was Spades.

But that guy wasn't exactly… emotionally complex. He didn't seem capable of getting under Bai Liu's skin in a way that would actually affect him.

And yet, from the moment Bai Liu came back online, his first order of business was targeting the Killer Sequence and Spades.

Liu Jiayi rubbed her chin in thought.

Just what did Spades do to piss off Bai Liu—the ever-calm, profit-driven mastermind?

For the first time in a long while, Liu Jiayi found herself genuinely curious.

Killer Sequence Guild Lounge
Spades sat slouched on one side of the sofa, his head bowed, while across from him, the Inquisitor of God sat propped up on his knees, delivering a blistering reprimand.

"Look at you!" The Reverse God waved his hand in exasperation, his voice rising. "I'm not saying you can't play solo. It's normal to clash with other players when you want to win—everyone wants to be number one, and as your tactician, I get that."

His frustration only grew as he continued. "-But how the hell did you end up breaking another player's heart—bah, no, another kid's heart?!"

"It was just a game pool, not even the league! Was that really necessary?!"

With a resounding slap to his thigh, the Inquisitor of the Reverse God demanded, "Spades, do you think that was the right thing to do?!"

Spades leaned back, arms folded over the whip resting against his chest, his head dipping slightly as if in silent admission of guilt.

Seeing this rare display of compliance, the Inquisitor of the Gods sighed, his tone softening. "Listen, Spades, it’s still support season. If word gets out that you’re out here bullying smaller guilds like this, it'll tank our support rate. We already have a reputation problem—there aren’t many members in the Killer Sequence as it is, and our image is terrifying enough. Most ordinary players don’t even want to support us."

He considered for a moment before offering a suggestion. "Tell you what, how about we bring something to the door and apologise to people, shake hands and pretend it never happened?"

Spades nodded. His head dropped even lower, almost to his chest.

The Inquisitor of the Gods blinked in surprise. "Wait, Spades—you actually agree? No backing out now!"

A nearby team member, sensing something was off, hesitantly stepped forward and took a closer look at Spades. After a long silence, he turned back to the Inquisitor of the Gods.

"Uh… Reverse God, Spades is asleep."

Reverse God: "....."

For a moment, there was only stunned silence.

Then, with a growl, the Reverse God rolled up his sleeves and roared, "SPADES—YOU—! MARK MY WORDS, ONE DAY YOU'LL BE ON YOUR KNEES BEGGING THAT PLAYER FOR FORGIVENESS, YOU SLEEPY BASTARD!"

Chaos erupted as the other players scrambled to restrain their furious tactician.

"Calm down! We still need him for the game!"

"This isn’t the first time he’s slept through a meeting!"

"Yeah, yeah, just hit him where it hurts—make him lose three games as punishment! It’s painful for Spades to lose a game! It hurts more than killing him!"

At this, Spades, still half-asleep, cracked open one eye just in time to hear the Reverse God take a deep breath and declare, "Alright, same as always—Spades slacking off in a meeting means he’s banned from

winning the next three games."

"For the next three rounds, our whole team will keep an eye on him and make sure he doesn't take a single victory, from us or the enemy. That’s his punishment. And a test of our skills. Got it?!"

"Got it!" the team echoed in unison, their fighting spirit ignited.

Spades, groggy and confused, slowly sat up. "…Wait."

Why is he being punished again? Didn’t he just finish serving one?!

The Dense Forest Borderlands

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The group walked in a loose, casual manner, yet passersby still veered away in fear.

"Look at the state of things!" The Reverse God shot Spades a glare. "This is your fault! You made this happen! Playing so ruthlessly in the game pool—was that really necessary?!"

Spades lifted his eyes, meeting the accusation with a faint, indifferent glance. "They're not afraid of me," he said coolly. "They fear anyone who brings victory. Not because of what I've done, but because they dread the possibility of losing it themselves."

He turned his head slightly, his tone unwavering. "If their fear is a necessary part of winning, then let them be afraid."

The implication was clear—victory would belong to him, no matter what. The sheer arrogance and certainty in his voice left no room for doubt.

The Reverse God was momentarily struck speechless, his annoyance reaching its peak.

Spades, for all his apparent lack of emotional intelligence, had a way of seeing things with razor-sharp clarity. And worse, he seemed to enjoy provoking debates just to keep everyone on edge.

With a sigh, the Reverse God rubbed his forehead, finally conceding. "Fine. Pick any three games." His tone was laced with resignation. "Let's see how well your solo training has paid off—and how much you've missed from our group training."

He took a deep breath, his expression turning serious. "If we can keep you in check."

Then, more firmly, he added, "Just get ready to return to the team. It's time to start proper league training."

Spades gave a small nod. Without another word, he unfurled his long black whip, striking a swimming, distorted poster in the game pool.

In an instant, the entire war party of the Killer Sequence vanished into thin air.

The Other End
Mu Sicheng crouched low on the floor of the Killer Sequence guild, sharp monkey claws embedded in the wall. Behind him, the question-mark-shaped tail of the capuchin flicked slightly, hooking onto any protruding decorations or fixtures.

He wore a chameleon-like coat that shifted colors to match the environment—a rare superhuman item that Bai Liu had obtained in the game pool and later assigned to him.

It had been a perfect decision. The coat allowed Mu Sicheng to infiltrate the Killer Sequence headquarters seamlessly, blending in without detection.

A few well-executed color shifts and some daring midair swings later, he landed firmly in a long corridor near the top floor of the guild.

Dust clung to his claws, and he casually flicked off the crumbled bits of the wall. His tail retracted smoothly behind him like a drawn wire as he glanced around with keen red eyes, eyebrows lifting in mild surprise.

—What the hell is this big guild doing? No security at all? Are they just waiting for someone to come in and rob them blind?

If Muke were here, he could have explained why the Killer Sequence headquarters was so empty and unguarded.

The Killer Sequence was a rising force in the game world, having exploded onto the scene last year on the back of Spades' overwhelming victories. Given their momentum, most guild leaders would have capitalized on that success, working to turn their team into the number one guild.

But there was one problem: the Killer Sequence had no president—because Spades refused to play that role.

Instead, the guild had developed in a wild, unstructured way. Its members were a mix of eccentric high-potential newcomers, players with unique abilities, and those who idolized Spades but had no interest in being tied down by traditional guild constraints.

While they had a guild building, the members treated it as Schrödinger's headquarters—sometimes occupied, sometimes not.

During league seasons, they banded together under the guild's name to meet registration requirements.
Outside of that, they were solo players.

The new generation of Killer Sequence members had absorbed Spades' philosophy: they were born to dominate the league. Each of them saw themselves as an unstoppable force—a ruthless predator ready to devour the competition.

This hyper-competitive mindset had only started to calm down when the Reverse God was recruited into the guild. He made them realize that a team needed more than just raw skill—there were only five true league killers.

"You guys need to actually contribute to the guild before you can call yourselves killers."

That was how the so-called tactician, the one Spades had personally poached and slapped with the title of [Guildmaster], ended up overworked and underappreciated.

Now, not only was he responsible for training the team and keeping disobedient players in check, but he was also burdened with managing every logistical nightmare that came with running a guild.

He was, in short, doing the work of eight people while Spades refused to pay him a dime.

Under these circumstances, guild security was understandably not the Reverse God's top priority—he barely had the time to breathe, let alone implement proper defenses.

Besides, Spades' influence had fostered a guild full of battle-hungry maniacs. These players didn't see security as a necessity; they wanted challengers to come knocking. The stronger the intruder, the more excited they got.

Most guilds wouldn't dare to pick a fight with the Killer Sequence, so security was, at best, an afterthought.

Ensuring the building was mostly empty, Mu Sicheng moved forward, slipping deeper inside.

As was common among guilds, there were typically two main places where high-level props were stored:

The personal inventory of the guild's dedicated Warehouse Keeper, accessible via the system panel.
The physical guild warehouse, where items were stored, tested, and maintained.
The Warehouse Keeper wasn't just a storage manager—they were also responsible for inspecting and maintaining high-grade and rare props in-game. They carried a vast number of valuable items at all times, making them a walking vault and one of the most critical roles in any guild, alongside the Weapon Transformer.

For example, in the Golden Dawn guild, the entire guild functioned as the Warehouse Keeper. It wasn't a single person but a collective responsibility.

Golden Dawn had no discernible purpose outside of this role, yet every single member was trained like a professional vault guard. It was as if they had all once worked in law enforcement, specializing in handling and securing dangerous items.

Naturally, this made them the natural enemy of thieves.

Guilds like the King's Guild, Kabbalah Life Guild, and even Charles' Gamblers' Club had attempted to spy on Golden Dawn's stockpile—not necessarily to steal, but simply to gather intelligence on what items they possessed.

But no matter how they tried, they always failed.

Under the guidance of a new team member, Armand, Golden Dawn had recently restructured its security measures again. Just the other day, they had caught a King's Guild scout in under one dimensional minute.

At this point, their warehouse security wasn't just tight—it was impenetrable.

Mu Sicheng frowned as he moved through the Killer Sequence building. Something about the warehouse's layout felt eerily familiar.

It bore an uncanny resemblance to the security blueprints Wang Shun had shown him of Golden Dawn's storage system.

Behind him, a translucent, rotating barrier shimmered for a moment—

[System Alert: A player has triggered the warehouse trap prop you set!]

At that exact moment, the Reverse God, who had just entered the game, saw a notification pop up on his system panel.

A team member beside him noticed his reaction. "What's wrong?"

The Reverse God smiled. "Nothing. Someone just triggered the warehouse protection prop I set up."

The team stared at him in disbelief. "Wait—someone actually tried to steal from the Killer Sequence?"

"Since when did we even have warehouse security?" another player asked.

"Yeah, I mean... we don't even have a Warehouse Keeper, do we?"

The Reverse God sighed and raised his voice to calm their curiosity. "We don't have the manpower to guard a warehouse. So, I had to resort to the simplest yet most effective solution."

The team leaned in. "Which is...?"

The Reverse God smiled warmly. "I contacted Golden Dawn's president, paid a sum of money, threw in a prophecy or two, and outsourced our warehouse security to them."

Silence.

The team: "....."

They stared at him, utterly dumbfounded.

—Did the Reverse God just... single-handedly whore out the strongest warehouse defense system in the game...

The Reverse God shook his head in regret. "Honestly, if I could, I'd outsource training too. But the Deer Hunter Guild, which produces the toughest players, doesn't take on outsourced battle team training, so —"

He sighed. "I have to do it myself. And you guys don't even listen to me as a tactician."

The team: "....."

—The Deer Hunters?! They believe in Spartan training! Their members scream in agony every day! They don't even have time to eat or take bathroom breaks! They're all getting kidney stones from dehydration!

One of the more unruly team members swallowed nervously. "We—we'll listen to you..."

The Reverse God gave him a smirk. "Really?"

All the players nodded frantically.

The more he walked, the stronger his unease grew. Mu Sicheng came to a halt just in time, scanning the architecture around him. He lifted his nose and sniffed carefully. The bright, open corridors were laced with an odd mixture of scents—layers of human presence tangled together, complex and varied. Beneath it all, there was the faint, sterile chill of metal doors.

—It was eerily similar to what he had smelled at the headquarters of the Heretic Authority.

As Mu Sicheng took in the scents, a butterfly with shimmering green and blue wings, edged in gold, landed gracefully on the window to his left. It fluttered its wings slowly, almost lazily.

Mu Sicheng turned his face away, frowning as he twitched his nose. He muttered under his breath, "—And a little... breath of moving air..."

"The smell of the wind."

The butterfly's wings suddenly beat faster. A gust of wind surged down the narrow corridor, carrying with it a blurred figure that merged seamlessly into the gale, striking toward Mu Sicheng at an imperceptible speed.

The sheer force of the wind sent shockwaves rippling through the walls. His opponent used the pressure to propel himself, bouncing off the surfaces with swift, unpredictable movements before delivering a heavy blow.

Mu Sicheng braced himself, crossing his arms to absorb the impact. With a defiant grin, he retaliated—his claws lashed out, fingers curling to seize the attacker's face and pin him to the ground.

His right paw flexed and retracted in an instant. Pivoting on his foot, he swept a kick low, aiming to take out his opponent's stance.

In this wind, whoever lost their footing first would be the one to fall.

His opponent, however, moved lightly, springing into the air and pushing off the wall with barely a sound. His breath was steady, his body blending effortlessly with the wind. A butterfly clung to his shoulder, its delicate wings still fluttering.

Mu Sicheng inhaled sharply—the wind carried his opponent's scent, thickened with the powdery residue of butterfly scales.

Then, suddenly, the gale intensified.

A suffocating force pressed down on him, the wind so dense it obscured his vision. Mu Sicheng's chest heaved under the pressure. He had no choice but to retreat. His monkey claws dug deep into the metal walls, anchoring him in place against the violent gusts.

The wind slowly began to fade.

As it dispersed, Mu Sicheng dropped back to the ground, landing lightly. Across from him, his opponent stood on the wrecked floor. His short, russet-brown hair was tousled from the fight, shimmering under the white lights with an unusual glow.

Armand met his gaze evenly. "I never thought we'd be fighting again in a place like this, Mu Sicheng."

Mu Sicheng arched an eyebrow. He twirled a golden winged hairpiece between his fingers, its surface gleaming under the light. With a smirk, he said mockingly, "Evenly matched? I wouldn't go that far. If this were a real fight, I'd be holding your head, not just your hairpiece."

"Is that so?" Armand remained unfazed, his calm gaze fixed on Mu Sicheng. "That's exactly what you told me the first time you fought me... and stole my record pen."

"The past doesn't only bring bitterness," Armand's eyes flickered toward the hairpiece. "It brings experience."

Mu Sicheng's expression shifted. A realization struck him, and he immediately tried to throw the hairpiece away—

But it was too late.

The golden ornament in his hand suddenly unraveled, snapping into a wire-mesh trap. It tightened around his wrists, upper arms, and hands, binding him in place. No matter how he struggled, he couldn't break free.

Armand tilted his head slightly, watching him. "You hate mesh restraints and handcuffs, don't you? I took note of that." He offered a small, knowing smile. "Consider it a welcome gift."

His voice softened just a little.

"It's been a long time, Mu Sicheng."

Muke led Du Sanying, who had done his homework, to the games pool.

To Muke's surprise, Du Sanying was performing better than expected. Not only had he adapted quickly, but he had already played more than 52 times—making him eligible for league entry.

After confirming that Du Sanying was willing to participate, Muke assisted him with the league registration and, following Bai Liu's instructions, brought him to the pool to practice.

Du Sanying gazed in awe at the shifting posters floating in the pools, his expression hesitant as he glanced at Muke.

"...Which one should I choose?" he asked timidly.

"It doesn't matter," Muke explained patiently. "I have a high enough base value to handle most games in the pool, and you're a player with full luck stats. Whatever game you pick won't pose much danger to you."

But Du Sanying, haunted by years of being the so-called lucky one, still looked uneasy. "...I might be lucky, but the people around me usually aren't."

"I know." Muke kept a polite distance, pulling up his player panel for Du Sanying to see. "That's why I'll keep some space between us—to protect you, and to limit my own exposure."

He offered a reassuring smile. "I may not seem remarkable, but that's

because I'm an assassin."

Despite his lingering hesitation, Du Sanying finally stepped forward and selected a game. Muke followed him in.

The first thing that hit them upon entering was an overwhelming cacophony of gunfire—loud, rapid, and relentless. Bullets strafed the ground, tearing through everything in sight. The bodies of monsters lay strewn across the battlefield, mixed with the dead and unconscious forms of fallen players, their corpses so mangled that it was impossible to distinguish human from inhuman.

It was a brutal sight.

Du Sanying stood frozen, staring in stunned silence.

"This game is already at the final stage," Muke said calmly, unfazed by the carnage. He reassured Du Sanying, "You're really lucky—the other players who entered before us have already cleared most of the monsters."

His gaze flickered toward the bodies on the ground. Many of the corpses were so disfigured that their faces were unrecognizable. Muke narrowed his eyes, keeping the second half of his thought to himself—some of those who were "cleared" weren't just monsters.

There was someone dangerous in this game.

Du Sanying's hands trembled as he bit his knuckle, his voice shaky. "...But that was too fast. I just got here…"

"There are players like that," Muke said evenly. "This game isn't worth staying in. We should—"

His instincts flared.

Without hesitation, he yanked out his armor and shielded Du Sanying beneath him, listening intently for the source of the gunfire.

Panicked, Du Sanying tried to crawl out. "Don't stay near me! Something unlucky will happen!"

The sharp clink of bullets colliding with prop armor was enough to draw the attention of a keen-eyed gunman. Before Muke could react, something massive dropped from above—a giant spring, crushing the armor they were hiding under.

In a split second, Muke rolled away, dragging Du Sanying with him. He landed on one knee, dagger in hand, and snapped his head up—only to freeze.

He had seen plenty of players in bizarre costumes, but the one before him was the kind that made a person stop—even in a life-or-death situation.

Perched atop a massive, three-meter-high, rainbow-colored spring, a figure sat with one leg crossed over the other, his feet idly swinging. He cradled a half-meter-long, dark green sniper rifle in one arm.

The upper half of his face was covered by a crude paper mask, drawn with a grotesquely distorted clown face—like a child's poor attempt at a school art project.

The lower half of his face was painted with an oversized, blood-red grin, smeared carelessly across his skin. The crude lipstick was haphazardly smudged with a thumb, the deep red staining his lips unevenly, some of it cracking and flaking off in dried, crusted streaks. A strong metallic scent clung to him, and flecks of blood still dripped from the corners of his mouth as he grinned.

His exaggerated green flared pants and the dark green sniper rifle were splattered with blood, fragments of entrails, and even bits of white brain matter.

Perched on the spring, he rested his chin in his palm, tilting his head as he peered down at Muke. His lips curled wider and wider, and through the slits of the paper mask, a pair of apple-green eyes gleamed.

"I remember that pretty, pretty face of yours," he mused, his voice carrying an unmistakable Hispanic lilt—one that held an eerie elegance, the slow drawl of aristocracy making him sound both lazy and bloodthirsty. "Because I saw it from below."

His grin stretched. "So, of course, I recognized you at first sight."

He lifted his sniper rifle—only to suddenly pause. As if struck by a thought, he wobbled on the edge of the spring, hopping on one foot like an acrobat balancing on a ball. With exaggerated gestures, he bent forward, one hand elegantly placed in front of him, the other behind his back, bowing in a refined, interlocked manner.

It was a noble's bow—formal, respectful.

Completely at odds with his ridiculous performance and grotesque appearance.

“My father taught me that one should always introduce themselves before killing an opponent.” His voice was unnervingly polite, almost gentle. “Out of respect, one must allow their opponent to know who it was that ended them.”

He straightened, his smile never faltering. But behind the painted mask, his eyes were devoid of laughter.

“My name is Daniel.”

His voice dipped into something colder, something possessive.

“Bai Liu’s beloved godson.”

With a casual motion, he raised his sniper rifle and aimed it directly at Muke. His grin stretched, sharp and ruthless.

“It doesn’t matter what your name is.”

His finger tightened on the trigger.

“Because you’re trash unworthy of him.”

His voice dropped to a whisper.

“Trash doesn’t need a name.”

BANG—!!!

Bai Liu, having wrapped up everything in the massive play pool, led Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda to the water’s edge.

Not a single player remained in the game pool.

Liu Jiayi immediately grasped the situation. “A major guild’s battle group just entered. Since their roster isn’t full yet, other players are too afraid to step in.”

She turned to Bai Liu, her gaze landing on his hand—tightly wrapped in bandages to stop the bleeding. “Shouldn’t we take cover too?”

“When have I ever taught you to hold back before a tournament?” A

poised and elegant voice interrupted Liu Jiayi's thoughts, punctuated by the rhythmic clatter of cork heels approaching. "Before a tournament, you suppress others, not yourself."

Hearts stood before them, clad in a striking blue gown with a double-draped neckline. Elbow-length beige gloves covered her hands, her hair styled into a meticulous, delicate bun. Long raindrop-shaped gemstones—blue and green—swayed at her ears, nearly ten centimeters in length.

She carried an air of classical sophistication.

Liu Jiayi stepped in front of Bai Liu. "Empress. It's been a while."

Behind Hearts, an entire squad stood in formation—clearly in the middle of training. But this time, a new face accompanied her.

A young foreign girl, no older than thirteen or fourteen, wore a black-and-white nun's habit. Her golden hair cascaded in soft waves, partially concealed beneath a pristine white veil. She held a small cross tightly in her hands, the symbol of prayer. Her eyes, a striking blend of green and blue, were so clear and innocent they seemed almost untouched by the world.

With just one glance, Liu Jiayi understood—Hearts had dressed today to match the new recruit.

The girl looked like she had stepped out of a classical painting.

Hearts reached out, gently brushing a stray lock of hair from the girl's forehead. "She's your replacement." Her voice was affectionate. "Go on, [sister], introduce yourself. Give her a blessing."

The girl, Phoebe, took a graceful step forward, undeterred by Liu Jiayi's reputation as the 'young witch.' She curtsied slightly, lifting the sides of her habit with practiced elegance. When she spoke, her voice was as sweet and delicate as honeyed confectionery.

"May the Lord bless you."

Rising from her bow, she looked at Liu Jiayi expectantly. "You have a brother, don't you?"

Liu Jiayi pursed her lips, her eyes flickering toward Hearts before she responded. "I did."

Phoebe smiled, angelic. “So do I. We don’t share the same mother, but we have the same father. It’s the same for you, isn’t it?”

Her voice remained soft, her expression warm. “He turned his back on me—just like your brother did to you.”

“But I don’t blame him.” Her smile remained unwavering. “I forgive him. God forgives everything.”

Liu Jiayi didn’t reply. She simply observed Phoebe in wary silence, an invisible tension rising around her like thorns.

Unbothered by the hostility, Phoebe, seemingly unable to contain her emotions, stepped closer. She took Liu Jiayi’s hands and pressed them against her chest. Her oceanic eyes shimmered with affection.

“We’re so alike. Maybe we should be family—brother, sister, or something else. I’ve always dreamed of being friends with you!” Phoebe’s smile brightened, genuine and almost giddy. “You’re my favorite player.”

Her voice dropped into a fervent whisper. “I’ll win the tournament—and bring you the happiness God has destined for you.”

Liu Jiayi yanked her hands away in shock.

Bai Liu immediately stepped forward, positioning himself between them. His gaze lifted to Hearts.

Hearts smiled slightly, unfazed. “Phoebe has always admired Jiayi. In fact, she was even better than Jiayi, but she chose to be an understudy just to stay close to her.”

She turned a knowing gaze toward Liu Jiayi. “But, sadly, the friendship ended before it ever had the chance to begin… because the child she adored ran away.”

Bai Liu’s expression didn’t waver. “Is that so?” His tone was indifferent. “Then why didn’t you use Phoebe before?”

Phoebe let out a soft sigh, pressing her hands together in prayer. “Because I wasn’t stable enough. My brother is still alive, and sometimes… he does things that upset and embarrass me. It affects my performance.”

Her lips curved in a saintly smile. “God forbid he dies sooner.”

The weight of her words—so calmly spoken, so brimming with sincerity—sent an almost physical shock through the squad.

Behind Hearts, Qi Yifang was already in tears.

This is not the teammate I wanted. She looks so pure, so innocent, always preaching about blessings and God—but inside, she's blacker than anyone here…

He sniffled. We're doomed… wooooo…

As Hearts led Phoebe away to resume training, Phoebe turned back, her eyes lingering on Liu Jiayi. A faint sadness tinged her expression.

"Goodbye, little witch." Her voice was wistful. "I hope God brings you into my dreams tonight."

Liu Jiayi shuddered, subtly rubbing at the goosebumps on her arms.

"Oh, one more thing." Phoebe tilted her head as though remembering something trivial. "If you happen to see my brother, would you mind killing him for me?"

Her tone was utterly casual—like she was asking for help with a misbehaving pet.

"His name is Daniel. He's an idiot who enjoys playing the clown."

The moment Hearts was out of sight, Bai Liu pressed a hand over Liu Jiayi's head.

"Hearts likes to toy with emotions. Until we know more about this nun, let's focus on the game."

Liu Jiayi took a deep breath and nodded, selecting the game to log in.

[System Alert: Welcome to the game Dense Woodside Town]
A former war-torn frontier town, thick with gunfire and filth. Swamps and jungles conceal treacherous beasts, buzzing flies, and mutilated corpses. As a battlefield cleaner, your task is simple—dispose of the dead.

[Points-based game: Players earn points for clearing corpses. The highest score in seven days wins.]

Tang Erda turned to Bai Liu. "This is a points-based game. Unlike puzzle games, there's no fixed main objective. Victory depends on two

things: collecting more points and stopping others from doing the same."

Liu Jiayi scanned the environment. "Tropical setting. Heavy rainfall and strong winds. Abundant flora and fauna. Complex terrain."

She tossed a small vial to Bai Liu. "Environmental factors will play a big role."

Bai Liu downed the antidote, color returning to his face. "Seems manageable. No players or monsters have attacked us yet. We should do a quick sweep and exit."

Tang Erda and Liu Jiayi nodded.

"To survive on a battlefield, first—camouflage." Bai Liu's gaze swept over their surroundings. "We need three sets of—"

A gunshot cut him off.

The sharp crack echoed through the dense jungle.

Bai Liu, Liu Jiayi, and Tang Erda instantly dropped to the ground, smearing mud over their faces. They held their breath, feigning lifelessness.

Through the gunfire, frantic voices rang out:

"Spades! Stop running! You promised you'd lose this round!"

"You said three-game penalty! Be a man of your word, dammit!"

"Put the corpse down, Spades! That's your teammate!"

A figure in a dark green uniform darted through the jungle, moving fast. As he passed Bai Liu, he hesitated—glancing down as if trying to assess whether Bai Liu was a viable corpse to loot.

Before he could decide, angry voices closed in: "PUT THE MASTER DOWN!!"

Without hesitation, Spades hoisted Bai Liu onto his shoulder and took off.

A sickening crack followed as he whipped around and headbutted the nearest pursuer.

A cry of agony rang out.

“YOU ACTUALLY TOOK OUT YOUR OWN TEAMMATE?!”

Spades ignored this and continued to run forward with the two bodies in his arms as Bai Liu, who was being carried on his shoulders, slowly opened his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Spades is soo funny

The Dense Forest Borderlands

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda watched from the jungle as Spades carried Bai Liu away with effortless ease.

"????"

What the hell?!

Without hesitation, Tang Erda and Liu Jiayi sprang into action. Exchanging a glance, they wordlessly slid through the undergrowth, moving swiftly in the direction Spades had disappeared.

The dense, broad-leaved vegetation and thick undergrowth made pursuit difficult. Spades, with his outrageous speed, quickly put distance between himself and his pursuers.

Yet Bai Liu, the supposed "corpse" being carried away, remained entirely unbothered. He lolled lazily on Spades' shoulder, jaw shifting idly, his expression unreadable.

He idly wondered when Spades would realize he wasn't actually dead.

Before long, Spades keenly spotted a makeshift shelter hidden beneath thick foliage—a small hut of canvas and wood, camouflaged with woven reeds.

The area around it was unsettling. Piles of corpses had been hastily buried under thin layers of sand and earth, left abandoned. Beside them, half-stacked sandbag bastions and concrete blocks suggested this was a temporary base—likely for a battlefield clean-up squad.

Spades, having claimed the stronghold for himself, didn't hesitate. Still carrying Bai Liu over his shoulder, he pushed open the hut's door with his knee.

Inside, the space was sparse. Two steel-framed beds were placed closely together. In one corner, empty shell casings from mines and grenades were piled haphazardly, probably collected during corpse searches. Bloodstained, tattered uniforms hung on the wall. Two dented aluminum cups dangled beside them, and underneath the beds

sat two half-opened medical kits. The compartment meant for antibiotics was empty.

Whoever had lived here had left in a hurry—likely taking supplies to aid an injured comrade.

Search-and-rescue squads sometimes doubled as battlefield medics.

Without a second thought, Spades tossed the headless corpse he had under his arm. He was just about to discard Bai Liu the same way when—

"So, this is the great Spades? Winning games by stealing his teammates' corpses?" Bai Liu finally spoke, his voice dry with amusement.

Spades had been mid-motion, ready to fling Bai Liu aside. Instead, he hesitated—twice—before adjusting his grip and laying Bai Liu flat on the bed. He peered down at Bai Liu's dirt-smudged face, eyes narrowing.

The grime made it difficult to see, so Spades, entirely unbothered, rubbed Bai Liu's face roughly with his palm—twice. The force of it distorted Bai Liu's features slightly before revealing his pale complexion beneath the mud.

By now, the two of them were close. Too close.

Spades stared, examining Bai Liu with sharp, focused eyes, as if trying to piece together who he was—leaning in ever so slightly.

Bai Liu leaned back just enough to break the moment, his gaze flicking toward the bloodstained clothes in the corner.

"Oh," Spades finally said, sounding almost surprised. "It's you. Bai Liu from the last round."

Then he nodded, entirely serious.

"Yeah, I steal from my teammates to win."

Without the slightest shame, Spades openly admitted his crime. Then, as if genuinely curious, he asked, "Is that not okay?"

Bai Liu: "....."

For a brief moment, he felt an odd sense of pity for Spades'

teammates.

Xie Ta played without rules, without hesitation. He had no qualms about stabbing his own teammates in the back—often with an expression of sincere confusion.

It seemed some things never changed.

Bai Liu pursed his lips, his eyes darkening. He turned his head back toward Spades, lips curling into a small smile.

But the smile didn't reach his eyes.

His voice, cold as ice, cut through the air: "I don't like people who prey on their teammates."

With a flick of his fingers, Bai Liu drew a soul note from his glove. The paper shimmered, revealing Tang Erda's face.

Spades reacted instantly, pushing Bai Liu's gun back into his belt, already reaching for his whip. But he hesitated.

The bitter accusations from Reverse God earlier echoed in his mind—the looming threat of losing the game three times in a row.

And in that brief moment of hesitation, Bai Liu moved.

With practiced ease, his wrist twisted downward, pulling the gun from Spades' grip. A sharp click rang out as he loaded the magazine, barrel snapping into place—aiming directly at Spades' heart.

Spades sidestepped fluidly.

The bullet struck the tent wall with a muffled thud, casting a brief glimmer of light. That light reflected in Bai Liu's eyes—cold, dark, and unyielding, as if holding an abyss of negative emotions.

Spades hesitated.

For the first time, he had the strange feeling that Bai Liu was... angry.

And that anger was more terrifying than anything Spades had encountered before.

On instinct, he stepped back.

But Bai Liu didn't give him the chance.

Noticing Spades' reluctance to strike, Bai Liu moved first—his body dropping low, twisting fluidly. His legs hooked around Spades' waist in a sharp motion, pulling him forward.

In one seamless motion, Bai Liu flipped their positions, his gun pressed against Spades' heart from behind—an embrace, but one meant to kill.

Spades ducked sharply, avoiding the shot, and pinned Bai Liu to the bed. He gripped Bai Liu's wrists, shoving them down onto the frame, prying the gun from his hands.

Bai Liu, now beneath Spades, exhaled roughly.

Spades held him down, eyes dark with confusion.

"Why do you keep aiming for my heart?" His voice was oddly serious.

Then, with dawning realization, he asked, "Is it because I took your heart last round?"

Spades frowned. "But I gave it back. It was the monster's heart I took."

Bai Liu, still pinned, looked up at him. He smiled—slow, sharp, and unsettling.

His voice was soft, almost amused.

"If you're so determined to cut out your own heart," Bai Liu murmured, "I figured I might as well be the one to do it."

His fingers flicked deftly. A second soul note materialized between them, fluttering like a magician's playing card.

On its surface was the face of a guild member—someone skilled with a short, sharp knife.

The pistol Spades had taken from Bai Liu vanished, replaced by a short knife that now rested in Bai Liu's hand. With a sharp movement, he unsheathed it, dropping to his knees on the bed and forcing Spades back.

Even as Spades retreated, Bai Liu didn't let up. The blade in his hand gleamed with a cold, sharp light, aimed unerringly at Spades' heart.

Instinctively, Spades drew his whip to block the strike.

Bai Liu's lips curled into a smile. "I thought you'd keep the whip put away."

Spades narrowed his eyes. "Where's your weapon?"

Bai Liu lifted his gaze, unbothered. "You broke it in the last game, remember?"

With that, Bai Liu braced his foot against the steel frame of the bed and flipped down, slashing his knife hard against the bundle of whips Spades had raised in defense.

Sparks flew as steel clashed. The blade struggled against the tightly woven leather, but Bai Liu didn't relent. He adjusted his grip, twisting the knife and forcing its tip between the strands of the whip.

Spades gave Bai Liu an indifferent glance, tightening his grip. His forearm flexed as he rolled the whip inward, coiling the blade within its folds and trapping it completely.

—This was the natural hierarchy of weapons. The superior technique overwhelmed the inferior. Under Spades' control, the once-lethal blade felt as fragile as soft clay.

Yet Bai Liu didn't withdraw. Instead, his fingers subtly shifted, pulling a soul coin from his glove and activating Tang Erda's system screen, changing his skill weapon.

The knife was never meant to defeat Spades—it was just an opening move. What truly mattered was the weapon that could match Spades' whip: a gun.

Bai Liu's gaze flickered downward.

The trapped blade morphed in an instant, reshaping itself into the barrel of a revolver. The tightly coiled whips now formed a passage that led directly to Spades' heart.

Without hesitation, Bai Liu pulled the trigger.

Bang!

The bullet pierced Spades' chest, exiting cleanly through his back. A fine, crimson line trailed to the ground as the empty, blood-smeared casing clinked against the floor.

Spades staggered back half a step from the impact, his face blank with

the delayed realization of being shot. Blood bloomed across his chest.

Bai Liu remained unmoved. With an emotionless expression, he shoved Spades to the ground, straddling him. His gun stayed steady, aimed unwaveringly at Spades' heart as he fired several more shots.

The dull thuds echoed in the silence.

"Why didn't you fight back?" Bai Liu's voice was calm, detached. "Like you did in the last game—why not rip out my heart?"

His eyes darkened. "Aren't you good at that?"

Spades, lying in a pool of his own blood, turned his head slightly toward Bai Liu. His damp hair clung to his skin, submerged in red. His voice, however, remained steady.

"Because attacking you again will get me punished."

Bai Liu's expression flickered—an emotion surfacing for just a moment.

Before Spades could decipher it, Bai Liu masked it once more.

Spreading his fingers, Bai Liu pressed a hand against the wound in Spades' chest. Blood welled up, seeping between his pale fingers—warm, thick, a strange mix of acid and fuel.

"I thought your blood would be cold too." Bai Liu tilted his head slightly, studying him. "Didn't expect it to be warm."

His bloodied fingertips trailed up from Spades' chest, brushing against his forehead.

Spades' eyes—black as night—met Bai Liu's gaze. Unlike Bai Liu's bottomless void, Spades' irises resembled glass beads in a darkened room. If caught at the right angle, they reflected a faint, silvery-blue glow, as if another set of eyes was hidden within them.

Bai Liu's fingers ghosted over Spades' eyelids, his voice unexpectedly soft.

"You have beautiful eyes. Why do you keep them covered?"

Spades, still lying on the floor, answered without hesitation. "I don't see the need to show them to outsiders."

A pause. Then, as if answering his own question, he added, "…And no one has ever called them beautiful before. Except you."

"Is that so?" Bai Liu murmured. His fingers traced the edge of Spades' eyes before he leaned in closer. His voice was almost hypnotic. "I like them a lot. They're silvery blue."

For a moment, Bai Liu's tone was soft, almost indulgent—like he had forgiven Spades, like he had fallen into the depth of those eyes.

Then, Spades' breath hitched.

The gun in Bai Liu's hand shifted back into a knife.

Without warning, he drove the blade deep into Spades' chest. Fingers curling together, Bai Liu thrust his hand inside, seizing Spades' still-beating heart.

Spades' pupils contracted violently.

—Ah. That's right.

Bai Liu was the type to return things blow-for-blow.

What Spades had done to him, Bai Liu would do to him in turn.

He could accept that.

If Bai Liu cut out his heart and ended it here, that wouldn't be so bad.

Bai Liu's grip tightened. He gazed down at Spades, then abruptly leaned in, closing his eyes.

At the same moment his fingers clenched, Bai Liu pressed his lips against Spades'.

The sensation was foreign, jarring—an explosion of contradictions. Heat and cold, pain and tenderness.

It was as if Spades' heart had been crushed not by Bai Liu's hand, but by the shock of the kiss.

Bai Liu's voice was a quiet murmur against his lips.

"I hate you. Remember that—I hate you."

Blood was pouring out of Spades' body and he wrapped his arms

confusedly around Bai Liu, who had curled up in his arms after the kiss. For a moment Spades felt that it wasn't him who was suffering from a broken heart, but Bai Liu.

"Are you still angry?" Spades asked.

Bai Liu didn't answer. He curled further into Spades' arms, the gun still loosely in his grasp, pressed against Spades' chest as if ready to fire again at the slightest provocation.

After a long silence, Spades hesitantly patted Bai Liu's shoulder. "… Sorry. I won't do that next time."

Bai Liu remained quiet for a moment longer.

Then, finally, he lowered the gun.

Chapter End Notes

If you didn't get it : Spades is wearing contacts

The Dense Forest Borderlands

As Wang Shun was working furiously on his pre-season team profile, the door to his office suddenly slammed open. A disfigured figure, wrapped in a mess of wire mesh and handcuffs, stumbled a few steps and collapsed onto the couch opposite Wang Shun, startling him.

The barely humanoid mass slowly raised a trembling hand, from which dangled eight or nine handcuffs and several layers of wire mesh. In a faint voice, it said, "... It's me, Mu Sicheng."

Wang Shun exclaimed, "What... happened to you?"

"Unlucky to run into a nosy person," Mu Sicheng muttered, struggling to pick at the wire mesh covering his face.

But the mesh was oddly elastic and sticky. Not only did it not come off, but it also snapped back into place. His voice grew more frustrated: "... It was that Armand from Golden Dawn who developed this thief-catching thing against me."

"So, that's what he did to you?" Wang Shun said, burying his head in a pile of information to research Armand.

Pushing up his glasses, Wang Shun glanced at the papers and said, "You're not to blame for falling into his hands. He was part of a special organization, tasked with guarding valuable and dangerous items. He rose to deputy captain at a young age."

Wang Shun looked at Mu Sicheng and added, "He's known to specialize in theft."

Mu Sicheng snorted in disdain, "I've seen a lot of people who claim to specialize in theft, and few of them can stand up to me."

Wang Shun glanced at Mu Sicheng's "outfit" before responding.

Mu Sicheng caught the glance and grew more irritated, shrugging off the handcuffs hanging from his arms with a rare grimace.

"It's not the same," Mu Sicheng said, frowning. "This Armand... he knows me too well."

"He knows my attacking habits, how I strike, where each attack connects, and he used that to trap me. And there's something else," Mu

Sicheng paused, his irritation rising, "something only I know, something I've never told anyone. It's as if he's known me for a long time and knows me better than I know myself."

Mu Sicheng continued, increasingly agitated as he tugged at the wire mesh tangled in his hair. "Damn, the thought of having to face someone like that makes my blood boil!"

At this point, Mu Sicheng turned to Wang Shun, "Don't use your [Know-it-all] skill on me right now!"

Wang Shun raised his hands, showing he didn't have a pen or paper in hand. "I wouldn't do that to my own teammates," he said, sounding helpless.

Mu Sicheng gave Wang Shun a sidelong glance before sitting with his legs spread, his hands resting on the back of the couch, chin propped on his hands. "Hey, Wang Shun, do you know if anyone has the skill to spy on people's memories? Like you, for example."

He raised an eyebrow. "This Armand guy told me he hadn't seen me in ages, and if I hadn't remembered meeting him only once, I would've been fooled."

Wang Shun hesitated for a moment. "Not that I know of among the players."

Though there were props that could simulate shared memories, like the ones used by the Deer Hunter, they weren't quite the type of voyeurism Mu Sicheng was talking about.

"Tch." Mu Sicheng stood up, waving his hand dismissively. "Then you're useless."

He turned to leave but tripped over the ankle cuffs and wire mesh he had stirred together. He fell to his knees in the doorway and angrily pointed at the pile of cuffs.

Wang Shun, observing from the sidelines, sighed, holding his forehead. "Just sit properly on the couch and get this mess off you before you go anywhere."

Wang Shun found a pair of scissors and pliers but could only fix the wire mesh. The handcuffs wouldn't budge. With a final sigh, he said, "We'll have to wait for Bai Liu to come back. He has magma for forging weapons. He might be able to refine this thing of yours right

away."

Mu Sicheng took a deep breath, ready to explode, but someone else beat him to it.

"Aaaaaaaaaah!" Du Sanying rushed into Wang Shun's office, dragging Muke, whose head was hanging and covered in blood. "Help!"

Wang Shun, startled, jumped. "What's wrong now?!"

Du Sanying pointed wildly at Muke, his voice shaky. "He... he met a madman and shot him, but I got lucky. The madman couldn't hit us both!"

Wang Shun furrowed his brow. "Why did Muke end up like this if neither of you were hit?"

Du Sanying broke down, his hands frantically moving. "The man... he said something like, 'Since you chose to stand by his side, you're a fake with my memories. One day, I'll take your place.'"

"He used some strange prop on Muke, said he had placed his memories in Muke's head, and then left."

"Muke went crazy after the prop, slashing and killing monsters until he regained some sanity and agreed to leave the game with me. But once we were out, he passed out."

Du Sanying wiped his eyes, his voice breaking. "Muke looks terrifying in the game..."

Mu Sicheng gave Muke a sidelong glance and, with a grunt, helped him up by tugging at the ankle cuffs. "Why did Muke stay there with a madman?"

Du Sanying swallowed, his voice low as he whispered, "Because the man said he was Bai Liu's son..."

Mu Sicheng: "..."

Wang Shun inhaled sharply.

Mu Sicheng froze, wide-eyed. "?!? What the hell?!"

In-game.

Bai Liu, unaware that he has a son, is sitting on the bed, watching expressionlessly as Spades, sitting on the floor, dresses his wound, rubbing his fingers over the muzzle of the gun in his arms.

…… The man bled out so much, but nothing happened at all and he recovered quickly.

Spades straightened his back and frowned – he sensed an unpleasant murderous aura.

From Bai Liu's point of view, Spades' waist and back were lean and firm, but not bulging with muscle, attached to the frame in a well-proportioned, powerful layer, which flows tautly beneath the cold white skin as he lifted his arms and turned his back in the act of wrapping, a fluid beauty.

Spades seemed to notice Bai Liu's gaze and gave him a questioning look.

Bai Liu averted his gaze imperceptibly, paused in his muzzle fondling and said abruptly, "You're in good shape, no wonder you're so popular."

Spades slowly: "?"

He didn't quite understand the connection, but Spades was acutely aware that Bai Liu was not in a good mood right now.

Spades then chose to agree with Bai Liu in order to avoid further conflict, nodding his head and saying "oh" for the sake of convincing.

Bai Liu's gaze became subtly mischievous again as he smiled, "So that's how Mr Spades, who was number one last year, got to the top. I'm really ignorant."

Spades: "……"

He felt he had answered wrong.

Before Spades was ready to open his mouth again to answer the question, there was a slight shaking sound from the jungle outside.

Spades gathered all his props in an instant, and with a glare, the whip was flung out and rolled back. In the blink of an eye he had Bai Liu circled in his arms, ducking under the bed with a swift movement, and pulling two medical boxes in front of him to block anyone outside

from finding him.

“My teammates are here.” Spades hugged, or rather clamped, Bai Liu’s waist from behind, “If they find out I’m suspected of hurting you again, I’ll be punished again.”

With blood stains on the floor and clear signs of a confrontation in the room, Spades would have been 100% convicted as the “guilty party”, given his usual style and history.

“Sorry, cooperate with me for now.” Spades trapped Bai Liu in his arms.

This guy didn’t wear any clothes in a hurry and was holding Bai Liu while naked.

In other words, Spade’s entire upper body was pressed against Bai Liu’s back, which was soaked by the hot and humid jungle dew. His abdominal and chest muscles were tough yet soft and pressed against Bai Liu’s shoulder blades and spine.

Spades, who was not at all self-conscious, seemed to be afraid that Bai Liu would break away from him and was still hugging him, with his thighs inserted between Bai Liu’s legs.

This distance was really too close. Ever since Bai Liu slept with Xie Ta in the orphanage, he hadn’t been in such close contact with this guy’s body for ten years.

Totally different texture from when I was a kid, feel like his body has grown so much, so aggressive ……

Bai Liu leaned forward with his neck, trying to pull away from Spades, breathing heavily: “…… I’m not going to run, let go a little.”

“I don’t believe you.” Spades’ voice is calm, his palm sliding upwards from the nape of Bai Liu’s neck down the knot of his throat, catching Bai Liu’s jaw and pushing it into his own shoulder, pressing it impermeably against his own body – as if he feels he has to do this to keep Bai Liu under control.

“You’re smart enough to use any little prop to escape someone’s control.” Spades’ eyes were serious and his hands were pressed against Bai Liu, but his tone was firm without the slightest hint of desire, “I’ve seen your videos, you might hide a prop somewhere in your body to try and defy me.”

Spades doesn't want to be found in a game where he's with a difficult tactician, which could make the game a lot more problematic.

Bai Liu had no intention of escaping, but when Spades restrained him so violently, Bai Liu subconsciously resisted. The man was so strong that Bai Liu struggled several times without moving out of his embrace, and now his eyes were red.

He was breathing heavily, his voice was muffled, but was laced with laughter: "If I wanted to hide something, ……" could you find where I was hiding it?

Bai Liu hadn't finished his sentence, but Spades behind him clearly misunderstood. He hesitated for a moment, and then said a polite apology – a social etiquette taught to him by the Reverse Gods, to apologise when doing something wrong.

But when Spades was taught, the Reverse Gods probably didn't expect Spades to draw inferences from one instance to another, and apologise while doing something wrong.

For example, now.

Spade put his hand into Bai Liu's soaked shirt without hesitation. Bai Liu's pupils shrank and he couldn't help but tremble as he threw a harsh elbow back at him. Spade reacted quickly, holding Bai Liu's elbow and pressing down. Unmoved, he continued to explore inside his clothes.

He has absolute power and speed over Bai Liu, and at such a close distance, it was difficult for Bai Liu to resist when Spades tried to do something to him.

Spades had a thin layer of calluses on his palms, as if he had been holding a whip for years.

Bai Liu arched his back, his skin flushed after being rubbed against these calluses, and he gasped as he lowered his head, his thin shoulder blades shaking.

Spades finally finished his examination and looked at Bai Liu, curled up in a ball in his arms, and out of some kind of weakness added, "Sorry."

Bai Liu's head was bowed and he did not answer, his breathing was ragged and fast. Spades could hear Bai Liu's rapid heartbeat and could

sense a peculiar emotion in Bai Liu – as if he was angry, but more than that……

“Are you still angry about what happened before?” Spades trying to placate him. But Bai Liu simply replies, “I’m out of shape.”

After a long silence, Spades expects a sharp retort. But instead, Bai Liu waits until his breathing calms, then gives a meaningful chuckle, “No, you’re in great shape.”

“I love it.”

The Dense Forest Borderlands

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The curtain of the tent made a soft rustling sound as it was lifted open.

Spades quickly pressed his hand over Bai Liu's lips and whispered close to his ear, "Here they come."

Bai Liu's gaze shifted past the obstacles blocking his view and landed on the shoes of the person who had just entered the tent—a pair of well-made prop shoes.

Spades had been right in his prediction; it was indeed his teammates who had arrived.

Someone muttered, "Spades, this guy left his looted body here—what the hell?"

"Reverse God, what do you think?"

The Reverse God scanned the area and replied, "I think he's going to use this place as a base."

Bai Liu, hidden under the bed, squinted—he recognized the voice of Reverse God as a synthesized AI, so close to a human voice it was almost indistinguishable unless listened to very carefully.

However, the games Bai Liu had worked on had done some technical interfacing with this system, and one of the voices was almost identical to Reverse God's. Bai Liu instantly recognized it—this man was using a synthesized voice in front of his teammates, not his original human voice.

He shifted his gaze upwards, trying to see the face of the god, but Spades' grip tightened on him. Still, Bai Liu managed to catch a glimpse of the god as he walked toward the bedside.

The face was so unremarkable that even someone like Bai Liu, who had a sharp memory for facial features, needed to stare for a couple of seconds before he could recall it. But the next time he saw Reverse God, Bai Liu wasn't sure he would recognize him immediately.

The man's features were so ordinary they blurred together.

Like his voice, there was something artificial about it—perfectly tuned, too normal, too balanced.

Reverse God didn't stay long by the bedside before turning away with the rest of the team. "Spades probably found a better stronghold and abandoned this one…"

"But he didn't even take his body with him…"

"…Probably found a better one on the way—one with more points on the verdict. Spades dropped this one. Not the first time he's done it. Remember the Kabbalah guild last time?"

The group left the tent, still chatting among themselves.

But Spades remained motionless, his body pressed against Bai Liu's shoulder, seemingly waiting for something to happen and not moving from under the bed.

"There's another wave coming in," Spades muttered.

As his words hung in the air, the tent's curtain—recently drawn closed—was lifted once again. Bai Liu peered through the gaps in the scattered items at the bottom of the bed, his eyes catching sight of several pairs of army-green rubber boots dragging a bloodied human form on a stretcher into the tent.

The man on the stretcher had no limbs left. Blood, semi-viscous and pouring from his mouth, had smeared his face beyond recognition. His severed limbs continued to spurt blood, staining the ground of the tent.

One soldier attempted to stanch the bleeding by tightly wrapping bandages around the mangled limbs. But his efforts were futile—the blood flow merely shifted from a fountain to a steady stream, with no sign of stopping.

His voice was tinged with panic and sorrow: "…He's still alive! Why didn't the medics take him for treatment when they cleared the battlefield? Why leave him behind, only for him to be torn apart by the enemy's artillery shells?"

"He could've survived!" The soldier continued, his hand trembling as he tried to secure the bandages. The force he used to bind the wounds

was nearly desperate.

The other soldier's voice, in contrast, was quieter, but the weight of what he said was unmistakable: "...Have you noticed? More and more soldiers are still alive when we're cleaning the battlefield these days."

"There are more wounded than ever, but the medical supplies aren't enough. There's just not enough to go around. The rear troops are preparing..."

The soldier working on the bandages barked a bitter reply: "...So, they're just letting them die—collecting their bodies and leaving no wounded soldiers, just martyrs, right?"

The other soldier fell silent.

The man's voice twisted with dark irony: "A metal medal for martyrdom. Worth less than five cents in wholesale, and they think it's worth a life?"

His voice broke as he continued, the grief apparent: "This man... just yesterday, he was eating with us, writing letters to his mother and fiancée. And now he's just a corpse. You think that medal is worth his life?"

The other soldier sighed, his voice heavy with sadness. "...I don't think it's worth it either. But Alex, this is war. The value of our lives isn't up to us, not even after we're dead."

Alex's trembling hand fell from the wound as he collapsed onto the floor, muttering, "...Yeah, it's war. And that's what the higher-ups want, isn't it? Just corpses. No emotions, no value, not even life."

There was no more blood pouring from the man on the stretcher—he was already dead.

Guy held Alex, whose gaze seemed far away, resting his head on his shoulder. "...But there are no such corpses in this world. We're just human beings, caught in this war. Maybe we're not meant to have humanity anymore."

"Alex, stop caring about the dead. It's too painful."

Alex wrapped his arms tightly around Guy's back, burying his face in his shoulder, trying to hold back his sobs. "I can't do it, Guy. I'm not a corpse. I can't stop feeling—sympathy, doubt, hatred, love."

Tears streaked down Alex's face as he glanced at the mutilated body on the ground, his voice almost a whisper, "Guy... do you think that if corpses could rise up and keep fighting, like they want us to, there would be no need for anyone to die? Just soldiers, collecting bodies?"

Guy stroked Alex's hair, sighing as if dismissing the question. "You're not even twenty yet, Alex. You shouldn't be thinking about these things."

"Surviving the battlefield—that's what you should focus on."

Alex lowered his head to Guy's chest, then suddenly looked up and kissed him fiercely, wrapping his arms around Guy's neck.

Instead of recoiling, Guy leaned back on the bed, allowing Alex's passionate kisses to take over, as if this wasn't the first time such a thing had happened.

They stripped each other of their bloodstained clothes, their breaths ragged, as they stared at each other. Alex pressed against Guy, trembling, his body straining, trying to suppress emotions and desires he shouldn't have, shivering in place.

He knew it was wrong.

But he didn't know what else was right.

Seemingly sensing Alex's conflict, Guy, lying back on the bed, raised his hand over his eyes, trying to sound nonchalant, even flirtatious. "Hey, relax, kid. There's always a way to be careful. Tom in the next tent goes through ten boxes of Warlock condoms a month."

"We just... well, it's like going to a brothel, right? Except it's not quite that, either. We don't want to go to one, so we let off steam this way..."

Alex stayed silent, his head still lowered.

"God," Guy interrupted himself, dropping his hand and staring vacantly at the blood-splattered tent ceiling, as if he were speaking to himself. "What am I saying... Alex, you're still a kid."

"You shouldn't be doing this with me, especially here and now... I've brought you down. God will punish me."

Guy tried to gently push Alex away.

“Then God should punish me too,” Alex said, lifting his tear-streaked face. “Because I just wanted this with you. I couldn’t think of anyone else.”

“You’re the only one who makes me feel like I’m not already dead.”

“I love you, Guy.”

With that, Alex pushed Guy back onto the bed. They rocked violently on the steel-framed cot, as if they might be crushed under it the next moment.

Spades, who had been concentrating on the main plot, suddenly found himself confused by the abrupt shift. “...?”

Bai Liu, who had been paying attention to the main storyline, also realized what was happening and stood silent for a moment. “...”

It seemed Guy and Alex were actually a couple.

While Bai Liu had read about such things in difficult, unique environments where women were scarce, he knew that, in these high-risk conditions, intimate bonds often formed between soldiers—sometimes crossing into sexual relationships—not because the men were necessarily attracted to each other, but because of the extreme circumstances that drew them together.

Bai Liu had anticipated that something like this might happen in this dungeon, but not under these circumstances.

The steel frame of the cot shook violently, occasionally knocking against the back of Bai Liu’s head as the passionate tangle continued just a bed away, the sounds of gasps and heated words reverberating through the tent.

If Bai Liu were alone, he would have shamelessly walked out from beneath the bed.

But... when there’s someone else in that situation, everything becomes...

Spades, making sure his small movements wouldn’t disturb the couple above him, leaned toward Bai Liu and whispered, “Is this... relevant to the main plot?”

Bai Liu turned to Spades and replied calmly, “Not really, except that it

reveals the character relationship between the two NPCs.”

“What’s your question about it?”

“Oh.” Spades nodded knowingly. “I see. Just now, when you heard Alex was about to penetrate Guy, you seemed a bit nervous. I thought it was something closely related to the main storyline and you wanted to hear it seriously.”

Bai Liu: “...”

Spades tilted his head. “Why are you blushing?”

Chapter End Notes

> The two men are having sex, and a meter away from them there's a corpse.

The Dense Forest Borderlands

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bai Liu calmly replied: “You are wrong, I didn’t turn red, it was the reflection of light.”

Spades: “?”

But it looks quite red, even under the ears, all the way to the collarbone…

He couldn’t see it much further down, maybe because it wasn’t too red down there.

Noticing that Spades wanted to get closer and look down at his body, Bai Liu immediately covered Spade’s eyes and reprimanded him coldly with a breathy voice: “Don’t look at me, pay attention to the plot.”

But paying attention to the plot, the plot is now…

After noticing that Spades was listening intently to the two men, Bai Liu felt that he had made the wrong proposal.

The folk customs of sex are different in different places. This may be because Guy and Alex come from a relatively liberal area. Their style in bed is extremely unrestrained and they can say anything when they are in love.

That includes some name calling for when they’re in bed.

“Poke my g-spot hard.” Spades repeated word for word seriously. He asked Bai Liu, “Is this related to the main plot? Whose g-spot do I need to poke hard?”
Bai Liu: “…”

Bai Liu tried to calm down: “No need, it has nothing to do with you.”

“Oh.” Spades asked again, “Where is the G-spot…”

Bai Liu spoke quickly: “You don’t need to know where the g-spot is, this thing has nothing to do with you and me, the main mission, or these two NPCs!”

At this time, Guy on the bed let out another long cry of relief: "——You're going to stab me to death, Alex."

Spades retorted to Bai Liu in an extremely upright and condemning tone: "-Listen, he is going to be stabbed to death. I think after this npc is alienated and turned into a monster, this g-spot is likely to be his weakness. We also need to learn to poke the g-spot…"

Bai Liu covered Spades' eyes with one hand and then covered Spades' lips with the other, and interrupted his words sternly: "-Shut up!"

But Spades has now entered an inexplicable state of inquiry. He feels that this thing is related to the main plot, and he must know why.

So Spades pulled off Bai Liu's hands that were covering his eyes and lips. He was about to continue asking righteously, but when he saw Bai Liu's appearance, Spades was startled.

Spades was confused: "You are even redder than before, Bai Liu."

Bai Liu: "…"

Spade noticed that Bai Liu was looking at him with an openly murderous intent, and the gun in his hand was aimed at Spades' heart, so Spades intuitively changed the topic to one that he felt was safer.

"What exactly is the G-spot?" Spades felt that he was discussing business, so his expression was very open and serious, and he looked directly at Bai Liu without any hesitation, "What weapon did Alex use to poke Guy's G-spot? a gun?"

Bai Liu: "…"

In a sense, Spades is right…

Bai Liu slowly exhaled a long breath, and he realized that he could not easily overcome this topic today.

Spades is sometimes just as curious as Xie Ta when he was a child. When he gets serious, he has to know.

"The G-spot is a human anatomical structure." Bai Liu calmly put on an academic attitude to fool Spades, "Generally speaking, every man has it, it is not special, so it is unlikely to be a weakness of these two NPCs."

Spades' tone was still confused: "Is that so? But I have learned about

the structure of the human body. Why didn't I know that men have this kind of thing?"

The human body structure class was taught by The Reverse God to Spades, using the People's Education Press' health textbook for primary and secondary school students. The main focus of the class was on where the weak points of the human body are, which can be used to neutralize the opponent's attack power.

Although The Reverse God briefly gave Spades some brief knowledge about sexuality in this class, it only extended to heterosexuals, that is, [a man and a woman have a baby after sleeping in bed for one night]. ——The g-spot is a superfluous knowledge point for Spades.

So Spades asked Bai Liu: "Where is your g-spot?"

Bai Liu subconsciously retorted without thinking: "I don't have a g-spot."

Spades spoke reproachfully: "You just said that all men have it."

Before Bai Liu could answer, Spades looked at Bai Liu with a sudden realization: "——Are you a woman?"

"That's not right…" Spades' eyes moved down to Bai Liu's chest, his tone was serious, "I just touched your body, you don't have female secondary sexual characteristics."

Bai Liu: "…"

Bai Liu took a deep breath: "I don't have a g-spot, but I am indeed a male."

Spades nodded, and concluded as if everything was understood: "I have learned about this situation in the textbook. The sexual characteristics of men and women are not obvious, so you're intersex…."

Bai Liu couldn't bear it and said: "Shut up!"

Spades looked behind Bai Liu hesitantly: "Behind you…"

Bai Liu calmly stopped: "I don't have a g-spot back there, so shut up."

"Hey." Guy's soft and teasing voice came from behind Bai Liu, "It seems that we have disturbed your discussion?"

Bai Liu remained still for about a minute before slowly turning his head.

Guy was half-kneeling on the ground in disheveled clothes, looking at Bai Liu under the bed with a smile, and stretched out his hand to him: "——Have you decided to come out now, or do you want to discuss it like this for a while?"

Bai Liu: "…"

Behind him, Spades explained innocently: "What I wanted to say is that there is someone behind you."

Bai Liu slowly exhaled a deep breath, reached out to grab Guy's hand, and was pulled out from under the bed by him.

Alex, who was cleaning up his body and the mess on the bed next to him, glanced at the two of them unkindly, at Bai Liu's clothes, and gave Guy a look.

"Relax Alex." Guy was still smiling. He leaned against the bed, his collar still open, and there was a soft and lazy dampness in the corners of his eyes and eyebrows, which made him look very approachable. "Although they are not wearing the military uniforms of our camp, they should not be enemy troops."

Guy glanced at Bai Liu teasingly: "Otherwise they would have shot you when you took off your pants and got on me instead of discussing our sex life under the bed."

Bai Liu: "…"

How much of the conversation between him and Spades have they listened to…

Alex's face turned red instantly, and he interrupted loudly: "Guy ——!!"

Guy found it funny and raised his hands in surrender: "Okay, I was wrong."

Spades, who emerged from under the bed, stood obediently next to Bai Liu. After noticing Alex's blush, he leaned down and said in Bai Liu's ear in a slightly novel tone: "Bai Liu, this guy turns red just like you."

Bai Liu: “…”

Guy had stayed in the army for a few more years than Alex. As an experienced veteran, he had his own judgment on this situation, so he looked at Bai Liu and Spades with a smile: “Did you young men sneak over from the town to see what it was like to fight in a war?”

A few dozen kilometers from the border lay a remote town, home to the army’s base camp. Isolated and economically underdeveloped, the sudden influx of soldiers had breathed new life into the town, driving up demand for entertainment—cigarette shops, pubs, brothels, and hotels flourished overnight.

For soldiers who lived on the razor’s edge of death, military pay was spent as soon as it was received, exchanged for fleeting moments of pleasure—just like Tom, in the tent next door.

To the town’s original residents, these soldiers, along with their well-dressed officers, were akin to nobles. They moved through the smoke of war, indulging in the finest tobacco, the strongest liquor, and the most beautiful women.

It was, without a doubt, the best recruitment advertisement imaginable.

More and more young men from the town began to yearn for the army. They snuck toward the front lines, eager for a taste of the life they imagined awaited them.

Guy had seen these hopeful recruits before. He glanced at Bai Liu and Spades, his expression filled with a helpless kind of pity. "Now that you know what war is really like… how can you still want to join?"

Before Bai Liu could respond, system notifications popped up before both him and Spades:

[System prompt: Congratulations to player Bai Liu for triggering the main plot mission—help NPC Alex win the war.]

[System prompt: Congratulations to player Spades for triggering the main plot mission—help NPC Alex win the war.]

Bai Liu exchanged a look with Spades. Then, smiling, he finally answered Guy’s question. “Of course.”

Guy sighed, exasperated. “I understand why you want to come, but

you have a choice—you're young. There's no need to gamble your life away."

He looked at Bai Liu with unguarded sincerity. "I joined the war because I had no other way out. My own family didn't want me."

Guy smiled wryly and gestured at himself. "Whether it was my sexual orientation, my lack of ambition, or my terrible grades, I was never what they wanted. They're a privileged, upper-class family, and I lived too freely—too much like someone beneath them. They wouldn't even let me have the family name. Instead, they forced me into the army, hoping it would 'fix' me."

"They thought war would baptize me—turn me into a 'real man.'"

Alex, who had been sitting silently beside Guy, reached out and took his hand. Guy squeezed back, his smile easy, unforced. "—But obviously, my idea of a man is a little different from theirs."

Then, with a playful wink at Bai Liu, he added, "They think men shouldn't have a g-spot, but I think it's a damn nice thing to have."

Bai Liu: "…"

How much did you hear?!

Alex's head snapped up, and he hissed through clenched teeth, "Guy!!"

Guy only chuckled. "Once the war is over, they'll compensate me handsomely, and I'll live just fine."

Then, he turned to Bai Liu and gestured to Alex. "This is my partner, Alex. He was a medical student. He wanted to keep studying, but in the past two years, high-end universities started requiring recommendation letters from senior medical personnel—specifically, from nobles."

Alex, a commoner, had no such connections. But he had an unwavering passion for medicine, so he joined the army.

"Because," Guy explained, "soldiers who earn enough merit are rewarded by the government. They're given the chance to attend any top university and continue their studies."

His gaze softened as he looked at Bai Liu. "See? We all know why

we're here. It's not for war itself, and it's certainly not for those flashy recruitment ads.

"But what about you?"

Bai Liu met his eyes evenly. "We know why we're here, too—we're here to end the war."

"If it doesn't end, it'll soon reach the town behind us."

He played along with Guy's romanticized view of war, molding himself into the kind of person this NPC would trust—a young man from a small town, devoted to peace, with a strong sense of duty to his homeland.

As expected, Guy was completely taken in. His eyes shone with emotion as he murmured, "…You're a good kid."

Alex, who had remained wary of Bai Liu and Spades from the start, sat next to Guy with a gun in hand, expression unreadable. He had refrained from interfering out of respect for Guy's decision to speak with them.

But when Guy uttered those words—"You're a good kid"—Alex's sharp gaze immediately snapped to Bai Liu. Not long after Guy had said the same words to him, they had become romantic partners.

His fingers tightened around his gun. His voice was quiet but firm. "Guy thinks you're harmless. But I don't."

Guy placed a hand on Alex's gun, gently pushing it down. "Hey, come on. He's a good lad. Maybe we can be a little friendly."

Alex's expression darkened. He clicked the safety off, his stare burning straight through Bai Liu.

"A good lad?" he said, voice low.

"There can only be one good lad in this tent."
[System prompt: The main NPC in the plot mission has a jealous reaction towards the player Bai Liu, and his favorability is declining sharply. After falling below the red line, the player Bai Liu will automatically exit the main plot mission related to the NPC!]

Bai Liu: "…"

He was careless, the persona was overdone.

Alex pointed his gun between Bai Liu's eyebrows: "You'd better tell the truth. What did you discuss under the bed?"

Bai Liu had already noticed Alex's huge hostility towards him. Whatever he says now will be wrong and cause a decrease in his favorability. So Bai Liu gave Spades a look and asked him to answer the question.

Spades responded to Alex's words with a straight face: "We were discussing the g-spot."

"Bai Liu said he doesn't have a g-spot, but I think he should have one. I'm imitating your process to find his g-spot, but he won't tell me where it is. I hadn't found his g-spot before I came out from under the bed."

Bai Liu: "…"

Alex:"……"

Guy: "…"

Alex put down the gun with a flushed face. He scratched his head and looked at Bai Liu and Spades standing next to each other with shining eyes, as if they were seeing the same kind of people. He said incredulously: "……God, are you actually a couple too?!"

"You are here in this small tent just like us -" Guy drawled out ambiguously and pointed his fingers at them, "- To have an affair? You guys have a lot of nerve!"

"It seems that we disturbed you. You must've been here before us."

Guy gave Bai Liu's waist a meaningful sweep, "But it seems like you haven't gotten to the point yet?"

[System prompt: Alex's favorability has increased sharply, and player Bai Liu has been included in the main plot storyline again.]

[System prompt: Guy's favorability has increased sharply.]

Bai Liu, who was about to argue, closed his mouth. He couldn't help but move the gun in his hand, glanced at Spades lightly, and smiled like a spring breeze: "Well, yes, he and I are a couple."

Spades, who felt a strong killing intent from Bai Liu, was confused: "?"

He got it wrong again, didn't he?

Chapter End Notes

The second-hand embarassement ... LMFAO

The Dense Forest Borderlands

After confirming that Bai Liu and Spades were going to join the army, Guy told them to wait until he and Alex finished their shifts so he could take them to fill out the application forms.

Alex silently sorted through the collection of bodies, his expression heavy with grief. As a new recruit, he still found it difficult to accept such large-scale death.

Spades kept his eyes fixed on the scattered body parts—not quite looking at them, yet his fingers fidgeted incessantly, betraying an uneasy restlessness.

The collection of corpses was a bonus task, and Bai Liu could tell Spades was eager to get his hands on the bodies Alex had gathered.

But these were Alex's fallen comrades.

Bai Liu smiled faintly, impassively, and stomped on Spades' foot. Leaning in, he murmured a warning, "Taking the body parts will make Alex upset. Don't you want to complete the main storyline quest and earn more points?"

Spades let out a soft hum of acknowledgment but cast one last regretful glance at the remains.

Guy, who was also helping with the retrieval, seemed far more composed than Alex. Though grief lingered in his expression, he remained emotionally steady.

As he passed by Bai Liu and Spades, who were standing close together, he smirked and teased, "Are you two about to kiss while waiting for us? That's cute."

Bai Liu, still stepping on Spades' foot: "……"

Spades tilted his head inquisitively. "Why would we kiss?"

Bai Liu swiftly clapped a hand over Spades' mouth, turning to Guy with an easy grin. "I'm in love with him. It's rare for us to have such an opportunity to be alone without others in the town."

Guy chuckled knowingly. "You can always step outside for some privacy. Be safe—Alex and I were like that when we first got

together."

His smile dimmed slightly as a shadow passed over his face. "If you really join the army and get caught up in this war…" He trailed off, as if recalling something painful, then sighed. "Make the most of the time you have together. Moments like these are rare."

Then, without warning, Bai Liu and Spades were unceremoniously shoved out of the tent by Guy.

Outside, they stood facing each other.

Spades, never one to forget a question, persisted. "What's a kiss?"

Bai Liu exhaled, rubbing his temples. After a brief moment of consideration, he decided not to overcomplicate things. "…A kiss is when one person's lips touch another person's skin. That's all."

"I know that." Spades' gaze drifted down to Bai Liu's lips. "I know that a kiss on the lips is the most special kind of kiss. It's called a 'kiss' and only happens between a man and a woman in a special relationship."

Bai Liu's lips pursed involuntarily at the way Spades stared at them. He turned his head slightly, the faintest hint of pink coloring his lips as he pressed them together.

"If you already know, why are you asking?"

His tone carried a hint of annoyance, but because his voice was so soft, it didn't feel like true irritation—more like something quieter, something almost… uncertain. A subtle, unspoken shift.

Realizing it himself, Bai Liu fell silent.

He closed his eyes and took a slow, deliberate breath, forcing himself to regain composure. He wouldn't let Spades stir his emotions so easily.

When Bai Liu was younger, he had been effortlessly led around by Xie Ta. Ten years had passed, yet somehow, he still hadn't learned how to guard himself properly…

Spades, oblivious to Bai Liu's thoughts, simply continued. "What I don't understand is why Guy thought we were kissing."

"We don't have any special relationship between men and women, right?" Spades' voice was calm, utterly matter-of-fact.

Bai Liu's breath caught for a fraction of a second before he slowly opened his dark, fathomless eyes. In an instant, any trace of confusion or complex emotion disappeared.

"Yes." Bai Liu's voice carried the ghost of a smile as he turned his head, his expression unreadable. "We certainly don't have any special male-female relationship."

"But Guy misunderstood and assumed we did. That made him feel closer to us, which will make our job easier."

Bai Liu met Spades' gaze. "So, in front of them, we're going to act as if we have that special relationship."

Spades fell silent, his expression serious, as if processing the information.

Bai Liu waited patiently for him to absorb it. Then, after a moment, Spades looked down at him. "Kissing can happen between two men, too, right?"

"Yes," Bai Liu replied evenly. "Just like a special relationship. Those exist between men as well—Guy and Alex are an example of that."

Spades' eyes lit up in sudden understanding. "So that's the kind of relationship we're pretending to have?"

Bai Liu nodded, then added with a smile, "Of course, we don't actually have that kind of relationship. It's just an act for the NPCs. When we're not in front of them, please keep your distance from me."

His smile was polite, but his voice carried an undercurrent of icy detachment. "Because I hate you, Mr. Spades. Our positions are opposed. I'd prefer if you stayed away from me."

Spades paused for a moment, then, without any particular emotion, said, "I don't hate you."

His gaze dropped to his scuffed boots, the whip in his hand twitching slightly as he flicked it idly once, twice. His tone was light, almost casual.

"I'm looking forward to playing against you," he said. "You're the first player I've met who isn't afraid of me."

"I quite like you."

Bai Liu, who had been about to walk away, halted for just a fraction of a second.

But just as quickly, he smiled as if unaffected, as if nothing had happened.

“Well, I don’t like you,” he said smoothly, then turned to leave.

Spades merely responded with a quiet, “Oh.”

And then, he said nothing else.

They stood still across a fifty-centimeter gap, both facing to one side, deliberately ignoring each other.

Bai Liu idly scrolled through his system panel, while Spades lowered his head, meticulously tracing the lines of his whip. It was as if the objects in their hands had suddenly sprouted flowers, holding their attention far more than they should, an excuse not to look at each other.

Before entering the game, Bai Liu had given Tang Erda a communication prop—a satellite phone.

In this league-mode instance, the system panels of all players were effectively disconnected, akin to computers without internet access. They couldn’t connect to the in-game shop, forum, or other players, leaving them completely isolated.

Even Bai Liu’s Soul Note skill was severed from its usual "network," drastically limiting his system panel’s functionality. The warehouse feature, which required a "network connection," was inaccessible to him as a visitor.

With no way to retrieve items from the warehouse, Bai Liu was unable to use any props to contact Tang Erda and the others. In this situation, a communication device was indispensable.

Bai Liu had experimented with various communication props in past instances. In his last game, he had discovered that a satellite phone offered the most stable connection across different copies and extreme environments.

Upon entering this copy, however, the satellite phone had degraded, transforming into an outdated, bulky radio-like device that was far less convenient to use.

But given the current silence between them…

Bai Liu figured there was no better time to use it.

Fortunately, the device came with instructions. While it looked like an old radio, its functionality resembled a stripped-down mobile phone, making it relatively easy to operate.

Tang Erda's reply came quickly:

[I saw someone triggered the main storyline quest. Was it you?]

Bai Liu glanced at Spades, who was inching closer under the guise of feigned indifference, then responded:

[Me and Spades from the Killer Sequence.]

Tang Erda: [You and Spades? If you both triggered the main storyline quest in the army camp, then you should be here. So why did the rest of the Killer Sequence join the enemy?]

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow.

[The rest of the Killer Sequence joined the enemy?]

Tang Erda: [Yes. I saw them loitering around the tent before deliberately allowing themselves to be spotted by the enemy. They were captured almost immediately—then defected without hesitation. Why would they join the enemy and fight against Spades if he's on this side?]

Bai Liu chuckled.

[Because, at this moment, they and Spades are not teammates.]

Tang Erda: [?]

Bai Liu replied that he would explain more once they regrouped at the enlistment point. Then, he put away the device and turned his head—only to find Spades practically pressed against his back. He smiled.

"Looks like your teammates are determined to teach you a lesson."

"They must've found you hiding under the bed during their patrol. They just didn't call you out on it."

Spades corrected him, "They found us hiding under the bed."

Bai Liu ignored the comment and moved on. "From how that tactician of yours chose his camp, he deliberately set you up to trigger the main NPC quest here while he joined the enemy side. He's forcing you into a head-to-head confrontation, trying to make you lose this game."

"He's reestablishing his authority over you." Bai Liu let out a soft chuckle. "Looks like the Reverse God Inquisitor knows you well. He knows exactly how to push your buttons."

Spades studied Bai Liu. "Defeating me with a team isn't impressive. I respond more to one-on-one duels. That's why I prefer you like this…"

Bai Liu stood up, dusting off his trousers, and cut him off effortlessly. "Aren't Guy and the others done yet?"

Spades glanced at the tent. "Almost."

"We have to act like we have a special relationship in front of them, right?" Spades asked, giving Bai Liu a sideways glance.

Bai Liu, keeping his distance, hummed a perfunctory acknowledgment.

The moment Guy opened the curtain of the tent and came out, Spades suddenly reached out and grabbed the back of Bai Liu's neck. Spades turned Bai Liu to face him with force, then pulled him into his arms before embracing Bai Liu, who was caught off guard . He raised Bai Liu's chin, lowered his eyes and kissed him without hesitation.

His cold, dry lips met Bai Liu's, warm and soft from being unconsciously pursed for who-knows-how-long.

Spades closed his eyes.

Bai Liu's pupils constricted.

Bai Liu instinctively moved to push Spades away, but the moment he caught a glimpse of Guy laughing as he watched and Alex awkwardly averting his gaze, he immediately sobered up.

Lowering his head as if shy, he parted from Spades' lips and buried his face against Spades' collarbone.

His breathing was slightly uneven, fingers curling into fists. His lips pursed briefly before he spoke again, his voice already calm.

"Next time, talk to me first before doing something like that."

Spades, hands still resting on Bai Liu's shoulders, let out a quiet, muffled sound. Then, as if only now realizing Bai Liu's mood, he hesitated before adding, "Should I have asked you this time too?"

"I'm sorry," he apologized sincerely. "Are you angry?"

Bai Liu suddenly laughed, looking up at Spades with an expression that made him pause.

His dark eyes, bright and unreadable, carried a heat that was both unfamiliar and familiar—a reflection of Spades within them, as well as someone Bai Liu was missing.

He rested his head against Spades' chest, where the scent of blood still lingered.

Just earlier, he had emptied two magazines into Spades and ripped his heart out.

The surge of emotion slowly settled.

Bai Liu exhaled, closing his eyes, his usual loose smile returning. "You haven't changed—always apologizing first for what you've already done."

When Xie Ta had spent time with him, the most common phrase he used was "I'm sorry."

That man had an inexplicable survival instinct, always sensing the moment Bai Liu's anger began to rise and apologizing just in time—

—before daring to do it again.

"Let’s leave it at that for now." Bai Liu pulled away from Spades, smoothing out his clothes as he turned to nod a polite greeting to Guy and Alex. Then, casting a sidelong glance at Spades with a friendly, almost casual smile, he added lightly, "But I hope there won’t be a next time."

Spades: “……”

For some reason, he had the distinct feeling he had done something wrong again.

They followed Guy toward the back of the base camp, where they boarded a train.

But it was an unusual stretch of railway—only a few dozen miles long, running solely between the front lines and the rear of the town.

Seated inside the carriage, Guy leaned back and explained reluctantly, "Strange, isn’t it? It’s rare to build a railway like this, but since this war has dragged on for a year and a half, with no advancement, they built this line to transport soldiers and supplies more easily."

Bai Liu pulled his gaze away from the dense jungle outside the window. Building a railway in such a humid, unstable environment was no easy feat.

The fact that so much effort had been invested into constructing it could only mean the commander had other intentions.

He turned to Guy. "Why have you been stuck here for a year and a half?"

Guy let out a long sigh. “Because about twenty kilometers ahead lies a key strategic location—Pluto Lakes.”

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. “Pluto, as in the king of the underworld? Why is it called that?”

Guy explained, "This region experiences incredibly heavy summer rainfall—tens of thousands of millimeters at peak times."

"During the rainy season, this lake, which sits at the lowest point of the terrain, swells rapidly due to the downpours. The resulting flash floods drown many people living nearby every year. That’s why they call it Pluto. The locals refer to it as ‘Summer’s Wrath of Death.’"

"It’s more than just that." Alex, sitting across from them, added seriously, "Once Pluto’s waters rise, the overflowing lake fills the surrounding rivers and canals, forming a vast, interwoven network of waterways. In this dense rainforest, with almost no viable roads, those rivers act as natural highways."

Guy took a deep breath. "In an environment like this, where it’s difficult to build infrastructure, control over the rivers means control over supply lines. Whoever seizes Pluto before the rainy season can use boats to transport soldiers, weapons, and resources across the entire region—giving them a decisive advantage in the war."

Bai Liu nodded. "So, whoever takes Pluto before the rainy season is likely to win."

"But in that case," Bai Liu mused, tapping his fingers against his knee, "you’ve been here for a year and a half, meaning you’ve already had two rainy seasons. Why hasn’t the tide turned during either of them?"

Guy shook his head with a bitter smile. "The year before last, we controlled Pluto. But that particular rainy season saw lower-than-average rainfall, meaning the rivers that formed were too narrow to provide a meaningful advantage."

"During that season, we lost our grip on the battlefield, allowing the enemy to reclaim Pluto. As a result, our side ramped up recruitment to prepare for the next conflict."

Guy’s expression darkened slightly as he glanced at Alex. "That was the year Alex was sent to the front line."

Alex nodded, his expression grim. "Last year, the enemy held Pluto. That rainy season saw significant precipitation—" He exhaled sharply. "—giving them total control over the battlefield. Their advantage has carried over into this year, and we’ve been steadily losing ground."

"Every day, we receive more bodies than the day before."

"Our superiors keep drafting more soldiers to replenish the front line." Alex’s voice was heavy, his fists clenched in his lap. "We can’t afford to lose. We’re not allowed to lose."

Guy patted Alex’s shoulder, sighing. "We don’t get a say in how these things play out."

With a bitter chuckle, he added, "In war, all we can do is die."

Alex lowered his head, his voice barely above a whisper. "...Sometimes, I think it would be better if we lost. At least then, the war would finally end."

Guy's expression stiffened. Glancing around warily, he gave Alex a light but firm tap on the head. "Don't say that kind of thing out loud—especially not on the train. If someone hears you, you'll be disciplined."

Alex remained silent, head bowed, fists tightening.

Guy sighed, wrapping an arm around Alex's shoulder, resting his chin against Alex's head. His voice softened.

"It's okay. After this rainy season, the war will end."

Alex squeezed Guy's hand tightly in response.

"The war must be over after this rainy season. Why do you say that?" Bai Liu looked up at Guy.

Guy was silent for a moment before answering, "You'll understand when you reach the enlistment point."

With that, he turned his gaze out the train window, his grip tightening around Alex. His eyes reflected the shifting shades of green outside—lush, vibrant, and marred by the fire of war.

"There's a proverb where I come from," Guy murmured, his voice barely audible over the train's rumbling, "It says that the time lovers spend together is more precious than gold."

He smiled then, turning to Bai Liu and Spades. The war and the restless green in his eyes faded, softening into something gentler—a light like an old photograph, damp and moving, filled with a happiness that couldn't quite conceal the envy and pride beneath.

Guy let out a bright laugh. "So when the four of us are together, doesn't that make us the richest people in the world?"

As Bai Liu's group jumped off the train, they spotted the crowded enlistment site from a distance.

People stood on tables, shouting through loudspeakers. Others waved draft posters, chanting slogans as they marched through the crowd. Some sat on the ground, filling out application forms that had been

trampled underfoot, scrawling with dirty ballpoint pens they had picked up from somewhere.

The whole scene was chaotic.

"Looks like there's no shortage of recruits today," Guy clicked his tongue twice. "Getting two sign-up sheets in a mess like this won't be easy."

He grinned and took Alex's still unresponsive hand. With a delighted whistle, he plunged into the crowd. "I'll get your registration forms!"

Ten minutes later, Alex sat dazed on the ground, gasping for breath, her face slightly squished from the rough crowd. Meanwhile, Guy waved his entry form triumphantly at Bai Liu and Spades.

"Got it!"

He pulled two pens from his pocket and set the application forms in front of them, guiding them through the process with an easygoing smile.

Bai Liu had barely taken his form when he noticed something off—one of the options had already been marked with an X.

It was obvious who had made that mark.

He looked at Guy and tapped the cross with his pen. "What's this? I can't choose?"

Guy's smile faltered slightly. "That's… the option to join the commando unit."

"A commando unit?" Alex's puzzled voice came from behind. "Has there been a new raid organized? How come I wasn't informed?"

At that moment, the man on the table with the loudspeaker raised his voice.

"Gentlemen, our general has assembled thousands of heavy artillery pieces, and they will be deployed to the front lines today in a steady stream!"

He was impassioned, spitting as he waved his arms.

"We all know that if we lose this rainy season, we will be buried at the hands of Pluto, the Grim Reaper! The heavy rains of the past two days

signal that the enemy is likely to gain a major advantage this season."

The once-noisy crowd fell silent, all eyes turning toward the man.

His voice turned mournful. "Shall we let this war for glory slip away? Will we hand over our free land to those shameless, insatiable slaves across the lake?!"

"Haven't we given them enough rights?!"

"We employed them from their poor, backward regions, paid them daily wages, provided them with three meals a day, and yet they demand more! They demand property, demand to exchange their labor for land, demand to be treated as our equals!"

"How dare they claim that these lands—lands that became prosperous only through our efforts—were theirs all along and that we should return them!"

"Shameless!" the man bellowed, his face twisted in fury. "If they truly had any pride, why didn't they demand this when we first started helping them develop?!"

"We signed agreements, we legally acquired the land with their consent, and we made them wealthy—yet now, under the banner of 'ownership,' they want to throw us out!"

Guy leaned in close to Bai Liu, speaking quietly.

"The rainforest had timber, minerals, water—an abundance of resources. But the people living there were poor. The officials who discovered the land signed an agreement with them: in exchange for freehold land, they'd provide jobs, property, and daily meals for the next hundred years."

Bai Liu hesitated subtly.

He thought he had seen his fair share of shady deals, but this was something else entirely—taking land that people already owned in exchange for cheap labor.

It wasn't just exploitation. It was a con.

Guy sighed. "At first, the indigenous people agreed because they had nothing, not even enough to eat."

"Factories sprang up, wealth poured in—but wages dropped lower and

hours stretched longer. Soon, the workers were treated as little more than slaves, mocked and trampled on."

"Then, one day, a dispute broke out. One of the indigenous workers killed a factory manager."

"The manager's family and friends, in their anger, locked every indigenous person involved in an abandoned factory… and burned them alive."

Guy fell silent for a long time before speaking again.

"A week later, war broke out."

"At the time, no one thought it would last. But the indigenous people knew the terrain better than anyone. International supporters rallied behind them, calling it a war for liberation. Volunteers flooded in from other countries."

Guy let out a small, bitter laugh. "Funny thing? I was going to be one of them. But my family dragged me away before I could sign up."

Bai Liu's gaze settled on the man still shouting atop the table. "There's another version of this story, isn't there? The one in the recruitment ads wasn't the truth either."

Guy looked at Bai Liu with admiration. "Exactly. The official story is that our country selflessly lifted these people out of poverty, gave them democracy, freedom. And yet these 'ungrateful savages' slaughtered a kind-hearted factory manager who only wanted to help them."

His eyes drifted to the discarded draft posters on the ground.

"You know what's complicated? That ad doesn't actually lie."

"That factory manager… he really was innocent."

His voice turned wistful. "He came from nobility but dedicated himself to helping the indigenous people. He wanted them to build their own factories, to escape the grip of the so-called upper class."

"He poured everything into this place, fought against his own family and friends to do what was right."

"But some of the locals never trusted him. They thought his kindness was just another ploy to oppress them. And in the heat of an

argument, one of them shot him dead."

"The country turned his death into a rallying cry. People flocked to the battlefield for him. They believed they were fighting for justice—including Alex."

Guy's voice softened. "Their hearts are in the right place. They're just naïve. They think they came here for an apology, but war isn't that simple."

He fell quiet.

Bai Liu studied him. "You knew that factory manager, didn't you?"

Guy gave a small, wistful smile. "It's a secret." He winked, but there was a sadness beneath the gesture that couldn't be hidden. "Don't tell Alex—he'd get jealous."

"He was my first love."

He exhaled, his smile both tired and fond. "I guess I'm lucky, huh? Both my boyfriends are incredible."

The man at the desk shouted over Guy's voice, his tone booming:

"To bring this year-and-a-half-long war to an end and to punish those greedy, lowly enemy troops before the rainy season is in full swing, we have organized a raid in two days' time. We have selected only the best veterans to form an elite strike force."

His voice carried across the gathering as he continued, "These soldiers will undertake the most dangerous assault charge following the shelling. Let us give a round of applause to the brave men of these assault teams!"

He then produced a long list of names, reading them one by one. With each name called, a soldier stepped onto the high platform amidst thunderous cheers.

Guy stared at the list, waiting quietly.

Beside him, Alex suddenly stiffened. His head snapped toward Guy, his expression shifting to disbelief, before he turned back to the list, his gaze nearly burning through the paper.

Then—

“Guy Davis!”

Alex’s fingers dug into Guy’s arm in a death grip, his knuckles white. His throat was dry, and his reddened eyes glistened as if the words had been stolen from him.

Guy simply smiled. Gently, he pried Alex’s hand away, finger by finger, and leaned in to whisper softly against his ear:

“The war’s almost over, baby.”

Then, amidst the deafening roars of the crowd, he stepped forward, making his way toward the commando platform.

Alex instinctively lunged after him, but the ecstatic crowd surged between them, blocking his path.

On stage, the officials applauded enthusiastically. “And now, let us welcome the General’s recognition of these fearless men!”

A dignified-looking middle-aged man, his uniform more refined than the others with its high stand-up collar, clapped his hands with a warm smile as he ascended the platform.

He moved down the line, bestowing each soldier with a medal—cheap trinkets worth less than five cents—hung around the necks of men about to die for him.

Then, turning to the gathered masses, he spoke in a solemn voice:

“Remember their faces. If they fall, they will have died for the most righteous cause in the world. They will be martyrs, worthy of remembrance by all mankind.”

His expression was grave, his voice heavy with self-importance. “I personally called for this raid to be initiated. I understand the painful consequences it will bring, but this is about delivering a crushing blow to those lowly enemies—”

Alex gritted his teeth as he watched the general grandstand. “He’s doing this for his military record.”

Bai Liu cast him a questioning glance.

Alex exhaled sharply, trying to steady himself as he explained, “The general was born a commoner. He married the daughter of a high-ranking officer and climbed his way into military and political

management, but the upper class—who pride themselves on their noble blood—have always looked down on him. He's kept his position through constant warfare."

He scoffed. "But more than war, I'd say he's better at politics."

His gaze flicked back to Guy on the stage, his breathing unsteady.

"Launching a raid now is just a way to make the reports look good. Even if the battle is lost, he'll have caused enemy casualties. And when these veterans die, their tragic sacrifice will be turned into propaganda to enrage the public and recruit more soldiers."

Alex clenched his fists, his voice thick with frustration. "They've used this trick to fool countless people."

Onstage, the general continued his speech.

"The Assault I team has the most crucial task. Only the most elite soldiers can enter—"

Someone in the crowd raised a hand. "Can new recruits join?"

The general chuckled, his smile broad. "No, but I admire your enthusiasm. You can join Assault II or III as part of the cleanup teams. To qualify for Assault I, you need to be a well-rounded soldier."

Then, a voice—smooth and confident—spoke from the crowd: "I think I have that quality."

All eyes turned.

The speaker was tall, standing out even among the already-screened soldiers. His posture was effortless, his hand raised conspicuously. In that hand was a silver revolver—its craftsmanship expensive, gleaming under the lights.

Tang Erda raised both hands slightly, looking almost helpless. He had just received orders from Bai Liu to infiltrate Assault I, and now, like it or not, he had to take the risk.

From afar, Bai Liu smiled and raised a hand in a playful gesture —"Come on, I believe in you!"

Tang Erda: "....."

This guy really had the kind of face that made you want to punch him.

The general's expression darkened. He clearly resented being challenged by a new recruit. His voice turned sharp. "War is not a shooting game for the nobility. Assault I requires extensive training—at the very least, you must master high-accuracy shooting."

His gaze swept over Tang Erda's silver revolver with undisguised disdain.

"That kind of gun—" The general lifted the medal in his hand with a smug air. "Boy, I understand your thirst for glory, but I think you'd be better suited to horse riding and hitting stationary targets ten centimeters away."

Tang Erda cocked his gun.

In one fluid motion, he flicked down the dark goggles resting on his head, narrowed his eyes, and pulled the trigger.

The shot rang out.

The bullet pierced the medal in the general's hand.

For a moment, time froze. The general's hands trembled as he slowly opened his fingers, letting the ruined medal clatter to the ground.

A stunned silence followed. Then, all at once, the crowd erupted in murmurs. Eyes widened. Soldiers exchanged looks of disbelief.

Tang Erda lowered his gun with practiced ease. "Am I qualified to join Assault I now?"

A whistle cut through the tension.

On stage, Guy grinned, his gaze sweeping over Tang Erda with open admiration. "Good lad, you shine as brightly as your gun skills!"

Tang Erda hesitated for a brief second before calmly responding, "Thank you."

Then, in his mind, the system notifications chimed.

[System Alert: Guy, the main plot NPC, has increased his goodwill towards you.]

[System Alert: Alex, the main plot NPC, has experienced a drastic drop in favorability towards you, and you have been excluded from the main quest.]

Tang Erda: “????”

What the hell just happened?! Why was he kicked out of the main mission?!

Baffled, he turned toward Bai Liu in the crowd, pointing at himself and shaking his head in confusion.

Bai Liu’s gaze slowly shifted—landing on Alex.

Alex stood rigid, his expression unreadable, his eyes locked onto Tang Erda.

Silence hung thick in the air.

Bai Liu sighed internally.

Carelessness.

The Dense Forest Borderlands

Tang Erda tapped his forehead with his index finger in a deliberate, serious gesture, signaling Bai Liu to think of something.

Alex, who had been glaring at Tang Erda, sneered. “Is he saying he’s not right in the head by making that gesture?”

Bai Liu: “……”

Such strong hostility.

As Alex stepped forward to meet Guy, who had just jumped down from the platform, Bai Liu approached Tang Erda.

He glanced around. “Where’s Jiayi?”

Tang Erda rubbed his brow, looking pained. “This is a battlefield. Jiayi isn’t allowed on the front lines. After she was found, the Red Cross took her away and wouldn’t let her return.”

“But she should be safe,” he added, his voice steady. “I checked the Red Cross camp on the map. No high-threat NPCs or monsters are there. It’s just a matter of her finding a way back to us.”

Bai Liu nodded. “Then we leave it to her.”

“I agree. Liu Jiayi always has a plan, and the rules here won’t stop her.”

Tang Erda’s attention shifted to Spades, standing quietly beside Bai Liu.

Out of trust in Bai Liu’s tactics, Tang Erda hadn’t questioned his decision to bring Spades along, nor did he worry about Spades feeding information back to Bai Liu. The moment Bai Liu had introduced Spades to him, Tang Erda knew that—at least in this game—Spades was on their side. Bai Liu wouldn’t have brought him so openly otherwise.

As for how Bai Liu had managed it, that wasn’t his concern.

Tang Erda gave Spades a quick, critical once-over before turning back to Bai Liu. “So what’s going on with the main quest? Why was I rejected when I didn’t even do anything?”

After Bai Liu explained, Tang Erda couldn't help but glance at Spades. The man's face remained unreadable, but something about the situation made Tang Erda's expression shift. His tone became a bit dubious.

"You're telling me… you got that Alex NPC to accept you by pretending to be in a relationship with Spades?"

Bai Liu glanced at Tang Erda from top to bottom, then fixed his gaze on Tang Erda's chest which was tightly wrapped in the military uniform and the rolled up sleeves that exposed his strong forearms, and said with a smile: "——Especially if you look like this."

Tang Erda felt uncomfortable all over. He covered his exposed arms with a tense expression, and buttoned the first button of his military uniform: "…Would it look better like this?"

"Hmmmm…." Bai Liu tilted his head, his eyes landing on Tang Erda's now more accentuated chest and the way his Adam's apple bobbed with unease. He replied honestly, "If anything, it looks even worse."

Tang Erda fell silent. Then, wordlessly, he unbuttoned the top again.

"But we can't change our in-game appearance, and I don't have any items to disguise ourselves," Tang Erda said with a frown. "How do we get Alex to stop being hostile toward me?"

"The fastest way," Bai Liu mused, glancing meaningfully at Spades, "would be to get yourself a…"

Tang Erda followed Bai Liu's gaze. He and Spades locked eyes.

A long, awkward silence.

Spades: "?"

Spades thought for a moment, then seemed to reach a conclusion. His face remained impassive as he flatly rejected Tang Erda.

"No. You can't have me. I have Bai Liu."

His voice was resolute. "We are in a very special one-on-one male-male relationship. No third parties."

During his education on physical intimacy, the Adversary had taught Spades with great seriousness that people in special relationships must remain devoted. No straying. No second thoughts.

Bai Liu took a deep breath, raised his hands, and looked away.

Tang Erda: "……"

Bai Liu, I can see you holding back your laughter even when you turn your head.

"You don't expect me to randomly rope in an NPC for this, do you?" Tang Erda said helplessly, half amused. "There's no way I'd get one to cooperate. What if I just tell Alex I already have someone back home?"

Bai Liu shook his head with a chuckle. "He won't believe it. And even if he did, your type is too common—his favorability toward you won't recover just from that."

Tang Erda frowned. "Then what? If Alex's favorability stays this low, I won't be able to access his main quest, even if I make it into Assault One."

Bai Liu tapped his chin, considering. His gaze flickered over Tang Erda before he smiled.

"I do have a way to improve Alex's opinion of you," he said smoothly.

"…But it's a bit of a gamble. His goodwill toward me might take a hit."

Tang Erda narrowed his eyes. "What's your plan?"

—

By the time Alex led Guy through the crowd, searching for Bai Liu, he found him standing close to Tang Erda, seemingly engaged in some private conversation.

Tang Erda's posture was stiff. Though his expression remained calm, his ears and face were flushed red—a clear sign of discomfort. Yet, despite looking like he could easily shove Bai Liu away, he didn't.

Bai Liu, on the other hand, looked entirely at ease, withdrawing his hand from Tang Erda's shoulder only when he noticed Alex approaching. He smiled and waved in greeting.

Alex instinctively tensed at the sight of Tang Erda… but something about the atmosphere made him hesitate.

There was a strange undercurrent between Bai Liu and Tang Erda—something off, something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

For the first time, a flicker of doubt crept into Alex's mind.

Was his hostility… directed at the wrong person?

A subtle dissonance settled in his chest.

On the way back to town for some rest, the sense of disconnection only intensified.

Bai Liu, Spades, and Tang Erda—the three new recruits who had signed up that day—needed to be assigned tents and accommodations. Along with that, two large parcels were delivered to them.

It was likely that all three would be participating in the upcoming assault mission, heading straight into battle after just a day of rest. As a concession to those who might not survive, they were granted relatively comfortable lodging in town for the night. Their assigned supply packages were heavy in their hands, packed with generous rations and necessities.

Without a word, Alex slowed his pace, subtly pulling back an enthusiastic Guy so that the three newcomers could walk ahead. Then, in a low voice, he asked, "Do you think there's something off about them?"

Guy, completely oblivious, smiled. "What's off? Bai Liu and Spades are a couple, and Tang Erda has known Bai Liu for a long time. They're both good guys."

Alex raised an eyebrow and pointed discreetly at Bai Liu, who was walking in the middle—empty-handed. "Did you not notice? Tang Erda is carrying Bai Liu's package. Would a normal couple let an outsider carry their partner's stuff?"

Spades, walking beside Bai Liu with his own two parcels balanced effortlessly in one hand, seemed utterly unconcerned that Tang Erda had taken Bai Liu's share. If anything, he didn't even seem to register that helping Bai Liu was something he ought to do.

Meanwhile, on Bai Liu's other side, Tang Erda was carrying four parcels—his own and Bai Liu's—his gaze flickering toward Bai Liu now and then, as if awaiting instructions.

It was a habit Tang Erda had developed as a lead attacker: carrying the tactician's things and always being aware of their position.

But to Alex, it looked like something else entirely.

"…Does Tang Erda have a crush on Bai Liu?" Alex muttered to himself.

Beside him, Guy nearly choked. His voice rose in alarm. "Are you saying Tang Erda is trying to interfere with Bai Liu and Spades' relationship?!"

Alex hastily clamped a hand over Guy's mouth. "We're not jumping to conclusions yet! And keep your voice down—what if Spades hears you?"

Up ahead, Tang Erda shifted uncomfortably before lowering his voice to Bai Liu. "Alex's favorability toward me has gone up. I really need to talk to him again..."

Bai Liu, still lazily skimming his system panel, hummed. "On my end, his favorability toward me has dropped, but it's still within range."

Meanwhile, Spades eyed the two parcels in Tang Erda's hands. His fingers twitched restlessly.

By all rights, that package should have been his to carry…

But Bai Liu had given it to Tang Erda instead.

When they finally reached the point where they had to part ways, Tang Erda moved to hand the package back to Bai Liu—only for Spades to suddenly reach out and take it.

"I'll carry it," Spades said flatly.

Tang Erda hesitated, glancing at Bai Liu for confirmation. Only when Bai Liu, standing behind Spades, gave him a slight nod and an amused smile did Tang Erda release the package. "Alright. Thanks."

Spades paused for a beat. "...Oh."

Then, as if suddenly remembering something, he turned to Bai Liu and pointed at Tang Erda, his tone as indifferent as ever: "He said you were a hassle, Bai Liu. So don't ask him next time."

Tang Erda: "..."

Bai Liu: "..."

Without waiting for a response, Spades adjusted the parcel in his hand, weighed it, and muttered that it was light before taking Bai Liu's hand and walking off with him.

Tang Erda, left standing there, couldn't shake the feeling that Spades had just rubbed something in his face.

It was Alex who arranged the accommodations. He sent Guy to show Bai Liu and Spades to their residence, while he took charge of leading Tang Erda—someone he still wasn't entirely comfortable with.

Except, the moment they set off, Alex felt an overwhelming sense of unease.

Because behind him, Tang Erda had been staring.

Not just looking—staring.

With a tense, unreadable, slightly… intense expression.

The closer they got to the door, the deeper Tang Erda's gaze became. Alex was nearly tempted to break into a sprint.

When they finally arrived, Alex all but threw down the supplies and turned to leave—only for Tang Erda to catch his wrist in a swift, firm grip.

Alex stiffened.

Tang Erda opened his mouth like he was trying to force something out, but the more he struggled, the more he seemed ready to combust on the spot.

"I…" His entire body seemed to be burning with sheer effort. "I..."

Alex, in full panic mode, yanked his arm back. "If you've got something to say, say it to Bai Liu! I'm not the one you like!"

Tang Erda inhaled sharply. "But it's not me and him."

Alex redoubled his efforts to break free, shaking his hand as if Tang Erda's touch burned. "You can't be with Bai Liu, and you can't be with me either! I have a partner!"

Suspicion crept into his voice. "You better not be eyeing Bai Liu or

Guy—they're both taken!"

"No, it's impossible for me to hit on them…" Tang Erda closed his eyes, his face turned red, and he almost said these words through his teeth, "…I, I'm the same as them."

Alex was confused: "??? Why are you the same as them? How can you be the same as them…"

Halfway through, Alex thought of Tang Erds's inexplicable shyness and obedience in front of Bai Liu, and his words paused strangely.

Then after an unknown amount of time, Alex, with a blank expression, looked up at the 1.92-meter-tall Tang Erda, and spoke shakily: "…Are you the one on the bottom too?!"

Tang Erda's eyelids trembled and his whole body turned red. He nodded with great difficulty.

"You don't…" Alex's pupils continued to tremble, "You originally had a crush on Bai Liu, but because you and Bai Liu are both bottoms, you can only be friends with him?"

Tang Erda pursed his lips and turned away without saying a word.

In Alex's eyes, this confirmed his thoughts. As a Top, he simply couldn't help but feel a twinge of pity for the bottom. Here was a man—a tall man—who had pined fruitlessly for his crush, followed him into battle, only to realize he had nowhere to go.

He patted Tang Erda's arm. The figure that originally made him feel hostile now only made him sigh and feel pity. Alex comforted him: "Hey, be happy, brother. There's always gonna be someone out there who can fuck you."

Tang Erda: "..."

The Dense Forest Borderlands

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bai Liu glances at his system panel. After a brief dip, Alex's favorability rating rises again. It seems things have been taken care of on Tang Erda's end.

He is now in his assigned dormitory—a converted hotel room packed with bunk beds for dozens of recruits. It's the best accommodation available, though that isn't saying much.

The only upside is that, for now, the room is empty except for Spades, sitting next to him, and Guy, sitting across.

Guy props himself up on the bed, stretching his arms. Catching Bai Liu's glance, he grins. "Not used to it, huh? This is the best we've got here."

Then, with a playful wink, he adds, "But don't worry. You'll probably have the room to yourselves tonight—some alone time for the two of you."

Bai Liu raises an eyebrow.

Guy chuckles. "The new guys will be out all night—partying at the taverns and brothels. It's their last chance to indulge before the raid. No guarantee they'll come back alive, so they might as well spend their advance pay while they can."

Bai Liu studies him. "You'll be there too, won't you?"

Guy shrugs. "Everyone from Assault One will be. Normally, Alex wouldn't let me go to these things, but I think he'll make an exception tonight." His smile turns a little wry. "After all, a man should have one last drink before he dies."

Bai Liu considers Alex's personality. "Alex will go with you?"

"Of course." Guy sighs dramatically but can't hide his happiness. "He wouldn't be able to relax if I went alone."

The moment Bai Liu confirms Alex—a mainline NPC—will be present, he asks, "Can we come with you?"

Guy blinks, surprised, then leans forward eagerly. “Of course! I thought this wasn’t your kind of thing.”

On the sidelines, Spades lowers his gaze to where Guy is holding Bai Liu’s hand. His fingers twitch against his knee before he looks away, pressing his lips together.

Oblivious, Guy continues enthusiastically. “I’m putting on a show for Alex tonight. It’d be great if you guys came as friends!”

Bai Liu senses the potential for a hidden plot. He smiles. “How can I help?”

Guy gasps. “God, Bai Liu, you just get me!” He runs a hand through his hair, looking both distressed and relieved. “I’ve been stressing over this because I have to do it without Alex. And the guys I know can’t keep a secret, so I have to handle everything myself.”

His eyes light up. “It’d be a huge help if you and Spades pitched in.”

Bai Liu nods. “Of course.”

Guy jumps to his feet. “I’ll go get the list, then. There’s a lot to prepare.”

As soon as he’s gone, Bai Liu’s smile fades. Silence settles over the room. Spades sits motionless, still keeping that deliberate fifty-centimeter distance between them—no more, no less.

Since they left camp, Bai Liu hasn’t spoken a single word to him.

He’s spoken to Alex, to Tang Erda, to Guy. He’s even shaken hands.

But he hasn’t said a thing to Spades.

“Are you deliberately avoiding me?” Spades finally asks, voice quiet, eyes lowered.

Bai Liu doesn’t immediately answer. He glances at the open door Guy left ajar, then replies evenly, “Yes.”

Spades lifts his head. “Are you mad that I kissed you?”

Bai Liu’s tone remains calm. “No.”

Spades frowns. “Then why won’t you talk to me?”

Bai Liu turns to face him. “Am I obligated to?”

Spades hesitates before replying, “We have a special relationship. We should talk more.”

“That was in front of Guy. It was for the mission.” Bai Liu tilts his head. “Privately, we’re nothing.”

Spades grips his whip loosely. “But—”

“I kind of hate you, Spades.” Bai Liu’s voice is steady, as if stating a simple fact. “I’ve said it three times now. Most recently, forty-seven minutes ago. Do you need me to repeat it?”

Spades’ fingers twitch around his whip. He shakes it slightly, then mutters, “That was forty-seven minutes ago. I thought maybe… you didn’t hate me anymore.”

Bai Liu exhales, exasperated. “Mr. Spades, did something happen in the last forty-seven minutes that would change my feelings?”

Spades looks at him seriously. “I carried your bag.”

Bai Liu deadpans, “Tang Erda carried it too.”

Spades’ expression doesn’t waver. “But you were happier when I did it.”

Bai Liu stares. “…What?”

Spades nods, completely certain. “I saw you look at me and smile. A couple of times.”

Bai Liu: “……”

“That didn’t happen,” Bai Liu says flatly.

Spades, undeterred, insists, “It did. You smiled behind me—”

“Enough. Shut up.” Bai Liu interrupts, squeezing the edge of the bed. His face is unreadable, but his grip tightens slightly. “That wasn’t at you. It was at Tang Erda.”

Spades’ whip stills. For a brief moment, he doesn’t speak.

Finally, he asks again, voice softer this time, “…So we have a special relationship in front of Guy, but not in private?”

Bai Liu's eyes half-close. He doesn't look back.

Guy returned with several large boxes, a long pole wedged under his arm, and a notepad clenched in his mouth. There was so much stuff that he was practically blocked from entering the door.

Bai Liu stood up to help, and Spades followed suit, assisting with the boxes.

Guy collapsed onto the bed, panting. "God, this is more exhausting than a battle."

Guy sat up and smiled mysteriously at Bai Liu: "It's something that can make this little bastard Alex smile at me all day long. Of course, usually Alex always smiles at me normally."

"You know, when you like someone, you can't help but smile at him." Guy winked at Bai Liu, "Just like you did with Spades."

The expression on Bai Liu's face froze.

Spades, who was packing the box, slowly straightened up. He was looking at Bai Liu with keen eyes. Although he didn't say a word, Bai Liu read [You were smiling at me] from this guy's unwavering eyes.

Bai Liu explained calmly: "No, I was laughing at Tang Erda."

"Come on!" Guy waved his hand and lay down again, "It's okay for you to lie to others. The look and smile you do to Spades are exactly the same as when I was with Alex just now."

"What a wonderful period of love." Guy sighed while lying on the bed.

Spades nodded in agreement.

Bai Liu glanced at Spades slowly. Spades nodded for a moment, and then said without any desire to survive: "You were smiling at me."

"You didn't laugh at Tang Erda." He also emphasized, "You said it wrong."

Bai Liu smiled nonchalantly and raised his eyes: "I made a mistake, so what?"

"I smiled at you this time, but I don't have to smile at you next time. I can keep laughing at Tang Erda, after all…" Bai Liu smiled very kindly. He leaned close to Spades and whispered in Spades' ear,

“When Guy is not here, I can smile at whoever I want, and for as long as I want.”

“It has nothing to do with you.”

With that, he turned his attention to the list Guy had brought with him.

Spades, now visibly deflated, sat back on the edge of the bed, staring down at the contents of the box, his expression thoughtful and confused. It was clear he wasn’t quite sure why his mood had shifted.

Meanwhile, Guy pulled out the list of items, noting the small exchanges between Bai Liu and Spades. He nudged Bai Liu with his elbow and grinned. “What’s going on between you two?”

“Nothing is as exciting as the show you and Alex had before.” Bai Liu changed the topic as if nothing had happened. He glanced at the things prepared on the list and looked up at Guy, “The relationship between you guys is really good.”

Guy held his chin, looking nostalgic, with a slight smile on his lips: “It’s not always good, he and I have also had arguments.”

He recalled quietly for a while and said abruptly: “Alex has a fiancée in his hometown.”

Bai Liu showed surprise at the right time.

“What’s with your expression?” Guy raised his eyebrows, “I didn’t do anything to fight for his love. When Alex and I got together, he didn’t have a fiancée. This was the one his parents chose for him later. After Alex received the photo of his fiancée from his parents, he immediately rejected it in a letter.”

“But you know what? I think I might be mentally ill.”

Guy smiled absently: “I even wanted to stop Alex from refusing for a moment, but it was unfair to the little girl, and Alex felt the same way.”

Bai Liu listened quietly.

“Alex is an excellent medical student. He made a lot of achievements while in college. He invented a medicine that can preserve the body of a dying person. This can extend the time before death and save more

people who were going to die – that's why he came to be a clean-up soldier, he wanted to see if he could help these soldiers."

Guy recalled: "That little girl, Alex's fiancée, was a small-town girl who admired him. Even though Alex wrote to tell her that he had a lover, she was still determined to wait for Alex to come back. She said that even if he wants to give up on her, he will have to give up on her face to face after he comes back alive."

"——I won't accept a letter from someone whose life or death is unknown, rejecting my love is disrespectful to me."

Guy laughed: "That is a very good little girl. She knows that I am a man, but she even challenged me in the letter to say hello, and arrogantly asked us to come back alive to give her love a perfect ending."

He lowered his head meekly and touched the wedding dress he took from the box in his arms.

"I'm a cunning person. I didn't tell Alex that I'd been drafted into the commandos, but I told his fiancée in a letter. I begged and pleaded with her if she could let me marry Alex before she did."

"What a despicable act, anyone who hears it would feel sick." Guy smiled self-deprecatingly, looking at the wedding dress, "That little girl didn't write a single word of reply to me."

"She just… rushed overnight to make this wedding dress in the size of an adult man and sent it to the front line. It was mailed to me. The sentence "God bless you with eternal happiness" was sewn on the wedding dress."

Guy's eyes welled up with tears, his voice cracking slightly. "You know, Bai Liu, I've been lucky. I've been surrounded by people who are good and kind, people with bright souls."

His voice faltered. "But in the end, they all suffered because of the war."

He wiped his eyes. "No one can be happy in war. So why does it even exist?"

Bai Liu stared at him calmly.

He replied quietly, "Because God doesn't want you to be happy. That's

why war exists.”

At night, the town was aglow.

The approaching battle had already set the town alight in advance—both literally and metaphorically. People drank as if they had already won, the streets bubbling with beer foam.

The men of Raider I had taken over a small tavern, its shelves nearly emptied by the veterans. The owner was busily hauling alcohol up from the cellar, the scent so thick in the air that just a few more inhales might have made him slightly drunk himself.

Those who abstained from drinking in an atmosphere like this stood out.

Tang Erda sat beside Alex, holding a glass of wine. They were all drinking low-proof wines—even Spades had a glass of sparkling wine in front of him.

Only Bai Liu had a glass of plain water with ice cubes.

"You… don't drink at all?" Tang Erda asked, glancing at Bai Liu with mild surprise.

In his memory, Bai Liu could drink. In fact, he distinctly remembered Bai Liu as someone who did drink…

Bai Liu shot him a sly look. "Corporate drones don’t have the right to drink. If I stay up working on a computer with a hangover, my head will explode the next day. I’m not putting myself through that kind of suffering for no reason."

Tang Erda: "……"

Life really has changed you, Bai Liu.

Spades sat quietly to the side, watching Bai Liu and Tang Erda talk. He opened his mouth as if to say something but hesitated. Then, recalling Bai Liu’s earlier warning—[I want to keep smiling at Tang Erda]—he shut it again.

His gaze dropped to the vodka in his glass.

Spades wasn’t a bad drinker, nor was he the type to lose control. But

when he got drunk, he became a relentless, insufferable interrogator—driving anyone who spoke to him into frustration.

Simply put, he became a barrage.

To avoid unnecessary conflict, Spades had decided not to drink. The gods had warned him countless times that alcohol made him prone to offending people.

Though Spades didn't quite understand what was so terrible about offending others, he'd been scolded about it enough times that he chose to refrain.

Bai Liu took a sip of ice water, watching with amusement as Tang Erda drank as if it were nothing. "You're a heavy drinker."

Tang Erda started slightly, lifting his glass. "There was a time when… I drowned my sorrows in alcohol. You get good at drinking when you do it too much."

Bai Liu immediately understood what Tang Erda was referring to. His tone softened. "I'm sorry."

"It had nothing to do with you." Tang Erda shook his head and, after a brief pause, downed half a glass more. His eyes remained clear. "Not anymore. I drink less now."

Bai Liu smiled. "Still, being a strong drinker has its perks. I like that about you."

Seated behind Bai Liu, Spades straightened his back ever so slightly.

Tang Erda had been effortlessly fending off numerous NPCs attempting to challenge Bai Liu to a drink. That was why Bai Liu had praised him.

But Spades misunderstood entirely. Expressionless, he picked up his whip, moved in front of Tang Erda—effectively edging Bai Liu aside—and placed a glass of liquor in front of him.

"Drink?"

Tang Erda, lost in thought, blinked. "???"

Confused, he turned toward Bai Liu for answers, but before he could catch a glimpse, Spades shifted to block his view.

Coldly, Spades asked, "I'm asking you to drink. Why are you looking at Bai Liu?"

From behind Spades, Bai Liu's calm voice warned, "Drinking with him is a mistake. Don't."

Before anyone could react, a few drunken men—drawn in by the rising tension—perked up.

"Ooh, a vodka showdown!"

"Boss, bring out all the vodka in the tavern!"

"A drinking contest before battle!"

In the indulgent, chaotic atmosphere, the bar around Spades and Tang Erda practically pulsed with the glow of various brews. The crowd, whistling and cheering, eagerly awaited the spectacle.

Spades remained expressionless as he raised his chin at Tang Erda. "Drink?"

As a lead attacker, Tang Erda usually followed Bai Liu's instructions to the letter. Now, overwhelmed by the sudden shift in focus, his gaze instinctively sought Bai Liu in the pressing crowd.

But Spades moved to block his line of sight, staring at him levelly. "How much longer do you need to think about it?"

"He's not drinking with you."

Bai Liu stepped out of the crowd, positioning himself in front of Tang Erda and meeting Spades' gaze head-on.

Tang Erda exhaled in relief, lifting a hand in surrender.

A wave of disappointed groans erupted from the spectators.

But Spades wasn't done. He reached into the crowd, yanking a reluctant Alex forward.

"If Alex is here, then you should be on my side," Spades said to Bai Liu, his gaze unwavering. "We have a special relationship now."

Alex, forcibly dragged into the mess, covered his face in exasperation.

God. I'd rather be on the front lines than here.

Bai Liu sneered. "So what if it's a special relationship? Tang Erda and I are also special. We're soulmates. You're just for show."

Tang Erda shivered at Bai Liu's laughter. He felt that Bai Liu had truly been provoked this time.

Wanting no part in the unfolding chaos, Tang Erda stiffly attempted to retreat—only for Bai Liu to seize him by the collar, patting his shoulder twice.

Spades' eyes darkened as they lingered on Bai Liu's hand.

"A special relationship can only accommodate two people," Spades said quietly.

"Bai Liu, you're wrong again."

Bai Liu's smile was unexpectedly soft. "How could I be wrong? I have a special relationship with him. And if I terminate our relationship, you'd have no claim over me, would you?"

Spades pressed his lips together, his dark eyes betraying a flicker of emotion.

Tang Erda: "……"

No, Bai Liu is seriously pissed. I can't handle this.

If only Liu Jiayi were here. At least then someone would understand what the hell Bai Liu and Spades are doing.

Spades seemed to realize that Bai Liu wouldn't back down. Rather than arguing further, he turned and locked eyes with Tang Erda.

"Are you drinking with me or not?"

Bai Liu's smile turned gentle as he stepped in beside Tang Erda. "He's my soulmate. I'm responsible for him. If you're drinking with him, I have to see it happen."

With that, Bai Liu reached for the vodka in Spades' hand, tilted his head back, and downed it in one go. He then smoothly flipped the empty glass onto the table.

Looking up at Spades, Bai Liu smiled.

"Why don't we have a drink instead?"

Spades held Bai Liu’s gaze, his fingers tightening slightly around his whip.

Alex, still trapped under Spades’ grip: "……"

Dude. Don’t take this out on my arm. You’re crushing me here.

Just when Alex thought Spades was about to either punch Bai Liu or beat up Tang Erda, Spades instead grabbed a drink without hesitation.

Mimicking Bai Liu’s exact motion, he placed his empty glass down, staring straight at him.

"Fine," Spades said. "Let’s compete. If I win, we’re still special. And you have to admit—before, you weren’t smiling at Tang Erda."

Bai Liu’s fingers tightened around his glass. A faint flush crept under his eyes, whether from alcohol or something else entirely.

His voice was a fraction lighter as he murmured, "… Fine. I’ll admit it."

Chapter End Notes

> Bai Liu says that Tang Erda is his soulmate (platonic).
> It's supposed to be soul friend but the word doesn't exist in English

The Dense Forest Borderlands

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The moment Spades accepted the challenge, the roar of the tavern almost shook the roof.

“Hey, take it easy, they’re new recruits!” Alex tried to stop him, helpless. “Don’t deliberately get them drunk!”

A half-drunk soldier beside them gave Alex an ‘OK’ gesture, then, with a playful smile, shoved him aside and turned to explain the rules of the drinking contest to Bai Liu. “Since Alex said so, how about the simplest way to drink alcohol?”

Tang Erda pulled on Bai Liu’s elbow, frowning as he shook his head, signaling for him not to drink.

He could tell Bai Liu wasn’t good at handling alcohol. After drinking the high-concentration vodka earlier, the man’s face had turned slightly flushed.

Spades glanced at Tang Erda holding Bai Liu’s elbow, paused for a moment, then turned back to the soldier explaining the rules. “What’s the most complicated way to have a drinking contest?”

“Wow! You’re brave and full of courage!” the soldier clapped excitedly, then turned to Alex, pointing at Spades and shouting, “Alex, I’m letting them off the hook for your sake!”

Alex rubbed his temples, a headache coming on. Realizing he couldn’t persuade Spades, he turned to Bai Liu. “Don’t listen to them. If you get drunk, you won’t even be able to walk back tonight…”

The soldier clicked his tongue, clearly disappointed. “Alex, you’re such a letdown.”

Spades looked directly at Bai Liu. “Would you like to drink?”

Bai Liu tilted his head slightly and smiled. “I’ll stay with you until the end.”

“Alright, here’s how it works,” the soldier snapped his fingers, drawing everyone’s attention. He began pouring alcohol into a small

iron bucket on the bar, the kind used for bartending ice, until it was full.

With pride, he held up the small bucket and shook it. “—Behold, my glorious creation: the Kiss of War. The last person to drink it supposedly saw the God of Death.”

Two nearby soldiers handed Bai Liu and Spades conical goblets, each about 15 centimeters tall, with a capacity of around 400 milliliters, and gestured for them to place them on their heads.

Spades took his without hesitation, placing it on his head and staring directly at Bai Liu. Bai Liu hesitated for a moment but, under Spades' gaze, quickly placed the cup on his head and looked back calmly.

When the soldier saw the funny sight of these two outstanding-looking people holding wine glasses, he couldn’t help laughing.

He laughed and said: “The rules of the drinking competition are like this. You have to continuously scoop the wine from this small bucket and put it on the wine glass above your head. Be careful not to spill it outside. If it spills outside, you have to drink the whole glass you’ve ladled.”

“Then, if you fill up the wine glass on your head and haven’t spilled a drop, the other person must drink the alcohol on your head. At the same time, during the drinking process, neither the wine glass on his head nor the wine glass on your head can be held. If it falls, you will be responsible for drinking twice the amount of alcohol in the glass.”

“When both parties are completely unable to hold the cup on their heads, the drinking competition ends, and the party with the most broken cups is the loser.”

He spread his arms. “Got it?”

Both Bai Liu and Spades nodded, eyes fixed on the glasses on each other’s heads.

The soldier whistled and tossed the small scooping cups into the iron barrel. “Let the game begin!”

Bai Liu reached out, taking the cup between his fingers, and steadily poured wine into the glass on his head.

To everyone’s surprise, Spades ignored the scooping cup entirely. He

grabbed both sides of the small barrel with both hands, raising it high above his head, and began pouring alcohol directly into the glass on his head, all the while locking eyes with Bai Liu.

The alcohol flowed smoothly, filling Spades' glass quickly, passing the halfway point.

Tang Erda: "!!!"

Alex: "!!!"

The onlookers were stunned.

Can you even play like that?!

Bai Liu didn't hesitate. He reached up to interfere, trying to stop the flow of alcohol from the barrel above Spades' head.

But Spades was a head taller than him. As Bai Liu moved closer, Spades raised the barrel higher, keeping it just out of reach.

Realizing Spades was deliberately using his height to suppress him, Bai Liu narrowed his eyes. With a swift motion, he leaped onto the bar with one hand, keeping his glass steady atop his head.

Then, just as everyone thought he was going to use his height advantage to grab the barrel, Bai Liu swept his leg in a cold arc, aiming to knock the glass off Spades' head.

Spades instinctively leaned back to dodge. In the same motion, Bai Liu kicked the wine barrel from his grip.

The barrel flipped through the air, scattering alcohol everywhere.

The crowd followed its path, eyes wide.

Spades' right hand snaked around his lower back, grabbing the whip hanging there, and circled the barrel. With a flick of his wrist, he pulled it back, catching the barrel midair. All the spilled alcohol was collected again, not a drop wasted.

The soldiers were dumbfounded. —What kind of operation is this?!

Magical Eastern Kung Fu?!

Seeing the barrel return to Spades' left hand, Bai Liu's eyes darkened. Without hesitation, he pulled out a gun from his waist, aiming at the

back of Spades' head.

"!!!" Tang Erda's hand instinctively went to his own gun, realizing it was gone.

Alex's face went blank.

The soldiers stood frozen, their mouths agape, unable to react in time.

Bai Liu pulled the trigger without pause. But before the bullet could reach its target, Spades moved quickly, evading it and prying the gun from Bai Liu's hand.

Instead of hitting him, the bullet ricocheted off and struck the wine barrel, creating a hole in its bottom. Alcohol began leaking out, dripping into Spades' hand, which he caught effortlessly.

"The barrel leaked on your hand," Bai Liu said, retracting his gun. His voice was hoarse, breath quickening slightly from the action. "I won."

Spades stared at him calmly. "You intended to aim at the barrel from the beginning."

—Targeting me was just a diversion.

Bai Liu shrugged, a smile tugging at his lips. "It's just a drinking contest. I'm not bored enough to shoot you for something like this."

Tang Erda, Alex, and the soldiers exchanged glances, dumbfounded. —So you do know it's just a drinking game!!

Bai Liu looked at Spades. "You lost."

Spades hummed softly. "I lost, so I drink."

He stepped closer, placing his hands on Bai Liu's shoulders. "Lower your head."

Bai Liu was silent for a moment, then slowly lowered his head.

Spades didn't need to stand on tiptoe to reach the wine glass on Bai Liu's head. As their faces drew nearer, Bai Liu could feel the heat radiating from him, his own breathing growing faster.

The close proximity made it feel as though Bai Liu had actively lowered his head, inviting Spades to kiss his forehead.

Bai Liu glanced up, eyes tracing Spades' Adam's apple as it moved with each swallow. He could feel Spades' heartbeat, which seemed faster than usual.

Strangely, his own heartbeat quickened in response.

Spades finished drinking, wiped his mouth with his thumb, and said nonchalantly, "Again."

In the second round, Bai Liu lost.

Spades didn't care about the glass on his head, grabbing Bai Liu's glass first and knocking it off. Both of them drank large gulps.

Spades sat back with a grin, letting Bai Liu drink from his head, but Bai Liu, for some reason, would rather hold the glass in his teeth and turn away than drink from Spades' head.

By the third round, they were tied. The backup barrel was damaged. The furious bartender scolded them and ordered three more large glasses each.

…

Tang Erda, initially tense, now sat back, helplessly watching the spectacle with Alex.

"I thought something would happen," Tang Erda sighed. "Thankfully, it didn't."

Alex shook his head with a smile. "I thought Bai Liu was really angry at Spades, but it turns out it was just a little conflict during the 'falling for each other' phase."

"Guy and I have been through that before. It's nice to just have fun."

Alex smiled at Bai Liu, who was drinking the alcohol from Spades' head, and sighed wistfully. "It's amazing. To love someone so much that you're willing to point a gun at them in fun, to be so close, so intimate."

Bai Liu lowered his eyes, focusing on the glass above Spades' head. He carefully balanced himself and drank slowly, trying to maintain control.

But after drinking so much, he might not have realized that his stability was not just in his own movements but in the world itself. To

everyone else, Bai Liu seemed to tip his head slightly, letting the glass slip off.

Spades instinctively reached out to catch it. He looked up, intending to point out their loss, but found Bai Liu staring blankly ahead, as if unaware that the glass had fallen.

Bai Liu leaned in, lips pressing against Spades' lips, the wine glass slipping from Spades' head and crashing to the floor.

The onlookers, thinking this was a drunken mess, began laughing and whistling.

Bai Liu blinked slowly, his hands now cupping Spades' face. He pulled away and opened his mouth, as if to say something, but only managed: "I didn't mean to kiss you."

"Oh," Spades looked at him, observing closely. "You've turned red again, Bai Liu."

Bai Liu wanted to blame it on the alcohol, but admitting he was drunk felt humiliating. So instead, he said, "I just turn red sometimes."

Spades raised an eyebrow. "When?"

"Is it when you kiss me? When you get close to me? Or when I tell others we have a special relationship?"

He listed off the moments, then paused before adding, "Bai Liu, you only turn red when you're with me."

"Why?" Spades moved closer, his breath warm with a hint of alcohol. "Is it because we have a special relationship?"

"No." Bai Liu paused, then answered calmly, "It's because I hate you."

"When I'm around people I hate, I turn red."

Spades took a moment to process this. "You only turn red when you're close to me."

"Do you only hate me?"

Bai Liu's eyelids lowered, concealing his emotions. He gently touched Spades' eyes and said softly, his voice hoarse from the alcohol:

"Yes, of all people, I only hate you."

But of all the monsters, I only love you.

Chapter End Notes

> I think this is my favorite quote from the novel
> Yes, of all people, I only hate you.
> But of all the monsters, I only love you.

Spades was quiet for a moment then said, “I don’t understand.”

Bai Liu curled his lips lazily and smiled. He seemed to find Spades’ appearance amusing, so he answered: “What don’t you understand?”

“I don’t understand why you only hate me.” Spades answered honestly.

Bai Liu withdrew from his arms and sat across from him. He raised his hand to support his chin with a kind of drowsiness in his eyes. He said with a half-smile, “You ripped out my heart and made me lose a very important game. You also killed the most important person to me, isn’t that enough for me to hate you?”

A drop of wine dripped from the tip of Spades’ hair, and he breathed calmly: “You have had many enemies. Every one of your current teammates has hurt you, and you don’t hate them.”

“You don’t hate a person for simply winning or losing a game.”

“And I didn’t kill anyone.” Spades looked directly into Bai Liu’s eyes, “I just killed the monster whose heart you hid.”

“I’m not the only player trying to destroy this monster. People around you, your teammates, have all tried to kill this monster.”

Bai Liu turned around coldly: “But you were the only one who succeeded.”

“No, I didn’t succeed.” Spades stared at him, “My intuition tells me that this monster’s heart is still alive because of you.”
He paused: “I thought you killed it after you got out of the game.”

Bai Liu’s breathing became very light, his eyes suddenly unfocused, and the fingers of his right hand twitched slightly.

“No.”

“…It committed suicide.”

“So you can’t blame me for its death.” Spades looked at Bai Liu, “I am no different from the players around you.”

His lips pursed into a straight line: “But you don’t hate Tang Erda, you

don't hate anyone in your team, and you don't hate Alex, who was hostile to you before."

There was a visible confusion on Spades' face: "Why do you only hate me?"

Bai Liu looked away: "——Don't make it sound like you know me well, this is only the third time we have met——"

After saying that, he stood up to leave. Spades stretched out his hand and grasped Bai Liu's wrist tightly. He looked at Bai Liu with a keen eye, and there was an imperceptible depression in his tone:

"——Why do you target me in such a special way?"

Bai Liu's hanging eyelashes fluttered, and his index finger moved involuntarily with alcohol sliding down on the back of his hand.

"Answer me, Bai Liu." Spades' eyes were like a dark bunch of thorns growing, enveloping Bai Liu in layers, ensuring he spat out the heartfelt answer that was hidden beneath the tangle of spikes, "-what is it about me that is different for you."

But before Bai Liu opened his mouth to answer Spades, a huge noise from the door of the tavern broke their stalemate in this small corner.

Deafening whistles and some sharp salutes came from the door, accompanied from time to time by some surprising, unbelievable laughter and teasing.

Bai Liu quickly withdrew his hand: "There is a game event coming, let's deal with it first."

"You haven't answered me yet." Spades had no expression on his face. He stood stubbornly in front of Bai Liu and looked directly at him, "Why?"

Bai Liu took a deep breath, raised his head and sneered: "I just hate you. There is no reason. You don't need a reason to hate someone. Can you understand this?"

Spades was silent for about ten seconds. He didn't say yes or no, nor did he get out of the way. He just stood there and said 'oh'.

"You got your answer." Bai Liu looked up at Spades, "Can you get out of the way?"

For the first time, Spade averted his eyes in front of Bai Liu. He lowered his head and raised the whip hanging next to his knees, as if he was going to hit a non-existent enemy: "…How long are you going to hate me for?"

The Reverse God had told him that hatred without reason has a time limit, so he wanted to ask.

Bai Liu was quiet for a while, his shoulders sank as if relaxed, and he said softly: "——"

The moment he spoke, the sound of huge champagne bottles being opened one after another drowned out the sound of Bai Liu's answer.

Spades only saw Bai Liu looking at him with a smile and saying a few words amidst the roar and cheers of the huge crowd, but he couldn't make out what those words were.

Then the colorful wedding bouquets fell down one after another and covered their heads.

Spades frowned and approached Bai Liu and asked, "I didn't hear what you just said."

"Forget it." Bai Liu smiled, brushed Spades' shoulder and ran forward.

Spades looked back after Bai Liu and saw Guy wearing a wedding dress and a snow-white veil in the crowd, holding fireworks, and Alex standing opposite Guy, who looked completely dumbfounded.

The surrounding soldiers formed a friendly circle. They raised their hands in the air, beat the rhythm with their feet, and hummed an out-of-tune wedding march.

Guy knelt down amidst the cheers. He held a bouquet high to Alex, who had a blank expression, and smiled brightly: "Alex, please forgive me for secretly planning this wedding without telling you."

"I hope this is a surprise for you rather than a shock." Guy joked humorously, gently, with a layer of tears in his eyes, "Hey, although I'm dressed a little weird, you shouldn't have this expression, right?"

As if he had just come to his senses, Alex knelt down stiffly, tremblingly, and with a red face, he hugged Guy who was wearing a wedding dress, tightly. His tears couldn't help but roll down. His voice was hoarse and he could only repeat several words meaninglessly.

“God, God, God!”

Guy stroked the back of Alex’s head, his eyes flushed. He couldn’t help laughing, and his tone became softer: “Maybe I can interpret your reaction as if you are willing to marry me?”

Alex cried almost convulsively: “Guy! I love you Guy!”

Guy helped the crying Alex up. They did not ask a priest to marry them – the current priest was still praying for the dead soldiers in the military medical camp, so they took an oath of marriage together under the witness of everyone.

Besides, their wedding was not blessed by God.

These soldiers, who had not seen a happy event for a long time, were so excited that Guy’s wedding dress was almost trampled to pieces by these rude soldiers.

Even if this is an absurd and secular wedding, on the eve of the war, there is no more comforting scene than seeing two lovers hugging each other and kissing with tears in their eyes.

It doesn’t matter whether the protagonist of this picture is a man or a woman. What matters is that they are alive and they love each other.

God may not bless them, but God has never blessed anyone here.

The crowd was noisy, and in the corner, Spades looked at Tang Erda expressionlessly.

Tang Erda: “…”

Bai Liu accompanied Guy to deal with those matters, and then handed Spades to Tang Erda, asking Tang Erda to help look after the half-drunk number one player.

Actually, although Bai Liu said that Spades was drunk, he didn’t look very drunk, although…

Spades asked one word at a time: “What is marriage?”

Tang Erda racked his brains and answered: “It is a ceremony that when people reach a certain age, in order to be with the person they like forever, they introduce each other to other people and comply with legal procedures.”

Spades was quiet for a while, seeming to digest, and then asked again: “What is a certain age?”

Tang Erda held his forehead in pain. He had already answered Spades’ countless questions – this man didn’t cry or make a fuss after drinking, but he had a lot of questions.

And he was very persistent. If you don’t answer, he will use various methods to get you to answer.

Tang Erda sighed: “Probably more than 20 for women and over 30 for men?”

Spades looked at him from the side: “How old are you?”

Tang Erda was startled: “Thirty-five or six.”

Spades made a sound and asked: “Then why don’t you get married? Is it because you don’t have a partner?”

Tang Erda, who was shot once, said: “…The situation is a bit complicated.”

Spades asked: “The person you like doesn’t exist?”

Tang Erda, who was shot twice, said: “…”

Seeing that Tang Erda didn’t answer, Spades continued, “The person you like is married to someone else?”

Tang Erda, who had been shot three times, said: “…”

Seeing that Tang Erda didn’t fight back, Spades continued to speculate: “The person you like…”

“Okay.” Tang Erda took a long, long sigh, “I’ll tell you.”

Spades will keep guessing when he can’t get his answer, and this person doesn’t know why, but he can always guess the most miserable answer with his strange intuition. Until now, Tang Erda has answered Spades’ questions to the point where he is numb from the holes Spades has put in him.

Tang Erda took a big sip of wine and looked at the empty wine glass in a daze: “The person I like… he likes me, but he has left.”

When Spades got the answer, he was quiet for a while, and then

suddenly asked: “Will Bai Liu hate the person who marries him?”

“?!?” Tang Erda was confused by the jumping nature of Spades’ question, but since Spades’ questions had always been jumping around, he thought hard for a moment and tentatively gave an answer, “There should be…… no way?”

“Everyone… generally likes their marriage partner.”

Although it was hard for Tang Erda to imagine someone Bai Liu would marry.

Tang Erda remembered that he had seen in Murphy’s Magic Mirror that Bai Liu had fallen in love with someone when he was young, but that person had long been tortured to death in the orphanage. It could only be regarded as a premature love of the great devil Bai Liu that ended in nothing.

Spades’ whip on his knees shook. He sat up straight, let out a heavy ooh, and nodded seriously.

Tang Erda was confused: “???”

What is this look of having found the answer?

Alex hugged Guy’s shoulders and cried, then laughed again. This young man who had previously advised Bai Liu and Spades not to drink, clutched a bottle and drank passionately with all those who came to congratulate him. Less than ten or five minutes later, he lay drunkenly on Guy’s shoulder, just saying ‘I love you’.

This unorthodox, carnival-style wedding finally progressed to the last step – the bride throwing the bouquet.

“The person who receives it will be the next couple to get married!” Guy stood on the stage and supported Alex to throw the bouquet backwards. He counted down happily, “3-2-1-!”

A group of old men were very curious about the bouquets and rushed to grab it.

But the moment Guy threw the bouquet, a black whip was thrown out, and just like a flash, it hooked the bouquet and disappeared.

A group of soldiers who were trying to grab the bouquet: “!!!”

There it is again! Mysterious Eastern Kung Fu!

Spades took the bouquet into his arms and held it up in a dignified manner with Guy's wedding veil, which had been stolen from him at some point, tilted on his head, exactly like Guy's proposal just now. The scene was imitated without any attempt at originality.

Spades then knelt down upright and raised a bouquet to Bai Liu who had been forcibly pulled over by him.

Bai Liu looked at this man with no emotion on his face, without any movement.

Spades, who had his proposal script interrupted by Bai Liu's unilateral non-cooperation, paused and recalled the opening lines of Guy's proposal: "Hey, although I'm dressed a little strange, you shouldn't have this expression, right??"

Bai Liu: "…"

The Dense Forest Borderlands

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Guy on the stage cupped his hands around his mouth, laughed and shouted loudly: “Bai Liu! Promise him!”

“This nice young man just asked to borrow the wedding dress from me!” Guy laughed so hard that he almost burst into tears. “I didn’t lend it to him, I only gave him a veil. He looked drunk. After borrowing the veil, he even came to grab my wedding dress and almost tore it off my body!”

Alex raised his head suddenly, hugged Guy’s waist in confusion, and looked around seriously: “——Where is the good young man who wants to tear Guy’s wedding dress off!”

Guy smiled more and more happily, lowered his head and kissed Alex.

The drunk Alex fell silent again after receiving the kiss. Guy raised his head and looked at Bai Liu with shining eyes, full of sincere tenderness and blessings.

“Promise him, Bai Liu, you really love each other.”

There was a very light layer of sadness hidden under Guy’s happy smile:

“Don’t wait until your lover dies to mourn him. Every moment you spend together is as precious as gold.”

Spades knelt on the ground, holding a bouquet and with his head raised, waited persistently for Bai Liu’s answer.

The crowd jumped around them meaninglessly, waving, laughing and opening bottles of champagne. The sweet and intoxicating foam of the sparkling champagne flew all over the room, and countless golden fragments fell from the roof like fireworks. The sound of laughter outside the windows rang through the night.
A few shiny little fragments fell on Spades’ hair.

Bai Liu lowered his eyes, reached out and gently took away the fragments, and then pushed away the loose hair from Spade’s

forehead.

The eyes under Spades' hair were dark and pure, reflecting Bai Liu's figure cleanly and completely, as if only Bai Liu could only be seen in this noisy world.

"Are you willing to marry me?" Spades asked seriously, holding the bouquet almost under Bai Liu's nose.

Bai Liu opened his lips. He had a lot to say and ask.

Hesitating to speak was a rare and impossible thing for him, but at this moment, it happened.

Because the person he wanted to ask couldn't remember anything or understand anything, and sometimes Bai Liu wasn't even sure that the person who had lost his memory was the Tawil in his memory.

They look so different.

But Spades always gives Bai Liu an… indescribable sense of familiarity, letting him know that Spades is that person.

Edmund, the NPC in the previous game, told Bai Liu that people are not containers composed of memory and flesh. There is something higher level than this that exists in everyone, distinguishing them from monsters that are exactly the same as themselves.

This thing is love.

So even if a person's body and memory are completely different, love still exists.

Bai Liu didn't believe in this statement, but he still didn't understand why Spades could find him out of so many [Bai Liu's] before.

He didn't understand where his desire to impulsively accept the bouquet at this moment came from.

Obviously this was just a game.

Bai Liu calmly looked down at Spades kneeling on the ground and asked, "Why do you want to marry me?"

Spades said: "I hope you don't hate me."

Bai Liu easily understood Spades' logic. His eyes were half-closed: "…

Why don't you want me to hate you?"

"There are so many players who hate you. Do you want to marry each of them so that they don't hate you?"

After a pause, he frowned and shook his head: "They have always hated and feared me."

"I don't want to marry them."

Bai Liu asked calmly: "If you want to marry someone who hates you, why don't you choose someone else?"

"They are afraid of you and will easily agree to your request. They will not always oppose you like me, or even hurt you repeatedly."

Bai Liu's long eyelashes dropped, and his voice was so soft that it was almost inaudible: "…I have never been your best choice."

"I've been… killing you."

"You have never killed me." Spade looked directly at him, "If one day I die, it will be my choice to die."

Bai Liu's breathing slowed down: "… There are so many choices, why do you have to choose me?"

— Even after dying for me twice, you're still picking me.

Spades' eyes reflected Bai Liu, and his tone was calm and serious: "Because you are different from others."

Bai Liu asked: "What's the difference?"

Spades pondered for a long time and gave the answer: "They can hate me, but I don't want you to hate me."

Bai Liu was quiet for a long time, then he chuckled and raised his eyes: "Why can't I hate you?"

Spades was quiet for a while: "…I don't know, I just don't want you to hate me."

The expression on Bai Liu's face softened unconsciously: "Just like I hate you, there is no reason for it, right?"

Spades lowered his voice as if he was a little depressed: "…Yeah."

“Promise him! Promise him! Promise him!”

The booing was getting louder and louder, and the soldiers who were red-faced and drunk were shouting loudly, as if they were threatening Bai Liu, but they were laughing happily, with a look full of expectation, eager to see a second married couple. Spades’ expression made it clear he was waiting for Bai Liu to speak.

“Spades, people will not marry someone they hate.” Bai Liu said softly, “This does not conform to the logic of normal people.”

Spades knelt motionless, as if he had fallen into a strange whirlpool of thinking because the logic of the proposal had been destroyed.

According to his idea, two people who hate each other can get married and end their hatred for each other through marriage, but Bai Liu said that the causal relationship was reversed, which made Spades pause in place.

This was different from what he thought.

Bai Liu’s eyes dropped to the bouquet in Spade’s hand, and he seemed to be talking to himself: “But you and I are both drunk now.”

“So we can do things that don’t make sense.”

Bai Liu reached out, took the bouquet from Spades’ hands and smiled at Spades who had not yet reacted:

“I do.”

Guy stuffed his index finger and thumb into his mouth, laughed wildly and whistled without any thought to his own image: “—Now the groom can kiss the groom!”

Bai Liu held the bouquet and slowly walked towards Spades. He slightly tilted his head and raised it as if he wanted to kiss him, and looked intently into Spades’ eyes.

Flowing golden fireworks fell from their heads. People from a strange country they didn’t know held up empty beer bottles and knocked against each other in confusion, shaking their heads and playing the beat of the wedding march. In the dim bar in the distance, a man in a wedding dress and a drunk groom were kissing passionately.

Bai Liu had never imagined his marriage before the moment he

jumped from the plane.

But at that moment, he had thought about it.

Bai Liu thought that the wedding scene imagined by a monster like him should be weird and unattended, but the strange thing is that the wedding he imagined with Tawil was like what all normal people in the world yearn for.

Vulgar, lively, with a large group of strangers who have only a slight connection with them to witness, and then they make the same promise to each other in the noisy background – we will be together forever, until death do us apart.

Until death do us part.

Bai Liu thought that after that, after he found Tawil… he might… try to accept a wedding.

Now he did get it, although it didn't seem to be the same as he imagined.

It's like this every time, he seems to have endless bad luck. Then that person, that person will always try his best, as if he wants to take advantage of the whole world, to bring what Bai Liu wanted back to him in all sorts of strange and bizarre ways.

——A storybook that had been torn and then pasted together, a lanky ghost doll with a missing face.

The wedding after parting.

This person has been clumsily comforting him, trying to cheer him up by giving Bai Liu the gift he wanted most.

Even if the price of this gift is to sacrifice one's own life.

Soothing background music was played in the tavern, and everyone swayed and danced in pairs, hugging each other. The lights dimmed, and only vague light and shadow could be seen.

Bai Liu circled the back of Spades' neck and pressed against his chin, blinking slightly.

With Bai Liu holding the back of his neck, Spades struggled to look back at the movements of Guy and Alex hugging each other in the middle of the dance floor – he had never been married, and he needed

a template to learn from after getting married.

Guy hugged Alex's shoulders and swayed. They were kissing continuously, and Alex's hand had already reached into the hem of Guy's wedding dress.

Spades' eyes flickered back and forth between Guy and Bai Liu, then he leaned into Bai Liu's ear and asked hesitantly: "-I'm going to kiss you now?"

He still remembered that he had made this person angry by casually kissing him before, so he asked in advance this time.

"People don't kiss people they hate, Spades." Bai Liu didn't look up and answered Spades softly.

"But we are married." Spades answered confidently, "Those who are married should kiss each other."

Spades felt Bai Liu, who was leaning against his shoulder, chuckle.

Then Bai Liu said: "Didn't you ask me before about how long I will hate you?"

Spades quickly asked: "How long?"

Bai Liu raised his head. There was a layer of luster in his eyes, and the smile on his face was pure and clear, with a touch of mischievousness that was not well hidden.

"——Forever, I will always hate you."

Spades stopped all movements and tried to argue: "We are married, so we should kiss, but if you hate me, we can't kiss -"

Bai Liu lowered his eyes, pulled Spades down, closed his eyes and kissed him.

After the kiss, Spades looked at Bai Liu: "You said you hate me, but you took the initiative to kiss me."

This was too contradictory. Spades couldn't understand such a thing. He was confused and depressed: "Why did you do this?"

"Because I'm drunk." Bai Liu didn't close his eyes this time, and leaned in to kiss Spades again, "——I can marry people I hate when I'm drunk, and I can kiss people I hate."

He kissed Spades and closed his eyes calmly.

“I would like to be with the person I hate forever, until death do us part again.”

Chapter End Notes

Till death do us part AGAIN !!!!!

Amidst the cheers, Alex, who was so drunk he couldn't tell where he was going, picked up Guy and was swarmed to his new, improvised room in the tavern.

This group of people also took the time to arrange a room for Bai Liu and the others. Although it looked simple, it still had that look.

Spades was about to bend down and imitate Alex's movements to carry Bai Liu into the new house, but Bai Liu calmly stopped him.

Bai Liu raised his eyes and glanced at Tang Erda, who had been motionless for a long time like a wood statue among the human race.

The expression on Tang Erda's face was blank. He stared at Spades and the veil on his head for a while, then at Bai Liu with a natural expression, and finally slowly lowered his head and glanced at the wine bottle in his hand. He then turned it over and checked the strength to confirm that he was not hallucinating due to drinking too much.

Tang Erda muttered to himself in a daze: "Is there a monster here? My mental value has dropped due to my alienation…"

Bai Liu calmly stopped Spades behind him who tried to lift him up again: "No need."

Spades raised his head: "?"

"Alex already hugged Guy." He wondered from the bottom of his heart, "Can't I hug you too?"

Bai Liu said: "——We don't need to."
Spades asked: "Why?"

Bai Liu thought about it for a few seconds, and then started to talk nonsense without changing his expression: "——Alex hugged Guy. It was the one who wasn't wearing a wedding dress that hugged the one wearing a wedding dress, not you hugging me."

Spades let out a sudden oh, then naturally opened his arms and looked straight at Bai Liu, as if he was ready for Bai Liu to carry him into the new room.

Bai Liu glanced at Spades, who was a head taller than him, from top to bottom, and looked away as if nothing had happened: “-But you look too heavy for me to carry, so forget it.”

Spades was quiet for a while, then he slowly put down his hands and put them behind his back. He said “oh” and stood in front of Bai Liu, still looking at him steadily.

Bai Liu looked up and raised his eyebrows, showing a questioning expression, asking what else he wanted.

“I’m not very heavy.” Spades defended seriously, “74kg, only one hundred and sixty-three pounds. You should try holding me.”

After saying that, he opened his arms again, with a calm expression on his face, and stared directly at Bai Liu, giving him a sense of urgency “Hurry up and pick me up and take me to the new room.”

Bai Liu: “…”

Bai Liu retorted calmly: “——I really can’t pick you up.”

“But we got married, you should carry me in.” Spades’ eyes glanced at the door of the room where Alex entered with Guy in his arms, and then his eyes fell flatly on Bai Liu’s face, “Even though Alex is drunk he can carry Guy, who weighs 174 pounds to the room.”

Spades lowered his eyes and looked at Bai Liu, calmly explaining the facts: “I am eleven pounds lighter than Guy.”

Bai Liu: “…”

He inexplicably felt a sense of condemnation in Spades’ words.

Bai Liu knew very well that he couldn’t carry Spades when he was drunk, but he’d learned the hard way that Spades was stubborn and serious when he’s drunk – this man wouldn’t give in until he got a reasonable answer.

“It’s true that I can’t carry you.” Bai Liu looked at Spades with a smile, “But a certain tool in my system panel has the ability to transport you. I can use this tool to carry you in. Can you accept this?”

After thinking for a moment, Spades nodded.

He could accept Bai Liu using game props to carry him in, such as floating mats used to reduce weight.

One minute later.

Tang Erda's facial expression was completely frozen. He took a rigid step, like a Haidilao food delivery robot that had lost its brain. His arms stretched forward stiffly, and his eyes stared blankly ahead, not looking down at the "goods" being transported in his arms at all.

The "Cargo" was expressionless with an upright posture, and his hands were neatly placed on the seams of his trousers. He lay straight on Tang Erda's stretched-out arms like a frozen corpse.

Because Tang Erda didn't support or hold Spades at all, Spades would roll off if he didn't straighten his body.

But even though Spades straightened his body, the slight bumps caused by Tang Erda's movement caused the expressionless Spades on his arms to roll from side to side.

But fortunately he didn't fall down.

Bai Liu walked beside them calmly, guiding the "food delivery robot" to the door of the new house.

Next to him were a group of soldiers with dull eyes and dumbfounded expressions. They watched in stunned silence as Tang Erda carried Bai Liu to the door of his new room.

It wasn't until the door of the room was closed and these strange three people disappeared into the doorway that the soldiers retracted their sight in a daze.

A soldier gulped and exclaimed: "God, what are they doing?"

"I know!" A soldier raised his hand excitedly to answer, "This is an ancient Eastern wedding custom!"

A group of soldiers looked over curiously.

The soldier rubbed his hands and laughed drunkenly: "I heard that the ancient eastern emperors would ask some of their male subordinates to help transport their wives to the bed."

"It seems like this – [I asked my subordinates to tie up my wife with something, and then asked them to carefully send her into the room.] " The soldier felt that he was talking about something extremely interesting, so he came closer to these people. The soldier lowered his

voice and said mysteriously, “In order to ensure the chastity of the wives being transported, these subordinates are usually castrated!”

The soldiers let out a long, shocked, and extremely gossipy “Oh——!!”

One soldier expressed extreme disbelief at such a cruel tradition. He shook his head and exclaimed: “So that tall recruit–?!”

The soldier who talked about customs nodded sadly: “Most likely.”

Everyone let out a long sigh.

The soldier changed the topic and said, “But you don’t have to sympathize with him too much. Generally speaking, such castration is voluntary for them.”

“Voluntary?!” Everyone’s eyes were shocked. “He is so tall and handsome but he is actually willing to do such a thing to himself!”

“Ancient Dongfeng civilization customs.” The soldier shook his head and showed off his knowledge, “It is said that this is to show his loyalty and to better serve his king!”

“That little man must have royal blood!” The soldier concluded.

Everyone let out another long ‘ohh’.

Bai Liu, unaware of his royal blood, sat on the edge of the bed and glanced at the “Beloved Concubine” Spades lying on the bed, and Tang Erda who stood beside the bed as if he had solidified.

“I, I’m leaving first.” Tang Erda said these words with difficulty, not daring to look at Spades on the bed and Bai Liu who was beside the bed, and almost ran through the back door of the room.

He didn’t know yet that he had been “castrated” outside.

Spades, who was lying on the bed, looked at Bai Liu quietly with a haunted gaze.

Bai Liu turned his back to Spades and said with a faint smile in his voice: “I showed you that Tang Erda is indeed in my system panel and is considered my tool. I didn’t lie to you.”

Spades turned over, buried his face in the pillow, and let out a muffled sound.

But soon, Spades' mood seemed to calm down. He looked sideways at Bai Liu, who was sitting by the bed, unbuttoning his cuffs and taking off his coat, his eyes becoming full of inquisitiveness again: "Are we going to do anything else tonight?"

"There's nothing to do." Bai Liu said

Bai Liu took off his coat and unbuttoned his shirt.

He didn't shy away from Spades' gaze, so he changed his clothes, then lifted up the quilt and lay down, smiling at Spades and saying good night.

Bai Liu reached out and turned off the lamp, everything turned dark, and soon his breathing became even.

Spades lying next to him looked confused – his intuition told him that the marriage process had not yet been completed.

But he didn't know what to do next. It seemed like the two of them were lying on the bed, unable to do anything else except sleep…

Spades turned over several times, and finally whispered good night to Bai Liu and closed his eyes.

Bai Liu, who was pretending to be asleep, quietly raised the corners of his mouth.

When Bai Liu was a child, when he wanted to escape some of Xie Ta's questions, or did something he didn't want Xie Ta to know about, but Xie Ta found out, he pretended to be asleep.

Xie Ta would not disturb his sleep no matter what.

It seems that this good habit has been carried over to this day.

But Bai Liu's lips froze halfway up – there was a strange sound and the intertwined breathing of two people coming from another room that was only separated from them by a wall.

Bai Liu: "…"

Are the rooms in this tavern so poorly soundproofed?

Spades opened his eyes. Instead of disturbing Bai Liu, who was still pretending to be asleep, he knelt down on one knee at the head of the bed quietly, tilted his head and put his ear to the wall – he must know

what the next steps are in getting married.

Bai Liu: "…"

He also opened his eyes and silently stared at Spades' side profile in the darkness.

The voices of Guy and Alex were so intertwined that ordinary people might not be able to hear what these two people were mumbling while kissing, but Bai Liu and Spades now have high level panels. Their acuity in the five senses was very high, so they could hear clearly.

"Oh God! Guy, Guy you're so…!"

Guy's laughing voice came over: "Alex, um, please slow down – condoms, I put condoms on the bedside… Hey, good boy, even if it's the wedding night, this is a must. Wear it."

Spades' movements stopped for a second or two, and then he turned around to open the bedside table, but Bai Liu had to stand up to stop him.

Bai Liu turned on the desk lamp, raised his eyes and asked calmly: "What are you going to do if you don't want to sleep?"

Spades looked at him: "I'm looking for the condoms in the bedside table."

Bai Liu paused for a moment: "What are you going to use them for?"

The voice on the opposite wall suddenly became shriller: "Oh my God! Guy – you're putting it on me with your mouth – God!"

"It's for wearing." Spades immediately understood the use of this thing. He stared straight at Bai Liu's lips, "Do you also want to use your mouth to help-"

Bai Liu retorted calmly: "Impossible."

Spades looked at Bai Liu: "Why is it impossible?"

Bai Liu took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly.

He realized that Spades couldn't simply be fooled again.

Bai Liu looked away, his neck turned red almost visibly, and the

fingers hanging by his side twitched twice almost convulsively: "——I can help you in other places——"

"I don't want Tang Erda to help me put it on." Spades interrupted Bai Liu without hesitation. He looked at Bai Liu right away, knelt down and pressed Bai Liu against the wall. He then pressed his lips against Bai Liu's. Very, very close: "I want you to do it."

The Dense Forest Borderlands

Bai Liu turned his face away from the approaching Spades. He could smell the obvious alcohol in Spades' breath.

Of course, maybe it's not Spades', it might be his.

Bai Liu probably drank more vodka tonight than he had drank in his entire life.

Although his actions and thoughts seemed to be very stable, his limbs also felt weak from drinking. As soon as Spades opened his arms and walked over, Bai Liu couldn't help but move back and lean his shoulders against the wall for support.

Spades lowered his eyes and looked at Bai Liu, who was blushing. This time, he didn't ask why Bai Liu turned red – because Bai Liu's face was red all the time after drinking.

The sounds from across the wall had become muffled.

Bai Liu slowly raised his eyes to look at Spades, his breathing was warm and light, and Spades could see a very shallow halo of alcohol and drunkenness in Bai Liu's eyes.

That halo made Bai Liu's eyes out of focus. It was clear that his eyes were on Spades' face, but Spades always felt that Bai Liu was looking through him, at someone hiding behind him.

"… I can put it on for you." Bai Liu said softly. He seemed to be smiling and a little lazy, "But do you know where to wear it?"

Spades paused, and he said honestly: "Where?"
Bai Liu's smile became more obvious. He reached behind Spades and opened the drawer. There was a whole box of Ares condoms, ranging from small to large. Bai Liu took them all out and spread them out over the bed.

"?" Spades was a little confused, "Should I wear them all?"

Bai Liu raised his head, holding his chin with a half-smile, his eyes filled with undisguised mischief and nostalgia: "Have you ever played with balloons?"

Spades: "I've seen them, but I've never played with them."

“It was the same for me when I was a child.” Bai Liu smiled, his eyes stopped on Spades’ face and became distant, “I grew up in an orphanage. The dean and teachers at the orphanage didn’t like children like me. During festivals, other children would get two balloons, but I didn’t get any.”

Spades’ lips pursed into a straight line: “They should have given them to you.”

“There is nothing that should or should not happen in this world.” Bai Liu lowered his eyes and said in a nonchalant voice, “I wouldn’t have been sad about this kind of thing, because the wholesale balloons are not worth much.”

Bai Liu paused: “But the other kid who didn’t get a balloon didn’t think so.”

“He got a bunch of balloons from somewhere, painted them colorfully with markers from the craft room, and handed them to me in front of all the children who got the balloons.”

Bai Liu lowered his head and smiled: “I saw the rubber rings on these balloons. He took them from the trash can, washed them, and tied them with string to make the balloons.”

“He didn’t know what these things were originally used for, but he turned them into balloons that children would find beautiful and gave them to me.”

Bai Liu’s eyelashes trembled slightly: “Essentially… I shouldn’t have been happy because of this kind of thing.”

“Because these balloons are actually not worth much, and they are dirty and disgusting.”

But Xie Ta just looked at him, holding up the balloons and looking at him. There were still small wounds on his hands from rummaging through the trash can, and Bai Liu quickly took them without knowing why.

Then Xie Ta looked at Bai Liu and smiled slightly.

At that moment, those cheap balloons and those dirty and disgusting condoms seemed to become pure and precious because of Xie Ta’s smile.

It was a very strange feeling. Bai Liu realized for the first time that the value of these items was actually subjectively biased.

“For the first time, I felt that these pretentious… things turned out to be valuable.” Bai Liu said softly, “Because he gave them to me.”

“He made those condoms feel less disgusting to me.”

Spades held up a box of condoms. After observing them for a while, he asked, “Are these disgusting balloons?”

“In the original concept, these are balloons used to do very dirty things.” Bai Liu raised his head, he reached out and touched Spades’ face and moved his hair away from his forehead. He looked at Spades’ half-closed pure black eyes, “It is used to accommodate the human body’s desire for complete contact.”

Spades was confused: “If you want complete contact, why do you need to use this thing to isolate?”

“Because of distrust, fear, dread.” Bai Liu lowered his eyes, “People can’t trust that the person they are in contact with has no disease, that they can marry them, that they can bring their children a happy marriage and future, and can love them forever, so they use this thing as the last insurance to protect themselves.”

“Most of the time, this is the correct way to use condoms – because there is really no one in this world who will love you forever and will not hurt you.”

“But people always use this excuse to get involved with each other, and then use this thing to separate themselves from each other – sometimes they don’t even use it, in order to better control and hurt the other person. Such as making the other person pregnant with their child, or having a better sexual experience.”

“From a universal logic point of view, it is right to use this thing.”

Bai Liu looked at Spades: “I thought this logic was ironic, so I told the person who gave me the balloons the origin and use of these balloons. At that time, I thought this was disgusting.”

“You know what he told me?”

Spades stared at Bai Liu and said calmly: “If I am a very harmful monster, when someone is willing to get close to me one day, this

thing can protect him from me."

"I don't find it disgusting, it's a protective prop."

Bai Liu was quiet for a long time and said, "Yes, that person told me that too."

"I can teach you how to use and wear it." Bai Liu's voice was very calm, "… Maybe there is no other person besides me who can teach you these things."

Just like Xie Ta didn't understand that the balloon he held up was a condom that everyone laughed at.

"No need." Spades interrupted Bai Liu abruptly.

There was no emotion on his face. He suddenly stretched out his hand to collect all the condoms at once, swept them into the bedside table, then turned off the light. He turned around, pushed Bai Liu into the quilt and covered him, and said in a muffled voice: "I don't want to wear it anymore. I'm going to sleep."

Bai Liu looked at the ceiling. There was a faint banging and gasping from the bedside, but he smiled for some reason and asked, "Why not?"

Spades was silent for a long time in the dark night before replying: "I'm not sure if you won't be hurt."

"This protective prop looks fragile."

Bai Liu's voice was very calm: "Didn't you already hurt me? Now you don't want to do it anymore?"

"At that time, my intuition told me that I should separate you from that heart." Spades' tone was a little low, as if he felt that he had done something wrong.

Bai Liu asked: "What about now?"

"Now my gut tells me I shouldn't hurt you anymore," Spades said.

Bai Liu turned his head slightly, looked sideways at Spades, and imitated the man's tone: "Why, there's no reason, right?"

"There is a reason." Spades said, "We got married and took an oath."

In a strange tone, he solemnly mimicked the oaths made by the soldiers when they imitated the priest to solemnize their marriage: "——From now on and forever, in good times and in bad, for riches and for poor, in health and in sickness, in happiness and in sadness, I will love you and cherish you forever."

Bai Liu couldn't help but chuckle, but he quickly poured cold water on Spades: "This is just a game, you don't need to take it so seriously."

"There are only games in my life." Spades asked in confusion, "Why can't I take it seriously?"

Bai Liu fell silent. He turned his back to Spades and said, "Good night."

Spades laid flat on his back beside Bai Liu. He let out a sigh, and then closed his eyes.

After he heard Bai Liu's breathing completely even, Spades gently opened the bedside table. He lowered his head and looked at the condoms inside for a while, then reached in and took out a box.

There was a heavy gasping sound from the next room.

"This thing turns out to be a balloon. No wonder you have to use your mouth…" Spades nodded in realization and said to himself, "So Guy and Alex blew up the balloons until they were out of breath?"

Then Spades fell into a new round of questions: "Why do two people blow up balloons together on their wedding night?"

But Bai Liu behind Spades had truly fallen asleep this time, and no one could answer his endless questions.

The next morning, when Bai Liu woke up slowly, he drew his gun within a second and pointed it at the unknown white spherical objects in the room.

Bai Liu felt like he had changed rooms to a different one during the night. The room was full of balloons, large and small.

After confirming that this room was the one where he slept last night, Bai Liu put away his gun, got dressed, and expressionlessly tore off a balloon as big as a wash basin taped to the wall.

He saw the mouth of the ball, a pale yellow rubber ring.

Bai Liu paused for two seconds. While buttoning his shirt, he walked to the bedside table and opened it, and then paused again.

At least six boxes of unopened condoms that were there yesterday had been used up, leaving only a few empty boxes lying in the drawer.

Bai Liu adjusted his breathing slowly, cleaned up all the balloons in the room, threw them into the trash can, turned around and walked out of the room.

As soon as he opened the door, he saw Alex and Guy outside, poking their heads through the doorway, and Bai Liu gasped as soon as he came out.

Guy spoke frankly and looked at Bai Liu with horrified eyes: “You’re still alive! I thought Spades had… killed you!”

Bai Liu was quiet for a moment, then he looked at Guy with a questioning gaze.

Guy’s eyes couldn’t help but wander around Bai Liu’s waist: “Spades came out last night and asked for condoms.”

“He asked for twelve boxes, in all sizes available.” Alex’s eyes were particularly strange, and he said slowly, “But we have already put six boxes in the room, which adds up to almost two hundred… “

Bai Liu: “…”

Guy couldn’t help it anymore and glanced curiously into the room: “What did you do last night? Did you use so much in one night?”

Alex thought of Tang Erda, and looked at Bai Liu with an increasingly uncomfortable look, and emphasized faintly: “And in all sizes…”

Bai Liu ignored the topic as if nothing had happened and asked calmly: “Where is Spades?”

Alex’s expression was very complicated: “We met Spades this morning. He said he didn’t have enough and went to town to buy condoms…”

“We thought you wouldn’t get up for a while.” Guy teased a little and winked, “After all, Spades seems to be in a hurry, and it feels like he will come back soon to continue using them with you.”

Bai Liu: “…”

Guy was right. After Bai Liu loaded the gun with a smile and said he was going to find Spades, Spades came running back by himself.

Bai Liu was startled when he saw Spades.

The man's face was covered with various paints, he was holding up a lot of huge balloons painted abstractly, and his hair was covered with various paints intertwined with colorful lines.

Spades walked up to Bai Liu. The man was unusually short of breath.

Bai Liu noticed a red mark around the man's mouth – he could tell he had worked very hard to blow up the balloons all night.

Spades held up a pile of about seven or eight balloons that had been damaged by paint. His black eyes seemed to be shining brightly in the mess of colors: "I couldn't find any markers, so I borrowed the paint to draw with."

Bai Liu realized that this guy was imitating Xie Ta's behavior of drawing on balloons with a marker and giving them to him.

But he wasn't good at it at all, so he created a bunch of even more miserable artistic failures.

But Spades himself didn't seem to think so. He straightened his back and said, "I blew them up all night, and these are the most beautiful ones."

"Here you go, the balloons they didn't give you." Spades put the balloons into Bai Liu's hand and said, "You should have them."

Spades gasped, and his tone was particularly serious: "The two of them certainly didn't blow up as many balloons as me last night. Our wedding won over theirs."

"I just asked around. Of the people who got married here recently, we were the only ones who used the most condoms during one night. We should be the ones who got married the best."

Bai Liu looked up at the dirty Spades. He finally took the balloons, then gave Spades a hug and said, "Yes."

"We tied the knot nicely."

The Dense Forest Borderlands

After the brief revelry, there was the coming war.

After Guy greeted Bai Liu, he quickly said goodbye to them, and followed the men of Assault One and a couple of dozen heavy guns onto the train.

Alex stood where the train started. He looked at Guy who stuck his head out of the train window and greeted him with a smile, his eyes almost staring right through Guy.

Tang Erda left even earlier. As a recruit of the Assault One team who joined through abnormal means, he took the train and left the tavern at about two or three in the morning to go to the battlefield for adaptive training.

Bai Liu asked Spades to wash off the paint, store the balloons in the box that Guy found for him, and put them in the room. He then went to the training ground with other recruits to receive their assignments.

Alex took them to the training ground. When he reached the door, he turned around and looked at Bai Liu: “I hope I will never pick up your bodies on the battlefield.”

“Of course, it’s very possible that someone else will pick it up.” Alex smiled reluctantly, but he quickly calmed down, raised his head and looked at Bai Liu firmly, “After I finish today’s cleaning work, tomorrow I will apply to join the second commando team, and I won’t be a sweeper anymore.”

Bai Liu looked at him: “Because Guy went to the first team, right?”

“Yes.” Alex lowered his head, he turned the ring on the ring finger of his left hand. With a very happy and contented smile on his face, he whispered, “We have come this far, and only death can separate us.”

Alex patted Bai Liu and Spades on the shoulders: “Guy crossed off your commando registration. Go be a sweeper, it’s safer.”
After saying that, he jogged off and waved goodbye to Bai Liu.

Bai Liu withdrew his gaze from Alex’s back and looked at the shelves standing near the door of the training ground.

The shelf was rusty, and there was a thick stack of registration forms

on it. There was a notice board with white letters and a red background on it – [Application for quotas for the Second Assault Team and the Third Assault Team].

“It seems that there is a player identity option here. The suggested answer given by the main line NPC is the sweeper.” Bai Liu said thoughtfully, “But the game also places a commando application here.”

The main task of the game is to help Alex win the war. The winner is the player who collects the most corpses within seven days.

From these two points of view, it is possible to complete the mission as a sweeper and a commando, but the price/performance ratio is too low.

Collecting corpses as a soldier is a pure labor competition. This is not in line with the usual design style of this game. There must be some shortcut to obtain corpses in large quantities.

What is the best way to get the most bodies in a war?

Of course, as one of the camps, there is nothing more cost-effective to obtain casualties than to initiate a war.

Bai Liu narrowed his eyes.

Helping Alex win the war does not assign a camp, but only characters and contact methods of victory. Combined with the attitudes of the two main NPCs, Alex and Guy, towards the war, it is very likely that there is a setting here. A subplot involving Alex’s rebellion.

Assuming that the designer of this game deliberately made Alex an NPC with an unstable position, as Bai Liu thought, then Alex would be likely to rebel against his current camp.

This should also be the reason why the players of The Reverse God’s group could join the hostile camp.

If Alex rebels and joins the enemy camp, players in the enemy camp can also trigger the main mission to help Alex win the war.

From this perspective, there are two player camps in this game. One is to help Alex, who did not rebel, win the war, and the other is to help Alex, who rebelled, win the war.

So the only question now is under what circumstances will Alex, a medical student with a gentle temperament who loves his hometown and country but has a negative attitude towards war, rebel?

Although Alex holds a negative attitude towards the war, this attitude isn't enough to catalyze Alex to violently resist his current environment and defect to join the enemy.

His opinion still remains that even if this war is wrong, he must wait until the war is ended with his own victory before settling these mistakes and compensating the innocent people who were harmed by this mistake.

Alex has accepted war for what it is, in which neither side is innocent.

In Alex's mind, the incompetent government is certainly guilty, but even more guilty are these backward enemies who killed soldiers and started the war.

In this case, Alex will definitely be inclined to stand in his own camp. Even if Guy dies on the battlefield, he cannot easily change Alex's perception of his camp and make him rebel – this was something that was predetermined when Alex chose to join his own army camp instead of becoming a volunteer for the enemy.

If Alex is to defect, a different kind of catalyst was missing.

Bai Liu turned his head and looked at the track where Guy was sitting, riding away on the train.

He knew what the catalyst was.

"Choose the sweeper." Bai Liu turned to look at Spades, "Do you have any objections?"

Spades nodded and said, "Anything is fine."

After Bai Liu and Spades entered the training ground and were assigned the status of sweepers, a communications soldier ran into the training ground in a panic holding a telegram. His eyes widened in horror and shouted sharply: "Guy Davis of the Assault One Team has mutinied!"

"He suddenly turned around on the battlefield and used a bazooka to blow off the head of his deputy shooter, destroying two hidden firepower points on our side."

The soldier who rushed in was so angry that his eyes were red: “This despicable asshole! He killed more than twenty veterans of the Assault One team, and then under the enemy’s fire cover, he cleaned the battlefield, dragged the loot and surrendered to join the enemy military!!”

The whole place was in an uproar.

That night, the fighting worsened again.

The operation of the first assault team failed miserably due to Guy’s rebellion. The general who relied on his wife to rise to power was so angry that he finally pulled the thousand heavy artillery pieces to the front line overnight and merged the remaining members of the entire first assault team into the second assault team. He let the second assault team take over, and launched the second assault at dawn.

Bai Liu and Spades, two sweepers with only simple training, were also forced to the front line along with the heavy artillery because of the imminent mass casualties.

They were given a simple military tent, some stretchers and two sapper shovels, some anti-infection drugs in small bottles, a dozen suture kits, and several rolls of hemostatic bandages.

Bai Liu and the others were stationed next to Alex’s camp. After they were stationed, they walked into Alex’s tent.

The light inside the tent was very dim, and one could vaguely see the piles of corpses on the ground, with Alex sitting motionless like a corpse in the middle.

This young man who said during the day that he wanted to join the Second Commando Team seemed to have had his soul sucked out of him in just one day, and he was so haggard that he lost his form in just a dozen hours.

Alex’s military uniform was spattered with blood and coagulated flesh from top to bottom, and his face was covered in patches of blood. He stared at the mutilated corpses on the ground in trance, flicking his eyes up only slightly as he saw Bai Liu and the others lift the curtain and enter, before he continued to stare again.

Bai Liu walked to the table and lit the lamp. The light illuminated everything in the tent, including the bedding on the narrow camp bed that had not yet been tidied up, where the two people had been

intertwined.

Alex's eyes slowly moved to the quilt, and he stared at it for an unknown length of time. Finally, the accumulated emotions overwhelmed him, causing him to bend down under the unbearable strength on them for a moment, covering his face, breaking down and crying.

Only then did Bai Liu ask, "Alex, what happened?"

Alex raised his head, his voice was hoarse and he was in a trance: "——I got on Guy's next train and was transported to the front line."

"I was worried about Guy, I was afraid that something would happen to him, so I secretly exchanged positions with other sweepers and came to the area where the first commando team was stationed – it was already very late, there was a heavy rain, and the sky looked particularly dark. I saw Guy and their tents moving, as if they had received a telegram from the commander. Because of the heavy rain, the lake level had risen a lot, and the raid had to be brought forward."

"The captain of the first assault team proposed to go far away and attack from the area outside the lake to the east. Guy seemed to disagree. I heard him refute the captain fiercely, saying that it was not a war zone at all."

Bai Liu knelt on one knee in front of Alex and asked softly: "Where is that place?"

"There is another indigenous village there." There were countless dried tears on Alex's face. "According to the requirements of the international peacekeeping department, the people there have declared themselves to be a neutral camp and are not allowed to attack."

Bai Liu continued to ask: "Then why did the captain attack there?"

"Because the indigenous people there adopted many children and women of the enemy who were displaced due to the war. Later, people from the enemy camp began to deliberately and quietly place their children and wives there because it was safe."

Alex paused for a moment: "But many of us here don't think it is innocent. The general has submitted applications to the international peacekeeping departments three times, requesting that this indigenous village be included in the war zone, but it has been rejected because

of insufficient reasons."

"So this time, the general was going to kill first." Bai Liu asked calmly, "But there are only children and women there, so what's the point of attacking?"

Alex shook his head: "It's not just that. The indigenous people here attach great importance to blood and family ties. If the commando team can hold that village hostage, it's very likely that these indigenous people will be suppressed for a short period of time – at least it can allow us to survive this rainy season."

"And…" Alex paused, "The International Peacekeeping Department's restrictions on us are not as big as you think. As long as the other party fights back, it can be judged as an act of war, and the other party can be included in the war zone."

Bai Liu asked again: "So was this plan implemented in the end?"

Alex was lost in silence for a long time before he replied with difficulty: "…It was done. I saw Guy get into the car with his luggage on his back and leave."

"We, the sweepers, followed very closely behind, and waited until the sky was dark… I couldn't remember what time it was, but there was more heavy rain in the middle, and then I heard the sound of artillery fire and screams. "

"But there was no artillery reserve in the villages raided this time, so there should have been no sound of firing."

Alex's breathing became rapid: "I didn't know what happened, but I was afraid that something would happen to Guy, so I ran over -"

He closed his eyes, tears falling down: "There were sounds of bullets and artillery fire everywhere, and someone was yelling hysterically, but I couldn't hear anything. I touched my ear and it was bleeding. I think it was from the shock. I screamed for Guy like crazy, and eventually I saw him on a hillside, bruised and battered."

"I wanted to rush over, but the people around me were pulling me and yelling at me ferociously, telling me not to go over. I didn't understand why I couldn't go over at first. There was Guy, my lover, and I wanted to go save him."

Alex opened his empty eyes: "Until I saw him raise his rocket launcher

and sniper rifle, shooting at the people around him coldly, without any hesitation."

"I know he has received professional training and was once the best rocket soldier in the team, but I have never seen this side of him."

"He was like a god of death, holding a rocket launcher at me and everyone, smiling with tears in his eyes and saying, 'I'm sorry, Alex, I can't watch the people he wanted to protect being so persecuted'."

"Marrying you was what I longed for most. After that, I think I will be happy even when I die."

Alex's tears slowly overflowed, and he took a deep breath: "——So he said that he has no regrets anymore, and he is going to die for something else."

"I carried the corpses he had blown up back one by one. Many of these people were the same people who blessed me and him last night, but today they are lying here, blown to pieces by the person they blessed."

Alex whispered, "I don't understand."

"The factory director, the first person he loved, pursued justice, and the lives he wanted to protect were human lives. These people–" Alex staggered to his feet. He pointed to 20 or so broken corpses on the ground. He was almost hysterical, and his eyes were red as asked Bai Liu, "–The lives of his friends who have rescued him countless times and blessed him do not count?"

Alex shook his head and backed away. He screamed desperately: "This is not right!! Guy did something wrong! These people didn't deserve to die!"

As Alex spoke, he staggered back and kicked a bottle on the ground. The bottle was empty, and it fell down and rolled to Bai Liu's feet.

Bai Liu lowered his eyes and looked over, and saw in neat writing on the bottle – [Medicine to Reactivate Cells of Dead Organisms (Animal Experimental Version, Do Not Use on Humans)].

[Developed by: Alex Brown]

Bai Liu moved his eyes, and saw several empty bottles scattered behind Alex. He then calmly looked at the corpses around him.

The fragmented upper limbs, half of a head with the brain exposed, and a calf whose tendons were broken by the explosion, all aimed their fractures at Bai Liu at an eerie angle.

In the dim tent, these bloody fractures seemed to be the eyes of these limbs. They were using their rotten eyes to greedily stare at Bai Liu, the uninvited guest with intact limbs.

It's as if…these fragments of corpses have evolved independent consciousness.

[System prompt: Congratulations to player Bai Liu for unlocking the "Dense Forest Border" monster book – half-dead corpse]

[Players can earn one point by collecting and subduing a half-dead corpse piece. The player with the highest total points within seven days wins]

It seems that these are the body parts that the game asked them to collect.
And the creator of these corpses… Bai Liu slowly raised his eyes to look at Alex, who was still collapsed, kneeling on the ground. He could feel a sway of position caused by tremendous pain in this NPC.

This should be a central plot point that determines whether Alex defects or not.

Bai Liu didn't get up and let the corpses squirm closer to him. He stayed crouched and looked at Alex: "You think Guy did something wrong, but do you think these corpses did the right thing?"

Alex held his head and howled in pain. He did not answer Bai Liu's words, but the wavering and confusion in his eyes already showed his answer – he felt that what these people did was not right either.

Bai Liu glanced at the corpses on the ground and said meaningfully: "Guy told you that war is like this. In war, everyone is a corpse without emotion."

"I think your idea before was quite good. If a corpse could come back to life to fight, no one would be harmed." Bai Liu sighed regretfully, "But this is simply impossible."

Alex paused.

After saying that, Bai Liu patted Alex's shoulder, who was motionless after hearing these words: "Get a good rest, there will be a big battle tomorrow, and we don't know how many fresh corpses will be produced. We will be busy."

Bai Liu stood up and pulled Spades, whose eyes were almost glued to the corpses, out of Alex's tent and back to their own tent.

Spades looked at Bai Liu: "You are baiting Alex to switch camps."

"That's not entirely the case." After Bai Liu entered the tent, he took off his military uniform coat stained with dirt and hung it on the wall. He then laid on the camp bed and turned his head to look at Spades with a smile. "Changing camps will not be beneficial to us. If Alex switches to the enemy's side and we defect after him, the enemy's acceptance of us rebels will definitely not be as high as that of The Reverse God and others who defected from the beginning."

"To put it simply, if Alex defects, our chances of winning won't be as high as those of The Reverse God." Bai Liu opened his eyes and looked at Spades with a half-smile, "In this case, The Reverse God and the others have a high probability of winning over you."

As soon as he heard about winning or losing, Spades concentrated instantly. He undressed as he sat on the edge of the bed close to Bai Liu: "How are we going to beat them?"

Bai Liu calmly retreated a little further onto the bed: "The game only gives two options; one's own camp and the enemy's camp. Judging from the current direction, whether it's Alex staying in his own camp or mutinying to the enemy, we have to become a weapon of war if we want to win. By spending huge amounts of labor to slaughter and

create corpses for Alex to transform."

"Personally, I don't like this cost-effective way of winning by comparing the panel value of both sides. Moreover, we couldn't beat them in terms of comprehensive panel value."

Spades interrupted Bai Liu: "It's comparable. My board value is higher than the other three people except The Reverse God combined."

Bai Liu was quiet for a moment and raised his eyebrows in surprise: "What's your panel value data?"

Spades reported a string of numbers seriously and then said: "The panel value of The Reverse God is confidential, I don't know it, but it shouldn't be higher than mine."

Bai Liu fell into an eerie silence – no wonder The Reverse God wants to suppress Spades' momentum…

With this ridiculously high panel value data, if he wasn't suppressed and doesn't obey orders, he's equivalent to a super wrecking ball. He would make the situation extremely chaotic and the outcome couldn't be seen clearly. When he plays in the league, nine other people are needed to beat him. Not even one person is able to beat him.

"I heard rumors from the outside world, and I only knew that your panel was worth over 10,000, but I didn't expect it to be so much more," Bai Liu said.

Spades replied: "I broke 10,000 when I first played last year. Later, my teammates asked me to keep it secret at the beginning of the league, saying that the panel value was too outstanding and could easily be targeted."

Bai Liu continued: "But even if your board value is high, it's only a personal advantage. In this game, The Reverse God and the others made a good first move, entering the enemy's army and taking advantage of the camp. Even if we rebel again, we will still be fighting for the corpses. At that time, their advantage will still be far superior to ours."

"So I'm thinking." Bai Liu smiled, "In order to dissolve their camp advantage, we can induce a third camp option."

Spades frowned: "The third camp, whose camp is it?"

Bai Liu replied: “Alex’s personal camp.”

At midnight.

Spades, who was lying defenselessly next to Bai Liu, held Bai Liu’s waist and slept deeply.

Bai Liu very gently moved away from Spades’ arms and legs, and crawled out of the bed to the outside of the camp.

He quietly walked into Alex’s tent. Alex was still sitting on the ground, looking exactly the same as before Bai Liu left, like he hadn’t changed his position for several hours.

Alex seemed to notice Bai Liu coming in, but he did not raise his head and just said in a hoarse voice: “The war will start in three hours. Don’t try to persuade me. Go back and have a good sleep.”

“You have joined the second commando team. In three hours, you and Guy will stand on the battlefield and fight each other.” Bai Liu turned on the dim lamp and looked down at Alex, “Do you want to see him one last time before you point a gun at each other?”

Alex slowly raised his head. A trace of hope overflowed from his originally dull eyes, but it was quickly extinguished: “Soldiers caught associating with the enemy before the start of a major battle will be tortured. Don’t risk it for me, Bai Liu.”

“But there is a place where your meeting is justified and you won’t be tortured.” Bai Liu smiled softly, “The neutral Red Cross Rescue Society, where wounded soldiers can seek help.”

Alex’s eyes suddenly lit up again: “But to go to the Red Cross, you need someone to guarantee admission. Do you know the people there?”

Bai Liu smiled: “Yes, I have someone I know who can guarantee your entry now.”

The Red Cross aid yard is brightly lit.

This borderless, neutral medical organization, whose main purpose was rescue, was stationed in camps on both sides, as well as at the warring border.

After Bai Liu reported his location to Liu Jiayi, Alex shot himself twice

in the leg without hesitation.

Soon the Red Cross car stumbled in and took away Alex, who had an injury on his leg.

Bai Liu went up with the car. The people in the car were very friendly to Bai Liu and asked him with a smile: “Are you Jiayi’s brother? She thought you were injured and asked us to come quickly, so we rushed over. You guys look really alike.”

In the eyes of these people, the faces of the two Asians, Liu Jiayi and Bai Liu, were undoubtedly similar.

“Hey, your sister is such an outstanding little girl.” The people in the car seemed to have a particular liking for Liu Jiayi and rushed to talk to Bai Liu about her. “She is very good at treating people. We can’t believe that such a young child could be so skilled. Treating battle injuries and heavy bleeding, she can do things alone that more than a dozen adults couldn’t.”

“She saved dozens of people in just two days.”

“Have you considered sending her to a medical university after the war?” A group of people hinted at Bai Liu frantically, “I remember that after joining the war, you had a place to go to a top university, have you considered giving it to Jiayi??”

Bai Liu smiled and replied: “But she is only nine years old.”

This group of people retorted fiercely: “It has nothing to do with age. Jiayi is fully capable of going to a top university for further studies. She is a little genius!”

It seems that within two days, Liu Jiayi had completely increased the favorability of the NPCs in the Red Cross Society.

This made it extremely convenient for Bai Liu. They drove directly into the Red Cross camp. When Bai Liu jumped out of the back of the truck, he saw Liu Jiayi trotting towards him.

Liu Jiayi was wearing a nurse’s uniform that didn’t fit well, with a small nurse’s cap on her head, blood-stained white gloves on her hands, and a palm-sized Red Cross logo on her sleeves that fluttered as she ran.

She was trotting this way through the intertwined chains of stretchers

with a serious look on her face, giving instructions as she ran.

The people here surprisingly listened to her words. As long as she said where to send it, the people carrying the stretcher would immediately send it to that place in the tent.

Liu Jiayi seems to be a very influential figure here.

When she ran up to Bai Liu, Bai Liu smiled and teased: “You’re doing well.”

Liu Jiayi took off her gloves angrily and threw them into the medical trash can: “Could you have delayed any more? You’re dragging out this camp game until just before the big battle with the intention of changing sides. I almost defected to your side with the entire Red Cross.”

“But you hadn’t given instructions yet, so I held my position.” Liu Jiayi shook the talcum powder from her hands and said seriously, “You didn’t contact me yesterday, so I knew you had other ideas about this game. As a neutral voluntary organization, the Red Cross can help you switch camps. Which side are you going to join now?”

Bai Liu smiled: “A third party.”

Liu Jiayi reacted very quickly: “You want to form your own party? With the main line NPCs and corpses as the core?”

Bai Liu nodded.

Liu Jiayi frowned and thought for a moment: “The corpses don’t need to be rescued, so the Red Cross will be useless to you. I want to get out of here as soon as possible.”

“Oh, by the way, the difficult part of this game is not the camps.” Liu Jiayi raised her head, “I think you also know, it’s the Killer Sequence players in a different camp than you.”

She was a little worried: “Even if The Reverse God and Spades seem to be targeting each other in this game, no matter which side they are, they aren’t something we can compete with now. After all, they are last year’s championship team, and their overall quality is too far off.”

“Essentially, the two camps that really determine the outcome of this game are Spades and The Reverse God. We are just a small addition.”

“I know.” Bai Liu smiled, “So I just need to make Spades and The Reverse God think that they and I are in the same camp, isn’t that enough?”

“That way no matter which side wins, I win.”

Liu Jiayi was startled. She quickly understood what Bai Liu wanted to do, and couldn’t help but “＝＝”: “Are you going to play double agent again?”

Bai Liu smiled and hummed.

Liu Jiayi frowned: “But Spades and The Reverse God are not slouches. How do you make the other party believe that you and them are in the same camp?”

Bai Liu lowered his eyes: “Of course, it’s my sincerity.”

Liu Jiayi: “…”

Don’t make bad jokes to me at this time!

“The Reverse God and the others, as well as the main NPC Guy, should be at the Red Cross now, right?” Bai Liu changed the topic.

Liu Jiayi nodded: “Well, because it was the eve of the war, The Reverse God and the others came to contact the Red Cross. I just triggered the main NPC Guy. He was injured and was sent here for treatment.”

Bai Liu looked at Liu Jiayi: “Did they recognize you as a player?”

“I was recognized…..” Liu Jiayi was confused, “But The Reverse God and the others generally have a good attitude towards me. They seem to regard me as an ordinary NPC with rescue functions, and they even traded points with me for antidotes twice.”

Liu Jiayi: “The NPCs here cannot be saved with antidotes, but players can. The Reverse God and the others took the initiative to buy antidotes from me, and I gave them to them.”

After thinking deeply, she replied: “They have no hostility toward us. Their purpose is very clear. They just want to win over spades.”

“To put it bluntly, they just want Spades to lose.” Bai Liu curled his lips, “We are quite consistent on this point.”

Liu Jiayi looked up at Bai Liu: “I feel like you have already figured out how to persuade The Reverse God. What about Spades? He doesn’t look like someone who is easy to persuade.”

“Spades’ side…” Bai Liu paused slightly strangely, “It’s taken care of. He completely believes that he and I are on the same camp.”

Liu Jiayi was shocked: “You guys had a fierce fight in the last dungeon, how did you convince him to believe in you wholeheartedly?!”

Bai Liu looked away imperceptibly: “I used some special means.”

Liu Jiayi walked around suspiciously and continued to face Bai Liu: “Why don’t you dare to look me in the face and say this? You never feel guilty when you do immoral things. What did you do to Spades that makes you feel so guilty?”

Bai Liu: “…”

Children who are too perceptive are really not a good thing for dirty adults.

When Bai Liu didn’t answer, Liu Jiayi raised her eyebrows: “I won’t force you to tell me, but I will always know.”

“But forget it now, the war is about to start, and there isn’t much time.” Liu Jiayi waved her hand, “I’ll take you to see The Reverse God and the others.”

Bai Liu followed Liu Jiayi and asked, “Isn’t it a bit too urgent for The Reverse God and the others to contact the Red Cross at this time?”

“You have the nerve to talk about others.” Liu Jiayi was speechless, “Aren’t you the same?”

Bai Liu: “I’m waiting for the key plot points.”

Liu Jiayi walked forward without looking back: “The same goes for them. People on the indigenous side don’t believe in the Red Cross people. They feel that the Red Cross and the other camp are on the same side, and have always refused our help. We are not allowed to help shelter their wives and children.”

“But the Red Cross was actually safer than the neutral indigenous village where they were hosting them.”

Bai Liu instantly understood: “But last night’s raid made the natives realize that neutral villages are not safe, so they began to consider the Red Cross. As rebels, The Reverse God and the others have no communication and understanding barriers with the people here. So they were sent over to communicate, right?”

“It’s not just that.” Liu Jiayi looked back at Bai Liu, “The Reverse God is more capable than you think. I don’t know what he did, but he is now the commander of the indigenous people, the top strategic officer. Today he came to the Red Cross to contact us, and he also came here as a commander to resettle harmless women and children.”

“In two days, from a rebel to a commander?” Bai Liu raised his eyebrows.

Liu Jiayi paused: “Yes.”

“Anyway, this guy gives me an uncomfortable feeling… He looks harmless and has a smiling face, but in fact he knows everything.”

“But if The Reverse God is the commander, it should be a very simple matter for him to come over to arrange for the placement of women and children. He shouldn’t stay here until the war, but return to the camp.” Bai Liu thought for a moment and asked, “What happened?”

“Yes.” Liu Jiayi said, “There are also factions among the indigenous people. Some of them are emerging indigenous people led by the new commander, The Reverse God. The indigenous people of this party are willing to accept many new things and hope to use the victory of the war as a basis for development and growth.”

“Most of the top leaders of this party had good relations with the factory director who was shot dead before, and received assistance and ideological enlightenment from him.”

“There are also some old indigenous people who are highly hostile to everything new. They believe in a religion preached by Arabs. I heard it is the religion of some evil god. They yearn for traditional farming life and reject all mechanical production tools. They feel as though it’s blasphemy against the hands God had given them to work with.”

Liu Jiayi turned to look at Bai Liu: “You’ve probably guessed that the leader of this indigenous party is the old commander, the one who shot and killed the factory director and started the war.”

“There are irreconcilable conflicts between the old and new parties.

Currently, the new party has the upper hand, but the old party is always unwilling to let the new party take power and causes all kinds of troubles."

"For example, today The Reverse God actually arranged for these women and children to be resettled a few hours ago, but a group of people from the old school suddenly came over and frantically stopped The Reverse God's actions, saying that The Reverse God was a traitor and an undercover agent. Not trying to protect these offspring and wives, but to sacrifice them to the enemy to obtain greater rewards."

Liu Jiayi led Bai Liu to a tent and raised her chin: "They are right here. They should still be arguing. Do you want me to go in with you?"

There was a faint quarrel in the tent.

Bai Liu shook his head.

Liu Jiayi nodded in understanding and threw a bottle of antidote to Bai Liu: "Your weapon was destroyed. If there is any movement, scream. I will guard outside."

After saying that, Liu Jiayi, who was wearing a nurse's uniform, took out a bottle of poison spray, hid it on the side of the tent, and gave an OK gesture to Bai Liu who was about to enter.

Bai Liu returned an OK gesture, then opened the curtain and walked in calmly.

Both parties who were arguing went silent. The one standing on the left was The Reverse God and his group, and the one on the right was a group wearing eagle feather hats, animal skins on their shoulders and backs, and oil paint on their faces. The faces of this group were fierce. Their exposed teeth were slightly sharp, probably because they had the habit of tearing large pieces of meat.

When they saw Bai Liu come in, this group of traditional natives were about to bear their teeth at Bai Liu, but they were stopped by the leader. He stared at Bai Liu for a long time and said in a very strange tone: "He is the one who is favored by the true God. Don't offend him."

Then he saluted Bai Liu, bowed and withdrew politely.

The emotion in Bai Liu's eyes was unclear, but he quickly restrained himself. He looked at The Reverse God: "It seems that I have disturbed your conversation."

"No, no, no, you saved me." The Reverse God rubbed his forehead, sat tiredly on the chair and breathed a long sigh of relief. He looked at Bai Liu with a smile and stretched out his hand, "I have been arguing with them for two hours. Once you came, they were willing to take a break and let me go for now."

Bai Liu lowered his eyes, extended his hand and shook The Reverse God's hand: "First time meeting you, Bai Liu."

The Reverse God smiled: "The tactician of the Killer Sequence. Just call me The Reverse God."

The Reverse God gestured for Bai Liu to take a seat: "You have something to talk to me about, right?"

Bai Liu sat down, raised his eyes and smiled: "Yes, I want to talk to you about how to make Spades lose this game."

The Reverse God, who had been slumped in the chair, slowly sat upright. He waved his hand, and the people behind him immediately withdrew. Only three other members of the Killer Sequence, Bai Liu and The Reverse God who were sitting on the chairs were left in the tent.

Bai Liu said calmly: "I have a way to make Spades lose to you miserably in this game."

The Reverse God and the three members of the Killer Sequence stared at Bai Liu with very surprised eyes. After a while, The Reverse God asked expectantly: "Tell me more specifically."

"I can lure Spades to a certain place on the battlefield and cooperate with you to attack him from both front and back. He trusts me more and won't be too wary of me, so the success rate of this plan is relatively high…" Bai Liu related.

"Stop." Standing behind The Reverse God, a young man who looked to be no more than seventeen or eighteen years old raised his hand and made a "stop" gesture. Then he looked at Bai Liu and asked sternly, "Spades will not listen to anything at all. If so, there will be problems with your plan from the beginning."

The Reverse God turned around and hit the young man as if he was angry: “Why are you talking to other players like this? Don’t you know how to be polite? Introduce yourself first.”

The young man paused stiffly: “Member of the Killer Sequence Team, control position, Bai Jiamu.”

The Reverse God raised his hand and apologized sheepishly: “I’m sorry, go on.”

Bai Jiamu interrupted Nishen’s words simply: “But there is no way he can control Spades. Spades doesn’t even care about us…”

“It may not be possible to reach the level of control.” Bai Liu raised his head with a smile, “But influencing him at this level should be fine.”

The Reverse God first apologized for his team members but changed the topic and asked with a smile: “Mr Bai Liu, you said that Spades would trust you. Is there any objective basis worthy of reference?”

Bai Liu said calmly: “Oh, that’s right, I married him yesterday.”

The Reverse God: “…”

Bai Jiamu: “…”

Other Killer Sequence members: “…”

The Reverse God fell silent for nearly a minute. He raised a hand, rubbed his stiff face, and forced a smile. “Mr. Bai Liu, you must be joking…”

Bai Liu interrupted him without hesitation. “You have a lie detector scale, don’t you? Take it out and try it.”

The Reverse God: “…”

Bai Liu’s unwavering confidence made several members of the Killer Sequence—who had initially dismissed the claim—begin to waver. They exchanged uneasy glances until, at last, Bai Jiamu reached for the scale.

Fixing Bai Liu with a steady gaze, Bai Jiamu asked, “Did you marry Spades yesterday?”

Bai Liu smiled without a flicker of change in his expression. “Yes.”

The scale slowly tilted toward [True].

The room fell into a long, stunned silence. Bai Jiamu, gripping the scale, looked as if his entire worldview had just cracked.

The Reverse God exhaled deeply and raised a hand to cover his face, as though shielding himself from the reality before him. When he finally lowered it, he looked like he had aged ten years.

His voice was hoarse. “Did Spades… force you?”

Bai Liu was silent for a long moment before replying, “You could say that.”

The scale tipped toward [True] again.

Bai Jiamu stared at the scale as if he wanted to strangle it.

The Reverse God rubbed his temples and, after a long pause, bowed slightly in an apology. “I’m sorry. Our team’s main attacker, Spades, seems to have caused trouble for you, Mr. Bai Liu.”

“He… he probably doesn’t understand marriage. He might think it’s some kind of game. I doubt he meant to—”

Bai Liu kindly interrupted, “He forcibly went through eighteen boxes of condoms and made me keep seven of them.”

The scale tipped once again toward [True].

Bai Jiamu remained frozen, his expression utterly blank as he held the scale in rigid disbelief.

A team member, who had been clamping a hand over his own mouth to stop himself from speaking, finally lost control and gasped loudly. “Eighteen boxes?! That’s insane!”

The Reverse God turned and smacked him on the head. Then, after taking a deep breath and adjusting his increasingly strained expression, he muttered to the other team members in hushed tones:

“What do we do? We never gave Spades any sex ed, and now look where we are. He forced someone!”

“I told you we should’ve taught him! He doesn’t know anything—he could’ve been tricked by some bad woman!”

“But back then, we saw how he looked at Hearts and thought there was no way he’d be deceived by a woman! He’s met Hearts over a dozen times and still mistakes her for someone else every time.”

“Bai Jiamu never let me show Spades the movie! This is Bai Jiamu’s fault!”

“As if that would’ve helped. This guy’s a man. Your collection of hetero films wouldn’t have taught Spades a damn thing.”

“The real issue here is—what’s our next move? Spades forced someone, and now that someone has shown up at our doorstep.”

“Are we… responsible for this?”

“Well, if one of our own screws around with an outsider and the outsider comes knocking, isn’t there a standard procedure for handling it?”

“Oh, oh, I know this one!”

The Reverse God straightened, crossed his arms over his knees, and regarded Bai Liu with an unreadable gaze. Then, in a solemn tone, he said, “Mr. Bai Liu, I will give you five million points to leave Spades.”

Bai Liu: "…"

A brief silence.

Then, without missing a beat, Bai Liu responded cheerfully, "Transfer the five million to me now, and I promise not to harass Spades or bother you about this marriage ever again."

The Reverse God and Bai Jiamu both froze—this was not the reaction they'd expected.

——Shouldn't he be outraged? Insulted? Demanding to know if they thought his dignity could be bought?

But Bai Liu, utterly unbothered by the notion of accepting five million points, smiled in satisfaction. "That said, the real reason I came here is because I'd like to work with you on something."

His expression sharpened. "I want to teach Spades a painful lesson in failure. I believe that's something you'd be interested in as well."

At that, The Reverse God finally sat up straight, his demeanor turning serious. "What exactly do you have in mind?"

Meanwhile, at the other end.

Alex sat silently in the wheelchair, his legs had been bandaged, and now he was sitting quietly by Guy's bed, staring wordlessly at the unconscious man on the hospital bed, breathing weakly.

A nurse nearby reminded him: "He was seriously injured. Thirteen shrapnel fragments were just removed from his body. The anesthesia has not worn off yet and he is still sleeping. If you want to talk to him, you have to wait for a while."

Alex shook his head gently: "No need for him to wake up."

"Can I be alone with him for a moment?" Alex looked up at the nurse.

The nurse smiled understandingly: "Of course, I will change the dressing in an hour. Is this enough time?"

Alex nodded: "Thank you."

The nurse waved her hand to indicate that he was welcome. She

opened the curtain and turned to leave.

Alex and Guy were the only two people left in the tent. Alex sat quietly by the bed for a while, and after a long time, he moved his wheelchair to the head of the bed.

He reached out and lifted up the white quilt, and Alex saw Guy's left hand placed by his side. The silver ring on his ring finger was shining and untouched by any stains.

Alex stretched out his left hand with the ring on it, as if he wanted to hold Guy's left hand, but in the end he just hovered it tremblingly and did not put it down for a long time.

Something invisible prevented Alex from tightening his grip on Guy's hand, even though he had done this action a thousand times.

Alex took a deep breath, turned his face away, took back his hand, and spoke to himself: "… Guy, I know you have never been on my side; your heart belongs to the other side."

"——Belongs to the side of justice and the weak indigenous people. You told me a long time ago that you would prefer to be a volunteer in their army." Alex smiled miserably and shook his head, "Even though the person you love most was killed by the indigenous, that still didn't change your opinion."

"You, your lover, you are both of the noble class, you are both kind-hearted people, and you are both here to help these backward natives escape the control of the aristocrats."

"Your ideals, pursuits, origins, and even your nobility are so similar."

Alex murmured to himself: "If he hadn't died, you would have been a perfect match."

"It's not my turn to get you, a poor boy who asked you to carry me back when I went to the battlefield for the first time."

Alex lowered his head, put his hand on the quilt, and gently shook Guy's hand under the quilt: "But I love you just as much as he does, Guy."

His eyes gradually filled with tears: "…I know that before the accident, he proposed to you, you never told me, but I know, Guy, you can't hide your words when you are drunk. Guy, you told me

everything."

"But you didn't say yes to him because you felt he deserved someone better, not someone like you."

Alex's tears slowly slid down the bridge of his nose, and his voice choked up: "——So that day, after he failed to propose to you, he didn't want to go back. So he went to check the safety equipment of the factory in a low mood, and happened to meet those who were working there. The natives arguing in front of the factory."

"He died in that dispute with the ring he proposed to you in his hand."

"His parents and brothers went crazy. They rushed over and beat and insulted you, the guy who brought their son and brother to hell. They even locked you up in the factory, trying to burn you with the natives they thought had killed him."

"You escaped with the help of the imprisoned indigenous people. They knew that you were the lover of the factory director, so they tried their best to help you escape first. But when you wanted to turn around and help the indigenous people, you were discovered by the security patrol."

"You were forcibly pulled away by the patrol and watched helplessly as the natives who helped you were burned to death."

Alex lowered his head and leaned against the edge of the hospital bed, sobbing: "I know why you betrayed us, Guy, you were tormented by the fire at that time and kept blaming yourself for your cowardice, you were blaming yourself for your escape. So you chose to marry me before the war – you didn't want to leave me with another regretful ending."

"But Guy, it's not supposed to be like this… you don't deserve to die, and neither do they."

Alex's low and mournful voice echoed in the small tent. A line of gloomy-looking natives stood outside the tent. They leaned against the tent to eavesdrop, and then talked to each other in a nasally slang with a distinct look of hatred on their faces.

"The man inside named Guy, who just came to join us today, is the one responsible for the death of his fellow workers in the factory in the first place!"

“He watched as his companions who rescued him burned to death!”

“What kind of relationship does he have with that factory director! He and that factory director are both people abandoned by God! They both deserve to die!”

“He, like the factory director, is a hypocrite who wants to invade our territory and make us slaves under the guise of helping us!”

“Without their presence, we wouldn’t be in such harm’s way.”

“Kill him, this man abandoned by God, and God’s blessing will return to us!”

A kind of fanatical and violent impulse soon spread among this group of traditional natives. Before the group of natives were about to lift the curtain and rush in to kill Guy, Bai Liu reached the edge of the tent first.

Behind Bai Liu was The Reverse God, and to his right was Liu Jiayi who looked tense.

Bai Liu looked at the eavesdropping natives with interest and asked in a friendly manner: “What’s the matter?”

This group of traditional indigenous people seemed to be afraid of Bai Liu. As soon as they saw Bai Liu appear, they lowered their heads, saluted and retreated. However, during the process of retreating, these indigenous people continued to glance at the tent in front of them with a sinister look.

Bai Liu’s ambiguous gaze swept past these aborigines, then he turned around and smiled at them. He nodded goodbye to The Reverse God, and led Liu Jiayi into the tent where Alex was.

After Alex cried bitterly, he rested his head on Guy’s bed and fell asleep. Guy seemed to be waking up, and his sleep was not very peaceful. He frowned and murmured in his sleep: “…Alex. “

Bai Liu introduced the relationship between the NPCs to Liu Jiayi: “Alex, another mainline NPC, and Guy, his marriage partner.”

Liu Jiayi crossed her arms in front of her chest, tilted her head to scrutinise Bai Liu from top to bottom, then raised her eyebrows and asked, “I’m more curious about you and your marriage partner now, eighteen boxes of condoms?”

Bai Liu: “…”

Bai Liu coughed calmly: “Condom is the name of a special kind of balloon. The use of eighteen boxes means that he blew up eighteen boxes of balloons for me.”

“Oh.” Liu Jiayi slowly jumped to the edge of the bed and sat down, her calves dangling, “Do you think I haven’t received any serious lessons on physiological knowledge?”

Liu Jiayi smiled very cutely: “The first lesson Hearts taught me was about sexual knowledge between any two human biological genders. It was mainly to help me avoid some dogs in this game who had special desires for me.”

“Oh, this sexual knowledge sometimes includes some non-human monsters with strong sexual abilities.” Liu Jiayi added with a sweet smile, “After all, people are free to have their own preferences, such as using eighteen boxes of condoms in one night, don’t you think so, Bai Liu?”

Bai Liu: “…”

Hearts, is this the right thing for you to do?

The Dense Forest Borderlands

It's not a good idea to play the bullshit game with a player with 91 intelligence.

Bai Liu paused for less than three seconds before choosing to tell Liu Jiayi the truth about what had happened.

Liu Jiayi: "…"

Liu Jiayi sneered. As a subordinate team member who had seen Hearts liking Spades and suffered deeply from it, she was keenly aware that something was wrong with Bai Liu: "So you just married him so easily? This is not your normal approach. Do you have any thoughts about Spades…"

Bai Liu calmly interrupted Liu Jiayi's words and changed the topic: "The war will start in less than three hours. This is an important plot point. I have already made arrangements with The Reverse God. Tang Erda, who has been demoted to the second assault team, will join him during the battle and try to minimize the casualties on The Reverse God's side."

"On your side, I need you to heal Guy as soon as possible so he can go to the battlefield."

Liu Jiayi stared at Bai Liu for a while, and then mercifully chose to follow his words and skip the topic.

She nodded to express her understanding: "Because he is the main line NPC, he can't be missing key plot points, otherwise there will be problems in progressing the plot. I will find a way to wake him up and maintain his basic mobility."

Bai Liu looked at Alex who was leaning on the bed: "I will take Alex back, and then both sides will fire wildly. You should also pay attention to your own safety here at the Red Cross."

"The Red Cross is not a completely neutral and safe place in the eyes of those who don't follow the rules." Bai Liu reminded lightly, "In an extreme dispute, unless there is a long geographical isolation, there is no such thing as a completely neutral place, and any area may be involved."
Liu Jiayi frowned: "Are you talking about the natives who were preparing to attack Guy at the Red Cross just now?"

Bai Liu shook his head: “Not entirely.”

He looked at Liu Jiayi calmly: “I mean all the people who took sides in this war.”

The night was dark.

In the damp and dark jungle, the armored vehicles in the front lined up to flatten the roads and plants, making it easier for the tracked tanks behind them to advance forward.

The dismantled parts of dozens of heavy artillery lay heavily on the tow hooks on the backs of these armored vehicles as they were pulled along for transport, muzzles looming eerily.

The soldiers moved forward silently and orderly with military shovels, occasionally clearing away some branches and leaves that were wrapped around the tires.

The jungle ground after heavy rain felt indescribably sticky to the feet, so the marching speed was not very fast. However, thanks to the year and a half of war experience, everyone was already accustomed to walking in the rainforest with such terrain, and there were no major changes.

Tang Erda was wearing a steel helmet, holding an assigned gun and standing guard next to the leading armored vehicle. He controlled his gaze and did not look at Spades beside him who had been staring at him expressionlessly for a long time.

This man had been staring at him with a look like “You must be hiding something from me”, but Tang Erda was very patient and didn’t say anything to him.

Spades didn’t ask anything, just looked at him silently. From time to time, Spades would hold up the gun and adjust it, with the muzzle pointed at him.

Tang Erda: “…”

Wasn’t Spades from the cleaning team? Why were you promoted to the second commando team?

The reason why Spades suddenly became a member of the second commando team couldn’t be explained clearly until you went back to earlier that morning.

Due to the sudden mixed orders from the commander, the Second Assault Team was still in chaos and low in numbers when the marching team assembled before departure.

When the members of the first commando team came to get Alex, who had signed up for the second commando team, he was not found in his tent.

Deserters were punished severely by law, but looking at the corpses of comrades from the Assault Team carried back to a tent by Alex, these people really couldn't bear to report Alex's escape.

Alex experienced two major changes overnight. Regardless of his mood, he was probably injured. Even if he managed to get up at this time, he probably wouldn't be able to fight anymore.

In desperation, they dragged away the only person nearby, Spades, who sat motionless looking at the empty bed on the other side.

Originally, Spades was not very obedient, these people were bluffing him with nonsense. Someone said that Bai Liu was also going. Spades paused, glanced at the person who said this, and followed him very cooperatively.

But when Spades arrived, Bai Liu wasn't there at all.

After Spades searched around, he stared at the soldier who said Bai Liu was here. There was no expression on his face and his tone was very calm, but he looked inexplicably ominous: "Bai Liu is not here."

The soldier was frightened and said, "Why don't you ask Tang Erda? He has a good relationship with Bai Liu. If Bai Liu comes here, he will definitely know where Bai Liu is."

So Spades stared at Tang Erda all the way, and Tang Erda felt that his back was about to be stared through.

But because Spades didn't know what was at stake, and kept his lips tightly pursed without speaking, Tang Erda didn't know why he was being targeted – he really couldn't figure out the brain of the league's number one player.

It wasn't until a break in the march that Tang Erda glanced at Spades who was sitting next to him with his head down eating a cake. He deliberated for a long time before tentatively speaking: "…Bai Liu isn't with you??"

Spades replied instantly: “You spoke first, you lost.”

Tang Erda’s head was full of questions: “…?!? What?”

Spades glanced at Tang Erda coldly: “You were competing with me just now to see who would speak first. If you spoke first, you lost.”

Tang Erda: “…”

He really wanted to hold his breath and wait for Spades to speak first so that he could make the first move. How come this person turned it into a big competition where whoever spoke first would lose?!

Tang Erda couldn’t understand, but he still managed to keep calm and decided to follow this person’s words: “I lose. Why didn’t Bai Liu go with you…”

Spades interrupted him again and emphasized: “You just lost.”

Tang Erda: “…”

Tang Erda touched his face and took a deep breath: “Okay, I lost. Where is Bai Liu?”

Spades held the gun leaning on his shoulder, with one eye exposed from the edge of the gun barrel, staring directly at Tang Erda: “Someone told me that he ran away with you while I was sleeping last night. “

The soldiers nearby who were eavesdropping on the gossip gasped in shock.

Tang Erda: “…”

How on earth did you come to this conclusion!!

Tang Erda held his forehead helplessly: “Bai Liu didn’t run away with me. I have been training since last night and haven’t seen him.”

Spades lowered his eyes, held the gun and said, “Then Bai Liu must have run away with Alex. He has been paying close attention to Alex since Guy’s accident.”

“He seems to like to pay attention to the fighting power of the person who just died.” Spades said calmly, “He also hugged Alex. Alex completely accepted Bai Liu’s comfort and betrayed his camp with him then ran.”

Tang Erda who somehow felt connoted: "…"

The soldier who was drinking water next to him choked in horror – aren't Alex and Guy a couple?

I didn't expect that Bai Liu, a young man who looked very ordinary on the outside, was so heavy-handed behind their backs, and actually liked widowed husbands!

Is this the special hobby of traditional Eastern emperors?

After a short rest, the entire team began to move forward again. The soil became increasingly slippery, and the ground became denser with puddles. There were also some small, unformed rivers and waterlogged riverbeds.

The heavy armor and tanks could no longer move forward, so they decided to stay where they were. The soldiers filled in the nearby riverbed, while the members of the Second Assault Team continued to move forward.

"The rough plan is that we arrive near Pluto Lake, first ambush and clear the ships and fire points on the lake to prevent them from spreading to the surrounding rainforest in ships to reserve combat power, attack from behind, and then attack with artillery fire here."

As Tang Erda walked, he explained to Spades next to him: "Their heavy forces are not as strong as this side, and this time the commander spent a lot of money – thousands of artillery pieces, more than 200,000 artillery shells to be fired before ten o'clock in the morning to beat them all."

"This rainforest will be blown into ruins and burned to a crisp." Tang Erda tasted a bit of blood in the air, and his expression was cold, "All the resources have been polluted and destroyed. He has no intention of letting the surrounding residents still survive here relying on the rain forest, and the subsequent consumption will kill the opponent."

Although it was just a game, Tang Erda instinctively didn't like this direction. It reminded him of some bad things that had happened in the past.

Tang Erda couldn't help but commented sarcastically: "Originally, the war was launched to compete for the resources here, but in the end, they would rather destroy it than let the original natives here continue to enjoy it."

This way of carelessly destroying things he couldn't get reminded Tang Erda of a very familiar person – Bai Six.

In the early days, this guy was still doing things for profit, but in the later stages, it seemed that he had gained too much profit. After his endless, black hole-like desire for money was satisfied, a boredom similar to laziness overflowed.

Bai Six began to indulge in new pastimes and entertainment. He began to like exciting games that put his life on the line, chasing victory, and collecting people's soul banknotes – money in another sense.

But then there came a point where victory could not satisfy him.

Bai Six began to be willing to expose his flaws, create opponents for himself, and even intentionally or unintentionally made the people in his hands lose control——

— and then get rid of them.

Tang Erda was a qualified toy who was not tired of being played with by Bai Six in more than three hundred world lines. He understood very well how evil this person was.

Mu Sicheng, Liu Jiayi, Joker, and even Mu Ke. In the later world lines, Bai Six would kill one or two of his own men in almost every world line on the grounds that they betrayed him or lost control. They were no longer completely subservient to him.

But for people like Bai Six, it doesn't depend on the other party whether they will betray him or not.

It depends on whether Bai Six is willing to give these people a chance to betray him.

Bai Six is the only believer recognized by the evil god. If this person had bones, a heart, and any structure similar to humans, they would be rotten and black when dug out, exuding the disgusting smell of money.

This war and the entire process really looked like Bai Six's handiwork.

The conflict between the two sides should not have broken out so early.

If it hadn't been for the death of the factory director, this dispute that

killed so many people might have been resolved more gently under the leadership of that factory director, especially since the factory director had already achieved a lot.

But it was such a coincidence that this key figure died tragically, all conflicts were rolled into a bigger knot, and all possibilities for peaceful development were cut off.

Tang Erda's mood fluctuated for a moment, then stabilized. They came to the lake, put on their diving suits and sank down.

Before entering the water, an experienced veteran reminded: "Be careful, there may be a lot of giant pythons in the lake here. The traditional indigenous people here believe in a terrible evil sect and like to keep reptiles."

"It is said that the factory director was also killed by these traditional indigenous people according to the instructions of the evil god."

Tang Erda's pupils shrank, and he suddenly took a step forward and grabbed the soldier: "How do you think that factory director died?"

The soldier was frightened, but he still responded to Tang Erda's words: "—I heard that it was the evil god these natives believed in who sent down the oracle."

"——To execute the factory manager in a brutal manner."

The Dense Forest Borderlands

Inside the Red Cross

Guy, who was lying on the hospital bed, slowly opened his eyes. He raised his arms and leaned against the head of the bed, lowered his head and shook his intact hands in surprise.

His injuries miraculously healed overnight.

Guy looked up and was even more surprised when he saw Bai Liu standing beside his bed: “Why are you here?”

“Maybe you should say thank you to me first?” Bai Liu pointed to Guy’s healing wounds with a smile, “I stole Alex’s potion to treat you. Although it is only for external use, it seems to have a good effect.”

Guy looked at the craters on his hands that didn’t even have scars, and looked proud and nostalgic: “Yes, he is a very good young man.”

“Alex doesn’t want you to be cured at all, but I’m sure you have your own resolutions.” Bai Liu sat on the bedside and looked up at Guy, “Remember what I told you the night before the wedding?”

Guy hummed softly. He fell into some deep thoughts and whispered: “You said that because God doesn’t want us to be happy, he created war.”

“Because if we live too happily, we don’t need the existence of God.”

Guy raised his head and looked directly at Bai Liu resolutely: “It was your words that made me determined to rebel.”
“I want to join the indigenous people and destroy their faith in God.”

Bai Liu raised the corners of his lips imperceptibly, and he lowered his eyes: “Really?”

——Just as he thought.

A big battle is coming next, and Alex’s third party camp is forming.

Alex left alone when Guy was about to wake up. He didn’t let Bai Liu tell Guy that he had been there. He just stayed outside Guy’s tent, sitting in a wheelchair and looking around in a daze.

The stretchers of wounded soldiers from this side and the enemy were

anxiously passing back and forth. The blood dripping on the ground pulled out red lines, criss-crossing around him and arranging into an invisible net, with the centre as him and Guy, who was behind him.

Bai Liu opened the tent and came out. He squinted at Alex in the wheelchair: “Do you feel like nothing can be done to stop this?”

Alex was silent for a long time, then hummed hoarsely: “The natives said before that all this was God’s will. Guy and I laughed for a long time, but now that I think about it…”

“… Perhaps everything that God has created can only be stopped by God.”

Bai Liu lowered his eyes: “Maybe.”

Alex paused for a while and suddenly said: “I have thought about using the medicine I tested on these people to prolong their lives, hoping that they can survive.”

“But I found that no matter how long it was, they would still die. But they would be able to move after death, becoming a moving, attacking corpse.”

Alex’s eyelashes trembled slightly: “The corpse has no memory, no emotions, and no soul, but it can move, hug, and kill. I’m scared. I feel like I have created a terrible monster of war so I dared not tell anyone.”

“Except Guy.”

Alex chuckled in a daze, tears falling from his eyelashes:

“He said that he doesn’t think such things are terrible. If one day, he turns into such a monster, he won’t feel sad, because then he can hug me tightly after death.”

“War will turn this moving corpse into a weapon, but people in love will use this weapon to embrace each other.”

Alex turned to look at Bai Liu. His expression was blank, as if he was asking Bai Liu, as if he was asking himself: “——Should I use this medicine?”

Bai Liu held the back of his wheelchair and looked down at him calmly: “Don’t you already have the answer?”

Alex clenched the potion bottle in his hand, lowered his head, and said to himself: “If…I won’t use it.”

“There are too few people in love in this world, and medicine can only become a weapon to break them up.”

Bai Liu glanced sideways at the tent and said softly: “Sometimes what breaks up people who love each other may not be external things, but that one of them has chosen a different path than you.”

“And you can’t stop him.”

Alex smiled bitterly: “Yes, Bai Liu, why did you have to tell me the real reason why Guy and I separated?”

“You are really… rational and cruel. You have to watch your lover go on the road of self-destruction. Bai Liu, you don’t understand the pain of it.”

Bai Liu lowered his eyes, “Maybe.”

He said, pushing Alex’s wheelchair outside.

After recovering, Guy quietly slipped out from behind the tent. He looked back at the front of the tent from a distance. There was nothing in front of the tent, only two wheelchair tracks left on the ground.

It was as if the Alex’s voice he vaguely heard was a hallucination caused by missing him too much.

Guy paused for a moment then left without looking back.

The morning light was faint.

The water in the central lake was dotted with fusiform wooden boats, with five to ten indigenous soldiers stood on each boat. Under the dark green water, a group of assault soldiers approached silently with mines.

At exactly 6:25 in the morning, all the lurking soldiers set their watches to the same time before entering the water. The bombing of the war was first launched from under the water.

After a group of people capsized, the assault team retreated quickly and began to lay down other mines in an orderly manner along the channel where the current lead, preventing the group of indigenous

soldiers in the central lake from attacking along the channel.

It was a perfect raid until the heavy rain came.

The artillerymen behind were loading bombs in the rain forest under heavy rain. Almost all of the tens of thousands of bombs in the first batch that could have caused huge turmoil were driven into mud pits by heavy rain before they hit the target, not producing the desired effect.

As the water level in the lakes and rivers previously blocked by water mines rose rapidly, the impact instantly became smaller. Countless natives rushed out in boats. As the heavy rain became more intense, the war became a stalemate.

Tang Erda's whole body looked like he had been fished out of muddy water. Half of his face was covered in mud. He touched his face, and was about to shake the gun that was half a kilogram heavy with mud out of his hand. He was not using it smoothly. He was about to lose it and replace it with a skill weapon but suddenly, Spades next to him thrusted his gun barrel over, stopping Tang Erda's attempt to throw the gun away.

Tang Erda turned around and asked in confusion: "What are you doing?"

Spades' clothes were all soaked in muddy water, and his face was stained with mud, which made the exposed skin look shockingly white: "You and Bai Liu are in the same group, right?"

Tang Erda nodded hesitantly.

Spades' eyes had a faint light in the pouring rain: "Don't use skill weapons, hold the gun, let's go back to the lake."

"I found the point where the bodies were stockpiled."

Meanwhile, at the other end.

The men from the Killer Sequence were sitting on a rocking boat on the lake.

Amidst the noise caused by the heavy rain, thunder and lightning, The Reverse God almost screamed: "Have you found were the corpses are stored?"

Bai Jiamu wiped away the raindrops dripping from his chin and shook his head: “We have searched all over the land, and no obvious storage points have been triggered.”

Usually this kind of scoring task is divided into two parts. The first is to find the correct scoring object, such as a moving corpse. The second is to find the scoring location. The corpse must be placed in a designated location before the points are officially counted for that player.

“There’s something wrong with the corpses. They’re not ordinary corpses as we thought.” The Reverse God wore a steel helmet and sat cross-legged on the boat rocking back and forth like a contractor, with the rain falling on his head. The rain on his head was flowing down stubbornly, as if a small waterfall was hanging in front of him. “We didn’t find the correct points object, and there was no way to use the points object to trigger the point location.”

The Reverse God touched his face and took a deep breath: “Spades’ intuition is still accurate. The points object corpse should be produced on the enemy’s side.”

“We are not in the same camp as Spades, so we can only find another way and wait for the mainline NPCs to defect and come over to produce points corpses for us.”

Bai Jiamu shouted loudly: “Judge, when do you think the main line NPCs will rebel?”

The Reverse God’s eyes were deep: “Soon, we already have a mainline NPC here. According to Bai Liu’s plan and the relationship between the two mainline NPCs, it should be after this battle.”

After saying that, The Reverse God stood up, and the water on the helmet slid down the brim of the helmet to wash his face.

The Reverse God: “…”

Why is this helmet so rotten and leaking?

Bai Jiamu couldn’t help but pull The Reverse God: “I don’t understand why we have to cooperate with Bai Liu. According to your arrangement, the main line NPC will also rebel. There is no need to cooperate with him.”

The Reverse God took off his hat and turned to look at Bai Jiamu.

That look was gentle, but Bai Jiamu didn't know what was going on. He felt like he had offended the majesty of his elders.

Bai Jiamu quickly let go of The Reverse God's hand, looking a little nervous like a child who realised that he had made a mistake: "…You are a tactician, shouldn't I ask?"

The Reverse God shook his hat and put on the rotten steel helmet again. He looked at Bai Jiamu and smiled, not angry: "I activated a prophecy skill after I came in."

This time, not only Bai Jiamu, but also the other two members of the Killer Sequence were shocked and looked over.

Although The Reverse God is rated as the best tactician in the league, it's not because of his prophecy skills, but because of his intelligence value.

The intelligence value of The Reverse God was 96 points.

In almost every game, this person can win with minimal casualties. Ever since the Deer Hunter had The Reverse God, the members of the team did not change until after The Reverse God left. They all followed The Reverse God.

After participating in so many league games, without a death-free gold medal, and under the guidance of the tactician The Reverse God, all members survived until The Reverse God left.

He is a well-known tactician who likes to play stalling battles. Compared with various other extreme tacticians, his methods can be said to be quite mild.

But after The Reverse God left, one member of the Deer Hunter team died quickly.

The Reverse God sat in the Killer Sequence's office all night that day, looking at photos of old team members without saying a word. The Killer Sequence was full of tough members, but no one dared to disturb him at that time.

They are still afraid of going against The Judge Against the Gods.

The Reverse God seems to be easy to get along with and rarely gets angry, but in fact his temper and behaviour are quite weird. Sometimes he smiles and looks very perceptive, and it's impossible to

figure out what he's thinking.

Because as a player, The Reverse God rarely uses his own skills. But his skill is a prophecy skill that pushes the rules of the game, which seems very unreasonable.

Skills that can be used to push the games permissions are all great weapons, such as Heart's imitating playing cards and Bai Liu's old trading wallet. No player would think that they could live a long life by hiding them and not using them.

But The Reverse God just didn't use it. There were very few times when he used prophecy skills. At least, there were only two times that Bai Jiamu could remember.

Once, The Reverse God gave a prophecy to Spades, but no one knew the content of that prophecy.

And this time, for a new player who they had just met for the first time. It was really bizarre. If he had used a prophecy skill this time—

Then something truly terrifying was coming.

Bai Jiamu blurted out: “Why did you suddenly read Bai Liu’s fortune?!”

“What fortune-telling!” The Reverse God retorted, seemingly angry, “My skill is called [Listening to God’s Words], and it’s different from fortune-telling, okay?”

“It’s all the same.” A teammate from Killer Sequence next to him leaned over with interest, “What did you figure out?”

The Reverse God’s gaze paused, and he smiled: “I have calculated the birth of a new god.”

Bai Jiamu quickly thought of the group of indigenous people who like to raise snakes, and their strange attitude towards Bai Liu. He frowned: “Are you saying that Bai Liu will become the new god of these indigenous believers in this dungeon?”

The Reverse God turned around, and there was no emotion in his voice: “Sort of.”

“However, the origins of gods are the same. Bai Liu can be selected here, which proves that he has been selected in all copies. That’s why he keeps encountering old gods… god level NPCs.”

The Reverse God was quiet for a moment: “The evil god chose Bai Liu as his next successor. He is inducing Bai Liu to kill the god-level NPC.”

Bai Jiamu frowned when he heard this: “What do you mean?”

The Reverse God turned around and smiled again: “I don’t really understand, I just saw some things that the gods were talking about. This is what the prophecy is.”
“Even I, a prophet, sometimes don’t know whether the things I predict are true, or whether the gods deliberately sent these words to lead me astray.”

The more Bai Jiamu listened, the more confused he became. His brows were almost knotted: “You mean God lies?”

The Reverse God shook his head: “As you know, my skill identity is similar to that of a judge in religion, and my skill is to accept God’s oracle about the future and use this prophetic oracle to judge

everyone."

"The oracle is absolutely true and God can indeed see everything that will happen to everyone in the future."

Bai Jiamu became more and more confused as he listened: "Then why…"

The Reverse God lowered his eyes slightly, as if he was deep in thought, and suddenly changed the subject when he spoke again, "Do you know how to deceive someone perfectly without lying?"

Bai Jiamu was startled: "How?"

The Reverse God raised his eyes and looked at Bai Jiamu, with a very strange smile on his face: "That is to only tell him a few words about the truth."

"Oracles are the most perfect manifestation of this deception."

The rain was getting heavier and heavier, and the strange smell of campfires came from the dense jungle.

In the center of the indigenous territory farther from the lake, stood a shed made of rolled broad leaves and grass roots. Under the shed was a two-person-high wooden statue of a God. The statue's eyebrows and forehead were painted with a unique grassy oil-based red paint.

There were six piles of torches placed around the statue. In such torrential weather, not only did the flames not go out, but it mysteriously burned higher and higher when blown by the wind.

The natives, whose bodies were covered with red paint, danced in a strange pattern around the statue and the six torches, beating their knees and humming an unknown eerie tune.

Kneeling in front of the statue was a man lying on his hands and knees in the mud. This man was the traditional indigenous leader. He put his hands up and humbly buried his head in the mud. He let the heavy rain drench his body and kept praying.

"O God, you gave us vast land and abundant rain. You foreshadowed enemies and crises to us in advance. You gave us Pluto, the death-like lake, as a harbor for defense. When the enemy sneak-attacked us with sinful artillery, at that time, rain and dew fell to help us fight back."

“Victory will be ours, for God has foretold it all.”

“You once sent an oracle to tell us that the only way to get rid of those evil strangers who have occupied our land and enslaved our bodies was to kill the factory director.”

The man kneeling on the ground slowly raised his head, as if he was afraid of offending the wooden sculpture. He raised his neck and looked at the statue with feverish eyes:

“You and I have the same opinion. The factory director was indeed a despicable and shameless foreigner, using his hypocritical appearance to confuse us!”

“We have regained our freedom under your oracle’s instructions. The next step is to win this war. God, please tell us, tell your weak and devout believers, what should we do?”

“For this I will offer you your favorite offering, our desire and pain!”

After finishing speaking, the man climbed into the shed and put his ear to the ground, as if he was listening to the oracle sent by God. He nodded in response from time to time, with a solemn look on his face, as if he had really heard something.

Other natives waited with bated breath.

After a while, the man carefully walked out of the shed. He stood with his eyes flickering, and there was an unconcealable malice in his voice:

“God said, kill that Guy and that new commander, and put me in power again, and God will give us everything we once had.”

“Everything will be peaceful again.”

On the boat.

Bai Jiamu was still thinking about what The Reverse God just said. He couldn’t help but ask: “But Reverse God, even if the oracle has the possibility of deceiving people, although I don’t think God really exists, didn’t you say that few people except you can hear the so-called oracle?”

Bai Jiamu was not religious. He was skeptical of this god-or-not-god stuff, but is okay with The Reverse God.

A liar who pretends to be gods (False prophet) - has a strong sense of self-management – The Reverse God doesn't believe in god, but only uses prophecies as a reference. Sometimes, he does not take the oracles seriously at all and would even go back on the instructions in them.

That's why this guy was called [Judge against the God] before.

"You want to ask me why an NPC in a dungeon can also hear the oracle?" The Reverse God sat on the edge of the boat and rowed. He looked back at Bai Jiamu with a smile, "Except for a judge like me who can make a one-way phone call to the God from time to time and ask him about oracles, whether ordinary people can hear the oracle depends on the intensity of the person's inner desires."

"In other words, most of the oracles that a person can hear are what he wants to hear from God, in line with their own desires."

"Historically, most of the cases where oracles were heard were because the person wanted to gain a certain status, so they used divine power as a cover to persecute others."

The Reverse God withdrew his gaze: "But it does not rule out that some people can really hear the oracle. God likes to give hints to people with such strong desires, and then uses these people to keep control and cause a mess to the world."

"God does not want to see the world in peace, so that his existence would have no value."

The members of Killer Sequence, who wanted to hear the gossip, came over and squatted next to The Reverse God, causing the small wooden boat to tilt over to one side.

The Reverse God quickly put his feet to the other side and stopped the two team members who were running his way. He stabilized the boat, and said helplessly: "If you don't want to help with rowing, it's okay to just watch me row alone, but why are you trying to capsize the boat? You must be undercover agents sent by the traditional indigenous people to assassinate me."

The team members nodded seriously: "That's not impossible. The traditionalists have an advantage in the game. If we defect with your head, we might be able to pass the level lying down."

The Reverse God: "…"

What is the point of me working so hard to take them through the game?

The members of the Killer Sequence were all smiling. They all knew that they came to this dungeon to help Spades get better.

Several of the team members were already very young. The process of running back and forth with Spades, and the tactician The Reverse God, it really felt like playing a game, and they all played very relaxedly.

Bai Jiamu took The Reverse God's oar and asked curiously, “Even when my desire is really strong, I still can’t hear the oracle. Why is that?”

The Reverse God glanced at him sideways. “You’re young—how strong can your desires even be? Those favored by God must have exceptionally strong desires.”

A team member beside them smirked and teased, “Oh, Bai Jiamu, are you saying your strongest desire hits first thing in the morning?”

Bai Jiamu’s eyebrow twitched. He shot a glare at the speaker. “Bai Yi, just because you’re my brother-in-law doesn’t mean you can crack dirty jokes! Watch yourself, or I’ll chop you up and feed you to the fish!”

Bai Yi rubbed his nose, stuck out his tongue, and wisely shut up.

Still flushed with irritation, Bai Jiamu turned back to The Reverse God and retorted, ears burning red, “Isn’t Bai Liu young too? Didn’t you say he was chosen as God’s successor? How strong can his desire be? What, does he just wake up every morning and deal with it himself?”

Bai Yi mumbled from the side, “Nope, he’s married to Spades. So, actually, they do it together at night.”

Bai Jiamu: “…”

The Reverse God: “…”

After a moment of silence, Bai Yi thoughtfully stroked his chin. “Of course, if Bai Liu really has strong desires, there’s nothing stopping him from doing it again in the morning. Or, you know… from morning till night—”

Before he could finish, Bai Jiamu's oar swung down mercilessly, smacking Bai Yi straight into the water with a loud splash.

Bai Yi's head popped back up, dripping wet. He looked at Bai Jiamu in disbelief, his face full of grievance. "Why'd you hit me?! I'm not making this up! Bai Liu said it himself—he and Spades went through 18 boxes of condoms in one ni—Gululu!!"

Bai Jiamu stood at the edge of the boat, pressing his oar down on Bai Yi's head with an expression of righteous fury. "Shut up! I'm not even of age yet!"

Bai Yi flailed, spluttering. "Bai Jiamu! You can't just ban adult jokes because you're underage! You'll be an adult in one month anyway!"

He struggled to keep his head above water, shouting between gulps, "Adults should have the freedom to be perverted—!! Gululu—!! Spades is married, are you really going to deny he has a sex life?! Gululu—!!"

Bai Yi gasped for breath and shouted one last time, "You just don't like the fact that you're the last single guy on the team! Even Spades—a textbook straight man—found a wife before you—"

Bai Jiamu turned completely red, from his ears to the base of his neck. His expression twisted into something murderous as he smacked Bai Yi's face twice with the oar.

Bai Yi flopped back in the water, dizzy, his eyes spinning in circles. The bubbles rising to the surface gradually slowed.

Bai Jiamu took two deep breaths, forcibly suppressing his embarrassment. Then, as if nothing had happened, he sat back down, straightened his back, and looked The Reverse God dead in the eye.

"I don't care that I'm the last single man in the Killer Sequence. Don't listen to his nonsense."

The Reverse God calmly ignored the blood stains on the oar and gave him a thumbs up: "Killing relatives for justice, well done."

The Dense Forest Borderlands

The rain was getting heavier.

The water quickly overflowed and soaked into the ground, making the mud thick and moist. Tang Erda followed Spades unsteadily. In the heavy rain, he could hardly see the rapidly moving Spades in front of him.

Spades was obviously heading towards Lake Pluto.

The closer to the lake, the deeper the water on the ground became. In the later stage, Tang Erda's lower body was already submerged, and Spades in front of him jumped into the muddy water like a fish.

Tang Erda took a deep breath and jumped in as well.

The muddy water was turbid, and raindrops pelted the surface. Coupled with the previous dual attacks of artillery fire and mines, the bottom of the lake was turned upside down. You couldn't see anything under the water, you could only feel the waves one after another. Tang Erda relied solely on his years of chasing people to keep up with Spades.

From time to time, some snake-like long black shadow creatures would slide past his side, but Tang Erda cautiously dodged them.

Spades swam very fast, and it didn't take long for them to reach the bottom of the lake.

The bottom of the lake was very different from when they came here to place mines. There were countless holes, large and small, all blown out by artillery shells.

But fortunately, the water here was deeper and the visibility was higher. Tang Erda could barely see Spades clearly in the chaotic water, suspended in the water at the bottom.

Then, Spades calmly took out a piece of a left foot that was rotting and still moving from his waist, and carefully examined it under the water like a detector.

Tang Erda looked in the direction of Spades. The bombed water exposed a layer of very strange volcanic rock texture, with a layer of viscous, asphalt-like earthy liquid flowing on it.

Spades handed the body piece to Tang Erda, who tentatively inserted the body piece into the pile of asphalt-like liquid.

[System prompt: Congratulations to player Tang Erda for triggering the corpse storage point – the bottom of Pluto Lake]

[Putting a complete part of the collected corpse of the living dead into the bottom of the lake can be counted as one point, and putting a whole corpse of the living dead into the bottom of the lake can be counted as twenty points. Placing a corpse into the bottom of the lake in scattered places can only be counted as twelve points. Players are requested to try their best to piece the corpse together and place it at the bottom of the lake.]

[System prompt: The bottom of Pluto Lake is not yet the territory occupied by the camp to which player Tang Erda belongs. We regret to inform you that you should join the indigenous camp that owns Pluto Lake, or help your own camp occupy Pluto Lake. Only after that, the player can score points for this corpse.]

The corpse pieces slowly fell out of the soil, and Spades firmly grasped the suspended corpse pieces.

Tang Erda took a deep look at the bottom of the lake, then raised his head to look at Spades. He opened his mouth slightly, and when bubbles overflowed, he pointed to the top, gesturing for Spades to go up and breathe.

Before they came up, the water surface suddenly shook violently. Tang Erda suddenly raised his head and looked at the water surface. The countless wooden boats suspended above suddenly burst into flames.

The burning boats hung overhead, like a sudden appearance of flaming clouds in the hazy sky.

If a fire attack is successful on a heavy rainy day, there must be something wrong with the wooden boats themselves. Someone must have done something to them, such as soaking them with oil, turning the boat into a flammable substance.

This is simply not an attack strategy that people here can do!

On the surface.

The traditional indigenous people wore shawls made of straw ropes and feather ring hats. They held guns and artillery and rushed forward on rafts that had not been painted with red paint. A strange accent vibrated in their throats. The person at the head was clearly the person who led the sacrifice before. He shouted with a fierce look:

“Kill these people cursed by God! Take back what is ours!”

“The paint God gives will summon unquenchable fire that burns the sinners!”

“Kill them! Burn them!”

The Reverse God and the others who were walking towards the river turned around, and Bai Yi emerged from the water, looking at the burning wooden boat warily: “Didn’t this group of traditionalists plan to wait for the enemy’s attack to end and turn around to attack us, the new faction, who are running out of battle power? How come they suddenly attacked us?”

Bai Jiamu frowned and said: “Now is the time when the two sides are fighting in chaos. It will do no good at all to attack our group of pioneers from behind. Are these traditionalists crazy about seizing power?”

“Something irritated them.” The Reverse God stretched out his hand with a steady expression, “Bring the telescope prop we brought in, let me see what happened over there.”

Bai Jiamu handed The Reverse God a standard telescope.

The Reverse God clamped it on the bridge of his nose, and his shaking and blurred vision finally settled on a small smoking jungle behind the lake. He frowned and adjusted the field of view of the telescope, and saw the situation in the small smoking jungle more clearly.

Then, The Reverse God couldn’t help but gasp.

There was a burning shed in the small jungle. The highly revered statue in the shed was shattered to pieces with a gun, poured with paint and set on fire. The entire sacrificial site was in a mess.

Only half of the shed was burned, and the torch next to it was not extinguished. It could be seen that the person who smashed the statue broke in and shattered it while the sacrifice was in progress.

The audacity of this!

This group of devout traditionalists must be going crazy to catch this troublemaker!

The Reverse God searched back along the path of the burning wooden boat, and sure enough he saw a man who kept jumping nimbly between boats. He was carrying a gun and had bloody bandages on his calves and shoulders, but he was avoiding the attacks in an extremely flexible manner.

He was followed by a long line of natives who were chasing him angrily and humming religious songs. Bullets and rockets flew past him from time to time.

This man is Guy who surrendered to them yesterday! One of the main NPCs!

Shouldn't he be at the Red Cross being treated after being seriously injured? Why would you come here to burn the statue of these traditionalists!

Guy was heavily pursued, and although he had tried his best to hide himself by using the boat to dodge, he still received two shots.

The Reverse God, who was holding the telescope, frowned. Why didn't Guy hide under the water?

Although hiding in such turbid waters may lead to random shooting, it's better than running around like a living target on the surface, right?

Soon, The Reverse God got the answer, and he couldn't help but squint.

Guy actually held up a huge statue head in front of him, and put a gun to it. He raised it while running, and opened and closed his lips, seeming speaking emotionally to the group of natives who were chasing him. Why did the traditionalists dare not shoot him?

This young man is quite talented. He knows that using a statue of a god as his hostage and shield before running away is not considered courageous.

The Reverse God put down the telescope and handed it to Bai Jiamu: "Go over and save people."

Bai Jiamu nodded and was about to row back when Guy ran this way.

As Guy ran in, The Reverse God and the others finally heard what Guy was saying.

Guy shouted loudly in the sound of rain: “You say God exists, you say God has saved you, you say God has given you everything, and God asked you to kill the good people who help you.”

He stood on a swaying small wooden boat, with several corpses killed by shrapnels lying at his feet. They were lying on the edge of the boat with their eyes open, and the blood on their bodies had long solidified.

Guy glanced at the dead people with compassion, his eyes were red, he raised the head of the wooden statue high, and pointed the gun at the forehead of the statue: “This is the only symbol of your so-called god here. If you really exist, take your head back from my hands!”

The Reverse God’s face changed when he heard this: “No, he is going to use extreme means to prove to these traditionalists that God does not exist! If he really breaks those traditionalists, they will go crazy and kill him without any hesitation, stop him!”

Bai Jiamu’s expression stiffened, he flipped his wrist and threw out a bright scalpel, which passed through the rain and mist, and struck the gun in Guy’s hand.

Bai Jiamu’s breathed a sigh of relief: “I caught it with my skill weapon, he missed.”

The moment Guy pulled the trigger, the gun was hit by the scalpel and fell. The bullet missed the statue’s forehead.

The leader of the traditional faction who was chasing him laughed maniacally: “God sent believers to stop you! God exists! You can’t kill God!”

“God is protecting Himself and me. That factory director, that dirty hypocrite, should be killed by me according to God’s instructions!”

Guy was half-kneeling on the boat. His eyelids moved, and he suddenly picked up the scalpel. Without hesitation, he grabbed it fiercely and chopped the head of the statue.

Bai Jiamu: “!!!”

The Reverse God: “!!!”

Why is he like this! Young man, you are too stubborn!

Guy seemed to explode, the muscles of his shoulders bulged, and he kept holding the knife and lowering it. He gasped, and the rainwater slid down his wet hair.

The head of the wooden statue was chopped into pieces and covered with scars by the scalpel.

The leader of the traditionalist faction across from him yelled like a chicken with his throat squeezed. His eyes were wide open, and he watched almost in disbelief as the head of the statue, which was protected by paint, was chopped into sawdust by Guy. There was a look of panic and horror on his face that could not be concealed.

A native next to him murmured to himself in a trance: “How could he destroy the paint coating that God has blessed us with…”

“Why didn’t God send heavy rain to drown him and thunder to burn him to death?”

“Why would God let a person who betrays God insult his own statue…?”

The leader’s eyes were about to burst. He raised his hand and gave the people next to him a slap in the face. He shouted at them hoarsely: “That’s enough! God exists! God is protecting us! Are you going to abandon God like these people?! Be punished by God and drowned?!”

The voices of doubt slowly weakened again.

Guy raised his head, and his eyes filled with countless emotions fell on the hysterical leader through the wet hair on his forehead. He showed a sarcastic smile: “God does not exist, he shouldn’t die.”

“God has never protected you at all. You are doing all this just for your own desires.”

Guy stood up staggeringly, raised the unrecognizable statue head in his hand towards the leader, and said hoarsely: “You dirty, cowardly person who dares to hide under the beliefs of a cult, do you dare to face up to the broken appearance of the god you have woven out of your own lies?”

The leader's eyes were red, and he roared as he raised his gun: "Shut up, you are the one abandoned by God!"

The bullets passed through the statue of the god that Guy had lifted up, shooting randomly at him. Guy slowly closed his eyes, with a satisfied and tired smile on his face, and fell into the lake of death named Pluto together with the god's head.

The Reverse God had a complicated look and stopped Bai Jiamu from stepping forward to catch Guy who fell into the water: "——This is the main plot of this NPC. We can't stop it. Just watch. He is destined to die. This is of his own free will."

Bai Jiamu was startled, and then asked in disbelief: "Why did he want to seek death on his own? He might still have a way to live if he didn't anger the leader."

"What he wants is for the leader to smash the idol with his own hands in anger." The Reverse God pointed at the natives, and sighed, "Look, the expressions of those natives have changed, and they are beginning to doubt their leader. "

"Guy knew that if he smashed the idol, he would not completely shatter the faith of these indigenous people. He wanted the person who created these lies, that is, the leader, to smash the idol with his own hands, so that these indigenous people would wake up."

The Reverse God sighed: "When he surrendered, he was ready to pay the price with his life."

"But I still find it very strange." The Reverse God changed the topic, touching his chin thoughtfully, "Based on my previous predictions, Guy's main plot should only be triggered in the middle to late stages. Why did it advance to the first day of the war? Guy already fully understood what to do to achieve his goal. Has anyone taught him?"

Bai Jiamu reacted very quickly: "The abnormal reactions of NPCs are all caused by players. Someone induced Guy to commit suicide?"

The Reverse God paused subtly: "What does this player want to do by advancing Guy's death and exacerbating the conflict between the two camps?"

The Dense Forest Borderlands

At the Red Cross.

Alex's ring finger on his left hand hurt while the dressing was being changed. He looked subconsciously and saw that the ring on his ring finger broke off out of nowhere, inexplicably leaving a bloody cut at the base of his finger.

Alex's heart choked, and an indescribable feeling of fear gripped him. He staggered, holding on to his wheelchair and tried to stand up: "Guy! Is Guy not in the tent anymore?"

Before he finished speaking, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Tang Erda running over from the edge of the Red Cross with a seriously injured soldier who had his head down on his shoulders, his face covered in mud. He shouted fiercely: "Guy is injured, but he is not dead yet, come and take care of him quickly!"

Tang Erda was followed by a large group of natives who were chasing them. Spades fell far behind Tang Erda, sweeping back and forth with his whip to clear away the natives who were following them.

The native who was chasing them were almost going crazy, with veins popping out and his eyes bloodshot. He kept firing at Tang Erda and said, "Give me this damn apostate! I'm going to break him into pieces for his offense against God!!"

The natives followed behind him, and some even raised heavy weapons such as rocket launchers, staring fiercely and hatefully at the three people fleeing in front, but they were unable to close the distance under the defense of Spades.

The people from the Red Cross hurriedly picked up their weapons, opened the defense line, and vigilantly put up a red-letter sign saying "No attacks here, this is a non-war zone". The defense tanks stationed here also slowly raised their guns and aimed at the group of natives who were about to break into the Red Cross area.

Tang Erda ran into the Red Cross area first, followed closely by Spades, while the natives who were unwilling to put down their weapons were sternly stopped outside the defense line.

The unconscious Guy and the idol head he was holding tightly in his hands were quickly transferred to a stretcher, carried past Alex, and

sent to the tent for saving wounded soldiers.
Alex saw the blood-stained Guy and reached out to touch him, almost falling off the wheelchair. Fortunately, Bai Liu next to him quickly helped and resettled the dazed soldier in his wheelchair.

“Don’t worry.” Bai Liu bowed and patted the ashes on Alex’s knees, raised his eyes and said calmly, “Guy will be fine this time.”

Alex glanced at Bai Liu in a daze. He looked directly into the man’s dark eyes, somehow remembering the god’s head on Guy’s stretcher.

The eyes of the statue with a compassionate smile were also like this, dark and peaceful, reflecting everything in the world, as if all human emotions cannot be integrated into them, watching all the scenes in this world that have been arranged by him.

… Guy will be fine this time. This statement was as if Bai Liu had already arranged that Guy would be fine.

Alex couldn’t help but shudder. He pushed the wheelchair away from Bai Liu, took a deep look at Bai Liu, then turned the wheelchair without looking back and chased Guy’s stretcher to stand guard outside the tent.

Bai Liu wasn’t angry when he saw Alex running away. He lowered his eyes and rubbed the ash that had just been stained from Alex’s knee on his index finger, and then calmly wiped it away.

Tang Erda sat at Bai Liu’s feet to catch his breath and rest. Spades disappeared as soon as he entered the Red Cross. Tang Erda looked around and couldn’t find him, so he gave up.

He raised his head and took a sip of water, and was about to report what happened to Bai Liu. Just when Tang Erda was about to speak, he raised his head to look up at Bai Liu and couldn’t help but be startled by the indifferent expression on Bai Liu’s face.

…This expression looks like Bai Six from other timelines plotting something…

Soon, Tang Erda calmed down the familiarity and fear he felt for a moment. He shook his head to get rid of those terrible thoughts in his mind, took a deep breath, and began to dutifully report to Bai Liu what happened on the battlefield:

“… Guy fell into the water after being hit. Spades and I happened to

be in the water. I found that he was still breathing and dragged him to the shore and started running this way…"

"After the natives discovered us, they chased us all the way. Fortunately, Spades was very capable of breaking them up. The two of us moved very fast, so we came here first…"

Bai Liu nodded: "It's pretty much what I expected."

"You arranged for me to join the first commando team just to cooperate with you in rescuing Guy, who was lured by you to fight for his life during the battle?" Tang Erda half-bent his knees and leaned his back on the gun barrel inserted into the ground. He looked at Bai Liu and asked, "When did you guess that Guy would rebel?"

Bai Liu smiled: "The first time I met Guy, he was very good at fighting, but he was willing to be a cleanup soldier. He was either a pure pacifist, like Alex, or he did not agree with the victory of the camp he represented."

Tang Erda breathed out, not surprised at all, and continued to explain along with Bai Liu's words: "If Guy rebels, Alex will definitely not last long and will also rebel. Then the enemy camp will have mainline NPCs and ownership of the lake. They will have a pretty big advantage later on."

"You want to ask me why I didn't join the enemy army from the beginning, right?" Bai Liu answered Tang Erda's call and smiled, "Because I am not planning to join either camp."

Tang Erda frowned: "You won't join either of these two parties? Do you want Alex to form a separate camp?"

Bai Liu nodded.

Soon Tang Erda cautiously put forward his opinion: "Bai Liu, I believe you have your own ideas, but from my perception of Alex's emotions just now, I feel that if Guy is successfully rescued and still alive, it is very likely that he will be successfully persuaded by the seriously injured Guy to join the indigenous camp."

"And if Guy dies, he will be completely stable in his own camp because he is angry at the natives for killing Guy."

Tang Erda said cautiously: "It is difficult for Alex to have the consciousness and possibility to rebel and become a third-party

camp."

Bai Liu nodded and agreed with Tang Erda's view: "It's true. Alex grew up in a very peaceful environment, and he was also very kind. That's why he chose to become a medical student in a war-like background, and in order to save people. He didn't kill anyone even after he came to the front line."

"This kind of character is called gentle and kind to put it lightly, but in the context of this game where you can't save people without killing people, it means being cowardly and incompetent." Tang Erda turned his head to look at Alex, who was guarding Guy's tent, his head bowed and buried in his arms, and couldn't help sighing, "Alex is a person who feels that war is completely wrong. Even if you kill him, you won't be able to make him stand up as a third party."

Bai Liu looked at the tent where Guy was being rescued, and said calmly: "It's possible."

"I've discussed it with Guy and he'll help me do it."

Tang Erda became more and more confused: "Guy was seriously injured. He may not be able to survive tonight. How can he help you?"

"There is no need for Guy to wake up." Bai Liu furrowed his brow, "He can help me complete all this even if he doesn't wake up."

At Midnight.

The bullet in Guy's body was removed through surgery. The doctor wheeled Guy into the tent after using some anti-inflammatory medicine.

However, Guy's anesthesia had not worn off yet, and he was unconscious with a high fever. Alex was standing by his bed, looking at him with red eyes.

Alex's hands and voice were trembling: "The ring is broken, Guy, my ring is broken, they said your ring is also broken, it was broken by a bullet…"

"The doctor said you may not be able to wake up."

Alex lowered his head and leaned against the edge of the bed, choking and saying: "Guy, the only evidence that we can be together is gone

now. If we both die, I won't be able to prove to Pluto that you are my spouse, to prevent him from dividing our souls."

Tears slid down Alex's chin, and before they could land on the sheets, a group of people quietly opened the curtains of the tent where Guy was sitting. They stared at him in the dark, holding sharp knives and wooden sticks. The voice was extremely hoarse when he opened his mouth:

"Alex, if you still want to live, get out of here!"

Alex turned around suddenly. He turned on the light in the dark tent. After seeing the group of people in front of him clearly, he was shocked and his voice was extremely difficult:

"You were the survivors of the first commando team…"

"We are still survivors." The leader used a sharp steel knife to support his body. His left leg was missing below the knee, and the bandage was still bleeding. It was obvious that the leg had just been amputated not long ago.

He stared at Guy on the hospital bed with red eyes, and gave a vicious laugh: "Thanks to Guy, I was blown away when he went to the group of natives. I don't know how much longer I'll live in this shithole."

Alex turned his wheelchair to block Guy's hospital bed. His voice trembled: "This is the Red Cross. What are you going to do?"

"The Red Cross only stipulates that we can't kill enemy troops here, but it doesn't stipulate that we can't punish our own people according to military law." The soldier at the head with the broken leg looked fierce. He raised his finger and pointed at Guy, "This traitor is still here, wearing our uniforms and has killed more than twenty of our brothers, why can't I kill him!"

The man roared at Alex like a trapped animal: "Alex, if you protect this traitor, we will kill you too!"

Alex subconsciously wanted to push himself up, but his legs were injured and he was quickly held down by the tall commando team. His hands were tied behind his back. No matter how hard he struggled, it was all in vain. In the end, he screamed at the top of his lungs: "Help!! Someone is attacking the wounded soldiers here!"

The leader walked to Guy's bedside. He looked back at Alex coldly,

with resentment and complexity in his eyes: “No one will come, Alex, they know it’s an internal matter.”

“No, no, no!” Alex was flustered and frightened. He spoke incoherently and tried to dissuade him with tears on his face, “Guy shouldn’t kill you, and you shouldn’t kill Guy. No one should attack each other! “

“This is wrong, this is not right!! We should stop!”

“But the fact is, we are attacking each other.” The soldier standing next to Guy stood on one foot. He raised the knife high towards Guy on the hospital bed, with an unconcealable cruelty in his expression, ” ——The war will never stop!”

The snow-white blade fell hard, and blood spurted out instantly. The angry soldiers kept waving wooden spikes and sabers, cutting Guy in his hospital bed to pieces of blood and flesh.

Alex’s heart-wrenching screams and pleas for mercy could be heard across half the Red Cross district.

Bai Liu stood at the edge of another tent. He lifted the curtain and listened calmly to the sound. Next to him stood Tang Erda with a solemn expression.

Tang Erda started to speak but stopped several times, and finally he couldn’t bear to speak: “…Is it true that we can’t save Guy?”

“This is a deal between me and him.” Bai Liu looked at Tang Erda calmly, “Guy doesn’t want to live, he wants to die at the hands of his former teammates to atone for his sins, so I made arrangements for him. In exchange, I used his death to achieve my own little purpose.”

Tang Erda didn’t know how he felt: “…Both camps directly killed Guy. Alex can no longer belong to any camp.”

…There is nothing wrong with this approach, and it is just a game, but it always reminds Tang Erda of Bai Six inexplicably.

This is what Bai Six was good at. After inducing others to die willingly, he can then use this death to achieve his own goals.

Tang Erda hesitated again and again, but gritted his teeth and asked: “Bai Liu, you really won’t become Bai Six, right?”

Bai Liu was silent for a few seconds, then he turned to look at Tang Erda, and suddenly smiled very lightly, with extremely light emotion in his eyes: “This is just a game, don’t be so nervous, Tang Erda.”

The Dense Forest Borderlands

Alex's shrill screams gradually faded, and bloodstained soldiers emerged from the tent one after another, shaking the blood from their hands as they left.

Bai Liu glanced at his watch, waited another fifteen minutes, then walked toward Guy's tent. He lifted the curtain and stepped inside.

Tang Erda remained outside, his expression complicated. "I won't go in. Alex's mental state won't be good right now."

He hesitated, then called out to Bai Liu just as he was about to enter. "Are you still going to use Alex?"

Bai Liu paused, his fingers gripping the curtain. He turned his head slightly, a faint smile on his lips. "Of course. Is there a problem?"

Tang Erda clenched his fists, his jaw tightening as if he wanted to say something—but in the end, he simply shook his head. "…No, it's nothing."

As a player, Bai Liu's goal was to win. Using NPCs to achieve that goal was only natural. He had no obligation to consider their feelings.

So why did this feel so wrong?

Bai Liu patted Tang Erda's shoulder, his voice soft. "If it makes you uncomfortable, I can consider Alex's feelings and find another way."

Tang Erda wanted to say it didn't bother him. But when he met Bai Liu's dark eyes—void of any real warmth—the words that escaped him were: "What way?"

Bai Liu's smile deepened. "A very effective one. You'll like it."

—After all, he had already used it on Tang Erda before.
Bai Liu lifted the curtain and stepped inside.

Alex sat motionless in the middle of the blood-soaked tent, his head hanging so low it seemed it might slip from his neck at any moment. His hands, resting on the sides of his wheelchair, were stained with blood that dripped steadily from his fingertips. At his feet lay Guy's severed head, eyes still open.

The hospital bed in the corner was a grotesque display—its once-white sheets now saturated with red. Scattered limbs lay atop them, torn flesh and viscera spilling from an open abdominal cavity. The scene resembled the remains of a butchered lamb, abandoned and forgotten.

In the stifling heat of the rainy season, it hadn't taken long for flies to descend on the body, already feasting.

Bai Liu stopped in front of Alex, but Alex remained unmoving, head bowed, seemingly unresponsive to the world around him. His lifeless eyes showed no recognition, no reaction.

Yet, with just one sentence, Bai Liu made him look up.

"You already knew, didn't you?" Bai Liu said. "I arranged for Guy to die like this."

Slowly, Alex raised his head. His voice was hoarse, barely above a whisper. "…Why?"

"I think you've already figured it out," Bai Liu continued, his tone light, almost pitying. "Otherwise, you wouldn't have come to the Red Cross to watch over Guy."

He lowered his eyes, looking down at Alex. "Because this is how Guy wanted to die."

"He wanted to atone for the teammates he killed. He blew them to pieces, so he wanted to die the same way."

Alex's face was streaked with dried tears, his already swollen eyes welling up again. He lowered his head, covering his face with trembling hands as he choked out a sob.

"Guy…"

For a long while, he cried. When he finally looked up again, his expression was a mix of disgust and barely concealed fear. His voice, though steadier, still wavered with emotion.

"Guy wanted to die for his sins. But you… if you wanted him dead, it wasn't for something as simple as that, was it?"

[System prompt: NPC Alex's favorability towards player Bai Liu is decreasing…]

Bai Liu didn't react to the prompt. He simply answered, calm as ever.

“No. I arranged all of this for my own goals.”

Alex’s back arched as he half-rose from his wheelchair, his voice breaking into a hoarse scream.

“—You orchestrated Guy’s death! You planned this from the beginning! You made sure I saw this! You’ve been using us this entire time!”

His breath came in ragged gasps, bloodshot eyes burning with hatred.

“—You’re nothing but a despicable liar, a filthy manipulator!”

Tears streamed down his face, his voice cracking as he muttered, as if speaking to himself:

“…Guy trusted you. He gave you his bouquet, watched as you had your wedding under his witness…”

His gaze sharpened, full of venom. “You don’t deserve any pure feelings in this world.”

Then, through gritted teeth, he spat out, “If Spades ever finds out who you really are, he’ll leave you.”

For the first time, Bai Liu’s fingers curled slightly at his side. But his expression remained composed—he even smiled, soft and unbothered.

“That wouldn’t be anything new to me.”

Alex screamed at him, cursed him, for over half an hour—repeating the same few accusations again and again. The words looped like a broken record. For all his education, for all his intelligence, he didn’t seem to know how to craft a proper insult.

In the end, his fury gave way to sobs.

He broke down, grabbing the hem of Bai Liu’s clothes with shaking hands.

“Why did you let him die?” His voice was raw. “Why did he have to die?”

Tears spilled freely down his face, his entire body trembling. “Wasn’t I enough? Wasn’t my existence enough for him to let go of his guilt and hatred—to start over?”

He clutched at the empty air between them, fingers curling around nothing. His sobs wracked his frame, desperate and hopeless.

“…There’s nothing left. Nothing left for me.”

Bai Liu shifted his gaze to the pile of things on the bed. His voice was calm, almost indifferent.

"He left his body for you."

Alex shuddered violently, his expression twisting in horror as he lifted his head to stare at Bai Liu.

But he quickly forced himself to regain composure. He wheeled himself back a few steps, shaking his head.

"I won’t use that drug on him. Guy will always be Guy. He was a human being. Even in death, he’s still a human being. I won’t turn him into a soulless monster."

Bai Liu chuckled. "Why not? What difference is there between a resurrected Guy and the Guy you love?"

"They’re nothing alike!!"

Alex’s voice rose sharply, his breath unsteady. He finally grasped the depths of Bai Liu’s madness, the realization sending a chill down his spine.

"——A corpse treated with that drug is just that—a corpse. Just flesh and blood vessels that can move. It’s not him. It’s nothing but a soulless monster!"

Outside the tent, Tang Erda stood guard, frowning as he listened. Alex’s agitation made him doubt whether Bai Liu was truly using a "gentler" method as he claimed.

Someone tapped his shoulder.

Tang Erda turned—and his eyes widened in surprise.

Spades stood before him, his face void of emotion. He stared at the tent for a long moment but made no move to enter. Then, in a low, unreadable voice, he asked:

"Is it impossible for a human to love a soulless monster?"

Tang Erda was caught off guard by the sudden question.

Inside, Bai Liu tilted his head slightly, gesturing for Alex to continue. "So?"

Alex's voice trembled with disbelief. "Could you love something that's just an empty shell?"

Silence stretched between them.

The only sound was Bai Liu's calm, even breathing—he seemed to be thinking.

Outside the tent, Spades stood rigid, his lips pressed into a thin line, fists clenched tight. It looked as though he might burst in at any second—demand an answer, maybe even hit Alex for asking.

Finally, Bai Liu spoke.

"I don't know."

Tang Erda's breath hitched.

In all his memories, no Bai Liu had ever given such an ambiguous answer—especially not before striking a deal or exploiting someone's emotions.

And yet, for some reason, Tang Erda felt himself relax.

——Bai Liu wasn't doing this just to manipulate Alex.

He had answered the question seriously. For once, it wasn't purely about strategy or personal gain.

He wasn't Bai Six.

Tang Erda let out a long breath.

A faint crease appeared on Spades' otherwise expressionless face. He kicked the gun lying across the entrance of the tent and asked coldly, "Why doesn't he know?"

Tang Erda bent down to pick up the gun, frowning. "Go in and ask Bai Liu yourself. How would I know why he doesn't?"

Spades let out a quiet "Oh" before stepping forward, approaching the tent. He walked back and forth twice, his movements unusually

hesitant, his brows furrowed. But in the end, he didn't go in.

Instead, he stepped back and squatted beside Tang Erda, lowering his head as he absentmindedly poked at the mud with his fingers. He pressed one hole into the ground, then another, lining them up in neat rows.

Tang Erda watched in confusion. "Why aren't you going in?"

Spades hugged his knees, rocking slightly where he squatted, resembling a child left behind by a friend, dazed and at a loss.

When Tang Erda pressed again, Spades only nodded lightly and muttered, "I don't know either."

He kept his eyes fixed on the small holes in the dirt, his voice dull as he continued, "…I don't want to see Bai Liu right now. He doesn't even know this."

Tang Erda followed his gaze and then paused, momentarily startled.

Then, unable to help himself, he sighed in amusement.

The holes Spades had been poking in the dirt—slightly crooked but still recognizable—spelled out two characters: 白柳 (Bai Liu).

Even if you say you don't want to see him, you still want to.

Inside the tent, Alex was equally bewildered by Bai Liu's response.

"…You don't know?"

Bai Liu's voice was calm, almost indifferent. "I can't say I don't know at all. It's just difficult to distinguish—whether you miss the feelings you once had for him in that body, or whether that body itself is holding onto the remnants of your feelings."

He paused before continuing, his tone unreadable.

"Sometimes, I feel like he's a souvenir left to me by the gods who took pity on me."

Silence stretched between them. Then, softly, Bai Liu spoke again:

"And sometimes, I feel that he is the monster I love."

"It's not that he has no soul," Bai Liu said, his voice barely above a

whisper. “It’s just that the soul is hidden within the body. I have to wait until the day it emerges and comes to see me again.”

Alex stared at him in disbelief, forcing out a weak laugh. “…You make it sound like you’ve gone through the same thing as me.”

Bai Liu lifted his eyes and met Alex’s gaze directly. “I have.”

“That’s why I can tell you—two people who love each other may be separated by death.”

His gaze dropped, landing on Guy’s severed head at Alex’s feet. His voice was calm, distant.

“But two monsters who love each other never will.”

The curtain of the tent was suddenly pulled open.

Bai Liu looked up.

Spades stood at the entrance, his silhouette framed by the harsh light outside. His chest rose and fell slightly, his gaze locked onto Bai Liu—silent, unmoving.

But Bai Liu didn’t seem surprised. It was as if he had known Spades had been there all along.

“You’re back?” Bai Liu asked evenly. “Why didn’t I see you earlier?”

Spades hesitated for a moment before replying.

“Yeah.”

Then, after a pause, as if searching for an excuse, he added, “I had mud on me. Didn’t look good. I washed it off before coming to see you.”

The Dense Forest Borderlands

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the early morning of the next day, in order to avoid decay and infection caused by the remains of the body, Guy's corpse would be collected and burned by the Red Cross people. So before dawn, Bai Liu collected all of Guy's body parts and waited quietly for Alex, who was still struggling to decide what to do.

"Have you thought about it?" Bai Liu asked.

The emotions in Alex's eyes were extremely complicated, "… If the resurrection is just a body, a monster, what should I do?"

Bai Liu glanced at Spades standing next to him from the corner of his eye, "It depends on how much emotion you can put into this body."

Alex gritted his teeth, as if he had gained some kind of determination: "Okay, I agree with your proposal, let's go!"

Bai Liu glanced at Alex's legs, took out a potion bottle from his pocket and tossed it to him: "Use the potion to solve your own leg problem first."

Alex took the potion, looked at Bai Liu, then took a deep breath and poured the liquid on the injured leg – the wound did not heal, but turned into a corpse-like grey colour.

He stood up quickly, picked up the backpack full of body parts, and looked at Bai Liu: "What is your next plan?"

Bai Liu smiled: "Do you want to resolve this war?"

Alex was startled, but he quickly retorted: "Now that the fight is like this, the sneak attack this morning was disastrous for both sides, it's impossible to stop it." "Of course." Bai Liu looked at Alex levelly, "Unless they have a common third-party enemy that scares them more, in that case they can stop the war and cooperate with each other."

Alex was stunned: "Where can such a powerful third-party enemy come from?"

Bai Liu glanced at the backpack which Alex was holding: “Does the army of the living dead you once imagined count?”

Alex was silent for a long time, and then he spoke in a hoarse voice: “…I know what you want me to do, but I don’t have that many potions and corpses to create a third-party army.”

“You don’t have to worry about this.” Bai Liu smiled and pointed at his feet, “Isn’t the Red Cross where we are located a perfect production site for potions and corpses? There will be a steady stream of potions and corpses delivered here for your use.”

Alex refuted in a low voice: “But the Red Cross will not give the corpses and potions to an ordinary soldier like me to use casually. Listen, Bai Liu, I know what you want to do, but this is impossible, you are just an ordinary soldier. The Red Cross is not your back garden. It is strictly guarded and only insiders can get the potion…”

“I agree with you.” Bai Liu pointed behind Alex and said meaningfully, “Maybe you can turn around and take a look?”

Liu Jiayi, who was wearing a nurse’s uniform, twirled her keys around and leaned against the tent. She raised her eyebrows and looked at Alex: “I just went to solve the problem of the corpses and the potions. I am responsible for the key to the potion warehouse and the disposal of the corpses. You can use it all as you wish.”

Alex glanced at Bai Liu with wide eyes as if he had seen a ghost. He felt an uncontrollable chill running down his back: “…When did you plan all of this?”

Guy’s death, his collapse and compromise, and the subsequent potions and corpses, this guy had it all handled before it happened!

Bai Liu even took the time to get married! He never left his sight from beginning to end, and Alex never saw him do anything!

God, how on earth did Bai Liu do all this!

Bai Liu looked at him with a smirk: “Do you really want to know the answer? Believe me, you won’t be happy after hearing this.”

Alex rubbed the goosebumps on his arms and swallowed: “…I swear, you are one of the best time managers I have ever met.”

While cleaning his gun, Tang Erda asked curiously: “One? Is there

anyone who is better at using time than Bai Liu?"

"It's Guy…" Alex sighed faintly, "When I first met him, he could maintain a 'good' relationship with seven or eight guys at the same time, and he could have private contact with at least three guys in one day without being discovered by others."

The word [good] was spat out hard by him.

Alex's eyes were deep, and he glanced at Spades who was next to Bai Liu meaningfully, "You know, Bai Liu, I found something in common with Guy and you. You can both contact others under the eyes of your partner without being found out."

Bai Liu, who had contacted team members many times behind Spades' back to do things: "…"

Tang Erda who was contacted: "…"

Liu Jiayi who was also contacted: "…"

Spades stared at Bai Liu suspiciously with squinted eyes.

The Reverse God, who had been privately contacted by Bai Liu from afar, suddenly sneezed loudly. Rubbing his nose in confusion, he muttered, "Who's cursing me?"

"There are too many people who'd want to," Bai Yi chimed in eagerly. "Want me to filter them for you in real time?"

The Reverse God waved a hand dismissively. "Appreciate the thought, but I'd rather not hear anything that might break my heart while I'm trying to enjoy my game."

Bai Jiamu held his chin beside him in a daze: "Reverse God, do you think that the Bai Liu guy has cheated you? Now Alex has not defected, and our main line NPC Guy is still dead. The traditionalist faction is about to make trouble."

"Let them make trouble. The more trouble they make, the quieter it will be here." The Reverse God said unconcernedly, "Guy's death must have been deliberately brought forward, but it's not a big deal."

Bai Jiamu asked in confusion: "The situation is in such chaos, isn't it a big deal?"

"No." The Reverse God replied affirmatively, "The more chaotic it is,

the better it is to reshuffle the cards and control the situation. Players who play this set must be very greedy. Although there is no more than 80% possibility, I generally don't take it easy. I have to make a judgement, but after contacting him, I feel that the player who disrupted the situation should be Bai Liu, and this is how he played the game before."

Bai Jiamu frowned: "Then you cooperated with him so easily before?"

"I've seen the video of his small TV, and his skills are related to money transactions." The Reverse God said, "It seems that the higher the points transaction, the more he has to execute the transaction."

Bai Yi next to him suddenly realised: "So you gave him five million points when we cooperated?"

"Part of it is for this, and another part of it is…" The Reverse God's eyes wandered, he clenched his fists and coughed, "For the money, he is married to Spades. As a tactician, I should give a gift on behalf of the whole team no matter what."

The Reverse God calculated solemnly with his fingers: "Except for Xiao Bai (Bai Jiamu) who is underage and refuses to rush the gift, the four of us adults should give 1.2 million points each which adds up to 4.8 million points, plus the transaction payment — Five million is just right."

Bai Jiamu: "…You are good at calculating, Reverse God."

The Reverse God continued as if nothing had happened: "However, did you pay attention to the wrong thing? Bai Liu said that he would help us make Spades lose, but he did not say anything about helping us win."

"Alex's defection was just a cover proposed by Bai Liu. He didn't tell the truth, which means that he cannot be included as part of the transaction."

Bai Jiamu stood up and looked unhappy: "He lied to us?"

The Reverse God glanced at Bai Jiamu: "To be more precise, we were deceived. Deception has always been an important part of this game. The game for players is whether they can prevent themselves from being deceived."

"There is nothing wrong with lying to others. It is us who were

deceived and are in the wrong."

Bai Yi muttered: "Reverse God, you have a very good temper, aren't you angry if someone lies to you?"

The Reverse God gave Bai Yi a meaningful smile: "If I get angry because I was cheated then shouldn't I be angry when I entered this game?"

"This game is a huge scam."

The sky was about to brighten.

There were many stiff figures walking in the woods, their faces interlaced with stitched threads. Flesh and blood sections were faintly visible as they moved. They emitted strange whining sounds, like a bunch of puppets made of real corpses, twisting their limbs unfamiliarly to move forward.

Bai Liu and his group fell far behind the group of corpses.

Liu Jiayi couldn't help complaining: "It's only now that I realised it was actually a zombie book."

"But it's not about fighting zombies." Tang Erda added, "We are the sweepers responsible for creating zombies. We will pick up a lot of corpses when the war starts."

"There are still too few corpses from the Red Cross." Liu Jiayi stared at the corpses in front of her, "I don't know how long we can last with these two camps holding us hostage."

Bai Liu was very calm: "Don't worry, as long as the war between the two parties does not stop, our camp will continue to grow."

"Yes." Liu Jiayi squinted at Bai Liu, "You would think that as long as there are dead people on the other side, our zombie army will continue to grow. In the end, they will try their best to avoid casualties on both sides in order to prevent us from continuing to grow. Thus achieving the goal of the war stopping forever."

"This is how you convinced that indecisive mainline NPC, right?"

Liu Jiayi withdrew her gaze: "Bai Liu, sometimes I really don't understand what you are thinking. You can always achieve the goal of peace with an extreme and evil approach."

“You say you are a good person, but you are indeed doing things in an extremely anti-human way. You do not have any compassion for these innocent soldiers. You will use them to do things for you even if they die.” Liu Jiayi stared at the broken zombie soldiers in front of her and said, “I would say you are a bad person, but judging from the results, you have done something that surpasses the efforts of all the good people.”

Liu Jiayi asked: “Sometimes I wonder, why on earth do you do this?”

Bai Liu smiled: “Because I’m curious.”

Liu Jiayi asked, “What are you curious about?”

Bai Liu lowered his eyes: “I was curious about what kind of ending Alex wanted, whether it was peace or endless war, so I included both possibilities in the plan.”

“The ending that Alex wants?” Liu Jiayi frowned. She realised there was something in Bai Liu’s words and asked keenly, “What do you mean?”

Bai Liu looked at Liu Jiayi: “Don’t you think Alex accepted our proposal to form a third camp and attack the other two camps too quickly?”

“This is not the normal behaviour of a person who would reject someone who harms others. Alex complied with my offer with almost no struggle, which was strange.”

“According to Alex’s previous performance, the emotional impact of Guy’s death on him should have been strong, but he calmed down very quickly and immediately threw himself into the production of the living dead.” Bai Liu opened his eyes and looked at the large zombie army in front of him, “And the zombies are being produced too fast.”

“Alex’s identity is set as a medical student who has not yet done an internship, but he is very skilled at finding a certain part of the same person among a pile of broken limbs and then sewing them together.”

“…It feels like this isn’t the first time he’s done something like this.”

Liu Jiayi’s steps forward paused, and she suddenly turned her head to look at Bai Liu: “Do you still remember the function of Alex’s potion?”

Bai Liu spoke calmly: “Yes, the function of his potion is to freeze

people in the state they were in before death."

"…The state before death." Liu Jiayi murmured to herself twice, then she suddenly looked up at the zombie army in front of her and her expression changed, "The potion this guy invented is not a biological healing potion at all. It's a time potion that can turn back the time of an organism! It's a resurrection in the true sense of the word!"

"These things are not zombies at all, they are the living dead who are going back and forth to their pre-death state!"

Before Tang Erda could react, he lowered his head and approached Liu Jiayi and asked doubtfully: "A time potion?"

Liu Jiayi took a deep breath and turned Tang Erda's head around, "You will understand when you see it."

As the group of originally swaying, stitched-up corpses continued to march, the fractures on their limbs gradually opened and closed, and the injured sites that were originally covered with various gunshot wounds gradually grew open then healed. The various wounds on the corpses creepily turned into bloody fresh wounds, and then healed bizarrely.

These corpses that were originally pale then became rosy and moved more and more flexibly, as if they were alive.

Tang Erda was completely stunned: "What on earth is going on?!"

Bai Liu was not surprised. He looked at the corpses that were "coming to life" as if he had expected it, and said flatly, "Sure enough."

Tang Erda immediately turned his head and stared at Bai Liu, "You already knew this?!"

Liu Jiayi rolled her eyes and said breathlessly, "Of course he already knew."

Tang Erda pointed at Bai Liu and said with condemnation: "Then why didn't he tell us? He is a tactician, why did he hide it from us!"

Liu Jiayi held her forehead: "Of course it's because he wants to play. Didn't you notice that he was in a bad mood? Haven't you been playing this game seriously all the time? It's all about playing games. Where's the fun? If Bai Liu doesn't tell you, it's because he's just playing with his teammates…"

“Tang Erda, sometimes it’s not a good thing to rely too much on tacticians.” Bai Liu quickly interrupted Liu Jiayi’s words and said seriously, “I prefer that you, as my best main attacker, think about the information gained on your own first.”

Tang Erda’s eyes flickered between Liu Jiayi and Bai Liu twice, then he cautiously took two steps back, crossed his arms and looked at Bai Liu: “First tell me what’s going on in this game.”

Bai Liu asked: “Do you still remember the time limit of this game?”

“Seven days.” Tang Erda answered quickly.

Bai Liu continued to ask: “Do you remember what day it is now?”

“In the early morning of the third day.” Tang Erda replied.

Bai Liu smiled: “Don’t you think it’s strange? A game with a time limit of seven days has reached its third day and is halfway through. No player has gained points yet.”

Tang Erda replied cautiously: “This situation is not impossible.”

“Yes, but it is impossible for top players.” Bai Liu said, “The players in this game, me, you, Liu Jiayi, and Killer Sequence can be said to be the top players in the entire system. If these top players haven’t even gotten a single point halfway through the game, it can only mean one thing.”

Bai Liu raised his eyes and looked at Tang Erda: “First, the design of this game is very poor. It doesn’t allow players to experience a sense of gain even halfway through.”

“Second, these three days are not the real three days at all. The game is not halfway through, and we found the wrong time reference.”

“Then what is the real time reference?” Tang Erda asked.

Bai Liu said: “I gave my radio equipment to Spades and asked him to find it. If he finds it, he should use the equipment to send you a message.”

Liu Jiayi asked in disbelief: “Bai Liu, did you just say that you gave our team’s communication equipment to an outsider?!”

Bai Liu replied calmly: “It’s not for nothing. I sold it to him. I sold him 73 points for 10,000 points. It’s not a loss.”

Liu Jiayi: "…"

Tang Erda: "…"

Yes, that's something only you can do.

Not long after, Tang Erda's radio equipment rang. He lowered his head to check, then looked up at Bai Liu: "He said he found it."

Bai Liu asked: "Where?"

Tang Erda called back: "The military mass cemetery built behind the town."

Bai Liu found a broken down truck that was abandoned in the mud on the road. Tang Erda used brute force to get it out and got under the truck to repair it. The three of them then tied up the pile of living dead and loaded them on the truck.

"The road here is not easy to drive." Tang Erda, who was sitting in the driver's seat, lifted up his vest and wiped off the mud on his face with a serious expression, "I will drive a little faster to make it less likely to get stuck. You guys sit tight."

From polar planes to battlefield tanks to this old truck…

Bai Liu slowly looked at Tang Erda: "I'm curious, what means of transportation do you not know how to drive?"

Tang Erda really thought for a few seconds, and then answered Bai Liu seriously: "If it fits the means of transportation in your definition, I will not use Mu Sicheng."

Bai Liu: "…"

Liu Jiayi: "…"

Who taught Tang Erda to tell cold jokes?

It took about a few hours to drive from the Red Cross to the small town. Fortunately, Tang Erda drove very fast and quickly arrived near the small town.

Tang Erda got out of the car and covered the writhing living dead on the back with cloth, then found a place to hide the car. When he was about to take out the skill revolver, he jolted. His head popped up from behind the car. "Hey," he called Bai Liu.

Bai Liu turned around.

Tang Erda hesitated for two seconds: “Do you want to use my skill gun? I won’t take it out if you want to use it.”

Bai Liu raised his eyebrows in surprise, “No, but I’m curious about why you suddenly thought of this?”

Tang Erda has fought with his skill weapon for so long. Using his own skill weapon is as easy as drinking water and eating. To be able to consider Bai Liu, who shared his skill, before using it was honestly quite difficult.

At least among the current Wandering Circus, only Mu Ke could do this.

Tang Erda paused strangely for a few seconds. He seemed to realise something from Bai Liu’s reaction: “You didn’t tell Spades about your skills?”

Bai Liu raised his eyebrows: “Why do you think I would tell him?”

Tang Erda paused again and said, “Spades and I have been working together for a while. He forbids me from using skill weapons. He said that you might want to use them, and that he will beat me if I draw the revolver.”

“…I thought you told him.”

Bai Liu was quiet: “I didn’t tell him, did you ask him how he knew?”

Tang Erda nodded: “I asked, he said he didn’t know, it was intuition.”

“Ignore him for now.” Bai Liu brushed off the topic calmly, “Go find the cemetery first.”

The cemetery is actually easy to find. The signs in the town all mark the cemetery. But the strange thing was that every time Bai Liu and the others went in this direction, they encountered a very thick and strange fog, and then after passing through the fog, returned to the same intersection.

“Is this a ghostly wall?” Liu Jiayi raised the poison spray vigilantly, “No matter how you go around, it’s the same place.”

Tang Erda also took out the Rose Revolver and stood behind Bai Liu: “Do you need to do something to get out?”

“There should be certain conditions before you can get out. According to the popular process, we should decrypt it first.” Bai Liu looked at Liu Jiayi, “But now there is a more direct way.”

Liu Jiayi quickly put down the spray and turned on the wireless device: “Send a message to Spades and ask him how he got out, right?”

The news from Spades came back quickly. Liu Jiayi frowned after reading it: “——Can you use a whip to clear the mist and come out?”

“Weapon attack?” Tang Erda cautiously fired twice at the fog directly in front, and then a crackling sound came from directly behind. His pupils shrank and he quickly pushed down Bai Liu who was standing in front.

The bullets flew over their heads and hit the sign with a loud bang, leaving a huge hole.

“The spaces are in a state of close contact with each other. Weapon attacks are ineffective and can’t break it. They will reappear in the same place.” Tang Erda shook his head solemnly.

Liu Jiayi frowned: “How did Spades break it? Is it possible that his whip can even break space-“

She paused suddenly when she said this, and then looked up at Bai Liu who was patting off the dirt on his knees.

Bai Liu stood up and looked back at Liu Jiayi with calm eyes: “——And maybe break time.”

Liu Jiayi pursed her lips: “It has the same function as the bone whip you destroyed before.”

“Then how do we get out now?” Tang Erda asked.

Bai Liu looked at Liu Jiayi: “Send a message to Spades and ask him to pick us up.”

As soon as he finished speaking, a needle cut across the side of Bai Liu’s face, and a line of blood was drawn.

The needle fell to the ground, and the curved tail was still wrapped with silk thread – it was a hooked needle used for suturing.

Tang Erda turned his head abruptly. Just as he was about to shoot, he

suddenly remembered that the space here was closely connected and it would be easy to shoot directly here. He had to grit his teeth and switched his gun to a military knife: “Who’s there?”

In the white mist, several figures that looked like women wearing wide skirts were looming, approaching Bai Liu and his group at the centre of the intersection from all directions. They held long guns in their hands, dragging them on the ground and making rustling sounds on the gravel.

Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda arranged themselves to the left and right in order to protect Bai Liu who was in the centre, both of them scowling.

Tang Erda took a deep breath and said, “You can’t attack casually here. Because the space is closely connected, we don’t know where our attack will hit. We can only fight hand-to-hand.”

“—But you two are not good at it, so I’ll count to three, and when the physical fight starts, you two will run back.”

Liu Jiayi nodded simply and threw two bottles of antidote to Tang Erda, “Be careful.”

The women’s figures were getting closer and closer, and only then did Tang Erda see clearly that the dresses these women were wearing were not just any other clothes, but beautifully sewn old white wedding dresses with many blood stains on them.

These wedding dresses seemed inexplicably familiar to Tang Erda. He looked up at the dresses, and when he saw the person wearing the wedding dress, his expression finally froze.

These weren’t women at all, they were all Guys.

These Guys were sutured with surgical stitches, and there were countless scars on their faces. In some places, the suture threads had not yet been cut. The smile at the corner of his mouth was weird but sweet, his skin was grey, and his eyes were completely black, with no white visible at all. The wedding dress on his body was stained with countless blood spots.

[Congratulations to player Tang Erda for triggering the second page of the “Monster Book of the Jungle Border” – Corpse Bride]

Chapter End Notes

A "cold joke" (冷笑话, lěng xiàohuà) in Chinese refers to a type of joke that is often dry, absurd, or awkwardly unfunny—so much so that it might make people groan instead of laugh.

The term "cold" (冷, lěng) suggests that the joke is so unfunny that it creates an awkward or "cold" atmosphere, as if it leaves people speechless rather than amused.

The Dense Forest Borderlands

When the first Guy raised his gun and pointed it at them, Tang Erda raised his hand to stop them and shouted: “Duck and run!”

“It’s not necessary.” Bai Liu looked towards the end of the fog, “The space here started to connect from the moment we came in, but now it’s completely sealed. We can’t escape.”

Tang Erda followed Bai Liu’s line of sight, and his expression froze.

At the end of the mist stood a looming sign, marked by a fresh bullet hole—a result of Tang Erda's recent shot. Next to the sign stood three figures: two large and one small, with their reflections mirrored beside them.

“It seems that we have to decrypt the code before we can get out of here.” Bai Liu turned to look at the zombie brides who were getting closer, “Tang Erda, please hold on for a while.”

Tang Erda raised his hand and swiped the guns of the two zombie brides. He held the gun of the third zombie bride, turned it around, pointed it at the opponent’s mouth, and fired twice. After having blood spattered on his face, he turned around and asked Bai Liu behind him: “There’s a puzzle here?”

Bai Liu pointed to the street sign next to him: “That’s it.”

“What kind of puzzle can this be?” Tang Erda asked doubtfully as he broke one of the Guys’ necks and wiped off the blood splashed on his face.

Bai Liu’s eyes stopped on the sign. There were eight road signs on it, pointing to the recruit station, the tavern, the training camp, the town exit, the registration office, the train station, the direction of the battlefield and the cemetery.

Liu Jiayi quickly scanned the sign above: “The prompt is the address, but no matter where you go, you will circle back to the same place. There should be some sort of special route to go out.” “But there are too many possible routes that can be combined with eight signposts.” Liu Jiayi frowned and looked at Bai Liu, “Do you have any clues that can serve as reminders?”

Bai Liu glanced at Guy, who was struggling with Tang Erda: “Haven’t

the clues already been given to us?"

Liu Jiayi suddenly turned her head to look at the Guys: "These guys are zombies, buried corpses, they came from the cemetery!"

"Yes, this group of Guys came from the cemetery and passed through this barrier." Bai Liu's eyes returned to the road sign, "Since this group of Guys who are already zombies can pass through this barrier, it means that this route is very familiar to him, and he can subconsciously follow it even after dying and becoming a zombie."

Liu Jiayi had been staying at the Red Cross Society and was not familiar with the NPC Guy. After hearing Bai Liu's analysis, she simply said: "I don't understand this. I'll help Tang Erda fight so please hurry up and figure it out."

After saying that, Liu Jiayi rushed to Tang Erda with two bottles of antidote, and kicked away a gun that came from behind him.

The gun went off, and Bai Liu sidestepped to avoid it, but his eyes were fixed on the sign.

If the seven days of the war were a cycle, these dead Guys should have remembered the path they had walked here during their lifetimes. Guy defected on the second day, so it should be the road that Guy traveled on the first day.

And Guy was with him all the way that day.

They met Guy when… Bai Liu shifted his gaze and glanced at the first road sign. "The first one is in the direction of the battlefield," he muttered, his thoughts interrupted.

Tang Erda had already confiscated all the monsters' guns. He lifted Liu Jiayi on his shoulders with both hands and ran two steps towards the battlefield. He turned around and said hoarsely: "Then what? Bai Liu, there are more and more zombies. Hurry up!"

Bai Liu reported the next address smoothly: "The second place is the train station, the third place is the registration office, the fourth place is the recruit station, the fifth place is the tavern, and the sixth place is the training camp."

Tang Erda asked urgently: "What about the seventh and eighth!"

Bai Liu glanced back and forth twice at the [Town Exit] and the

[Cemetery]. He had never been to these two places with Guy, so he didn't know the order.

But these are corpses, and the final destination of the corpses should be the cemetery.

Bai Liu was only quiet for a second, and then continued: "The seventh one is the exit of the town, and the eighth one is the cemetery."

Tang Erda stepped in the direction of the cemetery, then looked at the motionless mist behind him, and looked at Bai Liu in confusion: "Why isn't there a reaction? Did I not go the right way just now?"

He did not doubt that Bai Liu's judgment was wrong.

Liu Jiayi pulled away from Tang Erda's hands that had grabbed her. The man ran so fast that she was shaken and so dizzy that she didn't even have time to dissuade him. At this moment, she was put down and she said breathlessly: "You are going the wrong way. These Guys are from the cemetery, we should walk backwards from the direction of the cemetery."

Tang Erda: "…"

Tang Erda glanced at Bai Liu in confusion and disbelief: "But Bai Liu was thinking…"

Bai Liu smiled innocently at him: "I thought you knew you should walk backwards. It's easy to guess."

Tang Erda: "…"

"I told you that Bai Liu was just playing around, did you believe him?" Liu Jiayi waved her hand impatiently, "Let's go, you silly man."

As expected, he walked out easily after walking backwards. Bai Liu pushed aside the fog and saw another figure in front of him.

Tang Erda subconsciously pulled out his revolver and tried to shoot the figure, but before he could even do anything, a black whip came out of the mist with a snap. The speed was so fast that Tang Erda didn't even have time to pull away before he was whipped on the back of his hand.

This familiar weapon and the pain of the whip… Tang Erda withdrew his skill weapon and asked tentatively: "Spades?"

Spades walked out of the mist. He held the whip in his left hand and glanced at Tang Erda coldly: “Didn’t I tell you not to shoot casually?”

Tang Erda couldn’t help but “….”.

Why can Spades demand such outrageous things like not allowing others to use their skills and weapons in such a confident tone?

Bai Liu glanced at Spades lightly: “Don’t hit my team members casually.”

Spades said oh, then immediately turned to Tang Erda and said, “I’m sorry.”

Liu Jiayi, who was standing next to him, muttered in a low voice with disapproval, “You’re just going to say I’m sorry?”

Spades looked at Liu Jiayi calmly, raised his hand and whipped the back of his hand without hesitation then asked, “Is it alright now?”

Liu Jiayi: “…”

Tang Erda: “…”

Why would this person argue so seriously with an eight-year-old girl in such a childish way…

Seeing the serious look on Spades’ face and his aggressive attitude of arguing with Liu Jiayi to the end, Bai Liu had no choice but to stop him: “Okay, what clues did you find?”

Spades then turned to look at Bai Liu: “I found a woman in the cemetery.”

“Woman?” Bai Liu’s tone rose slightly, “Who?”

Spades looked directly at Bai Liu: “Alex’s former fiancée.”

Spades led Bai Liu and his group through a blanket of mist to a long-forgotten town, but at the same time, a brand-new town.

Once a lively and bustling border town, it now lay abandoned and decayed. The wooden signposts were rickety, their inscriptions long rotted and illegible. The tents that once marked the training camp were now buried beneath layers of old industrial buildings. The shelves at the entrance, where the list of names had been kept, were rusted through and discarded.

The tavern was nowhere to be found.

In the location of the tavern was a grocery store that has long since closed. The closing date was written to be thirty years ago.

The ground was covered with scraps of paper, billboard plastic, and some vinyl disc fragments.

Bai Liu turned around and found that the lush battlefield rainforest had disappeared and was replaced by a huge factory. Next to it was a dilapidated billboard that read [Producer of tropical forest raw materials, global log production base]. Next to it was a smiling lumberjack face oil painting.

The door of the factory, known as “the world’s largest log production base,” was locked, and the sign hanging on the door showed that it had been closed for a long time, similar to the closing time of the grocery store.

Bai Liu withdrew his gaze and continued walking through the ruined town.

Passing through the exit of the town and walking to a long-abandoned cemetery, Spades climbed over the rusty gate with familiarity and opened it for Bai Liu from the inside.

Bai Liu walked into the cemetery.

This was an extremely desolate and old cemetery. The marble monuments were covered with weeds. The cemetery was very messy. At first glance, it looked like a back garden that had not been taken care of for more than ten years. Crosses and tombstones were looming among the weeds.

But that was not the weirdest thing about this cemetery.

The weirdest thing about this cemetery was found out by Bai Liu, who carefully paid attention to the names of the deceased on every cross and tombstone.

The time of death, black and white photos, and names of the deceased on all the tombstones were exactly the same.

All the graves in the cemetery were the graves of Guy Davis.

And basically, every tomb has been dug open. From the inside, you

could vaguely see the corpses rushing out of the coffins that were violently destroyed, and the soil that was pushed out from the tomb next to them, piled on both sides of the tombstones.

Walking through the empty cemetery and reaching the corner, Bai Liu saw an old woman standing there holding a bouquet of flowers. She turned her back to Bai Liu, tremblingly bowed down, and placed a bouquet of flowers and a wedding dress on a tombstone.

“Hello.” Bai Liu called her softly, “Who are you?”

She turned around; her cloudy eyes filled with tears: “I used to be the fiancée of that boy Alex.”

“But that was fifty or sixty years ago.” She waved her hand, swept away the dust on the tombstone, bent at her waist and sat down with a sigh, saying, “Now, I’m just an old woman cleaning his tombstone.”

Bai Liu squatted down and looked into the old woman’s eyes: “What is your name?”

“Elena, just call me Elena.” The old woman looked back at Bai Liu, “Young man, who are you?”

Bai Liu said calmly: “Maybe you won’t believe me, but I am Alex’s comrade-in-arms.”

“Comrade?” The old woman indeed sneered, “Young man, I see that you are more senile than I. That war has been over for more than fifty years now. How about a more recent war setting for your dreams of being a war hero?”

Bai Liu repeated softly, “Fifty years have passed since the war ended?”

Elena lowered her head and looked at Bai Liu with droopy, wrinkled eyelids: “Maybe it’s been longer, I’m so old that I can hardly remember these dates.”

“I just remember that a long time ago, when Alex was still alive, he and the guy named Guy wrote many, many letters to me.” Elena took out a pile of old letters from her dirty skirt bib. “Every time I visit their graves, I read the letters they sent me in front of their graves, so as not to forget them all.”

Elena sighed tiredly: “You know, I am the only old woman who remembers these things now. If I forget them too, there will really be no trace of them.”

Bai Liu looked at the stack of letters and politely asked: “Can I see it?”

Elena looked at Bai Liu in surprise: “Are you interested? No young people want to hear these old stories anymore.”

Bai Liu smiled: “I am Alex and Guy’s comrade-in-arms, and I have an obligation to help remember them.”

Elena stared at Bai Liu quietly for a long time, and she suddenly laughed: “Young man, even if you are a liar who tells lies, you did use your lies to make me happy.”

She handed the pile of letters to Bai Liu kindly, with tears in her eyes: “You are welcome to remember these two people with me.”

Bai Liu held up the letter: “Perhaps you aren’t suggesting that I open it and read it in person?”

Elena laughed and waved her hands tremblingly: “Of course not, I can recite everything from the top of my head.”

Bai Liu lowered his head and arranged the letters in chronological order, and then opened them one by one. Elena was talking nonchalantly:

“…You know, young man, if a person had a bad life and is alone when they are very old, they will recall their past over and over again and

wonder what they did wrong to end up like this…"

Elena's old voice paused: "Do you know what is the most terrifying thing in this process?"

Bai Liu raised his eyes and looked at her: "What is it?"

Elena forced a smile, but tears flowed from the corners of her eyes: "If you did do a lot of things wrong."

Bai Liu lowered his eyes and looked at the first letter in his hand. It was from Elena to Alex.

[Tribute to my dear fiancé :

Your dirty, shameless, despicable male lover wrote to me two days ago, begging me to forgive him for his despicable behavior with you, and shamelessly asking me to bless your love and marriage.

What a disgusting idea!

Is there any god in this world who would allow two men to unite in front of him?

I even suspected that enemy artillery shells would be raining down on the place where you were getting married as punishment for your breach of ethics!

Alex, as a doctor who studies the mechanism of human life, the greatest profession on earth, why would you allow yourself to hang out with such a ridiculous psychopath, wasting your time when you could be saving people?

When you're with him, don't you feel like your future and ideals are tainted by shit?

At least when I got the letter from him, I felt like my dignity had been stained by shit.]

Bai Liu opened the next letter, and the sender was Alex.

[To Elena :

First, allow me to viciously refute the way you have addressed me. I have never met you, and I have never agreed to allow you to make your own decisions and become my fiancée. The title you addressed me at the beginning of your previous letter is completely wrong.

Second, there will only be one lover, wife, and person who will be with me for life, and that is Guy, not you, who suddenly appeared after Guy and I fell in love.

I don't know where your inexplicable affection for me came from, whether it was from my parents' unrealistic expectations and descriptions of me, or from the pursuit of the only young man in that narrow town who had achieved an advanced degree, or from the complacency and self-congratulation of your own beauty, the ridiculous notion that the prettiest girl in the town would be able to win over the nicest young man.

Allow me to solemnly explain to you, Elena, I am not an object that you can use to win or flaunt, I am a person with feelings.

After I gave my love to Guy, it was absolutely impossible for me to fall in love with anyone else unless I stopped loving him.

Elena, you are also an independent person. Your value does not need to be flaunted by getting me. You can go on to more worthy things to prove that.

Guy and I have two qualifications to go to higher education institutions. Mine will be used by myself. Guy said that you are still a naive little girl and has more qualifications to enjoy the beauty and knowledge of the world than he, who does not know if he'll come back alive.

If you have any thoughts of going to a higher education institution, Guy says he can give you his qualifications.

Although you said all kinds of things to Guy that I think are bullshit, Guy forgave you and nobly said that he would give you this opportunity to further your studies.

Although I strongly disagreed, Guy was adamant.

Guy said he could tell you were a girl with aspirations.

He said that you like me because I am a doctor. You think I am great for treating diseases and saving people, so you cast a kind of girlish admiration on me.

Guy asked me to pass on something to you. If you like saving people, why not try it yourself?

I'm sorry for the blind assurances my parents made to you, but I will still scold you if you make any inappropriate remarks about Guy again.]

Bai Liu continued to flip through it, and the next letter was from Elena again, but this time it was not addressed to Alex, but to Guy.

[Tribute to Guy:

I apologize for the inappropriate and emotionally charged insults.

I put all the money I had saved from working in the past three years from the age of eleven to now in this envelope as compensation for my personal exportation of inappropriate words.

I won't take the academic qualification you gave me. I still think you are wasting Alex's time. He could have more. He invented a potion that can delay the death of mankind. How many military men who died in the war could have been saved?

Everyone in town says Alex could be the next war hero!

But after he met you, all he can think about now is falling in love!

I still hope you stay away from him, maybe you can find another true male lover, but that person shouldn't be Alex.]

The next letter was from Guy to Elena.

[To the lovely little girl Elena:

Hey little girl, guess what? I think what you said is right.

Alex will indeed have a rather bright future, he was a very talented fellow. The experimental process of the potion is moving forward quickly, and his superiors have given him permission to experiment on wounded soldiers with remarkable results.

I'm not worthy of him. Alex is very good, so I still want to selfishly possess him for a while and have the best memories with him.

Elena, I have seen your photos. You are very beautiful, but you are too young, only fourteen years old. You still can't tell the difference between love and longing.

I have to admit, Alex is a good young man. However, by the time you and he can talk about love, it will likely be at least four years from

now. Believe me, with your beauty, determination, and perseverance, you'll probably have met someone else by then—someone who makes your heart race even more.

Of course, it could also be a lovely young woman. You should not be tied to any prejudice.

After the war, enjoying a romantic and slow-paced love in a peaceful era is what you and Alex deserve, instead of sacrificing your youth and marrying a war hero they imagined under the enthusiasm of war-mongering town residents and Alex' parents.

This isn't fair, not to both you and to Alex.

I hope you are happy, because you deserve happiness, and I hope I can be happy too.

But unfortunately, the happiness I want is not something God is willing to bless.

Hey, Alex told me you were a great wedding dress maker, could you make one for me? It just so happens that I want to dress up and marry Alex]

The last letter that Elena wrote to Guy was very messy, with many tears on it, as if the fourteen-year-old Elena was crying while writing the letter.

But her tone in the letter was completely different and cold:

[To Guy:

I don't know where you got those rumors that I was forced to marry Alex. There was no such thing. I did it of my own free will.

I won't make a wedding dress. I won't allow anyone to marry Alex before me. Just give up!]

Bai Liu looked at the wedding dress Elena placed on Guy's tombstone, raised her eyebrows and asked, "Can I know why you made a wedding dress for Guy in the end?"

Elena smiled with nostalgia, but her smile seemed to contain a lot of unspeakable sadness hidden in her happiness, and the corners of her mouth couldn't stop turning down.

"…I was too young at that time and didn't understand anything. The

town said that a beautiful girl would be chosen to marry a war hero in the town. The winner would get a sum of money from Alex's parents and my parents let me go."

"I was the most beautiful of all the girls." Elena's eyes became more distant. "I was chosen easily. I was still very young at that time and the law did not allow me to get married, so Alex's parents told me to wait for Alex's return, and I was not allowed to have any contact or love with anyone until Alex came back."

"At that time, my whole life was devoted to marrying the hero, Alex. When someone else took him away, I panicked. I hated Guy so much." Elena's eyes were red, and her tone was hateful, "Guy was a very glib guy, and he also likes to write letters to tease me. I simply didn't understand how a man who was fighting in a war could be so carefree and still smile every day."

"Guy is different from all the men I have met. He respected me, encouraged me, and said that sooner or later I will achieve results that are not inferior to Alex's. He even helped me get admission, so I could go straight to school when the time came."

Elena's tears overflowed from her wrinkles: "On the night when I was crying and writing this letter to Guy, I secretly made a wedding dress overnight and rushed to the post office to send it to him."

As she spoke, she turned to look at Bai Liu in a daze: "But when I got to the post office, they notified me that a new letter had arrived and asked me to pick it up. I opened it, and it was still a letter from Guy."

Elena burst into tears: "——It's Guy's obituary and a suicide note."

"Guy was shot dead on the spot after rebelling during a sneak attack in the early morning. He knew this would happen a long time ago and left a suicide note for me in advance, asking me to take good care of myself and help him take care of Alex."

"I wanted to give him a wedding dress, an apology, and a thank you…" Elena choked, her lips trembling as she said, "He didn't have time to hear all of it."

“I laid on the oversized wedding dress and cried and fainted at the door of the post office. Elena raised her head and her gaze drifted away. “When I woke up, I thought this was the darkest moment that war could bring me.”

“But everything that followed told me it was much more than that.”

Elena raised her hand, wiped her tears with her palm, took a deep breath, and continued: “Later, Alex and I had no contact for a while, until I heard someone say that the commander of that war had many tanks and artillery dispatched and transported from our town to the front line.”

“I realized that a big war was about to start, so I wrote to Alex again to make sure of his safety and try to persuade him not to participate in this dangerous war.”

Elena covered her face with wrinkled hands, her voice hoarse:

“I waited for a long time, waiting anxiously at the post office day and night, but still didn’t receive a reply from Alex until the day before the war.”

“That one, one…”

Her voice broke, as if she couldn’t pronounce the letter’s name.

While listening to Elena’s words, Bai Liu continued to search for letters. He once again saw the letter Alex sent to Elena.

This is a long letter, a family letter that arranges the aftermath, and a desperate suicide note.

[To Elena:

I shouldn’t have written this letter to you, but after thinking about it again and again, it seems that besides you, there is no one else I can confide in about my funeral affairs.

It’s so wonderful to say, Elena, little girl, that I’ve never met you, and yet you’ve enjoyed a nominal fiancé-couple relationship with me, survived the death of the person I loved most, and accompanied my parents through the most difficult of years.

If nothing else happens, you will have to witness my death next.

It's selfish and self-serving that you've been through all the great things in my life, yet I've yet to meet you once in person, have always rejected your existence, and in the end have to tell you, the stranger I know best, the most important thing about me before I die.

But there's no way around it. You're the only person I've ever willed to die without feeling guilty, I guess.

I know that my death will not make you too sad, but will only completely free you from this marriage relationship that should not exist in the first place.

Only with you can I realize that my death may be a good thing for someone, and I feel more calm and proud of myself.

Next I will confess to you all the mistakes I have made in my life.

I spent my whole life trying to save everyone around me, but in the end no one was saved.

I invented a potion that could freeze death, but everyone rushing to die didn't say hello to me in advance and instead said, Hey, Alex, I'm going to die, remember to freeze my death.

I could only helplessly cover their bleeding wounds, break down and cry, begging them to stay for even a second, and finally carry their bodies back feebly, sitting there until dawn, waiting for the next round of death.

The lake of death named Pluto must have found it hilarious that I was trying to prevent it from coming to earth.

I kept, kept, and frantically tried to improve my potions, but no matter how I slowed down their death, death would eventually come. All I did was make them suffer a little longer before death.

When they are in extreme pain and despair, they will quietly and with tears beg me to let them die easily.

Because even if they survive, they are likely to die in the next round of offensive and defensive battles.

Sometimes I ask myself, is my selfish desire to leave these people alive and tortured in this war more cruel than letting them die?

Am I wrong?

Elena, I have never wanted to reply to your letter because I cannot face the ubiquitous name in your letter – Guy.

Guy did not die on the battlefield. I lied about his death and used my status as a sweeper to secretly transport his “body” to my pharmacy laboratory.

I devoted everything I had to saving him, and he miraculously revived. I swear when I saw him open his eyes, I even wanted to thank the evil god for a moment.

Whichever god it was, I wanted to thank him for sending Guy back to me.

I want you to be honest. My potion originally did not have such a strong effect, but my experiments in this place are limited and I cannot get sufficient experimental supplies like those on university campuses. I can only use some locally produced experimental potions as materials.

Most of the experimental chemicals were of poor quality, causing the experiment to fail, but there was one strange thing that worked wonders – a strange paint.

This kind of paint is used by the natives here to smear on the statues of evil gods. It is a flammable oil-like texture. When I was short of oil-based solvents, my superiors collected half a jar of this kind from a captured native. The red paint came out and was sent to my lab as a replacement oil solvent.

Although this stuff looked sticky and weird, like human blood after melting oil, I didn’t have any other choice.

But the addition of this paint produced an incredible change – it made Guy, whose heart had stopped beating for half a minute when he entered my laboratory, come back to life.

I simply couldn’t believe what I saw, and I even felt that my desire to resurrect Guy was too strong and led to some self-deceptive hallucination.

But Guy is indeed improving day by day, or in other words, using improvement to describe his entire recovery process is not accurate. Combining my clinical and microscopic observations, I can come to a

conclusion that you will definitely think I am crazy——

——Time is running backwards for Guy.

His fallen skin reglued, his broken bones healed again, and even his nails and hair that grew after death were shortened.

This is not something that humans can do at all. This is the realm of gods. Even God does not have such ability.

From the moment I arrived here and learned that the reason why these ignorant and ugly natives launched the war was actually the so-called evil god's oracle, I hated the so-called evil god deeply.

And all along, I thought that this evil god was a symbol fabricated by the natives to explain things they couldn't understand and to express their anger that they couldn't dispatch. It was an illusory and evil image.

But when Guy sat up again, opened his eyes, smiled confusedly and asked me why he was in my laboratory, I closed my eyes and hugged him tightly.

If this is the work of the evil god, then I can understand why the natives are crazy because of the evil god.

When Guy woke up, he forgot everything that had happened in the past seven days – sneak attacks on innocent villages, killing children and women in neutral zones, and being shot dead after his rebellion.

Everything, he couldn't remember anything.

I carefully hid him in the laboratory, almost anxiously waiting for the war to come, but before the war came, Guy still got the information he wanted from a recruit who came to clean the laboratory.

He knew what had happened in the past seven days, and he also knew that the commander would summon enough artillery fire to launch the final battle – to blow up all the native habitats and the natives inside, as well as all surrounding neutral areas where the natives might flee.

Although this neutral zone did not participate in the war from beginning to end, and most of them were women and children, the commander felt that this kind of indigenous people with despicable beliefs must be exterminated, and they should not be left with any

chance to reproduce and share resources with us.

You can predict what Guy will do.

Guy went to assassinate the commander without hesitation. After the failure, he was blasted into a gun board full of holes by hundreds of guns, and burned to ashes by a flamethrower.

When I arrived at the scene, nothing was left.

I told the soldier on guard that I was on duty for him, and then I naturally stood alone all night at the place where Guy was burned to death, leaving black marks, letting my tears fall numbly in the dark night.

Elena, do you know what I saw that night?

I saw cannons as thick as a child's waist constantly being brought here, cold tanks, soldiers ready to go, and the eyes of the crowd filled with blood-red anger, fear, or greed.

At that moment, I realized that no matter how powerful the potion I invented, I still couldn't save anyone from this war.

People who want to kill others will still kill others, and people who don't want to kill will want to avoid dying painfully because they are unwilling to kill.

There seems to be a natural food chain between these two types of people, running endlessly.

Even the ability to resurrect the dead and reverse time seems to be unable to change the outcome of this war.

So I filled out the form to sign up for the commando team, and I wanted to go deep into the rainforest to meet the evil god who gave me the ability to realize my desires——

——Ask him what he needs to do to give everyone a lasting ending in this war.

For this, I am willing to give everything.

Elena, if I don't come back after this war, please forgive me for selfishly entrusting my parents to you. Please take care of them until you reach adulthood, and then go pursue your own life.

—-Alex.]

“This is the last letter I received from Alex,” Elena whispered with trance-like eyes. “The next day, the war broke out.”

“I still can’t forget that war. The artillery fire shook the small town where I lived. Ash fell off the wall. Plates and wine glasses were shattered on the floor. Planes were flying around outside the window. Everyone was scared. Huddled together at home, I hid under the bed and could see the fire flickering in the distance.”

Elena was silent for a few seconds: “The artillery fire lasted for three days. On the evening of the third day, the town where the soldiers were stationed, where the weapons were stored was attacked by the natives. The natives sprinkled the weapons with a magical red paint. “It ended up causing a huge explosion.”

“After the explosion subsided, there was no movement in the town and the rainforest that was blasted through. It wasn’t until half a month later that someone came to take over.” Elena looked at Bai Liu, “You said you were Alex’s comrade but that is impossible.”

“Because there were no survivors in that war.”

The Dense Forest Borderlands

Elena closed her eyes and her voice was hoarse:

"…… I waited four years, until I was an adult, and every day I wanted to hear about Guy and Alex's remains in the newspapers and on the radio, but I didn't wait until all the channels I had access to no longer broadcast news about the war. "

"…I gave up and kept waiting."

Elena's chest rose and fell slightly: "After I became an adult, I left the town to go to school, work, and live, but this place still haunts me. After I turned thirty, I saved up money and came to this small town where there was a war."

"It was very prosperous at that time, and the damage after the war was still repaired to some extent. Some people built a large factory relying on the rich wood resources of the rainforest, which attracted many people to work, but this prosperity did not last long. "

Elena looked back in the direction of the abandoned town: "The workers and machine tools in the large factory were running day and night, transporting the wood here to the world. Soon the wood here was exhausted, and a lot of trees were lost. Rainforests that originally received heavy rainfall gradually turned into deserts."

"… Later, everyone here left again, and I am the only old woman who is still guarding the tomb here." Elena patted the tombstone where she was sitting, and suddenly said, "Oh, by the way, didn't I forget to tell you about this cemetery?"

She rubbed her temples and sighed: "… When people get old, they tend to mess things up. This cemetery was used as a collective cemetery to bury dead soldiers during the war. After the war, it was acquired by a private owner and turned into a cemetery. Commercial cemetery for sale."

"But most of the corpses buried here are nameless corpses from the war. The government did not allow them to be removed, so they have been buried here. The named corpses were all taken away by their families."

"When I came here, I found the owner of this cemetery and said that I was willing to spend my own money to build two empty tombs for

Alex and Guy in this cemetery. That is to say, there are no corpses in the tombs, only the remains of them. Something for me."
When Elena said this, her eyes became vacant: "But they quickly gave me a reply, saying that Alex can have a cemetery in this cemetery, but Guy Davis cannot."

"…I asked them why, and they said that because Guy Davis had a rebel record, according to regulations, he was not eligible to be buried in any cemetery in the country."

Elena's voice suddenly became hysterical: "I screamed at this group of heartless businessmen; I said Guy Davis is dead!! He has been dead for more than ten years! Even God can forgive him after death. It's not your turn to judge him for his crime!"

"Even a mouse with indigenous blood can purchase a grave in your cemetery. Why can't an upright and kind person be buried!!"

Elena held on to the tombstone with a fierce look in her eyes. She choked and gasped:

"…I was young and vigorous at that time, and I was unwilling to accept it. I almost lost all my money and sold all my clothes and jewelry in order to sell them to Guy's tomb from this cemetery seller…"

Elena smiled proudly, but tears fell from the corners of her eyes:

"I still succeeded. This cemetery dealer agreed to sell me the grave in violation of the regulations. You see, with enough money, the sins of this group of people who refuse to give up pursuing even death can be easily erased."

"… After the cemetery dealer left here, this cemetery fell into ruins. I retaliated by changing all the tombstones here to Guy's name. At that moment, it was really a mischievous pleasure."

Speaking of this, Elena fell silent.

"…In Alex's grave, I put some things that I took from his house, Guy, in Guy's grave…" Elena couldn't help but take a deep breath, "Because I really can't find it. I didn't want anything related to him, so I put in the old wedding dress I made for him."

Bai Liu looked at Elena calmly: "Later, you found that the wedding dress was missing, right?"

Elena looked directly into Bai Liu's eyes: "Yes, there hasn't been a day in these years when I haven't been tortured by the guilt of not agreeing to his marriage to Alex. I put it in Guy's grave. The letter I later wrote to him agreeing to all his requests, and the wedding dress."

"But one day the tomb was opened, and the wedding dress and letter inside were gone. There was still a reply letter from Guy. It was indeed his handwriting. The ink on it was not dry yet and was still fresh." Elena's breathing quickened, "I doubt, doubt…"

Bai Liu asked softly: "You suspect that they are not dead yet, they are still alive, but they just don't want to see you."

Elena was silent for a long time and said softly: "…Yes."

"I started to experiment, and I found that whenever I put the wedding dress and letters on the grave, they would sometimes disappear the next day, and sometimes it would take a long time to disappear, and some new letters would appear, and the letters would disappear. It's from fifty years ago."

Elena breathed out: "These two things representing repentance may be the only reason why they are willing to come to see me. I started writing them according to the content of the letters and making wedding dresses for them, hoping that they would be willing to keep them. Come down and take a look at me."

"…I hope I can personally say to Guy and Alex, I'm sorry, and God wishes you happiness forever."

[May God wish you happiness forever] – Bai Liu had seen this sentence on Guy's wedding dress.

Elena drooped her eyelids and said with some difficulty in breathing: "…I waited and waited for who knows how many years, made who knows how many wedding dresses, and wrote how many letters, until everyone left. Here, I still haven't stopped waiting for them to come see me."

"…Sometimes, I suspect that I have gone crazy." Elena smiled, her eyes full of the vicissitudes of life, "I will see Guy in a wedding dress and holding a bouquet appearing in this cemetery from time to time. He still has a happy and beautiful smile on his face that I hope he can have. "

"…But when I got closer, I found that he was just a corpse that had been stitched together."

She looked at Bai Liu with cloudy eyes: "If you are really Alex and Guy's comrades, please tell them that I don't expect them to forgive me for my despicable behavior. I just hope to meet them. It's okay even if they don't forgive me."

Elena slowly shed a tear: "…I just want to see them be happy."

"And not because of me, Alex's fiancée, who can't be together until death."

"I will tell them." Bai Liu stood up and smiled softly, "The wedding dress you made is very beautiful and suits Guy very well."

Elena was stunned and raised her head.

Bai Liu said softly: "I have attended their wedding. Guy likes your wedding dress very much. He was very happy when he married Alex in the wedding dress. He said that he was so happy that he would willingly die for it the next second, too.."

Elena opened her lips. The look on her face was empty and broken. She looked at Bai Liu with suspicion and forced a smile: "Hey, young man, it's enough to tell some flattering lies once already…."

Bai Liu pulled out a silk-like white gauze scarf from his pocket.

Elena stopped talking in disbelief.

"This is the veil of one of your wedding dresses. My friend accidentally pulled it off Guy's head during the wedding." Bai Liu handed it to Elena and smiled, "I never lie to please people, ma'am."

Elena stared at the veil for a long time, then tremblingly stretched out her hand to touch it: "…the hair on it is indeed Guy's hair. This is a wedding dress I made a long time ago. The thread hasn't been connected here yet."

"Are they…happy?" Elena held the veil and raised her head carefully and asked.

Bai Liu lowered his eyes: "They are indeed living happily in a place where you can't see them."

After Elena handed the letter to Bai Liu, Bai Liu and his party said

goodbye to her and went back.

Liu Jiayi frowned in confusion: “If this is the real game world line, and the false game world line we experienced is the same relationship between the inner world and the outer world like Rose Factory, then there should be only one Guy— No, there were probably so many Guys who wore all the wedding dresses that Elena made.”

“Is it possible that it’s a seven-day cycle?” Tang Erda tried to come up with a new explanation. “The real world outside is running as usual, and the war world inside is a seven-day cycle. There will be a Guy in each cycle, and then Guy will be killed after death. Alex was buried in the cemetery.”

Bai Liu shook his head: “No, there is a contradiction in this explanation.”

Tang Erda asked: “What is the contradiction?”

Bai Liu glanced at him: “The effect of Alex’s potion is to change things back to the way they were seven days ago. It is not a cycle in the true sense. He can only restore existing things to the way they were seven days ago.”

“In other words, if Guy ran from the war world line to the real world line, then there would be no Guy in the war world line.” Liu Jiayi quickly reacted, “But we did see Guy in the war world line, so this argument doesn’t work.”

“And only Guy has multiple living dead. No one else in the War World line has this situation.”

Liu Jiayi thought: “I think the general direction of Tang Erda’s seven-day cycle is correct, but there must be something wrong with Guy, the NPC. I don’t understand why he is allowed to enter from the war world line to the real-world line?”

“You have to ask Alex, the creator of the War World Line.” Bai Liu looked up at the mist that appeared in front of him again.

The Dense Forest Borderlands

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With the help of Spades' whip, Bai Liu and the others passed through the fog smoothly without encountering any monsters.

But after they passed through, the scene they saw was completely different from before. The rainforest, which was originally full of towering trees, was filled with gray fog. A large area of trees was burning, and the air was full of ashes from the burning flames. The sky was so dark that it could only let out faint light, making it impossible to distinguish between day and night.

A strong, pungent odor of exploding gunpowder immediately hit them, and the bitterness of carbon could be tasted the moment they opened their mouths.

Tang Erda choked and coughed twice, covering his mouth and nose then said: "What happened in this war world during the hour that we were out?"

"The flow of time in the world of war is different from that outside." Bai Liu looked around. "The timeline here fast-forwards to the end of the Great War after we left."

Liu Jiayi waved her hand at the tip of her nose and looked up at Bai Liu: "——Is it the point where everyone died after the explosion that Elena was talking about?"

"Generally speaking, at this point, an excellent horror game will design some very exciting climax plots." Bai Liu looked at the mist-filled rainforest, "For example, a large-scale chase battle."

Tang Erda was startled: "Why is there a chase? Isn't everyone dead at this point and about to enter the next seven-day reincarnation?"

Liu Jiayi took out the poison from her waist, took two steps back cautiously, and narrowed her eyes slightly: "It is precisely because these people are dead that this is the most dangerous place before entering the next seven-day reincarnation."

Bai Liu looked directly at the rainforest where something seemed to be

emerging: “Because this means that except for us players, this war dungeon map is full of monsters and the living dead.” Tang Erda also became alert. He paused before drawing out his gun, and subconsciously glanced back at Spades, who was totally silent next to him.

Spades looked at Tang Erda silently, his hand on the handle of the whip behind his waist, his fingers seemed a little eager to move, as if he still wanted to stop Tang Erda from drawing the gun.

Tang Erda: “…”

As if aware of the silent confrontation behind him, Bai Liu turned around and glanced at Spades lightly.

Spades stiffened inexplicably, then silently turned the whip handle towards Tang Erda.

Tang Erda breathed a sigh of relief, then he dared to take out his gun, and pointed it at the gray mist rainforest that was shaking constantly, as if something was about to appear.

But the rainforest only trembled, and nothing emerged, only the crackling of burning leaves and branches could be heard.

Just as Tang Erda looked at Bai Liu in confusion, Spades, who was by Bai Liu’s side, suddenly pulled out a whip and smashed it into the ground, causing the ground to burst open.

Along the lines that opened on the ground, the soil splashed to both sides. Not only soil, but also a few fingers were thrown out. Tang Erda looked at the lines from where Spades’ whip had smashed, his expression stiffened.

Buried in the ripples beneath the ground were countless pieces of corpses that seemed to have been blasted and torn apart, white with blood and gunpowder stains, shattered limbs, half heads, hands with exposed wrist bones, writhing waists, with all with their severed mouths aimed at Bai Liu and the others as if they were eyes.

These fragments that could not be pieced together into humanoid limbs were densely squirming in the soil, as if they had smelled prey and were hiding in the ground as they approached.

Countless charred hands suddenly drilled out of the mud under Bai Liu’s feet, grabbed his ankle and dragged it down. Tang Erda did not

hesitate to shoot at the limbs and opened a big hole in the center of the palm accurately.

But it didn't help, these things were still twisting and tugging.

"The attack is ineffective." Bai Liu, who was caught, analyzed calmly, "These broken limbs are already in the state of the living dead. If you can't kill them, you have to find their weaknesses."

Spades swung his whip over and circled the living dead's hand, trying to pull it off Bai Liu's feet. He only pulled it once and then quickly stopped and slowly raised his head to look at Bai Liu.

Bai Liu looked back at him calmly: "It can't be torn off."

Liu Jiayi suddenly lowered her head and looked at Bai Liu's ankle. She squatted down and wanted to take a closer look, but Bai Liu stopped her.

Bai Liu lowered his eyes and looked at the fragmented limbs on his feet: "These things have grown with me and cannot be torn off."

"Grown together?!" Tang Erda lowered his head in shock.

The green and black fingers on Bai Liu's ankle pinched into the ankle, half of the knuckles were sunk in, and the skin was perfectly bonded together, like a hand that suddenly grew out of Bai Liu's ankle. At the same time, half of the knuckles at the end of Bai Liu's left hand fingers also turned blue-black.

"This monster's attack method is called [Fusion of Life and Death]. As long as the corpse touches the player, it will become a part of the player's body." Bai Liu raised his head, "When I am attacked by all the corpses of a person's body parts, the corpse pieces will completely merge into my body, turning me into a living dead."

As soon as he finished speaking, the hand on Bai Liu's foot disappeared, and his entire left hand turned blue-black, hanging motionless by his side.

The corpses kept getting closer, but they all seemed to have a target and jumped over other people to rush straight towards Bai Liu.

Tang Erda struck several corpses and blew them away. Liu Jiayi used poison to draw a circle. Spades whipped out a clean area in the circle. He looked straight at Bai Liu: "What did you do? Why are these

corpses only attacking you?”

Bai Liu shrugged his shoulders and said, “Maybe it’s because I’m the player with the lowest evaluation in the comprehensive panel here? Do they think I’m easy to bully?

Spades retorted almost without thinking: “You lied.”

“Don’t worry about what Bai Liu did for the moment!” Liu Jiayi interrupted Spades’ questioning, “These things can’t be killed. If we stay here, we will be completely transformed into corpses. Don’t let Bai Liu touch the ground. Put Bai Liu on your back and leave first!”

As soon as Liu Jiayi finished speaking, Tang Erda and Spades, who were standing on the left and right of Bai Liu, almost simultaneously made a move to grab Bai Liu, who was standing in the middle.

Both of them were a full head taller than Bai Liu. They grabbed Bai Liu’s shoulders and lifted them up at the same time. There was only one result——

——Bai Liu’s feet lifted off the ground, and he was lifted into the air like a primary school student. His feet were still swinging left and right in the air twice.

Spades: “You are so short, Bai Liu.”

Liu Jiayi: “!!!”

Tang Erda: “!!!”

It’s over, Bai Liu will definitely be angry!

Bai Liu slowly raised his head and smiled at Spades: “Really?”

On the way to escape, Tang Erda lowered his head and covered his mouth, not daring to look up at all. He looked left and right, cleaning up the nearby corpses on the ground. Liu Jiayi took a deep breath, suppressed the upturned corner of her mouth, turned her face away professionally, and used poison to disperse them as the body parts followed.

Liu Jiayi approached Tang Erda and whispered, “Did you take pictures?”

Tang Erda hesitated: “It’s not too good…”

Liu Jiayi rolled her eyes: “Don’t you think it’s funny?”

Tang Erda tried his best to be serious: “Fortunately, I have received strict training and will not easily laugh at my team’s tacticians…”

Spades took the lead and smashed the ground with his whip to clean up the corpses in front of him.

Bai Liu had straddled Spades’ shoulders, while Spades carried Bai Liu forward staggeringly.

“Am I still short now?” Bai Liu asked Spades slowly.

Spades paused: “No, you are very tall.”

——It is really too childish to increase one’s height by riding on other people’s shoulders, especially if it is done by Bai Liu, who is smiling but does not express his emotions.

This was too funny!

Tang Erda, who was behind him, finally couldn’t hold back his laughter.

Liu Jiayi said speechlessly: “Unless you really can’t help it, right?”

Spades who was in front quickly swept away the nearby corpses. After a while, he asked Bai Liu: “Are you angry because you are not tall?”

Bai Liu was quiet for a second and said lukewarmly: “No, I won’t care about such a trivial matter.”

Spades took a deep breath, then he swung out his whip and wrapped it around the trunk of a big tree nearby, and pulled it up suddenly. Both Spades and Bai Liu on his shoulders were pulled upwards by the whip.

He lightly stepped on the tree trunk, and using his strength, he shot out his whip and wrapped it around the trunk of another taller tree. At the same time, with a clear vision, he knocked off several corpses that fell from the shaking trunk.

After several back and forths, Spades smoothly jumped to the top of the tallest tree in the rainforest, which was enough to overlook the entire rain forest.

Bai Liu shook his head and then stabilized his sitting position on

Spades.

Spades' chest rose slightly, and his voice was serious: "Now you are the tallest person in the world."

Bai Liu's expression moved slightly, and just when he was about to speak, he heard Spades continue to say calmly: "——We can use this external thing to make up for our innate shortcomings. Bai Liu, don't be angry with yourself for your physical shortcomings. "

"It's not your fault that you are so short." Spades said every word.

Bai Liu: "…"

Bai Liu slowly exhaled a long breath and recited a few words quickly in a low voice.

Spades seemed to understand: "Bai Liu, what are you talking about?"

Bai Liu said calmly: "I am reading an ancient limerick that has been passed down to this day."

Spades: "What kind of limerick is it?"

Bai Liu smiled: "[Don't be angry.]"

Spades slowly said: "? Why are you reciting this?"

"Because it can repair my mental decline caused by emotional ups and downs." Bai Liu said.

Spades nodded.

He understood that this was a spiritual bleaching poem, and he would learn it if he had the opportunity in the future.

But the top priority right now was something else.

Spades had carried Bai Liu here, on one hand to soothe the emotional damage Bai Liu had caused to himself due to his short height (…), and on the other hand, to see what changes had taken place in the entire rainforest map.

The originally dark green rainforest scene had turned gray and black. There were huge craters everywhere on the ground. The ground was constantly being arched into cracks. Broken limbs were constantly crawling out of the cracks, approaching the big tree where Bai Liu

was. Looking down, it was dense and dark, like a bunch of ants looking for nests and food.

The closer he got to the town, the source of the explosion, the more broken the limbs Bai Liu saw. The closer he got to the lake, the more complete the corpses he saw.

And these complete corpses gathered in a place on the opposite side of the lake, seemingly cheering and jumping around something, their limbs and heads swaying crazily as if they were about to be thrown off in the next second.

Bai Liu squinted his eyes. He found a telescope from the props and looked through it. He adjusted the focus and finally saw clearly what was surrounded by the corpses.

A pieced-together sculpture of an evil god, five wooden stakes, and five people being tied to the wooden stakes.

The pile of black things stacked under the five people tied to the stakes looked like firewood, but Bai Liu looked carefully for a while and found that the pile was moving.

Bai Liu looked at it intently for a while, and finally determined that the pile of things was not firewood at all, but broken arms and calves that had been blown up to the point that they were dry as firewood.

These charcoal-black, dry limbs were piled like wood under five wooden stakes. A bucket of red paint was placed next to each stake. There were also six “wood fire” stacks – piles of broken limbs – placed around the five wooden piles.

These broken limbs were constantly moving and struggling, trying to climb onto the people on the wooden piles, but they were stomped down again and again by the dancing corpses, and each time they stepped on them, red paint fell on these broken limbs.

——This was obviously a weird human sacrifice ceremony in progress.

Bai Liu further adjusted the focus, trying to see clearly who the five people tied to the stakes to worship the evil god were, and then he raised his eyebrows subtly.

“Spades, I see four of your teammates being tied up by monsters.”

Spades nodded without any reaction, indicating that he understood,

and then asked: “I saw five wooden stakes. Who is the other one tied up?”

“It’s someone we couldn’t even imagine.” Bai Liu smiled, “It’s Alex.”

Chapter End Notes

> A limerick is a form of humorous poetry that consists of five lines. It has a specific rhythmic pattern (anapestic meter) and a rhyme scheme of AABBA, where the first, second, and fifth lines rhyme with each other, and the third and fourth lines share a different rhyme.
>
> Here’s an example of a limerick:
> There once was a man from Peru (A)
> Who dreamt he was eating his shoe (A)
> He awoke with a fright (B)
> In the middle of the night (B)
> To find that his dream had come true! (A)
>
> The limerick Bai Liu is referring to is likely this well-known Chinese nursery rhyme:
>
> 别人生气我不气，气出病来无人替。
> 我若生气中他计，气死自己为不值。
>
> Translation:
> "If others get angry, I won’t. If I get sick from anger, no one will suffer for me.
> If I get angry, I fall into their trap. Dying from anger is not worth it."

The Dense Forest Borderlands

Spades carried Bai Liu on his back and jumped along the branches with fewer corpses, moving with great leaps. Bai Liu was riding unsteadily on him. In order to stabilize Bai Liu, Spades first pulled Bai Liu's calf with his hand before moving his hand up to pull his thighs, and then…

In the middle of the process, Bai Liu calmly lowered his legs, from sitting on Spades' shoulders to clinging onto Spades' back, and put the hand that was about to move up to his buttocks on Spades' side: "I can hold myself up just fine, you don't need to help me."

Spades made a sound without realizing it, and the posture of withdrawing his hand to draw out the whip instantly became cold. The shiny black bone whip flicked out unexpectedly, the twisting whip like a poisonous snake in the air. Fiercely, he threw it at a corpse that jumped on the tree branch and almost split it in half with the whip.

Bai Liu looked at the corpse monster that fell from the air, the middle of its body sunken in: "Did you deliberately save your strength so as not to break the opponent in half?"

"Yeah." Spades responded.

He whipped back without looking back, with almost the same force. It only made a dent in the middle of another corpse, stopping its movement, but it did not damage the overall structure of the corpse.

Spades took the time to briefly reply to Bai Liu: "These things can't be beaten to death. It's not a good thing if they are broken and their numbers increase."

Bai Liu suddenly became interested and asked him: "You were so reckless when playing games before. You just killed monsters indiscriminately and didn't care about the quantity or quality of monsters. Why are you so careful with the monsters in this game?"

"Because these monsters are not coming for me." Spades looked back at Bai Liu indifferently, "They are coming for you."

Spades didn't say everything, but Bai Liu already understood what this man meant.

Bai Liu was quiet.

As soon as Spades finished speaking, a torso with exposed internal organs flew towards Bai Liu from behind, and was knocked away by Spades' merciless whip.

Even when knocking away such a rotten and decayed abdomen, Spades' control prevented any organ from falling out, ensuring that the number of monsters did not increase.

Bai Liu was only quiet for a moment, then changed the subject as if nothing happened: "Don't you want to ask me why The Reverse God and the others were kidnapped? This happened to your teammates. Given their strength, this is a strange thing."

"Oh." Spades nodded as if he had just remembered such a thing, and continued following Bai Liu's words without much care, "They were tied up, but what does this have to do with me?"

Bai Liu: "…"

Bai Liu said slowly: "You are their league teammate. For all intents and purposes, you should show appropriate concern for the safety of your teammates at this time."

Spades understood quickly, and he immediately said: "I will care about them now."

He took out a golden bell from his waist, half the size of his palm. Seeing Bai Liu looking at it inquiringly, Spades explained: "This is a reward prop from an ancient dungeon of the game. It's called twin bells. When one bell vibrates, the other will also vibrate."

"We have refreshed the dungeon three times. There are six bells in total, all of which are bound to the vibration relationship. If one vibrates, the other five will too. In some ancient or pre-modern dungeons where modern instruments cannot be used to communicate, The Reverse God requires that we use this bell to communicate."

Spades said: "The Reverse God also specially formulated a set of vibration frequency codes for this bell. Different vibrations represent different meanings."

Bai Liu commented with interest: "This is a good communication tool."

Without saying a word, Spades took out a bell from the system panel and handed it to Bai Liu: “I have two, I’ll give you one.”

Bai Liu glanced at the bell with a half-smile but didn’t answer: “You’d just hand over the communication tools within your team to me so easily?”

Spades looked at Bai Liu and said in a very matter-of-fact tone: “You also gave me your team communication tools, why can’t I give mine to you?”

Bai Liu was silent for a moment – he actually sold it to Spades for 10,000 points.

Spades directly threw the bell into Bai Liu’s arms, then held the whip in one hand and the bell in the other and shook it quickly.

The sound of bells ringing could be heard from Bai Liu’s arms and in the distance at the same time, startling many corpses in the forest, and they all moved towards the place where the bells were ringing.

Spades shook it violently and forcefully. Bai Liu looked at it for a while but couldn’t make out any clues. The pattern of Spades’ shaking didn’t match any of Bai Liu’s known codes. He had to ask: “Are you contacting them using a bell code?”

Spades said: “I don’t remember the bell password made by The Reverse God.”

Bai Liu paused for a moment, and his eyes moved to Spades’ bell that was still shaking rapidly: “Then what are you doing…?”

Spades answered very frankly: “Didn’t you ask me to care about them? I’m just concerned about them.”

Bai Liu: “…”

His eyes moved down to the bell, and then he looked at the members of the Killer Sequence who were tied to the stakes from a distance. The unusual sound of the bell attracted a large number of corpses that were screaming in agony.

Bai Liu silently withdrew his gaze and looked at Spades who finally stopped ringing the bell.

Spades turned to look at him: “Do you still need me to care about

them?”

Bai Liu: “No need.”

He finally understood why The Reverse God was willing to give him five million points to help educate Spades.

Across the lake.

Bai Yi looked at the corpses that were constantly approaching him, and screamed like a chicken that was being held by four butchers to chop its head off: “Ah! Who the hell is ringing the bell!!”

Bai Jiamu snapped and interrupted Bai Yi’s screams: “Can you stop? You and the sound of the bell mixed together are almost giving me a fucking concussion!”

“Between me and the bell, only one of us can stop the sound!” Bai Yi kicked the corpse climbing up below and yelled at the top of his voice, “Reverse God, tactician, who among us is ringing the bell! Make him stop!”

The Reverse God, who was tied to the wooden stake, sighed deeply: “It’s like this, Bai Yi. The hands of the four of us are tied very tightly. Logically speaking, we don’t have any bells to ring, so the person ringing the bell should not be here.”

Bai Yi understood instantly, and he choked up sadly: “Is our sixth bell stolen? I said at the beginning that five bells are enough, and if there is one more bell, it should be destroyed instead of kept. This sixth bell should be destroyed. If the bell falls into the hands of others, it will be a huge hidden danger, but The Reverse God insists on keeping this one, saying that this bell has its own destiny. Look, something is happening now…”

Bai Jiamu rolled his eyes and interrupted Bai Yi’s thoughts: “Silly, it’s not the sixth bell, it’s Spades who is ringing the bell.”

Bai Yi instantly restrained his miserable expression and retorted seriously: “Impossible. I have never seen Spades ring the bell after he got it. He won’t ring the bell.”

“That doesn’t mean that it won’t happen now.” Bai Jiamu replied breathlessly, “This one is not easy, if Spades can’t get through it, he might contact us…”

When Bai Jiamu said this, Bai Yi also asked in a subtle way with his eyes: [“Do you think this kind of thing is possible?”]

“I once saw Spades stepping on and hitting the bell with his whip, trying to break it.” Bai Yi recalled, “I was very shocked and stepped forward to stop him and asked him why he was doing it.”

The Reverse God was also very shocked: “This is an important prop that I saved through hard work in the game, and used to communicate within the team. Why would he do this!”

Bai Yi replied quietly: “Because he felt very annoyed. It kept vibrating and he couldn’t turn it off, so he just wanted to smash it.”

The Reverse God’s whole face was about to crack: “That’s because he doesn’t reply to our messages at all, okay! That’s all because everyone is exchanging game information intensely!”

Bai Yi smacked his lips: “Actually, Spades hates this bell. It’s not that I can’t understand it. It’s like there are many people chatting in a work group. You can’t leave the group, and you can’t block the leader’s messages, and the phone also keeps vibrating.”

“But when Spades is alone and is having fun playing games, he doesn’t want to be disturbed…”

The Reverse God’s eyes were glazed over, like an old father who was hit hard after he bought his rebellious son a toy that he didn’t like: “… So he wants to smash the bell I gave him?”

Bai Yi stomped on the corpse underneath him a few times, looked at The Reverse God sympathetically, and decided to change the topic: “So I don’t think Spades is shaking it. He probably doesn’t have any bells in this game.”

The Reverse God shook his head: “No, it must be Spades shaking it.”

Bai Yi asked suspiciously: “No, who took our sixth bell? Is it possible that that person is ringing it?”

The Reverse God’s eyes widened: “It must be Spades shaking it…”

“The sixth bell was originally in the warehouse, but last time Spades told me that his bell was broken and he could not participate in the team discussion. So I opened the warehouse before this game and handed the sixth bell to Spades with great care. I told him that this

was a prop that I got with great difficulty, and asked him to take good care of it and not break it again. I didn't expect that he would break it on his own initiative…"

The Reverse God looked sad at the end.

Bai Yi: "…"

Bai Jiamu: "…"

…What's going on? It's a pitiful story that this kind of honest father works hard to buy toys for his son, but the supercilious son throws them away just because he doesn't like them, and even lies to the father that he was careless.

"But Reverse God," Bai Jiamu turned to look at The Reverse God next to him, "When those indigenous living dead came to arrest us, we didn't attack them, but surrendered and chose to be kidnapped by them. How did you know that they will no longer fuse and devour us?"

The Reverse God calmly looked at the wooden sculpture of the Evil God facing him: "Because the old Evil God statue is broken, a new Evil God statue needs to be replaced. This rotation generally means that the cracks in the powerful old Evil God will appear. He is looking for his next successor, a new evil god."

"This kind of rotation of religious gods requires a large-scale sacrifice and ceremony to support it. When the conflict between the old and new gods is particularly intense, this rotation is usually accompanied by huge wars."

The Reverse God lowered his eyes to look at the charred corpses and continued:

"In the ceremony of the birth of a new evil god, sacrifices and witnesses are needed. The sacrifices are those who oppose the evil god, and the witnesses are those who have experienced the history of the evil god."

The Reverse God said lightly: "There are no better sacrifices and witnesses than us. They will not fuse us easily. They need us to maintain a clear consciousness to witness the rituals of the new gods. This is a tribute to the new gods."

As they talked, Alex, who had been keeping his head down on the fifth

stake next to him, as if he was unconscious, slowly opened his eyes.

He raised his head and looked directly at the wooden sculpture of the evil god facing him, with an unknown smile full of anger and sadness at the corner of his mouth.

The wooden sculpture of the evil god standing in the center had obvious signs of repair. The wooden sculpture's head, which had been chopped with a scalpel and shot once, stood on the wooden body with a smile, looking down at the scene with scarred and pitiful eyes. There were corpses dancing before his eyes, and five sacrifices tied to stakes.

In front of the evil god's wood carving, there was a huge piece of wood standing. The wood was split in the middle. It could be seen from the cross section that the material is the same as the one used to carve the evil god's wood statue.

The corpses moved their hands shakily and carved on this cross-section with axes and chisels. They could already see the outline of a new wood carving. With the progress of the carving work of the corpses, the wood carving born from the logs became more and more lifelike and realistic.

The wood carving of the New Evil God gradually took on a human form.

Bai Yi glanced at the wooden sculpture's eyes twice. For the first time in so many games, he felt an unspeakable creepiness. He gently kicked Bai Jiamu next to him with his foot and whispered: "Hey, did I see it wrong? The more I look at this wooden sculpture, the more I feel like it's—"

The Reverse God took a deep breath and looked at the smiling wooden sculpture of the new evil god: "——Bai Liu, right?"

The Dense Forest Borderlands

The wood carving gradually took shape, and the corpse under the stake tried to climb up restlessly.

Bai Yi twisted his body to remind The Reverse God: “The main NPC Alex finally woke up! Reverse God, you should quickly complete his story line, so that we can unlock the rest of the [True End] line.”

The Reverse God hummed, and he looked up at Alex who had just woken up: “Although I know that the whole world is just a scam created by the evil god who gave you power, I still don’t understand why you ended up becoming a believer of the evil god.”

“——It even came to the point of sacrificing all the lives of the people to the evil god in order to create the illusion you wanted.”

Alex moved his hands, which were bound behind his back, but said nothing.

The Reverse God continued calmly: “In this world of war, a huge explosion occurred in the town the night before yesterday. Someone poured paint on the town’s arsenal that night and set it on fire.”

“The entire rain forest was blown up, and almost all the soldiers in the rainforest were killed. However, these soldiers did not really die. Instead, they strangely turned into a half-dead state, walking around the rainforest in the form of corpses and body parts.”

“Whether it was using paint to blow up the arsenal or giving so many people the special potion you invented, did you do it all by yourself?” The Reverse God asked.

Alex lowered his head, blood dripping from the ends of his hair. He chuckled nervously twice: “I did.”

The Reverse God sighed.

“…We found you unconscious not far from the exploded arsenal. After confirming that you were still alive, we took you away to avoid monsters and escaped, until you were captured by this group of old-school zombie natives as a sacrifice, and you just woke up.”

“You killed so many people. Isn’t this contrary to your original intention of saving lives? Why did you do such a thing?”

"…Because I can't save anyone." Alex slowly raised his head, his eyes staring at the broken wooden sculpture of the old god with empty eyes. "Even in this illusory world, I can't save anyone."

The Reverse God followed Alex's gaze, paused for a moment at the smiling face of the old evil god, and continued to ask: "What happened in the real world line?"

"… What happened…" Alex's eyes were hazy and his face was twisted, as if he was trapped in a painful memory that he couldn't bear to recall. "I saved Guy, but Guy… still died. He was burned to ashes. There was no possibility of resurrection."

"Guy died on the eve of the war."

"At that time, I was eager to use my medicine to change everything, to save everyone, to undo this war…"

Alex smiled sarcastically: "But who could have known that in the end, I would be the one to ignites the arsenal with paint?"

"But this cowardly, deformed country, the one I fought to protect, didn't even dare to record in history what really happened."

Alex laughed loudly: "They dare not write that it was me, a native of this country with no flaws in my thinking from childhood to adulthood, a doctor dedicated to saving everyone, who set fire to the warehouse because he discovered the evil of war."

"They were writing that a group of natives had attacked the munitions depot, using this to prove that they were right in starting the war – these natives were just as stupid and hopeless as their recruitment advertisements said, and they were very worthy of being enslaved and blown to pieces."

The Reverse God asked: "What did you do during the war?"

Alex was silent for a few seconds, his voice hoarse: "…I signed up for the assault team after Guy died. I wanted to take advantage of the chaos of the war to go deep into the indigenous tribe and see if the evil god statue that gave me the power to change life and death could give me an answer to save everyone."

"It rained heavily on the day of the battle. When I swam across the lake, I was already shot with five or six bullets. I was dying." Alex seemed to want to laugh, but his mouth was pressed down, and he

looked like he was about to cry. "… But I didn't die. I saw the wooden sculpture of the evil god."

"Then, I lay in a pool of blood, looking up at the wooden sculpture. I didn't even have the strength to speak. I could only pray over and over in my heart, asking, 'God, can you save everyone?'" Alex said in a daze, "… I don't remember how long I prayed. Suddenly, I heard the sculpture talking to me."

The Reverse God reacted very quickly: "Driven by extreme desire, you heard the evil god's oracle? What did he say to you?"

Alex's expression was blank. "He said he could make my wish come true, but he wanted me to play a game with him."

"If I win the game, I won't have to pay the price of my wish coming true, and if I lose, I'll be stuck in this game forever."

The Reverse God paused: "What game?"

Alex's breathing quickened. He looked at The Reverse God and said word by word, "A game he designed called 'The Dense Forest Frontier'"

The Reverse God asked: "What is the content of the game?"

Alex took a deep breath and looked sideways at the broken wooden sculpture of the evil god. "He will turn the timeline back to seven days before everything happened and provide me with unlimited amounts of red paint to create an army of undead."

"I have a total of ten chances to reload the game. He will keep rewinding the timeline to seven days ago. As long as I can prevent the final war once out of ten times within these seven days, I will win the game. Otherwise, I will lose."

Alex hung his head: "I agreed to his request."

The Reverse God looked at Alex steadily: "So what did you do in this game?"

"In the first game, I chose to stop Guy from rebelling and used the Undead Potion to persuade him to stay in our army. I said I would secretly save the dead natives and our soldiers through the Undead Potion."

“I was still very naive at that time, and I had unrealistic expectations of my own side.” Alex blinked his eyes weakly, “… I thought that as long as we gave them the final victory, the war would be over.”

“I chose to assist my own army.”

“I tried my best to keep the secret of the potion, but soon, the people I saved found that they were resurrected after death and were not afraid of harm for a period of time. They reported the secret to both organizations.”

“There are no better soldiers than the undead who have not yet been fully resurrected. Because I am in my own organization, after they learned the effect of the potion, they forced me to mass-produce an army of undead.”

“Of course I refused. No matter what kind of torture they used or who threatened me, I would never agree. I knew I had the Undead Potion, and I could do it all over again.” Alex paused awkwardly, then continued, “–but I didn’t expect that they would actually find a group of volunteers.”

The Reverse God asked: “What volunteer army?”

Alex’s breathing became rapid. “They brought a group of 100 new soldiers to me, blindfolded them, pointed guns and flamethrowers at them, and interrogated me. If I didn’t take out the potion to save them, they would shoot them to death and then burn their bodies completely with flamethrowers until they were reduced to ashes.”

The Reverse God was startled, as if he suddenly realized something. He looked down at the dry wood-like corpses under his feet and said, “Then are these——”

“Yes,” Alex said, “These are the bones of the volunteers.”

Alex closed his eyes. “The first time, I didn’t agree. The second time, I gritted my teeth and still didn’t agree.”

“They were shot and burned in front of me, time and again. The youngest volunteer was only 15 years old, with a pair of gray-blue eyes. He rolled on the ground for half an hour after being covered with a black cloth before he stopped struggling. Some of these volunteers were burned into black bones that could still be saved, while others were burned into ashes that could never be saved.”

“After countless tortures like this, I finally broke down and took out the potion to save a group of volunteers.”

After saying this, Alex was silent for a very long time. Both sides of his face were shaking with some intense emotion, and his voice was extremely hoarse:

“After the volunteers stood up from the ground, the senior officers who had been watching nearby actually applauded. The volunteers who had just been rescued by me actually took off their black cloths with joy, saluted the senior officers, and happily reported that they had completed their mission.”

Alex’s eyes were red and almost bleeding: “It was only then that I realized that these teenage volunteers all came voluntarily.”

“Every volunteer soldier who died because of me would receive a five-cent martyr medal. The superior officers told these kids that I had a very powerful biological weapon in my hands that could transform the dead into humanoid weapons.”

“But because I’m picky and selfish, I don’t think everyone is qualified to be transformed, so I’m unwilling to use this potion on everyone.”

“They told these children, ‘I am going to give you a dangerous mission. I will kill you first, and then let me select some people from the dead to have the right to be transformed.’”

“Those who are not chosen are the warriors who die for the victory of the war, while those who are chosen are about to become heroes of the war.”

Alex’s breathing was so fast that his voice was intermittent: “-They told these children that the dead soldiers died because of my cruelty, and the surviving soldiers survived for the war.”

“Every volunteer soldier who was shot dead in front of me volunteered to win the war.”

Alex clenched his fists, his expression gradually becoming numb. “They found my weakness. I couldn’t bear to see them die so cruelly in front of me. They started to bring volunteers here in batches. Sometimes, they even tortured the volunteers to provoke me to take out the potion and forced me to watch closely.”

“I clearly knew that these volunteers were willing to accept these

tortures. For the sake of victory in the war, they could endure any torture."

"I rescued more and more soldiers, and my own undead army grew stronger and stronger. The war finally broke out."

Alex exhaled: "But in that war, because of the undead army, in order to save military expenses, only these undead soldiers and cold weapons were used. It did not meet the evil God's requirements for the scale of the war, so I did not lose the game."

"The war with the natives was over. It was the sixth day. I was in a trance and thought I was going to win the game tragically, but something unexpected happened."

Alex gritted his teeth and said, "The emergence of the undead has greatly fuelled the desires of the officers and the government. They feel that these undead were simply perfect weapons of war. They secretly approved the start of another war – to plunder all the territories on the other side of the rainforest."

"On the afternoon of the seventh day, I saw with my own eyes that they first fired a cannonball, which triggered a counterattack from the other side. Then they wrote in the report that the other side attacked us first, thus launching a full-scale war."

Alex said dryly, "It was a horrific war. I lost the first game and asked the evil god to let me go back to the past seven days."

The Dense Forest Borderlands

“The second time, Guy and I defected to the indigenous camp.” Alex narrated in a low voice.

“This time, with Guy’s encouragement, I learned about this group of natives and their evil god beliefs. I used to think they were very ignorant, but that was the first time I felt that ignorance was a good thing.”

Alex chuckled twice: “Their faith comes from the land and the evil god. They will never leave the territory given to them by the evil god to invade other places. In other words, they will not launch large-scale wars and continue to invade other places like my army did.”

“I foolishly thought that if I could just let the natives win the war peacefully, it would all be over.”

“I already know that hiding this potion is useless, because those who were saved by me will tell their own camp about the effect of this potion no matter what, so this time I chose to tell the natives the effect of the potion directly.”

Alex lowered his head and his expression could not be seen clearly: “After resurrecting two more dead natives, they easily believed me. I created a large number of native undead armies, formulated a plan, and attacked the enemy in an orderly manner. Soon, I achieved a phased victory.”

“When the enemy was desperate and prepared to use a large number of artillery, I ambushed them with the undead army and transferred this artillery to the indigenous people.”

“On the sixth night, under the dual threat of the undead army and massive artillery fire, they finally gave in, chose to negotiate peacefully with the natives, and gave up further attacks.”

Alex’s voice was hoarse: “I don’t know how long this false peace could last, but I was relieved at that moment. After signing the peace agreement and stopping the war, I thought I would definitely win the game this time, but I never expected…”

He closed his eyes, took two deep breaths, and then continued with difficulty: “…When I returned to the native camp, they aimed their artillery at the group of undead troops that had been fully

resurrected." "The natives said that these undead people were evil and cursed by the gods. They had tolerated the existence of these undead people until the end of the war, and only now did they finally decide to judge them."

Alex said hoarsely, "No matter how I explained that these undead would be no different from normal people after they were fully resurrected, they still didn't believe me. Unspeakable fear filled everyone's face. They shouted that these undead would not die easily and that they had to be bombarded repeatedly with cannons to smash them into pieces so that they could not be resurrected again."

"…Those undead were once their parents, friends, lovers, and even children. They knelt before me, hugged their corpses, and begged me to revive them. But now, after using those undead to win, they are afraid of their opponents' strength and declare them heretics. They want to send them to hell."

Alex sneered, "How ironic! I was originally glad that their foolishness didn't hurt others, but now it had become a weapon that hurts me."

"I shouted at the undead to flee, but they just stayed where they were."

"Because during the resurrection process, they will gradually recover their memories from seven days ago. They don't know what happened during these seven days. They just open their arms and smile to the relatives and friends who approach them then let them set up the artillery."

Alex gritted his teeth and said, "They still didn't understand what was happening until they were finally targeted by the cannons. I watched helplessly as they shouted the names of their loved ones, and were blown to pieces by them the moment they were fully resurrected."

"…I lost the second time, and I chose to reload the game again."

"In the third game, I didn't join any camp. I went crazy and kept creating my own undead army to attack and control the other two camps. The more they resisted, the more people died, and the larger my undead army became."

Alex took two deep breaths. "Just like that, I quickly took control of the situation. In order to contain me, the other two parties had to stop the war and chose to cooperate. One party transported a large number of artillery, and the other party used the terrain to coordinate with

each other to attack me."

"But I intercepted the artillery fire again. After the first two times, I not only mastered the firepower distribution, but also had a clear understanding of the terrain. I thought that as long as I could hold on for seven days, I would be fine."

Alex paused and said, "On the sixth night, I went to ask the evil god. I said that as long as there is no war in these seven days, I will win, right?"

"He said yes, but the world line you are in will continue to run as the world line in which you win."

Alex shed a tear, and his voice choked up: "… In other words, if I win in this world line, I must continue to create undead to ensure the strength of my camp, clamp down on the cooperation of the other two camps, and prevent them from going to war."

"But after seven days, these undead people will become living people. They are no longer immortal, but normal living people with flesh and blood. If I continue to create undead people, I must keep killing people. If I stop killing people, the war will break out once more, and everything I want to change essentially remains the same."

"I chose to reload the game again."

Alex was silent for a long time, his eyes staring at the statue of the old evil god with empty eyes: "…I have come back ten times, I have tried everything to prevent the outbreak of the war, to prevent everyone from dying."

"But even if I have an unlimited supply of immortality potion and ten chances to start over, a large number of people will still die in this war."

"I realized that neither the potion nor I could save anyone. The only way to stop the war is if the initiator of the war does not exist, so that the harm of the war will not be further expanded."

Alex shed tears numbly: "So when I loaded the last save, I chose to use all the paint the evil god gave me to pour on the arsenal and kill everyone with my own hands on the eve of the war."

"Finally, the real world continued to operate with the ending that I killed everyone for the last time, and the world's time continued to

flow forward."

"I lost the game with the evil god, so he combined my experiences that had been repeated ten times and created this nightmare-like world of war that keeps repeating. He froze me here forever as a character in his game, and watched my pain for fun."

Alex hung his head, tears dripping from his chin: "…The starting point of every cycle in this war world where I exist is always the arrival of a new group of soldiers that I have never seen before, and then it ends with these soldiers playfully sinking the undead I created to the bottom of the lake to count them."

"I can't remember how many times Guy was sunk to the bottom of the lake and reappeared in the tent, lying next to me. Other living dead would forget what happened seven days ago after they were resurrected. They didn't remember anything."

"But I remember."

Alex smiled nervously at the evil wooden sculpture, tears rolling down his cheeks: "–I remember every cycle!"

"Because I am not a living dead, I am the only living person in this world of the living dead. God does not allow me to die, so I cannot forget. I remember everything."

Alex's voice was so hoarse that it was almost a breath:

"At first I was trapped here and tried to change what happened here, trying to save them in this virtual world, but then I became desperate – I couldn't change anything."

He smiled blankly:

"No one understood what I was doing except Guy, who believed me completely, so I told him what was going to happen and Guy said, let's run away."

"We found a foggy blank area, which should be the boundary of this virtual war world. We tried many ways to get out but couldn't. However, Guy and I didn't give up. After each cycle, I talked to Guy again and we came here again to find a way out."

"Until one day." Alex whispered softly, "I knelt at the edge, the desire to not be trapped was driving me crazy, and I heard the voice of the

evil god again. He asked me, ‘do you want to go out?’”

“I said yes, and he said he could design a way for me to get out, but only me or Guy could escape from here, so he let me choose.”

Alex’s eyes were red: “I chose to let Guy out.”

“Guy didn’t know anything. He couldn’t hear the evil god’s voice. I watched him disappear into the mist. A surprised voice came from the other end, saying, ‘Alex, I’m out!’”

“The fog disappeared in front of my eyes in an instant, and I saw Guy standing on the other side of the barrier. He smiled and waved, asking me to get out quickly. I said I needed to study the rules of how to get out, and that it might have been an accident. I might have to wait for the next seven days to get out.”

Alex blinked slightly. “Guy is the living dead. I know he will be completely resurrected in the next seven days and then forget that I am trapped in this world. He may think I am dead in the real world.”

“But at least, there is one person — my lover, who was saved by me.”

“Guy came to the edge of the barrier to find me every day. He couldn’t get in, and he shared with me what he saw outside every day. He told me with surprise that he found my grave and his grave, and that Elena’s letter and wedding dress were placed on top. He said that the little girl had grown up and actually made him a wedding dress.”

Alex’s voice choked up: “He was holding up the wedding dress and smiling so happily. For a moment, I felt that my pain had meaning.”

“But seven days later, I came to that border again, ready to see Guy for the last time before the cycle restarted…”

Alex was trembling all over. “I found Guy on the other side of the barrier. He was holding the wedding dress and had transformed into an unconscious corpse, a bluish-white zombie.”

“I almost went crazy, smashing the wooden sculpture of the evil god over and over again, asking him why.”

“The evil god told me that Guy was originally a living dead. When he left this virtual world and entered reality, the time in his body broke away from the time in the virtual world and synchronized with the real time.”

“The evil god said in a compassionate voice, Alex, have you forgotten? In the real world, in the ending you chose, Guy had already been blown to death by you. He was originally a corpse.”

“Guy can only live for seven days. After seven days, he will become what he should be in the real world.”

“I’m unwilling to accept this. I’ve tried time and again to get Guy to leave here, but I’ve failed every time. All I’ve done is add countless zombie brides to the border.”

Alex’s voice gradually faded away. “I finally gave up and numbly took the wedding dress and letter that Zombie Guy brought back. I will give them to another Guy in the next cycle so that he can wear Elena’s wedding dress and marry me before he dies. This may be the happiest thing for him.”

“… I can’t do anything else.”

The Reverse God stared at him: “You should hate the evil god very much. I don’t understand, why are you helping the evil god complete the sacrificial ceremony for the evil god’s new successor?”

Alex’s eyes moved, as if looking at the Reverse God, and then turned back to look at the statue of the new evil god: “-Do you know how to escape from the control of a god?”

The Reverse God was silent for a moment: “Go create a new god, huh?”

“How can you be sure that this new god is a good person and won’t continue to design games to torture you?”

Alex’s voice was so soft that it was almost inaudible:

“I don’t know, but I’ve never seen the evil god have such a strong obsession with a new soldier. The moment the soldier named Bai Liu entered this war world, I heard the evil god happily tell me that the new evil god, the successor he had chosen long ago, had finally arrived.”

“At that moment, I could hardly control my disgust towards Bai Liu. I also hated the subordinates he brought in. I hated them for contacting Guy.”

The Reverse God recalled in his heart – that’s why Bai Liu told him

before that his favorability level fell below the safe value when he first saw Alex after entering the game, while the favorability levels of those players who chose to be in the enemy camp with Alex were all stable at above 60.

It turns out there was another reason behind this.

Alex continued, “But soon, I didn’t hate Bai Liu so much anymore, because the evil god told me that once the new god is formed, he will fall and his control over me will be lifted – this Bai Liu is here to destroy him and then inherit his throne.”

“The rotation between gods is so brutal, no different from humans.” Alex couldn’t help but smile sarcastically, “Maybe it’s because gods, by their very nature, are also humans filled with desire.”

“Have you ever thought about why the evil god told you this information that is harmful to him?” The Reverse God said, “What if he wants to kill you…”

The Reverse God stopped abruptly when he said this.

Alex turned his head to look at The Reverse God. His eyebrows were lowered, his eyes were gloomy, and his laughter maniacal: “—Who’s going to kill me? What I am least afraid of now is death.”

“I don’t want to save anyone anymore, and I’m not afraid of anything anymore. No matter what the cost, as long as I can end this, I’m willing to do it.”

Alex panted, his eyes red:

“That guy, when that evil god told me these things, when he said Bai Liu would destroy him, he was smiling from the bottom of his heart.”

“He fully expects Bai Liu to kill him and become the new evil god.”

Alex sneered morbidly: “–Maybe he is just like me, tired of living, and is almost going crazy waiting to die in this world full of ugly human desires, so he is looking forward to someone who can end his life.”

Alex stared at the wooden sculpture of the old evil god:

“You know, new soldier, I talked to this evil god once after I lost the game. He asked me condescendingly, if I knew why I lost the game?”

“I said I don’t know. I’ve tried my best, but I still can’t change

anything. Why can't everyone survive?"

"So he laughed and said that most of the time human desires are based on harming each other. The more unhappy a person is, the more he wants to hurt others, or the stronger his desires are, the more meaningful his existence is."

"He is the one who sees, stores, and listens to all the evil desires in this world. As long as there is one person in this world whose desires smell of blood, the evil god's game will never stop."

Alex's eyes gradually moved from the old woodcarving to the face of the new woodcarving: "——And Bai Liu is the player he found who is most suitable for this game related to desire. His desire is so strong that he can transcend this game and touch the existence of God."

"Bai Liu is a player born for the evil god's game. Everything the evil god carefully prepared in the game, war, destruction, death, souls, are all to celebrate his coming."

"God favours him and is willing to die for him." Alex paused, "Whether it's the previous one who died long ago, or this one who is full of expectations."

The smile on the old wooden carving of the evil god grew eerily gentle and sweet, and the new wooden carving of the evil god was less than a third of the way to being born perfectly from the log.

The smile on the face of the evil god wooden sculpture was warm and peaceful, as if a compassionate god was hypocritically looking down on all living beings.

–

At the temple.

The petrification of the prophet sitting on the stone bench had spread to his heart, making it difficult for him to speak. His voice became hoarse: "–What did you put into this copy?"

The hooded man had an eerily gentle smile that was exactly the same as the one on the old wooden carving of the evil god. He clasped his hands together and then opened them, and a pure black whip and a suspended inverted cross appeared out of thin air between his hands.

"——His original weapons and beliefs."

The whip was covered with bone spurs and was extremely sharp. Compared with the previous siren bone whip and Spade's lizard bone whip, this whip looked similar, but it carried a very obvious murderous aura.

The inverted cross was made of some unknown stone, the colour of which seemed to be flowing blood, and it exuded a soul-stirring light.

The Prophet's pupils shrank for a moment: "You put Bai Liu's weapon and the reverse cross into this copy?"

"Bai Liu is the most perfect successor I chose from among so many Bai Liu's." The man smiled with indulgence, "I broke his original weapon and reverse cross, so I should replace them with newer and better ones, right?"

"It's like I killed his old god, so I should give him a more perfect new god."

The Prophet gasped with all his might: "Bai Liu hates you, he will not become your believer, so your statement of giving him a more perfect new god is not true at all. He will not believe in you, nor will he want what you give him. The only person Bai Liu will believe in is-"

"Tawil." The man under the hood opened his eyes and smiled, "But Prophet, if Tawil doesn't exist, you still missed a person that Bai Liu believes in."

The Prophet was stunned, and this time his face was completely frozen.

The man under the hood laughed: "—That's Bai Liu himself."

"The more perfect new god I'm talking about is not myself, but Bai Liu himself."

"Bai Liu can dislike me, hate me, despise me all he wants. I need him to have these emotions towards me." The man had a smile in his eyes that was not to be seen. "I will continue to take away the things he cherishes, so that Bai Liu will have to face me and kill me."

"—Because only a God has the power to kill God. Bai Liu should have fully understood this truth by now. In order to kill me, he has to accept all the gifts of God's power that I have given him—"

The man smiled softly: "—Then, as I wish, become the new evil god

who kills me, the old god."

The Prophet spoke word by word with great effort, as if he was having difficulty breathing: "Do you really want Bai Liu to become the new god? You will be destroyed by him because of this."

The hooded man slowly stood up, his back to The Prophet who was almost petrified, and looked at the waves of the sea outside the temple, with a smile on his face and nothing reflected in his eyes:

"Prophet, you can see the future, so you should know that nothing in this world can last forever. Rocks, water, waves, sky, earth, even God will perish one day."

"—That's why living things have the instinct to reproduce. All conscious things are instinctively looking for some way to continue their existence."

The Prophet coughed and said, "Are you trying to seek the continuation of your existence in Bai Liu?"

"No, I think it's boring to pursue the continuation of this kind of existence." He smiled, "So I hope there is someone, a guy who completely complies with my game rules, a player who can crack all my games, who can break all the rules I set for each world and come to me, and kill me, the game designer, with his own hands."

His eyes hidden under the hood flashed with a strange light: "—Don't you think it's fun to be killed by such a person as a game?"

The Prophet spoke hoarsely: "—There are so many Bai Liu who can beat your game, why did you choose this Bai Liu as your successor?"

The man turned his head slightly and asked with interest: "—Then let me ask you, why do you put all your chips to win against me on this Bai Liu, why not on another Bai Liu."

The Prophet was silent.

The man turned his head, the sea breeze blowing his long ponytail outside the hood. He lowered his eyes and smiled gently: "—Because you and I both know that this Bai Liu is different."

"Bai Liu's soul is completely different from those crudely made Bai Six(s). He is the most perfect and the most interesting."

“He has a soul full of desire and restraint.”

“If I am going to die in some way,” He looked at the boundless sea, smiling expectantly, “I hope that Bai Liu, who has such a soul, will kill me personally.”

The Dense Forest Borderlands

Deep in the jungle.

Spades was jumping on the tree trunks with Bai Liu on his back, getting closer and closer to the other side of the lake. The voices of Tang Erda and Liu Jiayi could be heard faintly from below.

“That group of corpses are still chasing us. To be more precise, they are chasing you.” Tang Erda said.

Liu Jiayi asked: “Bai Liu, do you want to lure these corpses directly to the bottom of the lake when crossing it, and then accumulate points?”

Bai Liu hummed vaguely, Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda looked at each other, then they looked towards the lake in front of them, and instantly went their separate ways.

Behind them, from the ground to the branches, there were densely packed corpses, mixed with some half-formed corpses, looking ferocious and crazy, with fangs and claws bared, raising their heads and roaring at Bai Liu above.

Spades stepped on the tree trunk with his left foot to gain leverage and flew into the air. Immediately behind him, a number of black corpses jumped up and roared as they pounced towards Bai Liu behind him.

Spades turned around indifferently to protect Bai Liu, knocked down all the corpses with his whip, and knelt steadily on one knee on another branch.

The branch shook twice, and Spades suddenly asked, “Bai Liu, I think you know why these corpses are chasing you, and you can easily dissolve this pursuit. Why do you deliberately let these corpses chase you?”

Bai Liu smiled: “Didn’t Liu Jiayi just say that as long as these corpses keep chasing me, I can naturally lure them into the lake bottom to accumulate points. As long as these corpses are recovered by the lake bottom, they can be counted as my points. This is my goal.”

Spades said without hesitation: “You lied, this is not your purpose.”

Bai Liu paused for a moment, and his hand around Spades’ neck

loosened slightly. He spoke with a casual smile in his tone: “Spades, your intuition about me is not always correct.”

“Occasionally listen to what I say to you instead of trusting your own instincts.”

Spades was silent for a while, frowning slightly, as if he was getting used to not trusting his own instincts. Then he said, “As long as we lure the corpses into the bottom of the lake, you will take the initiative to stop them from following you, right?”

Bai Liu lowered his eyes: “Yes.”

Spades paused, jumped up on one knee, swung his whip to knock away the approaching corpses, and got closer and closer to the lake.

Bai Liu leaned on Spades’ shoulder. He glanced at the blue lake that was getting closer and closer to him, clenched his fingers slightly and curled them into a fist.

With the wind carrying burning embers blowing through their hair, Spades approached the lake faster and faster.

Bai Liu rested his head on the center of Spades’ shoulder blades, half-closed his eyes and remained silent for a while. Suddenly, he spoke in a joking manner as if chatting: “Spades, your intuition is really an amazing thing. Can you tell me what your intuition is telling you now?”

“My intuition tells me that you are afraid and you are lying.” Spades said calmly, “You don’t like jumping into the water. You hate this burning environment, these burnt body parts, and you hate seeing bodies sinking in the water.”

“You jumped into the lake not for points, but for something else, something more dangerous. You hate doing it, but you decided to jump in anyway.”

Spades paused for a moment: “I don’t understand why you want to do something you hate.”

“Do you hate denying your intuition?” Bai Liu asked softly.

Spades hummed, “I don’t like it.”

Bai Liu laughed softly: “Then why are you willing to deny your

intuition for me and trust me? You can clearly feel that I am lying to you, and you are also doing things that you hate."

Spades paused for a moment: "…Because you asked for it."

"Are you willing to do what is asked of you?" Bai Liu smiled, "Will you also do what others ask of you?"

Spades instantly retorted: "No."

Bai Liu whispered softly: "Then why are you willing to do it when I ask you to do it?"

Spades was silent for a moment, and when he spoke again, there was confusion in his voice: "…I don't know."

Bai Liu opened his mouth, as if he wanted to say something, but in the end he just smiled and explained: "Spades, has anyone ever taught you that sometimes people are willing to do something they hate for someone else?"

Spades shook his head honestly, then asked, "Why?"

Bai Liu was silent for a long time, then said: "Because I love this person."

He whispered in an incredibly soft voice, and the next second, he released his hands from around Spades' back and fell backwards.

Spades was whipping open a group of corpses approaching him. When he noticed Bai Liu falling off from behind him, he immediately turned around. He ignored the corpses rushing towards him and whipped open the corpse next to Bai Liu. He jumped down with Bai Liu and reached out to grab Bai Liu.

Bai Liu fell wantonly in the burning woods and the residual wind. His emotionless pure black eyes reflected the continuously approaching Spades like a mirror.

The corpses kept approaching Bai Liu. Although most of them were blown away by Spades' whip, there were too many of them and a small part of them still crawled onto his body.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu is attacked by a monster (Zombie Corpse), and his spirit value is decreasing…]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu's mental value has fallen below 60, and

he is about to see hallucinations…]

Spades stared intently. He tried several times to use the whip to circle Bai Liu's waist and pull him up, but he stopped at the moment of whipping.

——He was not sure.

Spades used any weapon to hit monsters without thinking about the strength. Although it seemed that he had good control over the strength, he himself was not sure of it.

Because he has never used a whip to save anyone.

He didn't know whether this blow of the whip would bring Bai Liu up intact or break him into two pieces.

For the first time, Spades felt that what The Reverse God said to him was useful.

——Practice with the whip well, or sooner or later you will encounter a situation where you want to use the whip but cannot handle it.

【At that time, you will lose to another person who is good at using a whip. 】

Spades used his whip to push away the corpses that were approaching him. He concentrated on stepping on the surrounding wood trunks, descended rapidly, and reached out to Bai Liu who was falling close to the lake.

Just when Spades' hand was about to grab Bai Liu's shoulder, Spades saw Bai Liu turn his head slightly and smile at him.

That smile was pure and naughty, and his eyes were full of the reflection of Spades, as if there was water flowing in them. It was obviously full of pure joy that could not be concealed, but it always made people feel that he would cry in the next second.

Bai Liu looked at Spdes with that smile and said softly, "Xie Ta, I missed you so much."

"Goodbye."

Spades was startled, and when he was about to grab Bai Liu's hand, Bai Liu slipped from his palm and fell into the cold lake.

Then Spades fell.

The corpses all around were crawling towards the lake frantically as if they had gone mad. A black mass poured into the bottom of the lake, instantly dyeing the blue-green lake surface black.

Even the corpses and dried firewood fragments used in the sacrificial ceremony for the new evil god were attracted away and rushed to the bottom of the lake recklessly.

There were only a few corpses left who wanted to run, but were fixed in place by some unknown force. They howled and screamed while carving the new evil god wooden sculpture in a distorted posture.

After Alex saw all the corpses run away, he laughed in a trance: “Bai Liu finally came, I can finally be free.”

The Reverse God’s expression changed: “Not good, with this kind of reaction, Bai Liu chose to accept the gift from the evil god.”

After he finished speaking, he raised his hand and cut the ropes that bound his hands. The other three team members also cut the ropes that bound themselves and jumped down from the wooden stakes.

Bai Yi yawned in confusion: “What’s going on? I just fell asleep. Have I collected all the [true end] line information and cleared the level now?”

Bai Jiamu couldn’t help rolling his eyes: “How can you fall asleep in this situation? Are you a pig?”

Bai Yi said confidently: “I can’t understand a single word every time The Reverse God pushes the [true end] line, I might as well take this opportunity to have a good rest. I still have to do housework after I log out of the game. Do you think it’s easy for me, a househusband, to find time to train every day?”

Bai Jiamu was speechless: “…You are the only one who can talk about your stupidity so openly.”

“Did you understand what The Reverse God said just now?” Bai Yi shrugged Bai Jiamu maliciously and looked at him sideways.

Bai Jiamu: “…”

Actually, I didn’t understand it and almost fell asleep afterwards.

The Reverse God waved his hand helplessly, interrupting the two people's bickering: "Okay, let's do the main thing first."

Hearing what The Reverse God said, Bai Jiamu and Bai Yi finally became serious, and they drew their weapons at the same time.

[System Alert: Player Bai Yi uses his personal skill (Cooking God), and selects a high-speed eggbeater as the tool]

Bai Yi pulled out a half-person-high eggbeater and casually carried it on his shoulder.

[System Alert: Player Bai Jiamu uses personal skills (Failed Scalpel)]

Bai Jiamu pulled out several scalpels with a loop on the end from his chest, put them on the base of his fingers, and turned them several times smoothly in a strange way without hurting the fingers around him at all.

Then he raised his hand to grasp the hilt of the knife, looked at The Reverse God and nodded, indicating that he was ready.

The Reverse God paused, raised his hand to pull something out from behind, but finally put his hand down: "Let's go."

Bai Yi asked curiously, "Hey, Reverse God, don't you use your skill weapon? Your skill weapon is the strongest among us, and according to Bai Liu's rebellious personality, your skill should have a miraculous effect on him."

The Reverse God turned around and smiled at him, his eyebrows curved and full of tenderness: "Yes, so we have to save him until the official league to maximize his value."

"It's a bit of an overkill and a bit stupid to use the trump card so easily now."

Bai Yi and Bai Jiamu who both easily used their "trump card" skills: "…"

They could never figure out whether The Reverse God was deliberately mocking them or seriously analyzing the current situation.

The Reverse God walked straight forward.

Bai Jiamu followed closely: "Where are you going?"

“The lake.” The Reverse God said without hesitation, “The final battlefield chosen by Bai Liu must be there.”

Bai Jiamu was puzzled: “Why?”

The Reverse God turned around and answered, “Because he made a deal with us, saying that he would make Spades lose miserably and quit the game at the lake.”

“This man will not break his deal easily. He will definitely deliver a crushing defeat to us at the lake as promised.”

On the other end.

After Spades followed Bai Liu into the lake, Tang Erda and Liu Jiayi also jumped in without hesitation.

The dark, cold surface of the lake was murky and unclear, and one could only see long black corpses vaguely swimming. A steady stream of corpses crawled into the water, spreading from the edge of the lake to near the center.

The bottom of the lake seemed to be boiling with asphalt-like mud, swallowing up the corpses.

Tang Erda stood in front of Liu Jiayi and kept shooting at the approaching body parts, but he was still hung with several body parts. Tang Erda’s left shoulder and Liu Jiayi’s left foot began to turn into corpses.

The visibility under the water is too low and the shooting speed of bullets will also be hindered. This is a map that greatly limits Tang Erda’s performance as a gunner.

Not to mention Liu Jiayi, her poison is an attack weapon that can kill one thousand enemies but only eight hundred in the water.

Before she found Bai Liu’s location, she was unable to provide Bai Liu with the antidote in time, and she might kill Bai Liu by mistake if she abused the poison.

Liu Jiayi curled up her corpse-like left foot and frowned in thought.

…She didn’t know if it was her illusion, but she always felt that in this copy, Bai Liu always separated her and Tang Erda from himself intentionally or unintentionally, or brought them to some game scenes

that would limit the use of their weapons.

For example, at the very beginning, Bai Liu allowed Spades to take him away, and later sent them out to the Red Cross Team and Assault Team 1 respectively. After they finally reunited, they took her and Tang Erda to the close border where they could not use their skills.

——Now it's this turbid lake where both her and Tang Erda's skills will be restricted.

Liu Jiayi believed that Bai Liu would be able to figure out the design rules of the game "The Dense Forest Borderlands". Normally, Bai Liu would have used some extreme tactics to gamble once and then ended the game.

But… he dragged it until now, and repeatedly used the map to restrict her and Tang Erda's skills…

This is not Bai Liu's tactical style at all. He is good at maximizing the skills of each person instead of restricting them everywhere.

…This gave her the feeling that… it was as if Bai Liu was waiting for something extremely dangerous, and this thing was something they would definitely prevent Bai Liu from touching, so Bai Liu would use various methods to isolate them, restrict their skills, and prevent her and Tang Erda from stopping them.

Liu Jiayi stared at the black bottom of the lake with a frown on her face, and the uneasy feeling in her heart grew stronger and stronger.

Bai Liu, what on earth are you trying to do by scheming against everyone like this?!

The Reverse God and his men rushed to the lakeside, and saw clusters of black corpses falling into the water. From a distance, it looked like groups of black ants crawling towards a large puddle.

Bai Yi got goosebumps all over his body. "Wow, what happened in the lake?"

The Reverse God turned his head to look at the surging lake not far away: "We can only know when we go down."

After saying that, he jumped down first without hesitation, followed by Bai Jiamu and another team member. Bai Yi rubbed the goose bumps on his body, pinched his nose bitterly, and followed them

down.

In an instant, Tang Erda beat both Liu Jiayi and the Killer Sequence led by The Reverse God's speed as they all swam to the bottom of the lake.

The body parts were continuously swallowed by the lake bottom, forming a large whirlpool. The more body parts were swallowed, the thicker the mud on the ground became. Bai Liu was lying in the middle of the body parts being swallowed.

Bai Liu clasped his hands together in front of his abdomen, his face calm and indifferent, his eyes half-closed with no light, and the fair skin above his neck glowed dimly in the dim lake bottom.

Bai Liu's shoulders, left hand, right hand, left foot and right foot had all completely turned into corpses, revealing an abnormal bluish-white color.

He lay peacefully on the corpses that surrounded him, like a body that was about to be buried with those corpses.

Spades grabbed his shoulders tightly and was trying to pull Bai Liu out, but in the end he could only watch Bai Liu sink deeper and deeper into the corpse.

It's not that he can't pull it out, but——

Spades exerted force with his wrist, and he clearly heard the sound of Bai Liu's bones breaking and tearing. He loosened his grip, bubbles overflowing from the corners of his mouth, and looked at the corpses under Bai Liu with an indifferent expression——

——These body parts have completely grown together with Bai Liu.

Unless Bai Liu figures it out himself, Spades can only tear Bai Liu's shoulders off his body bloodily instead of pulling Bai Liu out entirely.

But Bai Liu obviously didn't want to come out. He lay on the corpse as if he was asleep.

The corpse-transformation has spread to the heart.

Spades' resistance panel was ridiculously high, and these corpse parts posed little threat to him, so no part of him had been transformed into a corpse for the time being. He stared at Bai Liu for a long while, and

suddenly leaned over and hugged Bai Liu tightly, using his body to block the constantly rising corpse parts.

Bai Liu finally opened his eyes and looked at Spades who was on his body: “You don’t have to do this for me.”

“I’m not doing this for you.” Spades’ voice was muffled, and a lot of bubbles came out of his mouth. “I just feel that I did something wrong just now.”

Bai Liu asked: “What did you do wrong?”

Spades’ voice was a little depressed: “I should have trusted my intuition instead of your words. You really are lying to me.”

Bai Liu chuckled: “Yes, didn’t The Reverse God teach you that the smarter people are, the more they like to lie.”

“Yeah.” Spades responded calmly. He hugged Bai Liu tighter. “I understand.”

Bai Liu was dragged deeper and deeper by the corpse parts. His body and the corpse parts seemed to form an airtight barrier. The area that Spades could protect became smaller and smaller. In the end, only a pair of exposed eyes and a right hand of Bai Liu were left that had not yet been transformed into corpses.

Spades tightly grasped Bai Liu’s only remaining right hand, not daring to use any strength at all, nor to use too much strength. He stared at Bai Liu’s gradually disappearing eyes with his pair of black eyes.

Bai Liu’s voice with a smile came out from the corpse: “Spades, you know, I once held a person’s hand like this and tried to save him.”

Spades asked: “Did you save him?”

Bai Liu smiled and said, “He was saved.”

“Now, it’s his turn to hold my hand tightly and rescue me.”

Bai Liu’s voice gradually faded away: “——But I suddenly want to know what the world belonging to God is like after he was buried underwater.”

“——Can I enter the world that belongs to God, find him again, kill everything that imprisoned him, and then bring his soul out?”

As Bai Liu's voice faded away, the wriggling corpses finally stopped and the lake bottom became clear again.

Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda, who had been obstructed, finally saw the location of Spades at the bottom of the lake.

Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda rushed to Spades almost instantly.

She looked at Bai Liu in disbelief as he was swallowed until only his right hand was exposed.

Moreover, this right hand was gradually turning into a corpse, and Liu Jiayi immediately wanted to use the antidote.

Spades shook his head: "This is an attack by a spirit monster. Your healing potion is useless."

Tang Erda was about to pull out his gun and shoot the huge, wriggling corpse at the bottom of the lake, but Spades grabbed the muzzle of the gun.

He stared at Tang Erda without a trace of emotion in his eyes: "Bai Liu is down there, he and the corpse have grown into one, if you hit the corpse he will also be hurt."

Liu Jiayi stared motionlessly at her right hand, which had only two fingers left that had not been turned into a corpse. Her expression almost twisted in an instant.

——Think of a way! Think of a way quickly! There must be a way to stop Bai Liu from becoming alienated!

There is no way.

This was Bai Liu's own desire for alienation. She couldn't stop Bai Liu from doing anything he wanted to do. She couldn't even understand why Bai Liu did this!

Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda watched helplessly as their right hands were devoured and turned into corpses, while Spades released his fingers one by one.

In the end, the right hand also completely turned into a corpse.

[System Alert (for all players): Player Bai Liu's spirit value has dropped to 0, and his body has been completely alienated. Exit the game.]

The Dense Forest Borderlands

Liu Jiayi couldn't breathe as she looked at the dark blue hand. She choked and coughed twice, about to drown, but Tang Erda immediately brought her up to the surface.

Spades let go of his hands and floated in the water. He stared at the bottom of the lake motionlessly, then immediately floated up. In the process of floating up, he met the Reverse God who was diving, and they floated to the surface together.

By the lake.

Liu Jiayi was choking and coughing with a pale face. She stared at the lake, as if expecting a Bai Liu to jump out of it.

Tang Erda patted Liu Jiayi on the back, his face almost blank, he seemed to have no idea what had just happened.

——Bai Liu, the omnipotent Bai Liu, became 100% alienated in front of them, and then died?

This sounds like a joke.

If the system prompt for all players had not been there, Tang Erda would have almost thought that this was another trick of Bai Liu.

Spades climbed out of the water, followed by Bai Yi and the others who were full of questions: "What's going on? We just got into the lake and we received the death notice of Bai Liu?"

"Bai Liu is not dead." Spades said without even turning his head, water dripping down the ends of his hair, his tone cold and calm.

Bai Yi was getting more and more confused. He opened his system panel, checked the bright red system notification two or three times, and muttered, "…I didn't see it wrong, it was a death exit…"

Spades turned around and stared at Bai Yi without saying a word. Bai Yi's voice gradually became weaker and he finally shut his mouth. He hid behind Bai Jiamu, trembling a little and whispered, "Bai Jiamu, I feel like Spades is looking at me with murderous intent…"

The Reverse God looked at Spades: "Why do you say Bai Liu is not dead?"

Spades remained silent and did not answer.

The Reverse God understood instantly: “Is it your intuition that told you this?”

The Reverse God quickly accepted Spades’ intuitive judgment and analyzed calmly: “If Bai Liu is not dead, then he cannot quit the game. He must be somewhere in this game. Now we have to find him from this game.”

“But this game has many time loops, and there are external and internal worlds.” Bai Jiamu frowned, “How do I find my way around such a large game map?”

The Reverse God smiled and said, “I have a way to find Bai Liu.”

Bai Yi muttered softly: “But, Reverse God, this Bai Liu is none of our business, why should we help find him?”

Liu Jiayi supported her knees and helped Tang Erda to stand up. She looked up and stared at the Reverse God: “If you help me find Bai Liu, I can participate in all your training matches for free and ensure your safety.”

The Reverse God turned around and glanced at Liu Jiayi, and suddenly realized: “You are the little witch with healing skills.”

Liu Jiayi took a deep breath and nodded.

The Reverse God laughed: “It’s a pretty significant bargaining chip. I’m really tempted.”

“But little witch, didn’t your tactician teach you that when negotiating with a smart person, no matter how panicked you are, you should never take out all your bottom line chips at the beginning?”

The Reverse God smiled gently and touched Liu Jiayi’s head, saying softly: “– In this way, he will shamelessly take advantage of your bargaining chips.”

“Bai Liu is very important to you, right?” The Reverse God smiled and casually threw a bomb, “How about I help you find Bai Liu, and you join my team?”

Liu Jiayi’s pupils shrank, Tang Erda stepped forward and knocked away the Reverse God’s hand that was touching Liu Jiayi, and said

coldly: “Dream on!”

The Reverse God raised his hands with a smile, indicating that he meant no harm: “Just kidding, a big team like us, the Killer Sequence, generally don’t do things like taking advantage of others’ misfortunes to rob them.”

But almost every member of Bai Liu’s team was snatched from others.

This person was alluding to Bai Liu.

Tang Erda had a gun in his hand, and his expression showed a fierceness: “That has nothing to do with you.”

The Reverse God opened his smiling eyes, glanced at Liu Jiayi who was hanging her head, and then turned to Tang Erda: “But I think, as a tactician, I am fighting for you like objects, and then placing you so casually-“

“It’s a little bit disrespectful of your feelings.”

The Reverse God smiled: “——It’s as if he is relying on you to follow him forever, clamping your emotions and making you fearfully accept all the consequences of his willfulness and recklessness, and you can’t get rid of it.”

“How should I put it? It’s a more advanced way for a tactician to control his teammates than absolute control. You all definitely trust Bai Liu from the bottom of your hearts.”

The Reverse God smiled: “——But the pain brought by this trust is also doubled, because you have deep feelings for him.”

“But Bai Liu clearly knows that you will suffer for him. He can also design a game path that will not make you suffer, such as making you quit the game first.”

“Why did Bai Liu choose to suffer and let you watch him suffer?”

“The evil spirit loves to observe the suffering of others.”

The Reverse God’s tone was so light that it sounded like a whisper: “–Don’t you think that from the very beginning, Bai Liu was showing your pain to the evil god to prove his true nature, and then let the evil god wholeheartedly choose him as his successor so that he can enter the territory of God–“

“——Your suffering is nothing more than his tribute to the evil god ——”

Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda drew their weapons almost at the same time, and clamped the Reverse God from both sides at a speed invisible to the naked eye. Liu Jiayi jumped onto the Reverse God’s shoulder, clamped her legs around the Reverse God’s neck, and pointed the smoking poison spray bottle at his Adam’s apple.

Tang Erda clamped the Reverse God’s hands behind his back with one hand and pointed the gun at the Reverse God’s temple.

Bai Jiamu and Bai Yi picked up their weapons almost instantly, their expressions turned cold, and aimed at Tang Erda and Liu Jiayi.

“Let go of our tactician.”

The atmosphere was tense.

The Reverse God interrupted with a nonchalant and laughing voice: “Relax, I was just joking.”

“Bai Jiamu, Bai Yi, put down your weapons, they won’t kill me.”

Bai Jiamu and Bai Yi hesitated for a moment, but finally put down their weapons.

The Reverse God turned his head to look at Tang Erda who was pointing a gun at his temple. After thinking for a moment, he suddenly laughed: “I have investigated you, Tang Erda, the former third captain of the Heretic Administration, right?”

“In reality, I am a good citizen who has never done anything bad to any creature. I pay taxes on time, work overtime every day, and I have never killed any innocent people in the game.” The Reverse God smiled frankly, “Are you sure you can kill a normal person like me who does not meet your killing standards at all?”

Tang Erda clenched his teeth and the finger holding the trigger trembled slightly.

–cannot.

His principles do not allow him to kill normal people.

Liu Jiayi’s eyes were red, her fingers were stuck on the poison spray gun, her expression was almost unconcealable malice: “–Tang Erda

can't kill you, but I can, help us find Bai Liu, or I will kill you!"

"The cause and effect relationship is wrong, little sister." The Reverse God was unmoved and pinched the muzzle of Liu Jiayi's spray gun with two fingers, looking back at her with a smile, "–You want me to help you find Bai Liu, so you have no way to kill me."

The Reverse God looked at Liu Jiayi gently: "Are you sure you want to kill me now?"

Liu Jiayi clenched the spray bottle tightly, then slowly put it down.

Bai Liu's obvious weakness was in the hands of the other party, and she really had no initiative.

Bai Yi stared in amazement as he watched the Reverse God resolve a crisis with just a few words.

Bai Jiamu turned the scalpel as if he was used to it.

The Reverse God's tactical style has always been like this. He is not very controllable and has a neither-good-nor-bad relationship with every team member. Even if he has a conflict with the enemy, he will try not to use force to solve the problem.

After all, the Reverse God is a tactician who can make the opponent surrender directly without drawing their weapons in the league game. The title of low-casualty tactician is not for nothing.

Liu Jiayi jumped off the Reverse God's shoulder, and Tang Erda took back the gun.

"Even if Bai Liu is sacrificing your pain, you have to find him, right?" The Reverse God asked softly.

Liu Jiayi turned her back to the Reverse God, her shoulders and voice tensed: "——Yes."

She clenched her fists and sneered, "We, the heartless team members who were snatched away by him like goods, can feel the pain of Bai Liu's self-destruction——"

"——How miserable Bai Liu must be."

Liu Jiayi took a deep breath:

"If Bai Liu is really offering pain to the evil god, then the most

important tribute is his own pain. Our pain is just an addition, a secondary offering."

Liu Jiayi turned around and looked at the Reverse God calmly: "You don't have to rely on this kind of sophistry to shake the relationship between me and Bai Liu."

"Bai Liu is the person I chose myself. I know what kind of person he is better than you do. When I followed this guy, I was ready to be used to death by him."

"Bai Liu is my tactician." Tang Erda said solemnly, "As long as he wants to win the game, the main attacker must bear all the pain and do his best."

"As his team member, I will not be easily shaken by this little pain."

"…So determined?" The Reverse God thought for a moment, then smiled. "That's beyond my expectation. Okay, I'll help you find Bai Liu for free."

Liu Jiayi looked at him warily: "Free of charge?"

The Reverse God turned his head and looked in distress at Spades, who was squatting by the lake, staring at the lake and poking it with a whip from time to time.

Spades seemed to think that Bai Liu had sunk to the bottom of the lake and would soon come out, so he squatted beside it with his knees hugged, watching over him.

The Reverse God sighed helplessly: "It's not just you who are being used and sacrificed by Bai Liu and suffering, but also my ace team member."

"Your tactician Bai Liu is really a tough guy. He took away the soul of our team's main attacker in just one game."

The Reverse God smiled with crooked eyes, he turned his head to look at Tang Erda and Liu Jiayi: "As a return gift, I originally wanted to let his team members' souls be seduced by me, it seems that my skills are still not good enough."

Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda didn't know why, but they felt a chill down their spines when they heard the Reverse God's laughter.

——For some reason, this tactician called the Reverse God makes you want to run away when he laughs.

“How did you find Bai Liu?” Liu Jiayi asked directly.

The Reverse God smiled and said, “Use props.”

“What props?” Tang Erda asked.

The Reverse God scratched his face, his eyes wandering: “Well, we have to thank our team’s main attacker. He gave Bai Liu a very important contact item in our team. The judgment of this item is very strong. As long as the player is still there, it will automatically pop up from the item panel when the bell rings.”

“If Bai Liu is still in this game, you can find him by ringing the bell.”

Hearing this, Spades, who was squatting by the lake, slowly straightened his body. Without saying a word, he pulled out the bell from the system and shook it violently. As a result, the bell disintegrated after only two rings.

Spades uttered a slow “Ah! I broke it.”

The Reverse God took a deep breath and covered his face: “…Yes, you have made this bell before. The reason why it can last until now is because of its good quality.”

“Let me do it.”

The Reverse God had no choice but to take out his bell, hold the handle, and shake it lightly twice. Suddenly, several bells rang at the same time.

The bells of Bai Jiamu and Bai Yi were ringing, but the Reverse God immediately looked towards the other side of the lake: “There are no people from us on the other side, but there are bells ringing.”

Spades disappeared almost the moment the bell rang on the other side of the river, followed by Tang Erda and Liu Jiayi.

The Reverse God looked at Bai Jiamu and Bai Yi beside him and said, “Let’s go too.”

On the other side of the lake, next to the wooden sculpture of the evil god.

The corpses that had just been attracted away by Bai Liu in the lake had now come back one after another, dancing wildly around the two wooden sculptures of evil gods, chanting the evil god's songs with strange intonations in their rotten throats.

"…The mortal body has decayed, and the believers have carved new vessels to hold the wandering souls…"

Bai Liu on the new wood carving of the god became more and more lifelike, with only the head and shoulders still connected to the original wood, and the rest of the body having been completely carved, only the hair on the head was left uncarved.

The corpses who carved the wood carvings moved the old evil god wood carving next to the new wood carving that looked like Bai Liu, and compared the carvings carefully. They told "Bai Liu statue" that his originally short hair had been carved into a long ponytail that was loosely tied and hung to the side of the waist, just like the old evil god wood carving.

It seemed that because of this change in the new evil god wood sculpture, the smile on the face of the old evil god wood sculpture became more and more satisfied.

The corpses shook their arms and legs around the wooden sculpture of the evil god, and the chanting became louder and louder:

"The evil god boasts that there will be people wandering in his shadow.

The person in the shadow is fourteen years old.

So the evil god gave this man a spine, a heart, and a divine emblem.

Boasting that this person will be its only believer and will become the next new god

The person in the shadow is 24 years old.

Then the evil god fell and the souls of his followers wandered around.

Spine, heart, and divine emblem, all broken,

The change of evil gods,

…

God died but he survived, and he lives forever because of evil. “

As the chanting went on, the new wood carving was gradually completed. A corpse staggered and lifted a large stone and began to hit the old evil god wood carving. The old evil god wood carving, which had been patched up, was easily broken apart.

The corpses danced wildly, and a pure white bone whip along with an inverted cross pendant slowly appeared in front of the old evil god wooden sculpture.

They raised their hands tremblingly, and the chanting became louder again:

“…The evil god gave this man a spine, a heart, and a divine emblem…”

“Using the spine of the old god and the heart blood of the new god, this evil faith comes from the depths of eternity, and even death cannot extinguish it—”

“——Create a new evil god to rule the universe.”

The corpses trembled as they raised a sharp stick and stabbed it hard into the heart of the old evil god wooden sculpture.

A red liquid similar to sticky blood flowed out from the heart of the wooden sculpture.

The corpses held up white bone whips and received the red liquid with reverence and awe. The bone whips were strangely dyed into a pure black color starting from the handle, which did not reflect any light.

As it was dyed, the bone spurs on it burst open, looking extremely sharp.

Alex, tied to a stake, grinned – that was the red paint.

——These red paints are produced from the evil god’s wood carvings.

As long as you pierce the heart of the wooden sculpture with a thorn, a magical red paint with magical powers will continuously flow out of it, which will always help people realize their desires.

At first Alex thought it was just some strange plant juice produced by the wood used for the evil god wood carving.

Later, he realized that it had nothing to do with the wood, but was the heart and blood of the wood sculpture.

Bright red liquid dripped onto the white bone whip drop by drop. The dyeing process of the bone whip was already halfway through. The corpse carefully put the inverted cross pendant on the new wood carving.

Alex raised his head in relief, closed his eyes, and showed a trance-like smile on his face: "…It's finally over."

A sound of ringing bells suddenly came from the new wood carving shaped like Bai Liu. The carefully carved surface of the new wood carving was cracked with brittle cracks like eggshells. These cracks grew bigger with the ringing of the bells, as if a creature inside was about to break through the wood carving and get out at any time.

The corpses panicked and stopped chanting and ritual:

"…The bone whip has not yet been dyed…"

"…The New Evil God shouldn't enter the container at this moment!"

Alex was stunned. He stared at the wooden sculpture.

The half-closed eyes of the new wooden sculpture blinked slightly, and a strong wind blew, blowing away the smoke that had been lingering in the jungle.

The surface of the wooden shell was completely shattered, and the long, loose ponytail passed through the wooden shell and drifted in the wind. The inverted cross pendant was blown into the air by the wind, sparkling in the dark rain forest.

Sawdust flakes fell, Bai Liu slowly opened his pure black eyes, his ponytail tied loosely behind his head, casually falling on one shoulder and hanging to his waist.

There was no emotion on his face, just a calmness without wind or cloud. His eyes seemed to contain all kinds of human desires, sorrows and joys, and convey the eternal galaxies and laws of the universe.

The corpses in the rainforest lay trembling on the ground. The miasma that had been covering the rainforest dissipated, and a faint light fell from the illusory sky, falling on the sacrifices who were tied to wooden stakes and witnessed all this.

Alex stared up at the new god born before him in a daze, and almost stopped breathing.

——This is the new god that the old evil god has been waiting for so long.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu's body has been replaced, and the overall panel value has risen sharply… Calculating…]

[…climbed to 10,000…unlocked the Bronze False God achievement… unlocked the low-level belief value system…]

[…climbed to 30,000…unlocked the Silver Pseudo-God achievement…unlocked the intermediate faith value system…]

[The comprehensive panel value continues to rise, the system is calculating…]

[…Obtained the system's crown-level gift package (a gift from the evil god)…]

[…A bone whip of unknown attributes, and a reverse cross pendant that can communicate with the evil god…]

[…acquired a new hidden identity (the heir of the evil god). Based on this identity, the evil god gave the player Bai Liu a world line save point – congratulations to the player Bai Liu for obtaining the world line game design rights of "Secret Order Border".]

[From this moment on, the player Bai Liu is the supreme god of the world line of "Dense Forest Frontier". You can rewrite and design all the stories in this world, save and retrieve at any time, and rewrite at any time, as long as you find it interesting. This is the right granted by God to the heir.]

[…Based on the identity of (the heir of the evil god), the player Bai Liu unlocks the (the heir of the evil god's faith) collection system by leaps and bounds.]

[Player Bai Liu, becoming an evil god requires not only strength, but also faith.]

[If you want to kill the evil god and become the new god, it is not only about being physically strong, but also about constantly gaining the faith of mankind. This is the most important thing for you. When your faith value exceeds that of the current evil god, you will have the

right to kill him——]

[How do you make humans believe in you?]

[Friendly advice from the evil god: Only when humans are in enough pain will they believe in God. As long as enough pain is created, humans will sell their souls and become believers of the evil god out of despair, praying to the evil god for wishes and help.]

[In other words, when a human becomes a player in the evil god's game, the evil god gains his soul and faith.]

[For you, Bai Liu, when you have a person's soul banknote, you have his faith. When the quantity and quality of your soul banknotes are equal to mine, you will see me.]

【I believe this day will come soon. 】

[Looking forward to meeting you, Bai Liu (laughs)——An evil god remains]

The Dense Forest Borderlands

Bai Liu turned his head to look at the half-dyed white bone whip and reached out to take it, but was stopped by the corpses lying on the ground in panic: “It’s not ready yet. Your soul and this whip have yet to completely fit into the container…”

He lowered his eyes to look at the bone whip. The blood-colored paint turned black the moment it dripped onto the bone, as if the color was formed by corroding the bone.

“I like white.” Bai Liu said calmly and was about to reach over the corpse to get the whip, “No need to dye it.”

The moment Bai Liu stretched out his hand, a stern shout came from behind: “The ritual has not yet been completed, stop Bai Liu from taking the whip!”

A scalpel spun rapidly and broke Bai Liu’s whip.

Bai Liu pulled out the whip and swung it away without even looking back.

Bai Jiamu raised his hand to take back the scalpel. His face darkened: “–You made a notch in my scalpel. It’s at least a weapon of the same level as Spades’ whip.”

The Reverse God quickly stepped forward. He only glanced at Bai Liu, and had a rare serious expression on his smiling face: “——It’s really a huge investment. The evil god actually directly delegated the right to design the world line to Bai Liu, the heir.”

He turned around and said to Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda behind him with unprecedented seriousness: “To tell you the truth, if you still want your previous Bai Liu tactician to come back, you’d better stop this guy’s whip from turning black.”

“Otherwise, next time Bai Liu won’t just sacrifice your pain.”

The Reverse God said coldly: “The real evil god rituals all involve the sacrifice of souls. Your two souls are in his hands, right?”

After saying that, the Reverse God turned around and quickly ordered: “Bai Yi will surround from behind, Bai Jiamu should not interrupt the attack and interrupt Bai Liu’s movements.”

Bai Yi and Bai Jiamu said in unison: “Yes!”

Bai Yi lifted the egg beater high up, and with a few quick leaps, he jumped almost as high as a dozen floors. Then he raised the egg beater and swung it down with gritted teeth: “—Beat at high speed!”

The egg beater, which was half the size of a person, spun rapidly, making a buzzing sound almost like a chainsaw. During the falling process, the rotating egg beater was so fast that it could almost cut the air, creating an air vortex in the air.

Bai Yi held the egg beater high above his head, and the moment it fell, it passed through all the waist-thick branches of the trees almost without any hindrance, and landed heavily on Bai Liu.

“Boom–!!”

Where Bai Yi hit, almost the entire ground sank several dozen centimeters, and a huge white smoke erupted.

At the same time, Bai Jiamu kept waving the sharp scalpel in his hand, smoothly bypassing the trees in the rainforest, and making several “puff puff puff” sounds in the mist with incredible precision.

A suppressed groan of pain came from the white mist.

The black and white whip swirled and dispersed the mist. Bai Liu stood in the center. He raised his eyes to look at the Reverse God opposite him. His face had a calm expression, and in his hand he held Bai Yi, who was struggling in pain.

The egg beater was thrown aside in tatters, and the mixer body had long been beaten to pieces by the whip.

Bai Yi’s neck was lifted up by Bai Liu’s whip, and the whip was getting tighter and tighter. Bai Yi’s face turned purple, and he kept scratching the whip on his neck with his hands, looking weaker and weaker.

There were several scalpels stuck in his body and blood was flowing down. It was obvious that Bai Liu had just used him as a shield.

Bai Jiamu’s pupils shrank: “——Bai Yi!”

He was about to step forward without hesitation, but was stopped by the Reverse God, who just quickly said, “You can’t beat him,” and disappeared on the spot.

The next second, the Reverse God appeared behind Bai Liu with a cold look in his eyes. He raised his hand and made a Tai Chi starting move, then pushed on Bai Liu's shoulder.

[System prompt: Player God-defying Judge uses physical skills (Tai Chi Bagua)]

Bai Liu looked back and dodged sideways which made the Reverse God's push miss Bai Liu's jaw.

The Reverse God changed his palm into a hook and pulled back without hesitation, aiming at the inverted cross pendant on Bai Liu's neck.

Bai Liu immediately released the whip that was trapping Bai Yi, raised his wrist and exerted force, and the whip flew quickly between the two people. The Reverse God withdrew his hand instantly, and it seemed that he wanted to safely fight through this confrontation.

The bone spurs of the whip opened up, leaving a deep bloody mark on the back of the Reverse God's hand.

Under the protection of the Reverse God, Bai Yi panted and crawled out of the attack range of Bai Liu's whip.

Bai Jiamu immediately helped him up. Bai Yi patted his chest in fear, his eyes wide open: "Shit, I thought I was going to die. Couldn't you have waited until you were sure before stabbing me? You stabbed me all over!"

"I just waited until I saw the opportunity before I made my move!" Bai Jiamu cursed, "Who told you not to hide after you were caught?"

The Reverse God and Bai Liu were still fighting over there, and these two men were actually able to fight on equal terms at a speed invisible to the naked eye.

But gradually, the scars on the Reverse God's body continued to increase, and he was obviously at a disadvantage. However, his tone was still calm, and he took the time to instruct Bai Jiamu, "Go and find Spades, Tang Erda, and Liu Jiayi. Bai Liu has rewritten the world line and has just transferred them to other places."

Bai Jiamu was startled. He looked around and realized that he and Bai Yi were the only ones left around.

Tang Erda, Liu Jiayi, and Spades, who had always been in the front, disappeared out of thin air at some point.

The Reverse God stared at Bai Liu opposite him, his hands changing positions rapidly, pushing and pulling at extremely fast and extremely slow speeds, and several times he held the whip and shook it back. His hands were already full of holes caused by bone spurs and were covered in blood, but there was no change in his expression.

He fought Bai Liu at close range using physical skills, and he used Tai Chi, a somewhat rogue and flexible physical skill. This greatly restricted the use of Bai Liu's whip and prevented the group of corpses from continuing to stain Bai Liu's whip.

Bai Liu looked at the Reverse God and said, "Not a bad strategy."

The Reverse God was smiling and was in the mood to chat with Bai Liu: "Right? I figured it out when I was with Spades. Close physical contact is very effective against you whip users, so I specially developed a Tai Chi skill."

"But speaking of it." The Reverse God seemed as if he was just chatting from the tone of voice, and he raised his hand to slap Bai Liu's spine with a palm strike so strong that the wind ran away, "–Are you afraid to face Spades, Tang Erda and Liu Jiayi with this face?"

The Reverse God smiled very kindly: "They were about to see such a powerful person like you, but you temporarily changed the world line and sent them to another place in the game instance, not wanting them to see you."

"Are young people embarrassed to see their friends after their makeover?"

The expression on Bai Liu's face froze, and without turning his head, he raised his hand to block the hand that was attacking him from behind by the Reverse God.

"Probably." Bai Liu replied calmly, "Why? Can't I be embarrassed?"

As he said this, the whip in Bai Liu's left hand turned half black and half white, and the black paint on the lower part of the junction began to rise.

Seeing this change, the Reverse God's face froze, and he wished he could find the time to slap himself twice!

After Bai Liu became the evil god, he was able to face his desires so honestly!

The more honestly one faces one's emotions and desires, the deeper the desires will penetrate. The Reverse God's words to stimulate Bai Liu were intended to make Bai Liu reject the desires, but it had the opposite effect, causing Bai Liu to psychologically accept himself with emotions, desires and negative emotions.

Bai Liu opened his eyelids, and the black color on the lower part of his whip was spreading upwards like blood. "Personally, I prefer the white bone whip, but if it is used to kill people, I think the black one is also good."

"Dirt-resistant."

Bai Liu smiled and looked at the whip with blood streaking upwards: "Why not just wait until it's transformed and then end this game copy."

Finally, even the last trace of smile on the Reverse God's face disappeared.

On the other end.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu (owner of the Dense Forest Frontier world line) has modified the world line and sent player Tang Erda and player Liu Jiayi to the Red Cross.]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has modified the Red Cross into a looping, close-contact space that cannot be escaped from, restricting player Tang Erda's attack and player Liu Jiayi's skill usage.]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has activated a large number of zombie corpses and body parts in the Red Cross map, forcing player Tang Erda to fight, and player Liu Jiayi to voluntarily quit the game.]

Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda stood back to back, looking vigilantly at the Red Cross surrounded by fog.

They were at the lakeside one second, just listening to the instructions given to them by the Reverse God, and the next second they were inexplicably sent to the Red Cross that was surrounded by white fog, and couldn't get out no matter how hard they tried.

In the fog, corpses kept staggering and roaring, trying to get closer to

them.

“In ten minutes at most, these unkillable corpses will completely alienate us.” Tang Erda looked around intently, “—by then we will have no choice but to quit the game.”

“I haven’t found any obvious decryption points either.” Liu Jiayi gritted her teeth, still unwilling to give up, “But Bai Liu is still here.”

“I heard his voice but I didn’t see him.”

Tang Erda was silent for a while: “I heard it too.”

He raised his hand, and the revolver in his hand kept changing shape, eventually turning into a long rose revolver with a bullet belt.

Tang Erda raised his head, pointed his gun at the corpses, and slowly exhaled a long breath:

“——Then we should go all out and hold on until we can no longer. Let’s see if we can break the barrier that traps us and see Bai Liu.”

[System Alert: Player Tang Erda has obtained the equipment “Monster Book Status: Withered Rose Hunter”]

At the edge of town, at the intersection leading to the cemetery, the fog was heavy.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has modified the face setting of the zombie bride, changing the face setting of the zombie bride from NPC Guy to Bai Liu’s face]

[System Alert: In order to confuse the player Spades’ ability to identify monsters, the state of the Corpse Bride (Bai Liu version) has been adjusted to a drunken version. The panel value is being changed…]

[System Alert: Improved the comprehensive panel of the Corpse Bride and increased the attack power attribute to the highest setting value of this monster.]

[The setting collection of “Dense Forest Frontier Book: Corpse Bride” modified by player Bai Liu is loading…]

Spades held the whip. He was supposed to be the first to reach the other side of the lake, but was inexplicably sent here.

He looked around indifferently, and without hesitation, he whipped

the whip to tear apart this close space and time and rushed out of this place that could not trap him at all.

But at the moment when Spades swung his whip, a gray shadow in a veil walked slowly out of the white fog, and the whip split the rolling fog.

A guy named Bai Liu, with a smile on his face, wearing a long veil and holding a bouquet of flowers, appeared in front of Spades. Except for his pale skin, he looked as lively as a living person.

Next, several zombie brides in the “Bai Liu” state appeared intermittently. In a cluster, they surrounded Spades and smiled with curved eyebrows: “I am willing to be with you.”

“I’ll never hate you.”

“We will be together forever, till death do us part.”

“I will never say goodbye to you again.”

Hiding behind the bouquet, “Bai Liu” stared at Spades intently with intoxicated eyes and smiled sweetly: “I miss you so much, Spades.”

“——I don’t want to see Xie Ta, I want to see Spades.”

Hearing these words, Spades, who was holding the whip, narrowed his eyes slightly.

Although he knew that Bai Liu’s words were all fake, Spades still paused in swinging the whip.

At this moment, the zombie “Bai Liu” came from behind and grabbed Spades’ wrist.

“Bai Liu” smiled happily, but did not stop: “——These are all the words you want to hear from me, right?”

“Do you want to continue listening? Come escape this game with me and we’ll stay together forever.”

Spades’ whipped back coldly without holding back any strength, but the moment he hit the zombie “Bai Liu”, he heard the alert sound of his own system.

[System Alert: Player Spades has been attached to the Corpse Bride. Attacking the attached object is equivalent to attacking the player’s

own body.]

[System Alert: Player Spades was attacked by himself, and his health has decreased by 7]

Spades slowly lowered his eyes and saw that the place where the zombie Bai Liu was holding his wrist had completely grown into him, and from the place where he was holding it tightly, the corpse transformation was still spreading upwards.

The bride “Bai Liu” smiled with a strange cruelty and sweetness: “You and I are combined together, we are one. Killing me is the same as killing yourself.”

“Let’s all become complete monsters and stay here, so we’ll never be separated again.”

An endless stream of “Bai Liu” zombie brides smiled and ran over with guns in hand to attach themselves to him. Spades finally transformed his back and left shoulder, and he frowned.

[System Alert: Player Spades has turned into a corpse, and his mental value is decreasing…]

Next to the lake.

The Reverse God’s pushing and pulling speed was getting slower and slower, and blood was flowing from the corners of his mouth. However, Bai Liu’s whipping speed was still very moderate, and he was as still as a mountain, slowly confronting the Reverse God.

“I’m actually quite curious.” With a smile, the Reverse God coughed up blood while chatting with Bai Liu, “Since you used Spades so cruelly, sacrificed their pain, and set a dead end for Spades and the others, it seems like you don’t care about them at all.”

“But why don’t you dare let them see you like this?”

“If you are truly as you say, and you can accept becoming an evil god completely—”

The Reverse God suddenly grabbed Bai Liu’s neck and said, “——Then what are you afraid of?”

Bai Liu leaned back, swung his hand and wrapped the whip around the Reverse God’s wrist. After the bone spurs of the whip opened and

embedded into the Reverse God's flesh, he grasped the handle of the whip and pulled it vertically.

The Reverse God's hand was forcibly torn apart, and blood and flesh splattered between the Reverse God and Bai Liu.

"I can accept the way I am, which is completely different from what others can accept." Bai Liu shook the whip up and down twice to shake off the blood foam on the whip, and then retracted it.

Bai Liu calmly looked at the Reverse God who took several steps back while covering his wrist: "It is too self-conscious to ask others to accept your utilitarian and lustful negative side."

The Reverse God covered his wrist which was dripping with blood and looked directly at Bai Liu: "–Since you don't expect them to accept you as you are now, and you have already accepted the reality that they won't accept you, then what are you afraid of?"

The Reverse God laughed: "Bai Liu, you are not afraid of another possibility?"

Bai Liu's hand holding the whip slightly curled inward, and blood dripped along the edge of the bone spur.

The Reverse God endured the severe pain in his wrist, grinned, and continued: "–Are you afraid that they will still accept you even at this point?"

"You're afraid that they have real feelings for you, and what you've done is unworthy of everything they've done to win you back, right?"

"You would rather they hate you than accept you after they meet you."

The Reverse God raised his eyebrows: "Bai Liu, I have never seen a player as strange and contradictory as you."

"So do you want them to accept you or not?"

The black color on the lower half of the whip that Bai Liu held at his side paused for a moment as the Reverse God spoke, and then began to slowly spread upwards.

The Reverse God stretched out his hands, pulled it up and pushed it outward, a typical Tai Chi starting posture.

His palms created wind as the wheel spun, blowing his robe and hair in the face.

There was a faint and gentle smile in the Reverse God's eyes, and his face was calm: "I may not know much about your teammates."

"——But there is an intuitive wild animal among my teammates. I know that as long as he identifies someone——"

Bai Liu looked at the Reverse God Calmly, the whip in his hand spread out again, and the blood-colored paint on it climbed up ferociously and boiling.

The Reverse God rushed forward suddenly and was close to Bai Liu almost in the blink of an eye.

He raised his hand and turned over to avoid Bai Liu's whip that was aimed at his face. He dodged it smoothly with his shoulder tilted, and his wrist turned inward and outward, hitting Bai Liu's ribs hard. The Reverse God said with a smile: "–Don't expect him to let you go."

"You were paid to help me get rid of this guy."

Bai Liu raised his whip to block the Reverse God's high five.

At the moment when the palm and the whip hit each other, a huge white mist exploded on the spot.

At the Red Cross.

Tang Erda coughed and choked as he held the gun. The corpses in front of him became more and more broken into pieces and more and more numerous. The poison from Liu Jiayi's side corroded the corpse parts. As long as they were not completely corroded, the scattered corpse foam would make it easier for them to hide and attack them.

In the later stages, Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda simply gave up their skills and chose the most stupid physical attacks, but physical attacks could easily be "stuck" to the corpse parts and then directly possessed and became one with them.

After drinking the last bottle of mental bleach, Liu Jiayi staggered. Almost 50% of her body had turned into a corpse. Now she could only grit her teeth and hold on.

Mental bleach can restore mental value, and her healing potion can

restore health value. Logically, they should be able to hold on longer.

But there were too many corpses, and the mental bleach was soon used up. Her healing potion skills needed time to recover, so within a dozen minutes, she was almost out of ammunition and food.

——The people behind the scenes who designed this game map have almost pushed the limitations of the scene on their skills to the extreme.

“It’s no good. You need to quit.” Tang Erda held Liu Jiayi’s shoulders and lifted her up, who was half-kneeling on the ground and gasping for breath. He said calmly, “I can still hold on for a while. You quit first.”

Liu Jiayi was about to shake her head to reject it when an extremely strong wind swept in from outside and hit the gap in the close space and got stuck.

The fierce wind only paused for less than two seconds, and the space shattered.

A pure black whip smashed the entire barrier with a force that could split the sky and the earth, then it swept away all the body parts and corpses on the ground and directly swept the whip to the outside of the Red Cross.

The fog dissipated, and Spades, covered in blood and wounds with no emotion on his face, stood at the exit of the Red Cross.

Spades held the whip in one hand. The whip was stained with blood and tangled with some wedding dress scraps and some bouquet fragments. Then with his other hand, Spades reached around the back of his neck with an indifferent expression and tore off a zombie’s severed hand that was still moving and stuck to his shoulder.

[System Warning: Attacking the zombie attached to your body is equivalent to attacking yourself!]

[System Warning: Player Spades attacked 23 zombie brides attached to him, and his health has dropped to 37]

The zombie was still wearing a wedding ring on its hand, and the broken part looked like it was torn directly by Spades, with some flesh strands pulled out.

After pulling off the zombie's hand, blood gushed out from the broken neck of Spades. He pressed it casually, but gave up when he found that he couldn't hold it down.

Spades turned to look at Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda, and asked casually as if he had accidentally met them by chance: "I'm going to look for Bai Liu, are you coming?"

The Dense Forest Borderlands

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the jungle.

Bai Jiamu was running quickly with Bai Yi on his back, his eyes were sharp, and a scalpel kept flashing in his hand, spinning left and right, nailing the body parts that were close to them to the ground or tree stumps.

Bai Yi weakly called out from Bai Jiamu's back: "… Stop shaking, I'm going to fall."

"…You are so stupid." Bai Jiamu shrugged speechlessly and pushed Bai Yi, who was about to slide down, onto his back a little. "You lose as soon as you make a move. Are you a loser?"

Bai Yi was not convinced: "How was I supposed to know that Bai Liu was so strong!"

"He can fight against the Reverse God on equal terms, so he should be a player of the same level as Spades." Bai Jiamu dodged a corpse falling from above his head with a serious expression, "…If a player of this level wanted to kill you, you wouldn't even have time to log out of the game. Bai Liu should have held back on you just now."

Bai Yi paused and hummed.

Bai Jiamu added: "I feel like the Reverse God also held back, otherwise if he used his skills and weapons, he could have forced Bai Liu out of the game."

Bai Yi let out a long sigh: "Anyway, I never understood what the Reverse God was going to do."

"He could have just cleared Bai Liu out directly, so why did he use Tai Chi to slowly consume Bai Liu? He also made Liao Ke (the last member of the Killer Sequence Team) quit the game and let us come out to find Spades."

"If you can understand the Reverse God's operation, it would be a bit insulting to the Reverse God's intelligence point of 96." Bai Jiamu

rolled his eyes, “Do you remember what the Reverse God said to us when he first contacted Bai Liu?”

Bai Yi tried to recall the past carefully for a while and said, “I don’t remember.”

Bai Jiamu was speechless to the extreme: “He said that Bai Liu is a rival recognized by Spades and can make Spades understand many things.”

“He asked us to find Spades to meet Bai Liu so that Bai Liu could influence Spades.” Bai Jiamu took a deep breath. “I don’t know if it was because of Spades that he was infected. My intuition at this moment tells me that after this game, Spades can rejoin the team and fight with us.”

“It’s so simple as you say!” Bai Yi said with a bitter face, “The Reverse God asked us to find Spades, but when have we ever found him in the game? Even if we are teammates, Spades never lets anyone follow him once he enters the game. It’s super hard to find him, okay-“

Before Bai Yi finished speaking, he saw Spades leading Tang Erda and Liu Jiayi and jumping past them without looking back.

From a distance, Tang Erda’s questioning voice could be heard: “Spades, we just passed by that tree, and I seemed to see your teammates?”

Spades' voice was very calm: “No, you are mistaken, it is a corpse. Go find Bai Liu first.”

“Corpse” Bai Yi: “…”

“Corpse” Bai Jiamu: “…”

“Spades——!” Bai Yi and Bai Jiamu’s twisted and angry voices startled countless birds, “Stop right there!!”

Next to the lake.

The huge white smoke exploded and was then opened by the waving whip. Bai Liu stood in place with the whip hanging by his side and blood dripping from the bone spurs.

Two long, deep mud tracks were left on the ground. The Reverse God knelt on one knee at the end of the mud track, covering his right

elbow with his left hand.

The fingers of his right hand were bloody and trembling slightly as blood dripped down.

The Reverse God took a few deep breaths, looked up with a smile and said, "——I thought you would need some time to get used to this new whip, but I didn't expect you to get the hang of it so quickly."

Bai Liu lowered his eyes: "I didn't expect that you still won't use your skill weapons."

"Is there anything about me that deserves your repeated mercy?"

The Reverse God had a faint sweat on his forehead, but his eyes and mouth curved up: "I want to ask you the same question. You could have killed me earlier, so why did you show mercy to me again and again, and limit the damage to my right hand several times."

"What?" The Reverse God smiled, "Are you not ready to kill yet, or is it the same reason why you and I showed mercy?"

"——I like you because of Spades." The Reverse God laughed playfully, "He likes you. He has never liked anyone since he was born. You are the first one."

"As his tactician, I won't easily hurt the only person he loves, so why don't you kill me?"

Bai Liu slowly opened his eyelids and looked down at the rebellious god who was half-kneeling on the ground. The black paint on the whip spread upwards several times but was strangely pressed back again.

The smile on Nishen's face deepened: "You didn't kill me because you also like Spades and care about his feelings, right?"

Before he finished speaking, Bai Liu's whip suddenly stabbed towards the Reverse God. This time, it was no longer controlled by the Reverse God's right hand as before, but stabbed fiercely towards the Reverse God's heart.

The Reverse God half-knelt on the ground, holding the whip that Bai Liu stabbed at him with his left hand. The force of the whip pushed him to his knees and slid back a distance.

When the whip was about to pierce his heart, the Reverse God gritted his teeth and held the opened bone spurs on the whip tightly, deflecting the whip so that it pierced his shoulder.

After the whip penetrated, it paused only slightly, and the bone spurs expanded one by one, as if to make sure that every bone spur had pierced into the Reverse God's flesh, before Bai Liu pulled it back.

The tail of the whip that pierced into the Reverse God's body, directly tore the flesh on the Reverse God's shoulder during the process of being pulled back, and a large hole that was bleeding and deep enough to reveal the bone appeared on the Reverse God's shoulder.

The Reverse God's eyes half closed due to the pain, and he noticed that the black color of Bai Liu's whip had spread to two-thirds.

…This isn't good. Bai Liu is getting more and more skilled at using this new whip. Keeping him like this to slowly torture him during sparring, isn't it for the purpose of…

"I'm not going to show mercy to you, it's just that any new weapon needs practice after it is acquired." Bai Liu walked towards the Reverse God, dragging the bloody whip, "Your physical skills are very good, just enough to restrain me."

Bai Liu looked down at the rebellious god who was gasping for breath in silence. There was no human expression on his face, and he was as indifferent as a statue.

"There's no need for me to reject a high-quality training target that's been sent to me." Bai Liu said calmly, "I limited the attack range to your right hand before so that I could practice [Disarmament]."

The paint on the whip seemed to run upwards rapidly with joy, and soon it was three-quarters black.

"But now, since you are unwilling to use your skill weapon, you have lost your value for practice." Bai Liu raised the whip calmly, "Let's stop here today."

The whip that was dripping blood was raised high, and the hideous bone spurs on it were clearly visible.

The Reverse God's eyes gradually turned cold. He slowly put his hands behind his back to hold something and took a deep breath.

He really didn't expect that Bai Liu could force him to this point before he even got the complete inheritance of the evil god.

How should he put it…? Is he worthy of being the successor that the evil god has been waiting for so long?

[System Alert: Player Reverse God, do you want to use your personal skill…?]

A pure black bone whip suddenly flung over from the opposite shore of the lake in a brutal manner, directly hitting Bai Liu's abdomen and sending him flying hard at the waist.

The Reverse God finally breathed a sigh of relief. He collapsed backwards onto the ground: "…Finally, you're here."

Spades jumped several times and landed on Bai Liu who had just gotten up from the ground. For the first time, a serious expression appeared on his face: "You took something you hate."

Bai Liu coughed twice, brushed the dust off his knees, stood up straight, and looked at Spades calmly: "I thought I would be very annoying, but now I'm not that annoying."

Spades interrupted Bai Liu expressionlessly: "You are lying. You are afraid."

"People are always afraid of the unknown self." Bai Liu raised his eyes and looked at Spades, "But that doesn't mean the unknown is a bad thing. If the unknown contains what you want, then the unknown is not a bad thing."

Spades' eyes moved downwards: "Then why don't you hold the whip tightly?"

Bai Liu was silent. He clenched the whip suddenly. The black color on the whip suddenly shot up. Then he raised his hand and whipped Spades in the face without hesitation.

Spades dodged nimbly by stepping back, then with a cold expression, swung his black bone whip, which was full of holes, sideways.

The two black whips instantly intertwined in the air, pulled by Spades and Bai Liu respectively, and entangled in the middle to form a thorn.

Bai Liu was about to pull back his bone whip.

Spades did not let go. He exerted force with his wrist, gripped the whip tightly and lifted it up, and the whip separated under his control.

At the same time, Spades jumped up smoothly, stepped coldly on the whip that Bai Liu had pulled back, and quickly approached Bai Liu at the other end, reaching Bai Liu in the blink of an eye.

Bai Liu quickly loosened his grip on the whip and tried to draw other weapons from the skill panel, but Spades was already close to him, leaving him no time to react.

Spades used his waist to exert force, turned sideways and kicked Bai Liu's neck without holding back any strength.

Bai Liu could almost hear the sound of his bones being broken by Spades' kicks. He could see Spades' eyes, reflecting his own reflection with pure indifference.

Spades was…angry.

The next second, Bai Liu was kicked by Spades and rolled several times on the ground. After hitting the shore, he choked and coughed then fell directly into the lake.

The tangled bone whips finally separated, and Bai Liu fell into the lake holding the bone whip. Spades followed suit and jumped into the lake.

The Reverse God, who was supported by Bai Jiamu and Bai Yi, was shocked when he saw this scene: "Spades is using all his strength. He is serious."

Bai Yi was stunned: "Fuck! I've never seen Spades move so fast! I can't even see it clearly!"

Bai Jiamu hadn't reacted yet: "Why did Spades suddenly use all his strength?"

The Reverse God touched his chin and said, "…If I must say something, it's that you finally fall in love with someone, but that person completely denies himself and forces himself to become another person. The problem is that he himself hates this appearance, but he forces himself to endure the disgust and keep acting."

"He doesn't accept himself, nor does he let the people around him accept him as he is. No one in the world accepts Bai Liu like that. He

has even erased the meaning of his own existence, but he still has to calmly tell everyone, this is what I want."

"The person I love is being abused like this." The Reverse God looked at the lake, "Go and be angry, Spades."

Chapter End Notes

> Go and check the amazing art of Bai Liu with his new whip : https://danbooru.donmai.us/posts/6124614

The Dense Forest Borderlands

Liu Jiayi stared at the lake intently, then turned to look at the Reverse God: “Am I absolutely not allowed to go over there?”

“It’s better not to.” The Reverse God looked at Tang Erda who was holding the gun, “The same goes for you. If Bai Liu sees you two, you might be sent to other maps again. You don’t have the ability to break through space like Spades. If you are sent again, you will probably quit the game directly.”

Liu Jiayi closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

What the Reverse God said was reasonable, but…

“We are Bai Liu’s teammates.” Liu Jiayi stared at the Reverse God, “Is there nothing we can do?”

The Reverse God shrugged and spread his hands: “I am also a teammate of Spades, but now look, is there anything I can do?”

“The connection between these two people.” The Reverse God turned his head and looked at the calm lake surface, “It’s not something that teammates like us can interfere with.”

Under the lake.

The corpses swam back and forth with hideous and rotting faces, blocking out all light in the darkness.

Bai Liu hid himself behind a group of corpses, with no expression on his face, and slowly sank.

A pure black whip was swung left and right, knocking open the corpse covering Bai Liu. The faint dawn light from the lake fell on Bai Liu’s face as the corpse was thrown away.

Spades’ cold face appeared in front of Bai Liu. He held the bone-spurred whip that Bai Liu was swinging at with one hand.

The bone spur pierced into his palm, and as Bai Liu pulled the whip back, a blood mist erupted from Spades’ palm in the water.

But this did not stop Spades from approaching Bai Liu. He grabbed Bai

Liu's wrist that was wielding the whip and pulled it upwards with great force.

Bai Liu was pulled so hard that he opened his mouth subconsciously. A large amount of water poured into his throat. He was thrown out of the water and fell to the ground, where he turned around twice. He then raised the back of his hand, coughed, and wiped the water from the corner of his mouth as he tried to stand up.

Spades suddenly appeared behind Bai Liu who had just stood up. He bent his knees in the air and knelt on the back of Bai Liu's neck. He pressed down with an expressionless face, and Bai Liu was forced to kneel down on one knee.

Bai Liu subconsciously wanted to whip back.

But Spades' movements were too fast. He controlled Bai Liu's shoulders on both sides with his hands and slid down to grab Bai Liu's wrists, twisting them upwards with his left knee still pressing on the back of Bai Liu's neck.

It's completely an arresting posture.

Bai Liu knelt on the ground, breathing silently, his fingers curled up as if struggling to retract. His long hair spread out, covering his profile, winding down to the ground, and drops of water swayed and fell from Bai Liu's eyelashes.

The black whip with bone spurs fell to the side, and the black paint on it stayed weakly at the area that was three-quarters black, and no longer spread upwards.

Spades used force with his knees, and Bai Liu was forced to tilt his head back to look at Spades who was pressing him down.

There was a kind of dazed and empty look in Bai Liu's eyes, his chest heaving slightly, and because he had just suffocated, his eye sockets were slightly red.

Spades lowered his head and looked at Bai Liu. His eyes were focused, but the expression on his face was unfamiliar, and his tone was unprecedentedly cold: "——Bai Liu, didn't you say you were going to beat me?"

"You are no match for me in this self-loathing state."

“You could have defeated me or anyone else, so why did you exile and erase yourself?” Spades asked him calmly, “–Looking at yourself now as a carrier of other people’s desires and weapons, don’t you feel sick?”

“I will never let you, like this, beat me in the game.”

Spades slowly reached out his hand, trying to take away the inverted cross pendant from Bai Liu’s neck.

Bai Liu’s pupils shrank slightly for a moment, and the black color that had been stagnant on the whip next to him seemed to boil and began to twist on the entire whip. He suddenly smiled.

“What qualifications do you have to say that to me?” Bai Liu raised his eyes and stared at Spades. The smile on his face became extremely dangerous. His light-colored lips slightly opened and closed, and drops of water flowed down his jaw and across his Adam’s apple. “–Didn’t you do the self-erasure thing first?”

Spades was slightly startled.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu is mobilizing all the corpses in the lake…]

A huge, twisted hand made of corpse parts suddenly rushed out of the lake and smashed towards Spades. Spades tried to drag Bai Liu away, but Bai Liu rolled over and grabbed the black bone whip next to him.

The moment he turned over and knelt on the ground, Bai Liu looked at Spades who was approaching with a cold look and raised his hand to whip him diagonally upwards.

Spades dodged sideways.

Bai Liu continued his attack, with the whip’s spurs fully extended, aiming at Spades’ throat and pulling back, attempting to use the whip’s spurs to directly open Spades’ large blood vessels.

The inverted cross pendant swung out from the collar of Bai Liu’s shirt during the movement, emitting a dark glow that was almost blood-red.

The halo shone on the huge corpse hand behind Bai Liu. The corpse hand seemed to be crazy, twisting and hitting Spades continuously.

The huge corpse hand slammed heavily on the ground, and cracks continued to appear on the ground. Spades was only the size of a bean in front of this huge corpse hand, and he jumped nimbly to avoid it.

Spades' whip fell again and again, hitting the corpse's hand, which was broken into pieces. However, the pieces were not dead and soon gathered together again, blocking Bai Liu.

Bai Liu raised the whip, and with the defense and help of the corpse hand, he fought on equal terms with the constantly attacking Spades.

The wet long hair flew around Bai Liu in disorder, and the whip in his hand became darker and darker, with a smile on his face that was almost careless and cruel:

"What are you angry about?"

"You appeared in front of me again and again, playing games with me, and then you took the initiative to erase your own existence, dig out your own heart, erase my memory and leave. Aren't you the one who left?"

There was a light in Bai Liu's eyes that was almost like fire, swaying between his dark pupils:

"—I haven't said anything yet."

Bai Liu's whip suddenly appeared from the side of Spades under the cover of the corpse's hand. Spades quickly dodged, and Bai Liu suddenly appeared from the other side.

The whip in front of Spades disappeared like an afterimage, and returned to Bai Liu's hand like a boomerang. Bai Liu swung the whip with an extremely cold tone:

"——What right do you have to be angry in front of me?"

The whip hit Spades' back with a loud bang, knocking Spades directly into a pit. Then the corpse hand also whistled and hammered down, creating a huge cloud of smoke.

The mud on the lakeshore all cracked, and the pit where Spades fell into sank directly into the lake as it cracked and collapsed.

Bai Liu stood on the corpse's hand, lowered his eyes and looked at the pit that fell into the water. Only the last trace of white was left on the

whip in his hand.

He was silent for a moment, with no emotion in his eyes, and slowly raised his hand and made a downward gesture.

The outcome of a game agreed upon between two people may be decided when one of the players deserts.

It doesn't make sense.

The huge corpse hand was raised high up and smashed down fiercely, causing huge waves.

Bai Yi, who was standing next to him, stared with wide eyes: "… Damn, these must be some S-level monsters…"

"Reverse God." Bai Jiamu turned his head sharply and looked at the Reverse God, "Is Spades safe?"

The Reverse God glanced hesitantly at the still violently shaking water surface: "That should be the case, right? Spades' defense is very high…"

"If Spades is hit by these corpses, he will be connected to them. If he resists, he will lose his own blood." Tang Erda suggested hesitantly, "And Spades has been resisting just now. I think his health should have dropped a lot. Are you sure you don't want to go down and take a look?"

Seeing that Bai Liu was fine, Liu Jiayi added calmly, "When we met Spades, he told us that he only had 37 health points."

Bai Jiamu: "…"

Bai Yi: "…"

The Reverse God: "…"

It's over, Spades will really become their "corpse" teammate!

The Reverse God looked miserable as he sat cross-legged by the lake, wiping his tears with his hands: "Spades! Spades! Come out quickly, Spades! I will never teach you a lesson so harshly next time!"

"It's my fault. I trusted the wrong person. I thought Bai Liu would show mercy to you because of your old relationship with him, and at least leave you an intact body!"

“Wuwuwu.” Bai Yi cried loudly, “Spades, I will never curse you to death again because you didn’t recognize me as your teammate on the court. You’d better not die. If you die, it will be more likely for me to die on the court. Come back soon!”

Bai Jiamu froze for a moment, then solemnly pounded his fist towards the lakeside and said in silence: “Spades, I will always remember you as my teammate.”

Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda: “…”

What happened to this team?!

Spades hasn’t left yet, why do you seem to have already prepared a buffet for him?

“Hey!” Liu Jiayi interrupted the Reverse God’s fake crying, “What on earth are you guys up to? Won’t Spades get into trouble?”

The sorrowful look on the Reverse God’s face suddenly disappeared, and turned into a smiling face: “How should I put it? Spades’ health points are only 37, not to mention if there were only 7. It is not easy to kill him.”

“But.” The smile on the Reverse God’s face faded. He looked at Bai Liu who jumped into the lake and seemed to be searching for Spades. “——I really didn’t expect that Bai Liu would really kill him.”

“Spades’ current health won’t make him die so easily, but it will probably still be difficult for him to defeat Bai Liu. However, Spades should know that he can’t defeat Bai Liu in this situation with the blessing of the evil god and the world line.”

“Bai Liu really did what he said. He defeated Spades. After this incident, Spades should have a new goal.”

The Reverse God rubbed the wound on his shoulder and stood up with a grin: “My goal has basically been achieved. I can pack up and prepare to quit the game.”

Liu Jiayi dodged cautiously: “How do you know Spades is really not dead?”

“Because this is a game pool, you can quit the game at any time.” Spades smiled, “Spades looks stupid, but he won’t force it. When he really knows he can’t win, he will run away.”

“You can all prepare to quit the game. I’ll tidy up and complete one last goal.” The Reverse God eyes were fixed on the place where Bai Liu dived.

Liu Jiayi asked alertly: “What are you going to do to Bai Liu?”

“Stop Bai Liu from becoming the complete successor of the evil god.” The Reverse God said casually, waving his hand with a smile, “Don’t thank me too much for your help. Protecting the rare tactician resources is everyone’s responsibility.”

Liu Jiayi looked at the bowl-sized wound on the Reverse God’s shoulder with suspicion: “You were beaten like a dog by Bai Liu just now. Can you stop Bai Liu?”

“…What the hell do you mean?” The Reverse God pretended to be angry. “You little girl, you have a very dirty mouth. Be careful or I will tell your tactician about you.”

Liu Jiayi rolled her eyes speechlessly.

“But I do have something that can restrain Bai Liu.” The Reverse God took a step forward, his back facing Liu Jiayi, his voice still with a smile, “My skill weapon can restrain the evil god, isn’t it amazing!”

Liu Jiayi was stunned for a moment and her face turned surprised.

A skill weapon to contain the evil god. What is the origin of this skill weapon?!

“Then why do you want to help us?” Liu Jiayi paused doubtfully and asked, “Do you need us to help you with something?”

The Reverse God turned around, smiled at Liu Jiayi with curved eyebrows and eight teeth, and gave a thumbs up: “After all, I am called the Reverse God, and my favorite thing to do is to go against the evil god.”

“As long as the evil god is unhappy, I will be happy.”

Liu Jiayi stared at the Reverse God’s smiling face in a daze.

Just now, for a moment, she sensed a very different and intimidating aura from the expression of the Reverse God, who had always looked very gentle.

The Reverse God turned his head, his hands resting on his back as if

he was about to draw a weapon, and the smile in his voice was rarely serious: “And Bai Liu, the tactician, was able to fight against the evil god’s desires for so long during the inheritance ceremony without losing his original intention and being completely devoured——”

“——I admire him very much.”

[System Alert: Does the player Reverse God want to be equipped with the identity of “Monster Book: the Reverse God”?]

【Yes.】

In the lake.

The corpse’s hand had just smashed hard, stirring up the entire lake water, making it turbid and with bubbles rising continuously. Bai Liu waved his hand to the left, and the corpse parts that were blocking his vision dispersed, revealing the bottom of the lake.

The lake bottom, which was originally filled with thick mud and sand, has now been smashed into a huge, sunken pit with nothing in it.

Bai Liu stared calmly at the deepest part of the pit for a while.

He had the editing rights for the entire world line of “Dense Forest Frontier”, and he couldn’t feel the presence of Spades here.

Spades is out of the game.

Bai Liu’s sight seemed to be fixed on this pit. His eyelids were half closed, and the rising black color of the whip in his hand stopped at a point where there was still a line of damage and no longer moved.

Was it because just now… He felt that the way his emotions and desires were out of control was disgusting, and that he had lost the right to be taken seriously as an opponent, so Spades left?

Bai Liu’s long hair spread out and fluttered in the water, hiding all the expressions on his face. The whip hung casually, all the way to the bottom of the lake.

Again… like this.

It was this person who clearly said that he would always play horror games with him, and it was this person who clearly said that he would

reunite with him in the horror game.

But this person is also the first to leave, to be destroyed, and to withdraw.

The Dense Forest Borderlands

… He left so abruptly, leaving behind only a soulless container.

Bai Liu knew very well that all he had done was to trick Spades into liking him, and then his death, his pain, and the agony of his betrayal ensued.

Spades is a very special player, he has no soul and simply exists as a container, so Bai Liu cannot complete a soul transaction with him to control him.

This container named Spades has extremely strong defense. Even if any attack breaks through the defense barrier and hits Spades, or even beats Spades half to death, it cannot make Spades, an intuitive creature, feel “pain”.

This guy’s mind is so clear that the only thing on his mind is winning or losing, and he won’t feel any physical pain from any external attack.

To sacrifice the pain of Spades, it can only be psychological.

That is to make Spades develop an emotional attachment to someone, and then use this medium to make Spades feel pain.

That’s what Bai Liu did.

And if Spades had a soul, the whole process would be much simpler.

Bai Liu only needed to trade souls with Spades, because after the soul trade, the player who sold the soul to him will develop an irresistible emotional dependence on him, and Bai Liu can easily make the other party feel pain through his own “death”.

For example, Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda.

Fortunately, Spades was very simple, and the whole process was not difficult for Bai Liu. Although the level of favorability was not clear in the end, Spades did develop feelings for him that were at least more than friendship.

【 Except you, no one is not afraid of me. 】

【 I like you very much. 】

【 Do I need your consent to kiss you? 】

【 Sorry, please don't hate me. 】

【 Would you like to marry me? 】

【 Do not lie to me. 】

Spades' pain is nothing more than Bai Liu's most precious and pious sacrifice to the evil god.

So he is now hovering here, facing this container, struggling with himself…

Is it valuable?

There is no value.

After the sacrifice, the offering is the most worthless thing.

It's not worth it to him to remember it.

Bai Liu's fingers hanging down at his side slightly clenched and gripped the whip. The black color that had been controlled on the whip began to slowly climb up again, and it was only a little bit away from completely dyeing the entire bone whip black.

He calmly withdrew his gaze from the bottom of the lake, turned around in the water, and when he raised his head his expression was as indifferent as if nothing had happened.

Bai Liu raised his hand, and the huge corpse hand rose up gently, ready to send Bai Liu, who was standing on the back of its hand, out of the lake.

The whip that fell at the bottom of the lake slowly rose up. At the moment when it was about to completely leave the lake surface, a cold white hand suddenly emerged from the bottom of the lake, grabbed the whip tightly, and pulled it down hard.

Bai Liu, who was pulled away from the corpse's hand, turned around and looked at the hand, bubbles escaping from the corners of his mouth.

…How is it possible? He couldn't feel Spades' presence in this game at all.

Now, pulling his hand gave Bai Liu a very familiar yet strange feeling, as if it was Spades, but also as if it was not a Spades.

Another hand emerged from the mud and sand, also grasping the whip and pulling down. The movement was strong and fast. Bai Liu was pulled down unexpectedly and fell to the bottom of the lake very quickly. At the moment when he was about to hit the mud and sand, something broke out from the bottom of the lake and caught Bai Liu steadily.

The long silver-blue curly hair fluttered at the bottom of the turbid lake, and the pure eyes looked like a god looking down on the world. He held his only believer in his arms, and his voice was soft and gentle.

“You are my only believer, so you cannot believe in others.”

One of Tawil’s eyes was a shimmering silver-blue, and the other was a bottomless black. He bent down, calmly grasped the whip in Bai Liu’s arms and pulled it upwards. Bai Liu was pulled up and moved closer to Tawil:

“Just imagine that I left you behind, went about wreaking havoc, betrayed me and believed in someone else, hurt myself, and erased myself.”

“I’ll be angry, Bai Liu.”

[System Alert: Player Spades uses his personal skill (Degenerate into Monster), forcing the spirit value to drop to 0]

[System Alert: Player Spades is equipped with the Monster Book identity “Monster Book: The Fallen Old Evil God”]

Bai Liu’s pupils contracted sharply.

On the lake.

The god who was squatting on the shore seemed to have noticed the changes in the lake. He stood up suddenly and his expression changed drastically: “This Spades guy is too reckless!”

“In order to avoid quitting the game and continue to fight Bai Liu, he actually used his skills in a place like the game pool. The world line in the game pool can’t bear his monsterization at all. Does he want to destroy this game world line!”

“All of you, quit the game immediately!” The Reverse God turned around and roared, “Quickly!”

When Bai Jiamu and Bai Yi heard that Spades had used his personal skill, their faces changed. Bai Yi couldn’t help but exclaim , “Using skills in a place like this, does Spades want us to be wiped out?”

“Stop talking and go! Otherwise you will really become Spades’ dead teammate!” Bai Jiamu hit Bai Yi on the head.

Bai Yi and Bai Jiamu called up the panel and simply quit the game.

When the Reverse God saw that Tang Erda and Liu Jiayi had not left, the expression on his face almost broke, and he said in despair: “Why are you still here! Go away!”

Liu Jiayi stared at the lake steadily: “Bai Liu hasn’t come out yet.”

Tang Erda turned his head to look at the Reverse God: “The one who was most affected by Spades’ skill is Bai Liu. We need to meet him and go with him.”

“You went crazy when you saw Spades using his skills!” The Reverse God held his forehead helplessly, “The destructive power of that guy’s personal skills is terrifying, and he doesn’t have enough control over his skills. Every time he uses a skill, he can only maintain consciousness for a short period of time, and then he loses his self-awareness and attacks indiscriminately.”

“Spades himself is well aware of the destructive power of his skills. No matter what the situation is, he has almost never used his skills in the game.” The Reverse God turned his head to look at the lake, took a deep breath with an inexplicable look, “…but this time, he is so stubborn that he really doesn’t want to leave easily…”

“This is terrible… Two evil god-level characters appear in the same game together, and they refuse to leave.” The Reverse God put his hand on the back of his neck. He turned his neck, his eyes were cold, but there was still a casual smile in his tone, “I don’t know if I can control it.”

“These two little bastards in love are really good at causing trouble for the people around them.” The Reverse God exhaled, “But now I have no choice but to force it.”

[System Alert: Does the player Reverse God want to use the skill

weapon (the Judge's Cross Heavy Sword)?]

【Sure】.

A huge cross-shaped heavy sword appeared across the Reverse God's back, and the handle of the sword was just held by the Reverse God's hand behind his neck.

The sword was huge, with a blade about two meters long and about the width of two adult palms. The horizontal handle was also fifty to sixty centimeters. At first glance, it looked like a cross and was very heavy, weighing down the Reverse God so much that his shoulders seemed to be a little lower.

"It's so heavy…" The Reverse God complained, "Why is the skill weapon so heavy? Isn't it made from my desire? Make it lighter for me."

Before he could finish his words, the lake in front of him, which had been calm till now, suddenly formed a whirlpool in the center. It spun and sucked in everything around it, whether it was grass, dead trees, corpses, or things on the shore, all into some kind of abstract colored lines.

The whole world was like a game that collapsed after touching a bug, and began to disappear bit by bit with the whirlpool in the lake as the center, and this disappearance soon spread to the feet of the Reverse God and Tang Erda on the shore.

Tang Erda quickly carried Liu Jiayi on his back and jumped to a place where the wall had not yet collapsed, with a serious look on his face.

"Go out." The Reverse God said calmly without looking back, "I will bring your tactician out safely."

"I don't like casualties."

The flowing lines of color were sucked into the vortex crazily. Tang Erda glanced at the Reverse God and the heavy sword on his shoulder, patted Liu Jiayi, and said calmly: "Let's go first. We can't help here."

Liu Jiayi stared at the Reverse God's back, bit her lower lip, and finally pointed to the panel: "I know."

They were never able to interfere in anything that Bai Liu didn't allow them to.

Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda quit the game.

The Reverse God finally breathed a sigh of relief and left.

He was not sure that he could protect Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda from two evil god-level characters.

The Reverse God took a look at the lake where the whirlpool was growing bigger and bigger, took a deep breath helplessly, then jumped in without hesitation with sword in hand and swam towards the center of the whirlpool that was sucking everything away.

…Spades is really messing around.

Knowing that the evil god is searching everywhere for his fallen soul in the monster book, the old evil god Tawil wants to completely pollute this identity card.

Then Spades actually unsealed his soul in a game full of evil pollution sources and summoned the monster identity of Tawil. As a result, the world line collapsed and he was forced to absorb and store everything in this world.

If the monster identity of Tawil is completely contaminated by the evil god, Spades' soul will be completely hopeless, and he will really become an NPC in the game who has no self-awareness and only knows how to attack.

——Will become a complete monster that will never be able to leave the game again.

The center of the vortex has rolled to the bottom of the lake, revealing a strip of exposed mud. Kneeling on the mud are two people, or monsters, hugging each other.

The lines of the entire world mixed in the lake water and continued to pour into Tawil's back. He hugged Bai Liu, his eyes becoming more and more distracted: "I didn't abandon you and leave. I have always been… trying very hard to stay by your side and come to see you."

Bai Liu held Tawil's shoulders tightly with both hands and buried his head in Tawil's arms: "…I know."

"Don't hate me." Tawil's voice was so light that it was almost ethereal. He raised his hand to hug Bai Liu, but it fell down halfway. "Don't… sacrifice your pain to the evil god. Don't do things you hate for me."

“I will be very angry… and very sad.” Tawil said very softly.

Bai Liu took a deep breath and said, “I won’t do that again. Never again.”

Tawil lowered his head and placed it on Bai Liu’s shoulder, his lips were so pale without any blood.

He saw the whip beside Bai Liu that was still turning black, and said softly, “You are lying, you are deceiving me.”

“You can’t control your desires, and you still want the power that evil god has given you. Why?”

Bai Liu’s lips were pursed into a straight line.

Tawil drooped his eyelashes: “Do you hate me so much that you don’t even want to answer me?”

The lake water absorbed by Tawil behind him became redder and more viscous. The old wooden sculpture of the evil god was smiling in the lake. The heart gap on the sculpture was getting bigger and bigger. A large amount of red paint poured out of the gap, turning all the lake water red.

As the lake water poured into Tawil’s body, his silver-blue eyes, which had been glowing with light, became out of focus, and his voice became increasingly hoarse and dazed: “–Are you really unwilling to believe in me anymore?”

[System Warning: Player Spades’ monster book identity “The Fallen Old Evil God” is about to make him lose control of his desires! Please remove the identity equipment in time!]

“Do you really want everything he can give you?” Tawil’s voice was intermittent, revealing an unsettling emotion, “Everything he can give you, I can give you too.”

Tawil suddenly pressed down on Bai Liu, holding Bai Liu’s hands with one hand and pressing them to the ground. His eyes showed an uncontrollable persistence, but his tone was very gentle:

“I am the only God you believe in, and God will not allow you to abandon your faith.”

“If you really want to be completely contaminated by an evil god, that

evil god should be me."

Tawil's long eyelashes trembled slightly. He leaned over and pressed his forehead against Bai Liu's heart. At the same time, he awkwardly put his hand under the hem of Bai Liu's shirt: "I will thoroughly pollute you, Bai Liu."

The Dense Forest Borderlands

“Shit. Tawil!” Bai Liu lay on his back on the ground. He looked at Tawil, who was holding him down with his head down, with a rare expression that seemed like he couldn’t react. His breathing was completely disordered, but his tone was still calm. “What are you doing? Let me go.”

There was no emotion in Tawil’s silver-blue eyes. He used the whip to circle Bai Liu’s hands, pressed them down with one hand, and looked at him intently with his eyes lowered:

“Bai Liu, there is a price to pay for making a wish to the evil god.”

“You took my affection, companionship, heart and love from the beginning, and wanted me to stay with you forever.” Tawil’s long hair was winding on the ground, mixing with Bai Liu’s hair. He looked directly at Bai Liu, “In return, you have to give me the same thing.”

The shadow of Bai Liu was fully reflected in Tawil’s pupils:

“You are my only believer.”

“Your feelings, heart, love, pain and faith can only be sacrificed to me. You are not allowed to offer them to any other evil god.”

The lake water, completely dyed red by the fuel, poured toward Tawil’s back with more joy. An inverted cross vaguely appeared in his silver-blue eyes, and Bai Liu was reflected on this inverted cross, as if he was imprisoned in Tawil’s eyes by the inverted cross.

[System Warning: The desires of the player Spades’ monster book identity “The Fallen Old Evil God” are completely out of control, and the mental value is jumping at a high frequency…]

Tawil’s hand reached into the hem of Bai Liu’s shirt, and his cold fingertips slid from the waist all the way to the ground, finally stretching out his curled fingers and stopping at the position of his heart.

“…Your heart is beating so fast, is it because you are afraid of me now?”

Bai Liu covered his eyes with his bound hands, and said with a slight gasp: “No.”

“I can feel that you are afraid.” Tawil’s voice suddenly lowered, and Bai Liu could feel that he was very close to him. “An evil god who is about to turn into a complete monster is unwilling to let you go. It’s scary, isn’t it?”

“But even so—” Tawil grabbed Bai Liu’s wrist and suddenly pulled away Bai Liu’s arm that was covering his eyes. With a calm expression, he forcibly fixed Bai Liu and made Bai Liu look directly at him, “I will not allow you to escape from me.”

“The moment you looked me in the face, you lost the right to be afraid of me.”

Tawil’s face and flying silver-blue curly hair were reflected in slow motion in Bai Liu’s pure black eyes.

The black color on the whip covered with bone spurs paused for a moment, then exploded upwards.

Bai Liu whipped out the whip and instantly freed himself from the restraints. The whip wrapped around Tawil’s arm and swung to the side, throwing Tawil off him.

Tawil looked at Bai Liu who was escaping from under him, his eyes were empty, and the lake water behind him was pouring into his back like boiling water.

He looked up at Bai Liu who was standing at the other end:

“——You have abandoned your faith in me, haven’t you?”

“I no longer have faith in you, Xie Ta.” Bai Liu held the whip hanging by his side, with only one spot of pure white on it, and his tone was very calm.

“So what is the relationship between us?” Tawil asked Bai Liu.

Bai Liu looked at Tawil quietly, the red paint in the lake reflected in his pure black eyes, refracting a faint red color, and the only white spot left on the whip was swallowed up, leaving only an edge.

“As for the other relationships between us, since you can’t exist by my side as an individual, and even your memories and soul can’t be preserved, don’t you think it’s unfair to me to discuss any relationship between us now?”

“So I thought about it and felt that there was really no need to discuss it.”

Bai Liu arched his eyebrows, tilted his head and smiled: “So now, there is no relationship between us.”

After saying that, Bai Liu swung the whip in his hand.

The whip full of bone spurs rushed directly towards Tawil’s front.

“Boom–!”

Bai Liu used a gun to open Tawil’s black whip. He half-knelt on the ground, his chest heaving violently, his face covered with scars, his white shirt completely stained red with blood, and even his voice was hoarse: “Spades, stop.”

Tawil lowered his head in a trance. He saw the black whip full of bone spurs with blood dripping from it in his hand, and in Bai Liu’s hand was a silver revolver.

…and what he just saw in Bai Liu’s hand was a whip full of bone spurs.

Everything around was a mess. The lake water disappeared, and only a huge pit remained where the lake used to be. The swampy mud at the bottom of the lake was exposed, covered with piles of bones, and an old wooden sculpture of an evil god was exposed at an angle, and the head of the sculpture was smiling at Tawil.

In the vague and messy space, Tawil heard the old woodcarving say to him with a compassionate tone and a smile:

[Tawil, is the evil god still an evil god if he falls in love with someone?]

[The old evil god who was once indestructible is now full of desire for someone, full of emotions, full of weaknesses, and full of fantasies.]

[Look, your desire as a human is strong enough to hear the oracle I gave you, a former evil god.]

[In your own subconscious illusion, are you so afraid of being scared and abandoned by Bai Liu?]

[Tawil, you are just a mortal now.]

[You are only a hair's breadth away from selling your soul because of extreme emotions, desires, and delusions, and falling from human to monster.]

Tawil looked at Bai Liu in front of him.

Bai Liu looked up at him straightly, then suddenly rushed over with a gun in hand, fired several shots at his head, and revealed a strange smile: "–As long as I sacrifice you, the old evil god, I can completely become the successor of the new evil god."

Tawil was knocked down into the mud by the recoil of the gun. Suddenly, a rainstorm fell from the sky. The rain was incredibly heavy and instantly filled up the lake. Vines quickly grew in the mud underground and entangled Tawil.

The head of the old wooden sculpture of the evil god rolled to the side of Tavel, who was entangled at the bottom of the lake, with the same smile on his face:

[What's wrong? You didn't resist Bai Liu's attack at all. This is just an illusion. You won't fight back?]

[You knew that this Bai Liu was most likely fake, but you didn't dare to resist his attack on you. Is it because you were afraid that it might be real?]

[Maybe if Bai Liu really hates you, dislikes you, and fears you, maybe he will really do this to you, right?]

[After all, the connection between you two is so tenuous, it was just a chance encounter ten years ago.]

The lake shrank inward, became narrower, deeper, and smaller in area, from a large lake to a pond the size of a weir. The water turned from turbid to clear, with small fish and shrimps swimming around.

There was a rope around Tawil's ankles, tying him to the bottom of the lake, and the knot was tied very tightly, as if the person who tied it was afraid that he would be washed away by the water if he didn't tie it tightly enough.

Someone jumped into the water and pulled Tawil out. It was Bai Liu with wet hair. He looked about 24 years old, but the surrounding environment was obviously the welfare home where they stayed when they were 14 years old. Bai Liu was also wearing the clothes issued by

the welfare home at that time.

“I’m here to feed you, Xie Ta.” Bai Liu’s face was pale, and he suddenly smiled, “As long as you drink this, everything will be over.”

“I will never again let my life be messed up and made miserable for so long just because of a terrifying monster like you.”

Tawil looked at what Bai Liu was holding – it was a bottle of poison.

Witch’s poison.

When Bai Liu put the poison to Tawil’s mouth and looked at him expectantly, Tawil paused for a moment and then opened his mouth.

After drinking it, Tawil was mercilessly thrown into the pond again. With his eyes half closed, he sank, sank, and sank until he touched the bottom of the pond.

The mud and sand flowed away rapidly, and the bottom of the pool suddenly changed inward, from a bumpy stone bottom to an extremely smooth ceramic. As Tawil’s head was sinking, someone suddenly grabbed his hair and pulled him out of the water.

The pond in front of Tawil was transformed into a bathtub-shaped baptismal pool, and the environment changed from the orphanage pond to the church.

The faint moonlight shone through the church’s stained glass windows onto the face of the captured Tawil, creating a beautiful halo. The god enshrined on the baptismal font was originally Jesus on the cross, but now it has been replaced by an inverted cross and a broken wooden sculpture of an old evil god.

The wood carving smiled at Tawil, whose hair was grabbed.

Tawil had just been pulled out of the baptismal font. Someone grabbed his head and forced him to tilt his head back to face the statue. A sharp, twisted female voice came from behind him: “You monster, what strange thing have you done again!”

“I will punish you severely in the presence of God!”

Tawil was pushed into the water again, and when he was pulled out, the statue of the god on the stage had changed again.

Bai Liu stood on the stage with a smile. He squatted on one knee,

lowered his eyes, and used his gloved hand to lift Tawil's hair from his forehead. He held Tawil's wet face and whispered, "It hurts, right?"

"I was at the back of the church, hiding behind the curtains and it was very painful when I saw this scene."

Bai Liu smiled very gently, and the moonlight through the window cast a colorful halo on his eyelashes:

"——But the pain you, a monster who will never die, feel at this moment may not even be one tenth of the pain I feel for you."

A shrill female voice hysterically interrupted their conversation and pushed Tavel under the water again.

"——That weird kid Bai Liu is willing to hang out with you, so he's probably not a good person!"

Tawil was dragged out of the water again, and the sculpture on the altar was replaced. The director of the orphanage had been drained of blood, and his body was hung on the cross with a horrified face, kneeling on the ground, as if he was confessing to them.

This time, it was Bai Liu who pulled Tawil out of the baptismal font.

Bai Liu gently wrapped his hands around Tawil's neck, and his hands began to slowly deform. His nails became sharp and black, turning into two extremely sharp monkey claws, and then he elegantly crossed his hands to grasp Tawil's throat.

The thief's monkey's paw.

"You know, if it weren't for you." Bai Liu's claws dug into Tawil's veins, and her tone was so light that it seemed like a whisper, "I would just be an ordinary person who follows his desires wholeheartedly."

"What a blessing that would be."

The blood spurting out of Tawil's throat flowed into the baptismal pool in front of him, instantly dyeing everything red. Spiky blood-ganoderma vines emerged from the bottom of the red baptismal pool, encircled Tawil's limbs and dragged him down.

Bai Liu stood aside with an indifferent expression as he watched Tawil being dragged into the baptismal pool, blood dripping from the nails

of his hands:

“Xie Ta, the faith you gave me is worthless and only makes me suffer from beginning to end.”

“Even so, do you selfishly want me to keep believing in you?”

The vines entangled Tawil’s limbs and dragged him deeper and deeper into the bottomless place. The blood around him became redder and redder, as if some kind of red paint was constantly seeping into his body.

Tawil was fished out of the lake by some strange-looking natives, who hung his limbs with vines and fixed them on an inverted cross to make a wooden sculpture. Then they gathered around him, singing songs in strange accents, and walked up to him from the crowd, surrounded by Bai Liu.

Bai Liu held a sharp dagger in his hand. He smiled and walked step by step to Tawil, who was tied to the inverted cross. He put the tip of the dagger against Tawil’s heart and whispered softly:

“Xie Ta, from the time I met you until now, I was only free for ten years after you died and I completely forgot about you.”

“I have no faith in you, no feelings for you, no thoughts of you. I am just an ordinary person in this world who occasionally suffers from the desire for money. What a vulgar happiness.”

“You kept saying that you wanted me to be happy, but you never let me go after I entered the game. You held me tightly again and again, guarding me during every game, and you couldn’t wait to mark me as your only believer, fearing that I would abandon you, forget you, and stay away from you.”

“You kissed me, seduced me, and influenced me.” Bai Liu opened her eyelids with a gentle look, “You selfishly allowed your only believer to fall in love with you, to sacrifice his love and soul to you, and to quietly take possession of his ten-year pain as a sacrifice.”

“To me, is there any essential difference between your despicable possessiveness of me and this evil god now?”

Tawil lowered his head, breathing slightly, but did not deny anything Bai Liu said, and drops of water dripped from his long eyelashes.

Bai Liu smiled and stabbed the dagger into Tawil's heart. The bright red paint flowed out and dripped onto the almost black whip that Bai Liu held in his other hand.

Assassin's dagger.

The only remaining white spot on the whip was gradually stained black by Tawil's blood.

"You see, your blood is all equally evil." Bai Liu's smile deepened, "It has the same polluting effect on me."

Bai Liu held Tawil's face with bloody hands, lowered her eyes and smiled softly: "Xie Ta, now that it has come to this, do the only thing that will benefit me before you disappear."

Tawil raised his head and looked at Bai Liu with a pale face.

Bai Liu's smile was extremely bright:

"——As a sacrifice to the new evil god, break free of all restraints and become a god for me, and die in the horrific illusion you created, Xie Ta."

The black whip in Bai Liu's hand had bone spurs spread out, and the thorn-like bone whip climbed and entangled on the inverted cross, coiling around Tawil's hands and feet.

The bone spur pierced into the snow-white skin, and the tip of the bone whip stopped at Tawil's heart, then pierced in fiercely.

Blood seeped out and dripped onto the whip. The last white spot on the whip disappeared, turning it pitch black.

Bai Liu reached out and hugged Tawil, who was wrapped in bone whips. He leaned close to Tawil's ear and whispered with a smile: "–Xie Ta, your death is the most valuable thing to me."

"I like valuable things, so I will fall in love with you the moment you die, and then I will always pursue and miss you when you die."

"After you die, you will have my love forever. Isn't that what you want?"

"Want to make a deal with me?" Bai Liu smiled. He placed his hand on Tawil's heart. "Trade your death for my love?"

Hearing “Eternal Love”, Tawil’s heart, into which the end of the whip had been inserted, suddenly began to beat rapidly.

The evil god’s oracle came from afar, smiling:

[So this is what you fear and want the most, Tawil.]

[You used to be afraid of nothing and had no desires.]

[But now your fears and desires are all about Bai Liu. You are afraid that he will abandon you and forget you. You are afraid that Bai Liu will fall in love with someone else and believe in someone else. You want to possess his feelings and gain his faith.]

[You see, once God has emotions and becomes a human, he will be filled with desires and fears, and he will soon become a monster.]

[You knew this would happen, but you still fell in love with a person who was full of desire and reason, and who was likely to use you, and fell further for him.]

[This is really… so interesting.]

Tawil’s blood dripped from the bone spurs. He blinked slowly, and the luster in his silver-blue eyes gradually faded.

When he opened his eyes the next second, Tawil appeared in the tavern in the town again.

He was surrounded by a crowd of people who were jumping for joy and shouting, but a closer look revealed that these people had pale faces and marks of stitches on their bodies; they were all dead.

Tawil was wearing a black groom’s suit, neatly groomed. He looked up and saw Bai Liu, who was standing on the stage in a white shirt and suit pants, holding a bouquet of bright flowers and smiling at him.

The corpses around laughed grimly and shouted, “Now let the groom put the ring on the bridegroom, and then the bridegroom may kiss the bridegroom.”

So Bai Liu walked down from the platform step by step, holding a bouquet of flowers. He walked to Tawil’s side and took out a bone whip-shaped ring from the pocket of his suit pants. The ring was surrounded by thorns.

Bai Liu smiled and looked up at Tawil: “After you put on the ring, I

will love you forever, let's get married."

Tawil looked at Bai Liu, and there was no light in his silver-blue eyes.

When he was a child, he and Bai Liu occasionally talked about the topic of marriage.

[Marriage is when two people use love and law to bind each other and promise to be together forever.]

[Bai Liu, have you ever thought about who you will marry?]

Bai Liu propped up his chin and dozed off out of boredom. When he heard Xie Ta ask him, Bai Liu turned around and laughed, as if he found it very funny: [No.]

Xie Ta was silent for a long time before continuing to ask: [Why?]

[I won't love anyone forever.] Bai Liu laughed casually and replied, [Because that is too worthless.]

Xie Ta was silent for a very long time. Bai Liu seemed to notice his abnormality and leaned over to look at his expression with interest. Xie Ta slightly shifted his eyes and did not look at Bai Liu's face.

Bai Liu leaned against the bookcase, crossed his chest and smiled in an ambiguous manner: [You don't want to marry a woman and start a family, do you?]

Xie Ta didn't look him in the eye, but lowered her eyes: [Can't I have the idea of marrying someone?]

[You can have it.] Bai Liu smiled maliciously with his eyebrows curved, [But that's just a fantasy.]

[Because an immortal monster like you cannot be registered and allowed to marry someone.]

[You'd better be honest and give up those weird ideas of yours and follow me forever.] The fourteen-year-old Bai Liu squatted down, held Xie Ta's chin and turned him around, so that Xie Ta looked directly at him.

Bai Liu smiled with a very evil smile: [Because I am the only one willing to accept you and play games with you, little monster.]

The Dense Forest Borderlands

Bai Liu walked towards Tawil step by step, lifted Tawil's hand, placed the black bone whip ring on it, and smiled gently: "Have you thought about it?"

Tawil calmly stared at Bai Liu in the illusion, his silver-blue eyes were silent, and a pure black whip appeared in his hand.

"Maybe one day in the future I will die in exchange for your love, but not now."

The smile on Bai Liu's face grew stronger: "Why not? Your presence now only makes me feel painful, doesn't it?"

Tawil raised his eyes and looked directly at Bai Liu: "Because I don't want to."

The expression on Bai Liu's face froze.

"Even if I can only make you suffer, I will stay by your side." A hurricane blew up from behind Tawil, ruffling his long hair and blowing the collar of his suit into disarray.

"Your pain and faith can only belong to me, your desire and love can only be bound to me."

"Until you completely kill me, I will never let you believe in other evil gods."

"You are mine."

Tawil raised the whip and looked into Bai Liu's eyes: "Although it's despicable, I am indeed so greedy when I fall in love with someone."

"Is that so? Then there's nothing we can do." Bai Liu sighed with regret, raised his whip, and looked at Tawil with a smile, "Then I can only kill you."

The tavern in front of him shattered like a burning old photo, the illusion collapsed, and Tawil stood at the bottom of the muddy lake holding a black whip.

Everything around me turned into messy, jumping colored lines, like a series of uncolored drafts randomly superimposed on Photoshop. Only

the lake bottom under my feet was real muddy gray, with rotten, twisting corpses struggling in the mud.

This is the real game world, and it is about to collapse.

Bai Liu was holding a whip that had been completely stained black in his right hand, standing far away from Spades. His shirt was soaked through, sticking to his body in patches, with water dripping down drop by drop.

“You are unwilling to give up and accept the power of the evil god, right?” Tawil asked calmly.

Bai Liu slowly raised his head: “Xie Ta, we both chose the way we hate the most to solve the problem.”

“If I turn back now…”

“It’s worthless, isn’t it?” Tawil answered Bai Liu, “Is gaining value so important to you?”

“The essence of all human desires is to gain value.” Bai Liu looked at Tawil calmly, “It’s just that some value can be obtained from oneself, and some value must be obtained from others.”

Tawil’s long hair was blown by the wind that came from nowhere, and even his voice was blown to sound unreal:

“Bai Liu, what about you? What value do you want to obtain?”

Bai Liu looked at Tawil, whose figure was blurred by the wind, and spoke slowly: “I want to be able to dominate the value of God’s existence.”

“Even if you are completely consumed by desire because of this value, does it matter?” Tawil asked softly.

Bai Liu exhaled, and he suddenly smiled: “Completely consumed by desire?”

“Is this your first day meeting me, Xie Ta? When did I exist without desire?”

“I am originally a collection of desires. If there is anything to be swallowed, it is me swallowing up the desires, not the desires swallowing me.”

The wind was getting stronger and stronger, and the inverted cross pendant hanging on Bai Liu's neck fluttered in the wind, flashing a strange halo.

Tawil rushed out from the wind, and a clean and neat black whip came straight towards Bai Liu's face. Bai Liu dodged by tilting his shoulder. Tawil was already close to Bai Liu. He reached out to grab the inverted cross pendant on Bai Liu's chest without looking away, and his fingers had already touched the surface of the pendant.

Bai Liu didn't stop at all, he raised his hand and whipped, but Tawil whipped back to block.

At the moment when the two whips hit, the entire space continued to vibrate and twist.

[System Warning: The world line of "Dense Forest Frontier" is collapsing because it cannot accommodate too much data related to the evil god… It has collapsed by 80%…]

Bai Liu was almost forced to his knees by Tawil's whip and took several steps back.

Seeing that Bai Liu could no longer hold back the blood that was flowing from the corner of his mouth, Tawil took a step back, pursed his lips, and pulled the whip back slightly.

…No matter how determined he was, he couldn't be cruel to Bai Liu.

Bai Liu swung the whip again without any hesitation.

Tawil did not use the whip. Instead, he dodged sideways and pulled the whip back with one hand, while reaching out with the other hand to hook the inverted cross that was hanging out of Bai Liu's shirt collar.

The moment Tawil touched the inverted cross, Bai Liu looked straight into Tawil's eyes without dodging. He suddenly smiled, lowered his head and held the inverted cross in his mouth, pressing the pendant to the bottom of his mouth with his tongue. Even Tawil's fingers were bitten by Bai Liu.

Tawil paused, released the whip, bent his knees to hold down Bai Liu, opened his thumb and index finger to block Bai Liu's mouth, and reached in with his other hand to pull out the reverse cross that Bai Liu was holding in his mouth.

In close combat, Bai Liu was not at an advantage with the whip and was pinned by Tawil, unable to resist.

The next second, countless corpse hands stretched out from the mud around Tawil and grabbed Tawil's feet and pulled him down.

Bai Liu took the opportunity to escape. He turned his head and spit out the reverse cross, then turned around and whipped Tawil again.

[System Warning: The world line of "Dense Forest Frontier" has now collapsed by 95%…]

Tawil whipped the corpse's hand that was holding him away, stared at the long whip with bone spurs coming straight at him, and tightened his grip on the whip.

"It's forbidden to fight so hard in the game pool–!!" A roar interrupted the world at the bottom of the lake. The Reverse God came out from the messy lines around the bottom of the lake with a heavy sword in hand and landed steadily at the bottom of the lake.

As soon as the Reverse God landed on the ground, he collapsed and shouted: "You two little bastards, do something good! If you hit each other again, this place will collapse! There is no need to let the whole world be buried with you two just because of a lovers quarrel!"

But neither Bai Liu nor Tawil listened to him and continued fighting.

The bottom of the lake was shaking, and the edges, like dry soil that had solidified long ago, began to break under the rapid stomping of Bai Liu and Tawil.

[System Warning: The world line of "Dense Forest Frontier" has now collapsed by 99%…]

Being ignored by both of them, the Reverse God took a deep breath. He slowly raised his heavy sword, his face dark as if water was dripping out: "–Use the authority of the judge–the judgment of the evil god."

[System Warning: Does the player, Reverse God, want to use the highest-level personal skill (Judgment of the Evil God) in the monster book identity (Judge of the God of Rebellion)?]

【Yes.】

When the two whips collided and crossed each other again, The Reverse God appeared between Bai Liu and Tawil with his heavy sword raised like a flash.

The Reverse God looked solemn and slashed hard at the point where the two black whips crossed.

A violent white light exploded from where the heavy sword was chopped down. The huge impact force forced Bai Liu and Tawil to let go of their whips and were knocked far away.

The two pure black whips and the heavy swords shattered under the weight almost at the same time. The entire world line burst into a distorted colorful halo, and the sky flickered like a mosaic. Fragments kept falling from everywhere and hitting the bottom of the lake, being swallowed by the mud.

The corpse at the bottom of the lake let out heart-wrenching howls.

The black whip made a crisp sound under the heavy sword, and the smooth surface of the heavy sword had clear cracks like broken glass. The world line that had been disturbed by the two whips finally calmed down.

The Reverse God gritted his teeth and pressed down the heavy sword in his hand. The blue veins on his forehead and neck bulged, his eyes and face turned red, blood oozing out of his mouth, nose and pores. The bones in his hands holding the heavy sword broke one by one, and even his shoulders collapsed.

[System Warning: The health of the player Reverse God is rapidly decreasing…]

The Reverse God coughed and vomited a large mouthful of dirty blood, and said word by word: "–I've told you, children should not play with toys that are too aggressive when playing games. It's easy to hurt each other, and in the end you will be the ones who get hurt–"

"There is no need to continue this game of fratricide."

[System Alert: The player, Reverse God, used the Judgement of the Evil God to terminate the Evil God Succession Ceremony, neutralize the power of the Evil God, and the world line collapse ends.]

[System Warning: The world line of "Dense Forest Frontier" is being fully repaired, and all players are forced to exit the game.]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has exited the game.]

Tang Erda and Liu Jiayi, who had been guarding the game pool, noticed the unusual movement in the game pool and turned their heads to look over.

Bai Liu, with his long hair spread out and his body soaking wet, stretched out a hand from the game pool. Tang Erda immediately reached out and pulled him up.

When Liu Jiayi saw the front of Bai Liu's face, her expression changed: "How did you get so badly injured?"

Blood was oozing from the corners of Bai Liu's mouth, his long hair was disheveled and stuck to his pale face, the long whip in his hand was only left with a broken handle and bone whip fragments falling down, and his shirt was covered in blood.

"My injury is not serious." Bai Liu raised the back of his hand to wipe the blood from the corner of his mouth, his expression was very calm, "The injuries of others are more serious than mine."

"That tactician named the Reverse God might die in the game."

Tang Erda was shocked: "You killed him?!"

"No." Bai Liu said, "I don't know what method the Reverse God used to rush over and cut off Xie… Spades' whip and mine. Some kind of power related to the evil god in the whip backfired and attacked the Reverse God."

"When I logged out, I saw the Reverse God kneeling on the ground with his hands on his heavy sword and vomiting blood. He looked like he was going to die."

Even Liu Jiayi was shocked by this: "Did they break both your whip and Spades whip into pieces? Yours is fine, it's just an additional item, but Spades is a skill weapon, how did they break it?!"

"I don't know." Bai Liu lowered his eyes and walked forward, "It seems to be related to his skills."

"Bai Liu." Tang Erda took a deep breath and held Bai Liu's shoulders to prevent him from moving forward. "… Let me ask you something. Have you really completed the inheritance ceremony of the evil god?"

Bai Liu glanced sideways and said, “When did Captain Tang become interested in this kind of second-rate, game-like identity-changing ceremony?”

“I actually haven’t figured out what this ritual is, but I don’t think it’s as simple as you said.” Tang Erda stared at Bai Liu with his dark blue eyes, “Did you complete it?”

Bai Liu was silent for a while, then said frankly, “If I have to say it, I’ll leave it half-finished.”

“I got the status of the evil god’s successor and a strengthened body, but the whip was cut off, and the most important inverted cross in the ceremony was desperately snatched away by Spades.”

Tang Erda heaved a sigh of relief for no apparent reason. He let go of Bai Liu’s shoulder and said awkwardly, “…I was a little anxious just now. Are you okay?”

“It’s nothing.” Bai Liu turned around, curved his eyebrows at Tang Erda, and smiled, “It is Captain Tang’s duty to supervise me and prevent me from becoming a bad person. Good citizens like me will fully cooperate with Captain Tang’s inquiries on the performance of his duties.”

Tang Erda was stunned when he saw Bai Liu’s smile.

Bai Liu’s smile before had a sense of polite hypocrisy, as if he wanted to write the five big words “I’m deceiving you” on his face. He was very nonchalant and didn’t seem like he was deliberately deceiving anyone.

But now Bai Liu’s face was pale and there was blood at the corners of his mouth, but he did not show any weakness at all. Instead, when he smiled, there was a sense of superiority that came over him, making people feel as if he was the person you wanted to ask for help, and he was also listening to your troubles very seriously, indulging you with a smile, and willing to solve your problem.

…This way of facing people with the attitude of God is like Bai Liu.

“I’m not seriously injured. Let me go back to the guild to check on the other team members.”

After saying that, Bai Liu walked forward without looking back. Tang Erda glanced at the game pool hesitantly and called out to Bai Liu:

“Don’t you want to… wait for Spades for a moment?”

Bai Liu smiled and looked at Tang Erda: “I didn’t kill Spades, nor did I kill the Reverse God. I didn’t kill any good people in the game, so you don’t have to worry about that.”

“Or maybe you are worried about me and think I am lying. Can we stay here and wait?” Bai Liu said considerately.

“No.” Tang Erda stretched out his hand and drew a line between Bai Liu and the game pool, and asked hesitantly, “You and Spades were in the game, and the two of you…” They got married, kissed, and carried each other on their backs…

“It looks like you two have a very good relationship.” Tang Erda tried his best to find an adjective and said dryly, “Don’t you want to confirm the status of Spades?”

Tang Erda quit the game very early. He did not see the subsequent dispute between Bai Liu and Spades. He was still at the stage where Spades rescued them and went to find Bai Liu.

Bai Liu blinked slowly and said in sudden realization, “Oh, that.”

“That’s just a game.” Bai Liu smiled, “I didn’t take it seriously.”

The Game Pool

The Reverse God staggered out of the game pool, dragging Spades with one hand.

He was covered in blood, with almost every part of his body covered in wounds. Spades, who was dragged out of the game pool by the Reverse God, was in even worse condition than him. He was lying in a pool of blood, and it was almost impossible to recognize him as a human being.

The Reverse God dragged the unconscious Spades like a mop, and walked towards the direction of the Killer Sequence Guild with every step he took.

As the stunned players nearby watched, the Reverse God used the [Spades Mop] to drag a long bloody trail on the floor of the game pool.

When it came to the Killer Sequence, the Reverse God let out a long breath, coughed twice, looked back at the motionless Spades, sighed, and then helped Spades up the stairs with difficulty.

After hitting the back of Spades' head countless times, the Reverse God finally climbed up to the conference room on the second floor exhausted.

The Reverse God weakly knocked on the door of the conference room and called out hoarsely, "Is anyone there? Open the door. Your tactician and main attacker are about to die."

The door of the conference room was opened, and Bai Yi and Bai Jiamu, who were bandaging themselves, stared at the Reverse God and Spades, who were covered in bruises.

Bai Yi gasped: "How did you get hurt like this?!"

"It's hard to explain." The Reverse God slumped on the sofa, threw the corpse-like Spades to the side, and looked at the ceiling with lifeless eyes, "——I judged Bai Liu and Spades at the same time, and was drained."

Bai Jiamu stepped forward and handed a bandage to the Reverse God, but the Reverse God waved his hand and refused: "I'm fine. Although the fight was fierce, my mental state is stable. I didn't get hurt during

the dungeon, but my health was depleted."

Bai Jiamu was startled: "The blood on your body is…"

"The blood belongs to Spades." The Reverse God pointed at Spade and sighed, "After I judged Bai Liu, this guy went crazy for some reason and fought with me in the dungeon. I vomited three liters of blood and almost died on the spot. He also destroyed the world line that was being repaired."

Bai Yi squatted beside Spades' "corpse" curiously and poked it: "This is the first time I see Spades take injuries out of the dungeon, and such serious injuries at that."

"I had a hard time knocking him out." The Reverse God glanced at Bai Yi, "If you wake him up, Spades' weapon can be used to attack people in the hall. If he goes crazy, he will beat you in the hall."

Bai Yi was so frightened that he immediately retracted his hand, and crawled to a corner far away from Spades, looking at Spades in horror: "You haven't beaten Spades into submission yet?!"

"No, Spades is going crazy this time. If I hadn't stopped him, he would have gone to find Bai Liu as soon as he logged out of the game." The Reverse God was silent for a while, and then added, "But Spades' skill weapon was shattered by me, so he can't go crazy and beat people up in the lobby for the time being."

Bai Yi patted his chest in exhaustion: "Reverse God, why didn't you tell me earlier that you wanted to find a weapon master to repair Spades' weapon?"

The Reverse God looked at the "corpse" of Spades lying on its back for a while, then suddenly said, "Before we ask the weapon master to come over, let's first call Liao Ke over to take a look at Spades."

"Liao Ke?" Bai Jiamu paused, "You want Liao Ke to give Spades psychological counseling for the game?"

Spades hummed tiredly through his nose.

Bai Yi was surprised and said, "Spades is the only one among us who has never received psychological counseling for the game."

"Liao Ke's psychological counseling was very painful." Bai Yi looked at Spades with a gloating look, "You have come to this day too!"

“Stop laughing. Call Liao Ke over and all of you get out.” The Reverse God waved his hand weakly.

Bai Jiamu was about to leave with Bai Yi, who was still laughing at Spades, when the Reverse God suddenly stopped them: “Hey, wait, there’s one more thing I haven’t told you.”

Bai Yi and Bai Jiamu turned around, and the Reverse God’s eyes were so calm that they didn’t stir up any ripples: “Although I have told you many times, I will remind you again.”

“Spades must never be given the code to leave the game and enter the real world.”

Seeing the Reverse God’s expression, Bai Yi and Bai Jiamu were both stunned.

The Reverse God rarely has such a serious expression. Although he is a tactician who coordinates the overall situation, he is smiling most of the time and is not often angry. When talking about serious matters, even if some teammates are smiling, he rarely frowns to blame them.

But this also means that when the Reverse God really says so, this matter is usually very important.

[Don’t give Spades the code to enter the real world] was the first ban that the Reverse God issued to all members in this tone after entering the Killer Sequence.

This is a very strange ban.

How strange is it?

When a normal player logs into the game from a certain location in the real world, the game will automatically generate a twelve-digit code for that location. When the player wants to leave the game, he only needs to enter the twelve-digit code into the system and the player can log out of the game from this location.

Spades had no code.

He didn’t have any codes for any of the places in the real world.

So he was never able to log out of the game.

Spades is a very special player. He doesn’t even know the existence of reality. Even Bai Yi didn’t realize until later that Spade was

completely different from ordinary players like them.

“You don’t have a code?!” Bai Yi looked at Spades in shock, “Then where did you log into the game? Even if you log in and out from the same place later, you must have one when you log in to the game, right?!”

Spades lowered his head and played with the whip in his hand from time to time: “I logged into the game from Siren Town, and the game didn’t give me a code.”

Bai Yi took two seconds to react before he asked vaguely, “You are a player who logged into this game lobby from a horror game. You didn’t log in from reality?!”

Spades raised his head and looked at Bai Yi: “Reality, what is it?”

Bai Yi was speechless, racking his brains to explain the meaning of “reality”: “Reality is… after the players play the game, they feel scared and tired. They will leave the game and return to reality, to a place where they are no longer scared and no longer need to play games. Then they will hug their wives, or if they don’t have wives, they can hug their dogs, and sleep peacefully.”

Spades listened carefully, and then asked, “When I want to sleep, I will find a game instance, kill the monsters in it, and then lie on their corpses to sleep. Is this my reality?”

“No!” Bai Yi immediately retorted, “Reality and games are different!”

Spades looked at Bai Yi: “Why is it different?”

Bai Yi felt like his brain was in a mess. He touched his chin with a serious expression, trying to further explain the meaning of “reality”.

This is a completely philosophical topic that goes beyond the scope of Bai Yi’s topic.

“That’s right, that’s right, emm, how should I put it…” Bai Yi said while gesturing, “Reality is the real thing, which is different from a game copy. In reality, there is nothing you must do, and there are no messy lines like [true end] for you to follow. Generally speaking, you won’t encounter monsters, so you can stay there peacefully.”

“It’s the same after I complete the game,” Spades said calmly. “There are no monsters, and nothing for me to do. I can stay there forever.”

Bai Yi was speechless again. He began to pull at his hair frantically: “Ahhh! Anyway, reality is different. Everyone prefers to stay in reality rather than in the game. Reality is good and important! It is a thousand times and ten thousand times better than this crappy game copy!”

“If I had a choice, I would never enter this game and stay in reality.”

Spades was silent for a moment, lowered his eyes and shook his whip: “How is reality better than games?”

“There are so many good things about it.” Bai Yi kept talking about it like he was complaining. He counted on his fingers, “First, you don’t have to be so nervous when fighting monsters.”

Spades pursed his lips: “I’m not afraid to fight monsters.”

Bai Yi continued, “Don’t be afraid of dying.”

Spades: “I won’t die easily.”

Bai Yi glared: “Don’t bother collecting all the monster books to pass the level.”

Spades: “I can clear the level without collecting all of them.”

Bai Yi listed a lot of reasons, but each one was dismissed by Spades lightly. Bai Yi finally lost his temper. He muttered to himself with his eyes wide open: “For you, it seems that compared with reality, games are not that bad.”

Spades glanced at Bai Yi calmly and said, “You like the reality dungeon because you are too weak.”

“That’s not true!” Bai Yi was so angry at Spades’ secret taunting that he stood up and jumped twice. “Even if I were as strong as you, I would rather stay in reality!”

Spades paused and asked, “Why?”

Bai Yi slowly sat back next to Spades. He was quiet for a while, and his expression softened: “Because my lover, friends, relatives, these people who are very important to me are all in reality.”

“Living with them is different.” Bai Yi suddenly blinked, his eyes reddened, he raised his hand and wiped his eyes fiercely, “Even if the reality of living with them is as scary as a horror game, I will work

hard to become as strong as you, and then go back to protect them."

Bai Yi sniffed, as if he was trying very hard not to cry, but in the end he couldn't help it and started to sob: "Wow – I miss my wife so much -!!"

After Bai Yi had almost stopped crying, Spades started to ask questions.

Spades seemed to be really confused and asked slowly: "Friends, relatives, lovers, these——"

Spades turned around and asked seriously: "What are they?"

Bai Yi was stunned.

The Game Pool

Bai Yi met Spades' inquiring eyes. He opened his mouth and wanted to answer Spades' question, but at that moment, he couldn't utter a single word.

The definitions of friends, relatives, and lovers are actually very simple, but for some reason, Bai Yi felt that… the answer to these question is very cruel to Spades.

Although Spades himself didn't care.

Seeing that Bai Yi didn't answer him, Spades turned his gaze back and said, "Friends, family, and lovers are just like reality. You can't really tell what's important about them."

"Then there's no need to tell me the answer." Spades used his knee to push the whip hanging on his leg, lowering his eyes, "It doesn't matter."

Bai Yi was silent for a long time before he smiled awkwardly and hummed, "…Indeed, to Spades, none of this should be important."

"Because these things are just like [reality], they are just the gentle places where weak people like us escape."

Bai Yi muttered absentmindedly.

From then on, Spades never asked anyone any questions related to reality, and just played games alone like before.

The people in the Killer Sequence also unanimously decided not to tell Spade anything about reality.¸

Spades doesn't like living in the central hall. He usually sleeps in a game. If he finds a game that he really likes, he will often go to this game to sleep or rest.

For example, for a long time before, Spades slept in "Ice Age".

Bai Yi once said in shock, "You actually like to sleep there. Don't you feel cold in such a low temperature?"

Spades calmly said that he would not feel cold.

Bai Yi asked in shock, why?! Isn't it better to choose a warmer place

to sleep?!

Spades glanced at him and said, “My body temperature is very cold. I can’t warm up no matter where I sleep, so it’s all the same.”

So Bai Yi stopped talking again and stared blankly at Spades as he left with the whip and went to sleep in “Ice Age”.

In fact, Bai Yi knew in his heart that all the sympathy-like emotions he had towards Spades were unnecessary for the other party.

Spades doesn’t care about the opinions of ordinary human players like them. They are not a species that survives in the same environment, and their standards for judging the world and the future are completely different.

If it must be said then Spades is more like a monster that accidentally escaped from the game and accidentally entered the ranks of players.

It is foolish to look at Spades from a human perspective.

But sometimes… when Bai Yi occasionally discovered something very subtle and close to human in Spades, he would really feel sad.

——It’s a pity that Spades is a guy who sometimes acts like a human being. Why can’t he enter reality?

But Bai Yi knew in his heart that this sadness was unnecessary.

Because not allowing Spades to enter reality is the consensus of all players in reality.

Bai Yi couldn’t understand before why the Reverse God strictly prohibited everyone from coding the spades, but later he understood.

Once, when Bai Yi was in the lounge, the door was half-closed. At the moment when he was about to push it open, he heard the voice of Spades coming from inside.

“Reverse God, are you the one who forbids everyone to give me the code of reality?” Spades asked calmly.

Bai Yi’s hand, which was about to open the door, stopped there.

After a while, the Reverse God replied: “Well, I forbade it. Why? Do you want to enter reality?”

“No.” Spades paused, “But why can’t I go?”

The Reverse God smiled. Bai Yi could see through the crack in the door that the Reverse God was leaning on the sofa, his head tilted back and looking at the ceiling, as if he was in deep thought: “Spades, it’s not that you can’t go to reality. You can go.”

“But not now.”

Spades asked, “Why?”

The Reverse God said: “Because when [reality] has no meaning to you, [reality] is just a copy of your game, and you will look at [reality] with the eyes of looking at a game.”

“If one day, [reality] loses its meaning as a game to you, or [reality] makes you unhappy, you will choose to destroy [reality] without hesitation. You have the ability to do so.”

“But the most fundamental reason is that [reality] is not important to you.”

“Then you will become a monster in this copy of [reality].” The Reverse God raised his head and looked at Spades levelly, “You will destroy the [reality] that others are trying their best to protect.”

Spades raised his eyes and said, “Isn’t [Reality] a copy of a game?”

The Reverse God stroked his chin and thought for a while: “You can say it is.”

Spades continued to ask: “Then destroying the game copy is not something that [players] often do?”

“The players I met hated all copies of the game. They were terrified of them and often collapsed and screamed about destroying them completely.”

“Why do these players want to protect this copy of [Reality]?”

Spades looked at the Reverse God: “Is it because these players like the [Reality] dungeon?”

“No.” The Reverse God thought for a moment, and then he smiled as if he found it very interesting, and looked at Spades, “On the contrary, many of the players who come to this system hate [reality].”

“There must be something in reality that makes them very unhappy and greatly stimulates their desires, so they will enter the game. For many players, the horror of reality may not be less than the horror of any game here.”

Spades stared at the Reverse God: “Then why do they want to protect reality? Shouldn’t they do everything they can to destroy it?”

The Reverse God smiled and said, “It’s hard to understand, right?”

Spades paused and hummed.

“What they want to protect is not the copy of [reality] itself.” The Reverse God looked at Spades, “but some specific people in this copy.”

“So no matter how hideous, terrifying and gloomy this copy of [reality] is, and how it forces them to suffer and tortures them to survive, they will protect [reality] for these people.”

“Spades, humans, or the players you see are such creatures.”

“People instinctively seek their own existence, feelings and values in other people, and the desire generated by this pursuit is often more tenacious than the desire generated from themselves.”

“If people only rely on making profits for themselves, they will become the subjects of desires and spiritual needs. Games will soon drive such people crazy. This is normal because people are the product of groups. It is difficult for them to completely rely on themselves to meet their emotional and spiritual needs. They must rely on others.”

“You must have seen a lot of players who enter the game just for themselves, and then die in the game very quickly.”

“So most of the high-level players in this game are not playing for themselves, but because of someone or some very important people in [reality].”

The Reverse God held his chin and looked at Spades with a smile: “But for Spades now, these things are still difficult to understand, so just listen to them.”

“If Spades wants to enter reality, then he must make reality have irreplaceable meaning to you.” The Reverse God patted Spades’ shoulder.

“When there is someone in reality who is very important to you, and you are willing to not destroy reality for him or her no matter how much reality tortures you, then you can enter reality.”

Spades was silent for a long time. When the Reverse God stood up and prepared to leave, Spades suddenly spoke again: “Those very important people, are they friends, relatives, lovers?”

Bai Yi, who was standing outside the door, and the Reverse God, who was inside the door, were both startled at the same time.

The Reverse God sat back down with amusement: “Did Bai Yi tell you that?”

Spades hummed and lowered his head: “But he didn’t tell me what these are.”

“In a popular sense, relatives are people who are related to you by blood, friends are people who have a good relationship with you and are willing to help you and accompany you at all times, and lovers are -“

When talking about [lover], the Reverse God clenched his fist and coughed. His face turned red and he said distressingly: “Lover… Although I already have a wife, it is difficult for me to explain this to you clearly.”

Spades squinted at the Reverse God: “Love, is it complicated?”

“It’s not complicated.” The Reverse God scratched the back of his head and said embarrassedly, “I fell in love with my wife at first sight.”

“But it’s not complicated, it’s also complicated.” The Reverse God sighed helplessly, “I have been my wife’s boyfriend so many times. She was very good to every boyfriend, and every boyfriend was also a good person. But I don’t know why, maybe it’s because of bad luck, we can never make it to the end.”

“I was so anxious before the wedding that I didn’t sleep well for several days.” The Reverse God clasped his hands together and prayed devoutly, “Thank God for allowing her and I to marry smoothly.”

Bai Yi, who was outside the door, suddenly heard such a big gossip and took a breath of cold air – Wow, a highly intelligent person like The Reverse God would also worry about his marriage problems.

Bai Yi thought that only idiots like himself would worry.

“You have an intelligence score of 96, and you can also predict the future.” Spades looked at the Reverse God, “If you really want to know about the future of your marriage with her, there is always a way.”

The Reverse God slowly sat up straight, clasped his hands on his knees, lowered his head and remained silent for a long time before speaking: “…I can’t predict her.”

Spades looked at the Reverse God: “Your skills have no limit, why not?”

“Because I’m afraid.” The Reverse God slowly raised his head and looked at Spades. “I can predict the future of my friends and relatives, but I can’t predict it for her.”

Spades stared at the Reverse God: “What are you afraid of?”

The Reverse God paused and said, “Among all the relationships that people need according to common sense, love relationships are the most special. You can have some expectations about your relationships with friends, and most of the relationships with family members are innate. Only love relationships are difficult to determine.”

“Before I met her, no matter how smart I was, it would have been difficult for me to predict what kind of love relationship I would have and how it would progress.”

“Romances are full of unknowns.”

“You don’t know who you will fall in love with, nor do you know whether that person will love you or how long they will love you.” The Reverse God half closed his eyes, “I don’t know how far we can go, so while I still love her, I am afraid of not being able to see her future.”

“I’m not going to make any predictions about lovers.”

“As for me…” The Reverse God leaned back on the sofa and said softly, “A lover is probably the one who makes me fear a future without her.”

Spades was silent for a while, as if thinking, and then gave a serious

evaluation: “It’s hard to understand.”

The Reverse God put his hands behind his head, turned his head to look at Spades, and laughed: “Indeed, for Spades, whether it is friends, relatives, or lovers, it is difficult to understand.”

“Your birth is different from that of normal humans. You don’t have any relatives with whom you have a natural blood relationship. As for friends…”

“All the players around Spades are afraid of you, let alone being your friend.” The Reverse God sighed, “Although we teammates know your background, we can’t empathize with you. The best we can do is not be afraid of you.”

“It’s hard for us ordinary humans living in [reality] to understand your thoughts, and it’s hard for you to understand our thoughts either.”

“If friends can’t understand each other, there’s no point in the relationship.”

The Reverse God glanced at Bai Yi outside the door with a blank look: “It is very disrespectful to make friends with others based on superficial sympathy, and the other party does not need it.”

Bai Yi’s fingers on the door contracted slightly, and he slowly put them down.

“Lovers…” The Reverse God sighed, “I really can’t understand this relationship. I am still troubled and can’t give you more explanation.”

Spades was silent for a while: “If I have [relatives, friends, lover], will you give me the code to enter reality?”

“I won’t give it to you.” The Reverse God looked at Spades and smiled, “But at that time, Spades, your [friends, relatives, and lovers] will give you the code.”

Spades said “oh” and nodded as if he got an answer, then stood up and left.

When Spades pushed open the door, he saw Bai Yi standing outside. Bai Yi smiled and greeted Spades. Spades nodded to indicate that he saw it, and left without saying hello.

Bai Yi was silent and walked into the lounge.

He walked in and sat on the sofa. The smile on his face quickly disappeared. He sat in silence for a while, then took out a box of cigarettes, took out a cigarette and put it in his mouth, then handed the box to the Reverse God opposite him.

“I apologize.” Bai Yi paused and said, “Reverse God, I was wrong. I didn’t think it through. I will never think of secretly giving Spades the code to reality again.”

The Reverse God lifted his eyelids, stretched out his index and middle fingers to pinch a cigarette in the box, took it out and lit it.

Then the Reverse God spoke slowly: “Don’t help someone you fear deeply just because of momentary sympathy, and naively think of becoming friends with him.”

He exhaled a puff of smoke, and the white smoke spread out on the side of his face.

The Reverse God turned around and smiled, “It’s easy to get punished, Bai Yi.”

From that time on, Bai Yi barely understood why the Reverse God did not allow anyone to encode the Spades reality.

But Bai Jiamu didn’t understand. He asked the Reverse God several times why he couldn’t give the code to Spades.

[Spades is an idiot! He won’t do anything to destroy reality! So what if we give it to him! At least let this guy sleep in a normal, warm bed for once!] Bai Jiamu yelled.

The Reverse God always laughed it off when it came to the younger Bai Jiamu, saying with a smile, “I can give it to him, but not now, and not by you.”

[Wrongtime!!] The Reverse God always said to Bai Jiamu in a funny tone.

It was not until this moment, when the Reverse God was covered in blood and Spades was lying on the ground with bruises all over his body, that Bai Yi suddenly realized.

When a monster has the power to destroy [reality], it will never be

allowed to enter this copy of [reality] until it has a weakness.

Although this is unfair to the monsters.

Bai Yi took a look at Spades, who was lying face down in a pool of blood, then retracted his gaze and was pulled out of the meeting room by Bai Jiamu.

The Reverse God lay on the sofa motionless. After a while, the door of the conference room was opened again, and Liao Ke walked in carrying a cross-shaped medical box.

Liao Ke is a team member with a very low sense of presence. His appearance does not match the name of Killer Sequence at all. He is very gentle, with long and thin eyebrows, and wears a pair of plain reading glasses. There are some unintentional fine lines at the corners of his eyes, but at a glance he looks to be only 27 or 28 years old, less than 30 years old.

But in fact, the second child is already in high school.

Liao Ke looks very young and doesn't look old at all, but he is actually 48 years old this year and his eldest son has graduated from university for more than a year.

"Oh, Liao Ke, you're here." The Reverse God rubbed his shoulders and chatted casually, "Is your little daughter going to be a senior in high school next year?"

"It's not easy for you to still remember this." Liao Ke teased, then half-knelt beside Spades, turned him over and tied him up with a restraint belt.

The Reverse God squatted down to help.

Liao Ke tied Spades' hands and feet to the wall with restraints, then bandaged Spades' wounds with bandages. He looked up at the Reverse God and smiled, "My daughter has a hard time studying, but she has things she wants to do, and it's good to work hard for what she wants to do."

The Reverse God also smiled: "It's great that you found what you want to do at such a young age."

Liao Ke glanced at the Reverse God and said, "You are the same, aren't you? You entered the game at a young age just for what you

wanted to do."

The Reverse God was silent for a few seconds, then smiled as if nothing had happened: "Let's not talk about this anymore. I asked you to come here today to give Spades psychological counseling."

"It is indeed a harmless skill that can be used directly in the central hall." Liao Ke half-knelt in front of Spades, who was hung up by the restraints, with a strange expression on his face. "But this is the first time I use this skill on Spades. Are you sure this guy won't wake up and beat me up halfway through?"

The Reverse God sat cross-legged beside him: "He can't beat you anymore, his whip was broken by me."

Liao Ke smiled: "Then I feel relieved."

Liao Ke's eyes darkened. He looked directly at Spades whose head was hanging in front of him, and pulled out a stethoscope, a pen, and a notebook.

[System Alert: Player Liao Ke uses personal skills (medical consultation) and (medical record writing) on player Spades].

The stethoscope stretched out in suspension, with the head placed on Spades heart, and the ear hooks floating in the air, emitting regular heartbeat sounds like an amplified speaker.

Liao Ke took out a pen and wrote on the paper: "Patient Spades, what are your main psychological symptoms? How long has this situation lasted?"

"Tell me with your heart."

The heartbeat sound in the stethoscope became disordered, gradually changing from a regular thumping sound to the sound of poor contact and finally to Spades' own voice.

Spades' voice came out calmly from the ear hook: "I felt happy and sad, and it lasted for a game."

Liao Ke nodded: "Why are you happy and why are you sad?"

"I'm happy because I met Bai Liu, and I'm sad because I met Bai Liu." said the stethoscope.

"Do your happiness and sadness coexist all the time, or are you

sometimes happy and sometimes sad?" Liao Ke asked.

The stethoscope was silent for a moment: "Sometimes I am happy, sometimes I am sad, and sometimes they coexist at the same time."

Liao Ke wrote on the notebook, the pen tip making a rustling sound on the paper: "Can you give me some examples of your happiness, sadness, and different scenes that coexist?"

"I was happy when I slept with Bai Liu, his body was warm, I was happy when I drank with Bai Liu, I had never drunk before, I was happy when I married Bai Liu, he hugged me…" The stethoscope suddenly fell silent, "It's hard for me to list the sad scenes."

Liao Keshu's pen stopped writing: "Why?"

"Because I don't actually feel very sad, but I do feel very sad," said the stethoscope.

Liao Ke asked: "If you don't feel sad in a scene, but you are indeed sad, then this sadness may come from someone else. Who is this person?"

"Bai Liu." Stethoscope answered smoothly this time, "He is very sad, but I don't understand why."

Liao Ke asked softly: "Under what circumstances would Bai Liu be so sad that you would also feel sad?"

"When he hugged me," said the stethoscope, "When he dug out my heart, when he married me, when he said goodbye to me, when he performed an evil ritual to fight me…"

The stethoscope was silent for a long time: "He seems to be sad all the time."

Liao Ke asked: “You are feeling sad for Bai Liu’s sadness, but you are not actually sad, right?”

The stethoscope hummed.

Liao Ke lowered his head and wrote: “You and Bai Liu empathized.”

Stethoscope asks, “What is empathy?”

“Empathy is because you two have similar experiences, or the other person has a very different special meaning to you, which leads to your being able to empathize with the other person’s emotions.” Liao Ke wrote in his notebook, “Spades, do you know why you feel sad because of Bai Liu’s sadness?”

The stethoscope answered honestly: “I don’t know.”

“You actually lack the basis for empathy. Your experience is too blank, which makes it impossible for you to imagine what another person would feel in that situation based on your own experience.”

Liao Ke explained: “Most empathy is based on mutual understanding, but this does not apply to you and Bai Liu. You don’t understand Bai Liu, or in other words, you don’t understand anyone. You don’t even understand the mechanism of human emotion.”

“So it’s very strange that empathy appears in you.” Liao Ke raised his eyes, “Based on my understanding of you, I think the only explanation is——”

“You are instinctively sensing Bai Liu’s emotions.”

“But correspondingly, although you feel it, you have no way to handle such complicated emotions.” Liao Ke smiled, “To put it in an analogy, if Bai Liu’s emotions are some special data, and you are a computer, and you do not have the ability to process this special data, the influx of this data will cause you to have a very strange reaction.”

Stethoscope asked, “What’s the reaction?”

“In order to process this special data, you will also keep producing special data to respond to the other party.” Liao Ke smiled gently, “Sometimes people will fall in love with those who love them, and

hate those who hate them. This is a kind of human emotional feedback. You can feel the other person's emotions, and accordingly, you will also generate emotions to deal with the other person's emotions."

"Bai Liu is sad for you, so you will also be sad for Bai Liu."

Liao Ke continued: "But we need to find the source of this empathy together. That is, among all the people around you, Spades, why did you instinctively or subconsciously choose Bai Liu instead of others to feel their emotions?"

The stethoscope seemed to be thinking, and drooped slightly: "Bai Liu…is different from others."

"How is he different from others?" Liao Ke said softly, "This question may be difficult for Spades to answer. Let's cite the progressive relationships around you, Spades, to explore why Bai Liu is different."

"For example, the strangers in the game pool, what's the difference between them and Bai Liu to you? Why don't you choose to empathize with them?"

Stethoscope was silent for a long time: "These people are afraid of me."

Liao Ke nodded as if he had realized something, expressing his understanding: "Because these people are afraid of you, there is a natural barrier of empathy between you. They have ill will towards you, so you will shield them accordingly."

"In fact, normally speaking, if Spades was a human who grew up in a normal environment, his first reaction to being frightened by a large crowd would be to be infected. He would subconsciously fear and hate himself, thus aligning his ideas with those of other humans, seeking a sense of spiritual identity, and avoiding being isolated by the group."

"Humans are social animals and instinctively avoid loneliness, but Spades is not like that."

Liao Ke looked at the Reverse God standing beside him: "Spades must have always been in an environment where he was highly excluded. He is used to this state, so when he is feared on a large scale, he will just think it is normal and ignore the other party, instead of seeking recognition from these people who fear him."

“I want to ask you, Reverse God, do you know the circumstances of Spades’ birth?”

The Reverse God silently clasped his hands together and placed them against his nose. After a pause, he spoke: “This Spades guy… logged into the system from the single-player game in Siren Town.”

“Tawil, the previous evil god, became good friends with a human. After being forced into a deep sleep and falling, he drifted to the real Siren Town map.”

“From that time on, the new evil god punished Tawil by letting it drift between various games in a dormant state. It was beaten by players as a wandering god-level NPC, and was also cut into various evil origins to create and design game copies.”

“In order to go back and find that human, Tawil returned to the Siren Town where he first drifted into the game instance. While the new evil god was diverting his attention to finding his successor, he severed his soul and flesh there.”

“Tawil let his soul be trapped in the game and suffer forever, while his body transformed into a human form, sneaked in when a group of new players logged in, and finally logged into the game through a dead player’s small TV.”

Liao Ke realized: “Before, they said that there was an extra small TV in the new single-player game copy, and it was blocked so that the content inside could not be seen. Is it referring to Spades?”

The Reverse God hummed and said, “Spades was born from Tawil’s mermaid body. When he was born, although the player and the main NPCs were already dead, the game was actually almost completed.”

“That is to say, the residents of Siren Town have basically regained their normal consciousness and are now normal humans. They know that their tragedy was caused by the mermaid who was caught at the beginning, Tawil. This makes them extremely afraid and repulsive to Spade, who was born from Tawil’s body.”

“…These townspeople tried many ways to kill Spades, such as burning him with fire and cutting him with knives. However, Spades’ resistance was too high, so these things couldn’t hurt him at all, and he didn’t feel any pain.”

The Reverse God took a deep breath and said, “Spades did not resist

from the beginning to the end. Or rather, he did not understand what was happening at all. He just calmly let the townspeople deal with him."

"But because the townspeople have not been able to kill Spades, extreme fear has driven them crazy."

"They lined up in front of Spades, yelling at him with twisted and crazy faces, "You're a monster!" and then collectively slit their throats and committed suicide.

"Later, Spades searched through the bodies of these people and found the body of the dead player. He took his system coin and logged into the game covered in blood."

Liao Ke nodded as if he understood, then turned to look at Spades: "Spades, why don't you choose your teammates as the object of empathy? Your teammates are not afraid of you."

Stethoscope bowed his head, as if thinking seriously, and then replied: "They don't have any special data for me."

Liao Ke responded and laughed: "You are using my previous analogy, right? Feelings towards you are data, but your teammates' feelings towards you are not strong enough for you to generate special data in return."

"This is quite normal." Liao Ke seemed to be thinking, "Just like strangers in normal human society, there is a sense of distance, but your teammates' feelings towards you, Spades, should be stronger than those towards strangers. You should be able to feel it a little bit, and they have been with you for much longer than Bai Liu. Why can't they give back to their teammates, but can give back to Bai Liu instead?"

This time, the stethoscope was silent for a while: "Because… the first time I met Bai Liu, he smiled at me."

"I felt like he wanted me to hug him."

"I felt like he didn't want me to leave and wanted to stay with me forever."

"Other people are not like this. They are not afraid of me, but they also don't want to hug me and be with me forever."

“Only Bai Liu can produce this kind of special data for me.”

Liao Ke and the Reverse God were both silent for a moment, and then Liao Ke continued to ask: “The special data Bai Liu gave you is different from the feeling given to you by others, such as your teammates, right?”

“Yeah.” The stethoscope answered quickly.

Liao Ke continued to ask: “Can you use something to compare the feeling that this special data generated by Bai Liu brings to you?”

Stethoscope paused: “When Bai Liu first met me, he held my wrist.”

“It’s warm.”

Liao Ke lowered his head and continued writing on the notebook, then raised his head and looked at the Reverse God: “I have finished asking questions. I believe that you know what the psychological problems of Spades are, do I need to say it?”

The Reverse God held his forehead with his hand and sighed helplessly: “Although I guessed it in the game, when I really confirmed it, I still felt a little…”

Liao Ke smiled, he stood up and loosened the restraints that were helping Spades, then turned around and patted the Reverse God’s shoulder: “It’s complicated, right? When my little daughter first told me that she had a crush on someone, I felt the same way.”

“On the one hand, I’m glad that she has grown up and has someone she likes.” Liao Ke turned and looked at Spades with a smile in his eyes. “On the other hand, I’m worried that this fool will fall in love with a bad person.”

“But fortunately, it’s easy for you to understand each other.” Liao Ke suddenly reached out, grasped the Reverse God’s forearm, and pulled it out violently, “I think I should not only provide psychological counseling to Spades, but also to you.”

The Reverse God was caught off guard and hissed when he was pulled out. His hands were covered with bloody whip marks when he was pulled out by Liao Ke.

Liao Ke raised his eyes and looked at the Reverse God: “You can fool Bai Yi by saying that you are not injured, but you can’t fool a

professional like me. What are these whip marks? Why did you show your injuries?"

The Reverse God paused, then pulled back his hand, and said with a slightly complaining smile: "What could have happened? When I was about to log out of the game, that bastard Spades suddenly went crazy and whipped me with the broken whip. I was caught off guard and didn't have time to react, so I was injured and kicked out of the game."

Liao Ke looked at the Reverse God steadily: "The wounds on your body and Spades' body are the same kind of whip marks, both with barbs, Spades' whip doesn't look like this."

The Reverse God sat on the back of the sofa, lowered his head and said nothing for a very long time.

The blood from the whip marks on his body dripped onto the floor.

“I won’t ask any more questions. No one can get you to say anything you don’t want to say.” Liao Ke stopped talking and took out a roll of bandages. “Is it okay to treat your wound?”

“Sure, sure, of course!” The Reverse God joked with a smile, “It’s my honor that Brother Liao is willing to take care of me.”

“Stop talking nonsense and turn around and take off your clothes.” Liao Ke said.

The Reverse God bared his teeth as he took off his clothes, revealing his naked and muscular upper body. There were many whip marks from his shoulders to his chest. The wounds were torn and blood was still oozing out.

“I think you and Spades both have some abnormal pain perception.” Liao Ke sighed, “You two are so seriously injured, but you can’t even tell from your faces.”

Liao Ke wrapped bandages around the Reverse God’s back one roll at a time, until his entire back was almost covered.

Spades was not much better than the Reverse God, and was almost wrapped up like a mummy.

After finishing, Liao Ke picked up his medicine box and was about to leave. After pushing open the door and leaving, Liao Ke paused, turned around and looked at the Reverse God who was sitting on the ground guarding Spades who had not yet woken up, sighed with a complicated expression, and called out.

“Reverse God.”

The Reverse God turned his head with a smile: “What’s wrong?”

Liao Ke looked at him and said, “If you die casually, my sister-in-law will definitely remarry.”

“Hey!” The Reverse God face cracked. He watched Liao Ke push the door and leave. “It’s hard for me to get married. Don’t make such a joke!”

Liao Ke waved and closed the door. A smiling voice came from behind

the door: “If you don’t want your wife to remarry, then try to live well, Captain.”

The Reverse God leaned against the wall and suddenly laughed. He staggered to his feet with the help of the wall, grabbed the cigarette box on the table, put on his coat and pushed open the balcony of the meeting room.

Reverse God leaned against the balcony railing, holding a cigarette in his mouth but not lighting it.

He looked far away, looking at everything in the game. There was a light breeze blowing his hair and the coat hanging on his shoulders.

There is no natural wind in the system hall, but the movement of people sometimes causes air movement, giving people the illusion of wind.

The Reverse God was silent for a while, and finally took out a lighter from his pocket, covered the cigarette and lit it.

The flickering flame of the lighter made the Reverse God’s ordinary eyebrows and eyes look peaceful and gentle. The cigarette flickered as he was inhaled, and the Reverse God exhaled a puff of smoke. The rising white smoke quickly covered up the tranquility and gentleness, leaving only a hazy and strong feeling of sinking.

The door to the balcony behind the Reverse God was pushed open at some point, and Spades, who was wrapped like a mummy, staggered and leaned against the Reverse God.

The Reverse God subconsciously wanted to put out the cigarette.

Spades interrupted the Reverse God’s actions and turned his head to look at the Reverse God: “What does smoke taste like?”

“Why are you suddenly curious about this?” the Reverse God found it funny, “Weren’t you never interested in it before?”

Of course, this also has something to do with the fact that the Reverse God almost never smokes in front of Spades.

“This is something from [reality].” Spades stared at the burning cigarette between the Reverse God’s index and middle fingers and asked inquiringly, “Will Bai Liu like this?”

The Reverse God suddenly smiled and patted Spades on the back of his head: “I taught you so many good things before, but you didn’t learn… Don’t learn to smoke, Bai Liu doesn’t like cigarettes.”

After saying that, the Reverse God put out his cigarette. He held the extinguished cigarette in his mouth boredly, glanced at Spades, and said teasingly: “I didn’t expect you to fall in love with Bai Liu at first sight.”

Spades was silent for a moment, then asked, “What is love at first sight?”

“When I first saw this person, I felt that I would spend my whole life with her.” The Reverse God had a light smile on his face, as if reminiscing about the past. “In fact, no matter whether I can spend my whole life with her in the end, the moment I saw her looking at me and smiling at me in the crowd was really a happy moment.”

“Can’t I fall in love with Bai Liu at first sight?” Spades looked at the Reverse God.

The Reverse God smiled and said, “It’s not that you can’t do it, it’s just that it’s quite strange.”

The Reverse God lazily held the cigarette in his mouth: “Because in my opinion, people like Bai Liu will never easily take the initiative to approach anyone until they die.”

“Maybe it’s you who can make him feel happy, so he took the initiative.”

Spades looked at the Reverse God and asked, “What is the happiness that Bai Liu feels?”

The Reverse God was silent for a while and said, “Are you happy?”

“To explain it in a way that you can understand, Spades—” The Reverse God held the extinguished cigarette in his mouth and turned his head with a smile, “When Bai Liu hugged you, besides sadness, you felt another emotion from Bai Liu.”

“It’s just happiness.”

“How does it feel to be psychological counseled?” The Reverse God changed the subject and asked Spades.

Spades paused and said, “I don’t feel anything.”

Hearing this, the Reverse God laughed so hard that he choked and coughed a few times, and almost laughed the cigarette out of his mouth: “Bai Yi and Bai Jiamu both shut up for a long time after they were done.”

“It is actually very embarrassing to express your inner voice to others.”

“But we still have to listen to it to find out where the problem lies…”

Spades glanced at the Reverse God and asked, “Have you ever received any psychological counseling?”

The Reverse God calmed down. He subconsciously put his hand into his pocket and touched the lighter, as if he wanted to light a cigarette, but in the end he suppressed his anger and did not light it.

“I have.” The Reverse God replied to Spades with a sighing smile, “but unfortunately I didn’t finish it.”

Spades asked, “Why haven’t you finished it?”

The Reverse God smiled and said, “Because I have too many things in my heart, I can’t finish talking about them.”

Spades squinted at the Reverse God and said, “Why don’t you do it more often?”

The Reverse God leaned lazily on the balcony railing: “The purpose of psychological counseling is to let you know where your problem is. I know what my own problem is, so I didn’t continue to ask Liao Ke to counsel me.”

“And psychological counseling is not a panacea. Many times, even if you know that your psychological problem is this, when the time comes, you still have to suffer the damage that you deserve.”

Spades noticed that the Reverse God’s back was covered in bandages. He paused and asked, “Why do I still get hurt even though I know my own mental problems?”

The Reverse God took the extinguished cigarette from his lips, turned over and leaned his back against the fence, looking at Spades with a smile: “Because humans are such emotional animals, Spades.”

“Even if you know you will get hurt because of someone, you still can’t help but get close to them.”

The Reverse God smiled and said, “Just like the next time you have the opportunity to play games with Bai Liu, even if you know he can hurt you, you will go without hesitation, right?”

Spades answered quickly: “Yes.”

The Reverse God smiled again: “You are quite persistent.”

The wind-like flow coming from behind blew on Spades and the Reverse God. The Reverse God squinted his eyes and leaned against the wall for a while, then suddenly stood up and pushed open the balcony door.

“The whip I used to beat you two brats broke my heavy sword. I’m going to ask the weapon master to fix it. Remember to fix your own whip too.”

“The league is about to start, get ready.”

The Reverse God turned around and gave the Reverse God instructions with a smile, then he pushed open the door of the conference room, waved goodbye and left.

Inside the wandering circus.

Wang Shun was anxiously guarding outside Muke’s room, with Mu Sicheng squatting next to him and yawning.

“It’s been so long. Muke locked himself in this small warehouse as soon as he woke up. There has been no movement since then.” Wang Shun was so anxious that he almost broke into the room. When he saw Mu Sicheng squatting next to him and yawning, he was overwhelmed and didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “How can you still be in the mood to sleep?”

Mu Sicheng was so sleepy that he sat cross-legged on the ground and stretched his body lazily: “Why are you in such a hurry? As long as the person is not dead, we can wait for Bai Liu to come back and deal with it.”

While stretching, Mu Sicheng looked at the three people walking towards him from the end of the corridor. His eyes suddenly widened and he suddenly jumped up: “Bai Liu is back!”

Bai Liu walked in front without looking around, while Tang Erda and Liu Jiayi walked on his left and right behind him.

When Bai Liu really approached Mu Sicheng, Mu Sicheng was stunned: “No, Bai Liu, how come you are injured? And your hair has grown longer?”

“Something happened. Let Jiayi explain it to you later.” Bai Liu answered Mu Sicheng casually, then looked at Wang Shun, “What happened?”

When Wang Shun got a questioning look from Bai Liu, he couldn’t help but stand at attention, holding up his notebook and reporting one thing at a time, as if he was performing an occupational disease.

“When Mu Sicheng went to attack the assassin sequence, he was sent to the Golden Dawn Union. He was attacked and trapped, but he escaped. After removing the restraining props, he is now fine.”

Mu Sicheng shouted beside him, interrupting Wang Shun: “What do you mean by attacked? I was ambushed! Amazing, okay?”

Bai Liu ignored Mu Sicheng’s explanation and looked at Wang Shun: “What’s going on with Muke?”

“When Muke brought Du Sanying into the game pool, he met a new member of the Deer Hunter team.” Wang Shun looked at Bai Liu with a serious expression, “It seems that the other party used a very special memory prop on Muke, which can transfer his own memories into Muke’s brain.”

“When Muke came back, he was in a coma, but after he woke up, he took the key to the warehouse and a lot of paper and pens and locked himself in the guild’s warehouse. He never came out, saying that he wanted to be alone and separate his memories from that clown.”

Wang Shun hesitated for a moment: “The guild’s warehouse is almost like a small dark room, and Muke’s mental state is not right. If he stays there for too long, something will definitely go wrong.”

“I wanted to break in, but I didn’t know Muke’s current state. If he was in the critical period of memory differentiation, forcing in might cause Muke to have a stronger mental shock reaction.”

Bai Liu looked at the tightly closed warehouse door thoughtfully, then he took a step forward and knocked three times slowly, then spoke in

a calm voice, “Muke, I’m Bai Liu, can I come in?”

Muke’s trembling and broken voice came from the warehouse: “No!”

The Game Pool

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Inside the warehouse.

Muke knelt on the ground, hugged his head and curled up into a ball, his eyes blurred and he quickly muttered to himself: “Forget it, forget it, forget it all!”

There were more than a dozen used pens and a lot of scraps of paper covered with words scattered around Muke.

The handwriting on these scraps of paper was neat and fluent at first, but later became messy, as if the person who wrote these words could barely keep his mind clear at first, but later lost his mind and could only draw randomly.

On the front of each piece of paper were some strange-shaped tables, and on the back were many hysterically distorted clown mask patterns drawn on them.

These tables are all comparative tables, and the contents of the tables are very strange.

What is a comparison table? It is a comparison in the form of a table to distinguish the differences between two seemingly similar things, such as comparing bananas and plantains, and kiwifruit and gooseberry.

The comparison tables written by Muke do not compare things, but two people.

He was comparing the differences between [Bai Liu] and [Bai Six].

Muke’s comparison table was very detailed, listing appearance, life, and origin. He wrote down everything that happened to Bai Liu and Bai Six as if he was writing a chronicle, and then compared them one by one.

Muke murmured to himself: “They are different. Bai Liu and Bai Six are different.”

“Bai Liu saved me…” Muke scratched his hair, his eyes widened, “But

Bai Six also saved me."

"Bai Liu is just an ordinary employee who was once bullied by me. He wouldn't do so many things to hurt others like Bai Six did…"

Various details and memories kept flashing back in Muke's mind.

Bai Liu smiled as the puppet master Zhang Kui was sent to his death, tricked Mu Sicheng to get his soul at the most critical moment of the game, and used Liu Jiayi's weakness to bring her into the team. Without a trace of emotion in his eyes, he hugged the bruised and dazed Tang Erda, and whispered softly, "I'm sorry for everything that happened to you."

[Give me your soul, and let me atone for the sins of those Bai Six.]

Bai Liu lifted his chin emotionlessly, lowered his eyes to look at Muke, and said softly:

[If you continue to be so useless, I will abandon you.]

[I don't want worthless followers, Muke.]

Bai Liu would do things that hurt others. He didn't do it at first just because he was an ordinary person trapped in an ordinary position, without identity or ability.

But if Bai Liu and Bai Six were given the same identity, status, capital and ability…

Muke bent his waist in pain and gasped: "…What is the difference between them?!"

The lazily smiling Bai Six in Daniel's memory and the casually smiling Bai Liu in Muke's memory gradually overlapped.

No!!

Muke's heart beat wildly and he started to cough.

The clown was a fanatical believer in Bai Liu. Even if that insane belief was only present in his memory, it was enough to drive Muke crazy.

Muke's memory was eclipsed by the clown's chaotic and colorful memory. Muke gradually forgot his parents, school, and the people he had interacted with since childhood. Everything was distorted into

what Daniel remembered.

Muke felt like he was being swallowed by Daniel's memory.

His parents became Daniel's aloof and indifferent father, the school became a huge shooting range, and the people he interacted with changed from hypocritical and polite peers in the mall to people from the enemy party who beat him up.

Muke felt that his existence was being squeezed out bit by bit by Daniel.

Memory gradually turned Muke into another Daniel, and the only thing that belonged to him that remained in Muke's memory was Bai Liu.

If Bai Liu is Bai Six, then what is the difference between Muke and the clown who has the same memories?

Muke's heart was beating rapidly. He covered his arrhythmic heart and opened his mouth to gasp. His lips were purple. A feeling similar to colic forced Muke to wake up again.

He frantically searched for the tables on the ground, trying to find the difference between Bai Liu and Bai Six.

"They are different, totally different." Muke took a deep breath, his eyes red, and he tried to convince himself, "Bai Liu, Bai Liu has short hair, Bai Six has long hair, they look different."

"Muke." Bai Liu knocked again. His tone was still calm, but it changed from a negotiation to an order. "Don't make me say it a third time. Open the door."

Muke's shoulders trembled, and he subconsciously obeyed Bai Liu's order, staggered to his feet and opened the door.

Outside the door, the long-haired Bai Liu looked at Muke with no expression on his face: "Do you still recognize me?"

Muke stared at Bai Liu's long hair almost in a daze, and his hands trembled uncontrollably as he opened the door.

In an instant, all the memories that could not be forgotten were mixed together.

Muke slowly knelt on the ground, covering his twisted and hideous

face. The pain from his rapidly beating heart forced Muke to bend over and gasp for breath, his breathing so rapid that he was about to retch.

Bai Liu calmly glanced at Muke who was curled up on the ground, walked into the warehouse, closed the door, then squatted on one knee, picked up a few pieces of scraps of paper on the ground and looked at them.

“So you were trying to differentiate between me and Bai Six.” Bai Liu lowered his eyes, “… Now that it has come to this, the rest of the memory has been devoured, and only my existence remains.”

Bai Liu found an abandoned step in the warehouse and sat down. He clasped his hands in front of him, leaned forward and helped Muke, who was lying on the ground, up.

Muke looked up at Bai Liu in a trance, and couldn’t help revealing a clown-like crazy smile on his face. His expression twitched as if in a spasm, but the next second Muke raised his hand in panic to cover it up, and his voice was filled with tears: “Don’t look at me like this! This is not me!”

“Is it because your memory is so good that you have no way of forgetting the memories that the other party instilled in you?” Bai Liu asked in a calm tone without being affected by Muke’s emotions.

Muke lowered his head like a child who had done something wrong: “Yes.”

Bai Liu lowered his eyes: “I can indeed find a way to erase this memory for you, but if it is just erased, you will be afraid when you meet the clown again, right?”

“After all, even if it was erased, you were defeated by his memory. You escaped his memory.”

Muke’s shoulders trembled, he bit his lower lip and said nothing.

“Why was he devoured by the clown’s memory?” Bai Liu asked, “Doesn’t Muke have any meaning for his own existence?”

Muke still didn’t say anything.

Bai Liu continued: “When a person has his own meaning of existence, knows what he is and why he lives, it is difficult for the existence of

another person to erase his meaning."

"No matter how much that person's presence affects you, and no matter how similar they look to you, they are not the same person as you."

Bai Liu handed the scraps of paper filled with comparison tables to Muke, who was hanging his head, and said calmly: "Just like me and Bai Six."

Muke looked up in surprise.

Bai Liu looked at Muke: "Muke, don't you have any meaning for your existence? Friends, family, lover, career, material things, etc.?"

Muke hesitated for a long time, then slowly lowered his shoulders, became less nervous, and narrated absentmindedly:

"Because of my illness, I have had few friends since I was a child. They are all afraid of hurting me, and making friends with me is a very dangerous thing. My parents have always been very good to me and have tried their best to treat me and meet all my needs, but the doctor said a long time ago that I probably wouldn't live long…"

Muke was silent for a while and said, "So the way they looked at me was as if they were waiting for me to die."

"I have never liked anyone. I feel like they can live for a long time, but they are from two different worlds than me."

Muke slowly clenched his fists: "…I'm jealous of those healthy people who can live a long life, so I can't like them."

"Material and career…" Muke paused, "Everyone is very kind to dying people, so they gave them to me without hesitation."

Muke was silent for a long time, tears rolling down his red eyes. He raised his hand to wipe them away, and suddenly burst into laughter while crying:

"…For someone who knows his own death from birth, it seems that there is no meaning in his existence."

Bai Liu leaned on the steps, dragging his leg and half closing his eyes: "If we use stocks as an analogy, no one is willing to invest their feelings in a stock like you that is destined to lose money because it

will die soon."

"You are a worthless short stock, but in this situation, you met me who is willing to believe in and invest in you, so you clung to me tightly as if you had grabbed the last straw. You exist by my affirmation, you get emotional feedback from me, and you find the value of your own existence."

Bai Liu looked at Muke calmly: "And in this respect, you are the same as the clown who exists with the affirmation of Bai Six. So when you can't distinguish between me and Bai Liu, it's difficult for you to defend yourself and Daniel, is that right?"

Muke responded hoarsely: "Yes."

"Look up at me, Muke." Bai Liu said in an imperative tone, "Look at me and tell me what I have in common with Bai Six."

Muke subconsciously obeyed Bai Liu's order, looked up at Bai Liu, and said in a trembling voice: "You both like money."

Bai Liu hummed lightly.

"Use whatever means necessary to achieve your goals."

"Very good at games."

"…"

"Now you both have long hair."

Muke stated tremblingly, his vision blurred and he felt himself gradually sinking into a confused mind, unable to tell the difference between the real long-haired Bai Liu in front of him and the Bai Six in Daniel's memory.

"Long hair?" Bai Liu glanced at Muke thoughtfully, and suddenly smiled, "I remember that your skill weapon can be taken out in the central hall."

Although Muke didn't know what Bai Liu was going to do, he nodded and took out his dagger from the panel.

"Come here." Bai Liu lowered his eyes and ordered.

Muke went over with a dagger.

Bai Liu, with no expression on his face, quickly grasped Muke's hand with his left hand, and put his right hand around his neck to hold back his long hair that fell to his waist. Then, holding Muke's hand and the dagger in his hand, Bai Liu slashed upwards without any pause.

The long hair was cut off neatly.

Muke held the dagger that cut off Bai Liu's long hair with a blank expression.

"I don't have long hair anymore." Bai Liu raised his eyes, scattered strands of hair falling on his shoulders, "Muke, remember, if you choose to exist for Bai Liu, then never confuse me with Bai Six."

"Because it's me who has invested emotions and recognition in you, not Bai Six."

Bai Liu said calmly: "I don't like the idea of making investments myself and having others receive the appreciation of my assets for me."

"You are far more valuable than you think, Muke."

Muke knelt on the ground as if stunned, holding Bai Liu's severed hair in both hands, and the memories of Daniel in his mind faded quickly.

…Bai Liu and Bai Six are different.

Bai Six will abandon his worthless followers.

But Bai Liu won't.

The true God will give new value to incompetent believers.

Bai Liu stood up with the help of a bracket. He found a rubber band from somewhere in the warehouse and stretched it with three fingers. With his other hand, he combed his skin from the back of his neck upwards, gathered his messy black hair into a bunch, and with a nonchalant look, tied it into a ponytail that was neither too high nor too low.

Some dishonest strands of hair hung on both sides of his forehead.

Bai Liu pushed open the door of the warehouse and turned his head in the light that rushed in. His eyes were dull, and the backlight from his hair on his forehead made it difficult to see clearly. His shirt was

covered with bloodstains that had not yet dried.

“Muke, get yourself in a good mental state and come out for the meeting. The league is about to start.”

Muke gritted his teeth and stopped Bai Liu who was about to leave: “…But I can’t completely get rid of the influence of Daniel’s memory on me for the time being! Is this okay?”

He asked in a low voice, almost in panic: “Don’t you need to… replace me during the league?”

“Will this influence shake the meaning of your existence for me?” Bai Liu asked.

Muke was startled and immediately replied: “Absolutely not!”

Bai Liu retracted his gaze, turned around, pushed the door open and left without looking back: “Anything that cannot shake the meaning of your existence will eventually be transformed into the value of your existence, but there will be an unstable process in the middle.”

“I personally don’t hate this process.”

The door was closed. Muke sat quietly in the warehouse, holding Bai Liu’s long hair that he had cut off without hesitation, and muttered to himself, repeating Bai Liu’s words: “…anything that cannot shake the meaning of my existence can be transformed into an increase in my value…”

“As long as Daniel’s memory can’t devour me…” Muke looked at the long hair in his hands with trembling pupils, “I can find all the memories about the league in it, and then make myself stronger!”

Muke covered his heart, which was beating wildly and achingly, with his long hair, and laughed chokingly with tears.

Chapter End Notes

RIP Bai Liu's long hair 🕯🕯🕯🕯🕯🕯

The Game Pool

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The group walked towards the Wandering Circus meeting room.

Wang Shun followed behind Bai Liu, and from time to time he looked back worriedly at the small warehouse where MuKe was, whose door had not yet been opened: “MuKe, are you really okay? It’s hard to regain consciousness after being forced to merge memories.”

“It’s okay for now.” Bai Liu replied lightly, “He will handle it himself.”

“If you can’t handle it, I’ll take over. First, let me report what happened recently.”

Wang Shun reluctantly felt relieved. He held a pile of folders, stepped forward and opened the door of the conference room for Bai Liu.

Bai Liu bowed his head slightly to express his gratitude politely.

Wang Shun placed the documents on the long table in the conference room and pulled out the main seat for Bai Liu to sit down.

Liu Jiayi, Tang Erda and Mu Sicheng sat on both sides of the long table. Wang Shun walked to the end of the long table and opened his system panel, calling up a huge floating panel. Wang Shun reported recent major events to Bai Liu as if he was playing a PPT (PowerPoint).

“First, let me emphasize the league’s operating rules.”

“The league is divided into pre-season, mid-season, and playoffs.”

“The pre-season is the league we are about to participate in. The main participating teams are some new teams with no foundation and some old teams that are not very strong. The main confrontation mechanism is random confrontation. You play against the same team as the enemy in the next game. If you win, you advance. If you lose, you are eliminated directly.”

“The top two teams that advance to the finals of the pre-season, that is, the champion and runner-up, can directly enter the post-season challenge. Except for these two teams, all other pre-season teams are

eliminated."

Wang Shun clicked on the system panel:

"The mid-season tournament is a round-robin points system."

"The participating teams of the mid-season tournament are the top 30 teams in last year's league rankings and the last two teams remaining from last year's pre-season, a total of 32 teams."

"There are 496 games in total in the mid-season tournament. Each team will play a round with 31 other teams except itself. Each round includes singles, doubles, and team matches."

"Each win in a singles match earns 1 point, each win in a doubles match earns 3 points, and each win in a team match earns 8 points."

"After 496 games, the top eight teams with the highest accumulated points among the 32 teams will enter the playoffs. The two teams with the lowest accumulated points will be disqualified from participating in next year's mid-season tournament, and their qualifications will be given to the two teams that won the final pre-season games this year."

Wang Shun gave an example:

"For example, last year's first place in the pre-season was the Killer Sequence, so this year they don't have to start from the pre-season, but can directly enter the mid-season game. The last two teams eliminated from the mid-season game last year will have to start from the pre-season."

Wang Shun's brows turned serious:

"The following is the key work I will report today, which is also the serious situation you will face as you enter the pre-season."

"The overall combat quality and combat level of the pre-season teams are not high, but there are two teams that you must be vigilant against. They are the two teams that were eliminated from the mid-season tournament last year."

"One of these two teams is called Russell Cemetery, and the other is called Furious Lambs."

Wang Shun clicked it, and the PPT turned to another page, on which a gloomy collective cemetery logo appeared.

“The Mass Cemetery is the logo of Russell Cemetery. They ranked 12th the year before last, and ranked 8th in the mid-season last year, making it to the playoffs. Then they were drawn by Spades in the Challenger League and became the first team to face the Challenger League.”

Wang Shun looked at everyone and slowly exhaled:

“I believe we can all guess the result of this challenge. The Killer Sequence won, but the Killer Sequence paid a heavy price for this victory. This is also the main reason why I think they poached the Reverse God as their tactician this year.”

“In this match against Russell Cemetery, one of the Killer Sequence members died, and Spades was seriously injured and on the verge of death. It was a very tragic victory.”

Mu Sicheng felt dizzy after hearing this: “That’s not right. Russell Cemetery made it to the top eight last year and participated in the playoffs. So they won’t be eliminated from the mid-season tournament, right?”

“Why did you drop the pre-season to play against us this year?”

Wang Shun looked at the collective cemetery logo on the panel with complicated eyes: “…This is a long story.”

“The normal league process is like this. The mid-season game selects eight teams with high points to enter the playoffs. The pre-season game selects the champion and runner-up. The champion and runner-up of the pre-season game randomly select two teams from these eight teams that enter the playoffs to compete against each other.”

“If the champion and runner-up of the pre-season win, they can replace the two drawn teams and enter the playoffs. If the champion and runner-up lose, these eight teams will proceed to the playoffs normally.”

“So the challenge tournament is generally called ‘Ten into Eight’. Some players use a more general term, such as ‘Sixteen into Eight’.”

“The two teams that lost in the challenge match will have to face off in the final to compete for the ninth and tenth places in the league.”

“After losing to the Killer Sequence, Russell Cemetery entered the qualifying match for the top 90. However, in this qualifying match,

the Russell Cemetery tactician lost his balance and made mistakes, resulting in the team being wiped out."

The whole audience was silent.

Mu Sicheng couldn't help but glance towards Bai Liu.

…The tactician's influence on the entire team is really huge.

"After being wiped out, Russell Cemetery got the tenth place ranking. Logically, they could have participated in the mid-season tournament normally this year, but they gave up this ranking and the qualification to directly participate in the mid-season tournament this year, and chose to start all over again from the pre-season."

Wang Shun raised his hand and clicked the panel again, and the situation introduction of the Russell Cemetery team appeared on the PPT.

"Russell Cemetery, the nickname that circulated among players is 'Double Cannon Team'. The reason for this nickname is that this team will directly abandon the single and double matches as soon as they enter the game, firing two blanks and only playing the team match."

"Because they gave up the singles and doubles competitions and lacked outstanding individual performance, this team did not produce any star players." Wang Shun clicked on the panel and continued, "In other words, in Russell Cemetery, players are not important at all."

"This is the number of players who have died in the league over the years."

Mu Sicheng looked at the numbers and gasped, "Last year, Russell played in the mid-season tournament and more than 80 players died?!"

"That's right." Wang Shun narrated calmly, "In 31 games, Russell lost 82 players, an average of 264 players died per game, and this was even after they gave up singles and doubles games."

"Why did so many people die?!" Mu Sicheng was really shocked.

Bai Liu looked at the introduction of Russell Cemetery and said, "The core strategy of Russell Cemetery is to use skills reasonably according to the characteristics of other guilds, right?"

Wang Shun looked at Bai Liu and said, “Yes, Russell Cemetery prepares more than 500 reserve team members every year.”

Bai Liu seemed to understand something: “Most of these players are new, right?”

Wang Shun nodded. “That’s right. Most of these reserve players have never participated in the league. Even in the team match against the Killer Sequence, the players in Russell Cemetery were basically pure rookies.”

Mu Sicheng turned around and looked at Bai Liu, his head full of question marks: “What does this mean? How did you know?”

“A large number of new players died, high-frequency rotation, giving up single and double competitions, not training star players, and concentrating on team competitions.” Bai Liu looked at Mu Sicheng, “This is obviously a tactic based on sacrificing players.”

Mu Sicheng was getting more confused: “What tactics?”

“Let me explain it this way.” Bai Liu picked up a piece of paper and placed it between himself and Mu Sicheng, and wrote a keyword on it: [Skill].

“Among each batch of new players, the first player to clear the game will gain a skill, or more precisely, a skill identity.”

Bai Liu raised his eyes and looked at Mu Sicheng: “For example, mine is [Poor Wanderer], yours is [Capuchin Monkey Thief], and Captain Tang’s is [Withered Rose Hunter].”

“Our personal skills derive from this identity, sometimes it’s one skill, sometimes it’s multiple skills.”

“This identity is mainly generated based on the player’s core desires. Different players have different desires, so the generated skill identities are also different, and the derived skills are therefore very different.”

“But also for this reason, very high-quality skills with great growth potential and suitable for use in the game are not the majority. Most of the skills generated by players are either not suitable for use in the game, or have no growth potential, or have very limited use or strange use methods.”

“There are very few players who possess all three qualities, which also means that once a good skill player appears, he will be strongly sought after by the big guilds.”

Bai Liu looked at Mu Sicheng and said with a half-smile: “For example, the King’s Guild’s pursuit of you.”

“Don’t mention this.” Mu Sicheng waved his hand speechlessly to interrupt Bai Liu’s ridicule, “But what does this have to do with the league’s death and injury rate as high as Russell Cemetery?”

“It does matter.” Bai Liu smiled. “As a guild that is not very big, not ranked high, has no star players, and is not very powerful, Russell Cemetery has no competitive advantage when competing for new players with high-quality skills. The players it can recruit are all players with lower skills.”

“How can we win the league with these inferior players?” Bai Liu asked slowly.

Mu Sicheng was stunned.

“Since Russell Cemetery could not win in terms of [quality], they put a lot of effort into [quantity].” Bai Liu lowered his eyes and wrote the word [targeted] on the paper.

Mu Sicheng rubbed the goose bumps on his arms, stretched out his hand and raised five fingers in astonishment: “But no matter how many reserve players they prepare, they can’t use the human wave tactics. There are only five players who can play!”

“Five newcomers, with second-level skills, and they’re playing against a top-tier guild… Now I can understand why the guild has a high mortality rate in the league. It would be strange if no one died.” Mu Sicheng asked in confusion, “But this operation, no matter how you think about it, there’s no way it can win, right?”

Wang Shun answered Mu Sicheng’s question: “On the contrary, although the team competition in Russell Cemetery has a high mortality rate, the winning rate is also very high.”

After saying that, Wang Shun lowered his head and clicked the panel, and a new page appeared on the PPT:

“From the data I got, I can see that in last year’s mid-season tournament, excluding the single and double matches that Russell

Cemetery voluntarily gave up, their win rate in the 31 team matches they actually played was as high as 9355, and they only lost two games."

Wang Shun continued to click: "In the two games that Russell Cemetery lost, one was against the King's Guild, and the tactician was Hearts. The other was against the Deer Hunter, and the tactician was the Reverse God from the Killer Sequence."

Mu Sicheng looked at the result and exclaimed in astonishment: "This winning rate is too outrageous!"

Chapter End Notes

> Round-robin points system :
>
> Teams compete against each other in a round-robin format, where every team plays against every other team at least once. Points are awarded based on match results (e.g., win in a singles match = 1 point, win in a doubles match = 3 points, win in a team match = 8 points, and a loss = 0 point). The standings are determined by the total points accumulated, and the top teams may advance to the next stage or win the tournament, depending on the rules.

“How did they do that?!” Mu Sicheng was completely confused.

Bai Liu said calmly: “Intelligence and targeted skills screening.”

“I also tend to agree with this answer.” Wang Shun nodded and agreed with Bai Liu’s statement, “Russell Cemetery has collected a large number of new players with low skills, and then sent out a team of new players with skills that can suppress the opponent according to the different skills of the members of each guild team they are fighting against.”

Wang Shun continued, “This tactic was demonstrated when Russell Cemetery fought against multiple guild teams. Their players’ skills consciously targeted the enemy’s ace players.”

“The most obvious one is the one in Russell Cemetery vs. Killer Sequence Challenge.”

Wang Shun clicked on the panel and a short video appeared on it.

The character in the short video was obviously Spades trapped in the mud. Wang Shun explained:

“In this game, the skill of the Russell Cemetery Tactician is to swallow an enemy player into a mud, restricting their movement speed and reducing their attack damage. However, in return, one of our own players must sacrifice himself to activate this skill.”

“This skill is useless in daily games and normal leagues.”

“In the game, no team member would be willing to sacrifice themselves just to trap a monster. In the league, no guild would sacrifice the players they have worked so hard to train just to block the movement of an opponent’s player.”

Wang Shun turned his head and looked at Spades who was trapped in the panel: “But this seemingly useless skill is very effective when facing Spades who is used to leaving the team and acting alone, and uses fast movement and fast attack as his main killer moves.”

“After trapping Spades, the fierce offensive rhythm of the Killer Sequence was instantly interrupted. One day later, one member of the Killer Sequence was killed.”

Wang Shun turned his head and looked at Mu Sicheng: “If it wasn’t for Spades’ final breakthrough, last year’s first place would not have been the Killer Sequence.”

Mu Sicheng couldn’t believe it: “With this method, can we have a 93% chance of winning?!”

“It is precisely because of this method that we can have such a high winning rate.” Bai Liu lowered his eyes and looked at the paper. “Gather a large number of new players, and then select the skills that just restrain the enemy from a large number of players. Change the team as the enemy rotates. Each team has been carefully selected to be consumables, and they are replaced when they die.”

“Very good tactics.” Bai Liu commented calmly.

Wang Shun sighed deeply: “This tactic is very cruel, but cruel tactics are often effective in this game. I haven’t thought of a good solution yet.”

“How come there is no solution?!” Mu Sicheng was very unconvinced, “They developed tactics against us, and we can also develop tactics against them!”

Liu Jiayi, who had been silent, suddenly said, “It can’t be done.”

Mu Sicheng glanced over and said, “Why can’t they do it? They are just ordinary newcomers with ordinary skills. As long as we know the information about them…”

“The problem is that it’s hard to know.” Liu Jiayi looked directly at Mu Sicheng. “Russell Cemetery has 500 to 1,000 reserve players. In order to reduce the exposure of these players, Russell Cemetery gave up training star players and gave up single and double competitions. Basically, every player has no way to find game videos that can be entered into the small TV library.”

“Under such circumstances, it is difficult to obtain the skills intelligence of so many ordinary newcomers.”

Mu Sicheng turned his head to look at Wang Shun: “We can let Wang Shun sneak in, and then use his skills to obtain the other party’s intelligence…”

Liu Jiayi interrupted Mu Sicheng coldly: “Do you think the King’s Guild has never tried it?”

“First of all, even if Wang Shun could sneak into Russell Cemetery and obtain the intelligence of these hundreds of people without being discovered, it would be difficult to determine which of these hundreds of people’s new skills are targeted at our team based on the intelligence obtained from Wang Shun alone.”

“Secondly, Mu Sicheng, do you know how many permutations there would be if hundreds or thousands of people were to perform the permutations of five?”

“Tens of thousands.” Before Mu Sicheng could answer, Liu Jiayi gave the answer directly, “These hundreds of people can form tens of thousands of team combinations, and there are tens of thousands of possibilities for how their skills will look after being assembled and combined.”

Liu Jiayi looked directly at Mu Sicheng: “We are in the light, and they are in the dark. There are only five of us, and they have hundreds of newcomers who have hardly been exposed.”

“Besides, because of our excellent skills, our exposure rate is not low. Except for Tang Erda, almost everyone has several game videos that have been included in the small TV library.”

“We can’t do what they do and completely abandon our star players, because we need the audience’s support to get a golden ticket to immortality, so our exposure will become higher and higher in the future, and it will be easy for them to obtain intelligence on us.”

“The amount of intelligence information is totally unequal.” Liu Jiayi made a cold judgment, “It is impossible to formulate targeted tactics.”

“During last year’s mid-season tournament, even the Kings Guild didn’t know which players Russell Cemetery would send out to compete until the moment they took the court.”

Mu Sicheng slowly leaned over the table after hearing this, his eyes wide open: “…How can we play this? Isn’t this too shameless?”

Suddenly, Mu Sicheng straightened up again and slammed the table. “No! Russell Cemetery is using up so many of these reserve players and sending them to die. These reserve players definitely don’t want that!”

“We can start from this aspect!” Mu Sicheng said confidently, looking at Bai Liu with shining eyes, “Bai Liu, it’s time for you to play your

role. With your eloquence, you can definitely persuade these reserve members to join our Wandering Circus Guild!"

For a moment, Bai Liu, Wang Shun, and Liu Jiayi all looked at Mu Sicheng with a very friendly expression.

"Actually," Wang Shun said tactfully, "I think you don't need to be so active in tactical discussions, God Mu."

Mu Sicheng took a while to react, and after realizing what Wang Shun meant, he lay down on the table again in frustration: "…Did I say something wrong again?"

"It's impossible that this group of reserve players know that they are going to be used as cannon fodder, yet they are still willing to participate in the league for this Russell Cemetery?" Mu Sicheng put his head on the table and looked at Wang Shun.

Wang Shun sighed with mixed feelings: "That's true."

Mu Sicheng was really confused now: "Why?"

Liu Jiayi rolled her eyes and said speechlessly: "Idiot, do you know why the Russell Cemetery is called the Russell Cemetery?"

Mu Sicheng paused for a moment, then said in disbelief: "Fuck, no way? Cemetery? Is that what I thought it meant?"

"Bingo, yes, that's what you think." Liu Jiayi snapped her fingers. "New players who join this guild know what kind of guild they have entered, and they also know that they are likely to be sacrificed by the guild."

"They knew they were walking into a public cemetery and were prepared to become one."

Mu Sicheng leaned back in his chair, his eyes out of focus: "…I can't understand why they would do this."

"God Mu, you rarely pay attention to this news because you don't like the guild." Wang Shun explained, "Russell Cemetery is essentially an escape-type guild, accepting a large number of new players of the horror game."

"Some new players are very averse to the game and want to escape from it, so the president of Russell Cemetery stepped forward and

established this collective cemetery association."

"He promised these players that you can deposit your death here in Russell Cemetery. When the day comes when Russell Cemetery wins, I will make a wish to revive you from the cemetery and distribute the points to you, satisfying your desires and allowing you to leave the game."

Mu Sicheng thought it was ridiculous: "How could anyone believe this?"

Wang Shun nodded: "Many players believe it. Apart from the high-level skilled new players who were screened out by the big guilds, a considerable number of skilled players of varying quality went to Russell Cemetery."

Mu Sicheng was speechless: "What if Russell Cemetery can't win the championship at all? Wouldn't they have died in vain?"

Liu Jiayi kicked Mu Sicheng and raised her chin to signal him to take a look at the winning rate on the PPT.

Mu Sicheng was speechless again, but he still felt something was wrong: "Even if Russell can win, can these people ensure that the guild leader can fulfill his promise?"

Liu Jiayi couldn't help but show a "you are such a fool" expression to Mu Sicheng again: "Do you know what the slogan of Russell Cemetery is?"

Mu Sicheng looked at Liu Jiayi: "What is it?"

Liu Jiayi said: "May we die in hope."

"These new players who chose to join Russell Cemetery were the ones left behind by the big guilds. They had high hopes for their skills at the beginning and thought they could survive by relying on their skills. But later on, they found that their skills were not worth mentioning at all and no one cared about them. Their self-value system collapsed."

Liu Jiayi paused for a moment and continued, "In the later stages, these newcomers no longer believed they could survive in the game on their own. They lived in fear, thinking they would die sooner or later. Rather than being tortured to death in a horror game, they would rather choose a way to die with hope."

“In fact, many people don’t expect the president of Russell Cemetery to fulfill his promise. They just want to die in peace.”

Wang Shun, who was standing by, sighed as he listened: “God Mu, you and Bai Liu may not pay much attention to this kind of guild, because you are both high-level skilled players, and this kind of guild is the last resort for low-level skilled players.”

“I always find it amazing that such a guild formed by low-skilled players can actually have such great destructive power in the end.” Liu Jiayi recalled, “Although Hearts won last year, it was not a smooth game.”

Bai Liu turned his head to look at Liu Jiayi: “How did Hearts win Russell Cemetery last year?”

Liu Jiayi thought for a moment and replied, “The people in Russell Cemetery have no way to deal with Hearts. Her skills involve appearance change and charm. It is difficult to find a player who can resist her skills.”

“But the rest of the team was in a tight spot.”

“Hearts fought a war of attrition, slowly grinding away, and fighting very hard, but the opponent was a newcomer and his board was not as good as Hearts’, so in the end she still won.”

Bai Liu turned to look at Wang Shun: “How did the Reverse God beat this team last year?”

Wang Shun and Liu Jiayi fell silent at the same time.

After a while, Wang Shun said, “I didn’t see it clearly.”

Bai Liu raised his eyebrows: “Didn’t you see clearly?”

“One minute after the game started,” Wang Shun said with a wry smile, “The tactician from Russell Cemetery surrendered to the Reverse God.”

Reality

“It is still unknown why Russell Cemetery gave up the qualification for the mid-season game, but in short, this team is our number one enemy in the pre-season.”

Wang Shun clicked on the panel, and a bloody lamb head popped up on the PPT:

“In addition to Russell Cemetery, another team we need to focus on is the Fanatic Lambs, which was the last place in the mid-season tournament last year.”

“This team was the first in the pre-season two years ago. In the challenge match, they faced Deer Hunter, and their tactician was still the Reverse God. As expected, Fanatic Lambs lost the challenge match, but still successfully entered the mid-season match last year.”

Wang Shun raised his head and said, “The reason why I specifically mentioned this game is because in this game, the Reverse God, a famous moderate tactician, killed someone for the first time in the game. He killed the opponent’s tactician.”

“However, since this tactician was a popular player that year and had a golden medal of immunity from death, he is still the tactician of the Furious Lambs and continues to be active on the field.”

“During the Fanatic Lambs Challenge, all the members of the Deer Hunters played with injuries, including the Reverse God. Later, I checked and found that their injuries were not in the game, but injuries brought in from reality.”

“Then I looked up the Lambs’ pre-season games and saw something very strange.”

“I found that as long as the opponent of the Fanatic Lambs is a very strong or reputable team, the players of this team will get into trouble in real life and participate in the competition with injuries.”

“There were even a few times when the core players of the opponents of the Furious Lambs died on the eve of the competition.”

Wang Shun said very seriously: “So I made a guess. There is an information collector with similar skills to mine in this fanatical lamb. He can get the player’s exact address information in reality through

some means, and then attack the opponent in reality."

Mu Sicheng couldn't help but sighed: "How shameless, if you can't beat him, just fight him in real life."

"It's really mean, but in real life you are not as powerful as you are in the game. You are just ordinary people." Wang Shun emphasized, "You are already a very outstanding pre-season team. You must pay attention to protecting your own safety in real life."

"Especially Bai Liu."

Wang Shun looked at Bai Liu: "Mu Sicheng is a registered college student, Liu Jiayi has just experienced a major incident and is under multiple surveillance, Captain Tang has strong self-protection capabilities, MuKe's family is an old money family, and only you."

"You are now a marginalized person in society."

Everyone's eyes turned to Bai Liu.

"I'm talking to Bai Liu." Mu Sicheng came over and held Bai Liu's shoulders. "Do you want to live in my dormitory?"

Tang Erda frowned: "The security function of the university dormitory is not good enough, Bai Liu, your small rental house is not safe. I have a house near the base, why don't you move in with me…"

"It's not okay to live near the base. If something happens to your base, you can blame him." Liu Jiayi rejected Tang Erda's proposal. She looked at Bai Liu and said, "I think you can talk to MuKe and live with him. It's convenient for money and transportation."

Bai Liu thought: "It is indeed inconvenient to live alone."

Several people came over at the same time and looked directly at Bai Liu: "Who do you live with?"

Bai Liu smiled: "My current idea is to bring Du Sanying over to live with me."

Several people were silent for a while, and then Mu Sicheng was the first to ask a question: "Huh??"

After the meeting, Bai Liu logged out of the game from his rental house.

He took off his blood-stained white shirt and threw it into the laundry basket, unbuckled his belt, took off his pants and threw them into the laundry basket too.

Bai Liu walked into the bathroom naked, turned on the shower, unhooked his hair tie, closed his eyes and tilted his head back to let the warm water wash over his face, then reached out to take the shampoo next to the mirror.

The mirror was covered with water vapor, dimly reflecting Bai Liu's upper body. Bai Liu paused as he looked at his own hazy reflection in the mirror.

Compared to when he first entered the game, his body had undergone some visible changes.

Bai Liu never orders takeout or milk tea after work because they are too expensive.

He seldom participated in team-building activities, dinners or social events. At most, he would go to Heluyi Station with coupons every month to dine at a restaurant. He usually ate the cheapest eight-yuan set meal of one meat and one vegetable at the company, and the meat dish also included scrambled eggs with tomatoes.

From childhood to adolescence and then to adulthood, Bai Liu had never experienced a stage of food abundance. Due to insufficient intake, he always seemed to be the most backward in development among the crowd.

When Bai Liu was a child, he was the shortest among his peers. When he reached adolescence, he was the thinnest in his class. After he became an adult, he almost had trouble finding a job because of his height.

This year, Bai Liu is 24 years old. He looks at himself in the mirror and feels like…

He grew a little taller.

Tang Erda had been beating Bai Liu intensively for more than a month, and the changes brought to Bai Liu's body were more than that.

Bai Liu's skin color was originally pale due to working in the office without seeing the sun for years, but now it has a bit of redness. His

shoulders, neck, waist and back are stretched backwards, and his originally skinny limbs and abdomen now have muscle lines.

Especially the shoulders, back and abdomen, a thin layer of muscle wrapped around Bai Liu's body, making these parts look a lot stronger.

Although he still doesn't have the neatly trained six-pack abs like Tang Erda, Bai Liu has shallow depressions on both sides of his rectus abdominis. It feels like if he exercises more, he will soon see formed abdominal muscles.

Mr. Bai Liu, who is nearly 25 years old, feels strangely that he looks as if he has grown older.

While drying his body after taking a shower, Bai Liu suddenly paused.

He felt the whip marks left by Spades on his back.

But there was only a brief pause, and Bai Liu put on his clothes as if he had not touched anything, still wearing a white shirt and suit pants – these were the only two types of clothes in his closet.

Bai Liu was going to the sanatorium to pick up Du Sanying later. In order to look more formal, Bai Liu put on a rarely worn tie.

After going to the sanatorium to go through a bunch of procedures and having Du Sanying sign them one by one, Bai Liu successfully took Du Sanying out amid the questioning and horrified eyes of the person in charge.

"I'm sorry, please pick me up." Du Sanying scratched his head embarrassedly, "Because I was diagnosed as having no personal mobility, it's very troublesome to pick me up from the sanatorium. Did Bai Liu find someone to help?"

Bai Liu hummed and took the suitcase from Du Sanying: "Captain Tang helped me find someone."

Actually, it was Su Yang who helped.

Su Yang felt that it would not be good for either Du Sanying or the sanatorium for the children who would cause harm to people around them to stay in the sanatorium.

Originally, Su Yang was planning to apply to send Du Sanying to a

training camp near the base, but after Bai Liu took the initiative to express his willingness to take care of Du Sanying, Su Yang was surprised and simply helped to get the matter done.

Du Sanying followed Bai Liu with his head down, occasionally stealing a glance at the suitcase in Bai Liu's hand.

Bai Liu walked in front and said without looking back: "If you have any questions, just ask directly."

Du Sanying hesitated for a while before asking in a low voice: "…If I live with you, will it really not affect you?"

"I'd better live alone in isolation…" Du Sanying's voice became very weak.

Bai Liu pushed the suitcase and continued to move forward, saying calmly: "Do you want to live alone?"

Du Sanying lowered his head and looked at the corner of his clothes: "I have lived alone since junior high school. The people who lived with me…whether they were friends, parents, or my sister, something happened to them later."

"Yes." Bai Liu said calmly, "I have read your information and I know all these things."

"So you want to live alone?"

Du Sanying shrank his head and said in a low voice, "I don't want to."

Bai Liu dragged the suitcase and turned around to glance at Du Sanying: "You living with me won't hurt me, you can help me, you don't want to live alone, I can solve all the problems you worry about, so do you have any other questions?"

Du Sanying straightened his chest with red eyes, and his voice suddenly became louder: "No, no more!"

"Thank you Mr. Bai Liu for arranging for me to live with you!"

"Oh no!" Du Sanying suddenly slapped his head and asked nervously, "I have another question, Mr. Bai Liu, can you keep a parrot at home?"

Bai Liu thought for a moment and said, "It should be possible. The landlord didn't say no."

Du Sanying's eyes widened: "Mr. Bai Liu, do you live in a rental house?"

Bai Liu hummed: "Don't you like the rental house?"

Du Sanying waved his hands hastily: "No, no! I also rented a house when I was in junior high school, but I felt that people like Mr. Bai Liu…"

Du Sanying racked his brains to describe how he felt when he heard that Bai Liu lived in a rental house: "Living in a rental house is weird."

Bai Liu glanced at Du Sanying and asked, "What's so strange?"

"It's not strange…" Du Sanying changed the way he asked, "Why does Mr. Bai Liu want to live in a rental house?"

Bai Liu answered naturally: "Because I can't afford to buy a house, I rent one."

Du Sanying was shocked: "Isn't Mr. Bai Liu very rich?"

"I'm a laid-off worker and don't have much money." Bai Liu squinted at Du Sanying, "Although I saved some money in the game later, I would feel unhappy if I used it to buy a house."

Du Sanying asked curiously: "Why?"

Bai Liu said: "Because I don't like to spend money on highly premium products."

Du Sanying said "oh" as if he understood what was said, then looked at the suitcase in Bai Liu's hand and said, "Mr. Bai Liu, let me take it myself."

"Mr. Bai Liu will take a taxi home later." Du Sanying asked cautiously, "I don't like taking a taxi. Can I walk back by myself?"

Bai Liu asked calmly, "Is it because you've experienced a lot of traffic accidents?"

Du Sanying nodded, his expression downcast again: "…I'm prone to accidents when I'm in a car, and drivers who encounter me are unlucky, so I usually walk."

"I don't like taking taxis either. Let me walk back with you." Bai Liu said.

Du Sanying's eyes first lit up, and then they couldn't help but turn into wavy eyes, and he looked at Bai Liu with tears in his eyes: "Woo woo, Mr. Bai Liu, please take care of yourself."

Bai Liu glanced at Du Sanying and said, "I really don't like taking taxis because they are too expensive."

Du Sanying: "…"

Bai Liu said that he would not take a taxi and would walk with Du Sanying, so he really accompanied him all the way. On the way back, Du Sanying consciously walked on the small paths with few people, and became very nervous when he had the slightest contact with others.

Because of this, Bai Liu and his friend walked along older streets with very old stalls on the side of the streets.

For example, Du Sanying saw a height and weight measuring machine. An old man was sitting next to it with a sign at his feet that read "One dollar for three measurements."

"It's really cheap." Du Sanying said to Bai Liu, "I saw it was only one dollar per time before."

So Bai Liu suddenly stopped in front of the stall.

Du Sanying reacted for a while, then asked in surprise: "Mr. Bai Liu, do you want to take the test?!"

Bai Liu hummed, took out a dollar from his pocket, bent down and handed it to the old man next to the scale, then stood on it without hesitation.

The measuring rod of the measuring instrument slowly descended, touched Bai Liu's head, and then slowly moved up.

The big speaker on the measuring instrument emitted a flashing red light and loudly broadcast the report: "——Height 176 cm, weight 58 kg, normal thin!"

Bai Liu stood on the scale for a long time, until the loudspeaker finished broadcasting three times, then he slowly walked down.

There were three measurements. Seeing Bai Liu coming down, Du Sanying subconsciously thought whether he should go up and take the

measurements himself.

But that was not the case. After Bai Liu walked down, he slowly walked up again and took the test again.

Du Sanying: “????”

After the three measurements were completed, Du Sanying followed Bai Liu, whose steps he inexplicably felt lighter, in confusion: “Mr. Bai Liu, why did you have to measure three times?”

Bai Liu said calmly: “Confirm the established fact that my product has increased in value.”

Reality

Du Sanying was confused: “???”

After returning home, Du Sanying took the parrot out and hung it by the window. Bai Liu was watching from the side. When the parrot in the cage saw Bai Liu, it got angry and shouted twice, “Bai Liu, run away.”

Seeing that Du Sanying didn’t run away, the parrot looked around, then slowly widened its green eyes and stared blankly at Bai Liu who was smiling outside the cage.

It seemed to finally realize that it had arrived at Bai Liu’s territory. After standing there for a minute, it quickly buried its head under its wings and then shrank motionlessly in the corner of the cage.

Du Sanying explained awkwardly: “San San is not like this usually.”

Bai Liu expressed his understanding: “It is indeed difficult for animals to accept changes in their residence, but you usually use this parrot to remember things because it has something special besides being able to teleport people?”

Du Sanying nodded excitedly: “Yes! Mr. Bai Liu, you should know that many things in the game cannot be remembered in reality. They will be tampered with or erased, but San San can remember these erased things!”

“It’s very useful!”

Bai Liu looked at the parrot and said, “How can we make it remember these things?”

“It’s very simple.” Du Sanying said, “Just keep repeating it to it and wait for it to agree with you.”

“But San San can’t remember complicated things.” Du Sanying scratched his head embarrassedly, “It can only remember simple things, so I usually only let it remember the most important things.”

Bai Liu nodded as if he understood something.

After Du Sanying packed up his things, he held up the basin and clothes and greeted Bai Liu: “Mr. Bai Liu, I’m going to take a shower.

Can I use your bathroom?”

Bai Liu nodded.

After Du Sanying entered the bathroom, Bai Liu stood up and walked slowly to the windowsill.

Although the parrot in the birdcage buried its head under its wings, it couldn’t help but tremble slightly because of Bai Liu’s approach.

Bai Liu half closed his eyes, stretched out his index finger, and stroked the parrot’s fur.

The parrot trembled even more violently.

“What do you remember?” Bai Liu asked softly, “Tell me nicely and I won’t do anything to you.”

“Bai Liu, you bad guy!” the parrot screamed and shrank back as if resisting.

Bai Liu sighed with regret: “It seems that you are unwilling to cooperate, so let’s try another way. I will tell you something that you must remember, how about you help me remember it?”

“In return, I will ensure your and Du Sanying’s survival.”

The parrot hesitated for a moment, then slowly poked its head out from under its wings and looked at Bai Liu with a pair of vigilant green eyes, as if asking him what he wanted it to help remember.

Bai Liu turned around and sat on the window sill. Behind him was an unprotected tall building. The night wind blew gently, making Bai Liu’s half-long hair, which was not cut neatly, sway gently.

“On August 17, Spades broke my whip and my cross.”

The parrot hesitated for a long time, then repeated what Bai Liu said. It tilted its head in confusion and said, “Just remember this?”

“Just remember this for now.” Bai Liu said softly, “If he breaks other things of mine in the future, I will make you remember it too.”

The parrot spoke with genuine confusion: “Is this important?”

“It’s very important to me.” Bai Liu looked at it and smiled. “I don’t want what this person owes me to be erased or forgotten again.”

After taking a shower, Du Sanying came out dressed neatly. He looked at Bai Liu nervously: “Mr. Bai Liu, where should I sleep?”

“I have two single beds in my room. I bought them this afternoon.” Bai Liu said, “Please choose the one you like and sleep in the position you like.”

Du Sanying chose a single bed near the inside, and Bai Liu slept near the window.

There was a bedside table between the two beds, which was a bit like the cold, commercial layout of a hotel, but…

Du Sanying turned over carefully without making any noise. He looked absent-mindedly at Bai Liu who was sleeping on the other side. The moonlight faintly seeping through the window sprinkled on Bai Liu’s peaceful face, giving Du Sanying a dazed feeling.

…He had forgotten how long it had been since he had been in the same room with someone like this.

He had been with Mr. Bai Liu for nearly seven hours since leaving the sanatorium. It was just like what Mr. Bai Liu said, nothing bad had happened…

“Can’t sleep?” Bai Liu suddenly spoke without opening his eyes.

Du Sanying was so scared that he sat up from the bed: “Did I wake you up by turning over? I’m sorry!”

“It’s not like you woke me up.” Bai Liu opened his eyes. “This is also my first time living with someone. I’m a little uncomfortable with it.”

Du Sanying sat cross-legged on the bed and asked in surprise, “Has Mr. Bai Liu always lived alone?”

“Yeah.” Bai Liu replied, “I only slept with someone when I was very young, and since then I have always lived alone.”

Du Sanying was very surprised: “When Mr. Bai Liu was a child, did he sleep in the same bed with someone? Where is that person now?”

“Dead.” Bai Liu said calmly, “He committed suicide. He doused himself in gasoline and set himself on fire.”

Du Sanying paused.

He seemed to remember the incident vaguely, but he couldn't remember the details. It was just that a sense of sadness that he had witnessed the scene before made him apologize uncontrollably: "I'm sorry… I seem to have amnesia again, I can't remember it."

"It doesn't matter." Bai Liu said calmly, "Not many people need to remember this kind of thing."

Du Sanying was silent for a long time, and almost at a loss, he changed the subject: "Um, the gaming league of Mr. Bai Liu's team is about to start!"

"Well, we will start team competition training soon, and the training intensity will be increased." Bai Liu replied, "Because the league is about to start."

"I think Mr. Bai Liu will definitely be the champion of the league." Du Sanying cheered for Bai Liu earnestly, then lay down again. He looked at Bai Liu's profile, "What do you want to do after Mr. Bai Liu wins the game?"

This time it was Bai Liu's turn to remain silent. Du Sanying yawned and thought Bai Liu had fallen asleep. Then Bai Liu suddenly spoke again:

"With that guy, sleeping on a lot of money."

Du Sanying was stunned, then couldn't help but burst out laughing.

Bai Liu glanced at Du Sanying: "Is it funny?"

Du Sanying scratched his head, still smiling: "It seems normal for other people to make this wish, but Mr. Bai Liu said this wish so seriously…"

He said honestly: "I think it's funny."

"But it's a wish that can make people laugh." Du Sanying said seriously, "Mr. Bai Liu will definitely be very happy when it comes true."

Bai Liu turned his gaze back, a faint smile appeared on his face: "Maybe."

Killer Sequence Guild, Weapon Modification Room.

Hua Ganjiang hammered away at the cracks on the God-Defying

Heavy Sword, sparks flying with each strike. Seated on a high bench nearby, Spades watched him in silence, his gaze unwavering.

"Don't look at me like that," Hua Ganjiang muttered without lifting his head. "I know. I'm a weapon modification engineer for the Deer Hunters. I shouldn't be working for the Killer Sequence."

He let out a long sigh. "But what can I say? Your tactician—the Reverse God—is the soul of the Deer Hunters. The highest-ranking strategist in the guild. The judge who defied the gods themselves."

"The Reverse God saved a lot of people, including me."

"I owe him more favors than I can count, and yet... I didn't follow him when he left the Deer Hunters. That alone makes me ungrateful enough," Hua Ganjiang admitted, his expression conflicted. "Now that he's in a new guild and asked for my help with weapon modifications, how could I refuse?"

Shaking his head, he added wryly, "What a ridiculous year it's been. I'm a privately employed weapon modder, yet I've handled the weapons of three guilds and outsourced work for two others."

It was only then that Spades spoke. "Is that a problem?"

He lifted his gaze and met Hua Ganjiang's eyes. "Our guild's warehouse protection is outsourced too. Golden Dawn took it over."

Hua Ganjiang blinked, then burst into laughter—hard, uncontrollable laughter that left tears in his eyes. "The Reverse God outsourced weapon modifications to me and prop protection to Golden Dawn? Of course he did."

He exhaled sharply. "That man gathered the best weapon modifiers and item protectors in the game and put them to his own use. Your Killer Sequence is a brand-new guild that had no business surviving, yet thanks to his connections, you've solved the two hardest problems a new guild faces."

"You really lucked out, Spades," Hua Ganjiang said, his tone tinged with bitterness. "The Reverse God was so firm when he left. Our guild leader—cold and unyielding as he is—even softened his tone, practically begging him to stay. Said he'd do anything. But in the end, he still couldn't keep him."

He glanced at Spades. "I've always wondered—what did you offer

him? What made the Reverse God leave Deer Hunter?"

"You misunderstand." Spades' voice was steady, indifferent. "The Reverse God wanted to leave. I simply gave him a reason."

Hua Ganjiang froze. "That's impossible." His reaction was immediate, almost defensive. "The Reverse God was the core of the Deer Hunters. He got along with everyone. He was even our leader's close friend in real life. We fought together for years."

He shook his head, trying to make sense of it. "The guild leader trusted him more than anyone. He took injuries in the arena to protect him. And the Reverse God never let us down—his tactics kept us alive."

"Everyone loved him. Admired him. And he cared about us just as much. He was the soul of our guild."

Hua Ganjiang's gaze dropped to the heavy sword he was repairing. Slowly, he exhaled. "So when he transferred this year…" He trailed off. "I'm just a blacksmith. If even I can't accept it, how could the others?"

He slid the glowing-red sword into the forge, then nudged a bench closer with his foot and sat beside Spades.

Wiping his hands on his apron, he watched as the sword's silhouette melted into the furnace's magma. "...How cruel. That sword once protected us. Now, it's turned against us."

"And here I am, fixing it."

Hua Ganjiang let out a self-mocking laugh, pulling out a pack of cigarettes. He flicked one free, lit it against the lava, and took a slow drag. Smoke curled lazily in the air.

"Want one?" He offered the pack to Spades.

Spades declined.

Hua Ganjiang narrowed his eyes through the smoke. "Let me guess—the Reverse God doesn't let you smoke?"

He chuckled. "He was like that with the Deer Hunters too. Always pretending to be righteous, banning smoking. Funniest part? Our guild leader—biggest chain smoker I've ever met—actually obeyed him.

Just because the Reverse God said so."

"The man followed every order to the letter. Never smoked again, no matter how much he craved it." Hua Ganjiang shook his head. "Meanwhile, the Reverse God—who banned it in the first place—would sneak into my workshop whenever he wanted one."

He smirked. "I never smoked before, but he got me into it."

The laughter faded. Hua Ganjiang was quiet for a moment before he muttered, "I still don't get why he left."

"The Deer Hunters… that was his guild."

"He built it. He pulled us in—people who had nothing left, people who were about to die—and gave us a place to belong. A miserable, desperate place, sure, but at least we had each other."

His voice softened. "He always told us, smiling like it was a joke, 'I can see your future. It's going to be good. Just hold on a little longer.'"

"So we held on."

Hua Ganjiang took another drag, eyes distant. "I met him in real life, you know."

"In reality, I was just a poor bastard no one cared about. I ran a tiny blacksmith's stall that barely kept me afloat."

He exhaled. "I couldn't even take care of myself, let alone him."

"I picked up a stray kid, made him my apprentice. Thought I could give him a better life, but he just made me poorer." Hua Ganjiang laughed bitterly. "Sometimes, I got so desperate, I did things I shouldn't have. When you start down that path, it only gets worse."

"We were supposed to get financial aid that year. Didn't know we already had records against us. We lost our chance before we even knew it."

"The less money we had, the worse things got. The worse things got, the worse we became."

He lowered his head. "But back when I started stealing… all I wanted was enough to buy a decent meal. To send that kid to vocational school, get him out of this mess."

"But when I finally got caught, that idiot stepped up and said he did it too." Hua Ganjiang let out a breath. "So we both went to jail."

"I always thought he was a little messed up, living like a beggar. Turns out, I was right."

For a moment, silence. Then Hua Ganjiang suddenly chuckled.

"When I thought there was no way out, I met the Reverse God by chance. He bought me a meal—nothing fancy, but it tasted good. Opened two bottles of beer. Got my apprentice drunk."

He smiled faintly. "And then, drunk off his ass, he told me everything would be okay. That he could see the future."

"For a moment, I believed him."

"But reality doesn't work that way."

Hua Ganjiang's voice dropped. "I logged into a horror game in the same alley where I ran my stall. By the time the Heresy Bureau arrived, my apprentice's body had been cold for half an hour."

He paused. Then, softly, "That was the end of my real life."

"But in the game, I met the Reverse God again. He saved me more times than I can count. Because of him, I survived. Because of him, I joined the Deer Hunters."

He took a slow drag. "Eventually, I used my points to buy a body. Molded it into my apprentice's face. Forced it to move, act like it was him. Pretended he was still here, still helping me forge iron."

"But he can't leave this workshop. So I spend more time here than in reality."

Spades studied him. "You don't want to go back?"

Hua Ganjiang scoffed. "Go back to what? I don't even have a home in reality. At least here, I have my apprentice, my forge, and teammates who treat me well."

"I'm living a decent life."

"Sometimes, I wonder if what I'm doing is really the right thing," Hua Ganjiang muttered, tapping the cigarette between his lips. "I've thought about resurrecting my apprentice. But on one hand, I don't

have enough points. And on the other… what's the point?"

He exhaled a plume of smoke, his gaze distant. "Life was so hard for him. The best meal he ever had in his entire life might have been the one the Reverse God treated him to."

Hua Ganjiang took another drag before continuing, his voice laced with regret. "That day, my apprentice told me he had never eaten shrimp before. I was afraid the Reverse God would find it too extravagant, so I didn't let him order any. I even scolded him for being greedy."

"But in the end, the Reverse God just smiled, ordered a plate of shrimp, peeled them one by one, and let my apprentice eat them all by himself."

Hua Ganjiang stubbed out his cigarette, inhaling deeply as his eyes turned red. "I still don't understand… How could someone so kind and gentle leave so cruelly, without even saying goodbye?"

"When the president found out the Reverse God was gone, he went looking for him—he begged him to come back."

Hua Ganjiang's gaze drifted to the furnace, where the heavy sword had completely melted. His voice was vacant. "Our president is so arrogant, yet he lowered his head at the entrance of your Killer Sequence guild hall. He was even ready to kneel. But the Reverse God held him up and said he'd already signed up for the league… as a member of the Killer Sequence."

"He's not coming back."

"The president locked himself in his room for a long time after that. When he finally came out, he seemed… different. Gloomier. He used to be the team's main attacker, but now he's taken over as tactician, completely changing our entire playstyle."

"Recently, he brought in a new clown—a brutal one—to fill the void the Reverse God left behind."

Hua Ganjiang's fingers clenched into a fist. "The Reverse God never liked seeing unnecessary casualties on the field, but this guy—he wants to kill every time he strikes."

A hollow laugh escaped his lips. "…It feels like the president is just taking revenge on the Reverse God for leaving."

Spades, ever blunt, remarked, "You guys are all so childish."

Hua Ganjiang bristled instantly. "You? A naïve bastard who benefited from all this? You have no right to talk!"

The Game Pool

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Hey.” Hua Ganjiang leaned his head back, leaned against the wall, sighed, and suddenly laughed out loud, “Actually, I think it’s childish too.”

“I heard from others that the president has been the main attacker of the Reverse God for many, many years. Since the Deer Hunter Guild existed, the president has been the main attacker of the Reverse God.”

“In a team match with the president as the main attacker, no matter how fierce the battle is, the tactician the Reverse God will never get hurt, because the president will do his best to protect the Reverse God.”

Hua Ganjiang recalled: “If the Reverse God is a [prophet], the president is just like his [hunter].”

“——A Hunter born to protect the Prophet.”

“It was said that everyone wanted the Reverse God to be the guild leader at first, but he didn’t want to, so he handed the position over to the guild leader and said with a smile that he believed the guild leader would be able to lead everyone to the future that he saw.”

“But the future has not yet arrived.” General Hua exhaled and laughed at himself, “The person who gave us the future fled at the critical moment.”

Spades said calmly, “It’s not desertion.”

Hua Ganjiang was stunned.

Spades stared at him without any expression on his face: “The Reverse God is trying to give you the future you want in a different way.”

“When you can’t see the future, you can choose to believe in those who can see the future.”

Hua Ganjiang was stunned for a moment, then laughed out loud: “That’s right, we [villagers] who don’t know the truth still have to follow the [prophet’s] instructions.”

After saying that, Hua Ganjiang jumped off the stool and took the Reverse God's heavy sword out of the furnace with pliers.

Hua Ganjiang turned the sword over and looked at it a few times, then dipped it into the water and said, "It's almost done. Spades, where's your broken whip? Bring it here and I'll start repairing yours."

Spades handed over the whip, which was broken into pieces with only the handle left.

Hua Ganjiang looked at him blankly for a moment: "Although I never ask why weapons are broken, this is too outrageous!"

"If you fight with others, it will be bad." Spades explained perfunctorily.

Hua Ganjiang was stunned: "Is there any player who can fight like you? The league is about to start, and the Reverse God didn't stop you?"

Spades had a deadpan expression on his face: "The Reverse God has joined the other side to fight me together."

Hua Ganjiang: "…Then you must have done something really excessive."

Spades slowly leaned over the back of the stool, rested his chin on the back of his hand, and said, "Yes, so I want to apologize to that person."

Hua Ganjiang raised his whip to examine it carefully, and replied casually: "Then go ahead."

"But the Reverse God won't allow that." Spades slowly lowered his eyelids, "He said that before you figure out why the other party treated you like this, going to the other party casually will only make things worse."

Hua Ganjiang nodded in agreement: "That's true, have you figured it out?"

Spades was silent for a moment.

Hua Ganjiang laughed: "Haven't you figured it out?"

Spades was silent for a moment before speaking: "I feel like he likes me, but he always feels sad when he sees me, and he always thinks a

lot.”

“I don’t understand what he’s thinking or what he’s sad about.”

Hua Ganjiang dipped the handle of Spades' whip into the magma and smiled maliciously: “Love problems…”

“Generally speaking, based on my experience, if you give her (see notes) what she wants, she will forgive you a little, even if she doesn’t say it. What does she want?”

Spades paused for a moment and said, “Yes, a whip similar to mine and an inverted cross.”

After that, Spades was silent again: “But I didn’t want him to get it, so I broke them all.”

Hua Ganjiang was completely stunned: “Isn’t it normal for the other party to hate you?”

Spades suddenly raised his head and stared at Hua Ganjiang: “Can you do it? A whip that feels similar to my whip.”

Hua Ganjiang was full of questions: “Brother, do you know what level your whip is?”

“If I could mass-produce whips of your quality, I would have formed a union long ago!” General Hua said as he swung the whip in his hand. “To be honest, I’ve never seen anything like the texture of your whip bones.”

“I can’t find this kind of bone in the entire game, nor in real life. I don’t know what kind of lizard monster you used as a reference to create such a perverted skill item.”

Spades glanced at the whip in the lava and replied calmly, “It’s my bones.”

Hua Ganjiang was startled: “…Didn’t you say lizard bones?”

“At first, many people said I was a lizard,” Spades replied, “I thought I was a lizard too, so I said I was a lizard bone.”

Hua Ganjiang became more and more confused: “…Why do you think you are a lizard?”

Spades recalled: “Because when I came out of the shell, my lower

body was a fishtail, but I also had legs. I laid on the ground and looked like a lizard."

When Spades was born from Tawil's skin in the Siren Town, he had not yet completely shed his mermaid form. He had a huge fishtail on his lower body, but his feet slowly grew out of the fishtail. He looked weird and out of place, and almost scared the townspeople crazy.

The townspeople frantically slapped Spades who had stood up, trying to get the "lizard man" to get out.

So for a long time, Spades really thought he was a lizard. When he encountered a lizard in other copies, Spades would even take the initiative to observe and imitate the lizard's movements.

This misunderstanding continued until the Reverse God entered the Killer Sequence and seriously explained to Spades that lizards would not play games. It was only then did Spades suddenly realized.

——It turns out that I am a human being.

"Can you use my bones—" Spades raised his head and looked at Hua Ganjiang, "—to make a whip for Bai Liu?"

Hua Ganjiang was shocked and rejected it subconsciously: "No!"

Although his proposal was rejected, Spades still stared at Hua Ganjiang motionlessly, causing Hua Ganjiang to walk back and forth several times in annoyance: "No means no, even if you can stare a hole through me!"

"Even if I'm willing to help you, players are forbidden from hurting each other in the central hall. I can't pick your bones out at all. That's the first point."

Hua Ganjiang turned around and raised two fingers seriously: "Second, even if you go into the game and pick the bones off, you can't bring them out to make a whip for me."

"You can only get out of the game with injuries and game reward items. I've never heard of anyone being able to get out with their own bones."

"Third, even if you really find a way to get the bones for me, a whip will require at least four to six sets of your spine. You need a recovery period after you remove the bones and then grow them back. I can't

stay in the Killer Sequence to make whips for you during your bone growth recovery period. The Deer Hunter is also preparing for the league, so I have to be there."

"To sum up, your fantastic plan is not feasible."

"Once all these problems have been solved, you will help me, right?" Spades looked at Hua Ganjiang with a very focused and serious look.

This look made Hua Ganjiang speechless for a moment, and he evaded the question: "How do you solve it?"

Spades lowered his eyes to look at Hua Ganjiang's whip which had returned to its original shape in the furnace. He pulled it out, and the whip made a slight hissing sound as it was soaked in water, emitting wisps of white smoke.

Then he raised his hand to the back of his neck, and without any expression on his face, he placed the whip against the spine of his neck and slashed it down mercilessly.

Blood dripped instantly, and Hua Ganjiang looked shocked. Spades slowly withdrew his clenched fist from his back and opened it in front of Hua Ganjiang.

In the palm of his hand was a bloody spine.

"My whip can tear through time and space, so I can hurt myself in the central hall and remove bones." Spades said calmly, "My regenerative ability is very strong, and the bones I remove will grow back quickly, so it won't delay you for a long time."

"That's all solved. Now can you make me a whip?"

Hua Ganjiang's lips were trembling. He was silent for a very long time. With trembling hands, he took out a cigarette box from his pocket, put a cigarette in his mouth, and lit it. Then he dared to slowly lower his eyes to the bone in Spades' white palm that was still dripping with blood.

"You…don't you feel anything?"

Spades paused for a moment and said, "I can feel it."

Hua Ganjiang looked at Spades unreasonably: "Then why the hell can you dig out your own bones without batting an eyelid?!"

Spades was silent: “Because I just know that he wants this.”

Hua Ganjiang was startled. He remembered what he had just said to Spades – [Give her what she wants, and she will forgive you a little.]

“If you have to pay such a painful price to give the other party what they want…” Hua Ganjiang sighed with a complicated expression, “There’s no need to give it to them…”

“Give it to me.” Hua Ganjiang took the bone with a cigarette in his mouth. Seeing that Spades started to take the bone again, he turned away, “Don’t let the blood splash everywhere. Be careful when you take it.”

Spades hummed.

Hua Ganjiang looked at the bone in his hand and took a deep breath: “Damn, what is going on…”

The league day is getting closer day by day.

All the guilds were making their final frantic sprint. Not only in the game pool but even in the small TV area, the atmosphere was much heavier.

The Wandering Circus trained almost day and night, and under the high-intensity training of various games, not only Mu Sicheng cried out in unbearable pain, but even Tang Erda sometimes showed signs of fatigue.

Mu Sicheng lay helplessly on the desk in the lounge of the Wandering Circus, his eyes dim, “…I am about to experience the most terrifying thing in my life.”

Liu Jiayi was speechless: “It’s just a pre-season game, you weren’t that scared before, right?”

“No.” Mu Sicheng retorted with his eyes blank, “It’s not just the pre-season, I have to start school.”

Tang Erda lifted his clothes and wiped the sweat off his face. He smiled when he heard this and said, “Is the start of college going well?”

“Yeah, it should have been fine…” Mu Sicheng said angrily, “But I spent the whole last semester playing games and failed two subjects at

the end of the semester! Make up for it when school starts this semester!"

Mu Sicheng grabbed his hair and howled in pain: "And I haven't even started reviewing yet!"

MuKe was puzzled from the bottom of his heart: "The college exams are very simple, why did you fail?"

Liu Jiayi scoffed mercilessly: "You are the only one among us who will fail the exam."

Bai Liu, who was standing by, paused for a moment and said calmly, "I've failed them before, too."

In an instant, everyone in the office looked over there in shock.

"What's wrong?" Bai Liu returned these looks calmly, "Is it strange that I failed the exam?"

"My studies have always been average."

MuKe recalled thoughtfully: "I remember now. I saw on the resume that Bai Liu's grades didn't seem to be very good. I remember that his college entrance examination score was -"

"485 points." Bai Liu took a sip of water and said calmly, "I remember it was quite a distance from the first-tier line."

Mu Sicheng was shocked: "Your college entrance examination score is actually more than 100 points lower than mine!"

Then Mu Sicheng quickly fell into complacency, crossed his chest, and raised his eyebrows, looking at Bai Liu with a very annoying smile: "I didn't expect it, Bai Liu, you have thick eyebrows and big eyes, you look like an excellent student, but you didn't do as well as me in the exam!"

"Very strange." Liu Jiayi frowned. "Bai Liu has strong thinking and learning abilities. How could he score lower than Mu Sicheng?"

Mu Sicheng was angry: "Hey–!!"

Bai Liu thought for a moment and said, "When I was in high school, I didn't work very hard, and I wasn't sensible. I was quite rebellious, and I never focused on studying. I only started to study seriously in the last half of the semester."

“When the results came out, I considered repeating the year under the persuasion of Lu Yizhan, but I decided not to go in the end.”

Mu Sicheng rubbed his hands together, looking horrified: “What’s going on? I feel so uncomfortable hearing you say you’re considering repeating a grade that it scares me!”

Bai Liu glanced at Mu Sicheng and said, “Normally, people would consider repeating a grade after doing poorly on an exam.”

MuKe asked curiously: “Why didn’t Bai Liu go in the end?”

Bai Liu paused for a moment and said, “Because I had no money. I was over 18 years old and the welfare home had stopped providing financial support.”

Everyone was silent, even Mu Sicheng was stunned.

This reason is really… a little unexpected.

“Although the welfare home also provides educational subsidies for adults, there are not many places for that kind of subsidy. You need to have good grades or work hard to get it, such as Lu Yizhan. It would be very unfair if someone like me could get it.”

Bai Liu sat on the chair with a calm expression: “Although Lu Yizhan told me to repeat my studies, he would work hard to earn money to pay for my tuition and living expenses after I go to college, and then I can pay him back after I get a job, I still refused in the end.”

Liu Jiayi couldn’t help but ask: “Why?”

Bai Liu raised his eyes and said, “Because I hate studying and living in high school, so forget it.”

Wang Shun interrupted the atmosphere of a group of people chatting:

“Everyone, the pre-season game will start in one day. Now I want to tell you some important pre-game matters. Then please go back and have a good rest tonight. Tomorrow we will enter the game and officially draw lots for the game.”

“First of all, the main stage of the league is in the central hall. The days without spectators, which everyone is used to, will soon be gone.”

Wang Shun’s expression was serious: “None of you has obtained the

golden medal of immunity from death. You really need popularity."

"So when you encounter weaker opponents in the pre-season, please try to play more entertaining games to attract the audience's attention."

"Secondly, the game pool will be closed to the public soon. According to the practice in previous years, the game pool will be used as a private rental venue and rented out by bidding every day. The guild with the highest bid on that day will be able to rent the game pool for one day."

Wang Shun emphasized: "Although the league has already started, except for Captain Tang, the rest of you are all pure rookies, and the training intensity is far from enough."

"So from now on, not only will you have to participate in the pre-season, but the guild will also actively bid to rent a game pool every day. Once you rent one, please endure a little hardship on that day and continue to come to the game pool for training after the competition. We must make up for the cost of the rental."

"I asked Mr. Charles about the expenses for the game pool bidding, and he said he would reimburse them in full."

Wang Shun looked around at everyone and smiled knowingly:

"Finally, I wish you all a successful start and achieve what you wish for."

The night before the league game.

Mu Sicheng was half leaning against a desk lamp emitting white light, pouting his lips and lazily holding a pen, scribbling on his textbook with a highlighter from time to time, reviewing the subjects he had to take make-up exams for.

As he was drawing, Mu Sicheng's eyes suddenly shifted to the empty bed on the left side of the dormitory entrance.

That is Liu Huai's bed.

Because someone died in the dormitory, other students moved out of fear. Only Mu Sicheng did not move out despite being persuaded twice by the dormitory manager and lived here alone.

“It’s so annoying…” Mu Sicheng muttered to himself, “If you were here, you could draw a picture for me to review the key points.”

“You listen to the class very seriously…”

As he was talking, Mu Sicheng scratched his head in annoyance: “Ahhh! I wish I had only scored 485 points in the college entrance examination! I can’t do the test at all with all the league stuff in my mind!”

Liu Jiayi curled up on the bed, holding a clumsy and ugly doll in her arms. She closed her eyes and recited:

“Stupid brother…”

“Although Bai Liu, whom you entrusted me to, seems to be not good at anything, he is quite faithful to his promises.”

There were two soft knocks on Liu Jiayi’s door. She immediately hid her doll and huddled under the quilt, pretending to be asleep.

The door was slowly pushed open. Xiang Chunhua pushed the door open carefully, tiptoed to Liu Jiayi’s bed, tucked the quilt for her, touched her head, and then left.

Liu Jiayi slowly opened her eyes. She held the doll’s hand under the quilt and said softly:

“I have a very good family now, brother.”

“Bai Liu found it for me.”

MuKe sat on a bench in the hospital and put down the clothes that had just been taken off during the electrocardiogram.

The doctor opposite looked at the electrocardiogram carefully for a while and nodded: “Further examination is needed, but your condition has been relatively stable recently. Avoid strenuous exercise and keep a calm mind.”

MuKe stood up and bowed politely to thank him: “Thank you for your help, doctor.”

The doctor smiled and said, “You don’t have to be so polite. You have been my patient since you were a child. But MuKe, you seem to be in a good mood recently. Did something good happen to you?”

MuKe raised his head and smiled: “Yes.”

“I met someone who allowed me to exercise vigorously, to have an uneasy state of mind, but still be happy.”

The doctor was stunned.

Without waiting for the doctor to react, MuKe bowed again and said goodbye, then turned around and walked out of the room at a leisurely pace.

As soon as Tang Erda came out of the room, he saw Su Yang and a group of members of the third team standing in front of him.

He was slightly startled: “What are you doing…”

“Come on, come on, we’ve finished our business! Let’s go have a drink!” The team members rushed over, grinning, “It’s been a while since I’ve had a drink with you!”

Tang Erda was almost at a loss as he held these people back: “What are you doing! I have already left the Heretic Management Bureau and am no longer your captain!”

Su Yang smiled, his eyes curved: “Yes, but if you leave, can’t I come to drink with you?”

“We are not here to find the captain of the third team, Tang Erda. We are just here to catch up with our old friend Tang Erda. Is that not okay?”

Tang Erda lurched, then his shoulders slowly relaxed and he smiled with relief: “Okay.”

On the road, Tang Erda and Su Yang walked side by side. Su Yang glanced at Tang Erda and laughed: “I always feel that you have changed a lot.”

Tang Erda paused: “Is there?”

Su Yang nodded: “Before, I always felt that you were worried, as if you were carrying a lot of burdens that we didn’t know about. You refused to tell us, and you were very tense every day.”

“It feels like you are protecting everyone within your territory.” Su Yang raised his head and exhaled a breath of white air, “but at the same time, you are keeping everyone out of your door.”

“But now, it feels like you’ve lifted that burden off of you.”

Su Yang turned his head and smiled: “I’ve never seen you so relaxed. It seems that retirement is really a good thing for a 40-year-old man like you.”

Tang Erda paused for a moment, then laughed, “Although retirement life also has many uncertainties.”

“But the burden has indeed been taken over.”

Su Yang laughed: “Is it Bai Liu?”

Tang Erda held a cigarette between his fingers, a faint smile floating in his dark blue eyes: “Yeah.”

In the game pool.

[System Reminder: Due to the upcoming league, the game pool will be closed soon, please evacuate as soon as possible!]

People kept climbing out of the game pool. The game interface that was constantly rotating on the water surface gradually stopped and darkened. The bottom of the water changed from an illusory image to a solid reality. Only the shaking and turbulent water waves reflected the dim colorful halo that was pouring down from above.

Bai Liu stood up from the game pool, water dripping down his body.

From now on, you have to spend points to rent here. Although it is not his money, according to Bai Liu’s basic principle of “if you don’t take advantage of a good opportunity, you are a bastard”, he still trained in the game pool until the last moment.

Now Bai Liu was the only one in the entire game pool. Just as he was about to walk out, Bai Liu looked up and saw another person.

Spades stood outside the game pool, staring at him motionlessly.

Bai Liu stopped walking out and looked directly at Spades.

Neither of them spoke, they just looked at each other in silence.

Spades stood outside the game pool, Bai Liu stood inside the game pool, and the colorful halo flowed silently between the two people.

The game pool, which was originally bustling with people, now only had the two of them, but it did not feel empty. An inexplicable atmosphere permeating between the two people made people feel breathless.

Bai Liu spoke first, his tone was very calm: “What do you want to talk to me about?”

Spades paused, then slowly extended his hand to Bai Liu: “This is for you.”

Bai Liu lowered his eyes and looked at what Spades was holding.

In Spades’ hand was a pure white bone whip.

——It is exactly the same as the bone whip that Bai Liu got from Tawil at the beginning.

Bai Liu just lowered his eyes and watched, water drops dripping from his eyelashes and falling into the closed game pool, spreading out in circles of colorful halos.

When Spades saw that Bai Liu didn’t take it, he curled up his fingers hanging at his side and said, “It’s a lizard bone whip with the same strength as the mermaid bone whip you used before.”

“Don’t you want it?”

Bai Liu was silent for a long time before he looked up at Spades: “Is there only a whip?”

Spades lurched.

Bai Liu calmly asked back: “You also broke my reverse cross, shouldn’t you return it to me as well?”

“The inverted cross…” Spades’ eyes wandered for a moment, “…it’s not fixed yet.”

The material of the inverted cross is so special that Spades drove Hua Ganjiang crazy but still couldn’t make something similar.

Bai Liu nodded and took the whip: “Is that so? I’ll take the whip first. What do you want to use as collateral for the cross?”

Spades stood in front of Bai Liu like a statue with an expressionless face for a long time.

This guy practically has “I can’t think of anything I can use as collateral right now” written all over his face.

Bai Liu lowered his eyes and looked away, with a slight smile in his eyes: “Didn’t you expect it?”

Spades nodded honestly, then paused: “Is this okay?”

Bai Liu asked, “How is it?”

Spades took out a black marker and explained seriously, “If you really want it now, I can draw one for you first.”

Bai Liu: “…”

After logging out of the game, Bai Liu changed his wet clothes, walked into the bathroom, turned on the shower, and started showering.

Halfway through rinsing, Bai Liu seemed to realize something and turned his head to look at the mirror.

In the mirror, a very clear inverted cross was drawn in black marker in the middle of Bai Liu’s collarbone, which was very conspicuous against his fair skin.

Bai Liu leaned against the cold tiles and closed his eyes. He raised his head and let the water wash over him. He whispered softly, “…I actually let him draw it.”

In the game pool, after listening to Spades’ words, Bai Liu paused for a moment, then simply unbuttoned a button of his shirt, and tilted his neck back to expose the skin between his collarbones, making it easier for Spades to start writing.

Spades stepped into the game pool, his eyes fixed on Bai Liu’s heart, he picked up the pen and started drawing.

Bai Liu looked away: “Who told you to draw if you can’t give it?”

Spades’ eyes rested on Bai Liu’s collarbone without fail, and he said as he painted, “The Reverse God taught me this.”

Bai Liu asked softly, “How did he teach you?”

Spades glanced at Bai Liu and said, “The Reverse God said that when you don’t have a way to give something to someone for the time being, but you really want to give it to him, you can draw one for him

first.”

“One day.” Spades returned his gaze to Bai Liu’s heart and said seriously, “I will return the cross I broke to you.”

“What others can give you, I can give you too.”

In the bathroom, Bai Liu buried his face in the bath towel, covered the towel with one hand, and slowly exhaled a long breath.

He kind of regretted letting Spades draw on him.

Chapter End Notes

> In Chinese, pronouns are written differently but are all pronounced the same so he assumed that Spades was talking about a woman.

Pre-season

Pre-season day.

The group, who had not left the game pool for a long time, finally returned to the small TV area.

Mu Sicheng screamed as he entered the small TV area. He stared at the central hall with wide eyes and said in surprise: “What the hell is this?!”

The small TV area, where small TVs were originally densely arranged, sank in the middle, revealing a huge, sunken round hole. This round hole was filled with seats layer by layer, forming a viewing venue similar to the Roman Colosseum. Standing on the edge and looking down, it looked like a deep, wide, flat round pool.

In the center of the venue, there is a huge screen made up of countless small TVs spliced together on both sides, floating in the air. Audiences continue to enter the arena and take their seats, chatting excitedly with each other.

“Oh, right. This is the first time that God Mu has seen the small TV area during the league.” Wang Shun slapped his head, “I forgot to tell you that the central hall will undergo a major change in appearance during the league.”

Wang Shun pointed at the large pool that Mu Sicheng was looking at in shock. “Some of the small TV areas will be converted into viewing pools. The one you just saw is the largest viewing pool. It’s for the mid-season tournament. We can’t climb up there.”

“The mid-season games will be broadcast live in this largest pool.”

“In addition to this largest viewing pool, there are many viewing pools of different sizes around it.” Wang Shun pointed around, “The pre-season games will be shown in these viewing pools of different sizes.”

Mu Sicheng frowned: “These pools are just like the recommended spots on a small TV, with good and bad spots and high and low exposure, right? How can we ensure that our competition can enter a good pool?”

Wang Shun smiled and said, “This involves another thing, called the gambling pool.”

Mu Sicheng asked suspiciously: “[Gambling pool]?”

Wang Shun nodded. “Over the past year, the points that the audience has accumulated from you will be multiplied five times by the system and added to the [Gambling Pool] as a basic fund. Of course, the same goes for your opponents.”

“Generally speaking, the bigger your and your opponent’s gambling base funds are, the bigger your combined [gambling pool] will be, the bigger the viewing pool you will get, the better the position, and the higher the exposure you will get.”

Mu Sicheng raised his eyebrows and asked back: “In other words, if I want my game to be broadcast in a high-exposure viewing pool and attract more viewers, either I have to have a high amount of points charged, or the team I’m playing against has a high amount of points charged?”

Wang Shun smiled and nodded: “But you don’t have to worry about this problem for now. In the pre-season, you are already a team with relatively high charging points, so the viewing pool you get will not be too bad.”

“And as the game progresses, there will be a steady stream of spectators putting points into your [betting pool]. As long as you keep winning, the viewing pool you get will get better and better.”

Mu Sicheng crossed his arms looked at the largest viewing pool, and snorted, “Our match will definitely be broadcast here in the end anyway!”

“That’s because you guys made it to the playoffs.” Wang Shun pushed Mu Sicheng’s shoulders and walked forward, “Let’s go to the pre-season registration point to draw the opponent team first.”

Wang Shun walked away while looking back: “By the way, Du Sanying is indispensable for selecting teams, where is he?”

Bai Liu moved aside slightly, revealing Du Sanying who was trembling and about to cry behind him.

Du Sanying held Bai Liu’s clothes with tears in her eyes: “Wuwuwu, where is this place…”

“It’s been a week.” Bai Liu said calmly, “He doesn’t remember anything again.”

Wang Shun: "……"

Forget about this.

After Wang Shun explained science to Du Sanying until he was almost dry-mouthed, Du Sanying barely understood where this place was and what he was supposed to do now.

Du Sanying was taken to the pre-season registration office by Bai Liu.

The registration office was packed with people, especially next to the line-up for team drawing. There were few friendly-looking players, all of whom were eyeing Bai Liu's team, which had an outstanding appearance and was very popular.

Du Sanying pulled out a piece of paper from a large lottery ticket box with shaking hands. He looked down at the name on the paper and whispered, "Nomadic House?"

The expressions of the people guarding nearby changed, and Wang Shun's eyes lit up.

[System Prompt: (Nomadic House) has given up, (Wandering Circus) won without a fight and swallowed up the other party's gambling pool.]

【Please select the next team.】

Du Sanying hesitated for a moment, then reached in and drew: "North Star?"

[System prompt: (North Star) has given up, (Wandering Circus) won without a fight and swallowed up the other party's gambling pool.]

【Please select the next team.】

Du Sanying was silent for a while, then continued to draw: "[Stern River Ship Helmsman]?"

[…Has given up…]

"[Sheep-horned Snake Shadow]?"

[…Has given up…]

"[Stormtroopers]…?"

[…Has given up…]

“[Minions of Uza]…?”

[…Has given up…]

“…”

The eyes of the pre-season team players surrounding him almost made a big hole in Du Sanying, who was still drawing the team’s attention. They gritted their teeth and were full of shock.

All the teams gave up, how the hell is this reasonable?!

For others, a random draw is a life-and-death battle, and they have to use all their strength to win a round. But this person is like drawing a scratch-off lottery, with a 100% winning rate. Every time he draws, he takes up the entire gambling pool.

Du Sanying was at a loss as the people around him stared at him. He turned around and glanced at Bai Liu. Bai Liu smiled and motioned for him to continue smoking.

“Butcher?” Du Sanying pulled out another punch and raised his head.

The people around stared at Du Sanying intently, waiting for the system’s answer with bated breath.

[System prompt: (The Butcher) is actively preparing for battle. Please ask the Wandering Circus to go to Game Pool No. 17 to play the game.]

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief at the same time – finally, they were not the team that gave up.

“I, I, I won’t fight anymore, I give up!!” A panicked voice came from the side, “I won’t fight with Mu Sicheng!”

When Mu Sicheng heard his name, he groaned and looked over with a fierce look in his eyes, but he paused when he saw the other person’s face.

“Wow, Wuwu, Mu Shicheng beat me in the game, but I couldn’t beat him!” The man ran away crying, “He also took off my pants and showed them to the monsters!!”

“I don’t want him to take my pants off me again!”

[System Prompt: (The Butcher) has given up, (The Wandering Circus) has won without a fight and swallowed up the other party's gambling pool]

Everyone: "…"

What the hell is going on here?

Bai Liu slowly shifted his gaze to Mu Sicheng's face: "Do you still have this hobby?"

Mu Sicheng was furious: "Can you blame me for this? I was trying to steal something from him, but he plotted against me and I never stole anything. So what's wrong with me bullying him? I didn't really kill him!"

Liu Jiayi sneered: "Only an idiot like you would do such a boring thing."

Mu Sicheng was angry: "Anyway, the result is good!"

Du Sanying continued to draw. He asked slowly and doubtfully, "[Witch Saigao]…?"

Someone nearby stood up and choked up, "I am the tactician of [Witch Saigao], I also give up."

"Our entire team has been saved by the witch, and we are all fans of Liu Jiayi. We will never do anything to hurt her!"

The man looked at Liu Jiayi with affection and said, "Little witch, you have to win our share as well!"

Then he ran away crying.

[System Prompt: (Witch Saigao) has given up, (Wandering Circus) won without a fight and swallowed up the other party's gambling pool]

Liu Jiayi: "…"

Mu Sicheng crossed his arms and said "Wow" while dragging his tail. He looked down at Liu Jiayi with a slanted eye and said, "Is it only a fool like me who would do such a boring thing?"

Liu Jiayi had a blank expression on her face: "What are you talking about? I'm blind and can't hear you."

Du Sanying nervously drew another card: “Silver Rose Team?”

Tang Erda was stunned when he heard the name.

Someone walked out of the team. He looked at Tang Erda and smiled bitterly: “I didn’t expect to meet again in this way, Mr. Hunter.”

“It seems that I have no other choice but to give up.”

The man stepped forward and shook hands with Tang Er, patted his shoulder, and sighed: “Keep up the good work, take care.”

Tang Erda paused and shook his hand back: “Sorry.”

Wang Shun explained to Bai Liu, “Silver Rose is a league team that previously employed Mr. Tang Erda. After leaving Captain Tang, their ranking plummeted and they have been struggling in the pre-season for the past two years.”

“It can be said that this is a team that relies solely on Captain Tang.”

Du Sanying continued to draw at Bai Liu’s signal: “[Puppet Relics] Team?”

A man pushed through the crowd and slowly walked in front of Bai Liu and MuKe, and suddenly laughed: “Long time no see, MuKe, Bai Liu.”

MuKe paused: “Can it be possible?”

Fang Ke scratched the back of his head: “You have a really good memory. You still remember me.”

Mu Sicheng narrowed his eyes: “Hiss – I feel that this person looks very familiar, but I can’t remember where I met him…”

Wang Shun sighed with a complicated look in his eyes: “I didn’t expect to meet Fang Ke here.”

“He was the last one to survive among the group of puppets that Zhang Kui created before his death. He was in the same group as Liu Huai and Li Gou.” Wang Shun sighed, “After Zhang Kui’s death, he left the King’s Guild. I didn’t expect that he would form his own team to participate in the league.”

Mu Sicheng suddenly realized: “Oh, I remember now, Bai Liu saved his life when the last train exploded.”

Fang Ke looked at Bai Liu and MuKe with mixed feelings and finally smiled with relief: “After Liu Huai died, I was the only puppet of Zhang Kui who was still alive. I joined other guilds and became their tactician.”

“But it seems that I am not destined to be someone else’s tactician.”

Fang Ke raised his hand: “System, I abstain.”

[System Prompt: (Puppet Remnant) has given up, (Wandering Circus) won without a fight and swallowed up the other party’s gambling pool]

Before leaving, Fang Ke turned around and looked at MuKe: “We have to win Liu Huai’s share as well.”

MuKe hummed: “I will.”

Fang Ke looked at Bai Liu again and laughed: “I think you can do it too.”

“You found a very good operator this time.”

Then you can wave goodbye and leave.

Du Sanying was still carefully drawing, and the looks of the onlookers nearby changed from disbelief and amazement at first to envy and jealousy, and finally to hatred.

But as things have developed to this point, everyone’s eyes have become numb.

What’s the point of competing? Hurry up and destroy it.

Pre-season

On the day of the pre-season, the entire game community buzzed with a shocking revelation—there was a team that had won 41 consecutive matches without playing a single official game.

The discussion spread like wildfire. Even during the mid-season matches, where crowds gathered to watch intense battles, people couldn't stop talking about it.

"That's insane," one spectator exclaimed, staggered by the news. "What kind of luck is that?"

A spectator beside him smirked knowingly. "It's because of a newcomer with a luck value of 100."

The first spectator was dumbfounded. "A full hundred points in luck? Why hasn't a big guild recruited this player?"

The other shook his head. "It wouldn't help them. The big guilds don't rely on random draws—they compete against every team in the mid-season based on rankings. Luck doesn't play a role there."

"And in the playoffs? You think luck matters in a structured, skill-based competition?"

The first spectator clicked his tongue. "Fair point, but a high luck value can be really useful in the pre-season."

"Not enough to carry them," the other scoffed. "This team looks like it's just cheating its way through the pre-season, drawing only the weakest opponents."

"They might breeze past the lower-tier teams for now, but once they hit the stronger teams, they'll crumble."

The first spectator hesitated. "Still… I don't think they're that bad. I kind of want to place a bet on them."

His companion snorted. "That so-called 'Wandering Circus'? Yeah, no thanks. I wouldn't bet on them."

"Better them than the big guilds," the first spectator argued, his eyes locked on the massive screen displaying a match. "Look at that—that's what a real, bloody showdown looks like."

On the screen, a man in a Joker mask grinned maniacally, his face splattered with blood. He raised a bright green sniper rifle and, without hesitation, pulled the trigger.

[System Alert: Congratulations to Daniel for winning the single-player tournament. The Deer Hunter Guild has earned one point.]

For two long seconds, silence gripped the viewing pool. Then, deafening cheers erupted, shaking the screens.

“JOKER-!!!”

“JOKER-!!!”

Daniel, still covered in blood, logged out near the massive screen. Thick drops of blood slid down his skin. His paper mask had been soaked through, making it crumple and peel away. He removed it carelessly, tossing it aside.

Just as he was about to leave, he suddenly stopped. Then, with a slow, calculated turn, he looked back at the audience. His smile was so perfectly theatrical, it seemed almost artificial. With exaggerated politeness, he tipped his hat and bowed.

“I’m a clown,” Daniel said smoothly. “So don’t forget to support me.”

His apple-green eyes gleamed with amusement as he grinned. “Or else… well, you saw what happened to that guy on TV, didn’t you?”

On the screen behind him, his latest victim lay in a pool of blood, his face twisted in agony. Bullet holes riddled his body. He had been tortured to death.

Daniel let out a soft chuckle, waving a hand dismissively. “Ciao~”

Then, he walked off the stage, completely ignoring the frenzied cheers.

The first spectator gulped. “He’s… terrifying. I think I prefer a more tactical playstyle—like Bai Liu’s. That Wandering Circus team at least plays smart.”

“What do you know?” his companion snapped, eyes gleaming with excitement. “The blood! The violence! That’s what makes it fun! It’s not like the clown can actually kill you. It’s just thrilling to watch him kill!”

The first spectator frowned. “Still, Bai Liu’s playstyle is impressive—”

“Bai Liu?” The other sneered. “That guy’s nothing but a coward. Always looking for the easy way out. He’ll get crushed by the real strong players sooner or later. The moment he dies, I’m betting everything on his opponent.”

At that exact moment, Daniel—still dripping in blood—came to a halt in the middle of the street. He turned his head slightly… and then, in an instant, he vanished from sight.

Before the spectator could react, Daniel appeared directly in front of him, his movement too fast to follow.

A cold, metallic barrel pressed against the spectator’s forehead.

Daniel’s eerie, smiling face hovered just inches away. “I think I just heard you bad-mouthing Bai Liu.”

The crowd collectively sucked in a breath.

The spectator was frozen, his whole body trembling. He stared at the green sniper rifle aimed at his head—a weapon that could destroy a person’s very soul.

“I-I… I said Bai Liu is a coward, and that you’re really strong.” His voice shook violently. He forced a trembling thumbs-up.

Daniel’s expression turned ice-cold in an instant. His fake smile vanished.

“I hate hearing people talk badly about Bai Liu.”

His voice was void of warmth.

“Because he’s the best.”

Daniel pulled the trigger.

BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG—!

The spectator shrieked, covering his head, cowering under his chair. But after a moment, he realized—he was still alive.

It hit him then. This was the Central Hall. Daniel couldn’t actually attack him here.

Daniel sighed dramatically, looking at his useless sniper rifle with disappointment. “Right. I forgot… no killing in Central Hall.”

The spectator raised his hands, practically in tears. “I won’t say a word about Bai Liu again! I swear! I—I’ll bet everything on him! He’s the best! The absolute best!”

Daniel tilted his head, watching him with an unreadable gaze. Then, his lips curled into a mocking smile.

“But you’re not the best.”

He lifted the man’s chin with the barrel of his rifle, looking at him like he was something filthy. “You think you’re worthy of betting on Bai Liu?”

“Bai Liu doesn’t need low-level fans like you.”

Daniel straightened, putting his gun away with an almost gentle motion. His tone turned soft, disturbingly friendly.

“So, how about this?” His eyes gleamed. “Come into the game with me.”

His grin stretched wider.

“Let me kill you.”

The spectator’s breath hitched. His eyes darted around, searching desperately for help.

But the surrounding audience had already backed far away.

No one was coming to save him.

"Joker." Cen Buming, president of the Deer Hunters, approached, sweeping a casual glance over the spectator before turning back to Daniel. "There's a doubles match coming up. Don't cause trouble."

The audience looked at Cen Buming with gratitude.

Daniel didn’t take his eyes off the spectator. "I’m not in the doubles match, am I? I’ll be back before the team match starts."

He finally turned to Cen Buming, a smile curling on his lips. "I’ll be back when I’ve killed him. It won’t take long."

The audience went limp, stunned into silence.

In the lounge, Wang Shun looked at the others. "We'll have an easier time early in the pre-season thanks to Du Sanying," he said.

"But that doesn't mean we can get complacent. The mid-season is just as important."

Clicking on the system panel, a mid-season round robin flowchart popped up.

"Unlike the pre-season, which has multiple random matches, the mid-season consists of 496 games in total—16 games per day, lasting for 31 days, or about a month."

He scrolled further. "As per usual, the mid-season tends to end around the same time as the pre-season, sometimes even earlier."

Another click, and a table of rankings appeared.

"What matters in the mid-season is the popularity rankings. Most of the audience-favorite players are concentrated here."

He pointed at the screen. "This is the current top 300 list. But take note—you need to be in the top 100 before the next league starts to secure a death-free pass."

Wang Shun turned to them. "The reason I'm showing you the top 300 is that two of you are on it."

"Liu Jiayi, ranked 267 in popularity."

"Bai Liu, ranked 248."

He tapped the panel again. "Incidentally, thanks to Du Sanying's impressive card draw today, he shot up to 351."

Du Sanying let out a surprised squeak, pointing at himself. "Me?"

Mu Sicheng slammed the table. "Bullshit! Du Sanying made the list, and I didn't?!"

Wang Shun looked like he wanted to cry. "God Mu, you, Tang Erda, and Muke ranked low because you guys don't engage with the audience. Once you enter the game pool, you basically vanish."

"Plenty of viewers thought you were dead."

Mu Sicheng: "… I'm sorry to disappoint, but I'm still alive."

Tang Erda coughed awkwardly.

Muke remained calm. His skillset as an assassin meant keeping a low profile was preferable.

"During the league, every match can cause drastic ranking shifts," Wang Shun continued. "Today, aside from Du Sanying, two newcomers experienced major ranking changes."

"One was Golden Dawn's Armand, who climbed from 681 to 302 after a stellar solo performance."

His gaze flickered to Bai Liu. "The other is Deer Hunters' Joker. He jumped from 549 to 203, then dropped to 321."

Wang Shun focused the display on Joker. "He rose in the rankings due to his outstanding singles match and his brutal, aggressive playstyle, which drew the audience's attention."

He tapped the panel, and an image appeared—a corpse with a grotesquely twisted face.

"This is what an opponent looks like after dying to Joker. A gruesome death."

His expression darkened. "But that's not the issue. Abusing opponents is fairly common in the league—it shocks the audience, but it doesn't usually affect rankings negatively."

"Joker dropped because he left the match to attack a spectator while the Deer Hunters were still competing in a doubles round."

Another tap. A player with his skull caved in appeared on the screen.

"This is what his players look like."

Wang Shun's voice was tight. "From what I've gathered, Joker used some kind of prop to force a spectator into the game, then logged in after them, killed them to clear the match, and came right back out—just in time to catch the Deer Hunters' team game."

His face was grave. "This newcomer is very, very dangerous."

Du Sanying hesitantly raised his hand. "Uh… his ranking is climbing again."

Wang Shun stiffened, then snapped his head to the rankings—Joker's placement was skyrocketing from 321 to over 200 in an instant.

Mu Sicheng gawked. "How the hell is he going up again?!"

Wang Shun's eyes flicked across the forum. "The Deer Hunters lost their doubles match, forcing them into a team match. When I last checked, their team match was still ongoing."

His grip on the panel tightened. "This ranking jump can only mean one thing."

Bai Liu's voice was cold. "He won again."

Wang Shun exhaled sharply. "Yes. And not just that—he must've been the MVP, or his rank wouldn't have shot up this much."

Mu Sicheng stared at the rankings, hesitating before tapping Bai Liu's shoulder. "Bai Liu… am I seeing things, or…?"

"Your ranking is going up with his."

Mid-Season Viewing Pool
[System Alert: The Deer Hunter Guild has won the tournament, accumulating 8 points.]

[System Alert: The Deer Hunter Guild has won one singles match and one team match, totaling 9 points.]

The crowd erupted—nothing excited them more than a rising dark horse.

But this time, it wasn't like when Daniel won his first match.

The audience stared at the Joker in fear, wanting to cheer but not daring to make a sound.

It hadn't been long since the last spectator was murdered. No one wanted to provoke him.

The entire viewing pool buzzed with hushed excitement, their silence feeling eerily like a moment of respect for the two players Joker had just slaughtered.

Blood dripped from Daniel's body as he logged out. He shrugged off his clown mask and strode down the walkway—before abruptly stopping.

He turned back, gaze locking onto the spectators.

They flinched, instinctively leaning away.

… Terrifying.

Then, Daniel grinned. He waved, a casual, almost boyish gesture—like a neighbor greeting an old friend.

"I had a tough game today. Be sure to support me by placing your bets, yeah? Thanks."

His expression remained light, apple-green eyes gleaming with amusement.

"Oh, and—" his voice turned airy, almost playful. "If you hate Bai Liu, don’t bother betting on me."

The audience held their breath.

Daniel’s grin widened. "Because I don’t need the support of dead men. I’ll kill you all."

He waved once more—this time, blowing an uncharacteristically flirtatious kiss with two fingers before turning on his heel. "Ciao~ (Goodbye)"

Pre-season

Pre-Season Day 2
Du Sanying was drawn for the eighteenth time before a team finally appeared that didn't forfeit.

But this team… went on stage crying.

Wang Shun sat in their viewing pool, the corner of his brow twitching, while Bai Liu remained calmly beside him.

Their opponents huddled together on a bench, trembling. Every so often, one of them would sneak a glance at Bai Liu—who returned their gaze with such gentle eyes that they nearly screamed in terror. The five of them shivered in unison, sobbing quietly.

"They're scared because of the Joker's declaration earlier." Wang Shun groaned. "They think you're one of those Joker types who enjoys taking things to the extreme."

Bai Liu chuckled. "Not bad for showing up despite being this terrified."

"It's not like they have a choice." Wang Shun sighed. "A small guild like theirs doesn't even know if it'll survive next year. It's a gamble either way."

Bai Liu turned his gaze toward the large TV screen in the middle of the viewing pool. "Do you think we can finish the battle before the team match today?"

Wang Shun hesitated. After a long pause, he admitted, "I don't know."

"The pre-season uses a point system per game," he explained. "Unlike the mid-season, where points are settled cumulatively, here, it's per match."

"One point for singles, three for doubles, and eight for team matches."

"On paper, that makes singles and doubles seem insignificant. In the end, the real decider is the team competition."

"But that's not entirely true." Wang Shun's expression turned serious.

"There's one particular case where the match ends immediately—if

you win both singles and doubles."

He pulled up a panel for Bai Liu. "There's a special rule for singles and doubles called the 'Time Limit Rule.'"

"This rule states that if a single or doubles match is completed within one dimensional hour, the points for that match are doubled."

"In other words, if both singles and doubles finish within the time limit, their combined points double to eight."

Wang Shun glanced at Bai Liu. "At that point, the match ends early. We call it an 'early kill.'"

"Early kills are nearly impossible in the mid-season and playoffs. Even in pre-season, they're rare. The time constraint is so strict that it only happens when there's a massive gap in strength."

Bai Liu rested his chin on his hand, a lazy smirk curling his lips. "Which means if we manage to pull off an early kill, the attention we'll get will increase exponentially, right?"

Wang Shun nodded. "Exactly. It proves the team is overwhelmingly strong—and strength is the most attractive trait in the league."

"If you secure an early kill…" Wang Shun took a deep breath. "The sheer amount of attention it draws can instantly make up for all the exposure you've missed in the game pool."

His gaze flickered toward Tang Erda, who was warming up in the viewing pool. He murmured, "An early kill… That's what every tactician dreams of."

Suddenly, the large screen in the center of the viewing pool flickered to life, displaying a new message.

[System Alert: Single-player tournament is about to begin.]

[Wandering Circus Crew (Rose Hunters) vs. Celebes Crew (Hikers)]

[Game: "Dreamboat"]

[Objective: Kill the captain of the Dreamboat. The first player to land on the Lost Lands wins.]

[Game start!]

A flash of white light engulfed Tang Erda and his opponent. The next moment, their figures appeared on the massive TV screen.

Seven dimensional minutes later.

Tang Erda logged out, securing his gun against his back.

Almost immediately, his opponent's eyes glazed over, and he collapsed to his knees, trembling in pain before logging out.

Tang Erda hesitated for a moment but then reached out, helping the dazed player to their feet. He nodded naturally and said, "Thank you."

[System Alert: Player (Rose Hunter) has achieved an early kill and won the single-player match, accumulating 2 points.]

Tang Erda walked over to Bai Liu and sat down, nodding in greeting. Bai Liu smiled. "Well done, Captain Tang."

"It's our turn next."

Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng stood up leisurely.

[System Alert: The doubles match is about to begin.]

[Bai Liu, Mu Sicheng (Wandering Circus) vs. Wang Ling, Undead Pawn (Celebes)]

.....

Fifty-seven dimensional minutes later.

Bai Liu straightened his white shirt as he stepped off the field, accompanied by a grumbling Mu Sicheng.

"Shit, why did it take so long?!" Mu Sicheng was visibly frustrated. "Tang Erda finished in seven minutes! Why the hell did it take us over fifty?!"

He shot Bai Liu a pointed look. "Bai Liu, is there something wrong with your command?"

Bai Liu, completely unfazed, replied smoothly, "Yes. Especially when you dropped out of the group mid-match, rushed off to kill the boss alone, and almost dragged me down with you. I'd say that did present some issues with my command."

Mu Sicheng: "……"

His arrogance deflated instantly. He muttered under his breath, "Didn't I just want to finish the match early…"

Bai Liu's smile was almost predatory. "If you want to end the game quickly, you should listen to me next time."

Mu Sicheng: "……Fine."

On the opposite side, their defeated opponents sat paralyzed on the floor, gasping for breath. Their eyes were unfocused, disbelief written all over their faces.

The match had been brutal. It was supposed to be a two-player game requiring tight coordination, yet halfway through, one of the Wandering Circus players had vanished from sight. Even so, the strategist in the white shirt remained eerily calm, continuing to play at a steady, unhurried pace—until he nearly forced an early kill just by manipulating the game mechanics.

His ability to calculate… it's terrifying.

[System Alert: Players Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng have won the doubles match with an early kill, earning 6 points.]
[System Alert: Wandering Circus has accumulated a total of 8 points, achieving an early kill and advancing to the next round.]
[Celebes Team Eliminated.]

……

Du Sanying reached into the draw box, pulling out a slip. He raised his hand and announced loudly, "[Grave Robbers]!"

……

[System Alert: Player Little Witch has achieved an early kill and won the single-player match, accumulating 2 points.]
[System Alert: Players Mu Sicheng and Bai Liu have achieved an early kill and won the doubles match, accumulating 6 points.]
[System Alert: Wandering Circus has accumulated a total of 8 points, achieving an early kill and advancing to the next round.]
[Grave Robbers Team Eliminated.]

……

Du Sanying leaned in to read the next team name on the note. “[Winged Hound]?”

……

[System Alert: Player Muke has used Flash Strike to achieve an early kill within one dimensional minute, setting the record for the shortest solo match, earning the title ‘Lightning Solo’ and winning the match with 2 points.]
[System Alert: Players Mu Sicheng and Bai Liu have achieved an early kill and won the doubles match, accumulating 6 points.]
[System Alert: Wandering Circus has accumulated a total of 8 points, achieving an early kill and advancing to the next round.]
[Winged Hound Team Eliminated.]

……

Du Sanying carefully read the next name on the slip. “[Emerald Tiger Titan]…”

……

[System Alert: Wandering Circus has accumulated a total of 8 points, achieving an early kill and advancing to the next round.]
[Emerald Tiger Titan Team Eliminated.]

……

Du Sanying reached into the cardboard box under the almost dazed and awed gaze of the people around him. He read out the name of the team on it word by word: “Storm Mansion?”

The people nearby stole a glance at Bai Liu, who was standing behind Du Sanying and watching him draw the team, and discussed cautiously in low voices:

“…Will the Wandering Circus finish the game early this time?”

“Storm Mansion was at least one of the top 100 teams in the pre-season last year! No matter what, they have to play a team match!”

“Let’s go over and take a look later. I’ll write down the number of their viewing pool. It’s 98, right?”

Viewing Pool No. 98 was packed with people, and the audience that came later seemed to have nowhere to sit, but fortunately it was only

visually dense.

The viewing pools within the system are spaces that can be extended infinitely and can accommodate an unlimited number of spectators.

Everyone in the audience was discussing:

“Too strong, he killed all the players ahead of time…”

“Last year’s killer sequence was only able to kill the game early in the singles competition, the doubles competition was not that strong…”

“This team is mostly made up of newcomers, right?! Why are they so strong?!”

“It’s the tactician.” A lazy female voice interrupted the conversation between the audience members.

The audience was startled, and the moment they turned their heads, they gasped: “Red Hearts, the Queen of Hearts!”

Hearts smiled and waved her hand at them to say hello: “Hello.”

One audience member was so excited that his face flushed, his eyes sparkled, and he was so excited that he spoke incoherently: “I’m your fan, Queen, I love you very much! I’ve put all my points on the King’s Guild!”

Hearts smiled with her eyebrows curved: “Really? Thank you for your love, but boys still have to save some money for themselves to be married.”

The audience member nodded shyly and obediently, stammering, “I, I will, Empress!”

“Why is the Queen here to watch the game?” the audience asked cautiously, “Shouldn’t you be preparing for the mid-season game?”

Hearts looked at the screen in the middle of the viewing pool, resting her chin on her hand and whispering, “There is no King’s Guild match today, so I slipped out to watch other people’s matches, but I still have to go back later.”

“There is a Killer Sequence competition today.”

The audience member visibly wilted, and said in a frustrated voice: “Empress, are you going back to watch Spades’ game?”

Hearts smiled and said, “Yes.”

This audience member looked like he was about to cry, he liked Hearts, but it was an open secret in the game that Hearts was chasing Spades, and Hearts mentioning Spades in person obviously hurt the heart of this “husband fan”.

Seeing that the audience member was about to burst into tears, the audience next to him quickly changed the subject: “What’s the matter with the Queen just saying that the new team of the Wandering Circus is so strong because of the tactician?”

“I thought these newcomers were very strong.” The audience glanced at Liu Jiayi who was sitting next to Bai Liu, “…such as the little witch.”

Hearts’ eyes fell lightly on the little witch’s back: “Jiayi is indeed very strong, but she is also the most unstable in the team. I have spent a lot of effort but it is still difficult to balance her instability.”

“All newcomers have this problem, so in the game, newcomers are like a time bomb, and mistakes will occur from time to time to detonate the game.”

“It’s easy to make these newcomers win, but it’s hard to keep winning.”

Hearts’ gaze shifted to Bai Liu’s back: “This is something that only a tactician can do, balancing the instability of the team members.”

“The stronger the newcomers are, the harder it is to balance the instability. The tacticians of the Wandering Circus can absorb the instability of so many newcomers. This is a very impressive thing.”

Hearts exchanged her hands supporting her chin, her posture was leisurely and lazy, and her eyes were filled with a layer of misty light:

“I like men who are good with whips. If I hadn’t met Spades first, I would have liked him too.”

The fans and spectators nearby were indignant: “But he used a shady trick to snatch away your little witch, Queen!”

Hearts’ wine-red eyes turned and glanced at the audience out of the corner of her eye.

The audience fell silent subconsciously after seeing Hearts' look.

Hearts shifted her gaze to the big screen again and said in a light tone:

"Jiayi wasn't taken away by anyone."

"Jiayi chose to go with him, and I failed to keep her. I came here today to see Jiayi's performance. Don't treat Jiayi as an object in front of me. I don't like it."

A nearby audience member crossed his arms and scoffed. "Queen of Hearts, after all this time, are you still incapable of judging tacticians by the same standards as men?"

"Does being good-looking or handling a whip well automatically make someone superior in your eyes?"

Hearts lazily lifted her gaze, studying him for a moment before finally reacting. "Ah… You're the tactician of the Fanatic Lambs, aren't you?"

The man sneered and said complacently: "It seems that the Queen still remembers me. Have I caught the Queen's eye?"

Hearts smiled gently: "Actually, I don't remember much. I don't remember the ugly men who lost to me."

The man stood up in a rage, but the next second he forced himself to sit down again, and said sarcastically with a twisted look, "Hearts, don't be so complacent. After I successfully breakthrough in this pre-season, you bitch, will have a hard time."

"Is that so?" Hearts smiled nonchalantly and tilted her head, her long wine-red hair falling down. "Why don't you beat Bai Liu once and let me see?"

"Bai Liu?" The man looked extremely disdainful. "Only people like you who are deceived by appearances would think that Bai Liu has tactics. In my opinion, this person is just killing the goose that lays the golden eggs and trying to attract attention. He is the lowest level of tactician."

Hearts picked up on the conversation with a hint of interest. "Bai Liu won all the way to the competition."

"That's where Bai Liu is so wrong." The man snorted. "I don't need to tell you how fatal the instability of newcomers is, right, Hearts?"

"Instead of playing a few more structured games early in the pre-season to iron out the team's inconsistencies, Bai Liu wasted opportunity after opportunity. He focused on ending games early for notoriety instead of refining his team's coordination."

He let out a mocking laugh. "Short-sighted fools."

"You'll see—when Bai Liu plays a group game later on, he's going to run into real trouble. His tactics just don't hold up."

As they spoke, the screen in the middle of the viewing pool flickered.

[System Alert: Wandering Circus has 8 points, killed the game early, and advanced to the next round.]

[Stormy House team eliminated.]

The crowd erupted into a frenzy. The deafening cheers drowned out the conversation, and even the fan sitting beside Hearts barely noticed her anymore.

He jumped to his feet, waving his arms wildly, shouting the names of the Wandering Circus and Bai Liu.

In the league, winning meant everything.

Hearts withdrew her gaze. "So, your tactic of ambushing opponents in reality is working?"

Bai Liu, who had just logged out, dusted off his shirt. Across from him, the Frenzied Lamb tactician leaned back in his seat, shifting his gaze away from Bai Liu—who seemed entirely unaware of the hostility directed at him. Slowly, the man's lips curled into a sneer, his expression turning progressively darker.

"Of course."

"In a team already weak in cohesion, if one of Bai Liu's key players

gets injured or slips up, they're bound to lose."

Hearts remained unfazed. "Your tactics have a fatal flaw."

The man glanced at her with mild disdain. "Little Witch, isn't it?"

"As long as I don't kill them outright, they'll still be able to enter the game, and the Little Witch can just heal them with her potions."

"Yes." Hearts leaned forward, her voice soft but cutting. A sharp playing card materialized between her fingers, the edge pressing against the man's neck. Lifting it slightly, she whispered, "And if you so much as touch the Little Witch, I can't kill you here, but I wouldn't mind using your own tactics."

"Taking you out off the field."

The man lazily raised his hands in mock surrender, as if he wasn't taking the threat seriously. "Relax. I won't touch the Little Witch. Her skill set is too rare—I'd rather recruit her when we enter the league next year."

He smirked. "She's not the one I plan to target."

"I prefer to take down jugglers." His gaze darkened as it settled on Bai Liu. "Especially the flashy ones."

After their match against Stormy House, Mu Sicheng stretched, following Bai Liu out of the viewing pool. "Are we still playing today?"

"No more matches," Bai Liu replied. "We're heading to the game pool to practice for team play."

Mu Sicheng blinked. "Huh? Why not just practice team games directly?"

"If you forfeit singles or doubles, you can just play team matches one by one, right?" Mu Sicheng asked, genuinely puzzled. "Why go to the game pool when there's no real opponent?"

Bai Liu answered lightly, "Who said there's no opponent? Your opponent is Captain Tang."

Mu Sicheng stiffened. "Tang Erda???"

"Yes," Wang Shun confirmed with a nod. "President Bai and I discussed this at length and settled on this method."

"God Mu, you, Liu Jiayi, and Muke are all new to the league. You've never played at this level before, which means there's a lot of instability in your coordination. Especially in team games, where poor synchronization can disrupt both attack and defense rhythms."

Mu Sicheng frowned. "Wouldn't it be better to practice during pre-season?"

"No. Pre-season games expose too much information." Wang Shun shook his head. "That's one issue. The other is that your pre-season opponents—well, you saw them today. Do you really think playing against them is going to help you improve?"

Mu Sicheng fell silent.

To be honest, today's opponent had been so weak that it almost gave him a false sense of confidence. The league? That's it?

Wang Shun sighed. "You're feeling it, aren't you? They're so weak it's pointless."

"For strong newcomers like you, using teams like these as a grindstone will only get you accustomed to a low-level playstyle."

"But soon, you'll be up against top guilds. The sudden spike in difficulty will throw you off. That's why using these weak teams for training isn't something Bai Liu and I agree with."

Mu Sicheng scratched the back of his neck, frustrated. "But Bai Liu and I already work well together. Do we really need all this extra training?"

Wang Shun let out another weary sigh. "It's not that you and Bai Liu work well together. It's that Bai Liu works well with you."

"Bai Liu can work well with anyone, not just you. That includes Captain Tang—he's an experienced starter and can compensate for your mistakes to some extent."

"The real issue is you three working with each other. Bai Liu and Captain Tang are fine. Bai Liu doesn't need to be in your training group."

Mu Sicheng jabbed a finger at Bai Liu in protest. "But this guy is a newcomer too! Why isn't he training with us?"

Liu Jiayi rolled her eyes. "Do you seriously think we're on the same level as Bai Liu, that freak of nature?"

Muke nodded solemnly. "I'll train."

Bai Liu smiled. "I need to train too—just not in your group."

Muke hesitated, glancing between Bai Liu and Tang Erda. His eyes widened as realization dawned, and he swallowed nervously. "Wait… Bai Liu is going to…"

"Yes," Bai Liu confirmed, smiling. "I'll be on Captain Tang's side."

"You three will be one team. Your opponents will be me and Captain Tang."

Behind Bai Liu, Tang Erda approached with a stern expression, arms crossed. His sharp gaze flickered over them, void of any mercy.

Bai Liu's smile remained friendly. "With me and Captain Tang together, I think we'll be more than enough to polish out your instability."

Mu Sicheng, Liu Jiayi, Muke: "……"

Wang Shun turned to Bai Liu. "Today's game pool was auctioned off by our guild, so you can visit it anytime, except..."

Bai Liu glanced at Wang Shun. "Is there something else?"

Wang Shun hesitated for a moment before replying, "There's a killer sequence match today against last year's 27th-ranked team, [Skeleton Legion]. It's about to start. Do you want to watch it before heading over?"

Bai Liu paused briefly. "Let's go."

Killer Sequence Race Viewing Pool

This massive viewing pool was probably ten times more crowded than Bai Liu's previous pool, No. 98.

Bai Liu stood at the far end of the pool, his gaze fixed downward as he watched the killings unfold on the large screen at the center.

There was also a host in front of the screen, excitedly commentating with a microphone.

"What you're seeing now is our strongest player in the Slayer Sequence, [Spades], facing off against a member of the Skeleton Legion, [Disciples], who also performed well in last year's single-player tournament..."

Mu Sicheng couldn't help but complain, "This guy is so annoying."

Wang Shun explained in a whisper, "Popular matches have commentators. You'll have to get used to it, but you won't hear them during the game."

The host suddenly raised his voice, "Spades! Our Spades has the whip around his opponent's neck! Is he trying to end the match early?"

On the big screen, Spades knelt on one knee over another player's shoulder, his expression cold as he held the whip in one hand, strangling his opponent. The other player's face turned purple before he collapsed, bringing Spades down with him.

Spades smoothly flipped and seemed to grab something from the [Disciple], and then the screen went black.

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Spades for collecting all the key items.]

[System Alert: Player Spades kills the match early and wins the single-player match with 2 points.]

The room fell silent for a moment, then erupted in cheers.

The host's loud voice cut through the noise, "The game is over in 5 dimensional minutes! A new record for a single mid-season match! And this is the first match of the killer sequence!"

"This team of last year's champions has returned stronger than ever!"

Spades logged out of the game in full view of the crowd, walking straight back to his seat without even glancing around.

He nodded with a bemused expression, his eyes lowered as he wrapped bandages around his hands and the handle of his whip.

The crowd's frenzied attention was solely focused on Spades, but he never looked at them. The cheers and screams of the onlookers seemed irrelevant to him, as if he were a god long worshipped, powerful to the point of being a stranger.

Soon, the pairs race began.

[System Alert: Double Race about to start.]

[Bai Yi, Bai Jiamu vs. Centurion, Bone Shield Rider, Skeleton Legionnaire.]

The host droned on, excitedly commentating, "The pairs competition was always a weakness in the killer sequence last year. I wonder what's changed this year..."

Mu Sicheng, watching the big screen, observed Bai Yi and Bai Jiamu's flawless counter-attacks, gradually pressing their opponents into submission. His face grew darker.

Bai Liu asked calmly, "What do you see?"

Mu Sicheng ground his teeth. "Do these two share a brain?"

"The coordination is insane," Liu Jiayi added, her expression tightening. "When one moves, the other responds instantly, as if they're one person, and all their actions flow seamlessly together."

"And I didn't see any sign of communication," Muke remarked, taking a deep breath. "How?"

The four men on the big screen were tangled in a small space.

Just as Bai Yi was about to be struck from behind by a skeleton's bony claws, Bai Jiamu swooped in with a sharp eye, opening a scalpel without missing a beat.

Meanwhile, Bai Jiamu's opponent was sent flying by a backhand from Bai Yi, deflecting the attack with precision.

In such a confined space, these two didn't so much as graze each other while executing their moves, and everything seemed to be in perfect sync, even though they exchanged not a single word.

Step by step, the opponents were pushed into a corner and eventually lost.

[System Alert: Player Bai Yi, Bai Jiamu kills the match early and wins the single-player match with 6 points.]

[System Alert: Killer Sequence has accumulated 8 points in this match, ending the game early.]

[The Skeleton Legion has 0 points for the game.]

The room was buzzing with excitement.

The crowd cheered wildly for the Killer Sequence and Spades, some even dancing in their seats as if the winner had already been decided.

Wang Shun watched with mixed emotions. "This is the beauty of top guild competitions."

"Compared to last year's killer sequence, this year's has matured a lot," Liu Jiayi analyzed calmly. "That tactician must be the one who trained this team so well."

Bai Liu watched for a moment before turning around. "Alright, let's get to training. We're nowhere near their level yet."

After the Game, Killer Sequence Lounge

Reverse God clutched his head, eyes dull, muttering to himself, "What do we do? The next game is against the eighth-ranked team. They're strong. We can't kill the game early. We'll have to play a group match..."

The others didn't seem anxious. After all, the game had been killed early today, and Bai Yi was excitedly circling Reverse God.

Only Liao Ke looked at Reverse God with sympathy. "Has it gotten that bad?"

Reverse God nodded gravely. "Yes."

Bai Yi, curious, sat beside him. "Didn't we kill the game early today? What's so grim about it?"

Reverse God sighed. "I didn't kill the game early just for show. I did it to avoid a group match."

"Our group games are immature, and we'll get crushed by those big guilds that have honed their strategies."

"You're the culprit!" Reverse God glared resentfully at Spades, who appeared to be dozing on the couch.

Spades rolled over and went back to sleep.

Reverse God sighed in exasperation. "Forget it, it's useless to scold you

now. Anyway, it means we're in a dangerous position and need more practice for group matches."

He turned to Liao Ke. "Did we rent today's game pool?"

Liao Ke shrugged. "No, we were late. The one who rented the game pool today was the Wandering Circus. This team also killed the game in advance all the way today."

"I guess it's similar to our situation," Reverse God mused. "Team competition is their weakness, so they rented the game pool to practice."

He glanced at Spades, still lounging on the sofa, and raised his voice intentionally. "Wandering Circus, their tactician is Bai Liu, right?"

Spades, who had been sleeping, suddenly sat up, eyes wide.

His face still marked with red imprints from sleep, he fixed his gaze on Reverse God. "Bai Liu, where is he?"

Reverse God: "..."

The Reverse God scowled. "Bai Liu is in the game pool. Do you want to go find him?"

Spades looked at the Reverse God. "Why do you want me to look for Bai Liu?"

The Reverse God hesitated. "Bai Liu bought the game pool, and I want to ask if we can use a part of it. Of course, it won't be free, but we're willing to pay."

"Don't you think that you and Bai Liu are the only ones with a good relationship here? You seem to have some pull," the Reverse God added, trying to lighten the mood.

Spades straightened his back, nodded approvingly, then stood up, his expression unchanged. "I'll take you to ask him, then."

Liao Ke, watching from the side, thought, Spades, you're so easy to fool.

Outside the game pool, the Reverse God stared at the sign reading Do not enter unless you are a member of the circus, scratched his head, and tentatively took a step inside.

An alarm bell immediately went off.

Bai Liu walked out from the pool, followed by Tang Erda, who was packing his gun.

It took a while, but Mu Sicheng, with a bruised nose, Muke, with a bloody mouth, and Liu Jiayi, who was in slightly better shape but clearly bruised, finally crawled out of the pool on their hands and knees.

Mu Sicheng slumped to the ground, spat out a mouthful of blood, and cursed in disbelief, "Bai Liu, you bastard, it was just training, but you're too cruel!"

Muke sat up, clutching his sword, panting heavily, his lips trembling as he struggled to speak.

Liu Jiayi, who had recovered a bit more, collapsed to the ground in exhaustion, took a deep breath, and began coughing. "Bai Liu, I really

thought you were going to kill us for the team."

Bai Liu smiled. "Not really. I just didn't think you could handle that level of play. Better to fail here than die in a real league match."

Mu Sicheng, seething with anger, pointed at Bai Liu like a tattletale, addressing Liu Jiayi. "I told you! I said Bai Liu might try to kill us, and look—he admitted it!"

"Where are you going to find a better crew when we're dead?"

Bai Liu glanced toward the entrance of the game pool.

Mu Sicheng followed his gaze, spotting the awkward Reverse God and Spades, who was staring at Bai Liu, standing at the entrance.

"What's the Killer Sequence doing here?" Mu Sicheng stood up alertly, stepping in front of Bai Liu. "Hey, we rented the game pool for the day. Can't you see the sign? 'No Stray Circus Members Allowed'?"

Bai Liu stepped forward, looking at the Reverse God. "What can I do for you?"

The Reverse God scratched his face, avoiding eye contact. "It's a bit embarrassing, but Bai Liu, can we borrow the game pool your team rents?"

"Of course, it's not free!" Seeing the wandering circus members eyeing them, the Reverse God hurriedly waved his hand. "We'll pay, name your price!"

Bai Liu thought for a moment. "Yes."

Mu Sicheng gasped, "Bai Liu!"

Bai Liu smiled and looked at the Reverse God. "But it's not just money. I need something else, too."

The Reverse God's expression shifted. "What?"

Bai Liu grinned. "Some information I've been needing recently."

The Reverse God seemed to understand. "Ah, you mean the Mad Lamb and Russell Cemetery, right?"

"Yes," Bai Liu replied with a friendly smile. "Mr. Reverse God, you're one of the few tacticians I know who has fought and won against both

guilds. I'm sure you must have some key experience to share."

The Reverse God studied Bai Liu for a moment, his eyes cryptic. He rubbed his chin and then broke into a bright smile. "Of course! Tacticians should always help each other out!"

He then casually took Bai Liu by the shoulders and pushed him aside. "But that's a long story. How about I come over and talk to you alone while you let my players use the game pool?"

Bai Liu glanced at the Reverse God before turning to speak with Tang Erda. "Let them in, train first. I'll talk to the Reverse God."

Tang Erda nodded and dragged Mu Sicheng, who was reluctant and kept glancing back at Bai Liu, inside.

The killers needed to train in the game pool, but Bai Jiamu and Bai Yi were doing their best to keep Spades at bay.

Spades stood watching Bai Liu, who was talking to the Reverse God in the corner, while Bai Jiamu and Bai Yi, panting from exhaustion, struggled to carry him in.

Bai Yi was fuming. "Spades, didn't you hear the Reverse God? He told us to go in and train!"

Spades paused and replied flatly, "I don't want to go in and train."

Bai Jiamu asked, frustrated, "Then why are you here?"

Spades replied quietly, "I didn't come here for the training."

Bai Yi's brow furrowed. "So, what are you here for?"

Spades fell silent.

He had come for Bai Liu, but Bai Liu was clearly ignoring him. He wasn't looking at him or talking to him at all.

Liao Ke shouted helplessly and amusingly, "Reverse God, Spades is guarding the door and won't go in to train."

The Reverse God turned his head to see Spades staring directly at Bai Liu. He pressed his forehead in pain before glancing sharply at Bai Liu and bowing his hands. "President Bai, please do something. Ask Spades to go in and train. He doesn't listen to me much—only you."

Bai Liu observed Spades from a distance, his expression light. "He's not my main attacker. Doesn't it seem unreasonable to ask for my orders, Reverse God?"

The Reverse God chuckled. "There must be a lot of unreasonable things happening to you, President Bai. You use unreasonable things as an excuse… President Bai is so bothered by Spades that you don't even dare to say a word to him?"

Bai Liu fell silent for a moment before finally speaking. "Spades, go in and train."

Spades were silent for a moment, then gave a soft "oh" before turning and heading into the gaming pool lobby. His hand gripped his whip tightly, striking his knee with a violent fling, as if punishing himself.

The Reverse God relieved that Spades was finally complying, bowed deeply. "Thank you, President Bai."

Bai Liu gave him a sidelong glance. "You're welcome. And I hope, Mr. Reverse God, that you will provide me with satisfying information."

The Reverse God straightened up, his smile fading. "As for the intelligence on Russell Cemetery, your guild's intelligence master gathered nearly complete data. Beyond that, I have little more."

He paused before continuing. "As for how I defeated them, that involves the secrets of my skills, so I can't tell you."

He leaned against the wall with a sigh. "But my opinion is that Russell Cemetery is a team that changes players constantly. Intelligence doesn't do much; you have to face them on the field. It's a real pain."

He shifted slightly and added, "But I do have some information about the Frenzied Lamb."

The Reverse God's gaze turned serious as he looked at Bai Liu. "This team, in my opinion, is more dangerous than Russell Cemetery."

Bai Liu nodded. "I know you killed their tactician in a challenge."

The Reverse God paused. "We failed to kill him. That tactician has a golden medal of immunity from death. He is still the tactician of Fanatic Lambs."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "I've heard you're known for being a

moderate, never hurting anyone, let alone killing. So why did you do it in that instance?"

The Reverse God's eyes drifted toward the empty gaming pool entrance, his gaze distant. "There are two people on that team with lethal skills."

"One is their tactician, Kong Yangxu. His skill is [Silence]. After using it, he can freeze the panels of all players on the field, including their own."

He exhaled slowly. "After the system panel was frozen, skills, systems, and stored items were all unusable. The advantages accumulated by the large guild disappeared in an instant."

He frowned, his voice growing softer. "At this time, if there is no player in the team who has a golden medal of immunity from death and is injured." The Reverse God leaned his head against the wall, and exhaled with a look of realization, "It's a nightmare."

"They will attack this player desperately, trying to kill him, because they know that if this player dies, he is really dead."

"For a guild like the Deer Hunters that has a strong sense of team spirit, this kind of behavior will destroy our mentality."

"Because the panel is frozen, I, as a tactician, can't even click on the panel to give up. I can only watch them slaughter the team members. I also have to grit my teeth and complete the game mission, because only by clearing the game can the game end."

The Reverse God said calmly: "In the end, I killed the opponent's tactician, terminated his skills, and won the game."

Bai Liu asked: "What is the other lethal skill?"

The Reverse God recalled: "It's called [paparazzi]."

"This skill is the most dangerous one." the Reverse God turned his head, "This skill is not used on the field, but off the field."

"This skill captures the real coordinates of the person you are most in contact with."

"After getting the coordinates, they will attack the person at those coordinates in reality. At the same time, they will notify you and ask

you to rush over. You will witness the person being attacked."

When the Reverse God reached this point, he opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something, but in the end, nothing came out.

Bai Liu raised his eyes and looked at the Reverse God who had suddenly fallen silent: "I don't like to hear people reveal their own scars."

"But if you urgently need someone to listen to your story right now, I can listen to your complaints for free without charging you any fees."

Bai Liu remained calm and said, "I'm a tight-lipped person. No one would know from me that the famous No. 1 tactician had such a tragic past."

The Reverse God couldn't help laughing: "Then shouldn't I thank you?"

Bai Liu nodded: "You're welcome."

The Reverse God laughed out loud: "You are really interesting."

He was silent for a while, and suddenly said, "The coordinates captured by the Fanatic Lambs is where my lover works."

"She was a kindergarten teacher. She had just gotten off work at that time. The kindergarten was full of children who had not yet left. The Fanatic Lambs drove their car directly into it."

The Reverse God exhaled slowly: "She pushed those children away, and was knocked away, with a big cut on her abdomen."

"Although her life was not in danger in the end…she can no longer have children."

The Reverse God slowly lowered his head: "She likes children very much."

Bai Liu didn't respond.

The Reverse God chuckled softly. "Is it awkward hearing me say this?"

Bai Liu shook his head. "It's a big deal. I haven't heard about this on the news... I wonder if—"

The Reverse God interrupted, his voice distant. "Yes, it's exactly what

you think. You've met Li Gou, right? The criminal who used a point exchange prop to erase evidence of his murder?"

Bai Liu nodded slowly.

The Reverse God continued, "The people of the Frenzied Lamb do the same. After committing crimes, they exchange points for props to erase all evidence, even the memories of their victims—only the scars remain."

He looked down. "My lover doesn't remember what happened, or why she can never have children."

His eyes met Bai Liu's. "No one remembers but me."

He sighed. "I thought about killing them afterward."

He looked at Bai Liu, his voice quiet. "But there's no proof in reality. In the game, I couldn't kill him. And after the game, he can silence all skills. The cost of killing him would be too high. I don't want to risk my players' lives for that."

He smiled bitterly. "He'll die sooner or later."

Bai Liu regarded him with a steady gaze. "Have you considered using props to restore your lover's body?"

The Reverse God lowered his gaze. "I don't want to use any props related to this game on her. She's already been involved with me enough."

Bai Liu's eyes flickered. "I heard from Wang Shun that during the game, Kong Yangxu suddenly screamed at you in a frenzy, claiming no one could kill him in or out of the game."

The Reverse God nodded absently. "Oh, that one. I made a prophecy about him."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "Didn't he block your skills at that time? And you still managed to prophesy?"

The Reverse God grinned. "Yeah, it was a trick, but he believed it anyway."

He turned to Bai Liu, his smile widening. "I told him, 'No matter how vilely you struggle, one day you'll die at the hands of the cruelest and best tactician in the world.'"

He chuckled. "Pretty good bluff, right?"

Bai Liu’s gaze was unreadable. "It’s alright."

Pre-season

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning : Mention of rape

Kong Xuyang woke up from a nightmare. He sat up in a cold sweat, his hands and feet shaking.

The dream was about the challenge match with the Deer Hunter.

That was his most proud time. He was the number one in the pre-season. The rumored most powerful tactician was defeated by him and tried to protect the people around him in embarrassment and pain.

But whether in reality or in the game, this rubbish called the Reverse God can't protect anything. He is a cowardly waste and I don't know how he got the false reputation of the most powerful tactician.

A moderate tactician? To be moderate in this game is stupid.

Kong Xuyang sneered with disdain.

Until the last moment, the tactician named the Reverse God seemed to have suddenly figured something out. The smile on his face disappeared, and he shed his gentle outer shell, revealing his bloody and brutal inner self.

The Reverse God used only his fists and feet to beat Kong Xuyang so hard that he crawled on the ground, and finally vomited blood, passively canceling his own skills.

After releasing the skill, the Reverse God raised his heavy sword and stabbed it fiercely into his heart. His usually smiling face was splattered with blood, and he predicted in a cold tone in Kong Xuyang's ear:

"One day, no matter how despicable your struggle is, you will die at the hands of the cruelest and best tactician in the world."

That was Kong Xuyang's nightmare that has continued to this day.

From then on, he had a kind of jealousy and hostility hidden in fear towards all outstanding tacticians, and he wanted to kill all of them, including the Reverse God who once trampled him under his feet!

Kong Xuyang touched his face, climbed up from the bed where three or four naked women were lying, put on a bathrobe, and walked directly to the balcony.

He squinted his eyes and looked down at the pastoral villa community where he had just moved in under the sunrise.

It is said that the people who live here are either rich or noble. It is not a place that Kong Xuyang, a college student from a second-tier university who has been staying at home for six or seven years after graduation and has not worked in a job for more than three months, can live in.

Kong Xuyang, male, 31 years old, has two peaks in his life. One was being admitted to a second-tier university twelve years ago, and the other was entering the gaming industry three years ago.

Twelve years ago, Kong Xuyang was one of the few college students in the local area, although it was only a second-tier university. As the first college student in his family, Kong Xuyang enjoyed enough praise and preferential treatment from his parents and relatives. Everyone would say that once you go to college, you will have everything.

Beautiful women, superior status, and a lot of money are waiting for you in the future.

But once he entered university, Kong Xuyang was instantly back to his original form.

Although the university Kong Xuyang attended was only a second-tier university, there was news that it would be upgraded to a first-tier university in the near future. So when he entered, all his classmates had one thing in common: a lot of them had connections.

These people with connections were temporarily added in after hearing the news. Their lifestyle, culture, and entertainment consumption levels are far from those of people from Kong Xuyang's small county.

Kong Xuyang immediately saw the beautiful woman, the superior status, and the large amount of money.

But none of this has anything to do with him.

When his roommate's bed was filled with shoes that cost more than two thousand yuan a pair, Kong Xuyang didn't even dare to wear his

own shoes that cost more than a hundred yuan a pair.

Kong Xuyang had to wait until these people left the dormitory before he could shamefully take out the shoes he had hidden in the closet and put them on, and he had to tear off the logo.

He began to ask his parents for money in large quantities for various reasons, buying them branded belts and shoes and giving them small cans of tea. The price of a single item increased from over a hundred yuan to over a thousand yuan.

Kong Xuyang tried his best to fit in with these people, but they still looked at him and the things in his hands with contempt.

He exhausted his parents, but when he finally graduated, no one was willing to let Kong Xuyang sign the yearbook.

Those who sincerely studied thought he was vain and did not associate with him, while most of those who Kong Xuyang admired regarded him as a joke.

After graduation, Kong Xuyang found many jobs, many of which his parents thought were good, and they begged and pleaded to let him try them.

But whenever Kong Xuyang thought about how inferior these jobs were in the eyes of his classmates and how the salary he saved for several months could not cover the expenses of a banquet for these people, he would be immersed in an unspeakable resentment.

Why can these people enjoy these things, but he can't?!

It was obvious that he was the one who was supposed to have a bright future after passing the college entrance examination!

Kong Xuyang kept changing jobs. His requirements became higher and higher, his consumption became higher and higher, and more and more companies rejected him.

In the end, he couldn't find a job and would rather stay at home than go out and do what he thought were lowly, menial jobs just to make a living.

Kong Xuyang stayed at home, watching the lives of rich people on the Internet every day. He cursed them with the most vicious words out of resentment, and morbidly read through all the life details that they

posted on the Internet, substituting himself into their lives.

When he saw a good-looking girl, they will make vicious comments saying that she has been fucked many times and is already a black pussy. When he saw a very successful man, he would curse at him and say that he must have a background and got to the position in an improper way.

Kong Xuyang hated the huge gap between him and [The Superior].

He even began to resent his parents for not being powerful people like those other families, and for giving birth to him in such a family that couldn't even afford a pair of shoes worth over ten thousand yuan, had never watched an NBA volleyball game, and couldn't just give away a Sri Lankan sapphire ring worth hundreds of thousands of yuan to pick up girls.

This conflict reached its peak when Kong Xuyang's father slapped him in the face, got red in the face and told him to get out and work.

It was clearly his parents' fault, but he blamed himself for being a loser.

Kong Xuyang said almost viciously that he would not let him go back.

One day, one day… he will definitely become a superior person.

Although this obsession has no basis, after all, as an ordinary person, Kong Xuyang's most commendable achievement in his life is to go to a second-tier university, but he has a strong sense of self-confidence – I am so noble, as long as I try something, success will come naturally, and you will all come to crawl at my feet.

I didn't succeed because of the unfairness of this society, I didn't succeed because of my parents' inadequate backgrounds, I didn't succeed because…

It's not my own problem anyway.

This strong desire made Kong Xuyang log into the game, and he fell into a kind of ecstasy that was justified – see, he knew this day would come!

He is indeed extraordinary!

But soon he saw those highly sought-after star players, powerful big

guilds, and everything that was better and stronger than him, and Kong Xuyang immediately fell into a new round of resentment – why was there unfairness against him everywhere?

The ladder to becoming the best of the best was already in front of him, but Kong Xuyang decided to overthrow these star teammates, the big guild, and everything that oppressed him, by any means necessary.

But there was indeed a huge gap between him and these things.

Kong Xuyang quickly found the entry point and decided to start from the reality of these people.

Kong Xuyang found a player whose skill was [Paparazzi], and then he watched the reality of these star players with resentment—

——Luxury cars, beautiful women, and everything you need.

Just like his previous classmates who had connections, they were the upper class who oppressed him and made him live in poverty for so long. They all deserve to die!

Kong Xuyang teams up with some law-abiding bikers to attack his rival team.

His method worked. Kong Xuyang stepped on the screams and corpses of those who oppressed him and happily became the first place in the pre-season.

Just when Kong Xuyang felt that he was the center of the world, the protagonist of a novel, and everything was paving the way for his victory at this moment, he fell into the hands of the Reverse God.

The second time, in the crucial match that would decide whether or not Hearts would be eliminated from the mid-season tournament, Kong Xuyang used the same trick on Hearts again. He wanted to find this woman in reality and then have these speed racing teams gang-rape Hearts in order to affect Hearts' pre-match mentality.

Of course, he also knew that this was not a good approach, so Kong Xuyang gave Heart a chance. On the eve of the game, Kong Xuyang went to the King's Palace to meet with Hearts' and said kindly, "Queen, if you are willing to be my woman, I will not use my tactics, but respect you and fight you openly."

I respect my woman very much, Kong Xuyang emphasized

ambiguously – Hearts, you won't suffer any loss if you follow me. In reality, after I became successful, my parents begged me to come back and found many women for me to go on blind dates, but none of them were worthy of me, so I usually only went to the point of going to bed with them, but they always liked to pester me.

Kong Xuyang waved his hands impatiently and complacently. It was so annoying. Didn't they know that they weren't worthy of me?

Then he changed the subject, looked at Hearts, and said politely – if it's you, Hearts, I can accept the stage of discussing marriage with you.

Hearts smiled and said, "Well, let's see if you can find me in reality.

Kong Xuyang made a mistake.

For some reason, the skill [Paparazzi] is ineffective against Hearts. They couldn't find the real coordinates of [Hearts]!

In the second day's game, Kong Xuyang suffered a crushing defeat and was directly eliminated from the mid-season tournament by Hearts.

Kong Xuyang was defeated by tacticians twice. He himself is also a tactician. Coupled with the prophecy of the Reverse God, Kong Xuyang's disgust and jealousy towards Bai Liu, the famous new tactician, had reached its peak.

He should be the tactician who attracts the most attention.

If this were a novel, then he, as an excellent tactician who won first place in his first league game, should be the protagonist of the novel, and the whole world should revolve around him.

Who is this Bai Liu? He is just a clown who climbed up from the bottom. How can he steal his limelight and compete with him?

Kong Xuyang's eyes were sinister. He was determined to find the coordinates of someone Bai Liu was close to in real life and then torture that person severely.

Pre-season

"The pre-season is nearing its end."

Wang Shun stood by the panel, looking relieved. "Now that you're performing well in the team competition, it’s clear President Bai and Captain Tang have trained you well."

"It’s been a lot of hard work for you all—training intensely while competing just as hard every day."

Mu Sicheng slouched back in his chair, Liu Jiayi had her head resting on the table, and Muke was dozing off, his head propped up on his hands, eyes squinting.

Wang Shun couldn’t help but chuckle. "That was the toughest part. The next phase will be easier, now that you’re in the pre-season top circle, and the frequency of games has dropped to about three or four a day."

"Next, let's go over the individual popularity rankings."

"Bai Liu: 179."

"Liu Jiayi: 186."

"Tang Erda: 194."

"Mu Sicheng: 236."

"Muke: 261."

Wang Shun tapped the system panel. "Everyone's rankings will be rising more slowly from now on, as we approach the mid-season popularity circle."

"There are 32 teams in the mid-season, and each has five main players. So, the top 160 are where most of the popularity is concentrated, meaning you’ll have an overwhelming advantage over the pre-season teams. But it will be harder to move up."

"Especially this mid-season—there are a lot of newcomers who have quickly gained popularity and are now firmly in the front row."

"Joker, who I mentioned before, is currently ranked 79 and has already cracked the top 100—the highest of the newcomers."

"Following him are Armand from Golden Dawn and Sister Phoebe from King's Crown, ranked 93 and 102 respectively."

"These newcomers have the guild's backing, so their popularity rises quickly and, as long as they continue performing well, they'll stay in the upper circle. This means the competition for rankings will be fierce this year."

Wang Shun looked around the room. "Now, let's move on to the top five in the rankings."

"First, Thundering Spades."

"Second, Queen of Hearts."

"Third, Georgia."

"Fourth, the Inquisitor of the Reverse God."

"Fifth, the Executioner, the President of the Deer Hunter's Guild—the person I want to focus on today."

Wang Shun tapped the system panel, zooming in on the floating information.

"This guildmaster was previously a main attacker but switched to tactician after the departure of the Reverse God last year. This is his first year as a tactician, and judging by the roster so far, he's doing very well."

"It's worth noting that this guild president wasn't even in the top 50 of last year's popularity rankings until the end of the league, with his highest ranking being 59."

Mu Sicheng, half-awake and surprised, exclaimed, "No way? He's the president of a major guild and still ranked so low? That's crazy!"

Wang Shun laughed. "The popularity ranking isn't just based on strength—it also takes into account personal style, performance, and appearance."

"While the President of the Deer Hunters is strong, his personal style doesn't stand out. He's not very flashy, and his appearance doesn't help him stand out either..."

Wang Shun hesitated for a moment before clicking on the panel to play a short video. "You should watch it for yourselves."

The video showed the man thrusting his hand violently into his right eye, stretching it as though it were alive, his features contorting and shifting erratically. He appeared to search within his own eye before slowly pulling his hand out. Through the entire process, his face remained a bloodied blur, impossible to make out clearly.

Wang Shun paused the video. "Now you see? This Executioner's personal style is so gruesome that it's hard to even look at him, which is why he's never been very popular."

"But this year, his popularity has skyrocketed, even pushing the veteran tactician, the Inquisitor of the Reverse God, out of the top rankings."

Mu Sicheng frowned. "Why?"

Wang Shun took a moment before responding. "I think the departure of the Reverse God had a lot to do with it."

"As you saw in the video, the Executioner's style is brutal and aggressive. On the field, he's a very forceful main attacker, using aggressive and strong tactics, excelling at eliminating his opponents."

"But when Reverse God was around, being a more moderate tactician, the Executioner held back. He couldn't fully unleash his strengths and had a harder time appealing to the audience."

"With Reverse God gone this year, the Executioner has partnered with Joker, a newcomer who fits his style better. The tactics they've developed together are extreme, and on the field, you can see the Executioner's previously restrained aggression finally unleashed."

Wang Shun clicked again, and a new video played. "Here's a recent match from the Deer Hunters, a performance against the rowing 19, Moon Serpent Riparian."

The Executioner, drenched in blood and wearing a coat, extended his bloodied hand and grabbed the neck of a writhing serpent. Kneeling beside it casually, his arm rippled with veins and sinew as he savagely slammed the serpent's head into the ground.

The serpent struggled, spasmed, and then its body burst apart, splattering blood as its human form emerged, screaming, "It hurts! It hurts! I surrender! Abort!" But before it could reach out to signal forfeiture, it collapsed, its eyes frozen and tearfully staring.

The Executioner slowly stood, dropped his blood-soaked jacket over the defeated man's head, pulled out a cigarette, and lit it from the twisted, bloodied lips of his face. He exhaled a plume of smoke.

"When you break the law and hurt others," he said coldly, "you deserve to be tortured. Pain is just the easiest part of the punishment you get."

At this point in the mini-video, Wang Shun pauses, zooms in on the video, and points to the executioner's middle finger, where a cigarette is clamped, saying, "See? There's a silver ring here."

Mu Sicheng squints and spots a silver ring at the base of the executioner's bloodstained middle finger. "See it."

"This ring is his skill weapon, called the [Ring of Death]."

Wang Shun explains, "[The Ring of Death] was given to the executioner by Herod, the ancient legendary saint who was fair, just, and kind to all men."

"It is said that the executioner was afraid when he hanged a powerful rival king. To ease his fear, King Herod gave the executioner this ring, telling him that he was only putting sinners to death and had no reason to fear."

"From then on, King Herod granted the executioner the right to execute those who had sinned, including kings, and this ring became known as [the Ring of Death]."

"The exact mechanism of the [Ring of Death] is unclear, but it is said that anyone touched by the executioner's hand while wearing the ring will experience excruciating pain, as if they've been tortured countless times until they die from the agony."

"I've tried to gather information about those who were touched by the executioner. Generally, the more intense the pain, the more likely they had committed some crime in real life," Wang Shun continues. "But that's not always the case. Some players who were sanctioned by the executioner seemed like they might break the law soon, but they hadn't actually done anything wrong when they were touched. They experienced unbearable pain."

"If it weren't for the Reverse God intervening, those players would probably have died from the executioner's torture."

"So, in my personal judgment, the torturer's criteria for punishment aren't objective—they're subjective. You're tortured as much as the torturer feels you deserve."

"The Reverse God's departure is like unshackling the executioner, which is bad news for us." Wang Bolin says solemnly, "On one hand, it means the executioner can now unleash his full power and dominate the popularity rankings. On the other, it means he can execute us without restraint."

"Let's hope we can make a good impression on the executioner."

Wang Shun laughs bitterly. "I only told you all that because I didn't want to report on the teams playing tomorrow."

"We only have one game tomorrow, and our opponents are—"

Wang Shun takes a deep breath. "Frenzied Lamb."

In the ornamental pool lobby, Bai Liu, having just exited the disbanded ornamental pool, is followed by a man sneaking up behind him.

The man, holding a fist-sized camera, carefully blends into the crowd, searching for the right angle to photograph Bai Liu. He looks like a seasoned paparazzi reporter who has spent years capturing the private lives of celebrities.

Bai Liu talks naturally to those around him, seemingly unaware of the man following him.

The paparazzo smiles wryly, adjusts the angle, and when he finally has a clear shot of Bai Liu's upper body, he presses the button. The camera clicks twice and spits out a photo.

The man takes the photo, scans it, and eagerly clicks on the system panel to send an email.

[Got it! Let the action begin!]

The photo shows a dazed Du Sanying sitting across from Bai Liu, sucking on a large mouthful of noodles, with a line of twelve-digit realistic coordinates clearly printed below. Reality.

Du Sanying is holding Bai Liu's packaged beef noodles and drinking the soup. After finishing, he looks curiously at Bai Liu, who is

lounging on the sofa, watching TV.

Usually, Bai Liu would be in bed at this hour, but today he’s still watching TV.

Du Sanying glances confusedly at the garden babies on the TV. Does Mr. Bai Liu like this?

Bai Liu doesn't really care for such shows, but his TV hasn't paid the aperture fee for a while, so he’s only able to watch basic channels. Eventually, he stops at the children's channel.

Du Sanying asks, "Mr. Bai Liu, don’t you want to take a shower and rest early? We have an important match tomorrow, don’t we?"

Bai Liu responds calmly, "No need to wash up yet. Someone will be looking for us later, and I need to take you out for a trip."

Du Sanying suddenly says, "No wonder you asked God Mu to leave his motorbike downstairs when he left. This is the right time to use it."

Du Sanying scratches his head shyly. "God Mu’s motorbike looks so cool. I don’t know how to ride, but it’s nice to have a ride."

Bai Liu gives him a knowing look. "I don’t know how to ride either."

Du Sanying breathes a sigh of relief and laughs. "Mr. Bai Liu wouldn’t either…"

After a moment, Du Sanying suddenly looks horrified. "Wait, Mr. Bai Liu, neither of us knows how to drive! Who’s going to drive the bike?"

The sound of a motorbike revving beneath the windowsill is heard, the engine roaring, and bright high beams flood into Bai Liu's window, casting a halo of light over his face.

Bai Liu smiles. "Here it comes."

Du Sanying is in shock. "What’s coming?!"

Bai Liu turns off the TV with the remote, unbuttons his shirt for ease of movement, flips his sleeve up, and looks at Du Sanying. "The bikers who ambushed us are here. Let’s go downstairs and ride the motorbike."

Du Sanying howls, "But Mr. Bai Liu, neither you nor I know how to drive!"

Bai Liu nods. "It’s okay. It’s fine with you. Let’s go."

Bai Liu grabs the helmet hanging on the back of the door and tosses one to Du Sanying before putting on his own. He then opens the shoe cupboard and retrieves a rusty baseball bat.

Bai Liu turns to Du Sanying. "Ready?"

Du Sanying fumbles with his helmet while raising his hand. "Ready!"

Bai Liu extends his hand. "Come over when you're ready."

Du Sanying looks at Bai Liu’s hand and then at Bai Liu’s indifferent expression. He takes a deep breath and clenches his fists. It will be fine. His misfortune won't affect Mr. Bai Liu!

Du Sanying jerked his hand toward Bai Liu, who grasped his wrist and looked up at the door.

Outside, the clanging of metal sticks echoed through the hallway, accompanied by the sound of someone knocking with a stick and knife on the fence by the stairs. Footsteps thudded up the stairs and eventually stopped right in front of Bai Liu's door.

Bai Liu walked slowly to the door and whispered, "When I open the door, close your eyes. You’ll be fine."

Du Sanying swallowed hard and nodded.

The door slammed open, and vicious curses flooded the room.

"Bai Liu, get out here!"

"You dare to offend Brother Kong? Let's see if I don’t break your legs today!"

Bai Liu opened the door with an emotionless expression on his face. "Close your eyes."

As knives, fists, and sticks rushed toward him, Du Sanying instinctively closed his eyes. Bai Liu, however, kept Du Sanying in front of him, unfazed.

Just as the attackers were about to strike Du Sanying, the door to Bai Liu's room unexpectedly swung outward, crashing into the menacing group.

Without hesitation, Bai Liu used the door as cover, backhanding two baseball bats into the attackers.

Blood splattered, hitting Bai Liu's face and staining his shirt.

Bai Liu yanked Du Sanying by the wrist and stomped on the door, turning around as the shouting crowd continued up the stairs. Bai Liu glanced down at the scene, blood dripping from his bat onto the floor.

Du Sanying's voice trembled, but he kept his eyes shut. "Mr. Bai Liu, are you—are you all right?"

Bai Liu's expression remained unchanged. "I'm fine. No matter what happens later, don't open your eyes."

Du Sanying nodded quickly, his body shaking.

Bai Liu guided Du Sanying down the stairs, holding him by the shoulders in front of the thugs armed with knives and iron bars, then gently pushed him forward.

Du Sanying froze in midair. "Mr. Bai Liu...?" He had been pushed off the stairs!

Just as the knife and iron bar were about to strike, the old iron fence beside the stairs creaked and collapsed.

A group of men, holding onto the fence, fell into a heap as it collapsed, knives and sticks plunging into their own bodies.

Screams rang out.

"Ah! Old Wang, your knife! It's in my kidney!"

"Who had the PVC pipe?! Damn, it's in my hand! Take it out, it hurts!"

Bai Liu made a couple of quick, light jumps, landing next to a large man who had collapsed with a bloody head.

Du Sanying, still disoriented, had landed on top of the large man, but he was unharmed. He looked terrified, on the verge of tears, shivering but still keeping his eyes closed. "Mr. Bai Liu, can I open my eyes now?"

Bai Liu glanced at the large man Du Sanying was lying on.

The man glared at Bai Liu, attempting to get up and stab him with a

knife.

Without hesitation, Bai Liu lifted his hand and struck the man with a dry stick.

The man collapsed, blood spurting from his head as he lost consciousness.

Bai Liu tugged Du Sanying's wrist and pulled him down the stairs. "You can open your eyes now."

Du Sanying slowly, cautiously opened his eyes and screamed in shock.

The narrow stairway was filled with groaning thugs, the railing blocking their movement. The floor was littered with concrete debris and pools of blood from the iron bars.

Bai Liu's face was also splattered with blood, and his emotionless expression made him look especially... frightening.

Du Sanying swallowed nervously. "All these people... did Mr. Bai Liu take care of them?"

Bai Liu gave him a sidelong glance. "No, I was just helping you out."

Du Sanying was confused. "......????"

"Did I do all this?" Du Sanying, always a law-abiding citizen, hesitated, then realized the truth with horror. He broke down and shouted, "So, am I breaking the law?!"

Bai Liu turned his gaze away. "Not really. I checked. It's self-defense."

Pre-season

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bai Liu walked over to the body lying on the stairs, holding the blood-stained baseball bat in one hand and holding Du Sanying's wrist with the other and walked out.

Du Sanying trembled: "Mr. Bai Liu, where else are we going?"

"I don't know." The moment Bai Liu walked out of the narrow building entrance, the pale moonlight fell on his calm face, "Anyway, someone doesn't want us to stay here."

Motorcycles were whizzing around the entrance of the building. The drivers were tall and ferocious, and it was obvious that they were up to no good. The people on several of the motorcycles roared, turned the front of the motorcycles, and rushed towards Bai Liu who was walking out of the stairs.

Bai Liu turned his wrist to block Du Sanying, who had not yet recovered from his shock, in front of him: "Close your eyes."

Du Sanying closed his eyes nervously.

The oncoming motorcycle passed through a pool of dirty vegetable oil on the ground, miraculously brushed past Du Sanying from both sides and crashed into the wall behind Bai Liu, making a loud noise like an explosion.

The man on the motorcycle was covered in dust and dirt. He exhaled a puff of black smoke sluggishly and fell to the ground motionless.

Bai Liu didn't even bother to glance at Du Sanying, and patted him on the shoulder: "Open your eyes."

Bai Liu straddled Mu Sicheng's heavy motorcycle, and Du Sanying hurriedly sat on the back seat.

Without knowing what was going to happen, Du Sanying was already scared to tears. He held onto Bai Liu's waist tightly and said, "Mr. Bai Liu, what on earth are they going to do? What are we going to do?"

Bai Liu inserted Mu Sicheng's motorcycle key and turned it a few

times. The motorcycle started with a loud roar.

“They are here to surround and kill us.” Bai Liu said.

Du Sanying kept crying: “What about us?”

Bai Liu smiled faintly: “Of course, we are here to surround and kill them.”

The next second, Bai Liu stepped on the accelerator of the motorcycle to the bottom, and the motorcycle shot out like an arrow.

Du Sanying was caught off guard and opened his mouth wide to let out an unbelievable and terrible cry, so loud that the uvula in his throat could be seen.

As the motorcycle was speeding, Du Sanying’s lips were shaking from the wind, and his voice was trembling: “Mr. Bai Liu, don’t you know how to drive?”

Bai Liu looked straight ahead: “Put down the baffle next to your mouth, so you don’t catch the wind.”

Du Sanying: “Oh——”

He lowered the baffle obediently and spoke fluently, but he still couldn’t hide his fear: “Mr. Bai Liu, don’t you not know how to drive a motorcycle?”

“Yeah.” Bai Liu replied calmly, “But I have driven a Hello Trolley before, so it should feel similar.”

Du Sanying choked up and burst into tears: “How can they be similar! One is a shared electric bicycle, and the other is a heavy-duty motorcycle. There is a huge difference, Mr. Bai Liu!”

“If you want to deal with these people, Mr. Bai Liu can borrow Captain Tang’s car! Why borrow God Mu’s heavy motorcycle?”

Bai Liu said with a smile: “Don’t you think heavy motorcycles are cool?”

Du Sanying burst into tears: “But it’s not safe! It’s safer for Mr. Bai Liu to have an outsourced car!”

He himself would not easily get into trouble, but Mr. Bai Liu was very unlucky! Who knows what will happen when driving a dangerous

vehicle like a heavy motorcycle!

Bai Liu paused: “I can’t drive.”

Du Sanying was shocked: “Hasn’t Mr. Bai Liu ever passed the driving test?!”

Bai Liu said calmly: “The tuition is too expensive. I ride a shared electric bike to get on and off the bus every day. It’s a waste of money to learn how to drive a car that I can’t use.”

“I can’t afford a car.”

Du Sanying was speechless—it was actually for this reason!

Bai Liu drove Mu Sicheng’s heavy motorcycle and took the lead, circling through various remote and unpopular roads. The group of people behind him on motorcycles were chasing him closely, and they were about to hit Bai Liu’s vehicle several times.

Du Sanying looked back from time to time to see the people chasing him, and he was terrified.

These people are really crazy! They don’t care about the lives of pedestrians at all!

Bai Liu was clearly deliberately taking a detour to an area with fewer people, but this group of people didn’t care about turns and some of them just rushed straight past. If Bai Liu hadn’t reacted quickly a few times and taken a detour to an area with people at the intersection, these people would have already killed several people!

No wonder Bai Liu wanted to leave the place where he lived and didn’t drive. There was a lot of population flow in that place. This group of speeding riders who didn’t take human life seriously could easily hurt other people by mistake. If they drove, they would have to go to the highway, where the population flow would be even greater.

But now… what to do?

If we let this group of speedsters hang out outside, something will happen sooner or later, but we can’t let Bai Liu keep them hanging around forever!

Du Sanying was extremely anxious: “Mr. Bai Liu, can we enter the game?”

Bai Liu stared ahead through his helmet: “After you solve the problem, go in. Don’t leave any trouble for the future. Otherwise, they will come to block you next time you come out.”

Du Sanying was startled, then slowly came back to his senses and asked, “How do we deal with them?”

“There’s a driving practice field on the edge of town, and there’s no one there right now.” Bai Liu said calmly, “Let’s go there.”

On the edge of the city, there is a driving training ground.

Mu Sicheng was squatting on the ground bored, next to him was Tang Erda, who was walking back and forth with a serious face and frowned eyebrows.

Mu Sicheng was dizzy after being beaten away by Tang Erda: “Can you be quiet for a minute?”

Tang Erda beat him up: “Where did Bai Liu and the others go?”

Mu Sicheng raised two fingers speechlessly: “You have asked this question almost twenty times. Don’t worry, Bai Liu will be fine even if something happens to him.”

“He may be a bit erratic in his behavior, but he’s still pretty reliable. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have lent him my motorcycle.”

Tang Erda finally sat down next to Mu Sicheng. He looked at the densely packed nails that Bai Liu had asked them to place on the ground and asked intently, “Are these nails really useful?”

Mu Sicheng rolled his eyes and said, “I guarantee you, it will definitely work. Motorcycle tires are very fragile when traveling at high speeds. If a tiny nail gets stuck in the tires and deflates the tires, the front of the motorcycle will swing in an instant, and the people on the motorcycle will be thrown far away.”

“But what surprised me more was…” Mu Sicheng leaned over and held his face, yawning with an inexplicable smile on his face, “Bai Liu was actually willing to choose such a faraway training ground and use such a roundabout method in order to reduce the possible casualties he might cause.”

“Originally, Bai Liu could have used Du Sanying to get rid of these idiots at his doorstep, but then the residents around Bai Liu would

probably suffer casualties."

Tang Erda frowned: "Protecting others is what we should do…"

Mu Sicheng glanced at Tang Erda and said, "But it's okay if we don't protect them. It's not like Bai Liu took the initiative to kill them."

Tang Erda said coldly: "You didn't kill Senior, but Senior died because of you. Don't you feel guilty?"

Mu Sicheng was silent for a moment, he turned his eyes away, and said in a low and calm tone: "I may feel guilty, but Bai Liu certainly won't."

"He chose to do this just to make those of us who have a guilty conscience feel at peace."

Mu Sicheng sneered: "As a tactician, you have to accommodate us players."

Tang Erda also fell silent.

Mu Sicheng was right. If it wasn't for the need to appease them, Bai Liu wouldn't have gone through so much trouble to deal with a bunch of little hooligans.

In the distance, a large number of roaring motorcycles appeared on the horizon. The man riding the first one was wearing a white shirt and suit pants that were incompatible with the heavy motorcycle. The shirt and trouser legs were swaying in the cold night wind. He lowered his body with a calm look and quickly approached this side.

Mu Sicheng stood up suddenly and said in shock: "Damn! Why did Bai Liu drive at the highest speed? Is he crazy?!"

"No." Tang Erda rejected it. "Bai Liu wouldn't do anything impulsive. Something must have happened."

Mu Sicheng narrowed his eyes, and then his pupils shrank: "There's someone tied up in the car behind!"

Lu Yizhan was tied up with his hands and feet and pressed on the back seat of one of the motorcycles, unconscious. There was also a young woman with a red bow on her head and messy hair, also tied to the back of another motorcycle, in the same sleepy state.

The drivers of the two motorcycles laughed arrogantly and whistled:

“Bai Liu, what do you think? You didn’t expect us to capture not only you and the high school student but also another person and his girlfriend. We split into two groups to catch them.”

“You guys were kidnapped here together and just reunited. How was it? In the photos taken by the paparazzi, you were obediently eating the food that this woman made for you, and sitting happily with this policeman, just like a family. You must have a good relationship with both of them, right?”

“How about if you surrender and let us drive the car over you, and we’ll let you go?”

“If you don’t compromise, it only means that these two people don’t have a good relationship with you.”

The man shrugged with a look of regret and said loudly: “Then they are useless. We have no choice but to throw them off the motorcycle and let them smash to pieces on the ground.”

Du Sanying really burst into tears: “Bai Liu, what should we do? Who did they kidnap? What does it have to do with you?”

“Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian.” For the first time, Bai Liu showed aggression on his face, and his tone was extremely cold. “They helped me pay for part of my living expenses during high school.”

“I have a very good relationship with them.”

There was no trace of emotion in Bai Liu’s pure black eyes, but he still did not slow down, instead he rushed forward at full speed.

Du Sanying said in panic: “Bai Liu, there is a nail road ahead. We will be fine if we drive straight through it, but Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian will be thrown off their motorcycles!”

Bai Liu had a calm look in his eyes and drove directly into the nail road. Then, at the last minute, he turned over in the motorcycle desperately, letting Du Sanying sit in the driver’s seat, and he sat in the back seat with his back to Du Sanying.

Du Sanying was at a loss and uttered a high note: “Bai Liu!! I don’t know how to drive!”

The motorcycles behind suddenly became a mess. After a few spins, the motorcycles with their front ends flailing around couldn’t keep up

with the speed. They kept banging around and crashing into each other. The people in the motorcycles fell heavily to the ground, and nails pierced their flesh, causing them to scream in agony.

Du Sanying screamed “Ah ah ah” with tears streaming down his face and hit the front of the motorcycles, but miraculously he managed to avoid every nail on the ground and every motorcycle that was about to hit him head-on.

Bai Liu’s shirt was blown and inflated by the wind, and his eyes were staring at the two motorcycles with Lu Yizhang and Fang Dian lying on the back seat with cold eyes. When the two motorcycles were completely out of control and were about to crash into the ground, Bai Liu pulled out a white bone whip with a cold gaze and drew a distorted space on the ground that was similar to a crack.

Lu Yizhang and Fang Dian, who were about to hit the ground, were cushioned by the distorted space. Bai Liu, who ran over, knelt on one knee and caught them in his arms.

The two motorcycles collided with other cars that were parked randomly, and a huge fire exploded into the sky.

The people lying on the ground were trembling and howling. There were many nails stuck in their bodies and faces. Some people’s eyeballs were directly pierced out. There were broken parts and debris of motorcycles everywhere.

Tang Erda and Mu Sicheng ran to Bai Liu.

Mu Sicheng was shocked and asked, “What happened?!”

Bai Liu lowered his head, then slowly raised it and glanced at Mu Sicheng and Tang Erda.

Mu Sicheng and Tang Erda both felt their blood run cold at this look.

Bai Liu stuffed the two people in his arms: Mu Sicheng and Tang Erda, raised his hand to wipe the blood on his face, and said to the two people: “Help me keep an eye on Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian, don’t let them wake up.”

Bai Liu turned to look at Tang Erda: “You brought a gun, right? Give me the gun.”

Tang Erda was captivated by Bai Liu’s gaze, but he still refused

subconsciously: “I didn’t…”

Bai Liu looked him straight in the eye: “I won’t do anything illegal.”

Tang Erda paused for a moment, but finally took out the gun and gave it to Bai Liu.

After Bai Liu took the gun, he stood up and walked towards the pile of burning motorcycles.

“What?!” Mu Sicheng received the person in bewilderment, and turned his head to look at Bai Liu who was walking towards the explosion center, “What are you going to do, Bai Liu!”

Bai Liu didn’t say anything. All that could be seen was his conspicuous white shirt swaying in the night wind.

He walked to the pile of motorcycles and dragged two people out from them. They were the two people who had kidnapped Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian, dragged them to the scene, and used this as an excuse to threaten Bai Liu with arrogant laughter.

When the two men collided with the car, they were cushioned by the space created by Bai Liu’s whip, so their injuries were not serious, but there were many burns and nail holes on their faces.

They looked at Bai Liu who had pulled them out with viciousness and fear. When they noticed the gun in Bai Liu’s hand, they subconsciously took two steps back and shouted in fear: “It’s illegal for you to kill us! If you break the law, you will be hunted down in the real world!”

“Your best friend is a policeman! He won’t allow you to do such a thing!”

Bai Liu’s eyes were calm and still: “I can do what you do, use tools to erase everything after killing someone, then no one will remember it, right?”

The two men were terrified: “Don’t you feel guilty?”

Most of the players they can harm are still law-abiding in real life.

The Fanatic Lambs will do a rough investigation before harming these players. Some players release all kinds of desires and kill at will in the game, but in reality they restrain themselves, care about every little thing in reality, and never do anything illegal or criminal.

This type of player separates reality from games and cares about everything in reality. In their minds, killing people in reality and killing people in games are two different things.

Killing people in a distorted game world and killing ordinary people in reality, although there is not much difference in essence between the two things, the difference in feeling is particularly great.

These players cannot accept that they have committed crimes in real life, because they are so extreme in the game just to return to reality and be normal and happy ordinary people.

The psychological crime cost of this type of player is very high, and they rarely turn around and attack the Fanatic Lambs, so most of them will just endure it.

The Fanatic Lambs had investigated Bai Liu before. They believed that Bai Liu was a typical player of this type. He was very successful in the game, but in real life he did not even have a single violation record and was still fired by the company.

Kong Xuyang sneered and said that Bai Liu was a typical wimp, who attacked hard in the game but was timid in real life. Let them come on boldly and run over his face on their motorcycles.

It is difficult for someone who has never killed anyone in real life to commit a crime.

But Bai Liu seems to be a special case.

Bai Liu calmly raised his gun at the two men. The two men cried and tried to log into the game subconsciously, but found that their login devices had been taken away by Bai Liu long ago.

“Don’t kill us!” The two men squatted on the ground and cried, “You have never killed anyone in real life, you will suffer!”

Bai Liu lowered his eyes and looked at the two men. The fingers of Lu Yizhan, who was being guarded by Mu Sicheng, twitched slightly.

“Who said I want to kill you?” Bai Liu casually threw the gun at the two men, “The gun is for you.”

“Come and kill me.” Bai Liu said with a smile.

The two men took the gun and were completely stunned.

Madman! This man is a madman!

After realizing that Bai Liu was serious, the two men scrambled for the only gun.

Finally, one of them grabbed it and raised the gun to Bai Liu, panting. His hands were shaking a little because of the injury, but holding the powerful gun gave him great confidence. He laughed nervously: “Bai Liu, you don’t dare to kill people, do you think we don’t dare to kill people either!”

“I’m telling you, I once crushed a woman’s belly on a motorcycle and I could see her intestines pouring out.”

The man chuckled twice: “Although the woman didn’t seem to die in the end, I felt great at the time. She screamed in pain. I have a clear conscience for killing people. I am a natural-born killer.”

The smile on Bai Liu’s face did not change at all: “Really?”

The man seemed to be offended by Bai Liu’s cheeky smile, and screamed and pulled the trigger: “Go to hell!!”

But no bullet was fired.

The man was stunned.

Bai Liu backhandedly hit the man hard on the forehead with a baseball bat.

He calmly beat the man, especially in the stomach, until the man began to vomit bile, his intestines leaked from his anus, and he begged for death in agony.

The man next to him was completely dumbfounded. After Bai Liu glanced at him during a break in his beating, he was so scared that he took two steps back and finally rammed his head against the wall, screaming, “I hit myself! I hit myself! No need to bother with that!”

When Bai Liu was about to beat the man to death, a hand stretched out from the side: “That’s enough, Bai Liu.”

A woman who was about the same height as Bai Liu looked at Bai Liu with smiling eyes and handed him a stack of wet wipes.

Bai Liu’s face was splattered with blood from his jaw to the corners of his eyes. He lowered his eyes and glanced at the stack of wet wipes.

Finally, he threw away the baseball bat that was splattered with unknown liquid and took the wet wipes handed to him by the woman.

The woman glanced at the man who was about to be beaten to death by Bai Liu, squatted down approached the man's bloody face, and looked at him curiously: "Bai Liu, Old Lu (Lu Yizhan) is good. He taught you well. Now you can even find loopholes in the law."

"If you give the other person a gun and let him attack you first, then you are forced to fight back when your life is seriously threatened. This is a legitimate self-defense, and it is legal to kill the other person."

Bai Liu paused while wiping his face. He looked away and hummed vaguely, "Sister Dian, why are you awake?"

Fang Dian looked at Bai Liu with a smile: "Don't worry, Lu Yizhan is not awake yet."

"When he wakes up later, I will tell him that two bad guys attacked you with guns and you were forced to fight back. But because you are kind-hearted and have learned to behave properly under his guidance over the years, you still held back and did not kill them."

Fang Dian kicked the two people who were lying limp on the ground and said hesitantly, "They should not be dead, right?"

"It's the old rule from high school. If you do something bad, we'll give you a good confession." Fang Dian gave a thumbs up, and a brilliant smile with eight teeth appeared on his dirty face. "I won't let the big policeman Old Lu find out what we did."

Chapter End Notes

Fang Dian is Lu Yizhan fiancée

Yinshan Village

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After simply cleaning up the scene, Fang Dian called the police. Afterwards, she and Bai Liu borrowed Mu Sicheng's heavy-duty motorcycle, put the unconscious Lu Yizhan on the back of the bike and put on her helmet. She then took a step forward with her long legs, waved her hand, and prepared to ride back.

Du Sanying looked at the injuries on Fang Dian and Lu Yizhan from a distance, and reminded them fearfully: "Well, how about asking Mr. Bai Liu to call a taxi for you? Don't ride a motorcycle, it's not safe…"

Bai Liu glanced at the motorcycle expressionlessly, then looked at Fang Dian: "When did you learn to ride a heavy motorcycle?"

Fang Dian turned around to put a helmet on Lu Yizhan who was lying on the back seat. Hearing this, she looked up and laughed, "I haven't learned it, but I often ride a Hello Bike to work, so it should be similar!"

Bai Liu refused calmly: "It's a long way off, get down here."

Du Sanying's face cracked, and he screamed madly in his heart – Mr. Bai Liu, why do you have the nerve to say that about others!!

Isn't this exactly the same as what you said before?

Fang Dian sighed with regret and stared at Bai Liu for a while. After making sure that Bai Liu would not let her ride, she got off the motorcycle with a feeling of regret. After getting off, she touched the motorcycle and said, "If I hadn't been caught this time, I wouldn't have had the chance to see the racing scenes in the movies. It's so cool to drive a heavily-armored motorcycle…"

Bai Liu said, "I'll lend it to you when I have the chance."

Fang Dian's eyes lit up: "It's a deal!"

"I'll call a car to pick you and Lu Yizhan up later." Bai Liu said, "Send me a text message to let me know you're safe after you get back."

Fang Dian made an OK gesture, then helped Lu Yizhan to the side and

waited.

Bai Liu paused and said, “Don’t you want to know why you were arrested? It has something to do with me.”

“I can see that. I’m not stupid.” Fang Dian leaned on the motorcycle with her legs crossed, tilted her head and smiled. “But you didn’t seem to want to say it, so I didn’t ask.”

Bai Liu was silent for a moment: “I’m sorry…”

Fang Dian raised her hand to interrupt Bai Liu: “Hey hey hey! No need!”

She smiled as generously as always: “It’s still the same old rule. You implicated me once, so you owe me a favor. I’ll use the motorcycle you lent me to pay it off. There’s no need to apologize. We can just settle the debt between us.”

Fang Dian smiled brightly: “Are you busy with some team competition recently? I haven’t seen you here for a long time.”

Mu Sicheng and Tang Erda’s expressions changed, and they subconsciously glanced at Bai Liu.

Bai Liu’s expression remained calm: “How did you guess that?”

Fang Dian touched his chin and said, “You usually work for money, and you are short of money after being laid off. Old Lu will not let you do anything illegal. The fastest way to make money legally in the short term, apart from gambling, is generally through various competitive games.”

“And…” Fang Dian pointed at the people around Bai Liu, crossed her arms and smiled, “These are all unfamiliar faces. I haven’t seen them before. Are they your teammates?”

Bai Liu hummed.

Fang Dian still smiled: “It seems that you get along well with them. Bring them to my house for dinner sometime.”

Bai Liu lowered his eyes for a long time and agreed.

The taxi that Fang Dian called arrived quickly. Fang Dian supported Lu Yizhan, who was not yet fully awake, waved goodbye to Bai Liu then got in the car and left.

As soon as Fang Dian left, Mu Sicheng couldn't help but ask, "Is she a game player?"

"No." Bai Liu looked at the taxi's back as it drove away.

Mu Sicheng was puzzled: "But what she said just now was too accurate?"

Bai Liu retracted his gaze: "She guessed it."

Mu Sicheng couldn't believe it: "If she wasn't a player, she just met us once, how could she guess so accurately?"

Bai Liu was silent for a while and then said, "When we were in high school, Lu Yizhan and I played Gobang, various competitive games, and horror games with her. We never beat her once in three years."

"So far, I have never won a game against her."

Inside the taxi.

Fang Dian leaned against the car window, yawned lazily, stretched out her foot, and kicked Lu Yizhan next to her: "Okay, stop pretending, Bai Liu can't see it, open your eyes."

Lu Yizhan slowly opened his eyes and leaned back in his seat in silence.

Fang Dian didn't look at him, her eyes fell far away outside the window: "Bai Liu has changed a lot. When he was in high school, he was so lonely and could only play with you and me. Now he has so many new friends and can play games with him…"

"Hopefully he'll have fun."

Fang Dian smiled, she turned around and rubbed Lu Yizhan's head vigorously, smiling brightly: "Of course, Old Lu, you too."

"Y'all gotta have fun!"

Lu Yizhan slowly opened his arms, tightly hugged Fang Dian's waist, and buried his face in them.

Fang Dian gently pushed aside Lu Yizhan's hair and kissed his injured forehead: "Whether it's you or Bai Liu, it's not worth it to be sad because of something like a game that is supposed to make people happy."

Lu Yizhan took a deep breath and hummed muffledly.

The taxi drove along the remote and desolate road towards the bustling city center, and there was no one in the empty driving training ground behind it.

In-game.

Bai Liu took Mu Sicheng and the others to log into the game, went to the gathering place of the Wandering Circus Guild first, and went straight to the lounge.

MuKe, Liu Jiayi, and Wang Shun were already waiting there.

“The result of the last game of the Fanatic Lambs is out.” Wang Shun looked at Bai Liu and exhaled, “They won, and their betting pool has expanded again. Just now, your viewing pool was recalculated, and the result is number 9.”

“Your match with the Fanatic Lambs will be held at Viewing Pool No. 9.”

Bai Liu nodded: “I understand, let’s go now.”

Viewing Pool No. 9.

Kong Xuyang sat on the edge of his seat with a gloomy face. Next to him stood a few injured bikers who didn’t dare to look up.

“You said that your sneak attack on Bai Liu failed?”

Kong Xuyang folded his hands on his knees, trying to put on an air of authority, but the shame of failure made his face twisted, and he asked with a ferocious look:

“We have successfully ambushed the best tacticians in this game. Bai Liu is just a laid-off worker who was fired by the company at the age of 24. He is a loser. How could you lose to him in real life?!”

Kong Xuyang kicked a biker on the knee and shouted angrily: “Waste, a bunch of waste!”

“I brought you into the game, supported you in a life of luxury, and used props to clean up your messes, and this is how you repay me?!”

“I told you to split up into two groups, and not a single one of you succeeded?!”

These speedsters stood there as if they were walking on thin ice, not daring even to breathe.

Kong Xuyang was about to kick again when he saw that he could no longer control his temper. Bai Liu came over with his teammates and took their seats. He looked at Kong Xuyang, nodded, and greeted him, as calmly as if nothing had happened.

Just like the tricks Kong Xuyang had played before, Bai Liu didn’t care at all, and it didn’t have any effect on him. Everything Kong Xuyang did was like a clown, not worth mentioning in front of Bai Liu.

Bai Liu’s calmness completely angered Kong Xuyang.

Kong Xuyang stood up suddenly, but he finally controlled himself. He sat down with a distorted face, staring at Bai Liu with sinister eyes. Then, as if he suddenly thought of something, his expression softened a lot, revealing a sinister smile, and he mouthed: “Bai Liu, you can outrun the first day, but not the fifteenth.”

Bai Liu raised his eyebrows slightly.

More and more people gathered in the viewing pool, and everyone’s eyes were focused on the large TV screen in the center. The screen slowly lit up, and a line of words appeared on it:

[System Alert: Singles competition is about to begin.]

[System Alert: Wandering circus member (Rose Hunter) vs. Fanatic Lamb member (Hairy Fish)]

When the list came out, the audience was shocked:

“What’s going on? Isn’t it Kong Xuyang?”

“Hasn’t he always been fixed in the singles position?”

“Who is this hairy fish? I’ve never seen it before?”

Wang Shun was also surprised: “In order to increase his exposure, Kong Xuyang has always been fixed in the singles position. Playing singles is the easiest position for the audience to remember and the easiest to become a star player.”

“He actually gave this position to Hairy Fish, a reserve player who has never played? Why not let the regular players play?”

Wang Shun frowned in confusion: “What does Kong Xuyang want to do?”

“Send him out for sacrifice.” Bai Liu stared at the big screen intently. “Kong Xuyang should know that I will let Captain Tang compete in the singles match, so he knows that he will most likely not win the singles match. Even if he has the skill of [Silent] to freeze the panel, Captain Tang’s physical fitness is also very good.”

“That’s right.” Wang Shun pondered, “Captain Tang can beat Kong Xuyang to quit the game with just his bare hands.”

“There is no one on his team who can beat Captain Tang, so he just uses a reserve player for this position.” Bai Liu glanced at Kong Xuyang’s face, “It seems that he is going to play a doubles match.”

Wang Shun was startled: “Our doubles competition has always been you and God Mu.”

Bai Liu hummed calmly: “He probably just wants to take the initiative to confront me.”

Wang Shun looked at Bai Liu with concern: “Bai Liu, Kong Xuyang’s tactical style is very cruel. He likes to freeze the opponent’s panel and then torture and tease the opponent slowly. Can you do that?”

Bai Liu looked at Kong Xuyang across from him and said, “I’ve experienced it, and I think it’s just average.”

[System Alert: Wandering Circus member (Rose Hunter) won the singles match, finished the game in advance, and accumulated 2 points]

After Tang Erda logged out, he sat next to Bai Liu. A new line of words appeared on the big screen in the middle of the viewing pool, and Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng stood up.

[System prompt: Doubles match is about to begin.]

[System prompt: Wandering Circus member Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng vs. Fanatic Lambs member Kong Xuyang and Silent Lamb]

The whole audience erupted in huge cheers. This was a doubles match

that brought together popular tacticians from both sides.

Before logging into the game, Kong Xuyang hypocritically walked up to Bai Liu and shook hands with him, saying with a fake smile: “Bai Liu, do you know why my team is called [Fanatic Lambs]?”

Bai Liu smiled and shook hands with him, then asked, “Is there any story behind this?”

Kong Xuyang couldn’t help but grin, “Because our team’s trump card is a lamb.”

Bai Liu said with a long tone, “Is it [Fanatic Lambs]? I remember this player died unfortunately in last year’s mid-season tournament.”

Kong Xuyang’s face twisted for a moment, then he smiled again: “No, it’s a brand new [Lamb], [The Silence of the Lambs].”

Bai Liu shifted his gaze to the team member standing behind Kong Xuyang.

The man looked young, about twenty-five or twenty-six. He was wearing a motorcycle helmet and staring at Bai Liu. There were scars on his face. His eyes and face were round. The hair on his temples grew lushly all the way to below his ears. His nose and lips were protruding, and his cheekbones were retracted, like a lamb.

Judging from the wounds and the motorcycle helmet, this man obviously participated in the previous siege of Bai Liu, but Bai Liu couldn’t remember where this man had appeared in an instant.

Bai Liu lowered his eyes and saw what this lamb-like team member was holding in his hand.

——A white and red fabric bow hair tie.

This is something square.

Kong Xuyang laughed sinisterly: “Do you feel that this person did something very wrong to you, but you can’t remember who he is?”

“Because his skill is to make you forget who you are.”

“Just wait for me to torture you, Bai Liu. You will regret having the guts to confront me. But it’s too late to tell you this now.”

After Kong Xuyang finished speaking, he smiled, withdrew his hand,

turned around, and walked towards the login point.

Bai Liu looked at the Lamb team member following Kong Xuyang, retracted his gaze, turned around, and walked towards their login point with Mu Sicheng.

[Silence] + [Silence of the Lambs]…

That can indeed be considered a killer weapon.

[System Alert: Players Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng have logged into the game (Yinshan Village)]

Bai Liu opened his eyes.

Before his eyes was a desolate hillside of shrubs. Dense trees and bamboo forests shaded the dirt road. All around were fields where rice had just been planted. The green rice and swaying weeds on the ridges were so green that they were eye-catching.

There was an abandoned pond and a well filled with emerald green duckweed ahead. Bai Liu looked up and saw houses built on the hills. Smoke rose from the chimneys. Green mountains were in the distance and there was a light rain. It was quite peaceful, like a paradise.

[System Alert: It rains heavily during the Qingming Festival, and pedestrians on the road are heartbroken]

[Player's identity: You are a local gangster on your way back to your hometown, Yinshan Village. You haven't been back for many years, but not long ago you received a notice from a national archaeological team saying that your village had unearthed a century-old tomb that is unique and has great mining value, and it is right below your home.]

[The archaeological team wanted to excavate the ancient tombs under the houses, so they had to demolish the houses in the village, and they needed the consent of the household owners. But it happened that the few elderly people left in the village accidentally fell from the mountain when they climbed the mountain to worship their ancestors three days ago during the Qingming Festival, and they fell into the pond and drowned.]

[Your grandmother happened to be among the elderly people who drowned. All of your grandmother's other relatives are gone, so the ownership of the house naturally fell to you, the grandson who has

not returned to his hometown to worship his ancestors for decades.]

[Your ostensible purpose for returning to Yinshan Village this time was to pack up your things, keep vigil for Grandma on the seventh day after her death, and take over the house, but secretly, you had some ulterior motives.]

[The main quest of “Yinshan Village” is activated: survive until the archaeological team arrives to take over the ancient tomb.]

[“Yinshan Village” side quest activated: Explore “your” purpose.]

Bai Liu took a step forward and there was a strange sound under his feet, like paper breaking. He looked down and saw that it was a white, round piece of money for the afterlife with a square hole.

Bai Liu paused, then turned his head and looked back along the paper money.

The paper money floated all the way from here, from the abandoned pond, all the way to Bai Liu’s way home up the mountain. The pieces of paper were faintly trampled into the mud. If Bai Liu hadn’t paid special attention, he would not have noticed the paper money that had been soaked and softened by the rain.

Bai Liu looked up at the dilapidated village swaying in the mountain rain and saw the smoke rising from every household.

“Ahhhhh——” A trembling male voice came from far behind Bai Liu.

Bai Liu turned around and saw Mu Sicheng running towards him with tears streaming down his face as if his butt was on fire. Then he grabbed Bai Liu’s arm tightly and didn’t move. He was gasping for breath, and his face was pale with fear.

“Bai, Bai Liu…” Mu Sicheng’s voice trembled as he collapsed and screamed, “This is actually a Chinese horror game! I’m freaking afraid of Chinese horror games!”

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow: “Are you afraid of ghosts?”

“I’m not afraid of ghosts!” Mu Sicheng retorted in a timid tone, “I’m afraid of Chinese horror games. Don’t you think Chinese horror games are much scarier than those zombies and monsters?”

Bai Liu saw that Mu Sicheng was really frightened, so he changed the

subject: “Did you find anything?”

When Mu Sicheng heard Bai Liu ask this, he swallowed nervously and said stiffly: “…Look behind you, look at my footprints.”

Mu Sicheng was wearing a pair of sneakers. The footprints left on the muddy road after the rain were very obvious. Even the size and brand on the soles of his feet could be seen. A series of footprints on the road clearly connected from the vicinity of the pond to Mu Sicheng’s feet.

Bai Liu looked at the footprints and said, “I see.”

Mu Sicheng closed his eyes, and the hand holding Bai Liu’s arm trembled slightly: “…Look carefully.”

Bai Liu looked more carefully this time. He stared at the shoe prints for a while and then found something wrong.

Behind each of Mu Sicheng’s shoe prints there was a small inverted triangle footprint, very light, as if something was holding Mu Sicheng’s shoulders, standing on tiptoe and following him step by step.

Moreover, the size of the footprints is wrong. It is not the size of a human footprint at all. It looks more like… the footprints of a paper man buried with the dead.

“I always felt like something was following me…” Mu Sicheng took a deep breath, “Then when I turned around, I saw a paper bride’s face smiling strangely. Then my footprints were wrong. There was one more.”

Bai Liu retracted his gaze: “Have your health and spirit values decreased?”

Mu Sicheng shook his head.

“Then don’t worry about it for now.” Bai Liu looked at the village from afar, “Let’s go into the village first.”

Mu Sicheng only took a glance at the village, his face turned pale again, he tightly grasped Bai Liu, and slowly turned his head to look at Bai Liu: “…Wait.”

“You’ve read the player identity introduction, right?” Mu Sicheng pointed at the faint smoke still rising from the village, his face

darkening, “Yinshan Village is already a dead village. The last few elderly people alive were drowned three days ago. There’s no way anyone would light a fire and cook in this village.”

“What’s with all this smoke?”

Bai Liu looked over and said, “I noticed it, but I have to go over to find out who is making the fire and cooking, right?”

“I guess it’s made for the paper figurine that follows you as a burial object.”

“You’re still fucking scaring me!” Mu Sicheng couldn’t hold it back and almost burst into tears, “Are you really not afraid at all?”

Bai Liu smiled: “It’s okay.”

Chapter End Notes

> Mao Yu is the direct translation for Hairy Fish, but it's funnier in English that way
>
> [Silence] + [Silence of the Lambs]… They're the two skills of the team Fanatic Lambs

Yinshan Village

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The other end.

Kong Xuyang and Lamb landed steadily after logging into Yinshan Village. They took a look at the game map and the player identity introduction on the system panel. They couldn't help but smile proudly: "Great, this is God's help. The two-player dungeon randomly selected by the system is Yinshan Village."

The lamb next to him also showed a strange smile on his face: "Brother Kong, this is a copy we have played before."

Kong Xuyang's eyes flashed with a sinister light: "It seems that God wants us to deal with Bai Liu."

"Let's scout the location first. When we get there, listen to me. I'll let you use your skills first." Kong Xuyang looked back at the pond, his face frightened, and warned in a vigilant tone, "Xiao Yang, remember? In this game, you must not pass by the pond at night."

[Silence of the Lambs]'s real name is Yang Zhi. In the game, Kong Xuyang usually calls him Xiao Yang, which has the same accent as [Little Lamb], so the audience can't tell his real name.

After hearing Kong Xuyang's reminder, Yang Zhi glanced at the pond filled with dark green duckweed and couldn't help rubbing his arms. He nodded with a chill on the back of his neck, "I know, Brother Kong. Last time, we almost lost in this game because we walked along the road next to the pond."

Kong Xuyang withdrew his gaze from the weir pond and said, "If I hadn't walked through it before, I wouldn't dare to activate my skill [Silent] in this game, because after activating it, not only Bai Liu and the others, but also our panel will be frozen, and we won't be able to use skills or items even if we exit the game. We can only rush forward."

"Fortunately, we already know what happened."

Yang Zhi nodded repeatedly to agree with Kong Xuyang and said with

lingering fear: “This ‘Yinshan Village’ is the most difficult puzzle-solving dungeon we have encountered in the game pool. If I hadn’t gone through it once, I really wouldn’t dare to let you, Brother Kong, use your skills casually. It’s too easy to die.”

“But this is the good thing about decryption dungeons.” Kong Xuyang walked slowly towards Yinshan Village. “There is not much fighting involved. The lack of a system panel doesn’t matter to the two of us who already know the answer to the mystery.”

Kong Xuyang sneered maliciously: “But for our opponents, that may not be the case.”

“Brother Kong.” Yang Zhi pulled Kong Xuyang’s sleeve and leaned close to Kong Xuyang’s ear carefully, “I don’t know if there is something wrong with my memory. You also know that my memory skill is sometimes confusing. I always feel that I have seen this Bai Liu before.”

Kong Xuyang rolled his eyes: “Aren’t you talking nonsense? You participated in the attack on him tonight. Didn’t you just see this idiot?”

Yang Zhi stammered and said in a low voice: “Brother Kong, that’s not what I meant. I think I have seen Bai Liu before.”

“Speak louder. The audience can’t hear you at this volume. What are you afraid of?” Kong Xuyang frowned, “What did you just say?

“In fact, it’s not just Bai Liu. I also felt like I saw the other woman who was attacked last night.” Yang Zhi took out a faded red bow hair tie from his pocket and handed it to Yang Zhi. “This hair tie has been in the bathroom of my house for two years. I don’t know who left it there, but I saw it on that woman’s head last night.”

Yang Zhi paused: “Boss, I always feel that we have attacked Bai Liu and this woman before.”

“How is that possible?” Kong Xuyang denied without hesitation, “All the photos taken by the paparazzi are kept. There are no photos of these two people at all.”

“But…” Yang Zhi said hesitantly, “I always feel like there’s something wrong. Tonight a biker said that he attacked a woman two years ago and crushed her until her intestines came out. I remember this woman, but I don’t remember her face.”

Yang Zhi raised his head and looked at Kong Xuyang: “I have a memory skill, and it’s hard for me to forget someone’s face. Brother Kong, I wonder if someone has tampered with the memory of all of us?”

Kong Xuyang waved his hand impatiently to interrupt him: “Impossible, tampering with everyone’s memory? Are you kidding? If anyone has this skill, he is no longer a player, but a god.”

“Stop talking about this and that, and go to the village first.”

After Kong Xu finished speaking, he pulled Yang Zhi onto the muddy road covered with paper money and headed towards the mountain village where smoke was curling up from cooking fires.

Suddenly, a cold wind blew, and a burst of strange laughter that sounded like crying and laughing came from somewhere.

The two sets of footprints left by Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi on the muddy road slowly formed a small inverted triangle footprint from their heels. It seemed that something was following them, following their footprints one by one.

The pond filled with duckweed beside the dirt road after the rain suddenly shook twice, a few bubbles popped out, and another twisted laugh came from the bottom of the water.

The bright red wedding gown and white funeral clothes were swaying faintly in the water.

The other party.

Bai Liu dragged Mu Sicheng, who had fallen on his arm, along the muddy mountain road to the gate of Yinshan Village.

The dirt road was covered with white paper money for the afterlife, and it became denser as one got closer to the village entrance. In the end, the entire yellow dirt road was covered white with paper money.

Bai Liu looked up at the village. The village was shrouded in a hazy white mist and the sky was extremely dark. It was impossible to see anything in the distance at a glance. The only things that could be seen clearly were seven or eight houses nearby.

The doors of these seven or eight houses were all wide open. It was dark inside the houses and it seemed as if there were shadows swaying and footsteps from time to time, but when Bai Liu looked carefully, there was nothing.

Opposite the door, or next to it, there is a pile of fruits and vegetables neatly arranged, and a bowl of water. Next to the bowl of water is a pile of yellow paper money that has not been burned completely, and in the bowl of water there are two red candles that have not been completely lit.

The melted tears of the red candle dripped into the bowl of water, condensing into a layer of dark red wax on the surface of the bowl, with some black paper money ash floating on it.

There were a lot of firecrackers hung on the trees in the small courtyard right opposite the door. Because of this, the ground was littered with red barrels of firecrackers after they exploded. Now, after the rain, they had been soaked and softened and melted into the ground. A rich, greasy smell of sesame oil was floating in the air.

At first glance, it is the scene after a large number of sacrifices.

After taking a look, Bai Liu walked into Yinshan Village.

After entering Yinshan Village, Mu Sicheng stuck close to Bai Liu and did not leave his side.

Bai Liu walked past a house, and the open door of the house was suddenly slammed shut, followed by the wide-open windows that were quickly closed one by one.

Bai Liu's entry into the village was like giving the village a signal. As he walked in, every time he passed a house, the family would quickly close their open doors and windows.

The loud banging sounds of doors and windows slamming could be heard continuously, and you could also hear the sound of someone running around the room closing doors and windows.

Soon, lights came on in the dark rooms with closed doors and windows. The dim light shone through the windows, casting the shadows of the people inside on the windows.

Mu Sicheng glanced over and almost cried out the moment he saw the figure, but Bai Liu quickly covered his mouth.

Mu Sicheng looked at the figures dimly reflected on the white paper windows with rapid breathing.

Some of these figures leaning against the windows had only half a head, some had a big hole in the middle of their chest, and some had no hands or feet.

The shadow was reflected motionlessly on the window as if it was observing Bai Liu and the others coming in. The incomplete head would move slightly and stiffly as Bai Liu walked.

The candle in the bowl of water next to the door suddenly stood up and lit up as Bai Liu walked by. The candlelight flickered and had a faint purple-bluish tint.

The pile of paper money began to emit rekindled red sparks, and white money for the afterlife began to float down from the foggy sky, slowly landing on the shoulders of Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng.

The further he went inside, the clearer the figures by the window became. Mu Sicheng could even see the bloody handprints left on the paper windows.

These figures followed Bai Liu into the village and kept approaching the window.

Once, Mu Sicheng saw a blood-red eye staring at him and Bai Liu through the broken paper window.

“Bai Liu～” Mu Sicheng was so scared that his voice was shaking. He pulled Bai Liu’s arm down twice, “It seems that they don’t welcome us～”

Bai Liu hummed calmly: “It’s obvious that they are all closed to visitors.”

“They didn’t attack us. This isn’t a monster-killing dungeon. It should be a puzzle dungeon.”

Bai Liu looked around at the people and said, “What we need most in the decryption game is information. Let’s find a house and take a look.”

Mu Sicheng’s hair stood on end: “Now?”

Bai Liu glanced at Mu Sicheng calmly and said, “I was just kidding.

Seeing how scared you are, I'll try to calm you down."

Mu Sicheng: "…"

This person really has character issues.

At this time, someone patted Mu Sicheng on the shoulder. Mu Sicheng was frightened and turned around to attack people with his monkey claws, but was stopped by Bai Liu.

Standing in front of them was a man with a pale face and a haggard look, holding a flashlight. "You're the youngsters who came back to the village to take care of the matter of the ancestral graves, aren't you? I'm He Daniu, from a nearby village, and the archaeology team has bothered me to wait here for you."

Mu Sicheng and Bai Liu's system panels popped up prompts at the same time:

[System Alert: Players trigger NPC He Daniu and can receive the side quest – Guarding the Yizhuang]

As soon as He Daniu appeared, the lights in the rooms dimmed instantly, and the figures returned to the darkness, and nothing could be seen.

He seemed to have not noticed the figures in the room at all. He turned around and waved slowly to Bai Liu and the others, and said in a long tone: "Come with me, let's go to the charity cemetery first. Your grandparents are waiting for you there."

After saying this, He Daniu walked forward holding up the old flashlight that flickered unsteadily, muttering to himself as he walked: "I was also guarding Yizhuang in the next village. There was no one in your village, so I came to help guard it. Now that you are back, you are your own ancestors, so it's time for you to guard it yourselves."

"How can a person from another village like me guard the Yinshan Village ancestral hall?"

Bai Liu followed He Daniu and asked, "Why can't someone from outside the village guard it?"

He Daniu paused and said, "For a hundred years, Yinshan Village has never allowed outsiders to guard the village. We do everything by ourselves. Our ancestors have taken root here and lived here. The

native Yinshan villagers do not go outside, nor do they allow outsiders to enter the village.”

“So, after all these years, this place is still very old and underdeveloped. It looks the same as it did a hundred years ago.”

“Outsiders are not welcome here. If outsiders mistakenly enter here, they will be driven away.”

He Daniu coughed twice and continued, “It means that your grandparents, the last group of people who were born and raised in Yinshan Village, have all died. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be my turn as an outsider to help guard the bodies.”

"But I'll only keep watch for at most two more days, and if you don't come back, I'm leaving."

Mu Sicheng asked: “Why?”

He Daniu slowly turned his head and looked at Mu Sicheng with old, decayed eyes: “Why? It will be the seventh day in two days. Once [they] come back, I, a foreigner, can’t stay.”

Chapter End Notes

> For the translation, Yizhuang (义庄) refers to a type of charitable mortuary or ancestral hall traditionally used in China, particularly by clans or family associations, to store and temporarily house coffins before burial.
>
> Little SPOILER :
> This chapter revealed some key details. Let’s see if you caught them! The details are beautifully done and are extremely important to the story.

Yinshan Village

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“During the first seven days after a person dies, people from Yinshan Village are required to guard it,” said He Daniu. He walked up a mountain road as he spoke, then rested on his knees and muttered, “If outsiders like us guard it, something strange will happen sooner or later.”

Bai Liu stepped forward to support He Daniu: “What strange thing will happen?”

He Daniu was silent again, and after a long while, he waved his hand and said, “Forget it. Now that everyone is dead, you are the only remaining few in Yinshan Village. It doesn’t matter if I tell you – there’s nothing to hide.”

“This Yinshan Village is not only xenophobic but also has many strange customs. I am not from here, but I have heard a lot about them because they are so bizarre.”

He Daniu looked at the mountain road covered with paper money and fell into memories:

“No one in Yinshan Village has a good end. They died in many strange ways, such as being hit by falling bricks and tiles, choking on bones while eating, and so on. But the most common one was drowning – several people have drowned in ponds outside every year.”

“That’s not even the most bizarre thing. The most bizarre thing is the burial customs of Yinshan Village.”

“When someone drowns, Yinshan Village will bury and shroud them in a coffin-like normal. If the person is not drowned and is an unmarried woman, Yinshan Village will dress the dead woman in a wedding gown and bury her in a wedding sedan chair with great fanfare – beating gongs and blowing oboes.”

“They also like to bury people together as husband and wife, that is, people who died together around the same time will be buried on the same day. If someone drowned and an unmarried girl also died around the same period, then the wedding sedan and coffin will be

sent out together, and both red and white events will be held together."

"How could they do that…" He Daniu shook his head repeatedly, "When a newlywed is buried, the Five Reds are present: red face, red clothes, red sedan chair, red shoes, and red rouge. When a person is buried by drowning, the Five Whites are present: white water, white clothes, white pants, white shoes, and white paper money. When these two things collide, it will become evil, and the buried people will never be reborn."

He Daniu sighed, "This is how the ancestors of Yinshan Village have been buried. I wonder how many resentful souls have been buried in this land."

"But that's just my superstition." He Daniu turned his head and looked at Bai Liu, "You, young people shouldn't believe in this, right?"

He Daniu didn't wait for Bai Liu to answer and continued: "It's okay if you don't believe it. If you don't, you won't be able to communicate with ghosts and gods nor be able to see them."

"But if you believe in them, don't be afraid when you see these things. Just don't offend them. They won't easily take the initiative to hurt people."

He Daniu looked at Bai Liu deeply and said, "If you harbor evil intentions and insist on offending them, then you will never be able to escape from Yinshan Village even if you go to heaven or hell."

"This land is filled with evil spirits that have been trapped for hundreds of years. I advise young people like you, who don't know your place, to be careful."

After saying that, He Daniu didn't even look at Bai Liu's expression. He pushed away Bai Liu's hand that was supporting him and continued to limp up the mountain with his hands behind his back.

"Come with me." He Daniu said without turning his head, "We are about to reach the place where your ancestors left their bodies."

Bai Liu looked into the distance along the mountain road that He Daniu was walking on and saw a temple covered with white cloth not far away. When he got closer, he realized it was a Taoist temple.

There were seven or eight wreaths placed at the temple's entrance,

with two long funeral couplets hanging on both sides of the wreaths. Walking further in, there was a statue of Sanqing Yuanshi Tianzun enshrined in the center of the temple. The statue looked very old, but there was no dust or paint peeling off from it, and there were many signs of restoration showing that it was well cared for.

At that moment, the statue was holding a dustpan and had its eyes slightly narrowed, as if it was looking at Bai Liu and his group who were walking in.

The temple was filled with the pungent scent of incense oil as the burning of candles and incense sticks wafted into the air. Seven coffins were lined up outside the incense stand in front of the statue, each supported by two wooden benches.

As soon as He Daniu came in, he lit three incense sticks, bowed three times respectfully to the statue, and then set them on the censer.

“Gods three, ghosts four.” After lighting the incense, He Daniu turned around and looked at Bai Liu, “Remember this, don’t burn the incense wrong when you burn it for the Taoist master. Otherwise, if something happens, the Taoist master will not bless nor protect you little bastards who have forgotten your ancestors.”

Mu Sicheng leaned close to Bai Liu’s ear and whispered, “What does gods three, ghost four mean?”

Bai Liu explained softly, “It’s a common setting in Chinese horror games. Burn three incense sticks to the gods and kowtow three times. Burn four incense sticks to the ghosts and kowtow four times.”

Mu Sicheng asked solemnly, “What if I burn it incorrectly?”

Bai Liu’s eyes flickered across the seven coffins, “I guess it’s time to wake up the things in these coffins and start a chase.”

Mu Sicheng had a horrified look on his face, and he quickly muttered a few words in a low voice, “Gods three, ghosts four.”

“Come here.” He Daniu waved to Bai Liu.

Bai Liu pulled Mu Sicheng, who was saying in horror, “Fuck, my name has a four in it, what do I do??” and walked over.

He Daniu saw Bai Liu coming over and patted the coffin, “Look at this.”

Bai Liu lowered his head and looked at the surface of the coffin. There were four bells tied to the four corners of the black lacquered coffin. The four bells were strung together by several thin red lines, one horizontally and one vertically across the surface of the coffin.

A talisman was pasted at the place where the red lines crossed with patterns drawn on it in a flamboyant manner using cinnabar, three large characters were written in wild handwriting at the top – [Ansha Curse].

He Daniu raised his head and looked at Bai Liu, “Do you see the yellow talisman on the cross red line? This is the [Ansha Curse] drawn by a Taoist priest with profound Taoism nearby. It is used to suppress the water corpse in the coffin. Under no circumstances should you take it off.”

Bai Liu glanced at the talisman and asked, “What will happen if I take it off?”

He Daniu looked at Bai Liu steadily and said, “The people in these coffins are all your ancestors. They all died at a ripe old age. Logically, this is a happy funeral. Even if there is an evil spirit, they’re still related to you by blood – they shouldn’t make things difficult for you.”

“But the bad thing is that they fell into the water and died while worshipping their ancestors during the Qingming Festival.”

He Daniu looked at the coffin and said, “There are resentful souls trapped in Yinshan Village for who knows how many years. The Qingming Festival is when they come out to roam. Your ancestors were stained with a lot of resentment from the previous resentful souls, and they died by drowning. Water is associated with Yin, and water ghosts like to find substitutes.”

“What do you think will happen if you remove this tailsman?”

He Daniu’s pale face revealed a creepy smile, “Of course, you would be dragged by your dear grandfathers and grandmothers to be a substitute.”

Mu Sicheng shuddered at the laughter and subconsciously took half a step back.

Bai Liu was as steady as a rock, and asked calmly, “Do you have more of these [Ansha Curses]?”

He Daniu turned around and bowed to the statues of the Three Pure Ones in the temple. Without even turning his head, he replied to Bai Liu, “No.”

“Now, apart from our older generation, who still believes in this? Few are willing to pay for a Taoist priest. Only the people of Yinshan Village still believed in this. Before, temples were popular and incense burned strongly; there were even several small shops selling yellow talismans and cinnabar.”

“But later, the number of people in Yinshan Village decreased, and these small shops closed down a long time ago. These talismans were left in the village by the Taoist priest before he left.”

He Daniu turned around tremblingly and said faintly:

“That Taoist said Yinshan Village would be in chaos in the coming years, so he left these [Ansha Curses], saying that although they cannot resolve the chaos, they can at least delay it for a while. He also came to our village and told us not to get close to Yinshan Village in the near future, as it is easy to cause trouble.”

“Not long after that Taoist left, something happened to your grandparents, and these [Ansha Curses] came in handy.”

He Daniu stared at Bai Liu intently, “The talismans left by the Taoist priest are exactly seven, not one more, not one less. And the number of your dead ancestors is also exactly seven, not one more nor less.”

“Seven talismans, seven coffins, the first seven souls to return after the seventh day…”

“In Taoism, seven represents the extreme of yin and yang, and the number of repetitions. It means that the yin and yang energies of things converge at this number and allow past events to return.” He Daniu looked at the statue of the Three Pure Ones with a gloomy expression and shook his head. “What happened in the past will happen again, and human power cannot stop it.”

“If you hear the bells on the four corners of the coffin ringing, don’t run around. It’s more dangerous outside. If you stay here, the Taoist may be able to save your life.”

As he spoke, He Daniu looked up at the sky outside, then walked outside with a flashlight in hand, “It’s getting late, I have to go. If it gets any later, I won’t be able to leave.”

Mu Sicheng wanted to reach out and grab He Daniu, the NPC who looked very useful, to stop him from leaving, but he only grabbed the fluttering corner of He Daniu's clothes.

"Don't keep people who shouldn't stay, they can't be kept, just like people who shouldn't leave, can't leave…" He Daniu said in a vague voice as he walked out with a staggering step. His movements seemed slow, but his back figure quickly disappeared in the mist and ashes.

"If you have any problems, please ask the Taoist for help. It's dark now. Don't go through the dam. It's not safe…"

As soon as He Daniu left, the bright lights in the temple flickered, a cold breeze blew through, and the brightness was reduced by several degrees.

Mu Sicheng asked quietly, "Bai Liu, how credible do you think what He Daniu said is?"

Bai Liu lowered his eyes and looked at the talisman on the coffin, "You can trust him completely."

Mu Sicheng was startled, "Why? What is the identity of this He Daniu?"

"He should be that Taoist priest." Bai Liu said flatly, "This is a very obvious Chinese horror instance that uses Taoism to fight against ghosts and Gods. The NPC given at the beginning is so familiar with Taoist information and also gives a lot of friendly hints in the directions — which is typically indicative of a character designed as a reclusive expert."

"The only reclusive master we know of so far is the one he calls the Taoist Master, so my biggest guess is that He Daniu is that Taoist Master."

Mu Sicheng stood beside the statue, far away from the coffin, and asked, "I feel like this He Daniu wants to help us, and he's a Taoist master, so why did he leave?"

Bai Liu raised his eyes to look at the statue behind Mu Sicheng: "Because he can't handle the upcoming situation."

"Animals flee when faced with danger—humans even more so."

Mu Sicheng felt a chill run down his spine at Bai Liu's words and

instinctively stepped away from the coffin.

"But it's not entirely hopeless." Bai Liu withdrew his gaze and looked at Mu Sicheng. "He left us a clue. Check behind the statue—there might be something hidden there."

Mu Sicheng agreed, and his human turned into a monkey's paw. He took a deep breath and reached behind the statue to dig.

Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi, who had been hiding behind the statue, heard Bai Liu have Mu Sicheng come over, and they both smiled smugly at the same time.

Because they had played this game before, they took a shortcut down the back mountain and did not go through the main gate to trigger the NPC He Daniu to follow the plot. Therefore, they arrived at the temple earlier than Bai Liu and the others and hid behind the statue earlier.

Yang Zhi gave Kong Xuyang a thumbs up and sincerely mouthed praises to Kong Xuyang for his incredible foresight.

Kong Xuyang looked at the "Maoshan Talisman" in his hand and raised one corner of his mouth insidiously.

Bai Liu was quite smart. His guesses about the game setting and the plot weren't off at all, all were completely right.

That He Daniu was indeed an old Taoist priest. He stayed here to guard the coffin because he was afraid that the people returning here would be harmed by the vengeful spirits, so he stayed around specifically to warn them.

However, since He Daniu himself was also under the surveillance of the vengeful spirits, he dared not give tips openly. He could only rely on the protection of the temple to covertly provide players with some self-defense items.

Among the self-defense items that He Daniu left for the players, the most valuable one is the book "Maoshan Talismans" hidden under the statue.

With this book, even if a player has no skills or props, they can survive safely in this high-difficulty puzzle game.

But sorry, he already got the book.

This book was one of the important supports for Kong Xuyang to carry out his next plan because after he activates the skill [Silence], neither Bai Liu nor he will be able to open the system panel.

Without this book, he wouldn't be able to survive and complete this instance.

Kong Xuyang turned his head, glanced at Yang Zhi again, and mouthed, "Are you clear on what to do next? You use your skills first, and then I'll use mine. Got it?"

Yang Zhi nodded solemnly.

Kong Xuyang's eyes were fixed, and he made a one-handed gesture and mouthed, "One, two-"

"Three! Go!" Kong Xuyang shouted, they both jumped out from behind the statue at the same time and appeared in front of Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng.

[System Alert: Player Silent Lamb uses his personal skill (Memory-Eating Lamb) on Players Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng, which allows (Silent Lamb) to eat all of Player Bai Liu and Player Mu Sicheng's memories in this game, making the other party forget who they are, their memory will be restored after leaving the game.]

[System Alert: Player Kong Xuyang uses his personal skill (Silent), the system panels of all players are frozen and cannot be used.]

A wave of white light radiated, the system panel floating in front of Mu Sicheng quickly turned gray and froze, then shattered and disappeared. The game controller in front of him became gray, like an ordinary coin.

The moment Mu Sicheng noticed two people jumping out from behind the statue, he turned around and wanted to run toward Bai Liu almost as a conditioned reflex.

But before he could run over, the wave-like white light swept across the back of Mu Sicheng's head. His eyes involuntarily became blank and his movements suddenly stopped.

The white light flashed across Mu Sicheng and Bai Liu's brains, then turned into a ring-shaped halo and was sucked back into Yang Zhi's mouth. Yang Zhi's belly instantly swelled up, and he burped with his bloated belly.

Mu Sicheng stared at his hands blankly, frowned, and touched the back of his head before raising it to look around in confusion, “Where… is this place?”

“Why am I here…?”

Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi looked at each other and smiled knowingly, stepping forward to support Mu Sicheng, who was staggering in place due to dizziness caused by the use of skills, “You’re an outdoor live streamer, specializing in shooting supernatural videos of seeing ghosts!”

Mu Sicheng looked over blankly, “What the hell?”

Kong Xuyang pretended to be angry and patted the bag on Mu Sicheng’s shoulder, “Hey! How come you forgot who you are after drinking? Open the bag yourself and take a look.”

Mu Sicheng opened his backpack dizzily and took a look.

There were several cameras, a foldable tripod, two microphones, and two professional-grade cameras neatly placed in the backpack. In the small pocket was Mu Sicheng’s work ID, which clearly read [Supernatural Live Streamer signed by xx Livestreaming Platform].

Mu Sicheng was startled. He raised his work ID in disbelief, looked at the photo of himself at work, frowned, and asked, “Am I really a… supernatural livestreamer?”

Kong Xuyang beside him smiled diabolically: “Yes, this is your [identity].”

The most sinister thing about the game “Yinshan Village” is that it gives every player who comes in a particularly suicidal [identity] setting. Players must play this identity setting in the game. If they act contrary to this identity setting, the difficulty of the game will rise sharply, making it easy to encounter resentful ghosts and be killed during their actions.

The last time Kong Xuyang entered this game instance, there were six people. One of the identities was set as a [supernatural live streamer who came to Yinshan Village]. The side quest of this identity was to [take pictures of the most terrifying ghosts].

As soon as Kong Xuyang saw Mu Sicheng carrying a big bag, he knew that Mu Sicheng had obtained this identity setting.

But the most difficult identity setting was still…

Kong Xuyang turned his head with ill intent and looked at Bai Liu who was lying next to the coffin.

Bai Liu, Bai Liu, you are worthy of having a luck value of 0. You immediately drew the most difficult character identity in this instance that I have completed before.

Mu Sicheng seemed to have noticed that an unconscious person was lying there. He stood up suddenly and subconsciously rushed over to help Bai Liu up. He shook him anxiously twice, “Hey! Hey! What’s wrong?!”

After shaking, Mu Sicheng paused strangely.

What’s going on… Why is he so worried about this person he doesn’t even know? He didn’t seem to be the type of person who becomes very close with strangers, so why did he feel like this towards this person…

It’s as if they’ve already known each other for a long time?

But before Mu Sicheng could figure it out, Bai Liu had already woken up.

Bai Liu stood up naturally, as if he had never fainted, supporting himself with Mu Sicheng’s shoulder. Mu Sicheng also naturally reached out to help Bai Liu up, and put a small stool for Bai Liu to sit on and rest.

After helping him, Mu Sicheng paused again, and he slowly realized that something was wrong.

Why is he so used to doing this kind of servant-like actions towards this person…

After Bai Liu woke up, Kong Xuyang didn’t get the chance to give him any deliberate reminders. He took the initiative to open his backpack and look for something, then nodded in understanding.

This overly normal behavior made Kong Xuyang look at Yang Zhi in doubt, questioning with his eyes, Are you sure you ate Bai Liu’s memory?

Upon seeing Bai Liu’s normal, relaxed movements, Yang Zhi was also

utterly stunned.

Yang Zhi patted his belly in confusion. After confirming that the memory he was digesting in his belly was indeed Bai Liu's, he opened his eyes wide and raised three fingers to assure Kong Xuyang, that he really ate Bai Liu's memory.

The memories that Yang Zhi ate entered his stomach and intestines in the form of [meat] and were digested. If the digestion was fast, Yang Zhi could still see something from the memory after digestion. This was also the reason why Yang Zhi often had confusing memories.

But if all of a person's memories are devoured, it would be like eating a whole cow for Yang Zhi. A game is far from enough time for Yang Zhi to digest it.

Therefore, Kong Xuyang only uses Yang Zhi's skill to confuse the opponent and cannot be used as a skill to pry for information.

But Yang Zhi was aware of the memories he had eaten. He said that he was digesting Bai Liu's memories, which proved that Bai Liu's memories were indeed eaten and he was a blank person with no memories.

Kong Xuyang retracted his gaze and took two tentative steps towards Bai Liu: "Bai Liu? Are you okay? Did you drink too much just now?"

Bai Liu looked up at Kong Xuyang, "I'm fine."

Kong Xuyang sat next to Bai Liu and comforted him with a look of pity, "Our grandparents are both dead. We are all returning to our hometown to pay respects to our ancestors. We are in the same boat. Don't be sad."

"I'm not sad." Bai Liu took a book out of his bag, held it up, and smiled, "Because I seem to have come back to do bad things."

There were seven sloppy brush-written characters on the book that Bai Liu took out, which clearly read "Maoshan Evil Art Handbook".

Chapter End Notes

> In China, red is the color of marriages, and white is the color of funerals.
>
> The Five Reds refer to the red face (a blushing face), red clothes

(red wedding clothes in Chinese customs), red sedan chair (to carry the bride), red shoes, and red rouge (lip makeup). On the other hand, the Five Whites refer to white water (pure, clean water), white clothes, white pants (in Chinese culture, the dead wear white), white shoes, and white paper money (money burned for the dead).

Yinshan Village

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kong Xuyang was delighted, but looked surprised and asked, “What are you doing with this book?”

“Using it to make money.” Bai Liu said lightly.

Bai Liu opened the book, and several slips of paper of different sizes slipped out. He bent down to pick them up, patted them, and steadily lined them up neither fast nor slow on the book.

These notes were all IOUs, with the amounts owed ranging from a few thousand to over a hundred thousand. The repayment date on each note was circled heavily in red and had two exclamation marks drawn on it, showing the fear of the parties involved and their eagerness to repay the debt.

Bai Liu touched his chin as if he had realized something: “I seem to owe others a lot of money.”

Kong Xuyang looked over and couldn’t help but laugh contemptuously in his heart, secretly saying “Poor bastard”.

The character that Bai Liu got really fits his identity. He was an unemployed vagrant both inside and outside the game, and a short-lived ghost who was short on money.

Bai Liu played a thug who dropped out of junior high school and had been hanging around in society ever since. He had been to jail two or three times for committing crimes. Due to his generosity, he made friends with all kinds of people, but because of this generosity he also owed a lot of debt.

At this time, the man already owed a lot of money, and the banker who loaned him the money started to pressure him. Threatening that if he couldn’t pay back the money, he would break his legs and make him crawl on the ground for the rest of his life.

The man was frightened and desperately sought help from a shady Taoist priest he knew, asking him if there was any way he could make an easy fortune.

The Taoist said, “If you are really short of money, you can find an extremely yin place to borrow some yin wealth. The heavier the yin energy, the more windfall you will get.”

When the fool heard this, he happened to encounter the archaeological team that notified him to return home. He thought about it and became ecstatic – was there any place in the world more dense with yin energy than his hometown? A place where ancient tombs were dug out, full of gloominess and filth?

If he could borrow yin wealth from a place like this, wouldn’t he be rich?!

But fearing that something bad would happen after he takes advantage of ill-gotten wealth, the man remained cautious and carefully asked the Taoist, “Will nothing bad happen if I borrow ill-gotten wealth like this?”

When the shady Taoist heard that he wanted to return to his hometown to borrow yin wealth, he told him, “Borrowing money from ancestors is immoral but not a big deal. You would suffer a little misfortune, but there would be no fatal disaster because you are a descendant of this village after all.“

But this Taoist probably didn’t expect that this person’s village was actually Yinshan Village, a small village with strange funeral customs.

Generally speaking, it wouldn’t be a big deal if the younger generation borrows the yin wealth of their ancestors. Even if your ancestors were angry with you for not living up to their expectations, they’d wait until you arrived at the underworld to settle accounts with you and teach you a lesson for being an unfilial descendant. They couldn’t easily do it while you’re alive; after all, you were their blood relative, and they still expect you to burn incense and offer sacrifices.

But what if your ancestors never went to the underworld, and were trapped in this small village day and night, wandering around with resentment?

If you borrowed wealth at this time, it was hard to say what would happen.

Kong Xuyang retracted his malicious gaze from Bai Liu, replaced it with a worried look, and said hesitantly: “Seeking wealth through evil practices is against the will of heaven and earth, and there is bound to be retribution… It’s not good, right?”

Bai Liu's eyes were still on the book, not looking at Kong Xuyang, and he calmly asked, "Isn't all wealth that can be quickly obtained harmful and immoral to the world?"

Kong Xuyang was stunned and subconsciously retorted: "How could that be?"

Bai Liu finally let go and glanced at him lightly: "If there is a kind of evil practice that allows you to run a company where you can exploit your employees without them resisting, or predict the stock market trend in advance and cut off a large number of investors, or lend money at high interest rates with just one advertisement that makes others unable to resist borrowing from you."

"Even when playing games or competing, you can use evil practices to kill opponents with more competitive strength first, without leaving any traces, and finally winning the prize money."

"You can accumulate a lot of wealth with this, but according to you, isn't it all ill-gotten wealth obtained through evil practices?"

"Does that mean those who do these things should be punished?"

Kong Xuyang was startled by Bai Liu's nonchalant glance.

Kong Xuyang had done all these things before, leaving no trace behind by using props exchanged from game points. How could Bai Liu know?!

Didn't he forget everything?

Kong Xuyang looked at Yang Zhi with shock and doubt. Yang Zhi patted his belly in confusion, indicating that he was really digesting Bai Liu's memory. Kong Xuyang reluctantly sat down again with an uncertain mind: "What were you talking about, Bai Liu…"

Bai Liu withdrew his gaze calmly: "I was imagining what I might do if I got the evil practices. These ways make money the fastest."

"I really want this kind of ill-gotten wealth."

Kong Xuyang pretended to be amused and patted Bai Liu on the shoulder: "You are joking again, Bai Liu. You just said that doing these things will bring retribution."

Bai Liu glanced at Kong Xuyang and said, "No, I don't think there will

be retribution for doing this."

"All immoral wealth is merely split into either the legal or illegal category. The illegal ones will indeed definitely face retribution but the legal ones most likely won't."

Kong Xuyang tried his best to force a smile: "There are still legal ways to gain wealth immorally?"

Bai Liu raised the book in his hand, his eyes sincere: "I was just thinking, the law will protect the rights of the living, so exploiting the money of the living by all means is illegal, but it seems that exploiting the money of the dead is not included in the scope of legal considerations, so it is legal."

"So borrowing yin wealth is a legal act."

Kong Xuyang: "…"

He felt like something was wrong, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

Bai Liu opened the "Maoshan Evil Art Handbook", and found that some pages were wrinkled from being turned over, showing that it was read frequently. There were even detailed notes on one of the pages.

At the beginning of this page are three big characters: "發陰財".

Mu Sicheng, who was standing behind Bai Liu, quickly accepted his role as a supernatural anchor. He picked up his camera and started taking pictures. He saw Bai Liu looking down at the book. He held the camera and took a closer look, reading as he read:

"… 'Acquiring Yin Wealth'", wow, this is in traditional Chinese, so hard to read, let me see what it says…"

"Find a new grave for burial, with a tombstone, name, and gender, and bury the deceased no more than 100 days later. Prepare food… select three sacrificial animals (cow, sheep, pig), and on the fifth day of Gui, at the fifth yin hour (5 pm to 7 pm), bring a piece of longevity paper money… and proceed to perform the ritual."

"First, light four incense sticks. Place one in the back courtyard. Hold three incense sticks in your right hand facing west and draw them in the air. Pray to the wandering gods of day and night and yin and yang, and then chant the incantation—"

Mu Sicheng gradually became absorbed in watching, and his tone became dazed:

“Thundering command, swift as a shooting star, instantly heard in the ten directions and three realms, rotating years and months, rotating day and night. Received by Gongcao , day and night, yin and yang, gods wanders, communicating with the five directions-“

The incense burning in the temple flickered, and the cold wind whistled through the hall, making a strange echo that was similar to a woman’s laughter.

The Three Pure Ones statues behind Mu Sicheng changed from their original dignified expressions to glares, holding up their whisks and grinning, as if they were going to insult and beat Mu Sicheng, the Taoist disciple who performed evil practices in front of him.

The crisp ringing of bells was heard along with the sound of wind.

The red cross that was pressed on the coffin swayed, causing the bells on the four corners to start shaking as well. The three candles on the three incense sticks lit by He Daniu in front of the statue swayed twice in the cold wind and went out.

The lights in the temple dimmed, leaving only a faint yellow light from the swinging overhead electric lamps shining on the statues. Both the statues and people looked hideous under such dim lights.

The seven kind-faced old men in the black-and-white photos placed on the temporary altar opposite the seven coffins also became inexplicably eerie. In the photos, they stared straight at the four people in the lobby, and the originally friendly smiles on their faces became weird.

When Mu Sicheng met the eyes of the old man in the black-and-white photo facing him, he was startled and suddenly woke up.

He subconsciously looked at Bai Liu, who shook his head calmly: “It’s okay, you would have to recite this spell sooner or later, it’s better to see the effect beforehand.”

Mu Sicheng breathed a sigh of relief for some unknown reason.

Bai Liu’s eyes swept across the mourning hall, which had become much dimmer. Suddenly, his gaze stopped on two coffins.

Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi had been standing far away, both of them with tense expressions on their faces.

Even if you have played this game once, you would know that there are small traps and pitfalls everywhere. Just now, Mu Sicheng suddenly chanted a spell, and if they hadn't dodged quickly, they would have almost fallen into the trap!

The old man in the black-and-white photos placed on the altar facing the two coffins had kind eyes and a friendly smile, and he looked like a good person at first glance. But what made people feel cold was that these two photos, which were originally supposed to be individual photos, had unknowingly become photos of two people in the chaos just now.

In these two black-and-white photos, one of the old men was clutching Mu Sicheng's shoulder, who was holding a camera and seemed to have not yet come to his senses; The other clutched Bai Liu's shoulder with a calm expression, his face marred with corpse-like spots and greenish, and his nails had become darkish green and sharp, as he looked out of the photo with a strangely joyful expression.

Bai Liu's gaze paused for a moment on the old man's hand clutching his shoulder, then he withdrew his gaze from the photo and looked at the yellow talismans on the two coffins.

The cinnabar on the yellow talisman was dull and the edges and corners were damaged. It was obvious that it would not last long.

Bai Liu turned to look at Mu Sicheng: "Take off your shirt."

Mu Sicheng was confused, but still took it off subconsciously.

Bai Liu's gaze stopped on Mu Sicheng's shoulder – there were shocking blue-black and red finger marks there, which had just been grasped.

Mu Sicheng was so frightened when he saw the handprint that he let out a curse.

Bai Liu touched his shoulder. He felt a little pain in that place now. He unbuttoned two buttons of his shirt, turned his head and saw a concave handprint on his shoulder.

Because it was so cold, there wasn't even any pain.

Bai Liu looked at Mu Sicheng: "You were filming all the time, right?

Let me see."

Mu Sicheng handed over the camera.

Bai Liu stared intently at the palm-sized screen of the camera, pressing the back button on the camera, and his eyes quickly searched for something in the rewinding footage.

Mu Sicheng leaned over, a little afraid to look at the camera screen, and only dared to ask Bai Liu: "What are you looking for?"

Bai Liu's finger that was pressing the back button finally stopped, and he pressed the play button: "Finding something to verify my guess."

The images in the camera began to play normally, and Bai Liu watched intently.

Mu Sicheng swallowed and looked over.

The lights flickered in the shaking camera footage. Mu Sicheng could hear the hazy sound of himself chanting the incantation at the end, followed by the piercing sound of cold wind. The moment the incense in front of the statue went out, the whole screen darkened and then lit up again.

In the moment of darkness and light, something seemed to appear beside Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng, and then quickly disappeared.

Bai Liu played this scene again in reverse and slowed down. This time, Mu Sicheng finally saw what happened clearly and his blood ran cold.

Two faces that were completely swollen, distorted, and full of maggots appeared on the screen. Their faces were covered with green duckweed. The two bodies had blue-black fingernails grasping Bai Liu and the others' shoulders.

Then the two old men stared at the flashing camera with a sinister look, leaned on Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng's shoulders, and let out a strange laugh. Their swollen flesh cracked as they laughed, revealing pale flesh underneath.

The next second, the dim light of the electric lamp came on, and the two faces behind their ears disappeared.

Bai Liu handed the camera to Mu Sicheng, who was already frightened out of consciousness and turned to walk toward the coffin. He stared

at the yellow talisman on it for a second or two, then stretched out his hand as if to uncover it.

Kong Xuyang sternly stopped him, “What are you doing?! This talisman is the [Ansha Curse] that suppresses corpses! If you tear it off the coffin, the corpse won’t be suppressed anymore! Everyone will be in trouble!”

Bai Liu didn’t care what Kong Xuyang said and tore off the yellow talisman without hesitation.

The yellow talisman was turned over, and there was actually another talisman drawn on the back!

Bai Liu opened his “Maoshan Evil Art Handbook” and searched through it several times, and soon found the talisman corresponding to the talisman at the back.

“[Corpse Preserving Talisman].” Bai Liu said calmly, “So this is how it was. On the surface, this is indeed an [Ansha Curse], but it has been tampered with. There was also an evil [Corpse Preserving Talisman] on the back that turned drowned corpses into Yin corpses to increase the evil spirit. Moreover, the [Corpse Preserving Talisman] on the back is facing the coffin, making the talisman more effective.”

“Sticking this talisman won’t have any suppressive effect at all. It will only make these corpses turn into Yin corpses faster and come out to wreak havoc on the world.”

Mu Sicheng was startled and asked, “How did you know there was something wrong with this talisman?!”

Bai Liu glanced at him and said, “Because everything inside could come out and take pictures with us, this talisman has no suppressive effect at all.”

After Bai Liu finished speaking, he walked forward, raised his hand, and directly tore off the talismans on the seven coffins.

Suddenly, a strong wind blew, the hanging bells rang urgently, and the coffin lids on the seven coffins shook incessantly as if they would push the red line open at any time.

A hand with black nails suddenly stretched out from the edge of the coffin in front of Bai Liu, slowly pushing the coffin open.

Yin wealth: Potential wealth, career, and luck that a person has
Gongcao : A messenger of the heavens

An unintelligible roar came from the coffin—as if it were the roar of some country beast—and from within, something banged heavily against the lid, threatening to escape.

Pale, shriveled hands stretched out from the crack of the shaking coffin, dark nails leaving deep sawdust marks on the hard surface of the coffin. One can imagine how sharp these nails were; if they were to scratch a person's skin, the skin would probably peel off directly.

Mu Sicheng was frightened to death. He pulled Bai Liu's hand and subconsciously wanted to run away, but was held back by Bai Liu.

Not only did Bai Liu not run away, but he walked forward, turned the talisman he had just torn off over, and pasted it back on the red line.

A strange thing happened. The coffin, which had been shaking incessantly just now, suddenly came to a halt.

The moment the talisman fell, a golden light flashed from the red line. The hands of the corpses that were attempting to break free from the coffins gave off bursts of white smoke upon touching the red line as if they were being burned. Indistinct wails came from within the coffin, and after shaking twice as if unwillingly, it finally returned to tranquility.

Kong Xuyang narrowed his eyes when he saw this scene and clicked his tongue impatiently in his heart.

He was originally prepared to see this coward Bai Liu rushing out of the temple in fear, but he didn't expect Bai Liu to come up with a solution so quickly.

However, Kong Xuyang quickly adjusted his expression and hugged Yang Zhi with horror, just like an ordinary person, but the viciousness in his eyes still lingered as he stared at Bai Liu.

Indeed, when the talisman is turned over, it turns out to be the [Ansha Curse], which can hold out for a while.

Although they could avoid the first day, they could not escape the seventh, the talisman would not last till the seventh day. The orthodox Maoshan talisman techniques and the yellow paper were in his hands. When the seventh day arrived, with no protective talismans and only

holding a book of evil techniques, he wanted to see what Bai Liu would do.

Mu Sicheng stood stiffly like a wooden stick in front of Bai Liu, his chest heaving violently, and his face pale as he faced the eight coffins. He looked terrified at the sight.

He actually wanted to run away, but for some reason, Mu Sicheng felt that if he left Bai Liu here alone, facing Bai Liu in the future would be more terrifying than facing these eight coffins.

There wasn't the slightest bit of fear on Bai Liu's face. He patted Mu Sicheng on the shoulder and instructed him in a casual manner, "Go light the incense. Light three sticks and bow three times. Don't make it four. Avoid the altars."

Mu Sicheng's mind was still dizzy. After hearing Bai Liu's instructions, he let out an, "Oh" and walked forward weakly.

As a result, while Mu Sicheng was halfway through picking up the incense to prepare for the ceremony, fear lingering in his eyes as he glanced at the eight altars placed in a row on the table in front of the statue, he suddenly froze in place, stuck like a machine that had jammed..

Eight… altars?

Mu Sicheng turned around slowly, his face drained of blood. His fingers trembled faintly as he pointed at the coffin beside him "Bai-Bai Liu, there's one- one more coffin."

Bai Liu was already kneeling on one knee beside the extra coffin and was carefully touching the edges and corners of the coffin with his fingers. Hearing this, he hummed without even looking up, "I see."

At first glance under the dim light, this extra coffin seemed to be of similar specifications, size, color, and material to the rest of the coffins. It had a black lacquered top, a red string wrapped around the middle, and bells hanging on the four corners. However, after careful observation, Bai Liu discovered something strange about this coffin.

Bai Liu looked at the fingertips that had just touched the coffin — a thin layer of yellow soil was on them.

This was a coffin that had been used for burial.

Not only had the burial taken place, but it seemed to have been done many years ago. The bells hanging from the four corners were made of brass, with an old-fashioned design. Judging by the style, they likely dated back over a century to the end of the previous dynasty.

The red string was new, just like the ones used on the other coffins. The coffin seemed to have been freshly painted, hiding any signs of wood decay, yet the smell of damp, rotting wood lingered.

Although the exterior was repainted, it had probably never been opened, as a layer of untouched yellow soil could be felt along the edge of the coffin.

Additionally, there was no yellow talisman on the coffin, which screamed danger to the onlookers.

Mu Sicheng's hands were shaking as if he wanted to cry but had no tears, "Bai Liu, how come there is suddenly an extra coffin?!"

"What I'm more interested in now is why there is this extra coffin." Bai Liu stood up and walked past Mu Sicheng to the altar where an extra shrine had suddenly appeared. He looked at it for a while, and said thoughtfully, "I see."

Mu Sicheng carefully peeked over Bai Liu's shoulder. With Bai Liu as a cover, he vigilantly raised the video camera as if facing a powerful enemy and began to film the shrine.

It's a bit embarrassing to say, but after he counted out one more shrine, he didn't dare to look at it again out of fear. Now, with the double protection of Bai Liu and the camera, he dared to take a glimpse.

Mu Sicheng looked at the shrine on the small screen of the video recorder for a while. The more he looked, the more he felt something was wrong. His expression changed from confusion at first, to disbelief, and then to confusion again.

"This shrine…" Mu Sicheng said in confusion, "Why is it from 1884?!"

The dates of birth and death written on the shrine were clearly [1884-1900], and the gender and name were written very simply, with only one sentence: " A girl from the Li family."

Mu Sicheng began to doubt himself and took out his phone to take a look, "We are in modern society, how can this coffin be more than a

hundred years old?"

"After a woman gets married, she will be buried with her husband's surname, and referred to by her maiden name." Bai Liu focused his eyes on the coffin, "The person in this coffin is a 16-year-old unmarried girl. She probably died while getting married."

Mu Sicheng was confused again, "Why did she die while getting married?"

Bai Liu glanced at Mu Sicheng lightly, and Mu Sicheng inexplicably saw a hint of disdain in his glance.

Bai Liu turned to look at the coffin and explained, "After a woman gets married, she takes her husband's surname. If a woman from the Li family marries a man named Zhang and dies, she should be buried under the name of [Zhang Li] within the Zhang family's ancestral tomb."

"Yet the girl in this coffin was buried under the name of [the girl from the Li family]."

Bai Liu said flatly, "This is very interesting. Unmarried women in that era were not allowed to be buried in coffins or ancestral tombs. However, the size of this coffin shows that this woman was most likely buried in the ancestral tomb in the end."

"For an unmarried woman to be buried in the ancestral tomb, I can think of two most likely scenarios. The first is that this woman has made a great contribution to the family, or the second is that this girl died on the way to get married."

"But this girl has no surname or name, so I am more inclined to the second possibility."

Mu Sicheng suddenly came to a realization and said, "Then why is the coffin from a hundred years ago?"

Bai Liu replied calmly, "We must have found an ancient tomb. This is quite common in a small, isolated village."

Kong Xuyang gritted his teeth as he listened nearby.

He had erased all the basic information that the old Taoist He Daniu had told Bai Liu and the others, but Bai Liu was able to figure it out again on his own.

Just what kind of monster is Bai Liu?!

"…Does this mean there's a hundred-year-old female corpse in this coffin?!" Mu Sicheng realized what was in the coffin belatedly. He shuddered and took two steps back, looking horrified. "How terrifying."

Kong Xuyang walked forward with a fake smile and patted Mu Sicheng on the shoulder, "Hey! Is what Bai Liu's saying true? Maybe he's just guessing and saying that to scare you?"

Mu Sicheng retorted without hesitation, "Even if Bai Liu just made a random guess, he would still be right."

Bai Liu looked past Mu Sicheng, towards Kong Xuyang, and nodded in agreement, "Indeed, all of this is just my guess and may not be accurate."

Kong Xuyang was stunned by what Bai Liu said.

"Practice is the only criteria for testing truth." Bai Liu stepped forward, put his hands on the top of the coffin, and pushed it down with both hands. "If we open it, we'll know who is inside, right?"

Kong Xuyang had no time to stop him and could only watch Bai Liu push open the coffin lid.

He and Yang Zhi, both of whom had played this instance before, were stunned and watched in astonishment as Bai Liu released one of the strongest monsters in the Yinshan Village instance.

Mu Sicheng was now completely out of service. He stood in front of the coffin that had suddenly been opened with a blank expression, still holding the camera in his left hand.

The coffin lid fell heavily to the ground, shaking the floor and causing a cloud of dust and dirt to rise.

Amidst the filth, Bai Liu brushed the dust off his hands and covered his mouth and nose with his sleeve. He held up the flashlight of his cell phone, took a step forward, and approached the edge of the coffin.

The hazy fog brought by the dust gradually dissipated. Bai Liu waved his hand to disperse the dust in front of him, then looked into the coffin with the help of the dim lighting and the flashlight.

This coffin was just as Bai Liu had speculated. The outside of it had been painted, but the inside had never been opened. Once it was opened, a smell of moldy rotten wood hit the air.

Water was dripping from the dark, soft interior of the coffin. The wood was rotting and cracking, and a corpse wearing a lotus-embroidered cheongsam-style wedding gown lay peacefully at the bottom.

The bride was not tall. She wore a hair crown on her head and her clothes were covered with a thick layer of dust. Her hands were folded below her chest with her thumbs raised. Inside her clasped hands was a scale rod about an inch long that was enclosed in a pouch woven with red thread.

A foggy bronze mirror was embedded inside the top of the coffin, reflecting the bride's feet wearing black boots. Her face was covered with a satin veil with a pattern of mandarin ducks symbolizing double happiness. The tassels on her bridal veil hung dirty and limp over her shoulders, obscuring her features.

Bai Liu's gaze moved to the bride's hands folded below her chest and paused slightly.

The hands had plump skin and round nails, like jade carvings or wax sculptures. Not only were there no signs of dryness or decay, they even looked fresher than the corpse next to them that had just died two days ago.

Not to mention, the entire body was straight and upright, with the knees slightly bent, and the clothes did not age at all from decay.

——Just like a living person.

Bai Liu's eyes scanned the entire corpse and then returned to the scale bar that the corpse was holding with both hands. He reached out his hand without any fear and used a little force to pull the scale bar out of the bride's hands.

Although the wooden scale bar was covered in dust, one could still tell it was exquisitely crafted, with a carving of a dragon and a phoenix intertwining. It was clearly a wedding bar used to lift the bride's veil.

Kong Xuyang's eyes widened with uncontrollable fear as he watched Bai Liu pull out the wedding rod without a second thought. Unable to stop himself, he blurted out, warning, "Don't move!"

The coffin was originally foggy, with only the vague reflection of the bride's feet in the bronze mirror. However, the moment the wedding rod was pulled out, it suddenly swung to the side and clearly reflected a face with makeup and rouge on it, which was obviously the face of the bride.

The face of the bride in the coffin was still covered by the veil, obstructing the view. However, the bride in the mirror laughed tenderly and turned her head 360 degrees. She stared at Bai Liu holding the wedding pole with her creepy eyes, singing miserably and charmingly.

"Husband, come back and chat…"

"Even in death, as your bones drift by the river, you are the one I see beside me on our wedding night!"

Yinshan Village

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The bride in the bronze mirror had a head but no body, red lips, a pale face, a smiling expression and a crying voice, singing in a babbling childish manner.

“My dear husband, lift my veil and look at my face.”

“In Yinshan Village, girls marry at the age of 16 and then go to the grave.”

“My dear husband, push open my coffin and look at my bones.”

“In Yinshan Village, the elderly enter the water at 82 and then go to the grave.”

The voice of the bride in the mirror became more and more resentful. Her eyes rolled around as she stared at Bai Liu. The corpse in the coffin opened its clasped hands and slowly raised them as if trying to tear off its veil.

The bride continued singing,

“A Taoist priest came and said the old man’s death was justified and the young woman’s death was well deserved.”

“Thus, the people of Yinshan Village died like this, generation after generation.”

Kong Xuyang shouted sharply, “Don’t let her tear off the veil, or we will all die!”

After saying that, Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi rushed forward carrying the coffin lid, pushing Bai Liu aside. Bai Liu quickly reached for the bottom of the coffin and seemed to have grabbed something out. However, Yang Zhi and Kong Xuyang, who were in a state of panic, didn’t notice it at all. They forcefully closed the coffin lid.

There was a rustling sound of silk fabrics rubbing against each other in the coffin, the sound of the bronze mirror coming out vaguely, turning into a distorted and eerie tune, like a man with a deep voice scolding,

“Those who turn their backs on their hometown, forget their ancestors, or show no respect for their forebears, engaging in petty crimes like the tricks of a rooster’s cry or a dog’s theft—”

“For eternity, you will never leave Yinshan Village alive!”

Kong Xuyang broke out in a cold sweat. He used half of his body to press down the still-shaking coffin lid. Just as he was about to bite his finger to draw the [Ansha Curse], Kong Xuyang’s face turned pale and he froze.

Oh no!

To draw the talisman, one needs red cinnabar or human blood; moreover, it must be the blood of a boy with sufficient yang energy. The last time he came to this instance, he hadn’t slept with a woman yet, but now he’s no longer a virgin!

His blood can no longer be used to draw talismans!

Kong Xuyang quickly turned his gaze to Yang Zhi, but his face became gloomy again.

Yang Zhi had also indulged in the same, making his blood unusable as well!

The voice in the coffin sounded like a man or a woman singing softly, and the coffin was shaking more and more violently. It seemed that the thing inside was about to break free and run out.

Kong Xuyang was so anxious that his veins popped out. He turned around, asking Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng, “Have you two ever slept with a woman?!”

Several question marks suddenly appeared on Mu Sicheng’s frightened expression, “HAH?!”

Kong Xuyang roared, “Don’t fucking ‘hah’ me! Have you ever slept with anyone? Whether one of you two is a virgin can save four of our lives!”

Mu Sicheng who was also angry, “How should I know! I don’t remember anything!”

Kong Xuyang: “…”

Yang Zhi: “…”

Fuck, I forgot these two idiots' memories were swallowed.

Seeing Kong Xuyang reddening with anxiety, Mu Sicheng touched his chin and tried to recall, "I don't think I am one, right? After all, I'm so handsome…"

Kong Xuyang: "…"

Yang Zhi: "…"

No matter whether Mu Sicheng was telling the truth or lying, Yang Zhi and Kong Xuyang felt uneasy anyway.

They risked their lives playing the game just to finally lose their virginity! But this fucking bastard managed it just by relying on his looks!

Bai Liu picked up a piece of porcelain from somewhere, slashed his palm, and blood gushed out. He walked forward and stretched out his bloody hand in front of Kong Xuyang.

Kong Xuyang was confused and overjoyed, "…You're a virgin?"

Bai Liu pondered for a moment and said, "I probably have never slept with a woman."

Kong Xuyang breathed a sigh of relief, raised his hand, and dipped it in Bai Liu's blood to draw the talisman, and then he heard Bai Liu slowly add, "But I'm not sure if I have slept with a man."

Bai Liu looked at Kong Xuyang, who had a dull face, with sincere eyes, "Can my blood still be used after sleeping with a man?"

Kong Xuyang took two deep breaths, then roared, "No!!! You are filthy!!!"

Kong Xuyang was so angry that his eyes turned red. He felt that if Bai Liu said a few more words, he'd be so aggrieved that he would cry on the spot.

Fuck!! What kind of people are these?

Kong Xuyang has never hated himself so much for not being a virgin in his life, otherwise he would not be here being controlled by Bai Liu!

But there was no way. Things had come to this point. Bai Liu might not be dirty, but he himself was already as dirty as could be. His blood

certainly could not be used.

Kong Xuyang suppressed the heart attack, reached out his hand to touch the blood on Bai Liu's palm, and drew a successful talisman on the coffin in a flamboyant manner. Then he held his breath and waited with a solemn expression. His hands trembled slightly and sweat appeared on his temples.

Yang Zhi couldn't help but close his eyes and pray with his hands –

——Bai Liu, please don't have slept with a man, Bai Liu, please don't have slept with a man! Merciful Bodhisattva, savior of those in distress, please let Bai Liu still be a virgin!

Perhaps the Bodhisattva really heard Yang Zhi's sincere prayers. The shaking of the coffin gradually stopped, and the talisman on it faintly emitted a soft golden light.

Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi, who were sweating profusely, let out a long breath and slid to the ground in exhaustion.

Bai Liu was stroking his chin beside them, with a look of enlightenment on his face, as if he had gained new information, "It turns out that I have never slept with a man."

Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi, who were supporting each other to stand up, were so shocked when they heard this that they almost fell to their knees again.

Why do you say this in such a surprised tone?!

How the fuck do you not even know whether you've slept with a man or not?!

Kong Xuyang took a deep breath, turned around, and sternly warned Bai Liu, "If you want to wait until the seventh day, don't fucking touch these coffins!"

"I can leave these coffins alone." Bai Liu said sincerely, "But in exchange, what can you give me to keep these coffins alone?"

Kong Xuyang was stunned for a moment. He looked at Bai Liu in disbelief, "Are you fucking threatening me with these coffins?!"

Bai Liu smiled, "How can you say it's a threat? We are all from the same hometown. When fellow villagers meet, their eyes are filled with

tears. I am making a deal with you, my fellow villager. I would not make such a deal with ordinary people. This is called keeping the wealth within the family."

Kong Xuyang was truly angered to the point his eyes were filled with tears. His eyes were red and his shoulders were shaking. He pointed at Bai Liu and said with gritted teeth, "Fuck your mom! You're using these coffins as hostages to threaten me…"

Bai Liu corrected Kong Xuyang's statement slowly, "It's corpse matter."

Kong Xuyang's shoulders shook, from his shoulders to his wrists, then his hands, and finally his fingers were shaking with anger, "You are awesome, you are capable, Bai Liu, if you have the ability, just keep moving, and then we will all die together!"

Bai Liu smiled amicably, "If I can get something valuable in return, I don't mind dying."

After saying that, Bai Liu walked towards the coffin that had just been suppressed by Kong Xuyang.

Seeing Bai Liu really walking towards the coffin without hesitation, Kong Xuyang got really angry. He grabbed Mu Sicheng and held a piece of broken porcelain against Mu Sicheng's throat viciously, shouting hoarsely, "Bai Liu, if you take another step forward, I will kill your good teammate!"

"You don't want to see your teammate die in front of you, do you?!"

Bai Liu stopped and looked at Mu Sicheng for a while, then suddenly realized, "So he and I are teammates?"

Then, Bai Liu turned around and waved his hand indifferently, "Let go."

Kong Xuyang asked anxiously, "He is your bound teammate, do you not care?!"

Bai Liu said without even turning his head, "He doesn't look very smart, and he is bound to me. I don't like having teammates like this. If you don't do it, I'll do it myself later."

Kong Xuyang: "…"

Mu Sicheng: “…”

Chapter End Notes

At least, Bai Liu remembers that he's gay □

Yinshan Village

Kong Xuyang sat on a long bench with a sullen face, his cheeks twitching slightly. Yang Zhi stood beside him, patting his back to help him calm down.

Bai Liu sat calmly on the bench opposite Kong Xuyang. Despite seeing Kong Xuyang so angry, he smiled at him very amicably.

Kong Xuyang was so angry that he almost took off from the spot. He glared at Bai Liu in an attempt to intimidate him. He hit his knee hard, but unexpectedly, it triggered his knee-jerk reflex, and he kicked Bai Liu very delicately.

Bai Liu smiled again, “My friend, you are so cute, playing like this.”

Yang Zhi turned his head and bit his lower lip firmly to prevent himself from laughing out loud.

Kong Xuyang: “…”

It doesn’t matter, Bai Liu’s life will pass soon.

Bai Liu considerately changed the subject, “My fellow countryman, you are willing to trade with me, and you didn’t kill my teammate. You are a kind person, so I won’t blackmail you. You can definitely give me what I want to trade with you.”

When Kong Xuyang heard Bai Liu calling him a “kind person”, his face twitched twice, and then he asked cautiously, “What is that?”

“I just want to chat with my fellow countryman for a while.” Bai Liu looked at Kong Xuyang with a smile and chuckled. “Although I was born in Yinshan Village, I don’t seem to remember anything. I hope you can guide me.”

Kong Xuyang’s eyebrows were twisted into knots, “You went through so much trouble just to let me take you?”

Bai Liu nodded as if he was serious, “I’m unfamiliar with the place and I’m scared to walk alone.”

Kong Xuyang glanced at Mu Sicheng, who was huddled beside the statue, far away from the coffin and still shivering, and then slowly shifted his gaze back to the urn that Bai Liu used as a footstool.

Kong Xuyang: "…"

What do you mean by scared? Bai Liu, look back at your teammate's performance and then give me a perfunctory answer.

Bai Liu didn't seem to worry at all that Kong Xuyang would abandon him. After reaching a simple verbal agreement, he began to chat with him with a smile. "What are Brother Kong and Brother Yang doing back in the village this time?"

Yang Zhi, Kong Xuyang: "…"

Calling us "brother" already? You're really not holding back.

Yang Zhi looked at Kong Xuyang for instructions, and after getting his approval, he explained mysteriously, "We came back to do a cultural relic business."

Bai Liu suddenly realized, "Oh, Brother Yang and Brother Kong are back to rob the tomb?"

Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi paused at the same time.

That's right, the roles they play are two tomb robbers. The main purpose of their return this time is to steal a burial object in the main tomb chamber of the excavated ancient tomb. This was also the side quest of their identities.

Kong Xuyang had not originally intended to hide his identity from Bai Liu, because the tomb they were going to was right below Bai Liu's ancestral home, and without the guidance of Bai Liu, the "descendant", they could not enter.

Bai Liu fell into deep thought.

The lyrics sung by the bride in the coffin just now mentioned three types of people who will never be able to leave Yinshan Village alive.

One was those who showed no respect for their forebears, which obviously referred to the supernatural live streamer Mu Sicheng.

Second, were the people who engaged in petty crimes like the tricks of a rooster's cry or a dog's theft. Unsurprisingly, they were Yang Zhi and Kong Xuyang.

The remaining type were people who turned their backs on their hometown and forgot their ancestors.

Bai Liu lowered his eyes and looked at the “Maoshan Evil Art Handbook” in his arms—this was referring to him.

The people of Yinshan Village revered Taoism and believed in Taoists for generations, being very devout in their beliefs. However, Bai Liu actually came back with a kind of dark ritual and used it to borrow yin wealth to pay off his debts. He was completely unfaithful, unrighteous, and unfilial.

Judging from the current situation, his identity should be the most dangerous and the riskiest.

But the higher the risk, the greater the reward. Although Bai Liu doesn’t remember anything, he didn’t reject this identity and was happy to continue according to the setting of this identity.

For example, guarding the first seven days well.

Bai Liu looked at the shrine facing him. The photo placed on it was a black and white photo of a kind-faced old lady holding his shoulders.

In the black and white photo, Bai Liu had a strange smile on his face.

The next morning.

When Bai Liu woke up, he and Mu Sicheng were the only ones in the temple. Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi had gone somewhere unknown. Bai Liu woke up Mu Sicheng who was still sleeping, walked to the temple door, looked down, and paused.

Mu Sicheng followed Bai Liu to the temple gate with sleepy eyes, looked down, and was completely awakened by shock. “Fuck, what is this!”

The wreaths placed in the temple were in a mess and scattered on the ground, as if someone had picked them up and smashed them to pieces. The ground was littered with tiny pieces of white paper flowers.

But these were not what was most terrifying. The most terrifying thing was the densely packed and neat rows of small footprints at the entrance of the temple.

The footprints were only half the size of a child’s palm, in a triangular

shape, with only the front soles of the feet. It seemed as if a group of people were tiptoeing back and forth in front of the temple entrance in a certain pattern, as if they wanted to come in but couldn't find the entrance, and were finally forced to leave.

Bai Liu looked at the footprints for a while, then lowered his head and followed the leaving footprints out.

"Hey!" Mu Sicheng got anxious when he saw Bai Liu leaving. He looked at the strange footprints with fear a few times, before stamping his feet and gritting his teeth, finally deciding to follow him, "You aren't afraid either?"

Bai Liu walked forward like he had heard nothing.

These groups of footprints went around the temple as if trying to find its entrance. After circling several times, they returned empty-handed and finally went to the village.

Mu Sicheng held up his camera to take pictures. He rubbed his arms and looked at these strange footprints with chattering teeth.

These footprints were like a group of people walking together on their tiptoes, with their steps almost the same size. The distance between each footprint looked the same to the naked eye until they reached the village's main road, where this regular and dense string of footprints began to disperse.

These footprints went from the main road one by one to the houses in the village, before disappearing in front of the doors seemingly returning home.

Mu Sicheng was about to breathe a sigh of relief when he got to this point, but Bai Liu soon gave him the final blow.

Bai Liu followed the footprints to the front of the door where they disappeared on a piece of mud. Bai Liu squatted down and brushed aside the wood debris covering the mud. Mu Sicheng saw clearly the place where the footprints ended, revealing a sight that froze the blood in his veins.

The heel of the tiptoeing footprint suddenly touched the ground, turning it into a complete footprint. Two hand prints also appeared, and the fingers of these two hand prints were inverted.

It seemed that here, the "person" who returned home put down his

heels and hands on the ground and began to crawl into the house on all fours with twisted limbs.

Mu Sicheng's hair stood on end, "What the hell is this!"

Bai Liu stood up and looked at the door that had a faint gap, "Let's go in and take a look."

After saying that, Bai Liu pushed open the door.

The old wooden door made a distant creaking sound and then slowly opened.

Dust was floating in the house. Although it was daytime, the light was still extremely dim to the point only the outlines of some furniture could be vaguely seen. Bai Liu turned on the flashlight on his mobile phone and walked inside.

Mu Sicheng swallowed his saliva, held up the camera with trembling hands, and walked in.

Upon walking into the house, he understood why it was so dark inside. The whole house was sealed shut, with only two translucent tiles on the ceiling acting as skylights to let in light. An old electric lamp hung on the beam, and spider webs covered the wires.

There was a stove with firewood piled up in the corner. On the stove was a large rusty iron pot and a few chipped ceramic jars on the edge, which seemed to be used for seasonings.

Mu Sicheng tried to turn on the light but failed. He waved away the dust in the air, coughed, and said to Bai Liu who was walking in front of him, "I don't know how long people have lived here, but the lights are out of power."

"That's not necessarily true." Bai Liu raised the flashlight and shone it on the wall. "Didn't we just follow someone in? Maybe it lives here."

Mu Sicheng's scalp tingled. "Don't joke like that…"

His voice stopped abruptly as he looked at the wall illuminated by Bai Liu's flashlight.

The light was too dim just now, and Mu Sicheng had been looking at the camera screen, so he didn't notice that the entire house, the ground, the walls, and even the beams were covered with the same

four-limb mud handprints and footprints that they had just seen outside the house.

The wall that Bai Liu was illuminating now was covered entirely with muddy handprints and footprints, painting the wall gray-yellow. If you didn't look carefully, you would think that this wall was just a mud wall.

But after a closer look…

These handprints and footprints were distorted in all kinds of ways as if a person's arms and feet were chopped off and printed on the wall with mud. Mu Sicheng simply couldn't imagine such limbs growing on the same person.

Bai Liu acted as if he didn't see the handprints and footprints, and continued walking inside calmly with the flashlight in hand.

Mu Sicheng didn't want to follow several times, but he didn't dare to go out alone, so he had to follow.

Passing through a main room with a few burnt candles in the corner, Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng arrived at the bedroom of the room.

There were two lofted wooden beds with mosquito nets hanging around them in the bedroom. Opposite them was an FM TV that was at least twenty years old, and next to it was an electric fan covered with spider webs.

Mu Sicheng didn't dare to look around, fixing his eyes on the camera's screen. The only person captured on the small screen was Bai Liu.

Bai Liu lifted the mosquito net hanging on the wooden bed. He stepped on the edge of the bed and leaned in to take a look. His figure was half-hidden by the white gauze mosquito net.

Mu Sicheng was filming intently, and then he suddenly screamed in fear.

Bai Liu turned around and asked, "What's wrong?"

Mu Sicheng's face turned pale with fright. He pointed tremblingly at the bed that Bai Liu had stuck his head into, "Just now, a crooked head stuck out from under the bed!"

Bai Liu knelt on the ground and looked under the bed without

hesitation.

Mu Sicheng almost flung Bai Liu back to stop him from looking under the bed, his voice nearly cracked with fear. “What are you still looking at?! Let’s go out first! Would I lie to you?! There really was a pale head sticking out and looking at you with a crooked look!”

Bai Liu pulled Mu Sicheng over, held his chin, and asked him to look under the bed. He said calmly, “Look for yourself to see if there is a head.”

Mu Sicheng closed his eyes at first, and after a while, he carefully opened one eye and said in a daze, “T-there isn’t—”

“But I really saw it just now!” Mu Sicheng held up the camera and handed it to Bai Liu.

Bai Liu said calmly, “If you really saw it, and it’s not under the bed now, it should most likely be on the bed.”

Mu Sicheng was playing the video in reverse when he seemed to suddenly realize something, his face completely froze. He carefully handed the camera to Bai Liu, and without even breathing, he moved the finger that was pressing the reverse button to the selfie button.

The camera’s lens switched from video recording to selfie-taking, and the screen’s perspective changed, revealing the heads of Bai Liu, and Mu Sicheng.

But that’s not all, a third head appears on the screen.

A pale, tilted head was stretching down from the bed, with both hands holding the edge of the bed. Then, through the cover of the mosquito net, it looked under the bed alongside Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng.

The head seemed to notice the gazes of Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng. It turned around very slowly, coming face to face with Mu Sicheng who was standing next to it.

Mu Sicheng covered his mouth tightly to prevent himself from screaming.

The head was white as snow, its features strangely connected into one piece, like the rough outline of a plaster sculpture. Only some vague indentations and protrusions could be seen on the face, but no distinct facial features such as eyes, ears, nose or mouth.

Just when Mu Sicheng thought that this thing had no eyes, nose or mouth, a bloody cut appeared at the mouth of the head, as if someone had cut it with a knife. The cut went all the way behind the ear, revealing sharp fangs inside. A strong bloody and foul smell hit his face.

It stretched out its barbed tongue as if preparing to lick Mu Sicheng.

Bai Liu quickly pulled Mu Sicheng back and hid under the bed, preventing the thing from licking his head.

The thing tilted its head and slowly crawled down from under the bed, revealing its body with four limbs growing on an extremely twisted, wavy spine. It crawled outside the bed, and with its face, which had no facial features but only a mouth, it tilted its head and quietly looked at the two people huddled in the corner under the bed.

Mu Sicheng tightly grasped Bai Liu's hand, he was so scared that he had already broken out in a cold sweat.

"This thing has no eyes, nose or ears." Mu Sicheng whispered to Bai Liu in a very low voice, almost a whisper, "Can it find us? We can sneak around later…"

Bai Liu did not answer Mu Sicheng's words but stared at the head without facial features. He slowly reached out and picked up a small stone from under the bed, raised his hand, and threw it out, hitting the thing in the face. The thing outside the bed suddenly opened its eye, its eye sockets splitting open like gaping mouths, revealing two bloody slits. Its eyeballs rolled around inside them, before fixing straight on Bai Liu beneath the bed.

Mu Sicheng was almost scared to death, “What are you doing?!”

Bai Liu said calmly, “Proving to you that it has eyes — it’s not very likely for you to be able to sneak away in front of it.”

“This thing is a kind of ghost.”

Mu Sicheng looked at the thing outside in horror, “A ghost?”

Bai Liu explained calmly, “Have you heard the story of being an accomplice to a tiger? To put it simply, a person who is killed by a certain creature becomes a ghost, but will help the creature find prey.”

“So many people have drowned in Yinshan Village. These drowned people will turn into water ghosts, and the water ghosts will look for substitutes.”

“Normally, water ghosts will be reincarnated after finding a substitute, but the water ghosts in Yinshan Village cannot be reincarnated even if they find a substitute. They are still trapped here. As a result, these water ghosts cannot become human no matter how many people they kill and eat. Those whose substitutes are eaten by water ghosts will also become ghosts. People who are alive will be afraid of the people who killed them, and ghosts who died will be afraid of the ghosts who killed them when they were alive. Therefore, these ghosts will be driven by water ghosts.”

“Those who eat people but are not human are called tigers, and those who assist the tiger after death become ghosts who are called accomplices.”

“I suspect this thing was an innocent passerby captured by the water ghosts who turned into a ghost after the death of the people in Yinshan Village and used as a substitute, turning into a ghost.”

Bai Liu looked at the thing outside the bed, “When the passers-by die and forget their human form, they will become neither human nor ghost. But when they are accomplices of the tiger, they need to pretend to be human to lure passersby into the mountains, so these accomplices will imitate human beings, like now.”

The twisted humanoid monster outside the bed suddenly contorted its neck and moved the moment it opened its eyes and saw the two people under the bed. Its twisted spine made a creaking sound, and its twisted limbs straightened out. It slowly stood up while deforming

itself.

Mu Sicheng could only see a pair of bent calves slowly changing from being turned outward to being turned inward, turning into a pair of normal calves. Its toes turned from facing away from the bed to face them, gently standing on tiptoe, leaving behind the triangular footprints with only the forefoot that Mu Sicheng and Bai Liu had seen outside the house.

A pair of pale hands gently grasped the edge of the bed, and a smiling woman's face bent over, appearing from under the bed. She waved to Mu Sicheng under the bed tenderly and amiably, with an eerie smile on her face. "Come out."

"Why are you hiding under the bed when you're a guest at my house? Come out."

The woman had a normal face with all the right facial features. Her voice was very friendly as if she was an ordinary woman who was genuinely welcoming her neighbors. The strange thing was that her eyes had only whites.

Mu Sicheng got goosebumps. "It transformed from a ghost into a human right in front of me to trick me! Why does it think I would be fooled?"

"Maybe they think you're not very smart and easily fooled," Bai Liu said.

Mu Sicheng looked at Bai Liu speechlessly, "How do you know she is a ghost?"

Bai Liu replied, "It is recorded in the Maoshan Evil Art Handbook."

Mu Sicheng also felt something was wrong now. He glanced at the ghost outside the bed that had not come in, and asked curiously, "How do you know she won't go under the bed? She crawled out from under the bed."

"Because I saw this." Bai Liu moved aside to let Mu Sicheng look behind him.

A collapsed earth hole under the bed was revealed, which was roughly big enough for an adult to enter and exit. Next to it was a folded plastic coordinate with [7] written on it and [Left by the Archaeological Team of xxx University] written on the bottom.

Mu Sicheng looked at the hole in astonishment, “What is this?”

Bai Liu held up the coordinates and looked into the dark and gloomy pit, “This should be one of the coordinate points where the archaeological team excavated the ancient tomb. The tomb is below.”

The woman outside the bed was still walking back and forth on tiptoe, bending down from time to time to look at them with her empty eyes yet she never came under.

Bai Liu looked outside the bed, “This ghost should have crawled out of this hole, which means the tiger it feeds lives inside. Ghosts are generally afraid of tigers, so they dare not come in.”

“So, we are already in the tiger’s mouth!” Mu Sicheng wanted to cry but had no tears, “We are already in the tiger’s mouth, there is no need for her to catch us!”

Bai Liu withdrew his gaze, lay down, and prepared to enter the pit.

Mu Sicheng held Bai Liu’s shoulders tightly. He looked at the dark pit. The stale smell coming out of it made him shiver. “…Do you really intend on going down?”

Bai Liu turned around and saw Mu Sicheng huddled up in fear. He reassuringly patted his shoulder and said, “If you are really scared, you can go over there.”

Bai Liu pointed outside the bed. The woman just happened to be looking down at them. She had a strange inhuman smile on her face, and her voice was soft, “Come out and be my guest, little brother.”

Mu Sicheng: “…”

Mu Sicheng followed Bai Liu into the pit with tears in his eyes.

The pit was very narrow. While a skinny person like Bai Liu could slowly pass through by supporting himself with his elbows, a big person like Mu Sicheng could only roll and wriggle his way inside.

The further he moved, the more dead and desolate Mu Sicheng’s face looked.

This passage was way too small. If something happens in the tomb later, he won’t be able to escape and will be stuck in this passage!

Bai Liu held up a flashlight and shone it inside. The corridor extending

into the pit seemed to have no bottom. Mu Sicheng felt that they had been crawling inside for a while yet there was no obvious change in the surroundings except that it became increasingly humid and a little more spacious.

“Mu Sicheng.” Bai Liu, who was crawling in front, turned around and said, “You go ahead. My phone is running low on battery. I’ll need some light when we get out later. Let’s use the night mode on your camera to explore the way.”

The passage was now wide enough for Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng to pass through.

Mu Sicheng shuddered when he turned on the night mode and aimed it at the depths of the tunnel.

The camera’s night mode produced a fluorescent green screen. When all the dark and unknown things around him were captured on a small green screen, Mu Sicheng felt even more unsettled for some reason.

Mu Sicheng asked in a trembling voice, “Bai Liu, how long have we been crawling?”

Bai Liu glanced at his phone and said, “It’s been almost an hour. It’s past ten now. We need to get out quickly, otherwise it will be more dangerous when it gets dark.”

Mu Sicheng was frightened, and muttered quietly, “Are normal archaeological corridors this long….?”

But even though he was muttering, because he didn’t want to face the evil spirit outside the bed, Mu Sicheng braced himself and went forward with his camera in hand. He stared at the scene in the camera and suddenly paused.

“Bai Liu…” Mu Sicheng turned his head stiffly, “The passage just moved.”

On the green screen of the camera, Mu Sicheng clearly saw the passage swaying left and right as if something was crawling on both sides.

Bai Liu was unmoved, “Yeah, I saw it earlier.”

After Mu Sicheng realized that Bai Liu didn’t take this change seriously at all, he continued to crawl inside heartbroken.

The passage in the camera was shaking more and more frequently. Mu Sicheng could feel that the things crawling around were getting closer and closer to them. He could even hear the sounds.

Thump thump thump… Thump thump thump…

Mu Sicheng was familiar with this sound. He had just heard it last night. It was the sound of someone pounding on the coffin lid inside the coffin.

The width of the passage was now wide enough for Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng to crawl side by side. Bai Liu glanced at the camera held by Mu Sicheng, then suddenly covered Mu Sicheng's mouth and nose, turning them to one side of the passage.

Bai Liu warned coldly, "Don't move, something is crawling out."

Mu Sicheng was like an ice sculpture, holding the camera motionlessly.

From afar, there was a rustling sound of someone digging the soil with their hands and feet. Mu Sicheng held his breath and held up the screen. He stared at the green screen. Suddenly, in the darkness, an arm with the palm and back of the hand completely reversed appeared and stretched into the camera screen.

A face with unclear facial features appeared in the camera. The head was tilted at a strange angle, the spine was on the belly, and the back was soft flesh. It swayed as it crawled, with its knees completely bent inward, and it crawled past him in a posture that Mu Sicheng was completely unable to describe in words.

When Mu Sicheng was just about to breathe a sigh of relief after the evil spirit had completely passed by, his pupils suddenly shrank.

This evil ghost was dragging a coffin behind him!

The coffin was dragged out by the ghost, and a constant "thump thump thump, thump thump thump" sound came from inside.

The moment they passed by Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng, the thumping sound suddenly stopped.

The lid of the coffin lifted, and a pair of pale, delicate hands stretched out from the edge. The nails were painted a brilliant shade of peach.

The woman—like the bride in the coffin inside the temple—was veiled, her upper body slightly raised. Though the cover obscured her face, Mu Sicheng had the unsettling feeling that she was staring directly at him and the pit.

She tapped the coffin lid twice more with her fingers, producing a hollow thump.

In response, the ghost dragging the coffin ahead of them seemed to receive some kind of command. It slowly turned its head back, its face splitting open—eyes and mouth stretching into gaping slits. Its bloodshot gaze locked onto Mu Sicheng, who was barely ten centimeters away. Then, with a sickening crack, its bones began twisting and contorting.

"We've been spotted—run!" Bai Liu shouted without hesitation, darting forward on his belly.

At his command, both Mu Sicheng and the ghosts surged into motion —some flying, some crawling.

Panicked, Mu Sicheng let out a cry and scrambled after Bai Liu. Fortunately, the tunnel was wide enough for them to move in a half-crouch, allowing them to advance much faster than before.

Behind them, the pale, distorted form of the ghost lunged forward, its body twisting like soft clay being reshaped.

Mu Sicheng risked a glance back—and instantly regretted it. His breath caught in his throat, his body moving on sheer terror alone.

But the narrow passageway limited his speed. The ghosts, moving on all fours, were gaining on him. Just as the exit came into view, a sharp pain shot through his ankle—teeth sinking into his flesh.

Mu Sicheng barely had time to make a sound before he was yanked backward, dragged into the darkness.

Without hesitation, Bai Liu turned and grabbed his outstretched hand. He bit the tip of his tongue, dipping his finger into the blood before

tracing a talisman onto Mu Sicheng's wrist. His voice was calm as he chanted:

"Thundering order, like star fire… Yin soul covers the body, Yin soul entangles the road, Yin and Yang are separated. Break!"

Mu Sicheng's mind went blank. On instinct, he pressed his hand—still marked with Bai Liu's talisman—against the ghost pinning him down.

The talisman pulsed. A ripple of invisible force erupted from Mu Sicheng's hand, instantly severing the connection between him and the ghost.

The creature let out an ear-piercing wail and lunged forward again—but then, it abruptly froze. Its head twisted a full 360 degrees, the slits of its eyes and mouth slowly vanishing, as if erased.

It could no longer see them.

Mu Sicheng pressed himself against the tunnel wall, barely daring to breathe.

The ghost sniffed at the air, shifting back and forth as though separated from them by an invisible barrier. Unable to locate its prey, it finally retreated.

Mu Sicheng collapsed to the ground, panting heavily. In a daze, he raised his camera. "G-go… let's go…."

Bai Liu took the camera from him, then crouched down, using the dim light to inspect Mu Sicheng's injured ankle. He tore a strip from Mu Sicheng's clothing and began wrapping the wound. His fingers briefly paused.

The ghost's teeth didn't look very clean… could Mu Sicheng get rabies from this?

Rabies, as far as Bai Liu recalled, had a fatality rate of nearly 100% if untreated within 24 hours…

Mu Sicheng exhaled shakily, wiping the cold sweat from his face. "What was that just now? What did you use to keep the ghosts away?"

Bai Liu met his gaze. "A talisman—[Yin and Yang Road Separation Talisman]. It divides the yin and yang worlds, creating a space in between so that anything on either side can't touch each other."

Mu Sicheng frowned. "If you had something that useful, why didn't you use it earlier? We wouldn't have had to run like stray dogs—"

Bai Liu paused before replying. "There are two types of [Yin and Yang Road Separation Talismans]. The orthodox kind is used for protection—it places the user in the Yang world, forcing evil entities back into the Yin world."

Mu Sicheng's face grew stiff. "Yours isn't…?"

Bai Liu looked at him with something almost like pity. "No. Mine is unorthodox. It's used to release evil things—to push them into the Yang world. The person who performs the ritual… is the one trapped in the Netherworld."

A beat of silence.

"So now…" Bai Liu exhaled. "We're stuck in the underworld."

Mu Sicheng whipped his head around to where he had just used the talisman. He shone his camera over the ground and, sure enough, a faint trail—like a road—had been left behind.

That ghost from earlier hadn't been able to cross it.

Still unconvinced, Mu Sicheng limped over and attempted to step across.

But no matter how hard he tried, he remained stuck in place—just like the ghost.

For the first time in his life, he wished he and that damn ghost were standing on the same side.

Mu Sicheng stared grimly at the other end of the path, then turned back to Bai Liu with tears welling up in his eyes.

"…How do I break this [Yin and Yang Separation Talisman]?"

Bai Liu patted his shoulder in what was supposed to be a reassuring gesture. "Don't worry, it's easy to break."

"We just have to wait until midnight. When yin and yang naturally meet, the path will lose its effect, and we'll be able to return to the yang world."

Mu Sicheng glanced at the time and let out a hollow, almost tearful

laugh.

"…Great. Just twelve more hours to go."

"If we can survive that long, we'll be free when night falls."

Bai Liu's gaze flickered for a brief moment.

They say the first twelve hours after being bitten by a rabid animal is the best window for vaccination…

Let’s just hope that ghost wasn’t carrying anything.

The tunnel gradually widened until it was tall enough for Bai Liu to walk upright. Mu Sicheng, however, still had to keep his head slightly lowered.

He glanced at the back of Bai Liu’s head as he walked ahead and muttered under his breath, "…I really thought you weren’t going to save me."

Bai Liu never stopped moving. He hadn't even turned around once.

"I wasn’t planning to." His voice was matter-of-fact. Then, he finally glanced at Mu Sicheng. "But you saved me first, didn’t you? I only got bitten because you pulled me out of the way."

Mu Sicheng huffed, shivering for some reason. "Fine, count that as your conscience."

Bai Liu looked away. "I wouldn’t call it conscience. I just keep my promises."

As they walked, the muddy tunnel walls slowly revealed a more structured form. The dried earth on the walls crumbled, and the damp ground beneath them turned into a sticky, sludge-like texture that squelched under their steps.

The once irregularly shaped passage had become a rectangular corridor, about a meter wide and two meters high. Though it was slightly more spacious than before, it was still narrow enough that two people walking side by side would feel cramped.

Bai Liu tilted his head, examining the space. He stretched out his arms in front of him, measuring.

"This is about the right size for a coffin to stand up and pass through."

A shiver ran down Mu Sicheng's spine. "Can you use literally any other unit of measurement?"

Bai Liu paused, considering. "This passage could fit about one and a half people walking side by side."

Mu Sicheng: "…"

Thanks, that's so much more comforting.

After nearly three hours of walking, the exit of the passage finally appeared before them.

It was a dark, double-opened stone tomb door, with a cross-eyed, open-eyed, clawed statue of the San Qing Heavenly Father standing on one side. The door was not fully closed but had a gap wide enough for one person to pass through.

Bai Liu turned on his flashlight and shone it on the stone door. "There are no signs of it being broken open forcibly from the outside, nor any visible damage. It must have opened naturally."

Mu Sicheng, holding his camera up to the tomb door, frowned. "Shouldn't such an ancient tomb door be sealed shut? Can they really open on their own?"

Bai Liu slid through the tomb door, holding his flashlight high. He glanced at the sides of the door. "It opens from the inside."

There were two lifting buttons, one on the left and one on the right of the door's interior. Attached to each button was a string leading to the stone door—a very simple mechanism that was clearly designed to open the door with just a press.

Mu Sicheng's heart skipped a beat as he watched, and he swallowed hard. "…What the hell? Why would there be a button to open the tomb door from the inside? The tomb is full of dead bodies! How could it open by itself?"

Bai Liu casually scanned the area and replied, "That can only mean the person who built the tomb knew that the bodies inside would one day be able to open the door themselves and walk out."

After surveying the area, Bai Liu pulled two red candles, two candlesticks, and a box of matches from his backpack—items he had picked up from the temple's altar earlier that morning.

He fixed the candles into the candlesticks, handed one to Mu Sicheng, and lit it with a match.

Mu Sicheng slung his camera around his neck, took the candlestick, and looked at Bai Liu in confusion. "Are we using candles now? It's not like it's very well-lit in here."

Bai Liu held up his own candlestick, the flickering flame casting an eerie greenish hue. "It's not just about the lighting," he said flatly.

"Do you remember where we are?"

Mu Sicheng looked around at the cramped surroundings. "In the tomb?"

Bai Liu scanned him with a serious look. "Not just in the tomb. We're on the road to the underworld."

"In the underworld, fireless light can't distinguish between the living and the dead. This means that with a torch, you can't tell whether someone is human or a ghost. Only firelight, like that from a candle, can make the distinction."

"So here, the candle that casts a shadow belongs to a human, and the one without a shadow is a ghost."

Mu Sicheng's heart raced. "Wait, aren't we the only ones here? Why do we need a candle to tell us apart?"

Bai Liu held up the candle, its light illuminating his face in a way that made him seem unnaturally still—there was no visible sign of life. "What if I'm not actually me?"

Mu Sicheng, startled, instinctively stepped back, raising his candle to shine a light on Bai Liu. He let out a relieved sigh when he saw Bai Liu's shadow on the wall and snapped, "Don't mess with me!"

Bai Liu turned his head and walked forward without a word. "I'm not messing with you. Ghosts can take on human forms. If you meet a ghost that looks like me, how would you identify it without a candle?"

"Also, there's the [Mountain Ghosts Blow Out Lamps] rule. If your lamp goes out in the tomb, don't go further. It means either a ghost blew out your candle, or the air around you has become too thin to keep it burning."

Mu Sicheng shivered. "What if the candle does go out?"

"No." Bai Liu's voice was calm. "This is the underworld—the land of ghosts. If we last even a little longer, we've done our part. What else can we do?"

"If a ghost blows out your candle, just go with it and try to hold on as long as you can..."

Before Bai Liu could finish his sentence, Mu Sicheng clearly saw a pair of small hands—made of greaseproof paper—resting on Bai Liu's shoulders. A paper-mâché face peeked out of the shadows behind them.

The figure was ghostly pale, with two bright red blushes on its cheeks the size of a child's fists. It wore a red onyx melon cap and a long green-and-black coat, its face drawn with a wide, cheerful smile.

Mu Sicheng could almost hear the eerie sound of paper creaking as the figure leaned over Bai Liu's shoulder and blew out the candle he was holding.

At the same time, Mu Sicheng felt something cold cover his eyes, followed by the sound of sharp laughter—something had climbed onto his shoulder.

Soon, the candle in Mu Sicheng's hand was extinguished.

The tomb plunged into an impenetrable darkness.

Mu Sicheng shouted in the darkness with a trembling voice, “Bai Liu?”

Then, he heard four or five voices of “Bai Liu” answering him in different tones.

“Hmm.”

“Hmm.”

“What?”

“I’m here.”

“Bai Liu’s” emotionless voice echoed in the tomb. Mu Sicheng’s hair stood on end. He took a step back, raised the camera to the front, and turned on the night vision mode.

On the green screen, Mu Sicheng saw a scene that made his hair stand on end.

In the tomb’s narrow passage, Bai Liu stood in the middle, observing him while four or five twisting and deforming ghosts crept closer to him. They stared at Bai Liu with their blood-red eyes and used their slit-like noses to smell the scent on him.

Their limbs and bodies looked like white plasticine being molded. Their heads protruded from under their armpits and their feet were folded behind their heads, posing in various twisted and flexible postures. But judging from the protrusion of the skin, they indeed had bones.

Judging from the postures they were posing… Mu Sicheng couldn’t imagine how a creature with bones could pose like that.

Then gradually, these ghosts became exactly like Bai Liu.

They stood in a row on tiptoe with their heads lowered beside Bai Liu. If he didn’t look into their eyes, Mu Sicheng could hardly tell who was the real Bai Liu.

The five ghosts suddenly looked up and stared at him with their heads tilted, a black iris slowly fell into their pure white eyes. They smiled at Mu Sicheng who was standing opposite them then turned their heads

abruptly and moved closer.

Mu Sicheng was so scared that he almost flung his camera away.

He subconsciously turned the camera to look around him, but what was shown clearly on camera the next second made him so scared he shrieked with fright.

Around Mu Sicheng, several ghosts were also transforming.

It seemed that these phantoms were preparing to transform into the appearance of Mu Sicheng — showing a “Mu Sicheng” face with distorted features, laughing at him with their teeth chattering.

In the chaos, a slender hand stretched out from the pale and wrapped body of the ghost, with a match gently held in its fingers.

A calm voice came from afar, “On the road to the underworld, follow the ghosts. When you cross the ghost bridge, hold your breath and wait for me to find you.”

This was Bai Liu’s voice!

Cha–!

The match was ignited, and the candlestick in front of Mu Sicheng, who was curled up in a ball, was lit.

The moment the fire lit up, all the ghosts and monsters around Mu Sicheng disappeared, leaving only Bai Liu holding a match to light the candlestick for him, looking at him quietly.

Mu Sicheng raised the candlestick and was about to breathe a sigh of relief, when he suddenly remembered the words he had just heard in the dark, “Wait for me to find you.”

He subconsciously raised the candlestick and shone it on Bai Liu in front of him.

The green firelight was reflected on Bai Liu’s indifferent face, and no shadow was shown on the ground or the wall.

Mu Sicheng’s back slowly tensed up. He held the candlestick and moved it before him, trying to keep his voice steady, “Where are we going now?”

“Bai Liu” walked forward and looked back at Mu Sicheng. The smile

on his face looked like it was painted with a strange paper texture.

“Going to the tomb, to find a coffin and carry it back to the human world.”

On the other end.

Bai Liu was holding the candlestick, and there was no one around him.

Upon entering the tomb, Bai Liu stepped on a flip trap door on the ground and stood on it to keep his balance without moving, waiting until the ghosts appeared and chaos ensued. Bai Liu moved his foot and stepped on one side of the trap door then slid directly from the trap door through a passage and fell down a level.

Before the phantoms could react, Bai Liu disappeared.

Bai Liu stood up, brushed the dust off his trousers, and looked up at the place where he fell.

This was a square tomb chamber, not very big. Bai Liu estimated that the length, width, and height were about three meters by three meters by two meters. The walls were covered with thick dust.

However, these were not what Bai Liu was concerned about. He looked around and finally set his sights on the hinged door where he fell – this was the only exit of this square tomb.

This was a sealed tomb.

And that’s not all.

Bai Liu lowered the candlestick, the light from the candlestick flickering as if it would go out at any time, but the faint light was enough for Bai Liu to see clearly what was placed on the tomb’s floor.

The floor of the tomb was filled with many wine jars neatly and densely stacked. The jars were sealed with square red paper and had red strings around their necks. The character “奠” was written on red paper using black ink, with two old copper bells hung at the end of the red strings.

Red string, bells, red paper, this is obviously the same packaging as the coffin that Bai Liu had kept watch over before.

The “things” in the wine jar probably aren’t something that Bai Liu wants to see right now.

In such a small tomb, Bai Liu roughly counted and found that there were about a hundred such wine jars, occupying most of the space in the tomb. It can be said that only the place where Bai Liu had just landed was empty, while the rest of the ground was filled with wine jars.

Bai Liu could probably reach the hinged door by stepping on the wine jars, but the jars were only sealed with a thin layer of paper, which would likely break if Bai Liu stood on it, and the cover of the jar would open. Before he knew what was in the jar, Bai Liu was not going to act so rashly.

In addition, the hinged door was shaking, so even if Bai Liu stepped on the jars and reached the door, he couldn’t get out.

The situation seemed to be at a stalemate for a moment, but Bai Liu was not too distressed. He vaguely felt that there should be a solution to everything here.

Bai Liu held up the candlestick and shone it around, this time he looked more carefully.

There seemed to be something painted on the mud and rock wall. Bai Liu held the candlestick and moved closer to take a look. He kept his body balanced so as not to touch the wine jars placed close to the wall. He wrapped his hands with clothes and wiped away the dust and mud on the wall.

The dust on the wall fell off, revealing a mural with faded painted patterns that looked extremely old. Many parts were so blurry that it was impossible to make out what was painted on them. However, from the inscriptions next to it, one could roughly understand the meaning of the mural.

Wall paintings in tombs are generally used to record some important events in the tomb owner’s life. Judging from the murals, the tomb that Bai Liu entered should be the collective cemetery of Yinshan Village, commonly known as the ancestral tomb. It was not built for a certain person but for a clan.

There were many little red figures on the mural. They were neatly dressed, building tombs, worshipping the Three Pure Ones, and praying for good weather and a bountiful harvest.

Judging from the painting, Yinshan Village at that time did not have those strange joint burial customs. Most villagers died of natural causes and were placed in coffins and buried in the ancestral tomb.

Bai Liu paid attention to the age of the inscription at this time — about two hundred years ago.

That is to say, two hundred years ago, Yinshan Village was just an ordinary village. No villagers drowned, and there was no custom of putting unmarried women in wedding sedans and burying them together with the drowned people.

Bai Liu turned around, holding up the red candle to look at the second wall.

The little figures on this wall are divided into men, and women, old and young, standing at the village's entrance with miserable faces. The strong men had been picked out and seemed to be dragged away by something black. The place where these men were about to go was painted with mountains of knives and seas of fire, guillotines, and steel guns, just like the eighteen levels of hell.

The men being pulled by the dark, ghost-like creatures struggled to remain in Yinshan Village; but despite their vehement unwillingness to leave, they were still dragged into hell.

They fell into a sea of fire and a mountain of swords and were cut into pieces by guillotines and steel guns. The men screamed in agony. Even though it was just a simple and faded mural, Bai Liu could see the pain and misery of these men.

Next to the mural of the men falling into hell was an inscription that read: [You will never die a good death, and will never be reborn!]

Only women, old people, and children were left in Yinshan Village. They stood at the entrance of the village, wearing mourning clothes, looking at the men who had fallen into hell from afar, covering their faces and crying.

Bai Liu turned and looked at the third wall. The fire in the candlestick became dimmer and emitted a bluish-white light. The wine jars around Bai Liu also turned silently as he turned to look at the next painting.

But Bai Liu didn't seem to notice this and continued watching unmoved.

A Taoist with long eyebrows appeared on the mural on the third wall.

The Taoist had long black eyebrows, a snow-white beard, and a golden cap on his head. He looked like an immortal and had a sense of a celestial being. He sat on a cloud holding a horsehair brush, overlooking the world with a worried look on his face. On the ground were the people of Yinshan Village, dressed in mourning, bowing down to the Taoist.

The villagers of Yinshan Village begged and prayed sincerely, and it seemed that they finally moved the Taoist into heaven.

The Taoist priest, holding his whisk, descended from the mortal world step by step down the clouds and landed at the gate of Yinshan Village. People were kneeling on the ground at the entrance of the village, holding up the fattest of three kinds of livestock and rice wine in the village to offer as sacrifices to the Taoist priest who had descended to the mortal world.

The Taoist accepted them.

Bai Liu turned to the mural on the fourth wall. The jars under his feet were getting closer and closer to him, from being at a distance to being right next to his legs, as if to intentionally trap him.

The Taoist priest on the fourth wall suddenly changed from an ethereal appearance to a person with a green face and fangs, frowning eyes, sharp blue-black nails, and all kinds of yellow talismans stuck on his body. He looked like a suppressed demon.

The Taoist held up his whisk and beat the people of Yinshan Village with it like a whip.

The people of Yinshan Village were forced by him to jump into the water and drown, turning into water ghosts. He put unmarried girls into wedding sedans and buried them alive in a cemetery where they would suffocate to death.

The Taoist seemed to be planning some important ceremony. He dug the girl who had been suffocated to death out of her grave, dressed her in formal wedding clothes, put her in a coffin, and buried her in the ancestral tomb.

The bodies of the drowned men were fished out of the pond by him, and the Taoist stuffed the swollen bodies into a shroud, bound them with straw mats, and buried them by the roadside.

Innocent passers-by were constantly dragged into the pond and drowned by the bodies of water ghosts buried on the roadside. They became substitutes and turned into ghosts for the Taoist to control.

When the bodies of the drowned people had filled the pond and no new passers-by could drown in the pond, the Taoist finally appeared again.

His face became increasingly darker and drier with sunken eyes resembling those of a deer and ears that were pointed. His three senses-eyes, nose, mouth-had turned purple, his fingers were like steel, and he sniffed as he walked. He did not look like a living person at all, but a complete zombie.

The zombie Taoist dug out the corpses from the pond and threw them to the back mountain. He also dug out the remains of the Yinshan villagers that had been buried on the roadside. At this time, the corpses were almost rotten, with only some decaying meat and bones left. The Taoist collected these dry bones in wine jars, sealed them with red paper, red thread, and bells, and placed them in a side tomb chamber of the ancestral tomb.

This Taoist seemed to be using the tomb and these bones to set up a formation.

Some of the murals in the middle have become blurred, leaving only the last one, a painting of the closing of the ancestral tomb.

The Taoist was lying in the main tomb chamber with talismans all over his body, and more than a dozen bridal coffins were standing around him to serve him. The rest of the side tomb chambers were filled with various ghosts and wine jars.

The burial objects in a normal tomb were gold, silver, and jewelry. This Taoist occupied someone else's ancestral tomb and used extremely overbearing things like the Red and White Evil Spirits as burial objects.

Using the bodies of people's ancestors who were tortured to death as burial objects and building a temple under their ancestral home, such heavy yin energy was enough to affect the descendants living there.

This Taoist wanted to refine all the people in Yinshan Village into red and white evil spirits from generation to generation and continue to serve as his burial objects.

No wonder the villagers of Yinshan Village later died miserable deaths. This Taoist priest had cast such a spell a hundred years ago to trap the people of Yinshan Village. How could the people here have a good end?

The techniques used by this Taoist were extremely evil in Taoism, and extremely detrimental to one's virtue. This technique lasted for more than a hundred years, until the last few villagers left in Yinshan Village were forced to drown by this magic trick, but he still did not stop and even summoned back Bai Liu and other remaining descendants of Yinshan Village to continue to torture them to death.

Bai Liu's gaze stopped on the face of the Taoist lying in the main tomb chamber on the mural.

If they hadn't died, this Taoist would probably have to wake up if he didn't get what he wanted.

Over a hundred years, countless people have died tragically, and the resentful evil spirits have created zombies. What will happen when they all wake up?

Yinshan Village

Chapter Notes

出 means way out or out

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bai Liu looked up at the last mural on the ceiling.

This last mural was a long painting with a blood-red background. Despite being relatively blurry, it seemed to connect the things that appeared in the previous paintings.

The bride in the coffin jumped out, wearing a veil on her head and riding on the shoulders of some dark-faced people. Ghosts with distorted faces crawled on the ground beside the bride, while her wedding veil swayed as she walked to her destination. Bai Liu looked back and saw some bamboo racks lifted high by the ghosts, on which were piled many wine jars like the one under Bai Liu's feet.

The wine jars seemed to be opened with white arms clinging to several of them.

Some of the pictures in the middle were blurry, making it hard to tell what was drawn. All he could see was the inscription next to the picture: […In the Gengzi year, Renchen month, and Guichou day [1], everything was unfavorable. The Night Wandering God brought his night patrol officers to kill anyone who entered the village…]

Next to it was a line of small characters that said: [Specific matters are listed in the village calendar.]

The last one was the Taoist zombie. In his left hand, a peach wood sword pointed towards the sky while his right elbow rested on the dust. Half of his face was that of a compassionate Taoist who pitied all living beings yet the other half seemed to be an intimidating zombie with a ferocious appearance.

It sat upright on the altar while countless wronged souls and evil spirits writhed below it. These resentful ghosts twisted and roared in the black smoke, and their swollen and drowned faces emerged, pushing the altar forward towards the village entrance.

Countless people were standing vaguely at the entrance of the village,

holding swords, axes, chisels, oil pans, torture instruments, and dragging iron chains. They wore strange round-top hats on their heads and short black boots in the style of cow and sheep feet. They looked more like devils escaping from the eighteenth level of hell than human beings with their hideous faces grinning brightly.

Judging from their appearance, these little ghosts were the same ones who had previously taken the men from Yinshan Village away.

Upon rushing straight towards Yinshan Village, the little ghosts met the zombie Taoist priest coming out of the village entrance. The zombie Taoist priest glared at them and raised his sword to slash. The ghost bride and her servants also rushed forward and held down those little ghosts.

The two groups of “people” seemed to have engaged in a fierce fight at the entrance of the village.

The rear painting was blurry again, making Bai Liu look at the very end of the mural.

The entrance to the village was filled with blood, corpses, and bones scattered everywhere, leaving only the Taoist priest, who had turned into a zombie. He supported his body with a sword and stood in the middle of the village with a vicious and ferocious face. Black hair grew on his hands and feet, his fangs were bared, and his mouth was covered in blood.

The inscription beside it read [The descendants of Yinshan Village abandoned their ancestral tomb and built this tomb for the (—??) Taoist priest and ancestors.]

When Bai Liu finished looking at the last mural, there was no place for him to stand. The wine jar pressed tightly against Bai Liu’s calf, as long as he made one move, he could knock it down.

The wine jar had a narrow mouth and a thick body, the paper used to seal it was extremely thin. It had been left here for so long that if it fell to the ground, the paper would probably tear, allowing the contents of the wine jar would crawl out.

A secret room, surrounded by a bunch of wine jars – it seemed there was no way out.

Holding the candlestick, Bai Liu looked around calmly before suddenly stepping on a wine jar.

The wine jars that surrounded him shook a few times and gathered in the middle. After colliding with each other, the wine jars seemed to sense that Bai Liu had disappeared from among them, so they stopped moving.

Bai Liu also stood there without moving, but after a while, a human face appeared on the sealing paper of the wine jar.

The nose of the human face on the paper was moving as if sniffing Bai Liu's scent, and then the wine jars slowly moved towards the one where Bai Liu was standing.

Bai Liu waited until these wine jars came close to the jar he was standing on again, then he changed to another jar and continued to stand. He looked at these wine jars calmly and said to himself, "As expected."

These wine jars contained the bones of the people who drowned, which were the "bodies" of those ghosts. Those who ran away were ghostly spirits while their real bodies were still here.

According to Taoist theory, after the soul leaves the body, the corpse is just a corpse and will not change into another form to do evil. In short, it is safe.

As soon as Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng entered the tomb, they encountered many ghosts near the hinged door. That means there must be many wine jars in the tomb that are "empty", that is, the wine jars after the ghosts leave their bodies.

In other words, these wine jars will not move.

Bai Liu selected the moving wine jars and stood on the ones that did not move. It did not matter even if he stepped on the sealing paper of the wine jar and broke it, because there was only a dead body without a soul inside. The red string of the sealing paper trapped the moving wine jars. According to Taoist theory, these things were yin objects and needed the help of a living person's yang energy to break the mouth of the jar and see the light of day again. Therefore, they tried to use Bai Liu, a living person, to break the jar or the sealing paper.

If an ordinary person were to enter this side tomb chamber and move around, those wine jars would subconsciously block their way and be kicked over. As long as the jars fall over, the contents inside would spill out as desired.

As a result, in order to avoid the escaped spirit, the people who entered would cause havoc, causing more wine jars to be broken.

After the person's yang energy becomes exhausted, they would be consumed to death by the ghosts and become a wine jar as well.

In other words, once you enter this tomb, you cannot move.

Unfortunately, Bai Liu was a weirdo. Upon entering, he looked at the murals for more than half an hour. No matter how the wine jars moved around, he didn't move his feet at all. Only after Bai Liu had basically seen all the wine jars that had been moving in the tomb, did he calmly choose one of them and leisurely step on it.

Moving left and right would result in bumping into wine jars, but moving up and down would not.

Now Bai Liu moved on a higher level as these wine jars chased him. The more these wine jars moved, the more conspicuous those wine jars that could not move became.

Bai Liu remembered that when he entered the tomb and the candle went out, five ghosts imitating him appeared, as well as 5 ghosts imitating Mu Sicheng.

Assuming that these ten ghosts are all left from this side tomb chamber, it can be inferred that there are about ten jars in this tomb chamber that were safe.

Bai Liu glanced at the immovable jars in the tomb chamber, there were exactly ten of them.

However, he did not rule out the possibility that his inference could be wrong; if one of the jars was just unwilling to move, Bai Liu would be "instantly dead" if he stepped on it. Yet, Bai Liu discerned that he did not seem to care about the risks when doing things. He always moved in the direction of the highest possibility and maximum benefit — not even caring if he died halfway.

Bai Liu felt like he was a result-oriented person.

He glanced at the ten jars, visualized them connected in a line, and then paused.

Upon connecting the ten jars, the Chinese character "出" was formed, but this character "出" was missing a stroke, so there was no head.

The stroke was in the southeast direction, and moving jars kept "walking" back and forth at the location of that stroke.

This felt like a mechanism that required a jar in each place, but there were only ten immovable jars, and one was missing.

Bai Liu raised his eyebrows slightly – was this forcing him to step on a jar with something in it?

As if aware that Bai Liu was stepping on the jars, the moveable jars became more and more restless. Deformed human faces kept appearing on the sealing paper, with their mouths wide open and roaring silently.

A chilly wind blew back and forth in the sealed tomb, and a sickening odor of rotting corpses began to emanate from the jar.

Bai Liu took another step and moved to a new jar.

The wine jar Bai Liu had stepped on before was pushed by other moving wine jars. The moment he raised his foot, the seal was broken, revealing a twisted corpse curled up in the water.

The corpse was lying face up, its face so rotten that only a pair of eyes were intact. The eyeballs were misty as if covered by a layer of gauze, and its swollen, pale lids were open, staring outside with its eyes staring out in its death. [2] These should be the corpses of those evil spirits.

The power of the ghosts would be doubled when there is a corpse. If these ghosts were to get out of the jar with the corpse…

After imagining the scene, Bai Liu estimated the fighting power of the ghosts. He objectively felt that he would most likely die here.

Bai Liu kept switching jars while being chased by the wine jars. The seals of the immovable jars were damaged one after another. Bai Liu finally approached the southeast corner of the last missing stroke of the [出] character.

The wine jars were like a school of fish that had smelled the bait, almost filling up the direction of the last point of the exit.

Bai Liu stood calmly on the wine jar that was the final stroke of the [出] and looked around, looking for a way to escape.

If he stepped on a moveable wine jar and no exit appeared while the spirits trapped in the wine jar crawled out, Bai Liu needed to pay attention to the direction in which he was being chased to avoid knocking down the other wine jars.

Bai Liu stared at the wine jars that were shaking constantly in the southeast corner of the room. He quickly stepped on a jar, turned around, and stood on a jar in the corner, with his back pressed against the two walls.

The jar that was just stepped on shook twice before coming to a halt; it gradually began to tilt strangely in one direction. Five pallid fingers slowly stretched out from the torn red sealing paper and grasped the edge of the jar.

A head appeared, bent at a 90-degree angle and stuck horizontally in the mouth of the jar. The head seemed to be completely separated from the body as a sinister smile was plastered on its deathly pale face and long wet hair protruded from the mouth of the jar. Its body casually pulled out of the mouth of the jar with its limbs twisted in a weird angle.

Bai Liu could hear the sound of bones creaking and deforming even when he was standing diagonally from it. He glanced at the four walls and sighed with regret in his heart.

It seemed that he guessed wrong.

At least for now, there is no mechanism in this side tomb, which means there is room for Bai Liu to have a door.

Bai Liu didn't think he had guessed the meaning of "出" wrongly, the hint was quite obvious.

But there seemed to be no [way out] now, unless… something is missing. Standing on the jar, Bai Liu looked up at the ceiling where the hinged door lay, making a clanging sound.

Pale faces popped out from behind the hinged door, and ghosts crawled in on all fours from outside.

Bai Liu clicked his tongue and thought to himself, as expected.

These eleven jars must specifically contain ghosts in order to be opened. So, not long after he stepped on one jar and broke the seal, the ghost would return.

These returning ghosts were originally preparing to crawl toward Bai Liu; however, not long after they came in, they seemed to smell something. Bloody cuts appeared on their faces as they revealed a strange smile, before changing directions and crawling towards the jars that Bai Liu had stepped on.

Then, the ten jars that were stepped open by Bai Liu stretched out their pale arms and feet one after another and slapped the vermilion jars, and the twisting heads in the jars made a creaking sound of bones interlocking.

The eyes on the rotten face of the drowned corpse were staring straight at Bai Liu who was standing in the middle, and the smiles at the corners of their mouths were getting bigger and bigger.

Chapter End Notes

> [1] Gengzi year refers to the 60th year in the Chinese calendar (such as 1780, 1840, 1900, 1960, 2020, and 2080…)
> Renchen month is from the Qingming Festival to Lixia (early April to late May)
> Guichou day occurs in a sexagenary cycle, meaning it repeats every 60 days in the traditional Chinese calendar.
>
> [2] “Dying with one’s eyes open” means that they had an unresolved grievance before they died. It can also mean the literal way.

Yinshan Village

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When all ten ghosts returned to their respective wine jars, the side tomb where Bai Liu was located finally made a sound of twisting mechanisms. The bottom floor of the tomb suddenly sank, and after a few loud rumbling noises, smoke and dust came out of the cracks in the tomb.

The light of the candle in Bai Liu's hand suddenly dimmed.

The entire surrounding was wrapped in thick smoke. Bai Liu heard the sound of jars rolling around on the ground. Some of them hit his feet, fell over and broke, making crackling sounds.

Now Bai Liu guessed that all the ghosts in the side tomb had been released.

The ghost corpses, or more precisely, the spirits were crawling in the thick smoke. From time to time, a face without facial features would poke out from the smoke and move its nose to sniff around.

Some of the minions had two blood-red slits instead of eyes; while some had bloodshot eyeballs rolling around in their sockets as if they were looking for Bai Liu in the smoke and darkness. Then they crawled towards places where light shone.

Bai Liu exhaled and blew out the candlestick in his hand. Everything fell into darkness and nothing could be seen.

He could feel that the tomb was still slowly sinking, and he didn't know when it would stop. Occasionally, wet hair, hands and feet brushed past Bai Liu's back and ankles. He could hear the sniffling of breath and the sound of a tongue licking something wet and sticky.

The cold feeling kept approaching Bai Liu, and it seemed that the ghost corpses were about to find Bai Liu hiding in the darkness by smelling him.

Bai Liu took two steps back, leaning against the wall before calmly taking his coat off and dipping it in the corpse water flowing on the ground. He proceeded to wrap his lower body with the coat soaked in

corpse water, put an empty wine jar that a ghost had crawled out of on his head, then huddled in a corner with his breath held.

The strong stench of corpses covered up Bai Liu's smell, resulting in the sound of the ghosts sniffing around to be more sporadic. Correspondingly, the sound of their crawling became more and more frequent. Bai Liu could hear the sound of jars and broken tiles being dug from time to time.

The tomb chamber seemed to be about to sink to a fixed position, and began to make creaking sounds.

Bai Liu could feel a few ghosts approaching him, sniffing twice near the mouth of the jar and then leaving.

Of course, there were also some that did not leave.

Bai Liu looked down through the mouth of the wine jar. From his narrow field of vision, he could vaguely see a pair of wet, pale feet standing on the ground very close in front of him, still oozing water.

Bai Liu slowly turned the wine jar on his head towards the wall, trying to avoid the corpse standing in front of him, but as he turned, the feet slowly tiptoed and walked in the direction Bai Liu was turning.

In the end, the toes of these feet were facing Bai Liu, who was holding the wine jar, and they were getting closer.

Bai Liu paused subtly, recalling the explanation of toes facing forward in "Maoshan Evil Art Handbook".

When a ghost points its toes towards you, it means it wants to possess you, or follow you home and live with you. That's why there is a saying that you should not put your shoes with the toes facing the bed when you sleep at night, because the ghost will step on your shoes, get on your bed, and sleep with you.

There are so many ghosts here, but only this one is persistently guarding Bai Liu.

Could it be that it wanted to live with him… Bai Liu took a look at the wine jar he was using.

The pair of legs standing in front of Bai Liu slowly bent down and squatted in front of Bai Liu.

Bai Liu could see the position below its shoulders. This thing hugged its knees with both hands and remained quiet for a while. Then its joints began to deform and its head twisted 120 degrees. Its entire head tilted and looked down at the bottom of the jar at Bai Liu who was looking up from inside. Its eyeballs were completely black.

It pointed at the jar on Bai Liu's head and made a strange gurgling sound in its throat, like a person talking in water:

"This is my… jar. Where's your jar?"

The tomb finally sank to the bottom. After a severe earthquake, the tomb fell to a new place. The main door opened and a dark corridor appeared.

Bai Liu quickly removed the wine jar from his head and covered the head of the ghost in front of him with it, "Just borrowed it for a moment, returning it to you now."

After saying that, Bai Liu turned around and rushed into the corridor without looking back.

Those ghosts discovered Bai Liu, the running human, and screamed — crawling on the wall to chase after him.

The zombies behind were also crawling very fast. If there was light, Bai Liu could see the afterimages of the zombies' hands and feet when he looked back.

At the moment when the ghosts were about to catch up with Bai Liu, he took off his undershirt and threw it forward — abruptly turning sideways and entering a passage next to the corridor.

The ghosts behind were chasing him relentlessly, but it seemed that in the darkness, these ghosts relied on their sense of smell to chase living people. Bai Liu hid in the side corridor and felt those ghosts running past him and heading towards the undershirt that had his scent.

Bai Liu breathed lightly as he looked at the corpses that were piled up in a white mass where his clothes were, their teeth clattering.

Soon the sound of clothes being shredded was heard in the corridor.

The piled up zombies dispersed, and one held up a wine jar. They seemed to have put the scattered pieces of clothes into the jar as if they were the remains of Bai Liu's body. They sealed it using red

paper with the character “奠” written on it and then turned around, crawling back with the jar.

It was obvious that they thought they had turned Bai Liu into the next ghost and were going to take him back to feed the [tiger].

Bai Liu raised his eyebrows slightly.

The actions of these ghost minions were so coordinated that they could tear up the “human flesh” that came into their mouths and put it into the jar. They didn’t seem like mindless ghosts, but rather like they were intentionally trained by living people.

But in this tomb full of ghosts and monsters, in Yinshan Village where the last descendant was drowned, apart from the four of them who returned home, are there any living people left?

Bai Liu was just about to stick his head out to see where these ghosts were going to send the jar of wine containing “him”, when a pitch-black hand suddenly stretched out from the side, covering his mouth and nose tightly.

“Don’t look back!” Someone warned hoarsely, “Something is coming to clean up the place!”

Bai Liu obediently stopped moving.

Soon, several paper figures that were only half as tall as Bai Liu appeared. These paper figures were giggling, with smiling faces made of ink on their faces. They held paper brooms in their hands and swept back and forth a few times around the place where Bai Liu’s clothes were torn. Their movements were stiff and rigid, and then they disappeared again.

After the paper man left, the person who covered Bai Liu’s mouth and nose breathed a sigh of relief, but still held Bai Liu’s throat without moving, his body very tense.

Bai Liu calmly took out a match, lit the candlestick and held it up to illuminate the person. “Mu Sicheng, why are you here?”

Mu Sicheng’s face was dirty and covered with traces of mud; there was blood at the corners of his mouth and around his eyes. His body was also covered with wounds — it was obvious that he had just experienced a fierce battle. He stared at Bai Liu for a while then lowered his gaze and looked at Bai Liu’s shadow on the ground before

he finally breathed a sigh of relief. He released the hand that was strangling Bai Liu's throat and leaned limply against the wall without moving.

"It really is you, Bai Liu." Mu Sicheng's chest rose and fell violently, and his eyes were blurred. "…I thought I had saved another ghost."

Bai Liu looked Mu Sicheng up and down and asked, "What happened to you?"

"Don't mention it." Mu Sicheng was depressed and scared. He squatted on the ground and said, "I don't know where you went. I followed that fake Bai Liu to carry the coffin. On the way, we crossed a bridge. The fake Bai Liu asked me to cross it."

"But that bridge was made of paper!"

"The bridge was full of ghosts carrying coffins, some strange paper figures, and some translucent things that I could only vaguely see the shapes of. The water was pitch black, with duckweed, black hair and paper money floating on it. It was obvious that if you fell in, you would not be able to get out."

Mu Sicheng's face darkened. "I did as you said and held my breath. I almost suffocated to death but at least I made it through. Then I wandered around and got dizzy. I ended up in a secondary tomb chamber that was connected to the main tomb chamber."

"This time the tomb was filled with coffins, standing upright. There were more than thirty of them, tied with red satin, and arranged in the middle in some kind of formation. I can't remember exactly what it was."

Mu Sicheng frowned and recalled, "That fake Bai Liu asked me to choose a coffin to carry out. Didn't you tell me to follow the ghost's lead? So I chose one that I could carry."

"I just carried the coffin out of the secondary tomb. The coffin was a little slippery and fell down. I bounced up a bit, but I was afraid of offending the body in the coffin so I said 'Sorry, this is my first time carrying a coffin. Please forgive me.' As soon as I finished speaking, a woman's laughter came from the coffin behind me, and then the coffin was knocked twice."

Bai Liu recalled, "That seems to mean giving orders to the ghosts, right?"

“Yes!” Mu Sicheng stood up angrily and asked Bai Liu to look at the big red satin flower hanging on his waist. “After the coffin made two noises, a bunch of ghosts suddenly appeared together with the fake Bai Liu and they pressed my head and put a big red flower on me, forcing me to marry the bride in the coffin!”

Bai Liu half smiled and said, “Are you married?”

Mu Sicheng shook his head fiercely, “No! When those ghosts were setting up the wedding hall, I beat them up in the chaos and then ran away.”

“So you ran away from the marriage?” Bai Liu nodded as if he had understood something and smiled. “The other party really liked you and chose you as her ideal husband, but you ran away without even rejecting her doesn’t seem very right, does it?”

“No, okay!” Mu Sicheng roared, “She doesn’t really want to marry me because she loves me!”

Mu Sicheng clenched his fists, his hands shaking with anger, “You don’t understand at all. I wasn’t just going to marry the bride I carried on my back, I was supposed to marry all the brides in this entire tomb — all those 30 or so brides!!”

Chapter End Notes

> Go see the fanart of Mu Sicheng and his brides: https://pin.it/6NdhVMeI4

Bai Liu stroked his chin and thought momentarily, “This isn’t good, it’s a crime of polygamy.”

Mu Sicheng was furious, “You only thought of this?! Do you know how much effort it took me to escape? I was forced to bow to heaven and earth with them!”

Bai Liu’s eyes indicated, “Did you get these injuries when you escaped and got beaten?”

“Not only that.” Mu Sicheng was furious when he said this, “I had almost escaped but when I turned around, I saw you being captured and marrying the more than 30 brides. I panicked and turned back to save you.”

Mu Sicheng became angrier and angrier as he thought about it. He raised his hand and slammed the wall viciously. “In the end, what I fucking rescued was a ghost. It bit me twice when I was crossing the ghost bridge with it. I couldn’t hold my breath, then almost fell off the paper ghost bridge and drowned!”

Bai Liu took a quick look and found that there were indeed two teeth marks and blood stains on Mu Sicheng’s shoulder.

“Didn’t you use the candlestick to shine on the other person?” Bai Liu asked.

Mu Sicheng glanced at Bai Liu with resentment: “When I was getting married, all my belongings were confiscated and the candlesticks were also taken away.”

“Although the person you saved wasn’t me.” Bai Liu smiled tactfully, “It wasn’t very wise to turn around and save someone during that situation but thank you anyway.”

Mu Sicheng: “…”

Why… did he feel like Bai Liu was implying he was stupid…

Mu Sicheng muttered, “… What if it was you? If you die, I’ll be alone in this place. I don’t know how to get out.”

Bai Liu glanced at Mu Sicheng out of the corner of his eye, “You think

you have to rely on me to get out, which means that you think I am better at handling this kind of situation than you. Then why do you think I will be trapped when you can get out?"

Mu Sicheng, "…"

Damn, yeah!

Mu Sicheng scratched his face in annoyance. "This is the first time I've encountered such a situation. I was scared stupid…"

"It's okay. The first time is new, the second time is familiar. You will be able to handle it if you go again." Bai Liu walked in holding the candlestick.

Mu Sicheng was stunned for a moment and followed, "… Bai Liu, what do you mean?! You are not going to…"

Bai Liu hummed calmly, "I want to go again."

Mu Sicheng collapsed. He hurriedly stopped Bai Liu who was walking forward and said, "I told you there are a lot of ghosts over there. It's very dangerous. Why are you going there?!"

Bai Liu held up the candlestick and looked at Mu Sicheng quietly, "Because I want to find Mu Sicheng."

Mu Sicheng was startled, "What finding Mu Sicheng? I'm right here…"

Mu Sicheng's unfinished words were paused in Bai Liu's calm gaze.

The facial features on his face gradually flattened and disappeared, his skin turned pale blue, and the sound he made became buzzing and dull as if someone was talking underwater.

The faint candlelight flickered back and forth between "Mu Sicheng" and Bai Liu.

The candlelight cast two shadows on the wall. Bai Liu's shadow was clearly visible, but Mu Sicheng's shadow was layered and blurry, with many double shadows flashing as if it would disappear at any time.

"How could this happen…" Mu Sicheng blankly touched his face, which only had vague outlines of his facial features, "Am I a ghost? But I have a shadow…"

Bai Liu held the candlestick close to Mu Sicheng, turned his wrist

upward, and placed it in front of Mu Sicheng. Mu Sicheng's nose twitched twice subconsciously. He seemed to smell the scent of a living person on Bai Liu and couldn't help but inhale twice.

As the vitality from Bai Liu entered Mu Sicheng's nostrils, the originally blurred features on Mu Sicheng's face became clear again.

Mu Sicheng realized what he was doing only after he had sucked the life out of Bai Liu. He froze momentarily and took two steps back in panic: "Don't come over! I really am a ghost. I was just sucking the life out of you…"

Bai Liu pulled down his clothes to cover his wrists. He looked calmly at Mu Sicheng across from him who was going crazy, "You are not a ghost but you are about to become one."

"You are a disembodied soul."

Mu Sicheng was stunned, "A disembodied… soul?"

Bai Liu hummed, "In short, your body was severely damaged due to certain circumstances. It may be that you were taken away and used as a substitute, or you may be on the verge of death, causing your soul to leave your body and wander around."

"If there is no way to get your soul back to your body before we return to the world of the living at midnight then your soul will really remain on the road to the underworld and become a ghost in this underground tomb."

Bai Liu looked down at the time on his phone, "If my phone isn't broken then it should already be five in the afternoon and there are still seven hours left."

After Mu Sicheng moved away from Bai Liu, his facial features began to disappear again and his voice became muffled once more, "Seven hours should be enough."

Bai Liu moved closer to Mu Sicheng again, stretched out his hand, and let Mu Sicheng absorb some of the vitality on the back of his hand.

After being inhaled once more, Bai Liu's face turned pale: "Seven hours is the most optimistic scenario."

"You are now in a state where you are about to turn into a ghost and need to absorb the vitality of living people to maintain your soul form.

There is only one possibility—" Bai Liu glanced at Mu Sicheng, "—that is, your body is about to die."

Mu Sicheng took two steps back and raised his hand to cover his eyes. He actually began to feel that the light from the candlestick in Bai Liu's hand was harsh. He looked at his hand blocking his eyes and felt a chill down his spine.

He didn't know when his hands became like those of the spirits, crooked and upside down, pale and creepy, and water dripping down.

Bai Liu raised the candlestick and shone it towards Mu Sicheng, whose eyes had turned bloodshot. "The most urgent thing is to help you find your body, otherwise my vitality won't be able to keep your soul form for long."

Mu Sicheng was silent for a while, then asked, "What would happen to me if I can't return before my body perishes?"

Bai Liu glanced at Mu Sicheng and said, "You will die."

"Then you will become like those ghosts, gradually forgetting you were once human; your human form would be neither mortal nor ghost with your limbs inversed, unable to distinguish between yin and yang. Your only motive in the world would be to look for a substitute, becoming an accomplice to the tiger."

"But I can use my vitality to keep your soul alive. I just need to find your body before that."

Bai Liu stretched out his wrist and handed it to Mu Sicheng so that he could absorb the vitality.

Mu Sicheng stood in the darkness without saying a word and did not come up to absorb Bai Liu's energy, but he did not leave either.

Bai Liu did not take back his hand but kept it raised calmly, waiting for Mu Sicheng to speak.

"What will happen to you if I have sucked all your vitality away and haven't found my own body yet?" Mu Sicheng finally spoke, his voice a little hoarse this time.

Bai Liu calmly replied, "Living people without the energy of life are just like walking corpses. I will become a zombie."

Mu Sicheng pursed his lips and took two steps back as if he were preparing to escape from Bai Liu.

Bai Liu laughed as if he was seeing something strange. He asked Mu Sicheng with interest, “Why do you think I would give up all my vitality and turn into a zombie for you?”

“I will only protect you under the premise of ensuring my safety. I protect you because you are useful. You are one of the few living people in Yinshan Village and you obey me very well. You are more valuable alive than dead.”

Mu Sicheng took another step back, his voice clearly wavering, “… You are so capable, you can handle these things better by yourself, right?”

Bai Liu took a step forward holding the candlestick, then extending his hand towards Mu Sicheng’s face, whose features were gradually disappearing, and said in a light voice, “Didn’t the tomb robber named Kong Xuyang say that we are bound teammates?”

“If this Yinshan Village is divided into fixed teams and various camps, is there some kind of competition going on here?”

“Suppose this is a competition…” Bai Liu raised his eyes and looked at Mu Sicheng who was hiding in the shadows, “Then before the competition started, I chose you as my teammate at that time; I believe in my choice so you should be valuable and capable of helping me win the competition.”

“I don’t like losing, so I need you to be alive.”

“You now have two choices. The first is to obey me directly and absorb the vitality I give you to preserve your soul form. The second choice is to escape and find a place to die. I will capture you and force-feed you vitality to keep you alive.”

Bai Liu took a step forward with his wrist extended out, staring at Mu Sicheng stoically, “Which one do you choose?”

This time Mu Sicheng did not retreat.

After a long time, Mu Sicheng’s face showed some features. With a ferocious and forbearing look, he moved closer to Bai Liu’s wrist, clenched his fist, and took a breath.

Bai Liu's face turned even paler. He retracted his cold wrist, rubbing it before looking at Mu Sicheng and smiling, "Thank you for your cooperation, teammate."

Mu Sicheng was about to take a deep breath but when he realized that he was just a soul and couldn't breathe, he stopped in frustration, "… How long can I absorb your vitality before you turn into a zombie?"

Bai Liu thought for a while and said, "I should be able to hold out for more than an hour. After all, I am a young, strong man. My Yang energy is still sufficient."

Mu Sicheng looked at Bai Liu's thin shoulders and repeated doubtfully, "Young, strong man?"

Bai Liu smiled and turned around, "Any questions?"

Mu Sicheng paused before shaking his head quickly, "No!"

Bai Liu turned back and walked into the dark passage, "Okay, don't worry about my affairs here. I'm well aware of my own situation. Take care of your own affairs first. Do you remember when your soul left your body?"

Mu Sicheng hesitated for a moment, "… No."

Bai Liu wasn't surprised at all, he just nodded to show his understanding, "It's usually difficult for the person to detect when their soul leaves the body. You just feel like you're always walking – oblivious to when it ran out of your body. You think you're still alive, but in fact, at this time, as long as you look back, you will find that your body is lying in the same place, not moving at all."

"Let me ask you this in a different way." Bai Liu pondered momentarily, "Do you remember when your shadow became blurry?"

Mu Sicheng answered quickly and confidently this time, "My candlestick was taken away during the wedding ceremony. I am sure my shadow was still normal during the wedding ceremony!"

"That means your body and soul separated after the wedding ceremony." Bai Liu held up the candlestick and shone it towards the road in front of the corridor. "Then let's go back the same way. Do you still remember the way to the wedding hall?"

Mu Sicheng did not answer.

Bai Liu paused, lowering the candlestick in his hand; he shone it on the ground, the flame flickering.

A ghost with a deformed face was lying on the ground, faintly resembling Mu Sicheng. It was curled up in pain, spitting out water from his mouth and his eyeballs were completely black.

Bai Liu squatted on one knee and stretched out his wrist for Mu Sicheng to take two breaths. Mu Sicheng choked and gagged twice, and his twisted body returned to normal, with his facial features looming.

Mu Sicheng raised his head, and a thick layer of black air appeared on his face. He reluctantly answered Bai Liu's previous words: "I- I still remember some of the roads, but I can't remember some of them anymore…"

"It's normal. When you become a ghost, you will gradually forget your memories of your life." Bai Liu helped Mu Sicheng up. "The fact that your soul's yin energy is gathering so quickly means your body is in a very bad condition. We have to hurry."

Yinshan Village

After Mu Sicheng absorbed two breaths of Bai Liu's energy, he barely maintained his human form. He led Bai Liu into the depths of the tomb passage.

Although Mu Sicheng was walking in front of Bai Liu, only Bai Liu's footsteps could be heard in the dark tomb passage.

Bai Liu held up the candlestick to illuminate Mu Sicheng who was walking in front of him and glanced at Mu Sicheng's shadow cast on the wall in his peripheral vision.

Mu Sicheng's swaying shadow became fainter and fainter, like a wisp of smoke reflected on the wall.

From time to time they would come across one or two wine jars placed in the middle of the tomb passage.

Mu Sicheng carefully stood in front of Bai Liu and had him go around behind him so as not to touch the wine jar.

The wine jar seemed to be able to smell the energy of a living person. It slowly turned a half circle as Bai Liu walked. The red paper sealing it slightly arched twice, then slowly calmed down after smelling the ghost scent of Mu Sicheng.

Mu Sicheng breathed a sigh of relief. He looked back at the wine jar standing quietly in the middle of the road and patted his chest with lingering fear. "There were also these wine jars in the wedding hall. It would chase people. I wonder what is in it."

"That thing contains the bones of a drowned person, and it will chase after the scent of the living." Bai Liu looked at Mu Sicheng, "Do you remember when this wine jar stopped chasing you?"

Mu Sicheng was stunned. He frowned and thought hard for a moment, "…I don't quite remember. It seems that after I escaped, these wine jars didn't pay much attention to me."

Bai Liu pondered, "Then your body should have been lost on the way out of the wedding hall. Apart from you turning back to save me, did anything strange happen in between?"

Mu Sicheng tried hard to recall, "…I can't remember clearly, it seems

that I met some paper figures carrying something…"

Suddenly a strange sound of footsteps stepping on paper scraps emitted behind Bai Liu. The footsteps stopped and started again, like something was jumping down the stairs. Every sound was the sound of two heavy feet landing on the ground. It sounded like the person was walking very slowly, but it was almost instantly close to Bai Liu's back.

The candlestick in Bai Liu's hand started to shake, and the flame suddenly turned pale. He quickly pulled Mu Sicheng into a tomb passage nearby, hid behind Mu Sicheng sideways, and put his hands together to cover the faint light of the candle.

Under the very dim candlelight, a pair of strong, pale hands with sharp black nails suddenly appeared from the damp and dark low tomb passage.

The hand jumped again, revealing the body hidden in the darkness. The person holding these hands was a middle-aged man wearing a mandarin jacket and shorts, with a yellow talisman on his forehead.

This middle-aged man's figure was tall and strong, with an abnormal purple complexion, black lips, and sunken eyes. He stared straight ahead, with two long fangs at the side of his mouth stuck in the flesh. His knees were jumping forward without bending at all, and there was an old yellow talisman stuck on his forehead, which seemed like it could fall off at any time due to the jumping.

Bai Liu squinted his eyes and looked at the yellow talisman for a while and confirmed that the talisman drawn on the yellow talisman was the Yinshi Talisman in "Maoshan Evil Art Handbook", a talisman used to refine the dead into yin corpses.

After being refined, the Yin corpses can be driven by the person who drew the talisman, but at the same time, the person who drew the talisman will also receive backlash. If the person who drew the talisman is dying, these Yin corpses would turn around and devour their master.

Through the dusty jacket, one could vaguely see a large gash on the back of the middle-aged zombie, deep enough to reveal the bone. It had been stitched up roughly but it was clear that it had been done after death and the spine could be seen at the stitching.

This big knife wound should be the fatal injury of the middle-aged

man.

The zombie jumped extremely fast. In just one jump, it jumped high in front of Bai Liu, but then, a second zombie jumped out from the darkness behind.

This zombie looked about the same age as the previous one, both were young and strong, and there was a big wound on its neck.

The zombie's head was almost chopped off and was sewn back together but the skill of the person who sewed it was obviously not very good. As the zombie jumped, its neck cracked and its head fell to the side. Its black eye sockets looked straight at Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng hiding in the shadowy tomb passage.

The crooked-necked zombie's nose moved twice as if it smelled a living person. An angry look appeared on its stiff face. It turned its raised hands and jumped into the tomb passage.

Mu Sicheng stood in front of Bai Liu with a tense expression. Bai Liu hid behind Mu Sicheng's shoulder, hiding the candlestick behind his back with one hand and calmly covering his mouth and nose with the other hand.

The zombie tilted its head, opened its mouth full of fangs, and moved close to the left side of Mu Sicheng's neck with a resentful look. It sniffed twice as if it would bite hard if it smelled a living person. Mu Sicheng had never come into such close contact with a zombie before. His hair stood on end but he dared not move.

Bai Liu was hiding behind Mu Sicheng's right shoulder at this time, with his back to Mu Sicheng's back.

Zombies have poor eyesight, travel under the moon, like to eat human blood, and rely on their sense of smell to find people. They like to sniff at the places where vitality flows in the human body's seven orifices. Therefore, the "Maoshan Evil Art Handbook" records that if there are zombies in the area, you should sleep face down. This way, when the zombies sneak into the bed from house to house to sniff and bite people, they will not find you.

The zombie sniffed Mu Sicheng's face carefully, with a hint of confusion on its tilted head. It bared its fangs viciously, turned around abruptly, and reached towards Mu Sicheng's left shoulder.

Bai Liu, with his back to the zombie, seemed to be able to see the

zombie's movements. He moved a step and hid behind Mu Sicheng's right shoulder again.

After this went on a few times, the zombie finally got annoyed. It seemed to curse something, poked Mu Sicheng's shoulder with its nails, and after confirming that the other party was a ghost, it turned around and walked away.

Mu Sicheng was almost exhausted. He leaned against Bai Liu and let out a long sigh, wiping the non-existent cold sweat from his face, "They're finally gone…"

"They're not all gone yet." Bai Liu's voice came softly behind Mu Sicheng, "There should be five more, a total of seven zombies."

As soon as Bai Liu finished speaking, a new zombie jumped out in front of Mu Sicheng. Like the previous zombie, this new zombie was extremely curious about Mu Sicheng, who exuded the smell of the living. It stuck out its fangs and probed him several times before leaving in boredom.

As a result, after a while, another zombie jumped out and stretched its head to sniff the living person's scent on Mu Sicheng. Bai Liu grew accustomed to it and took advantage of Mu Sicheng's agile hiding to successfully make the zombie think that Mu Sicheng was just a ghost who had died not long ago and was still emitting life energy.

The zombie bared its teeth and muttered a few threats to Mu Sicheng, then poked Mu Sicheng's shoulder with its nails and cursed him out.

Mu Sicheng couldn't understand what the zombies were saying, but based on the zombie's expressions, he inferred that the zombie was probably scolding him, telling him to get out of there.

Mu Sicheng: "…"

Although this seemed to be true, it really sounded like it was swearing at him.

This process was repeated six times in a row. Except for the first zombie who didn't come to bother Mu Sicheng, every zombie that followed came to sniff him. Some even bit Mu Sicheng before leaving in disgust; they then waited for the next zombie to repeat the process.

Mu Sicheng, who had two holes bitten on both sides of his neck and face, felt there was nothing left to live for: "…"

Are you sharks?! If you take a bite and it doesn't taste good, can't you inform each other?! Why do you have to bite me again?!

However, Mu Sicheng now discovered that being a ghost had its advantages and he wasn't so afraid of these things anymore.

After the seventh zombie passed by Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng, there was no more jumping sound in the tomb passage. Mu Sicheng was just about to stick his head out to see if there was anything behind him when he was stopped by Bai Liu.

Bai Liu looked towards the dark corridor: "There's still something that hasn't left. If you hear any noise, don't go out."

Mu Sicheng held his breath and concentrated for a long time but didn't hear anything. However, his nose was sensitive and he smelled a very greasy scent of incense and candles.

Slowly, Mu Sicheng also heard a crackling sound, like the sound of someone walking on paper. It was fine and fragmented, not loud, but it echoed back and forth in the dark tomb passage and was exceptionally clear.

Bai Liu narrowed his eyes and looked deep into the tomb passage. A swaying orange light was flickering and swaying unsteadily, like a ghost or a spirit. The floating lights on the river made it difficult to see the distance, but one could definitely feel that they were approaching.

From afar, the yellow fire was getting closer and closer. At last, they could see the true content hidden in the yellow fire.

Mu Sicheng saw a huge triangular copper incense burner with countless tall incense candles burning fiercely. Sparks were flying everywhere, illuminating the entire tomb passage like daylight. Carrying the incense burner forward were some paper figures that were almost deformed by the weight.

Under the huge weight of the incense burner, the bodies of these paper figures were flattened and deformed. The faces that were painted with joy were also squeezed into strange expressions with piled-up wrinkles, and the clothes on their bodies were squeezed so tightly that it was impossible to tell what was originally drawn on them.

The paper people carried the incense burner and moved forward little by little. From time to time, sparks would float down and ignite the

paper people carrying the incense burner.

The bodies of the paper figures ignited by the sparks burned rapidly. In the flames that burned them into curls and deformations, Mu Sicheng could clearly hear the eerie laughter of these paper figures in the dazzling fire.

“Hehe~”

“Hehe~”

The swaying incense burner and the burning paper figurine passed in front of Mu Sicheng and Bai Liu. They were light and heavy. At the end of the team carrying the incense burner followed a paper Taoist priest.

This paper Taoist priest was the most exquisitely made one. Its face was lifelike and its facial features were delicately drawn like a real person. It had black eyebrows, a long beard, and a dignified expression. The only difference was that its eyes were without pupils and there were no eyeballs in the middle of its eye sockets.

In addition, this paper Taoist priest was covered with talisman paper. It had two fingers of one hand raised over its head, holding a golden bell, and the other hand holding a peachwood sword that was pointing at the incense burner in front of it. Its eyes, blank and made of a white ink-like texture, stared straight ahead. It took a step with its left foot then took a step with its right foot and walked straight forward. As it walked, it made the same sound of walking on paper that Mu Sicheng had heard prior.

In such a strange scene, Mu Sicheng’s courage, which had just expanded rapidly because he was a ghost, quickly shrank back. He pulled Bai Liu’s sleeve and asked in a low voice, “What… is it doing?”

Bai Liu looked at the paper Taoist priest and said, “The paper man is driving away the corpses.”

Yinshan Village

The paper Taoist priest walked slowly in front of Bai Liu. Unlike those little paper figures with stiff movements, the priest's movements were smooth and natural just like those of a real person.

The moment the paper Taoist priest walked past Bai Liu, Bai Liu pushed Mu Sicheng aside, matched the paper Taoist priest's footsteps exactly and followed closely behind.

Mu Sicheng looked at Bai Liu with a question mark on his face. He gestured and asked with his mouth, 'Why are we following it?'

Bai Liu replied with his lips, 'You have seen paper people guiding corpses before. Maybe you can find your body by following them.'

The paper Taoist strode forward with the peachwood sword in hand. It seemed to have no eyes and could not see Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng following him. After it passed through one tomb passage after another, Bai Liu heard the sound of splashing water.

After passing through the narrow tomb passage again, a river about fifty meters wide appeared in front of Bai Liu.

The water in the long river was flowing rapidly. Under the light of the incense burner held up by the paper man in front of him, Bai Liu could see the splashes of water hitting the rocks. A low white bridge spanned the long river.

The bridge was very low and narrow, its body almost touching the water surface. There were no guardrails on both sides. It felt like people on the bridge could touch the water's surface with just a hand.

Of course, there was no one on the bridge. There were only some shadows of Bai Liu, whose specific features could not be seen clearly for the time being, dragging slowly on the bridge.

The closer Bai Liu got to the long river and the bridge, the more he could smell a peculiar smell of the water. The short white bridge that looked to be made of rock from afar turned out to be just a paper bridge made of oiled facial tissue when he got closer. Coming and going on the paper bridge were some ghosts with dull faces walking on tiptoes, as well as some black translucent residual souls.

But these were not the most eye-catching things. The most eye-

catching things were the women holding white oil-paper umbrellas and walking gracefully on the bridge as if they were taking a walk in the rain.

These women stood with their backs to Bai Liu, holding oil-paper umbrellas. They were wearing white funeral shrouds, barefoot and waving white handkerchiefs in their hands. They walked from the center of the bridge to the bridgehead, swaying their waists with every step. They turned around holding umbrellas, as if preparing to look back.

Mu Sicheng held his breath, waiting for these women to turn around, but these women holding umbrellas suddenly dropped their umbrellas and jumped into the river.

The bodies of the women floated face down under the paper bridge, with their long hair spreading in the water. They floated motionless under the bridge, but when they crossed the bridge, they turned face up again.

The corpses, lying face up, had resentful smiles on their dark and swollen faces, and their eyes were fixed on the “person” still walking on the bridge. They turned left and right, looking for something on the bridge. When they couldn’t find anything, the resentful smiles on the corpses’ faces became more and more distorted before slowly drifting away.

Not long after, a woman walking with an oil-paper umbrella suddenly appeared in the middle of the bridge.

Bai Liu stared at the women walking on the bridge, and soon he realized that these women seemed to be the same group, constantly floating in a cycle on the bridge and under the river, walking on the bridge, jumping off the bridge and then floating under the bridge repeatedly.

Every time they passed under the bridge, these women would stare at the bridge surface as if looking for something.

As they failed to find what they were looking for, the women looked at the passers-by on the bridge with more and more resentment and viciousness, as if they were resentful of the “people” on the bridge for blocking their search.

Mu Sicheng was frightened by this group of strange women and quickly pulled Bai Liu’s sleeve. “…What are they doing?”

Bai Liu glanced at Mu Sicheng and said, “You walked across this bridge once, and now you don’t remember anything?”

Mu Sicheng was startled and murmured, “…I don’t remember.”

Bai Liu retracted his gaze, “According to the records in Maoshan Evil Art Handbook, these women should be sacrificial bridge ghosts.”

Mu Sicheng asked, “What is a sacrificial bridge ghost?”

Bai Liu looked at the women holding paper umbrellas.”It’s said that in the past when husbands leave home, the women of the family will go to the bridge everyday, regardless of rain or shine, waiting for their husbands to return home. But if the news of their husbands returning home isn’t good news, but news of their death, some women would jump off the bridge in grief to die alongside the deceased.”

Mu Sicheng looked at these women with some sympathy at this time, “So they are looking for their husbands to return home?”

“It should be.” Bai Liu glanced at Mu Sicheng’s sympathetic eyes, “The floating corpses that died under the bridge have strong resentment. The ghosts of the corpses will circle the bridge from generation to generation, always watching the bridge and waiting for their husbands. If they can’t find their husbands, they will drag all the men who cross the bridge into the water.”

Mu Sicheng was shocked and said, “Why drag me into water?!” I’m not her husband!”

Bai Liu nodded calmly, “Yes, they know that too. So if they find out you are not their husband after they pull you into the water, they will drown you alive out of grief because they have mistaken you for someone else and then throw you aside before continuing to wait for their own husbands.”

Mu Sicheng, “…”

“Shit!” Mu Sicheng reacted, he grabbed Bai Liu, frowning, “There are sacrificial bridge ghosts, isn’t it dangerous for you to cross this bridge?”

Bai Liu’s eyes darkened. “Yes, the Sacrificial Bridge Ghost is one of the most dangerous ghosts in the records of Maoshan Evil Art Handbook.”

“The resentment of the sacrificial bridge ghosts cannot be countered,

but can only be dispelled. If we don't have a talisman that can help us disguise ourselves as their husbands, once they find out that we are just two strange men, we will definitely be dragged off the bridge together and drowned, trapped in this cycle of going up and down the bridge."

Mu Sicheng felt a chill down his spine when he heard this, "Then do you have a disguise talisman?"

Bai Liu paused, "No, that is an orthodox spell, called [False Body Talisman], which is not in my book of sorcery records."

"Then let's not cross the bridge and go back…" Before Mu Sicheng finished his words, he suddenly spasmed and trembled a few times. The black energy on his face suddenly became thicker, and his limbs deformed as he lay prone on the ground. His eyes were red and he rushed towards Bai Liu with his teeth bared!

On the other side, in the tomb.

Kong Xuyang, who had a [False Body Talisman] on his head, held up a candlestick and chatted smugly with Yang Zhi who also had a False Body Talisman on his head, "Then Bai Liu will probably die in the tomb, right?"

Yang Zhi nodded and gave Kong Xuyang a thumbs up with unconcealed praise on his face. "Of course, Brother Kong. You really did a great job, really great, you led them directly into the tomb."

Kong Xuyang pretended to be impatient and waved away Yang Zhi's hand, "What's so great about this? It's just a guide talisman to let the Yin corpse lead the way. The main thing is that Bai Liu likes to court disaster. He dared to rush into the tomb without anything. Isn't this just courting death?"

"His tactical style involves willingly taking risks even if he dies. Can I say that I am good? Isn't this all due to the opponent's foil?"

Kong Xuyang patted the lamp ash on his hands and sighed pretentiously, "Of course, I still hope that Bai Liu can struggle to live a little longer. Otherwise, there's nothing to watch, just us passing through the monsters and decrypting the puzzle. With this instance being so winnable, how can I gain popularity without the attention being hyped up?"

Yang Zhi nodded repeatedly, and said with emotion, “I watched Bai Liu compete before, and I thought he was very awesome, but I didn’t expect that he couldn’t even get through a single round in the hands of you, Brother Kong.”

Kong Xuyang sneered, “Awesome? How can a laid-off worker in real life who’s just a loser, compare with me?”

“But Bai Liu has won first place in the Rising Star Ranking and first place in the King’s Ranking by relying on his own strength.” Yang Zhi recited Bai Liu’s achievements without noticing that Kong Xuyang’s face had darkened. “I didn’t expect that he would lose so easily…”

“Are you done?” Kong Xuyang glanced at Yang Zhi sinisterly.

Yang Zhi then realized that he seemed to have hit Kong Xuyang in the foot, and quickly tried to make amends, “But he is still no match for you, Brother Kong!”

But after saying this, Yang Zhi felt a little guilty because Kong Xuyang had never been first on the King’s Ranking.

Kong Xuyang was suppressed by Hearts the year before last and by Spades last year. This year, he finally had a chance to win but it was snatched away by Bai Liu who suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

Kong Xuyang sneered, ignored Yang Zhi, and went deeper into the tomb holding the candlestick.

From time to time, there were women holding oil-paper umbrellas, ghosts crawling on the ground and brides with veils walking around them, but Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi seemed to not exist, walking among these ghosts recklessly. However, these ghosts did not harm them, and the women holding oil-paper umbrellas even came over to hold umbrellas for them.

Only after they had sent them to a new tomb chamber did the women turn around and walk away slowly, holding their umbrellas, leaving behind a trail of water-stained footprints on the floor of the tomb.

Yang Zhi looked at the women walking away and patted his chest in fear. “This [False Body Talisman] is really amazing. The sacrificial bridge ghosts directly regarded us as their husbands and even held umbrellas for us.”

“If I didn’t have this [False Body Talisman]…” Yang Zhi seemed to

remember something terrible and shuddered.

Kong Xuyang also looked sympathetic, but cursed angrily, “These women are crazy insane. When I previously passed this instance, I almost died in the hands of these sacrificial bridge ghosts. Fuck, once they found out that I wasn’t their man, I became their enemy. What a bunch of bitches!”

Yang Zhi was still terrified, “Yes, and the only weakness of these sacrificial bridge ghosts is their husbands as recorded in the monster book! If you, Brother Kong hadn’t found the [False Body Talisman] in the Maoshan Evil Art Handbook in time last time, we would have all died in their hands!”

“Damn whores.” Kong Xuyang cursed sinisterly, but no one knew what he was thinking about, the expression on his face relaxed again.

Kong Xuyang sneered, “Didn’t you want to kill me last time? This time just follow me obediently and hold an umbrella for me.”

Yang Zhi rubbed his hands together obscenely and laughed twice. “Brother Kong, give me your orders, maybe these women can be good…”

In disgust, Kong Xuyang waved his hand to interrupt Yang Zhi, “Your taste is too strong!”

Yang Zhi tactfully changed the subject, “How far do you think Bai Liu and his partner can go in the tomb?”

Kong Xuyang became interested again after hearing this, “We have been to this tomb before. The most dangerous ones are the thirty or so brides in the wedding hall, the sacrificial bridge ghosts, and the zombies.”

“Of course, the scariest thing is the Taoist priest in the main tomb.” Kong Xuyang’s expression became more serious when he said this. “That thing is at least a monster with a panel value of 20,000 - 30,000. We must not let it wake up, otherwise we will all die.”

“After the seventh day, within two days, that zombie will absorb enough Yin energy from the last batch of villagers in Yinshan Village and start to awaken. After waking up, it will start to massacre the villagers. There is no way to stop it.” Kong Xuyang’s face was dark. “Last time, as soon as we logged out of the game, the Taoist priest killed all the remaining players trapped inside.”

“Many of those players are prospective members of large guilds. They had no power to resist that Taoist priest.”

Yang Zhi thought of the Taoist priest who also had an emancipated face, “It’s okay, as long as Bai Liu dies, the game will be over. They can’t survive the sacrificial bridge ghosts.”

“I hope Bai Liu and his companion can hold and let the game go on for a little longer. After all, Bai Liu is said to have a lot of fans who support him. These fans probably want to watch Bai Liu for a little longer.” Kong Xuyang shrugged with regret, but the malicious smile on his face grew bigger and bigger. “I am a person who is always willing to satisfy the audience’s wishes.”

“But if Bai Liu really can’t even beat a bunch of abandoned women who held umbrellas for me, I wonder what those audiences who support him will think when they see this scene?”

Yang Zhi understood and praised, “Why would they support Bai Liu? They are here to support you, Brother Kong!”

Yinshan Village

Viewing pool.

The audience was talking a lot as they watched Bai Liu on the screen about to walk to the Ghost Bridge, but the voices were very low and not aggressive.

When two very popular teams confront each other, at least in the viewing pool, the audience dare not say anything bad. After all, the team members who have not entered the game are sitting below. If they say something and offend the other side, it is not impossible that they will be hunted down afterward.

The precedent of the Clown killing the audience member was still there.

But it is inevitable to discuss the direction of the competition, and the current trend is clearly unfavorable to Bai Liu.

"… Tsk tsk, I think Bai Liu is finished."

"Kong Xuyang always likes to play tricks on his opponents after silencing the panel. I didn't expect that he also had a big card like devouring memory. Together, they are truly invincible."

"A skill that silenced the panel is naturally very hard to deal with. Many big guilds have fallen into this trap…"

Wang Shun turned his head back to the audience and looked at Bai Liu on the big screen with worry. "The growth rate of points in our gambling pool has slowed down a lot."

MuKe looked coldly at the Fanatic Lambs players on the opposite side. "The Fanatic Lamb gambling pool's points growth rate has tripled."

"The growth rate of the gambling pool points depends on the momentum of the game. Once it slows down, it will be difficult to increase it." Wang Shun became more and more worried. "The lower the growth rate of the betting pool, the fewer viewers are optimistic about you. This also means that the possibility of getting a golden medal of immunity from death in the later stage is smaller."

"This match is one of the most watched matches in recent times. Kong Xuyang is also a very talked-about contestant. Although I don't think

Bai Liu will lose to Kong Xuyang…" Wang Shun sighed, "I'm worried that if Bai Liu doesn't win beautifully and excitingly in this match, his popularity won't increase."

Wang Shun paused for a moment and said, "You will soon meet the Russell Cemetery Team. They are not going to come down from the field alive. They are using a suicidal strategy. If you don't get the popularity bonus in this game, it will be difficult to get it in the next one."

"Without the golden medal of immunity from death, it will be a tough battle with Russell Cemetery." Wang Shun smiled bitterly.

Liu Jiayi was surprisingly very calm, "Can the gambling pool be rigged?"

[Pool Rigging] was a tacit cheating method between teams. The extremely fast-growing pool will be displayed on a vertical TV screen next to the game login entrance. This screen is also called the [Team Points Growth Rate List]. Teams on this list will be quickly noticed by the audience.

If the gambling pool is growing rapidly, it means that the team that owns this gambling pool has a very good momentum and is currently performing well.

Similar to stocks and funds, a rapidly rising betting pool will have many viewers placing blind bets. They will rush in without asking any questions and place bets on the players and teams, thereby rapidly expanding the gambling pool and increasing the popularity of the players. After placing bets, these viewers will turn their attention to the team.

The concept [Pool Rigging] is that one's own team puts in a large number of points first, allowing one's own betting pool to rush to the [team points growth rate list], attracting a large number of viewers to place blind bets. This practice is also called [dealer rigging], which is used when the team is in a slump and attempts to make a last gamble. Simply put, it is to lure people in first.

If this approach fails, that is, if the players lose, they will be scolded for "taking a few others with them when they die", and the team usually has no way back and will be directly besieged by the audience who lost points and disbanded.

If this approach is successful, the quick, high-yield gains will quickly

make the audience who have tasted the sweetness addicted and thus, become more loyal to the team. They will place more bets in the next game and wildly increase the player's popularity value to give him a golden medal of immunity. This is a typical [gambler's mentality].

Liu Jiayi looked at Wang Shun and said, "Our behind-the-scenes financial backer Charles made his fortune by rigging schemes. Why doesn't he come to take control of the situation now?"

"I personally don't like this way of getting to the top. The audiences it attracts are too extreme and it's easy to get into trouble. It's also not very fair to these audiences…" Wang Shun frowned and sighed, "But I did ask Charles before if he wanted to set up a scheme."

Liu Jiayi asked: "What did he say?"

Wang Shun said, "He said he would not participate in the pre-season. In the pre-season, he would not participate in any of Bai Liu's affairs except to help fund Bai Liu's training."

"Charles's original words were, 'If the dark horse can't even run ahead of him then he doesn't deserve to put in more effort.'" Wang Shun took a deep breath, "In the pre-season, Charles clearly told me that he would not give Bai Liu any help."

Liu Jiayi quickly shifted her focus, "Then do we have enough points in storage for our own guild to set up the game?"

"It's far from enough." Wang Shun shook his head. "And Bai Liu clearly said that these points cannot be moved. He said that these points are the foundation of the guild members. If they are moved, it will easily lose people's hearts."

Liu Jiayi pursed her lips and looked at Bai Liu on the screen, "What is Bai Liu's current popularity ranking?"

She actually had no doubt that Bai Liu could win the game but… how could he increase his popularity when he was in a slump, get into the top 100 in popularity before the match at Russell Cemetery, and get the golden medal of immunity from death? This was the core of the game.

"Bai Liu's popularity ranking is now 151, making it into the mid-season tournament." Wang Shun replied, "But there is still a long way to go before the top 100."

“If we really want to set up a plan to boost Bai Liu’s power, we can only hope that a high-scoring audience will suddenly appear and place large bets on him.”

Wang Shun couldn’t help but let out a bitter laugh. “But these wealthy audiences have already been bought up by various celebrity players during the cheering season. They are all playing in the betting pool of the mid-season tournament. How can they see Bai Liu, a newcomer in the pre-season tournament?”

Tang Erda looked at the team’s gambling pool on the system panel, resting his hands on his knees, and said in a deep voice, “The growth rate of our gambling pool is almost zero.”

Wang Shun was startled, and quickly opened his system panel to check, “How could it fall so badly!”

“It’s not just us. The growth rate of the gambling pool of the Fanatic Lambs has also slowed down…” Wang Shun muttered to himself as he watched, “The growth rate of the gambling pool of all teams in the entire pre-season has slowed down… What’s going on?”

Liu Jiayi responded quickly, “In the mid-season tournament that’s being played now, which 2 teams are playing against each other?”

Being reminded by Liu Jiayi, Wang Shun slapped his forehead and said regretfully, “I was so focused on our guild’s battle today that I forgot about this important matter!”

“At the same time as our match, there is also a big match in the mid-season tournament.” Wang Shun looked at the battle table displayed on the system panel with complicated eyes, “… Killer Sequence vs. King’s Guild.”

“Now all the points in the game are pouring into the gambling pools of these two guilds. This situation is most likely the result of the competition is about to be announced.” Liu Jiayi stared at the skyrocketing gambling pool points data of King‘s Guild and Killer Sequence on the system panel. “I can’t tell who will win from the data for the time being. Wang Shun, can you tell?”

Wang Shun shook his head slowly, “The growth rate is too fast, I can’t analyze it.”

Mid-season viewing pool.

Two white beams of light flashed on both sides of the huge screen. The members of Killer Sequence and King's Guild walked out in a column.

The one walking in front of Killer Sequence was the Reverse God, and the one walking in front of the King's Guild was Hearts. After they had walked out of the aisle, they passed the host who was standing in the middle with a microphone in his hand and a blank expression, and shook hands very politely.

The audience had basically the same expression as the host, blank as if they simply couldn't believe what they were seeing.

There were so many people watching the game, and yet at the most exciting moment of the game ending, no one made a sound.

The whole place was so quiet that you could hear a pin drop; it was eerily silent.

Everyone stared blankly at the two teams walking towards each other in the center of the field as if they had not yet recovered from the game and had no idea what was going on.

The Reverse God smiled and shook Heart's gloved hand, "Very brilliant tactics."

Hearts smiled charmingly, "Isn't this more suitable for you?"

"After all, you gave up a singles match." Hearth raised her eyelids and glanced at the Reverse God with a moving look, "but you shaved our heads bald."

The host seemed to have just come to his senses. He excitedly jumped up with the microphone in his hand and shouted, "Everyone!! The result of the match is that Killer Sequence beat the King's Guild 22-1!"

"This is the biggest mid-season game in history!!!"

"In the singles match, Killer Sequence forfeited, in the doubles match, Killer Sequence ended the match early, scoring 6 points, and in the team match, Killer Sequence ended the match early, scoring 16 points, earning a total score of 22 points"

"You are quite courageous. You dare to do this when you are dealing

with us." Hearts casually glanced at the Killer Sequence members behind her and her eyes only paused for two seconds when she passed by Spades. "The team you are in still barely defeated me last year and this year, you dare to sacrifice my guild to pave the way for your own momentum."

The Reverse God pretended to be sincere and scratched his head with a friendly smile, "I just gave it a try, I didn't expect it to work."

Hearts was stunned for a second by the Reverse God's shamelessness.

The rules of the mid-season, pre-season, and playoffs were different. The core of the mid-season is points, the gambling pool and the immunity from death metal. Killer Sequence had undergone major roster changes this year. Although the five main players are still ranked in the top 100, the popularity rankings of the players are quite polarized.

Hearts and the Reverse God were firmly in first and third place but apart from them, Bai Yi, Bai Jiamu, and Liao Ke were hovering in the lower 70 to 90 circle. Their positions are very unstable. Once popular players start to exert their strength in the later stage, they will be squeezed out.

The reason for this phenomenon is very simple. Because Killer Sequence performed poorly in team competitions, the team's average ranking could not be improved, resulting in a ranking gap.

The same is true for Wandering Circus.

The only way to resolve this situation is a strong and highly-watched team competition.

The Reverse God made a risky move. He chose this team match as the one against the King's Guild.

"Single matches have always been your strong event. Every time, Spades can end the game early and secure two points." Hearts looked at the Reverse God, "I didn't expect you to give up Spades' single match and not let him play, postponing Spades' golden medal of immunity to the team match."

Hearts stared at the Reverse God quietly, "Spades is not good at team competitions. Your gamble was very risky."

The Reverse God smiled again. He glanced at Spades who was

standing next to him and obviously distracted. “People can always change.”

Hearts let go of the Reverse God’s hand, bowed slightly, and saluted gracefully. She then stood up and looked at Spades who was standing next to the Reverse God.

She paused for a moment, looking at the black whip in Spades’ hand then took off her red gloves and extended her hand to Spades. She smiled very elegantly and said, “It was a pleasure to compete with you this time, Spades.”

Spades’ wandering eyes paused on Hearts’ face for two seconds, “Who are you?”

Hearts: “…”

The Reverse God suddenly burst into a loud choking cough. He calmly stood in front of Spades, firmly and forcefully grasped Hearts’ hand then shook it up and down twice. “Yes, Spades also enjoyed the game this time!”

“Are you so happy that you don’t even remember who I am?” Hearts pulled her hand back with a disingenuous smile. She nodded slightly to the other members of the Killer Sequence, turned around, and walked off the stage with the other members.

The Reverse God breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Hearts leave the stage. He turned around and poked Spades on the forehead with his hand in frustration and scolded him, “You have played against her twice! She was so polite to you, you should at least remember what she looks like!”

Spades recalled seriously, “We’ve fought her before?”

The Reverse God: “…”

Bai Yi: “…”

Bai Jiamu: “…”

Liao Ke: “…”

Hearts, give up this man and look for your next love. You played in the finals with him once and he didn’t even remember you. He’s really not worth it!!

Yinshan Village

Hearts came down from the stage with her teammates wearing high heels and her expression calm. Many spectators swarmed around her. They had fanatical and crazy looks on their faces, yelling at Hearts with ferocious expressions and waving their arms as if they had lost their minds because of the extreme result of the game.

“I will always support you, Queen! You will definitely continue to win in the next game! You will win back!”

“I put all my wealth on a woman like you and you actually lost! Go to hell!”

“It’s okay. If the betting pool is gone, we can raise more! I will continue to support you, Queen! Until I die!”

“Go to hell! You bitch, did you let them win on purpose because you like Spades? Die, bitch!”

The audience was kept out by the members of the King’s Guild and could not touch Hearts. In the central hall, they could not harm Hearts, but correspondingly, Hearts could not harm them.

One spectator who looked like he was going crazy had bloodshot eyes. He jumped up and spat at Hearts fiercely, cursing, “Bitch!”

The saliva didn’t land on Hearts, but the eyes of the little nun following behind Hearts darkened. She was about to look up but was held down by Hearts without even turning her head.

Hearts turned her head calmly and looked at the group of spectators following her, with a smile on her face, “In your eyes, if I win, I’m the queen, and if I lose, I’m a bitch?”

The audience member was stunned by Hearts’ eyes, and his mind became clearer. He took two steps back in fear but still said: “…You lost the game, I invested so many points for you, and they are all gone. You should be scolded!”
Hearts smiled softly and charmingly, “Do you really think you are my fan if you use this logic to judge me?”

“Fans vote for their idols for harmless entertainment, but when you vote for me, are you doing it for your own entertainment?” Hearts’ eyes were alluring, and the smile on her lips deepened. “You pinned

your hopes on me in order to win more points to survive and satisfy your own desires, and I allowed you to pin your hopes on me. Our relationship is not that of a fan and an idol."

"It's the relationship between believers and gods. You bet on me not for me, but for yourself. Because you don't dare to go on the field, you put your trust in me, the god, and hope that I can win back your life, desires, and future for you on the field. Do you understand?"

The audience member took several steps back under Hearts' gaze, and finally almost fell to the ground, saying in a trembling voice, "…I understand, Queen."

Hearts retracted her gaze, turned around and left, and nonchalantly said to the member next to her, "From now on, if this person wants to bet on me, it's strictly forbidden."

"I will not allow such an incompetent person to place his desires on me."

Phoebe, who followed behind Hearts, made a cross on her heart, then touched the head of the pale man with pity. She prayed devoutly. "May God bless you to hell soon, my poor child."

After saying that, Phoebe skipped away behind Hearts.

As Hearts walked forward, the people next to her quickly reported the results of the past few days' competitions. The audience who had been chasing her to scold and praise her before did not catch up but stood far behind in awe.

"Fanatic Lambs vs. Wandering Circus?" When Hearts heard this, she raised her hand to stop the reporter from continuing. She asked, "Is the game over now?"

The reporter shook his head: "The battle is at a stalemate with Wandering Circus currently at a disadvantage."

Hearts seemed to have heard something interesting, and her red lips curved slightly, "Wandering Circus is at a disadvantage? Then go and take a look."

Under the siege of the frenzied audience, The Reverse God finally managed to escape with the Killer Sequence members. But when he turned around, Reverse God was filled with questions and asked loudly, "Where is Spades?"

Bai Yi pointed in a direction and said, “Not long after Hearts left, he ran away in the same direction as Hearts.”

“Why is Spades chasing Hearts?” The Reverse God became more and more confused.

Bai Yi stroked his chin and thought, “Maybe he was finally moved by Hearts and went to stop her from finding a second love?”

Bai Jiamu rolled his eyes speechlessly, “I think Spades will never be moved by Hearts even if he was beaten to death by Hearts.”

“What the hell.” The Reverse God waved his hand helplessly to interrupt the two people’s banter, “What else is there in the direction that Spades is going besides Hearts?”

Liao Ke handed the system panel to the Reverse God. “There is also Wandering Circus’s pre-season game.”

The Reverse God’s eyes flashed across the system panel and froze immediately: “Why is the Wandering Circus’s gambling pool increasing at 0% so slowly?”

Liao Ke shook his head. “The specific situation is unclear, but the Wandering Circus is currently at a disadvantage.”

“Count the points we earned from this gambling pool.” The Reverse God restrained his expression and ordered in a deep voice, “Go and see what’s going on.”

The viewing pond where Wandering Circus is located.

Wang Shun looked at the Wandering Circus’ gambling pool points growth rate on the system panel, with an anxious look on his face. “The match between Killer Sequence and the King’s Guild has ended, why hasn’t the growth rate increased?”

“It has gone up.” MuKe said coldly, “But it’s not us who have gone up, it’s the Fanatic Lambs. Their points have increased by nearly four times.”

Liu Jiayi also stared at the panel. “All the points that flowed back after the competition were eaten up by their gambling pool.”

Wang Shun frowned, “How could this happen? The results of the competition haven’t come out yet, the gap shouldn’t be so huge…”

“Someone dug up Kong Xuyang’s old account.” MuKe quickly read through the pages. “Killer Sequence won very gloriously this time. Their tactics were very impressive. The popularity of the Reverse God has risen a lot. Kong Xuyang, who had suffered a heavy defeat in the challenge match, was brought up.”

“The Fanatic Lambs members are making a big fuss about this old story, saying that Kong Xuyang is a more powerful tactician than the Reverse God, and that Reverse God was once beaten half to death by Kong Xuyang. Many viewers were lured into placing bets by this news.”

“Not only that.” Liu Jiayi scrolled down the system panel a few times, “They have made a big bet to rig the match.”

Liu Jiayi looked up at Wang Shun, “They probably thought they had a good chance of winning, so they rigged the game at the end of the big game and put a lot of points into their own gambling pool. Now they have rushed to third place in the [Points Growth Rate List].”

As he was speaking, Wang Shun looked up and saw a group of people from the Fanatic Lambs sitting opposite him waving at them with a grin. They first pointed at Bai Liu on the big screen and gave him a thumbs-up, then turned it over in contempt, turned it downward, and laughed in unison.

“A wandering hobo, loser, truly living up to the name.”

Tang Erda’s face darkened, wanting to stand up by supporting himself on his knees, but was held down by someone. Tang Erda turned around to see who could hold him down, but when he saw the person, he was shocked and exclaimed, “Reverse God?!”

The Reverse God greeted Tang Erda with a smile, “Long time no see.”

After saying this, the man shook hands with Tang Erda, nodded in a friendly manner to several stunned Wandering Circus members around him, and then very naturally called his team members to sit down on the side of Wandering Circus.

Wang Shun was stunned, “Reverse God, what are you doing…”

The Reverse God sat together with Wang Shun, shoulder to shoulder, looking at Fanatic Lambs opposite with an inexplicable dark look in his eyes, but with a smile on his face. He also extended his hands to greet the Fanatic Lambs opposite them. “Came to find Spades and

watch the game; also to confirm my own prophecy."

The Fanatic Lambs member who was giving a thumbs-up sign to Wang Shun and the others was stunned by the smile of the Reverse God and slowly withdrew his hand.

For some reason, even though the Reverse God was smiling at them, they felt a chill running down their spines.

"To confirm my own… prophecy?" Wang Shun repeated in a daze.

The Reverse God showed his eight teeth and smiled brilliantly, "Of course, to confirm the prophecy that Kong Xuyang will die at the hands of the most cruel and outstanding tactician."

Wang Shun blankly had a question mark on his face, "?"

As the Killer Sequence took their seats with the Wandering Circus, not only were the members of the Wandering Circus stunned, but even the audience was dumbfounded. They stared wide-eyed at the Killer Sequence members who were quickly getting along intimately with the Wandering Circus. If you didn't look carefully, you would have thought the two guilds were one family, as they were sitting so close to each other.

Bai Yi casually hung his left hand around Tang Erda, and hung his right hand on MuKe, as if they were already familiar with each other. He looked at the big screen with excitement: "Wow, a Chinese horror game, my favorite! Which game is this?"

Bai Jiamu disclosed it expressionlessly, "The game you were so scared of that you quit immediately in the game pool, 'Yinshan Village.'"

Bai Yi: "… Our uncle-nephew relationship ends here!"

Tang Erda was trying to shake off Bai Yi who was stuck on his back uncomfortably. He sat straight and asked seriously, "What is your purpose in coming here?"

Liao Ke held a cup of tea that he got from somewhere and took a sip slowly. "Don't be so nervous, junior, we are just here to watch the game."

"Where's Spades?" Bai Yi poked his head in the audience, looking for someone. "He must have come earlier than us. Where is he?"

At this moment, Spades and Hearts met on a narrow path before entering the viewing pool.

Hearts looked at Spades quietly, with the team members of the King's Guild standing behind her.

Spades looked at Hearts in confusion. He didn't understand why this strange woman was blocking him and preventing him from entering the viewing pool.

Hearts suddenly smiled, "Spades, you still don't remember my face?"

Spades nodded honestly and asked, "Who are you?"

Qi Yifang, who was following Hearts, couldn't bear it anymore. He rushed forward angrily, wanting to say something, but Liu Ji pulled him by the clothes. He clenched his fists, turned his face away, and endured it.

Hearts was such a fascinating beauty that you would never forget her in your dreams if you only looked at her for a second in a crowd. But Spades had played two games, and he still doesn't remember her!

Moreover, Spades could remember Liu Ji, who had the most common face in the entire King's Guild, but he couldn't remember Hearts. Moreover, he had just seen them, so how could he not recognize Hearts now?

Spades was simply pretending not to know the Queen of Hearts and deliberately humiliating her because she liked him!

Thinking about how the aggressive audience just scolded Hearts for losing to Spades on purpose because of her feelings, Qi Yifang became angrier and glared at Spades fiercely!

A handsome man is a disaster!

Hearts was not like Qi Yifang, she didn't seem offended. Instead, she smiled and introduced herself calmly, "I'm Hearts, your opponent in the last game. Why do you always forget what I look like?"

Spades calmly looked at Hearts, "Because this is not your real face."

"I don't remember the false disguises presented to seduce or satisfy a certain desire, because each time is different, there is no need to remember."

After saying that, Spades walked past the suddenly silent Hearts and said flatly, "Excuse me for a moment. I need to go in and watch the game."

As Spades walked past Hearts, about to disappear into the viewing pool barrier, Hearts spoke abruptly. This time her voice was neither soft nor light, but rather dignified and serious, "There's someone like you, related to the spades symbol and the black whip, who is a very important person to me."

When Hearts turned around, her expression seemed to change, yet remained relatively the same. Her wine-red eyes carried a trace of a young girl's innocence, "Your name, and that black whip on your body, do you remember where they came from?"

Spades paused and said, "I don't remember." Then he walked into the viewing pool.

Qi Yifang carefully glanced at Hearts, who was unusually silent, and then at Spades, who was walking into the viewing pool. "Queen, are we going back?"

"No." Hearts raised her eyes, showing the same soft charming smile again with her gaze lingering at the viewing pool where Bai Liu was, "In this game, apart from Spades, there are more men who can use a whip."

"There must be one that is related to the person I'm looking for."

At the viewing pool.

Wang Shun was as anxious as an ant on a hot pot, “The growth rate of the gambling pool has really dropped to 0! Yet the growth rate of the Fanatic Lambs has increased sixfold!”

“Hey, don’t worry, don’t worry.” Reverse God calmly pushed Wang Shun down with a smile on his face, “Fanatic Lambs has invested a lot of money and is still pouring money into the gambling pool. It’s normal for it to increase five or six times.”

“But if they go up further, it will be difficult to fill the gap in popularity!” Wang Shun was so anxious that he almost sweated.

“No.” The Reverse God looked up at the big screen. Just as he was about to speak, Spades sat upright next to him and indifferently continued his words, “Trust Bai Liu. These people will vote for him.”

The Reverse God looked helplessly at Spades who suddenly appeared, “Where did you go just now?”

“I met a woman I didn’t know.” Spades said briefly, but his eyes were fixed on the big screen. “Bai Liu, he will definitely gain many followers.”

Spades’ words were so certain that even Wang Shun, who had been anxious, calmed down.

“Our gambling pool’s growth rate increased.” Mu Ke suddenly raised his head and looked at the Reverse God, “Someone has invested heavily in Bai Liu, a player in our gambling pool, with tens of millions of points. Is it you?”

The Reverse God raised his hands innocently, “No, I haven’t had the time yet.”

Mu Ke looked at Spades again, “Is it you?”

Spades didn’t pay any attention to Mu Ke who was looking at him. He was looking down to open the panel and settling points. Then, with no emotion, he chose Bai Liu, the tactician of Wandering Circus, and then made a heavy investment.

“En, now was me.” Spades turned his head to look at Mu Ke and replied lightly.

MuKe: “…”

The Reverse God held his forehead helplessly, “MuKe is asking whether you made the previous big investment of tens of millions of points. Even if you invest now, you can’t pretend to be someone else…”

“If it’s not Spades, nor Reverse God, who else has such financial resources…” Wang Shun turned his head sharply to look at Hearts, who was sitting far away in a small corner of the viewing pond, and cried out, “Queen!”

Hearts waved at Wang Shun with a radiant smile and lazily pointed at her panel.

The panel looked blurry as it was far by many seats, but from its general structure, it was clearly a pool betting panel.

“It’s Queen who invested heavily in Bai Liu!”

The continuous large bets made Wang Shun dizzy and confused. He asked in confusion, “Why did the Queen place a large stake in Bai Liu?!”

“Maybe she’s attracted to Bai Liu?” Bai Yi made a bold assumption. He stole a glance at Spades. “After all, it’s time to say goodbye to the first spring and look for the second spring. Bai Liu seems to be the type that Hearts likes. He’s strong and can use a whip.”

Spades turned his head expressionlessly and looked at Bai Yi, “She can’t fall for Bai Liu. Bai Liu and I have already…”

The Reverse God quickly covered Spades’ mouth, smiled politely, and raised his hand to indicate, “I think the key point now is that the Fanatic Lambs are chasing the position, and they are still betting.”

Two consecutive heavy investments pushed Wandering Circus directly to fourth place, and the gap with the third-ranked Fanatic Lambs was getting smaller and smaller.

The faces of the people on the Fanatic Lambs’ side have begun to turn purple, but they have already smashed the market to such an extent that there is no way they could stop. If they stop, once they fall, it will definitely backfire, and the growth rate will be reduced to its original state in an instant. They can only keep chasing the positions.

The Reverse God narrowed his eyes and beamed amiably, “What we have to do now is to keep adding small lines to the gambling pool —

keep narrowing the gap with the Fanatic Lambs, but not surpassing them."

"Why can't we surpass them?" Bai Yi asked curiously.

Liu Jiayi glanced at the Reverse God and said, "In order to keep the Fanatic Lambs hanging, we'll force them to keep betting to increase their position, squeezing the entire Fanatic Lambs Guild dry. Once we surpass the Fanatic Lambs, they will not continue to add to their positions to maintain their momentum to suppress us."

The Reverse God groaned yet smiled, "It's not to squeeze them dry. I just hope they won't play this kind of heavy-handed game next time. It's not very friendly to ordinary audiences."

Next time they won't be able to play this type of heavy-handed game anymore, because the guild won't have any points. Isn't this just squeezing them dry…

Liu Jiayi turned her eyes away.

She felt that this Reverse God looked kind, but was actually quite ruthless and left no way out.

"It all depends on Bai Liu's performance." The Reverse God leaned back in his chair and looked at the big screen. "As long as Bai Liu can turn the tables, the Fanatic Lambs will not be able to hold a large position."

On the big screen, Bai Liu was pressing down on the back of Mu Sicheng's neck as he lunged towards him. With a cold expression, he stretched out his hand and let Mu Sicheng absorb his vitality.

The abnormal pale color on Mu Sicheng's face gradually faded while his struggling and roaring stopped.

Bai Liu's face turned even gaunter, and under the flickering candlelight, his blue veins were almost vivid through his skin.

Mu Sicheng came back to his senses, gasping for breath. He knelt on the ground and vomited several mouthfuls of black water with a strong fishy smell. He wiped his mouth and clenched his fists.

"… If I become a ghost, will I attack you first since I sucked your energy?" Mu Sicheng asked hoarsely, "Then you might as well…"

“En.” Bai Liu helped Mu Sicheng up and indifferently blocked Mu Sicheng’s subsequent words, “So before that, we have to find your body.”

“… My body is probably on the other side of the bridge.” Mu Sicheng looked at the paper bridge getting closer and closer, his face solemn, “But there are so many sacrificial bridge ghosts on the bridge…”

On the bridge, women in white clothes who were holding white umbrellas were getting closer and closer to them. Mu Sicheng felt a heavy chill emanating from these women.

These women were tall and slender. They walked on the bridge in a regular pattern with their backs to Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng. They walked slowly at first, but the closer Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng got, the faster these women walked.

On several occasions, Mu Sicheng even sensed several women glaring at them through their umbrellas, a mix of resentment and expectation, before leaping under the bridge with strange grins on their faces.

A fishy taste rose up in Mu Sicheng’s throat, and he felt an instinctive fear, “Didn’t you say there’s no way to deal with the sacrificial bridge ghosts? How are we going to get through?”

Bai Liu glanced at Mu Sicheng and said, “You shouldn’t be asking me this. I should be asking you.”

Mu Sicheng was confused, “Ask me?”

“Yes, because you have already crossed the bridge once.” Bai Liu said.

Mu Sicheng answered subconsciously, “You were the one who guided me and taught me how to cross the ghost bridge! You told me to hold my breath and cross the ghost bridge!”

Bai Liu shook his head slightly. “I did guess that there was a paper ghost bridge in the tomb for burial, and I told you how to cross the ghost bridge by holding your breath, but that is based on the premise that there are no sacrificial bridge ghosts. If there are sacrificial bridge ghosts, they will follow the body even if you hold your breath.”

Mu Sicheng asked, “What is following the body?”

Bai Liu explained, “When you go up the bridge, the sacrificial bridge ghost will think you are her husband. They will come to hold an

umbrella for you, follow behind you, and escort you home. This is called following the body."

Mu Sicheng felt a chill on his back, "… What if she finds out later that I'm not her husband?"

Bai Liu said calmly, "If you were her real husband, she would hold an umbrella and walk down the bridge with you to go home, but if you were not, she would drag you off the bridge with resentment and hatred, and die with you on the bridge."

"… Is it possible that the bridge-sacrificing ghost has stayed on the bridge for too long and has forgotten what her husband looks like? She can't tell whether I am her husband, and thus allowing me to sneak across the bridge?" Mu Sicheng hoped for a lucky break.

Bai Liu rejected it, "It's unlikely. Ghosts recognize people by their yang energy, not their appearance. Apart from the [False Body Talisman] that can change the yang energy of living people, nothing can deceive them."

"Then how did I cross the bridge?" Mu Sicheng was also confused, "I can't remember."

"No need to remember." Bai Liu helped Mu Sicheng up and walked towards the paper bridge with a calm expression, "Let's get on the bridge first. You could cross the bridge last time, so you can do it this time."

Mu Sicheng was shocked, "Why?! Wouldn't the sacrificial bridge ghost follow our bodies?"

"Don't worry about them." Bai Liu smiled, "They won't follow us."

Mu Sicheng was full of doubt,, "Why won't it follow us? Didn't you say that any man with Yang energy will be followed?"

"Because we are not worthy of being followed." Bai Liu looked at the paper Taoist priest walking in front, "Their husbands are back."

"The real husband…" Mu Sicheng turned his head and looked at the bridge. "You mean…"

Before Mu Sicheng finished his words, the first zombie driven by the Paper Taoist jumped onto the bridge. The paper bridge shook slightly from the zombie's force. The women who were walking forward with

umbrellas paused, turned around, and walked towards the bridge.

The umbrellas covered the women's faces, so their appearances could not be seen clearly. One could only see the hems of their clothes hanging on the ground being constantly kicked up by their quick steps, revealing a pair of small feet that were deformed by being wrapped, with their bones tightly wrinkled into a ball, or "three-cun (10 cm) golden lotus".

The women walked quickly to the front of the zombies, raised their umbrellas slightly, and held them up. As the zombies jumped, their little feet moved forward, their steps were silent and drifted away, and their upper bodies holding the umbrellas did not move at all.

Bai Liu watched the strange scene of women on the bridge coming over one by one to hold umbrellas for the zombies. "You said before that you vaguely remembered seeing paper figures carrying incense burners on the bridge. I guessed that you followed these paper figures to cross the bridge. Since you were able to cross the bridge successfully, and these sacrificial bridge ghosts did not follow you, that can only mean one thing."

"They followed someone else's body." Bai Liu looked at Mu Sicheng, "These zombies are their real husbands."

Mu Sicheng suddenly had a eureka moment and angrily said, "You knew it a long time ago, didn't you?! That's why you followed Paper Taoist directly!"

"You knew it but you didn't tell me! You think it's fun to scare me?" Mu Sicheng condemned bitterly.

Bai Liu answered honestly, "Yes, I have only scared people before but never scared ghosts. It was quite fun."

The ghost Mu Sicheng: "…"

Yinshan Village

After a moment of helpless rage, Mu Sicheng reluctantly gave in to Bai Liu's twisted sense of humor.

What else could he do? If Bai Liu hadn't told him, he wouldn't have even realized he was being played. So be it.

Mu Sicheng dragged Bai Liu along and followed closely behind the Paper Taoist. Not far ahead, seven women holding umbrellas walked side by side with seven zombies, moving forward in eerie unison.

Even with a paper Taoist priest standing between them, the sight sent shivers down Mu Sicheng's spine. He couldn't shake the fear that one of them might suddenly turn around.

Halfway across the bridge, he couldn't bear to look at the unsettling scene any longer. He took two deep breaths and turned his gaze to Bai Liu beside him.

Bai Liu held his breath, his expression calm as he walked forward without glancing around. Seeing Bai Liu so composed, Mu Sicheng felt an inexplicable sense of relief.

Just as he was about to look away, he suddenly caught sight of a pale, dripping hand emerging from the water beneath the bridge behind them. The hand braced itself on the bridge's edge, then began to climb.

A moment later, the figure of a woman in white pulled herself onto the bridge. Her hair, soaked and heavy, clung to her face as water dripped from her body. Her shoulders twisted unnaturally from side to side, her movements eerily distorted, as if her bones were rotating freely in their sockets to support her body.

Slowly, she rose to her feet, her umbrella tilting forward to conceal the upper half of her face.

Despite taking small, mincing steps, her toes pointed unnervingly upward as she rushed forward. In the blink of an eye, she was directly behind Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng. A bone-chilling cold radiated from her, freezing them in place.

She took another two steps before leaning against Bai Liu's shoulder.

Mu Sicheng saw it clearly—when she drew close, the lower half of her face curled into a grotesque smile. Her slightly parted lips were filled with black mud and tangled water plants, which oozed from her mouth, turning into filthy sewage that dribbled down her chin.

Mu Sicheng was so startled that he instinctively tightened his grip on Bai Liu's wrist. The oppressive aura from the woman behind them made him too afraid to speak.

Bai Liu halted, unmoving. The woman pressed against his shoulder, her head lowered, equally motionless.

Droplets of water dripped from her soaked hair, sliding down to Bai Liu's neck. The chill emanating from her body intensified, a frost-like mist forming with each breath Bai Liu exhaled.

Mu Sicheng stood stiffly, his gaze locked ahead. He watched as the Paper Taoist continued shaking his bell, moving farther away. Yet, he didn't dare to follow.

His instincts screamed at him—if he and Bai Liu bolted off the bridge now, Bai Liu would be seized by the sacrificial bridge ghost and drowned.

There were supposed to be only seven ghosts who had died on this bridge. As long as they followed the Paper Taoist, the seven zombies would be enough for them to cross safely. Mu Sicheng himself had already done so once.

So why—when it was Bai Liu's turn—had an extra ghost crawled out from beneath the bridge?!

Mu Sicheng discreetly rolled his eyes before sneaking a glance at the woman clinging to Bai Liu. Just as he shifted his gaze, she slowly tilted her umbrella toward Bai Liu.

The lower half of her face was strikingly well-defined, her skin ghastly pale, lips curled into a haunting smile. Black mud oozed ceaselessly from her mouth and nose. Her fingers, clutching the umbrella, were caked with dirt—evidence of her desperate struggle, clawing and choking at the bottom of the river before she drowned.

Then, the upper half of her face was revealed—

Mu Sicheng gasped.

The woman's upper face was gone. Her skull had been crushed so violently that most of it had caved in. What remained was a jagged cross-section just above the bridge of her nose. The exposed white bone, riddled with holes, was packed with sand and mud, which seeped down her ruined face like a funnel—spilling from her mouth and nostrils in thick, black sludge. The filth stained Bai Liu's pristine white shirt.

Yet even as he came face-to-face with the half-headed sacrificial bridge ghost, Bai Liu remained unmoved. Calmly, he continued walking toward the bridgehead, the woman still leaning against his shoulder.

Mu Sicheng watched in disbelief, frustration bubbling up inside him. He wanted to shout a warning but bit his tongue, afraid of drawing attention from the ghosts and zombies both ahead and behind them. Instead, he frantically gestured at Bai Liu, mouthing his words:

"You'll be dragged off the bridge if you reach the bridgehead!"

Mu Sicheng was trembling. His stomach twisted when he glanced at the ghost girl's disfigured face.

"If she pulls you off the bridge and your head hits the pier, you'll die like her!"

Mu Sicheng himself wasn't alive. He had no real body—falling off the bridge wouldn't matter for him. But Bai Liu was still living. If he died here, he would truly die.

Teeth clenched, Mu Sicheng made a decision. He reached out to grab the woman beside Bai Liu.

But before he could touch her, Bai Liu swiftly caught his wrist. Without a word, Bai Liu lifted the woman's umbrella, tilting it slightly to reveal the underside.

A brand-new yellow talisman was pasted inside the canopy.

The words "Body Binding Talisman" were written across it.

Mu Sicheng's eyes widened. "Who put that there?"

At the Other End

"Brother Kong, you're really thorough." Yang Zhi adjusted the flashlight on his head and sighed. "Honestly, I thought Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng would die the moment they entered this tomb. But you still went ahead and set up all these talismans and traps at every key point…"

Kong Xuyang shot him a glance. "What do you know? Winning without a fight isn't a good show. If they die because of the tomb's mechanisms, does that even count as me defeating them?"

He sneered. "That would mean the game itself killed them, not me. And if that happens, how am I supposed to steal Bai Liu's audience and get his supporters to switch to me?"

"Bai Liu must die." Kong Xuyang's eyes darkened. "And he must die by my hands. Only with this victory can I enter the top 100 in popularity and earn the gold medal of immunity from death."

"Otherwise, when we face Russell Cemetery later…"

At the mention of that name, Kong Xuyang's face twitched, his expression turning even grimmer. "That guild is unsettling. They might have someone who can counter our abilities. And they don't care about dying. Without the gold medal of immunity, beating them would be nearly impossible."

Yang Zhi chuckled. "That's why you're the one who thinks ahead, Brother Kong. I wouldn't have even thought of using the [Body-Binding Talisman] on one of the sacrificial bridge ghosts while crossing the ghost bridge. Trapping her there instead of letting her cross with us was genius."

"You've completely blocked Bai Liu's escape route."

Kong Xuyang smirked, a trace of pride in his eyes.

"There's another way across the bridge aside from using the [False Body Talisman] like we did—you can follow the Paper Taoist. That thing leads the seven zombie husbands of the sacrificial bridge ghosts across. Since the bridge can only hold seven sacrificial ghosts at most, once each ghost finds her husband, they stop chasing the living. That's how people can safely cross."

"So, when I crossed, I used the [Binding Talisman] to trap a ghost beneath the bridge—a woman who had sacrificed herself. That created an eighth sacrificial bridge ghost."

"This extra ghost will search for her husband among the other seven. And just as he's about to leave the bridge, she'll climb up." Kong Xuyang's lips curled into a cruel smile. "No matter what Bai Liu tries, he'll have to face the ghost I prepared just for him."

"He'll be dragged off the bridge," he said with satisfaction, "and there won't be much left of his head."

Bai Liu walked at an unhurried pace, and the woman beside him, holding an umbrella over his head, followed in step.

But the closer they got to the bridge, the more her expression changed. At first, she had a soft smile. Then her lips pressed into a firm line. Now, the corners of her mouth turned downward in an unmistakable frown.

She tilted her head slightly, turning toward Bai Liu, as if looking directly at him.

It was as if she had realized—Bai Liu wasn't her husband.

Resentment twisted her expression into something dark and menacing.

The umbrella, which had only covered Bai Liu's head at first, slowly tilted, as if trying to envelop his entire body.

As it did, deep crimson stains spread across the fabric—dark splashes, like the blood left behind when someone jumps off a bridge, clutching an umbrella.

A rancid stench of corpses, water, and blood filled the air.

Bai Liu, undeterred, peeked out from under the umbrella and mouthed to Mu Sicheng: Wait. Listen to my plan.

Before he could finish, the woman's face suddenly appeared behind him, her lips brushing against his ear. Her mouth moved rapidly, as if whispering, but no words came out—only a sharp, unsettling clicking sound, like the grinding of disjointed bones.

She spoke faster and faster. The chattering of her joints sent chills down the spine. Even with only half of her face visible, the sheer hatred twisting her features was unmistakable.

Mud, dirt, and blood seeped from between her lips.

Bai Liu calmly pulled his head back under the umbrella.

For a moment, the clicking stopped.

Then Mu Sicheng, from outside the umbrella, saw the woman's shadow pressing against Bai Liu's ear. Her jaw unhinged—slowly, impossibly wide—before snapping open with a hideous, frenzied clack-clack-clack.

Mu Sicheng—who had already experienced the terror of a sacrificial bridge ghost attaching itself to his body—felt a cold sweat break out.

But Bai Liu wasn't a ghost. He was human.

How the hell was he going to get out of this?

The Paper Taoist continued leading the zombies and bridge ghosts forward, one by one. Mu Sicheng's eyes flickered ahead. The bridgehead was right there!

But the shadow under the umbrella—it was changing.

At first, the woman's silhouette only showed half a head. But as they neared the bridgehead, Mu Sicheng watched, horrified, as it twisted and grew.

The blood on the umbrella began to peel away, floating toward the shadow.

The shadow absorbed the blood. It quivered. Then it shifted—shaping itself into the upper half of a face.

Mu Sicheng's stomach dropped.

That wasn't blood at all. It was fragments of flesh, splintered bone, and brain matter—pieces of the woman's shattered skull from when she had jumped.

These fragments had been stuck to the umbrella's fabric.

And now, as they approached the bridgehead, they were returning to her.

As if time itself was reversing.

The woman's face, torn apart in death, was being restored. Piece by piece.

The sacrificial bridge ghost always repeated the cycle of her death.

Her journey from beneath the bridge to the bridge itself reflected her corpse's state after death.

But walking from the bridge to the bridgehead—that was the moment before her fall.

And in this moment, she was regaining the appearance she had in life.

Finally, standing before Bai Liu, she was whole again.

Her pale face bore a melancholic expression while she held the umbrella for Bai Liu with hazy eyes. The clicking sound of her joints turned into a faint female voice, “You are not him.”

The next moment, the woman turned her head to look at the other side of the bridge, then returned her gaze to Bai Liu. Her expression was chilling, “I’ve waited for so many people, but none of them were him.”

The bridgehead was right in front of them.

The woman’s feet paused, and she looked towards the bridge with red eyes. Her body was soaked with muddy river water, dripping down her clothes. The umbrella turned inward and pulled Bai Liu towards the bridge as if she was ready to jump off the bridge with him at any time.

Mu Sicheng finally couldn’t bear it anymore, so he tried to pull Bai Liu out.

Bai Liu took the initiative to get out of the umbrella and coldly ordered, “Jump!”

Mu Sicheng was stunned for a moment but soon realized that Bai Liu wanted him to jump into the river. He looked at the river’s surface in horror and disbelief.

Many corpses were floating on the river with their faces facing down and dressed in white with their hair disheveled. It seemed that these corpses had heard Bai Liu’s words and slowly turned over, revealing a swollen and rotten face, smiling at them with their mouths wide open.

Fuck, there are so many dead bodies under the bridge, wouldn’t it be suicide to jump down?!

Before Mu Sicheng had time to prepare himself mentally, Bai Liu grabbed his hand and jumped down without hesitation.

Mu Sicheng and the ghost who died on the bridge were both stunned for a few seconds. They probably didn’t expect Bai Liu to be so self-aware that he would jump into the river before she dragged him down.

Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng fell into the dark, fishy water, which poured into Mu Sicheng's mouth and nose. As a conditioned reflex, he choked and coughed a few times. Behind him came the heartbreaking cry of a woman, "… Give it back to me!"

Mu Sicheng was so panicked by the roar that he took the time to look back. He was shocked to find that Bai Liu had snatched the umbrella of the sacrificial bridge ghost before jumping off the bridge!

The woman had no umbrella in her hand. She was wearing white clothes, her eyes dripping with blood and tears. She looked at Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng who jumped into the river with extreme resentment, then turned around and jumped towards the bridge pier without hesitation.

Flesh and blood flew everywhere, bones shattered, and the woman hit the bridge pier violently then her face returned to its bloody incomplete appearance. She opened her huge black mouth filled with mud and sand before chasing after Bai Liu in the water with an extremely ferocious look.

At this moment, it was not only her, but all of the floating corpses in the water were like sharks that smelled blood. Their swollen and eroded bodies were swimming strangely as they rushed towards Bai Liu from underwater!

"Fuck!" Mu Sicheng turned his head and swam forward holding Bai Liu's wrist, "Run!"

"Don't run. You can't get away." Bai Liu threaded through the water, his head floating on the surface, looking at the two banks of the river with a pale face, "There are things guarding the shore. We can't get up even if we run."

Mu Sicheng looked towards the shore.

The Paper Taoist rang the golden bell, driving the zombies and the sacrificial bridge ghosts who held umbrellas for them off the bridge. Then the zombies jumped and landed on the other side of the river.

The Paper Taoist put a talisman on the foreheads of the zombies that were standing still, before walking away shaking its head while ringing a bell.

As the Paper Taoist walked, it came to the entrance of the main tomb chamber opposite the bridge. It was as if a spark from a distance fell

on its body and it suddenly caught fire.

A raging fire burned on its body, and in a few breaths, this lifelike paper man turned into smoke and disappeared.

At this moment, under the faint light of the Paper Taoist's burning fire, Mu Sicheng saw many burly and motionless zombie corpses hidden in the darkness on the other side of the bridge.

These zombies all looked like middle-aged men, with a yellow talisman of suppression stuck on their heads. They stood unmoving at the riverside at a certain distance with sacrificial bridge ghosts standing next to them, holding umbrellas to shield their faces.

They seemed to have been specially arranged like this to guard the tomb. There were some bones and backpacks under their feet, as well as some corpses with as well as some corpses with their eyes open, still bearing grievances from life, and not yet completely decayed.

These corpses had their mouths wide open in fear, their faces were black, and there were two huge bloody holes in their necks.

Judging from their clothes, these corpses should be passers-by of Yinshan Village, somehow entering the tomb by mistake. Upon encountering the sacrificial bridge ghosts, they jumped into the river in fear and tried to escape. As a result, they tried to escape death by reaching the shore, but before they could even breathe a sigh of relief, they were bitten to death by the zombies guarding the shore.

Under the bright orange-yellow flames of the Paper Taoist burning, the zombies did not move but looked ferocious. Their three white eyes rolled as they stared at the Bai Liu floating on the river; their expression revealing dried yellow bloodstains on their fangs.

We can't get to this shore anymore!

What about turning back? Go up from the bridge first and avoid this disaster!

Mu Sicheng dragged Bai Liu and swam frantically while turning to look at the other side of the bridge. He widened his eyes in shock, "Why is the way that we came from gone?!"

On the other side of the bridge was an illusionary darkness. They could not see any real scene or the path they came. They could only see specks of blue-green ghost fires hovering around. In the distance,

they left the darkness, floating towards the bridge and turning into paper figures of ghosts.

Bai Liu choked twice when he fell into the water, making his face more pallid, “There is no turning back in the underworld, don’t even think about going back,” he retorted, “We can’t go ashore, and we can’t turn back, so where should we go now?”

After speaking, he looked back at the floating corpses that were chasing him and cursed angrily, “These ghost things swim pretty fast.”

Bai Liu breathed in Yin energy and choked on the Yin water. As a living person, his Yang energy was greatly reduced and he felt much weaker. After entering the water, he was completely supported by Mu Sicheng as he swam downstream while holding his shoulders.

Fortunately, Mu Sicheng was in good physical condition and Bai Liu was not heavy, so Mu Sicheng was still able to swim very fast while dragging him for a long distance. But even so, the floating corpses behind them were getting closer and closer.

Bai Liu adjusted his breathing, raised his wet eyelashes, and looked at the bridge, “Let’s swim around and go back under the bridge.”

Mu Sicheng was stunned, “HA??!”

Bai Liu looked at Mu Sicheng and said, “With your speed, you should be able to lead these floating corpses around and swim back to the bridge.”

Mu Sicheng asked from the bottom of his heart, “No, we just risked our lives to jump off the bridge, why do we have to go back under the bridge?!”

There are so many ghosts on the bridge. If Bai Liu goes back now, he’d be courting death!

Bai Liu’s choice was so bizarre that Mu Sicheng was utterly stunned. But before he could say anything, the floating corpse behind him suddenly caught up.

Mu Sicheng felt his feet step on the slippery back of a body covered with cloth.

Several pale faces of drowned people vaguely emerged under the swaying water around them. Then, Bai Liu, who was held up by Mu

Sicheng, suddenly sank, as if something grabbed his ankle and dragged him down.

“Fuck!” Mu Sicheng cursed angrily and leaned back, exerting force with his arms then kicked and pulled at the thing pulling at Bai Liu’s calves before pulling Bai Liu out of the water.

Bai Liu returned to the surface of the water. His complexion was even paler than before, his eyes were closed, and his wet hair stuck to his forehead with water droplets sliding down.

“Bai Liu!” Mu Sicheng swam while roaring and shaking Bai Liu wildly. He even slapped Bai Liu in the face, but Bai Liu still didn’t wake up.

Mu Sicheng’s palm was scratched by something. He paused, then slowly looked at Bai Liu’s sickly lips.

Two blue fangs were exposed at the corners of Bai Liu’s lips as if they had not been properly kept. It was this thing that had scratched Mu Sicheng’s palm just now.

[A living person without vitality is a walking corpse. If you absorb too much vitality, I will probably become a walking corpse or a zombie.]

“Fuck you!!!” Mu Sicheng completely collapsed. “Bai Liu, didn’t you say you knew your limits and wouldn’t let me suck your yang energy to this extent? Didn’t you fucking say you were still a young and strong man and could have your yang energy sucked away for more than an hour?!”

“It’s only been a short time! You are so incompetent!”

Now he didn’t know when Bai Liu would wake up, and he didn’t know what to do. He could only try to do what Bai Liu told him before he fell unconscious!

Mu Sicheng gritted his teeth and pushed Bai Liu’s legs quickly, starting to circle around with the floating corpses behind him. The corpses floated up and down in the water, and from time to time a pair of eyes appeared on the water’s surface, staring at Bai Liu with a greedy, ghostly gaze, like a crocodile on the hunt.

In the later stage of the dragging, Mu Sicheng’s hands began to feel sore and weak. He looked up at the bridge in front of him with his teeth gritted and pushed forward with all his might, pushing Bai Liu under the bridge.

The floating corpses behind him were left trailing at a distance and would not catch up with him for the time being, but Mu Sicheng did not dare to relax at all, because these things would catch up with him sooner or later!

The question is, what the hell is he supposed to do now?! Bai Liu didn't tell him what to do after he got under the bridge!

Mu Sicheng hung Bai Liu's collar on a bridge hook so that Bai Liu was suspended out of the water and could breathe smoothly. Then he turned around and guarded Bai Liu wholeheartedly.

He was extremely panicked, but still tried to remain calm, turning around and standing in front of Bai Liu. He took a deep breath and looked at the floating corpses in white that were getting closer and closer.

Bai Liu was a very methodical person. Bai Liu knew that he was going to turn into a zombie, so he would definitely give him some hints on how to wake up or deal with the zombies before that!

Mu Sicheng's mind was working so quickly that he felt he had never thought so fast in his life.

Bai Liu said that zombies drink blood and worship the moon to survive, meaning human blood can stimulate zombies!

But there are dead bodies everywhere, including Mu Sicheng himself. Where can we get human blood?!

Mu Sicheng was thinking so hard that he was dizzy, but still couldn't figure out how to wake Bai Liu up. Unfortunately, the floating corpses had already swam over. Mu Sicheng collected his thoughts and looked over with a brutal look.

He himself is now a ghost and has a natural advantage over dead creatures with strong yin energy like floating corpses, which is that he is not afraid of death.

He kicked away the floating corpses in white one by one and kicked away a pair of them one by one. Mu Sicheng was so angry that he broke the necks of several floating corpses that approached him with red eyes, throwing their heads onto the shore.

Go ashore and look for it yourself, damn ghost thing!

This group of floating corpses will not die after their heads are twisted off, but losing their heads will make them lose their direction. Hence, they would go look for their heads, prolonging the time it takes them to return and fight Mu Sicheng.

Mu Sicheng was out of breath as he fought, but as the fight continued, he gradually discovered that his hands and feet began to rotate and deform. His facial features also gradually disappeared.

He had begun turning into a ghost after being affected by the yin energy emitting from the corpses.

Yinshan Village

Mu Sicheng's head became increasingly dizzy, and everything in front of his eyes began to double.

Another floating corpse swerved around, approaching Bai Liu. Mu Sicheng subconsciously aimed to slap it, but the floating corpse dodged, resulting in the slap landing on Bai Liu's face. Bai Liu tilted his head down a little, his lip sliced by his fangs.

A line of blood oozed out from the corner of his mouth, dripped onto his fangs, and melted into Bai Liu's lips.

Mu Sicheng persisted in struggling with these stubborn floating corpses. His face seemed to be covered with a thick layer of plaster putty, and even his facial features could not be seen. His hands and feet were turned over, with his wrists and elbows facing inwards.

The greasy white bodies of the corpses floating on the water's surface piled up in front of Mu Sicheng. The corpses under the water swayed and tugged at Mu Sicheng's ankles. Some of the floating corpses took the opportunity to bypass Mu Sicheng and snuck towards Bai Liu.

Bai Liu, who was hanging under the bridge, was yanked by several floating corpses that slipped past, and his shirt was almost torn.

The blood on Bai Liu's lips dripped into the water, and he slowly opened his eyes.

Mu Sicheng was still being dragged below with only half of his head exposed above the water. He was suddenly grabbed by the collar and pulled to the side. An intense golden light exploded from behind him, covering all the floating corpses and the woman in white in front of him.

The golden light was so bright and dazzling that people dared not look directly at it. Mu Sicheng, who was pulled aside, felt as if he was being sucked in.

Bai Liu opened a tattered umbrella and stood in front of Mu Sicheng. Golden light burst out from inside the umbrella, trapping the floating corpses and sacrificial bridge ghosts during the chase. The floating corpses and the ghosts contorted their faces revealing hideous expressions. They stretched out their limbs and struggled miserably, trying to get out of the white paper umbrella. But they were like small

pieces of iron attracted by a magnet, firmly fixed in Bai Liu's open umbrella, unable to move.

Bai Liu hung the umbrella on the hook under the bridge, circled around the floating corpses and ghosts under the water, and then floated out. With a pale face, he stretched out his wrist to let Mu Sicheng suck some vitality, who was dumbfoundedly standing by.

After Mu Sicheng recovered his facial features, Bai Liu immediately gave a calm order, "Take me to the bridge and run. We will be safe once we get off the bridge."

Upon hearing this, Mu Sicheng climbed onto the bridge. After getting on, he quickly turned around and pulled Bai Liu up by his arms; he held Bai Liu's shoulder and ran off the bridge without looking back.

However, he heard the sound of small feet chasing behind him. Mu Sicheng turned around and saw the woman with half her face missing running after them with a resentful look. Her mouth was huge, and her upper and lower teeth clicked as if she were talking. Through her mouth, he could see the mud and sand in it, along with the rotten bones on the back of her neck.

Mu Sicheng raised his voice, "She's chasing us!"

"Don't look back." Bai Liu, laid on Mu Sicheng's shoulder, reminding him softly. He looked very haggard, but his tone still held composure, "She can't chase down the bridge."

Bai Liu's calmness set Mu Sicheng more at ease. Mu Sicheng used up almost all his strength and ran down the bridge half-carrying Bai Liu on his back. He sprinted all the way to the entrance of the main tomb chamber before he dared to put Bai Liu down from his shoulders. He then collapsed and sat on the ground, gasping for breath.

Although logically speaking, Mu Sicheng was already a ghost and didn't need to breathe, the intense situation just now still triggered his physiological reactions as a human being.

Mu Sicheng propped himself up with his hands on the ground, looking up with his chest heaving violently. His eyes were unfocused as he asked, "… They didn't chase after us?"

Bai Liu leaned against the dirt wall and looked towards the other side of the bridge, "They didn't."

The sacrificial bridge ghost was wandering back and forth on the bridge in white clothes. From afar, the upper half of her face had grown back and she seemed to be staring at Bai Liu. But after a while, she turned around quietly and walked towards the bridge step by step in a graceful manner before spreading her arms and then jumping down.

The spreading darkness gradually swallowed up the bridge. All that could be seen was some floating green fluorescence and the sound of sad women sobbing,

“Why haven’t you returned yet? I’ve been left alone watching the bridge day and night…”

Mu Sicheng finally breathed a sigh of relief, and said in a trance, “It’s finally quiet.”

“How do you know they won’t chase us off the bridge?” Mu Sicheng recovered and turned to ask Bai Liu curiously, “And that umbrella, why did it suddenly emit golden light?”

Bai Liu propped himself up, dusted off his hands, and looked down at Mu Sicheng who was still sitting on the ground, “Do you remember when I showed you the yellow talisman stuck inside the umbrella?”

Mu Sicheng thought for a moment and said, “I remember.”

“That talisman is called the [Binding Talisman], and its function is to trap ghosts in the place where they died tragically. It can be said to be a formation to trap evil spirits, and it is one of the Maoshan orthodox techniques.”

“The effect of this talisman is mentioned in my Maoshan Evil Art Handbook, but there is no drawing method for this spell. Using this talisman on the sacrificial bridge ghost on this bridge is obviously to prevent people from crossing the bridge. It is to kill us two who have mistakenly entered the tomb.”

Mu Sicheng asked cautiously, “Do you know who?”

“This talisman is very new, and it was drawn no more than a day ago.” Bai Liu lowered his eyes, “If there are no other strangers in Yinshan Village, then it is most likely that Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi made it.”

Mu Sicheng cursed, “Those two fucking bitches.”

“But it’s not entirely a bad thing that they are willing to draw talismans to backstab us.” Bai Liu slowly pulled out a wet but still intact talisman from his sleeve. It was the [Binding Talisman].

Bai Liu smiled and said, “We are just in need of orthodox talismans.”

Mu Sicheng was shocked and exclaimed, “You tore the talisman off the umbrella!”

“Well, because there was more than one talisman in the umbrella, Kong Xuyang seemed to have pasted three talismans inside the umbrella of the sacrificial bridge ghost to ensure that his plan would not go wrong and that the person crossing the bridge would be trapped.” Bai Liu put away the talismans and looked at Mu Sicheng. “I tore off one, pasted one on the sacrificial bridge ghost, and left the other in the umbrella.”

Mu Sicheng finally reacted, “Those floating corpses died in the river under the bridge. So you had me go back to the bridge, and then shine the umbrella with the [Binding Talisman] on them because the talisman will trap them at the place where they died!”

Bai Liu nodded, “That indeed was my plan, but there was a little accident during the execution.”

Mu Sicheng noticed the two small fangs on Bai Liu’s lips, and stood up angrily, pointing at Bai Liu before scolding, “You call this a small accident! You fucking fainted! You almost turned into a zombie! Your plan almost turned us all into ghosts, okay?!”

Bai Liu sighed regretfully, “How could I know that you were so useless? I got the umbrella to clear the ghost bridge. I also told you the route to get under the bridge. All you had to do was open the umbrella.”

“But you actually went to fight these floating corpses.” Bai Liu looked at Mu Sicheng quietly, then retracted his gaze and shook his head gently, “… Forget it, I can’t blame you. I was also wrong to choose you as a teammate.”

Mu Sicheng, “…”

… After Bai Liu said this, it seemed like it was really his fault from the beginning to the end…

How could he be so stupid? Yes, why didn’t he think of opening the

umbrella at that time?!

Mu Sicheng began to reflect seriously and painfully on his own stupidity and mistakes, his head even drooping listlessly.

Bai Liu, who had kept his plan to himself, lost consciousness halfway through and then shifted the blame onto his teammate afterward. He glanced at Mu Sicheng calmly, patted his shoulder with an air of tolerance, and said, “It’s okay, just pay attention next time. Let’s go.”

Mu Sicheng glanced at Bai Liu’s sharp teeth sticking out of his lips and felt more and more guilty. He asked awkwardly, “… Are your zombie fangs okay?”

“They’re okay.” Bai Liu waved his hand to indicate it was not a big problem. “Real zombies have teeth that are more than an inch long. At most, I just have too much Yin energy.”

Mu Sicheng frowned and inquired, “Is it just too much Yin energy? Then why couldn’t you wake up before?”

“The Yin energy, Yin Water, and the Underworld Bridge had a great impact on a living person like me, causing my consciousness to become blurred for a while.” Bai Liu looked at Mu Sicheng, “I may also fall into this state of blurred consciousness later, but there is a way to wake me up.”

Mu Sicheng listened carefully, “What way?”

Bai Liu touched the blood stain on his fangs and said, “It’s this, human blood, Sucking human blood can wake me up.”

Mu Sicheng was stunned, “This tomb is full of ghosts from the underworld, where does the blood of living people come from…”

“I am.” Bai Liu smiled. “Although I have a lot of Yin energy, I am still a living person. My blood is useful. You hit my teeth before and made me bleed. I will wake up by myself when I taste it.”

Mu Sicheng was silent for a while, “Thanks, brother.”

He knew that Bai Liu did this just to save his life.

Bai Liu smiled and said, “I have always felt that your life should have been mine for a long time. It’s natural for me to protect my things. No need to thank me.”

As they talked, they walked toward the main tomb chamber. Soon, they arrived at the place where the Paper Taoist had burned before. There were ashes on the ground. They took another step inside, into the passage of the main tomb.

The passage was extremely dark with no light to be seen, but one could smell a nauseatingly strong scent of incense, candles, and ointments, mixed with the greasy sweet aroma of rotten fruits and wedding candies.

Moreover, unlike the coldness of the ghost bridge before, the closer Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng got to the main tomb, the higher the temperature became. Heat waves surged from inside, the scent of rotten fruits and wedding candies became fresh, and the smell of incense, candles, and ointments became pleasant.

Faintly there could be the sounds of clinking wine cups, people congratulating each other, footsteps of people coming and going, and the scolding of playful children. These sounds were transmitted through the tomb passage and turned into extremely long and ethereal echoes, changing the atmosphere from joyous to eerie.

“It’s very lively inside this tomb.” Bai Liu looked towards the main tomb passage as if he had realized something, “It sounds like a big banquet is being held.”

Mu Sicheng rubbed his arms, and he got goosebumps all over his body, “Are there not a lot of ghosts in here?”

“Not sure if it’s a lot.” Bai Liu’s eyes were calm, “Either way, it’s not little, otherwise there wouldn’t be a feast.”

He walked inside, stepping over the ashes of the burning paper Taoist priest, and into the main tomb passage.

The dark passage suddenly lit up with red lanterns from the outside to the inside. On the red lanterns, a “囍” character was pasted in white. They were hung from the outside all the way to the inside where Bai Liu couldn’t see. The bright red light shining through the lanterns made the passage seem like it was bleeding.

The originally vague sound in the tomb passage suddenly became clear and sharp, “A guest has come to congratulate us!”

Yinshan Village

Red lanterns were hung on the inner wall of the low tomb passage, swaying left and right with the hot humid wind blowing out from inside. The bright scarlet light swayed back and forth on the damp wall with the lanterns, casting many shadows of different heights on the wall, just like a shadow play.

The shadows moved stiffly and they stretched their heads and ears to each other as if they were talking. They made the distant and blurry sounds of words and footsteps Bai Liu had just heard. As the light swayed and changed their positions, they walked into the main tomb chamber.

On both sides of the main tomb chamber entrance, illuminated by lanterns, stood two shadows, bending respectfully, one on the left and one on the right, as if welcoming guests. The dark eyes of these two shadows were empty, yet within the shadows' faces, something shifted and swirled as if looking at the people, or shadows at the entrance.

The shadow's lips slowly opened, and the strange strident voice came out from the wall again,

"Two guests are here to congratulate us. Please enter the main hall!"

There were many shadows on the wall, but there was no one in the tomb passage. There was only dim red light swaying. Between the light and darkness, the shadows kept changing their shapes and movements. They were moving inside, becoming clearer and clearer on the wall.

After being urged twice by the two welcoming shadows at the entrance, Bai Liu still did not move. Their eyes, which were smiling in crescent shapes, rose and then sank. Their originally laughing mouths also disappeared, leaving only two red hole-like eyes staring at Bai Liu.

The shadow's foot, which was originally standing on the wall, sank halfway and bent strangely to the ground, getting closer and closer to where Bai Liu was standing. It urged for the third time in a shrill voice,

"Two guests, please come in."

Bai Liu lowered his eyes and walked inside with Mu Sicheng following

closely behind.

The two shadows guarding the entrance clasped their hands, bent their bodies, and turned their eyes to watch Bai Liu enter the tomb passage. A huge arc slowly opened at their mouths,

“Distinguished guests have arrived, host and guests welcome the visitors!”

As soon as Bai Liu walked into the tomb passage, the shadows on both sides of the passage stopped their steps and noisy conversations instantly. These shadows stilled and silently stared at Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng who came in with their eyes reflecting red light.

These shadows were of different sizes and shapes. There was a woman with a bun holding a little girl with two braids, a hunchbacked old man with a cane, and a middle-aged man in a short jacket. They all stood silently on the wall, staring at Bai Liu as he slowly walked towards the main tomb chamber.

Mu Sicheng’s scalp tingled. He moved closer to Bai Liu and asked in a low voice, “What are these shadows? Didn’t you say that only living people have shadows in the underworld?”

“Living people can cast shadows in the underworld, but they are also not the only ones who can cast shadows in the underworld.” Bai Liu walked towards the main tomb chamber without looking around.

“A shadow is an image formed by the gathering of a person’s three souls and seven spirits then imprinted on a physical object by light. The essence of a shadow is the same as our reflection in a mirror. Therefore, both folk and Taoist sayings say that ghosts have no shadows and cannot imprint on mirrors, because ghosts’ three souls and seven spirits are incomplete.”

“Things with form but no shadow are transformed into souls, and things with shadow but no form are transformed into spirits.”

Bai Liu glanced at the shadows on the wall and said, “These shadows should be the spirits of the people from Yinshan Village who died but are trapped here forever and cannot be reborn.”

Mu Sicheng looked around at the shadows and shuddered, “… So these shadows are just spirits. Compared to the sacrificial bridge ghosts transformed into souls outside, they are not as harmful, right?”

Bai Liu retracted his gaze, “The Maoshan Sorcery describes that a person’s soul is good but the spirit is evil, a person’s soul is intelligent but the spirit is ignorant… If the soul is there, the person exists; if the soul is gone, then he is not the same person.”

“The moving corpses and shadows of the world are all caused by the souls. Only those who have the Tao can control the souls.”

Mu Sicheng swallowed his saliva, “… What do you mean by that?”

Bai Liu explained simply, “It means that the soul is kind and the spirit is evil. The soul is intelligent, and the spirit is ignorant.”

“As long as the soul is there, the ghost can still be called a human being. But once the soul completely dissipates, the ghost will not even have a trace of humanity. The most powerful ghosts in this world are all spirits. Only people with profound Taoism can punish spirits.”

Mu Sicheng couldn’t help but complain, “No way?! Those sacrificial bridge ghost souls outside can be considered kind and humane?!”

Bai Liu calmly replied, “Compared to spirits, they are.”

The red light of the lanterns in the tomb passage became brighter and brighter. At some point, Mu Sicheng discovered that the shadows on both sides began to move slowly. Their eyes illuminated by the red light stared at Bai Liu without moving, their steps ethereal and unreal.

The shadows’ mouths were split into red cracks of varying sizes, and they whispered to each other. The sound of their voices was very vague as if they were listening to the whispers of their neighbors through a wall, secretive and noisy.

Mu Sicheng couldn’t hear clearly what they were saying, but it was definitely not good, because the look these shadows gave them made Mu Sicheng feel a lingering malice.

Just as Mu Sicheng felt a chill on the back of his neck as he watched these shadows, he frowned and asked absentmindedly, “Are these shadows getting shorter and shorter?”

Bai Liu pulled Mu Sicheng and had him walk right behind him.

“Watch your step.” Bai Liu faintly reminded, “These souls are trapped in the wall as shadows. Although they’re not attacking us now, their shadows can touch our shadows; however, they shouldn’t be able to

break away from the wall and actively attack us.

Mu Sicheng subconsciously lowered his head and was horrified to find that at some point, the feet of these shadows had slowly slid down the wall to the ground, and were getting closer and closer to their shadows.

No wonder he just saw these shadows getting shorter and shorter!!

The shadows on the wall appeared to understand that their approaching conspiracy had been discovered, and they all grinned. Almost identical smiling faces and red mouths appeared in different silhouettes of men, women, young and old, and at the same time, laughter in different voices came from the wall.

Mu Sicheng was so frightened that he immediately started marching in a straight line behind Bai Liu, trying to keep his shadow in the center and away from these spirits.

Bai Liu glanced at Mu Sicheng's shadow on the ground with the corner of his eye. It was so faint that it was almost invisible.

The absence of a shadow meant that Mu Sicheng's soul was almost separated from his body, which is why he cannot cast a shadow.

The Mu Sicheng here has humanity but no shadow, so he was the soul. The thing left in Mu Sicheng's body is, needless to say, the spirit.

The spirit has no humanity, only evil.

Things became a little bit troublesome. Only orthodox Taoist techniques could subdue the soul, but Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng had no orthodox techniques, only unorthodox ones.

They could only take one step at a time and see what happens.

Bai Liu walked to the end of the tomb passage and pushed open a narrow, faded red double wooden door.

The shadows on the wall looked at Bai Liu with an avaricious look that made one's scalp tingle. They complimented each other and entered the wooden door, laughing.

Bai Liu also led Mu Sicheng into the wooden door.

As soon as they enter the wooden door, the low tomb scene suddenly becomes much brighter. The height of the tomb roof had increased

several times compared to before, and it looked like it was two or three floors high. The decoration of the main tomb chamber was imitated from the main hall of an old mansion. Red and white candles along with lanterns were lit everywhere. It could almost be said to be blinding.

The shadows that came in one after another wandered around the wall, on which were painted many scenes of banqueting guests. The sounds of the shadows chattering, laughing and playing responded appropriately. Of course, if these shadows were not blatantly staring at Bai Liu, he would have blessed this lively banquet more sincerely.

Opposite the wooden door, there were seven old fashioned square tables seating eight placed in a certain pattern. The tables were covered in thick dust, but the Eight Trigrams patterns on the tables could be vaguely seen. The legs of the tables were nailed to the ground with golden nails and could not be moved.

What was placed around the table were not tables, chairs or benches, but coffins standing upright. All of the coffins were open, leaving only an empty coffin box. Coffin lids were piled up randomly on the ground, with seven standing and eight lying down, and red strings wrapped around the coffins.

The interiors of the coffins were badly decayed and were still dripping water. A bronze mirror was inlaid at the head — similar to the bride's coffin that Bai Liu had seen in the temple before.

Bai Liu walked forward, circled the coffins then squatted down and carefully stroked the red line on the coffin lid, "There is not much dust on the broken end, it was just torn apart, the corpses inside should not have gone far."

Then Bai Liu stood up and walked around the coffins one by one, counting quietly, "1, 2… 33."

"There are only 33 empty coffins." Bai Liu looked around, "16 are missing."

Mu Sicheng stood far away. He was frightened when he saw the coffins and didn't want to get close at all, "How do you know there are 16 missing?"

"This should be a formation with seven as the maximum number." Bai Liu pointed at the seven tables with eight seats each. "The zombies driven by paper figures, the sacrificial bridge ghosts, and the coffins

we watched in the temple are all seven. According to this rule, each table here should also correspond to seven coffins."

"We can tell from the dust on the ground." Bai Liu gestured to Mu Sicheng to look at the ground. "The dust in these places is not heavy, and there are traces of dragging. Coffins should have been placed there originally."

"These 16 coffins must have been carried away by the ghosts we met on the road."

Bai Liu said in thought, "But these ghosts were originally formed because of the tomb owner. They should only listen to the orders of the tomb owner alone, and this formation should have been set up a hundred years ago."

"Why would the tomb owner allow these ghosts to move the bride's coffins out of the tomb a hundred years later and destroy the formation he painstakingly set up a hundred years ago?"

Bai Liu lowered his eyes and rubbed the dust off his hands, "Obviously, he was only one step away from gathering the Yin energy and training himself into a peerless Yin corpse and emerging into the world."

Yinshan Village

The shadows of the seven or eight Eight Immortals tables were cast upon the six walls of the crypt, multiplying into forty-two shadow tables. At these phantom tables, the silhouettes of men, women, and children sat, laughing and chatting as if they were guests at an ordinary country banquet.

From time to time, these 'guests' stole glances at Bai Liu, yet something more terrifying seemed to restrain them. Though their gazes lingered on him with longing, they dared not rise from their seats, as if held in place by an unseen force that prevented them from pursuing his shadow.

Bai Liu turned his attention to the main wall facing the tomb passage. In its corners, two red candles flickered, their wax pooling beside the charred remains of paper money and incense ash.

Among the many shadowed tables reflected on the wall, one stood out —the foremost Eight Immortals table. Something was off about it.

Mu Sicheng, noticing the same anomaly, murmured, "...Who are those two vacant seats for?"

"This is a wedding banquet." Bai Liu's eyes swept over the twin wedding candles. "The central seats at the main table, facing east, are reserved for the bride and groom."

Mu Sicheng's brow furrowed. His gaze lingered on the shadowy octagonal table as if it stirred a memory just out of reach. "A wedding...? Why does this setup feel so familiar…?"

Before he could finish his thought, a sharp voice echoed from afar, cutting through the silence.

"—The guest of honor is invited to take their seat!"

At once, the murmuring shadows fell silent.

Near the main table, two new shadows appeared around the Eight Immortals table. They strode forward with a deliberate, ritualistic air.

One of them, poised and veiled in what must have been a traditional wedding dress, nodded and bowed before settling into her seat at the head of the table.

The other—a tall figure in a trendy tracksuit, with monkey-ear headphones resting around his neck—lounged back casually in his chair. One arm draped over the back of the bride's seat as he shot a slow, wicked grin at Mu Sicheng, the smirk stretching across the wall as if whispering directly into his ear.

The instant these two figures took their places, the surrounding shadows bowed their heads in deference. None dared to look toward Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng anymore.

Mu Sicheng's eyes widened in shock. He pointed at the wall, his voice cracking. "Shit! That shadow—it's me, isn't it?!"

Bai Liu studied the barely discernible shadow with an understanding nod. "It's you."

Mu Sicheng reeled back, staring at the shadow. "Why the hell is my shadow sitting in the main seat?"

"You must have paid your respects here before," Bai Liu replied coolly. "That makes you one of the newlyweds, giving you the right to sit at the main table." His gaze lingered on the shadowy Mu Sicheng seated at the banquet. "That shadow is your prana. You need to reclaim it before it fully separates from you."

Bai Liu turned to Mu Sicheng, his voice calm but firm. "Or you're done for."

Mu Sicheng stammered in disbelief. "What!?"

The eunuch-like shrill voice rang out once more:

"—The honored guest shall now host a private banquet for their esteemed guests!"

The two newly seated shadows rose again.

Mu Sicheng's shadow turned to face him, its eerie grin widening. Its lips were blood-red against the deep blackness of its form, and its hollow eyes oozed darkness.

With a mocking gesture, it beckoned Mu Sicheng to follow before striding away.

The bride's shadow moved with small, deliberate steps beside it. Though she did not appear to be walking fast, she remained

impossibly close, her veiled head tilted unnaturally low. With every step she took, water dripped from beneath her veil, seeping into the ground like ink bleeding into paper.

"Follow," Bai Liu ordered, pursuing the shadows without hesitation.

The two figures moved swiftly, and in the blink of an eye, they reached the crypt's back door.

As if expecting them, the door creaked open on its own. The shadows paused, turning their faceless gazes toward Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng, as if ensuring they were following, before vanishing beyond the wooden threshold.

Bai Liu chased after them without hesitation. Mu Sicheng, running alongside him, panted, "How do I fuse with my shadow?"

"Find your body and enter it," Bai Liu instructed, never breaking stride. "You and your shadow are both spirits of the same body. The spirit controls the vessel—once you re-enter it, your prana will be forced to merge back with you."

Mu Sicheng exhaled in relief. "That actually sounds pretty easy."

"It's not." Bai Liu retorted flatly. "It's the hardest part."

Mu Sicheng frowned. "Why? Isn't it just a matter of finding my body?"

"In theory, yes." Bai Liu finally spared him a glance, his expression unreadable. "But do you know where your prana has hidden your body?"

Mu Sicheng's breath hitched. A horrible realization dawned on him.

"You mean..." His voice wavered. "It's already hidden my body—inside the main tomb—with the other ghosts?!"

"Hmm." Bai Liu nodded. "It knows that once you enter the body, it will be forced to inhale and merge with you, ultimately disappearing. Since it's an [evil spirit] that craves independence, of course, it would try to prevent you from finding your body."

"One more thing—while your [soul] didn't actually perform the three rites of heaven and earth with those brides, your prana still made it to the main seat. That makes you the guest of honor here."

Bai Liu turned to Mu Sicheng. "This can only mean one thing: after

you were stripped of your body, it remained inside and manipulated it to complete the three rites—marrying some ghost bride, or perhaps multiple ghosts here. It's already half-owner of this tomb."

"All the ghosts and evil spirits here are under its command. Finding your body will only get harder."

Bai Liu glanced at his phone. "Once the clock strikes midnight and the road to the underworld closes, if you haven't returned to the yang world with a complete human body..." He turned back to Mu Sicheng. "Then you'll truly become a ghost, and your body—along with whatever spirit is left inside—will turn into a zombie."

"It's almost ten o'clock."

Mu Sicheng's expression darkened. "Two hours left."

Bai Liu looked ahead, his gaze settling on the flickering shadow of a bride around the corner. "Still, I don't think all hope is lost."

Mu Sicheng struggled to keep his composure. "What do you mean?"

Bai Liu, ever composed, quirked an eyebrow. "If my [prana] were trying to take my body at this moment, I'd probably be confirming with you the exact amount of money to burn for me on Qingming Festival."

Even now, he could still joke with a straight face.

"There's no need to struggle. My [prana] would simply wait in silence, lurking for two hours before taking my body back in ghost form."

Mu Sicheng clenched his fists. "But my [prana] didn't lurk. It came out in the open—because it was confident, wasn't it?"

Bai Liu shook his head, rubbing his chin. "No, I think it's just not very smart."

"After all, it's your [prana]. It still lacks human reasoning. I'd call it stupid—but that might just be our breakthrough."

Mu Sicheng: "....."

His eye twitched. "I'm being serious! Stop undermining me!"

"I am being serious." Bai Liu patted Mu Sicheng's shoulder, speaking without missing a beat. "Think about it. If you were your [prana], and

you had two hours to fully take over a powerful body, would you go around announcing your presence? Would you parade yourself like the guest of honor at a grand wedding banquet? Would you personally invite your opponent over?"

Mu Sicheng's brows furrowed. "……No, that'd be stupid. Why would he do that?"

"That's for you to answer—it's your [prana]." Bai Liu watched Mu Sicheng quietly. "Under what circumstances would you do something like that?"

Mu Sicheng frowned deeper, his hands unconsciously tugging at his hair. "……I can't remember a lot of things……"

Bai Liu slowed his tone, pressing a hand against Mu Sicheng's tense spine. "Let's try a different approach. If you did this, what would your reason be?"

Mu Sicheng closed his eyes, inhaling sharply. "If I did this... it would be for the sake of..." His eyes opened, dark with realization. "Showing off. Or fun? I've done this kind of thing before—stealing from people, then flaunting it in front of them..."

His voice dropped into a low murmur. "I liked watching people struggle to find something that was right under their noses."

A pause.

"Why would I enjoy something so mean-spirited...?"

"It is mean-spirited." Bai Liu commented honestly, but his lips curled into a small smile. "But in this place, your childish nastiness might just be our greatest asset."

Mu Sicheng turned his head toward Bai Liu, suspicious.

Bai Liu smiled. "I think I know exactly what [you] plan to do."

After passing through several winding corridors, the shadowy figure of the bride disappeared into an unlit chamber. Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng followed.

The room was lower and narrower than the previous hall. It was a bedroom. A massive carved mahogany bed stood in the center, draped in a thick red canopy with a satin coverlet embroidered with

mandarin ducks and the double happiness symbol. At each of the four bedposts, white lanterns hung—each one affixed with a red double happiness character, glowing with a faint, eerie light.

A thick layer of dust coated everything.

There were no shoes by the bedside. Instead, three dozen damp footprints of varying sizes were scattered densely around the bed—most of them small, cloth-shoe imprints. Only one stood out: the unmistakable mark of a sneaker.

Bai Liu glanced at Mu Sicheng, who nodded. "That's my footprint."

A sudden gust of wind swept through the room, lifting the heavy red veil.

From beneath the bed, a pair of powder-blue embroidered shoes emerged—standing upright at the edge of the mahogany frame.

The shoes were still dripping. Water seeped down, staining the wood.

Mu Sicheng instinctively took a step back, only for Bai Liu to press a steadying hand on his shoulder.

Calmly, Bai Liu stepped forward. His gaze remained fixed on the embroidered shoes before he reached out and lifted the red veil completely—pulling it aside with both hands.

Mu Sicheng's breath hitched as he took in the sight before him.

Yinshan Village

A red veil draped over the high bed, and dozens of figures stood in a row, their backs to Bai Liu outside the bed tent, as if posing for a group photo.

The brides, clad in various styles of red dresses and trousers, stood motionless like wax figures. Their heads were covered by heavy red veils embroidered with dragons and phoenixes, their feet encased in embroidered shoes. The veils appeared waterlogged, dripping from the yellowed willow fringes, each drop falling onto the bedding with a soft patter.

Water seeped from beneath the bed, slowly spreading across the chamber. The air was thick with the stench of dampness and blood.

But the most unsettling sight was the brides themselves. Though their backs faced Bai Liu, their embroidered shoes pointed in the opposite direction—heels forward, toes backward—as if their heads had been twisted 180 degrees.

A chill crawled up Bai Liu’s spine.

He lowered his gaze, searching through the bridal procession.

In the bottom right corner of the group, Bai Liu’s eyes landed on a bride wearing black sneakers. Her hands—long, broad, and pale blue with distinct veins—stood out from the rest.

They were a man's hands.

Blackened, elongated nails curled at the tips, droplets of water slipping from them.

Mu Sicheng followed Bai Liu’s gaze, holding his breath. Carefully, he mouthed, That’s my sneaker… Just like you guessed, this thing is really showing us my body!

Bai Liu’s gaze remained fixed on the sneaker-wearing "bride."

By Mu Sicheng’s own account, his evil spirit was mischievous and arrogant, never bothering to properly hide what it stole but instead flaunting it, luring others into taking it back—like dangling bait in front of a bear.

And what was the most effective way to tempt them into grabbing it?

Naturally, by placing it in the most dangerous prana in the room.

Aside from the zombie Taoist, the most dangerous presence here was undoubtedly the newlywed brides—women who had died on their way to their weddings, their grievances powerful enough to linger.

Bai Liu bent his knee, placing one foot on the bedframe.

Then, with a push, he leapt onto the bed.

Mu Sicheng let out a startled cry.

The wooden bed groaned under the weight of more than thirty figures as it swayed from Bai Liu's landing.

The brides standing atop it shifted ever so slightly with the movement. Their heels—previously turned inward—began rotating, slowly aligning toward Bai Liu.

Yet their upper bodies remained perfectly still, as though their feet and torsos were disconnected.

A soft, feminine giggle floated out from beneath the veils, whispery and unsettling.

Standing at the edge of the bed, Mu Sicheng instinctively reached out to pull Bai Liu back—but stopped himself at the last moment, his expression taut with unease.

"Bai Liu, what are you doing up there?! I should be the one up there, right?" he hissed.

"Your body is among these thirty or so brides." Bai Liu was about to move forward when he glanced down at Mu Sicheng, who was gripping the hem of his shirt. Bai Liu's eyes flicked to Mu Sicheng's hand, silently telling him to let go. "Instead of holding me back, you should be preparing to find your body in the chaos and jump in."

Mu Sicheng pointed at the bride in sneakers, skeptical. "Isn't that my body? I just have to jump into it, right?"

Bai Liu gave him a bland look. "You may not be the brightest, but I doubt you'd leave something you enjoy—something you're skilled at, like stealing and hiding—just sitting out in the open."

Mu Sicheng narrowed his eyes. “Where the hell did you get that joystick?”

“From the coffin in the temple last night. I had a feeling it’d come in handy.” Bai Liu’s tone was casual as he continued, “This veil isn’t something we can simply lift. Otherwise, Kong Xuyang would’ve told us last night not to lift it at all rather than just warning us not to let the bride lift it herself.”

Without waiting for Mu Sicheng’s response, Bai Liu reached out and grabbed the head of the nearest bride.

He yanked.

The bride’s head tilted back unnaturally—but the veil remained perfectly in place, as if fused to her scalp.

Bai Liu released her and watched as she slowly straightened her head again, then turned back to Mu Sicheng, his expression as indifferent as ever. “As expected. That means the veil can only be lifted with a special tool or by the bride herself.”

Before Mu Sicheng could react, Bai Liu extended the joystick and, without hesitation, hooked it beneath the veil of the bride wearing sneakers.

The soaked fabric peeled away.

A tide of blood burst forth, drenching the chamber in crimson.

For a moment, both Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng stared at what lay beneath.

The bride had no head.

There was only a cross-section of raw, pale flesh at the base of her neck, still oozing blood. What had been pushing up against the veil, mimicking the shape of a skull, was nothing but a tangled mass of black hair sprouting grotesquely from the severed stump.

Mu Sicheng choked out, “What the fuck—”

Bai Liu remained composed. “It’s not your body. The sneakers were a distraction.”

“So now what?” Mu Sicheng turned to Bai Liu. “Do we just start uncovering them one by one?”

Bai Liu's gaze lowered to the bed. "I doubt your prana is going to be kind enough to let us do that."

The moment the headless bride's veil hit the ground, the laughter of the remaining brides sharpened into something high-pitched and unhinged.

Then their feet—dozens of them—began turning violently faster.

In an instant, all their toes aligned in Bai Liu's direction.

Their upper bodies jerked forward in unnatural lunges, bones cracking as they locked into place.

Then, all at once, they bolted toward Bai Liu in a rapid, broken sprint.

"Run!"

Bai Liu dove under the bed without hesitation, and the bride immediately followed. Glancing back, he grabbed Mu Sicheng and yanked him into a frantic sprint around the bed, tossing the wedding rod to him.

"You reveal it," Bai Liu said.

Mu Sicheng, fumbling to catch the rod, barely ducked in time to avoid the bride stumbling toward him with uneven steps. "Why me?" he shot back.

"One of these thirty brides is inside your body," Bai Liu replied, narrowly avoiding capture as he suddenly dove diagonally under the bed, rolling out the other side.

Emerging, he dropped to one knee and looked up at Mu Sicheng. "I can't tell them apart right now, so uncovering their heads is like opening a blind box. And if I remember correctly, my luck with these things is terrible."

Bai Liu smiled and reached for the joystick in Mu Sicheng's hands. "Unless you're too scared and need me to do it? I don't mind—though that would mean all thirty chasing after us."

Mu Sicheng instantly pulled the rod back, eyeing Bai Liu warily. With no other choice, he scrambled onto the bedframe as the bride crept closer, tiptoeing after him. Taking a deep breath, he lay back against the bed tent, then suddenly twisted around, hooking the veil off a

bride's head with the rod.

"Not this one either!" Mu Sicheng groaned, his frustration mounting.

Bai Liu, entirely unbothered, idly reminded him, "You should be careful. The brides whose veils you remove seem to chase after you."

Mu Sicheng froze. "And you're telling me this now?"

Bai Liu shrugged, looking innocent. "The one I uncovered was headless. It moved irregularly, so I didn't realize it right away. But it still came after me."

Bai Liu easily dodged the headless bride lunging at him and added, his tone light yet laced with urgency, "I suggest you hurry. It's almost midnight."

Mu Sicheng gritted his teeth, then propelled himself up one of the chamber's wooden pillars with agile movements, locking his legs around it. Looking down at the swarm of brides below, he muttered a curse and, in one swift motion, used the rod to rip the veils off six of them.

"Damn it! Not one of these either!" Mu Sicheng growled. "That bastard Prara better not be messing with me—what if my body isn't even here?!"

Bai Liu crouched beside the bed, watching the headless bride search in circles. He glanced up at Mu Sicheng, a lazy smile tugging at his lips. "Oh, it's here."

"Which one, then?" Mu Sicheng snapped, exasperated. "This is like Tang Bohu choosing Qiu Xiang—except I'm choosing twice as many!"

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "You're giving yourself too much credit. Tang Bohu got a wife after choosing Qiu Xiang. You? You're just looking for your own corpse."

Mu Sicheng: "..."

I may not be human, but Bai Liu, you're truly inhuman.

"But you have the rod," Bai Liu continued, resting his chin in his hand. "You're more skilled than your 'prey.' Just get on with it—the body's still yours. It's no match for you."

Muttering under his breath, Mu Sicheng begrudgingly bent down to

hook another veil.

Bai Liu, meanwhile, kept his eyes trained on the brides below. As Mu Sicheng's rod descended, one of them subtly lifted her fingers—an instinctive "hooking" motion, a movement thieves often made when reaching for something they coveted. It was exactly how Mu Sicheng moved when he stole.

Bai Liu's smile deepened.

It seemed that, under his provocation, a certain restless "bride" wanted to steal the rod.

Speaking quickly, Bai Liu instructed, "Mu Sicheng—third one at nine o'clock."

Mu Sicheng reacted instantly, his reflexes honed to perfection. Without thinking, he flicked the rod, lifting the veil in a blur too fast for the naked eye.

The cover flew off, revealing—

A grotesque "Mu Sicheng." His face twisted in a malicious snarl, black eyes gleaming, mouth bared with sharp one-inch fangs. His knees tensed, ready to pounce.

Mu Sicheng instinctively braced himself to counterattack—

"Don't fight back. Let him pounce," Bai Liu ordered coldly.

Mu Sicheng hesitated for a fraction of a second but obeyed.

The monstrous "Mu Sicheng" lunged forward, sinking his teeth into Mu Sicheng's neck—not drinking blood, but stealing his soul. Mu Sicheng's face contorted in agony, his form fading, until finally—

He disappeared from the pillar completely.

Yinshan Village

Mu Sicheng stopped resisting as he was grabbed by the flesh of his neck by the flying "Mu Sicheng." But instead of blood being sucked, it was his soul. The pain contorted his face into a hideous mask, almost as if it were a shadow. Finally, he disappeared completely from the pillar.

The "Mu Sicheng" zombie, now having absorbed the soul, stretched his shoulders in satisfaction and jumped down from the pillar. His expression twisted into something brutal as he strode toward Bai Liu.

However, Bai Liu kept his head down, seemingly unaware of Mu Sicheng approaching him.

As Mu Sicheng drew closer, just before he could open his mouth to bite, his face dropped to his knees. His features seemed to merge as if two faces were struggling to become one, and his body began to twitch uncontrollably.

Bai Liu slowly raised his gaze. "Mu Sicheng, it will take some time for you to fully merge with your soul. Can you control this zombie body?"

Mu Sicheng's soul twisted out from his face and responded in a hoarse voice, "Barely... I can!"

"It's almost midnight—when yin and yang converge and yang pours in, it's when yin is at its weakest." Bai Liu jumped off the bed, calmly continuing, "Now that the paths of yin and yang are aligned, we can return to the path of yang. This is our best chance to escape."

"But there's a problem." Bai Liu turned his head, eyeing the bride standing motionless, her head covered, staring at Mu Sicheng. "Your body is now one of their husbands and the owner of this tomb. With the host and guest fleeing, the shades in this tomb will surely pursue you."

"I need you to avoid completely devouring the prana, so you can maintain control of your zombie body and retain enough of your sanity to fight them off."

Mu Sicheng exhaled heavily. "So, you let the prana consume me, did you?"

Bai Liu nodded.

Mu Sicheng's face darkened, his fangs bared, and his claws dug into the ground. He exhaled a deep breath. "...I'll try."

"Then wait for me to count: one, two..." Bai Liu paused and glanced at his watch, then crouched down and grabbed Mu Sicheng by the shoulders, his gaze firm as he ordered, "Three, run!"

Mu Sicheng shot off like a stray arrow.

The lanterns in the house behind them flickered as the wind kicked up from Mu Sicheng's swift motion, and when the flames steadied, all the brides in the room had disappeared.

Bai Liu knelt on one knee, steadying himself on Mu Sicheng's back as he scampered around the shadowy chamber on all fours.

As they turned a corner, a headless bride emerged in front of them, about to close in. But Mu Sicheng swerved sharply, his fingers gripping the side wall of the tomb as he sprinted past the bride with ease.

Just as the bride turned, another one appeared. Bai Liu was quick enough to block her with a wedding pole, lifting the cover just in time.

A complete reversal—what had been a masked bride now revealed a playful, white-faced, red-lipped head looking down at Bai Liu.

Bai Liu pressed down on the back of Mu Sicheng's neck, and Mu Sicheng leapt off the wall, scuttling low to the ground to avoid the bride's line of sight.

The shadows, who had been talking and laughing, suddenly stopped when Mu Sicheng rushed in with Bai Liu on his back. Their eyes shifted, no longer hiding the malice within.

Standing outside the door were two welcoming guests, wearing melon caps. They bowed, kicking their hands, and flashed smiles like crescent moons. Their voices, sharp as eunuchs, rang out: "The guest of honor greets the guest!"

Mu Sicheng didn't slow down and led Bai Liu straight out the front door.

The welcoming guests' smiles vanished, replaced by stern shouts, "The guest is robbing the bride—an uninvited guest! Kill the guest to

welcome the honored guest!"

The shadows seemed to have been waiting for this command. Their eerie hissing voices rose from within the walls, their mouths splitting into grotesque, blood-red arcs. Their eyes gleamed with malicious amusement.

The moment Mu Sicheng bolted out the front door, the shadows twisted into thin black lines, darting off with remarkable speed.

Mu Sicheng looked back, his face shifting between two expressions, schizophrenic in tone—one moment malicious, the next wary.

"They’re catching up—what do we do?" he hissed.

"Die here, Bai Liu!" he snarled, then growled again, "It’s fast!"

"You can’t outrun these prana," he added grimly.

Mu Sicheng tore through the tomb’s passage, the red lanterns lining the walls casting ominous shadows. They seemed to slither like bloodthirsty black snakes, hunting down their prey.

"It’s true that in the underworld, we can’t do much against these evil spirits." Bai Liu’s gaze was flat. "But it’s twelve o’clock now, and yin and yang have met."

"In the yang world, there is neither fire nor light, nor soul nor spirit," Bai Liu continued.

He steadied himself and leaned forward, his hand snapping to his joystick. With a quick motion, he hooked one of the lanterns from the wall. As the lanterns extinguished, a puff of smoke escaped, and the red light vanished, plunging the tomb into darkness.

Deprived of light, the prana reflected on the walls was swallowed up, leaving only silence behind.

Mu Sicheng leapt off the wall and out of the tomb, the paper bridge that had been swallowed by darkness now reappearing before him.

On the bridge, a ghost with an umbrella glared at Mu Sicheng and the others approaching. Beneath it, countless bodies rose and fell, undisturbed.

Mu Sicheng leaped onto the bridge's abutment, his face set in fierce determination. With several swift strides, he cleared the ghost,

jumping over it with ease.

Bai Liu turned around, watching as the ghost struggled to catch up. The ghost, still clutching its umbrella, was soon left behind by Mu Sicheng's rapid pace, trapped on the bridge with resentment in its eyes.

"It's one minute past twelve," Bai Liu murmured, leaning over Mu Sicheng's back. "We need to be back on land by twelve fifteen. The meeting of yin and yang lasts only a quarter of an hour. Run as fast as you can."

"As fast as we can!" Mu Sicheng grinned, pushing himself harder. His tongue hung out, and he was panting, but he managed to speak, "At this speed, we'll be safe!"

As he spoke, his face contorted with a snarl. He grabbed a ghost that had crawled out from an altar and, with one swift motion, sank his fangs into its neck, flinging its head aside with brutal force.

Bai Liu heard the crack of bones and patted Mu Sicheng on the head. "Don't drink the ghosts' blood," he said. "Too much Yin is bad for you."

"And the blood of a water ghost corpse isn't good either," Bai Liu added.

Mu Sicheng spat out the neck of the accomplice he'd bitten, grimacing in disgust. "Ugh, you should've told me sooner. It's all watery and fishy!"

"You were the one who rushed in too fast," Bai Liu replied, his eyes narrowing as he glanced toward the altars rolling in from the darkened tomb passage. Ghosts with twisted bodies crawled out from them. "These altars weren't originally here; they were in a side chamber where I fell."

"Someone moved these altars to make things harder for us."

Mu Sicheng tilted his head, sniffing the air as he crawled forward on his hands. He frowned. "This smells so messy. Who's behind this?"

Bai Liu slowly raised his eyes. "It's got to be Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi. They're trying to make us lose, hoping we'll die in the catacombs while they stand at the exit."

At the tomb's entrance, Kong Xuyang, holding half of a [Yin-Yang

Road Separation Talisman], tossed it to Yang Zhi with a sneer. "Bai Liu actually used the Yin-Yang Road Separation Talisman in a place like this. What a way to get himself killed."

Yang Zhi gave a small, unremarkable compliment. "That's what you do when you're pushed to the limit."

Kong Xuyang smirked, looking toward the trapdoor at the entrance to the tomb. "I'd say it's rather unkind of us to just stand by and watch without helping him out, especially in this snowstorm."

Yang Zhi looked toward the door, his eyes glinting with memory. "I remember falling through here and landing in a side chamber filled with altars."

Kong Xuyang nodded solemnly. "Yes, that side chamber is full of altar water ghosts. If you touch one, it'll double and trap you."

"I remember, Brother Kong," Yang Zhi said, recalling the past. "When you first played Yinshan Village, you used that side chamber to screw over two players and take their things. How'd you manage that?"

Kong Xuyang rolled his eyes. "You're still using your memory-based skills? You can't remember anything."

Yang Zhi smiled, fawning. "Brother Kong, you're the master of traps. You use so many tricks, in and out of the game, that even I can't keep track."

Kong Xuyang tilted his neck back in a triumphant laugh, waving Yang Zhi away. "If you know so much, get out of the way."

"With the Yin-Yang Road Separation Talisman, as long as they don't return to the Yang world before midnight, they'll be trapped in the netherworld," Yang Zhi said, his eyes gleaming with malicious pleasure as he looked at the altar beneath the trapdoor. "And the altar ghost, though weak, is the hardest ghost in Yinshan Village. It's perfect for stalling."

"All it takes is a little [driving charm]," Kong Xuyang said, pulling out a yellow talisman. He dipped his pen in vermilion and drew a stroke on the talisman before sticking it to the trapdoor. "This will guide the ghost and block anyone from escaping the tomb."

As the yellow talisman glowed, a red light burst from it. The altar beneath shook violently, rolling toward a certain direction as if

summoned by some unseen force.

Yang Zhi grinned. "Brother Kong, your traps are as wicked as ever."

"No poison, no husband," Kong Xuyang said, his smile still wicked. But before he could say more, a violent gust of wind erupted from the trapdoor, spinning and eventually exploding.

Two figures appeared in the dusty air.

Before Yang Zhi could even see who they were, a ghost with a limp neck smashed into both him and Kong Xuyang, sending them flying into the door, coughing up blood.

As the dust settled, the two figures revealed themselves.

Mu Sicheng lay on the ground, his face bruised and his fangs stained with blood. He spat out a mouthful of ghost blood, glaring at Yang Zhi and Kong Xuyang as they stumbled toward him.

Bai Liu knelt on top of Mu Sicheng, blood staining his face and shirt. His face was pale, but he wore a smile that was so friendly it made one's skin crawl.

Bai Liu grinned at the two men, who were still choking and coughing on the ground. "Well, well, old friends. We meet again."

Yinshan Village

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kong Xuyang's eyes widened, and he was about to speak when Yang Zhi exclaimed in astonishment, "How did you manage to escape the tomb?!"

"I won't go into the details, old man." Bai Liu smiled warmly, his eyes drifting to the yellow talismans in Kong Xuyang's hands. His smile deepened. "I get the feeling you didn't want me out of there any more than anyone else, did you?"

"Cut the crap." Kong Xuyang backhanded a drive charm onto the trapdoor, cursing with a malicious laugh. "You think you can just escape and be safe? I've got some tricks up my sleeve."

"Heaven and Earth, Divine Warrior Dao, Thundering Orders, Urgent as Starfire... Borrowing the Military Text!"

A violent gust of wind erupted from beneath the trapdoor, so strong that it nearly lifted the three people standing nearby.

Kong Xuyang stood unfazed, not even his hair swaying. His smile became even more sinister. "From the moment I entered this tomb, I set traps everywhere, including, of course, the most important exit point."

"I've laid two traps in this location—one for entry." Kong Xuyang looked down at the stone door with a faded yellow talisman on the side. "Step on this, and you'll fall into the side-chamber trap."

He then turned his grim expression to Bai Liu. "You're lucky you didn't die after stepping in it."

"But you can avoid the first day, not the fifteenth." Kong Xuyang's gloomy expression faded into an evil grin. "I've linked all the traps I've set in this tomb into a single talisman."

Holding a yellow talisman of mixed gold and red between his fingers, he stuck it to the tomb door and shouted, "Ten percent of the three worlds will hear from afar, and the evil spirits will be bound in a spell!"

As soon as the charm stuck, the entire tomb shook. All light disappeared, and faint sounds of paper footsteps, lanterns rattling, and women moving forward with broken steps echoed from the pitch-black tomb tunnel.

The altar beneath the loose-leaf door attached to the wall stirred, and two ghastly white hands emerged from within, grabbing the wall and slowly crawling upward. The altar's top was crowned with a yellow talisman, and the body inside writhed and slithered into the tomb passage.

At the same time, red lanterns floated slowly through the darkened tomb, casting eerie shadows of men, women, and children that swayed along.

While the walls were lined with figures of normal height, the tomb passage was filled with short, jumping paper figures.

These paper figures were no taller than half an adult's height, with yellowed, thin paper covered in heavy white paint. Their cheerful, false smiles contrasted with their hollow eyes, and they carried red-and-white lanterns marked with the character "Xi." Their lanterns illuminated the new bride walking ahead of them, dressed in a wedding gown, head covered, arms crossed in front.

As the shadowy figures blinked, they began to approach Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng, swirling and laughing in chaotic circles, their colorful faces drawing nearer.

Mu Sicheng bit down on two ghosts crawling from the ground but froze as a woman's laughter came from behind. When he turned around, a new bride had appeared on his shoulder, calling out, "Groom～"

Mu Sicheng jerked his head back to look at Bai Liu, only to see another bride appear in front of him.

The situation was even worse for Bai Liu, surrounded by paper figures who held lanterns in his face, running around him mischievously. One by one, they pasted themselves onto his body from his feet, gradually covering his entire form, until his face was almost obscured.

The mouths on the paper figures opened and closed, their smiles growing more intense, as if sucking on something. Their faces reddened, eventually bulging out of their flattened sheets, their eyebrows growing into full, fleshy faces. From their mouths came a

shrill, childish laugh.

Behind Bai Liu stood a headless bride, silently resting her severed head on his shoulder. Her sharp green-and-white hands clutched tightly at his shoulders, preventing him from escaping the paper figures' grasp—the same ghost Bai Liu had earlier removed from his head.

The child-turned-paper-figure giggled with increasing delight.

Mu Sicheng noticed that Bai Liu's body was becoming thinner as the paper figures clung to him. His exposed hand turned deathly pale and slender, like paper.

"Bai Liu!" Mu Sicheng, panicked, rushed toward Bai Liu but found himself unable to move freely with a dozen brides clinging to his shoulders.

A dozen brides were piled together, their dizzying laughter echoing through the tomb passage, while the red glow of twin lanterns floated around them. The light reflected eerily on their faces, hidden beneath their veils.

The figures on the walls swayed back and forth, their laughter growing louder. Their bloodshot eyes slid down the walls and swirled greedily around the shadows of Mu Sicheng and Bai Liu. It was as though they were vultures, ready to descend upon their prey, tearing apart their souls and devouring them.

Kong Xuyang laughed loudly. "It's nice to be surrounded by so many 'cunts,' isn't it, Bai Liu?"

He raised his eyebrows triumphantly. "In this tomb, we have the secret treasure of the Daoist zombie, and all the yin energy here is mine to command."

At the tomb entrance, Kong Xuyang waved a hand mockingly at Bai Liu, who was heavily besieged by the netherworld creatures. He deliberately mimicked Bai Liu's tone when addressing him. "But, old man, it's a rare blessing for someone like you to die in a tomb of this grand scale."

After saying this, Kong Xuyang paused for a moment, enjoying the sight of Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng quickly being ensnared by the powerful nether forces. He grimaced with disdain, then turned and opened the tomb door. He waved for Yang Zhi to leave with him,

adding casually, "With just a minute until twelve-thirty, I think the show worked out quite well—watching you two, trapped in the underworld, tangled with these monstrous spirits."

He turned back to flash a fake benevolent smile at Bai Liu. "Your audience must love how I prepared your death. I'll take your popularity as a bonus."

With that, Kong Xuyang left without looking back, the tomb door slamming shut behind him, leaving only the faint sounds of scraping limbs, women and children's laughter, and bones being chewed from within.

Kong Xuyang continued in a chipper mood, not even glancing over his shoulder as he strode toward the exit. "It won't be long now, this game's almost over."

He sighed as he walked, "It was probably the fastest race we've ever had in the high stakes." Then, with a trace of mock sorrow, he added, "But it wasn't unexpected—Bai Liu's just a former employee, after all. It's normal for someone like him to fall so quickly."

Yang Zhi, however, glanced back at the closed tomb door, feeling uneasy.

"Brother Kong," Yang Zhi said, walking quickly to catch up with Kong Xuyang. "I think something's wrong."

Kong Xuyang, clearly irritated, waved a dismissive hand without breaking his stride. "You're thinking too much. Mu Sicheng and Bai Liu have no memories or skills. There's no way they could kill the monsters in this Yinshan Village tomb on their own."

He snorted, an air of satisfaction on his face. "The only way Mu Sicheng could kill a ghost here is if he's zombified—if that's the case, he's not far from death. I've prepared a trap with such dense Yin Qi that it won't be long before that foolish monkey turns into a zombie and is completely out of the game."

Yang Zhi's face lit up with realization. "So that's it."

Despite this, an uneasy feeling lingered in Yang Zhi's mind. His half-formed memories of Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng kept surfacing—memories of their extreme personalities that were hard to suppress.

Every so often, he would glance back at the tomb entrance and ask

cautiously, "Brother Kong, are you really sure you can trap them? These two don't stay pinned down easily, and the backlash... it seems quite powerful."

Kong Xuyang shot him a sideways glance. "What, you doubt my ability to set traps?"

Yang Zhi shook his head. "No, of course not. I'm just...," he trailed off, unable to pinpoint why the situation felt so wrong. There was an invisible tension in the air that unsettled him, despite the seemingly easy victory ahead.

He knew in his gut that Kong Xuyang was one of the best at laying traps—both in and out of the game. His traps had caused many high-ranking teams to suffer great losses. The tomb was set up with all kinds of talismans to summon Yin creatures as a final defense, ensuring the defeat of Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng.

Even though Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng had memories and abilities, Yang Zhi was certain that they wouldn't be able to escape Kong Xuyang's trap.

Yet, Yang Zhi couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng were not the type to rest on their laurels.

On a deeper level, Yang Zhi realized it wasn't just Kong Xuyang who was seeking a counterattack—Bai Liu was too.

Bai Liu had frequently used the [Jedi Counterattack] to leap from rookie to No. 1 on the Rising Stars list, then to the top of the King's list, eventually reaching the same status as the veteran teams. He was a master at turning the tables.

Though Yang Zhi had the feeling Kong Xuyang would win, there was a vague foreboding in his chest.

He knew, deep down, that this trap wasn't meant for Bai Liu by Kong Xuyang—it was from Bai Liu to Kong Xuyang.

As the tomb door closed, leaving only a narrow crack, Bai Liu's calm voice suddenly pierced the silence, accompanied by the flutter of a yellow talisman.

Chapter End Notes

Jedi Counterattack: A character, despite being in a seemingly

losing situation, manages to turn the tables on their adversaries through unexpected intelligence, tactics, or sheer willpower. It plays off the idea of the "underdog" making a dramatic comeback.

Yinshan Village

The yellow talisman passed by Kong Xuyang's side. He turned slightly, catching it between his fingers. After swiping the runes on the talisman, he sneered, "A low-level Yin Corpse talisman?"

"Bai Liu is dreaming more and more absurdly," Kong Xuyang continued with a cold, contemptuous smile. "He thinks he can break free from my trap with a mere corpse charm? He believes he can turn things around and control the yin creature I've summoned?"

With a flick of his fingers, the two yellow talismans in his hands ignited without wind, flames of blue and purple licking the edges before the talismans turned to ash. He sneered again, "This paltry amount of Yin energy is far too weak to feed the ghosts."

More yellow talismans kept flying out from the cracks in the tomb door, but Kong Xuyang intercepted and burned each one before they could do anything.

The disdain and amusement on Kong Xuyang's face grew more evident. "Dying for nothing—it's almost a quarter to twelve."

"Isn't Bai Liu going to be trapped in the underworld forever?" Yang Zhi stared at the gap in the tomb door. He should have felt relief, but for some reason, an uneasy tension gripped him. Cold sweat gathered at the corners of his forehead, his lips dry and pale. "Brother Kong, is there really no way to counter the Yin and Yang charm?"

Kong Xuyang shot Yang Zhi a strange look. "You've played Yinshan Village too, haven't you? Don't you know that the Daoist elements in this copy are based on Taoism and karma?"

He continued, his tone growing more dismissive, "According to this game's setting, the Yin-Yang Crossing Talisman is an evil spell. If it's used, you can either be lucky enough to escape at the exact moment the charm expires, but we're guarding the tomb door, and Bai Liu is trapped by my trap. He won't get far."

"Or, an extremely skilled Taoist might reverse the spell, but such a person doesn't exist at this stage in the game. And, according to the Taoist rules, anyone who uses the evil spell is bound to be reversed, like Bai Liu. Right now, he's already being reversed."

"We're about to win. What are you so nervous about?"

Yang Zhi forced a smile, wiping the cold sweat from his forehead. "You're right."

Although Yang Zhi knew deep down that Kong Xuyang was correct, an uneasy feeling gnawed at him, growing stronger with each passing moment.

Kong Xuyang, casual as ever, watched with amusement as more corpse charms shot out from the tomb doorway. He didn't even bother to stop them, glancing down at his watch. With a grin, he began counting down slowly: "Ten."

"Nine."

Yang Zhi, feeling increasingly flustered, interrupted Kong Xuyang's countdown. "Brother Kong, why don't we leave first, just in case Bai Liu—"

"What if, what if?" Kong Xuyang rolled his eyes in annoyance. "I don't understand why you're so worried. Bai Liu won't turn things around unless a highly skilled Taoist priest helps him—"

At that moment, Bai Liu's calm voice came from the tomb doorway. "Eight."

Yang Zhi and Kong Xuyang paused, slowly turning their heads toward the tomb door.

Bai Liu continued the countdown, clearly and without haste. "Seven."

Yang Zhi took a step back, horror spreading across his face as he pointed at the tomb door. "Brother Kong, Bai Liu is counting down too!"

Kong Xuyang, his expression dark, grabbed Yang Zhi's shoulders to stop him from backing away and stared fiercely at the gap in the tomb door. "Let's see what he's up to. Four."

Bai Liu's voice remained calm. "Three."

"Two." Kong Xuyang scoffed, his tone grim. "Don't worry, we'll win. Just wait."

Bai Liu's voice came again, faint but steady. "One."

As the final countdown echoed, and the time reached a quarter past twelve, a gray, gloomy color spread rapidly from both sides of the

tomb passage. The eerie laughter of the paper figures and the soft giggles of the bride grew louder, almost piercing, as if coming from far away, through the tomb door.

"Treat your guests to the road to the underworld, live in a house of the underworld, and become a household of the underworld!"

These shadowy creatures seemed to be dragging Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng further into the tomb, their clothes rustling and the sound of their shoes stomping against the ground.

Mu Sicheng struggled, shouting, "Get out! Let go of me and Bai Liu!!!"

Kong Xuyang was ecstatic. "It’s done!"

Yang Zhi let out a long, relieved sigh, his joy overflowing. "Brother Kong, we won..."

Before Yang Zhi could finish the word "win," a red light suddenly erupted from the tomb door, followed by a deafening sound that shook the air.

The sound bounced through the air, causing the ground to vibrate violently, as though a massive object was repeatedly slamming onto it, crushing the underground catacombs and shaking the earth from side to side.

Kong Xuyang and the others staggered under the shaking. Kong Xuyang managed to steady himself by grabbing the wall, but Yang Zhi was thrown off balance and fell onto his backside. What the hell is this? Is there such a thing in a tomb?

The grim grey that had obscured the tomb door flickered and faded. Inside, the paper figures and the bride let out frightened whispers, followed by the sound of paper tearing as if they were fleeing.

Kong Xuyang's expression turned pale. "What's happening? How did the Yin-Yang Roadmap talisman activate? There's no way Bai Liu could have triggered it!"

"No living person in Yinshan Village can break the Maoshan evil spell!" Kong Xuyang's mind raced, and he took a few steps back in front of the tomb door, which was now cracked. "The only NPC who could have used his body to undo the evil spell was driven away by me in the opening chapter! What went wrong?!"

The tomb door creaked open further with each shake, and a blinding red light cracked through it. From within, a hoarse, guttural roar, almost like a beast awakening, echoed. With it came a chilling gust that made the hairs on the back of their necks stand up.

As the tomb door shattered open, Bai Liu's pale face emerged from the shadows, his lips curling into a smirk. "You made a great trap, but you're right about one thing—there are no living Daoists here who can undo the evil spell."

"But," Bai Liu grinned, "there are Taoist ghosts that can."

He glanced around, his eyes gleaming with mischief. "Have you forgotten who this tomb was meant to bury?"

Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi fell silent, their faces frozen in disbelief. Slowly, they turned their gazes toward Bai Liu.

Bai Liu raised the Yin Corpse spell, which Kong Xuyang had mocked earlier, and smiled. "This little Yin ghost may be small, but it's enough to awaken the master here."

Kong Xuyang's eyes widened in disbelief as he watched the approaching zombie dressed as a Taoist priest. It grew taller with every leap, its long, thick black nails scraping the air.

The zombie's face was covered with freshly drawn yellow talismans, leaving only its dark eyes visible, surrounded by wrinkled, dry skin. Those talismans were none other than a nether corpse spell.

Kong Xuyang instantly recognized it as the most dangerous monster in the entire Yinshan Village copy—the 100-year-old Zombie Daoist.

The tomb, filled with countless burial sites, had claimed the lives of so many villagers, their souls trapped in limbo, all to gather enough Yin Qi to create this one terrifying zombie.

Yang Zhi panicked first. "Bai Liu, are you insane?! If you wake it up, we're all dead!"

"I know," Bai Liu shrugged with a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "But I'm going to die anyway. Might as well drag you all to my funeral while I'm here."

The paper figures, symbols of the underworld's gloom, scattered as the red-glowing Zombie Daoist leaped forward. Just before it reached the

tomb door, an invisible path crossed its jump, halting it mid-air.

Kong Xuyang's heart skipped a beat. "The Yin-Yang partition charm... it's working!"

"Trap it!" Yang Zhi cried, her face pale with fear as she prayed that Bai Liu's talisman would hold the zombie boss at bay.

If this thing was truly unleashed, they had no chance. Running would be useless—death was inevitable.

The Zombie Daoist, with its face covered in talismans, exhaled a visible puff of white air, then lowered its head. Its black and purple eyes scanned the path below, its finger twisting slightly as it seemed to draw talismans in the air.

"How... how does it remember all these Taoist techniques even though it's dead?!" Yang Zhi gasped in shock.

"The Dao is profound," Bai Liu observed thoughtfully, stroking his chin, "and it's familiar with these feats. Looks like it's just what's needed to undo the charm."

The watery barrier on the path shattered after a final flick of the Zombie Daoist's nails. The creature sniffed the air, then moved straight toward Kong Xuyang without hesitation.

"Shit!" Kong Xuyang swore, tossing yellow talismans behind him as he ran, frantically placing them on himself. "Bai Liu, even if you summoned it, you have no way of defending yourself! You'll be the first to die in a chase, not me!"

"I'll make it through just the same when you're dead! Either I survive, or I win!" Bai Liu's grin widened, his voice calm but cold. "Is that so?"

Without another word, the zombie ignored Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng at the door, leaping straight at Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi, who were already fleeing.

Yang Zhi, hearing the sound of the zombie jumping behind her, turned to look. "The vampire's not after Bai Liu and the others! It's coming after us!"

Kong Xuyang looked back in horror and screamed, tossing more yellow talismans as the zombie neared. "How could this happen?!"

The yellow talismans disintegrated instantly under the Zombie Daoist's power. It continued to pursue them relentlessly.

Watching the distant figures of Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi as they fled, Mu Sicheng felt a sense of confusion mixed with relief.

He looked down at himself, fully restored now that the Yin-Yang Roadmap had failed. Turning to Bai Liu, he asked, "If the Zombie Daoist is after the living to kill Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi, why isn't it after us? We're alive, yet it's ignoring us."

"This Daoist zombie doesn't hunt the living," Bai Liu said coolly, watching the zombie's retreating figure. "It hunts outsiders."

Mu Sicheng's confusion deepened. "Outsiders? You mean people who aren't from Yinshan Village? But if Kong Xuyang and the others are considered outsiders, then aren't we, too?"

"We were outsiders, too," Bai Liu smiled, his eyes softening as he lovingly patted Mu Sicheng's head. "But after you took over thirty wives from Yinshan Village, we're no longer outsiders."

Mu Sicheng blinked in disbelief. "Wait, according to that logic, you didn't marry anyone from Yinshan Village, right? You're an outsider too! So why didn't the zombie chase you?"

Bai Liu's smile grew even warmer. "What are you talking about, silly child? I officiated your wedding, ate at your banquet, and haunted your bridal chamber. Of course, I'm considered an elder in your family now. How could I be an outsider?"

Mu Sicheng: "....."

Mu Sicheng swallowed his irritation, holding back the words, "That's fucking fine," as he took a deep breath and changed the subject. "What's next? Is that zombie Daoist going to keep us safe?"

Bai Liu shook his head. "According to the mural, the zombie Daoist will go berserk later on. Not only will it kill outsiders, but it will also refine the people in the village. I think it'll hurt us, too."

Mu Sicheng frowned. "Then what? Do you know when this zombie Daoist will go berserk?"

Bai Liu thought for a moment. "It should happen on the seventh day of the old men's heads in the temple when the darkness is strongest."

Mu Sicheng paused. "So, we don't have much time left?"

"Right." Bai Liu nodded, stepping outside. "Based on the information we've gathered so far, and from Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi's reactions, we're likely in some kind of competitive game. We're playing roles, and the first to pass—or kill the other person in this role-play—wins."

Bai Liu glanced down at the footprints left by Yang Zhi and Kong Xuyang, as they scurried away. "If I'm right, they've played this game before, but they're not familiar with this tomb."

Mu Sicheng clenched his fists, his hostility clear. "Fuck that. I'm sick of people who've been through the game and abused it to cheat others."

"But the next part of the game should be new to them, too." Bai Liu looked up, his smile charming. "I like a fair game, so now we're on the same page again."

Mu Sicheng frowned. "Haven't they played before? How can it be strange for them?"

Bai Liu smiled knowingly. "There are different storylines in the game, leading to different endings. From the way they were so afraid of the Daoist zombies and went out of their way to avoid them in the tomb, it's clear they didn't take this storyline last time. Otherwise, they would have known how to deal with the Daoist zombies."

"Simply put, last time, they must have taken the 'normal' route, and that's what they got."

Bai Liu sidled closer, his smile pleasant. "But I've chosen the 'true end' route this time. In this branch of the game, there's an information gap between us and them. It's up to each of us to make the most of it."

With that, Bai Liu turned and walked outside, his expression unreadable.

Mu Sicheng hesitated for a moment. He opened his mouth to ask something, but in the end, said nothing and followed Bai Liu in silence.

If triggering this so-called "true end" line had been Bai Liu's goal from the start, then everything that had happened since they entered the tomb made sense. From the ghost trap that separated them to Mu Sicheng crossing the ghost bridge alone, his soul trapped and married to over thirty brides, to Bai Liu risking his life to save him—everything seemed orchestrated.

The accidental-seeming traps laid by Kong Xuyang allowed them to avoid danger and, strangely, benefited Bai Liu. Because Bai Liu gave his life to save Mu Sicheng, Mu Sicheng was now deeply devoted to him. Because Mu Sicheng married his bride, they managed to avoid the Daoist vampire. And because Kong Xuyang had set up a trap that gathered Yin energy, Bai Liu had managed to awaken the Daoist vampire...

It seemed like, from the very beginning, everything and everyone in this game had been arranged by Bai Liu.

Mu Sicheng was nothing more than a puppet in Bai Liu's hands, following the path Bai Liu had laid out and finding it all strangely interesting. Unaware of being used, he gave everything and still felt a strange gratitude.

Mu Sicheng looked at Bai Liu's slender back as he walked ahead, holding the candlestick, the light casting a warm glow on his face. But there was no warmth in his eyes, only a coldness that sent a chill down Mu Sicheng's spine.

Bai Liu turned his head and cast a questioning glance, his expression open and unguarded. "What's wrong?"

Mu Sicheng noticed the two sharp teeth peeking from Bai Liu's lips.

The cold feeling in his heart dissipated, and his expression softened. He scratched his head awkwardly. "Nothing... I was just wondering, all this... didn't it make you angry?"

Bai Liu smiled casually. "It's fine. It'll take time to recover. Don't worry about me."

Mu Sicheng sighed in relief, but guilt gnawed at him. His conspiracy theories and malicious assumptions about Bai Liu had been misplaced.

How could someone who had meticulously planned everything and used others so coldly be the same Bai Liu who had nearly died to save him?

Bai Liu held the candlestick, the warm orange light reflecting off his face as his smile remained friendly, though his eyes betrayed no emotion. "We're teammates. It's only right that we help each other."

Mu Sicheng nodded, his tone earnest. "Of course. That's natural."

The Other End

Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi, both wearing several protective amulets, crouched in the shadow of the bushes, careful not to make a sound as they watched the Daoist vampire standing motionless at the entrance to Yinshan Village in the dead of night.

The zombie's figure was enormous, appearing almost two meters tall in the darkness. It wore a yellow-bottomed black Daoist robe, a yellow crown made of gold and jade, thick-soled black and white cloud boots, and carried a long peach wood sword. A blood-red aura swirled around it, sending an unsettling chill through the air.

Its fangs, long enough to reach its cheeks, were stained with old, rusty blood. Its eyes were ebony and its nose a dark purple on its forehead. Every now and then, a low rumbling sound emanated from its throat, while its fingers twitched slightly, like a warning from a predatory beast.

"Brother Kong..." Yang Zhi whispered, drenched in cold sweat. "Is there anything in your Maoshan Daoist teachings that can control it?"

Kong Xuyang muttered in frustration, "If I had any idea, do you think I'd still be hiding here with you?"

Yang Zhi's legs buckled, and he sank to his knees. "But it's a zombie! There must be some way to stop or slow it down using proper Daoist arts!"

"I do have some spells in this book that can restrain a zombie," Kong Xuyang admitted grimly. "But none of them work on this one. Not only is it a Daoist who's been transformed into a zombie, but it also has the ability to break these spells on its own."

"This thing has golden light around it, meaning it performed many good deeds in its life, and people prayed for its safety after death. It's a heavenly-blessed ghost, making it immune to regular spells."

"What?!" Yang Zhi exclaimed, his confusion clear. "You and I both know this creature was created by a Daoist to live forever. He sacrificed hundreds of people from Yinshan Village to make himself into this ageless, immortal monster. How could there be any golden light around it?"

Kong Xuyang's face darkened. "That Daoist used a twisted form of alchemy—blood sacrifices, forcing his own daughter to die on the way to her wedding, and his elderly father to drown in a weir, all to refine this beast."

"Right," Yang Zhi said, nodding rapidly. "This zombie has been feeding on the resentment of Yinshan Village's descendants, leading to the village's extinction. After a century, it finally regained its full form when its Yin energy was complete."

"Zombies feed on blood, and we've got the blood of Yinshan's descendants in us. This Daoist zombie has been fed by their anger for so long that it instinctively seeks people with a similar scent..."

Yang Zhi shuddered and muttered, "Last game, during the first seven nights, I felt something rush out of the tomb. A player beside me was drained dry, his blood sucked out so fast that in ten seconds, he turned into a mere husk. If we hadn't run, we would have—"

Kong Xuyang cut him off sharply, "Stop it."

The two men fell silent. All that could be heard in the bushes was the chirping of cicadas, the occasional buzz of crickets, and the low, guttural growls from the zombie's throat, mixed with the tense, ragged breathing of Yang Zhi and Kong Xuyang.

Sweat dripped from their jaws, their anxiety palpable.

"Damn it," Kong Xuyang cursed through clenched teeth. "I've played so many games, but I've never seen such an evil monster!"

"It kills players with no warning, no major moves, no conditions—it's basically immune to all attacks, with insane attack and defense stats," Yang Zhi added, shaking his head, near tears. "As soon as it's released, there's no time to find its weaknesses. It just kills."

"At least it’s not fully berserk yet," Kong Xuyang said, trying to calm down. "If we can just survive until then, we've been through this once before. It’s not that hard..."

Yang Zhi eyed the zombie nervously. "But Brother Kong, if it's been released, we can't take the [normal end] path we took last time. If we try, we'll be killed in the chase before we even get a chance."

"We have to take the [true end] path, the one that involves deciphering this zombie’s background." Yang Zhi smiled weakly. "First, we need to figure out its weakness to control it."

"But that’s a path we haven't taken yet, and it's dangerous. It’s better than trying to follow Bai Liu, though. He’s already explored the tomb and somehow hasn’t been attacked by this zombie. He has the advantage..."

Kong Xuyang stood still for a moment, his face turning red with anger. He kicked the tree in front of him, trying to vent, but just as he was about to strike, the zombie turned and faced him.

Kong Xuyang immediately shrank back, paralyzed with fear. He didn’t dare to move. After a long moment, once he was sure the zombie wasn’t looking their way, he muttered a quiet curse, "...bitch Bai..."

Before he could finish the word "Liu," the zombie suddenly spun around, baring its fangs and letting out an angry roar as it leaped toward him.

Kong Xuyang, terrified and furious, stumbled over his words in his panic. "Bai Liu isn’t a slut! I’m the slut! I’m the slut, okay, it’s fine!"

The zombie, upon hearing this, seemed to calm slightly, nodding as if satisfied. It turned back toward the village, its eyes dull and lifeless, retreating into a state of madness and ignoring the two men hiding outside.

Yang Zhi: "..."

Kong Xuyang: "..."

Kong Xuyang’s eyes burned with rage, his teeth grinding. "Damn it, why does every zombie keep turning toward Bai Liu?"

Yinshan Village

Seeing Kong Xuyang on the verge of losing control again, Yang Zhi quickly shifted the subject.

"Brother Kong, we still have an advantage. We figured out how to collect the clues for the true ending path during the last round."

Kong Xuyang's eyes were bloodshot, but he forced himself to focus, exhaling deeply. "The Yinshan Village yearbook. The missing sections of the mural are in the village calendar. If we find the yearbook from a hundred years ago, we can piece together the backstory of this Daoist vampire."

"And that's how we find its weakness," Yang Zhi said, patting Kong Xuyang's shoulder to ease his tension. "A player found a page of the calendar in the game last time. Do you remember where they found it?"

Kong Xuyang's eyes shifted toward the hill and the weir hidden in the darkness. He spoke slowly, his voice low, "The mass grave behind the weir."

In the Tomb Passage.

The entrance to the tomb, which had been narrowing steadily, was now broken open with brute force. The walls were marked with deep claw scratches from the zombie.

Bai Liu held up a candlestick, illuminating the area. "These claw marks... they're from the zombie trying to break free."

"That strength is terrifying," Mu Sicheng remarked, comparing the claw marks to his own hand. They were at least two sizes larger, and dug deep into the stone. His scalp tingled. "If this zombie goes berserk, it wouldn't take much to scratch us to death."

"We need to finish this before that happens," Bai Liu said calmly.

Bai Liu approached the entrance where they had crawled in. Stepping on Mu Sicheng's shoulder, he vaulted upwards.

The entrance to the tomb was under a bed. As Mu Sicheng was about

to crawl out from underneath it, Bai Liu grabbed him by the shoulders.

Bai Liu looked beyond the bed, his voice steady. "There's light. Someone's outside."

Mu Sicheng then noticed the faint flickering of silvery-white and grey-black light on the floor beneath the bed, accompanied by the soft sound of electricity crackling and multiple voices speaking intermittently.

The voices, at times rough and at times delicate, seemed distant, as though separated by a layer of something. They didn't sound like real people speaking.

"...These devils will freeze us, starve us, kill us. But as long as we have breath, we'll hold this place and keep outsiders from taking it..."

"But with all the men gone, leaving only the old and sick, where can we keep them? We can't keep them..."

"When are the men coming back? The daughters-in-law should go to the bridge at the village entrance again! Don't forget the umbrella, it's been raining a lot lately... almost Ching Ming..."

Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng exchanged a glance and immediately understood the source of the voices.

"The sound of a TV," Mu Sicheng murmured. "Someone's watching television."

Bai Liu gestured for him to go first, then deftly slipped out from beside the bed. He knelt in the shadows, his form hidden from the TV's glow, and silently observed the scene, as if confirming something.

Once certain, Bai Liu made a quiet "shh" gesture, signaling for Mu Sicheng to come out more quietly.

Relieved, Mu Sicheng crawled out from under the bed. But when he stood and turned around, he froze, gasping in horror. He quickly ducked down next to Bai Liu, whispering in shock, "What the hell?!"

By the bed at the entrance sat two elderly men with their backs to them, their white hair stark against the dark room. The old men faced an old wooden cabinet with rotting edges, inside which sat a small, square, outdated FM television, no more than 12 or 13 inches.

The picture on the screen was black and white, flickering and blurring intermittently, but the two men seemed transfixed, leaning forward, their backs rigid as they stared intently at the screen.

The light from the TV illuminated their faces vaguely. Dark spots surrounded their cloudy eyes, and something was wriggling in their mouths and noses as if trying to crawl out. White dots, resembling worms, stretched and contracted in their ears. Despite this, their faces remained fixed in wooden smiles, their lips moving rapidly, as though speaking.

Mu Sicheng held his breath but didn't hear any sound from the two old men's throats. Soon, however, he realized where their voices were coming from.

The movements of their mouths matched the voices coming from the TV.

Bai Liu glanced at the TV set. "They're dubbing the people on the TV."

The flickering black-and-white images on the screen appeared to be old archival footage. Several plain, old-fashioned women sat by the door of Yinshan Village, wearing small boots and traditional clothing, kneeling beside a coffin. They waved white handkerchiefs and covered their faces with long tears, with unfolded white umbrellas at their sides.

Mu Sicheng whispered, "These women are dressed like the martyred bridge ghosts. Are they living martyred bridge ghosts?"

Bai Liu nodded slightly. "I think so."

The eerie-looking old men continued to open and close their mouths, their voices in sync with the TV.

"Men are dead, too many to fit in the grave..."

"…torn to pieces by those ghost things, can't even get into the ancestral graves, can't see their ancestors..."

"Put them in a coffin and bury them at the mountain at the other end of the bridge, so they can rest properly."

"O, my ingrate! You died a horrible death! How am I supposed to live with this?"

The women sobbed as they clung to the coffin, unwilling to let go, on the verge of fainting. Eventually, they followed the men carrying the coffin across the weir and onto the bridge.

Their faces were streaked with dried tears. They held umbrellas to shield the coffins, trying to prevent the mutilated bodies and souls from being damaged by the sun.

But as they crossed the bridge, these women, having lost their husbands, looked at the long rows of coffins falling into the mountains. While carrying the coffins beneath their umbrellas, they suddenly folded them up and, without a second thought, jumped off the bridge, holding the umbrellas tightly.

Below the bridge, a shallow stream awaited them. The women crashed into the piers, their heads broken and bleeding.

They clutched their umbrellas in death, staring longingly at the distant coffins on the bridge with sad, forlorn expressions.

The moment the coffins were out of sight, they slowly closed their eyes and collapsed into the water, motionless. Their blood stained their traditional clothes, umbrellas, and the clear water below.

Mu Sicheng felt a chill run down his spine, but Bai Liu stared at the image intently, as though searching for something.

Mu Sicheng, feeling more and more uncomfortable, asked, "Who are you looking for, Bai Liu? There can't be anyone you know in there, can there?"

"Maybe," Bai Liu replied, his gaze still fixed on the screen.

Mu Sicheng was startled but quickly regained his composure. "No, Bai Liu, you don’t have a memory. There are only a few people you know —me, Kong Xuyang, Yang Zhi. I know them all."

Bai Liu glanced at Mu Sicheng briefly. "I’m looking for someone outside the picture."

"Off-screen…" Mu Sicheng was confused. "What does that mean?"

Bai Liu answered calmly, "Neither you nor I know the person in the image, but there may be someone outside the frame who looks familiar to both of us."

Mu Sicheng's confusion deepened. "It was a hundred years ago. Who could we have known?"

"You missed one person—the one who took this picture," Bai Liu said, still staring at the image. "If I'm right, this person is someone you'll recognize the first time you see them."

Curiosity outweighed his fear. Mu Sicheng clutched his chest, frowning as he stared at the edge of the frame, trying to spot the person holding the camera.

Soon, Mu Sicheng saw the figure adjusting the camera, making his face visible.

As soon as the cameraman's face entered the frame, Mu Sicheng turned to Bai Liu in shock. "Why does he look like that?"

Bai Liu remained calm. "What else? What do you think he'd look like?"

Mu Sicheng, pointing at the flickering cameraman on the screen, was on the verge of jumping up and down. "He looks just like me!"

The cameraman on the black-and-white TV was dressed in an old-fashioned, modern style—wearing a three-piece Little Ma suit and leather shoes. He had a mourning hat on his head and a tear-stained face. He was adjusting the camera while writing something in a yearbook with a quill pen.

Bai Liu observed the man. "He's probably the village calendarist."

The village calendarist recorded the village's fortunes, big and small, and also documented the missing information on the mural.

"How do you know he'll look like me?" Mu Sicheng asked, his curiosity piqued. He came closer to Bai Liu, eager for an explanation.

Bai Liu glanced at Mu Sicheng and the camera hanging around his neck, which had been recording, and spoke up.

"I'm just guessing. We're in a game where we play four roles, and all four characters are descendants of Yinshan Village."

"From the props and quests we've obtained, the four roles are a grave robber, a decent warlock, a villainous warlock, and a cameraman."

Bai Liu looked at Mu Sicheng. "Don't you think it makes more sense to move this setting forward a hundred years?"

Mu Sicheng’s eyes widened as he began to understand. "So, you think it’s not the role we’re playing now, but the role we’ll play a hundred years from now?"

"Exactly," Bai Liu said. "To be precise, we’re playing the roles of the descendants." He tapped eight times on the floor, connecting the dots. "If this is a well-designed game with tight logic, and you’re the cameraman—the recorder of paranormal events—and now we have a cameraman in front of us, someone who uses a chronological calendar to record misfortunes and fortunes, with tasks overlapping by up to 80%, then I personally think there’s a strong chance you’re a descendant of him."

"If I were designing this game, I’d adjust your appearance to remind you of that."

Mu Sicheng finally understood. "So, you're saying he looks like me!"

Mu Sicheng stroked his chin, about to ask for more details, when the sudden sound of a bench shifting in front of him startled him.

The two old men sitting ahead of them stood up stiffly and hurried to turn off the TV, pressing the FM button. However, the old TV with its faulty connections didn't seem to respond very well.

Mu Sicheng was about to inquire about what was going on when Bai Liu tapped him on the shoulder and gestured for him to look under the cupboard.

There, lying quietly, was the plug of the TV—completely unplugged.

An unplugged TV with artificially dubbed voices...

Mu Sicheng slowly turned to look at Bai Liu, cold sweat starting to bead on his forehead. He muttered, his voice shaky, "So this isn't a TV broadcast at all..."

"It's the actual picture," Bai Liu replied calmly.

The images on the TV flickered and jerked, freezing into place.

Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng appeared on the black-and-white screen, cowering in a corner.

Around them, a circle of women with their heads hanging low stood, dressed in birthday attire, holding birthday handkerchiefs. Two open coffins were placed directly in front of them.

From behind the tiny television, a pair of green and black hands slowly emerged, followed by a cracked black head, its features twisted into grotesque shapes, squinting at Bai Liu and the others.

The old man, whose back had been turned to them, twisted his head a full 180 degrees. His previously loving expression was now a hateful grimace, his teeth bared as his voice echoed from the television.

"You descendants have finally returned. Drag them to the mass grave and put them to rest!"

Without hesitation, Bai Liu grabbed Mu Sicheng, still dazed, and yanked him toward the two coffins, leaping over them and running for

their lives.

The ghosts behind them were like black, spider-like shadows, crawling in all directions toward the wall. Their faces were twisted with grim determination as they pursued Bai Liu and the two old men. Their heads turned backward as they laughed maniacally, waving their arms and legs in a grotesque display while chasing after them.

The two old men moved quickly, walking backward but with unnatural speed. In the blink of an eye, they were almost upon Mu Sicheng, their green and white faces twisted in joy, their fangs bared and mouths dripping.

“Shit!” Mu Sicheng snapped back to reality, recoiling in fear. He grabbed Bai Liu’s arm, and they ran wildly, barely escaping.

They burst out of the house, with the terrifying figures hot on their heels. The dark, mist-covered village seemed to stretch endlessly, and Mu Sicheng aimed for the temple ahead, hoping it would be their safest bet.

As they neared the temple, Mu Sicheng noticed the lights flickering at the entrance. In the flashing light, five figures stood by a wreath at the temple's door, waving slowly and shakily at them, as though beckoning them to come closer.

Mu Sicheng hesitated but stepped forward, his heart pounding. He saw five old men in birthday attire, their faces a sickly shade of green, black, and purple, their smiles twisted but affectionate. They waved at them with long, black fingernails—each nail more than an inch long.

Inside the temple were seven open coffins.

“Five here, two inside the house—exactly seven,” Bai Liu observed quickly. “At this point, the Yin energy is too strong. These seven old men have all escaped their coffins, and there’s no way they’re going back inside the temple now.”

Mu Sicheng, running desperately, asked urgently, “So where do we go now?!”

Bai Liu made a swift decision. “Nowhere’s safe at this hour. We’re heading to the mass grave at the bridge.”

“Huh?!” Mu Sicheng was stunned. “Why go there?!”

“To dig graves,” Bai Liu replied nonchalantly.

Mu Sicheng shuddered. “Digging graves? Why?!”

“The village calendar keeper records the village’s events—happiness, funerals, marriages... At funerals, he writes the biography of the deceased and buries it with the village calendar for that day,” Bai Liu explained quickly, still running. “The mass grave was built later and only contains certain bodies—most people from Yinshan Village are not buried there.”

Mu Sicheng’s eyes widened in realization. “Are you saying that what happened to those men when they died over a hundred years ago was written down in the almanac by the chronicler and buried with their coffins on the mountain?”

“Exactly,” Bai Liu nodded. “And it's not just that. Remember the catacombs, when we met the paper dodger crossing the ghost bridge to chase away the zombies? I think those zombies are the men buried on the other side of the hill who died there.”

Mu Sicheng suddenly understood. “Yes, those zombies were torn apart and then sewn back together, just like on TV. They’re like the husbands of those martyred bridge ghosts...”

“Yes!” Mu Sicheng finally realized, fully grasping the connection.

Bai Liu sprinted towards the village entrance, breathing heavily but speaking quickly. "The paper Daoist is the incarnation of the zombie Daoist. On one hand, it led these zombie men over the bridge from the hill to the village, and on the other, it manipulated the ghosts of the helpers to move the bride coffins out of the tomb and into the village, ultimately draining the anger from the last seven descendants of the village."

"By the time the extreme number of the seventh day of the first month converges, the Yin Qi gathered from these heavy accumulations of Yin grievances, combined with this evil art of corpse refining that has lasted for a hundred years, will be enough for this zombie Daoist to take form, appear in the world, and go on a killing spree."

Bai Liu reached the entrance of the village and finally stopped.

The ghosts behind him hissed in fear from a distance, as if they were scared of something nearby and didn’t dare approach. In front of Bai Liu, next to the village pagoda, stood a tall, flat-faced Taoist zombie.

Its hands were raised, its face covered in yellow talismans, yet it stood still, unmoving.

Bai Liu stared at the zombie for a while before suddenly walking up and tearing the two Yin Corpse Talismans off its face.

Once the talismans were removed, the zombie's face was partially revealed.

In contrast to its tall, imposing figure, the zombie's closed eyes were surrounded by dark shadows, with clear, handsome brows and a dead white complexion.

Mu Sicheng glanced back, his eyes flickering between Bai Liu's face and the zombie's, then looked almost confused. "…Bai Liu, this zombie looks just like you!"

Yes, aside from its height, the zombie bore a striking resemblance to Bai Liu, who had been working late all week.

Bai Liu remained calm. "I use evil magic, and this zombie Daoist also uses evil magic. I must be his descendant; it makes sense that I look like him."

"You knew this zombie looked like you, which is why you used so many Yin Corpse Talismans to cover its face, so Kong Xuyang and the others wouldn't recognize it when you released it." Mu Sicheng suddenly realized something. "This zombie isn't chasing you because you're its descendant, is it?"

Bai Liu answered casually, "I suppose so."

"…Strange…" Mu Sicheng rubbed his chin. "Didn't you say Kong Xuyang and the others played a game? They're terrified of this zombie, so they must have seen it before. Given that this zombie's face resembles one of the players around them, why didn't they notice the role-playing setting of descendants?"

"I've thought about that too," Bai Liu replied thoughtfully. "But from their last reaction, I think Kong Xuyang was very fearful and avoided this zombie's close presence. He crawled furiously on the ground with his head lowered as soon as it came near him. I have a feeling he wouldn't have faced this zombie directly."

"And Yang Zhi keeps turning to look at this zombie. I think he's seen its face before."

"That's strange," Mu Sicheng said, frowning. "Yang Zhi and Kong Xuyang both should have played the game before, but Yang Zhi seems completely unaware of many things, just like us. For instance, Yang Zhi has clearly encountered this zombie, but he doesn't seem to know the setting at all. He could probably guess the truth just from seeing its face."

"Why can't Yang Zhi remember? This game is so terrifying, how could he forget?" Mu Sicheng wondered.

Bai Liu suddenly shifted the topic. "In what kinds of situations do people forget intense, traumatic experiences?"

Mu Sicheng thought for a moment. "Maybe they encountered something even more impactful? Maybe they're just forgetful? Memory loss?"

"Tsk." Mu Sicheng shook his head with a frown. "These reasons don't quite fit. It doesn't look like Yang Zhi has lost his memory, since it's us who've lost ours. It's odd that he can't remember the scene."

Bai Liu slowly turned his head toward Mu Sicheng and smiled. "You just reminded me."

Mu Sicheng's scalp tingled at the eerie smile. "Remind you of what?"

"Besides memory loss, there's another reason a person might confuse or forget a powerful, traumatic experience," Bai Liu said, looking at the zombie's face, which eerily resembled his own. "It could be a confused memory."

Mu Sicheng blinked in confusion. "Confused? No way! It hasn't been decades, how could he confuse something like that?"

"If you're talking about Yang Zhi, it has been decades." Bai Liu's smile curved deeper. "Don't you think it's a little unfair that we lose our memories as soon as we enter this tournament-style game?"

Mu Sicheng hesitated. "What do you mean?"

Bai Liu's gaze turned toward Mu Sicheng. "In a game with such bizarre settings, like ghosts and gods, does Yang Zhi have his own powers as a player? Maybe he has a memory-devouring charm or something."

"And what if he devoured decades of memories from both of us, causing his own memories to blur? That would make him unable to

remember much of what he experienced in his last game—like this zombie's face."

Mu Sicheng thought Bai Liu's theory was outrageous and was about to refute it. But as he considered it, he realized all of Yang Zhi's inconsistencies seemed to line up, and he swallowed his objections.

The idea of having one's memories consumed was utterly repulsive—like having a private diary exposed to a stranger uninterested in it.

Mu Sicheng rubbed his arms uneasily and asked, "What if Yang Zhi really did swallow our memories? He won't find something in them to use against us, will he?"

"Against us?" Bai Liu smiled carelessly. "Do you think your memories are harmless?"

Mu Sicheng was stunned. "No, it's not... it's not good to have someone like Yang Zhi read your memories!"

Bai Liu turned his gaze from Mu Sicheng and looked out into the endless darkness of the night beyond Yinshan Village. He spoke plainly, "Some people's memories are like cotton candy. Swallowing them won't do any harm, and they'll return as sweet as ever. But others' memories are more like diaries—swallowing them gives someone a handle to blackmail you."

"I think I could develop that kind of personality," Bai Liu added with a smirk, "and my memories probably wouldn't be pleasant."

He turned back with a crooked smile. "Swallowing them could feel as painful as swallowing a razor blade."

Yinshan Village

Yang Zhi's body was drenched in an icy chill, and he winced, slowly awakening from a trance-like nightmare.

Beside him, Kong Xuyang frowned as he looked at Yang Zhi, who was crouched next to him. "What's going on with you? You've been out of it," he said.

Yang Zhi shook his head vigorously, trying to clear his mind, forcing a weak smile onto his pale face. "I don't know what's happening. The more I process Bai Liu's memories, the easier it is to slip into his past. It never used to be like this..."

Kong Xuyang's interest piqued as he mentioned Bai Liu. "What do you mean by 'slipping into his past'?"

Yang Zhi furrowed his brow. "His memory is strange. It's as if there are three layers of overlapping areas."

Kong Xuyang raised an eyebrow. "What overlapping areas? Weak points? Private memories?"

"No... nothing like that," Yang Zhi replied, his voice uncertain. "It feels like the memories have been overwritten, creating another layer over the original ones. It's strange when I try to process it, like eating the same memories over and over from the same period."

Kong Xuyang's curiosity deepened. "So, Bai Liu's memories were wiped and rewritten, you think?"

Yang Zhi nodded slowly. "It seems like it. His life has been full of confusion."

Kong Xuyang smiled meaningfully. "Well, at least the monster we're watching hasn't moved. Tell me more."

He sat down, putting on a bored expression. "I haven't heard anything interesting tonight. Tell me something to cheer me up."

Yang Zhi glanced at Kong Xuyang, then said deliberately, "Bai Liu first experienced this memory collapse at fourteen, back when he was raised in a private orphanage."

Kong Xuyang's eyes narrowed. "The childhood of a typical loser,

then?"

Yang Zhi's face grew uncomfortable as he continued, "Bai Liu faced a lot of discrimination and abuse in that orphanage. The director didn't like him and often punished him for trivial things, like claiming he hadn't finished his chores or study tasks on time. Sometimes, the punishment was to make him stand barefoot in a bucket of water in the snow during winter, or to cut ice in sub-zero temperatures to clean the pond behind the orphanage."

Kong Xuyang whistled in amusement. "Sounds like the typical life of a loser."

"But these memories were altered," Yang Zhi continued. "The final memory left on Bai Liu's side is that he grew up in a well-managed public orphanage, with good treatment and no abuse or torture. He did have issues with rebellion, but the teachers and director treated him well."

Kong Xuyang clicked his tongue. "Well, if the abuse is erased from memory, there's no lasting trauma. So, what about the second memory layer?"

Yang Zhi's expression grew more serious. "The second memory overlap happened at eighteen, just a few months before his entrance exams."

"Gao Kao?" Kong Xuyang smirked. "I checked his college entrance exam results—they were only around 400 points. Far lower than mine."

Yang Zhi frowned. "Even though someone might have altered his memories to spare him from childhood trauma, Bai Liu still didn't manage well academically."

Kong Xuyang raised an eyebrow. "Over 300? Did he skip three years of high school?"

Yang Zhi shook his head. "Bai Liu never really paid attention in class. He usually slept through it. A good friend of his, Lu Yizhan, tried to keep him focused, but it didn't last. He'd skip evening study sessions and go out to play games."

"He even got into serious trouble in his senior year," Yang Zhi continued. "It went on his record, and the whole school criticized him. His grades only got worse after that."

"How bad were his grades?" Kong Xuyang asked, intrigued.

Yang Zhi responded, "They were so low that he barely passed. What do you expect when you don't study? But the real trouble came when he tricked some classmates into stealing money from their families for gambling. It escalated to armed fights involving tens of thousands of dollars. He almost went to jail."

Kong Xuyang raised an eyebrow. "And yet, the school didn't expel him?"

"No," Yang Zhi said. "Fang Dian, the top student in his class, and Lu Yizhan, another top student, both threatened to leave the school if Bai Liu was expelled. They went up to the flagpole in front of the whole school and took all the blame on themselves, forcing the school to let Bai Liu stay."

Kong Xuyang whistled. "And what happened to Bai Liu after that?"

"He was still bullied," Yang Zhi replied. "His desk kept getting moved, and his bed was constantly ruined, splashed with water and other things. It was school bullying, but Bai Liu didn't care. If his desk was gone, he'd just change classrooms. If he couldn't sleep in his dorm room, he'd sneak out to an internet café and sleep there instead."

Kong Xuyang clicked his tongue. "A real gangster."

Yang Zhi's expression grew increasingly strange. "But at this point, someone suddenly appeared in Bai Liu's memory."

"Or perhaps it's not quite right to call it a person," Yang Zhi continued. "This entity could only be seen by Bai Liu—no one else. It's like a companion ghost, or the kind of imaginary 'friend' a lonely child might create when something goes wrong in their mind."

"This ghost followed him silently, appearing and disappearing with him every day. Bai Liu never pushed it away. It would crouch like a dog every night in front of the chair where Bai Liu slept, occasionally resting its head on him and curling up beside him."

Kong Xuyang snorted. "Bai Liu's brain is messed up, isn't it? I mean, it's honestly surprising his mind hasn't cracked sooner, given everything he's been through."

"… I don't know if it's Bai Liu's brain that's messed up, or if it's me, consuming too much of his memories and getting confused," Yang Zhi

muttered, running her fingers through her hair, her voice trailing off. "This ghost… this friend of his, appearing out of nowhere at the end of high school... someone he couldn't tell if he imagined or not..."

Yang Zhi paused, staring at Kong Xuyang. "It… it looks exactly like Spades."

Kong Xuyang froze, his eyes wide. "What?!"

Meanwhile...

Bai Liu led Mu Sicheng around a weir, crossing a dry stone bridge as they followed the path shown on the television, eventually reaching a wild mountain range filled with graves.

The graves varied in size—from new ones to old, some recently buried and others long forgotten. Even after Qingming, remnants of offerings still lay scattered about: unburned paper money, half-burned candles stuck in the ground, firecracker strings hanging from gnarled trees, and scattered afterlife money.

The newer graves belonged to the recently deceased villagers of Yinshan, with neat marble headstones and laser-engraved epitaphs. In contrast, the older graves were little more than weathered mounds, sometimes accompanied by crude gravestones that were barely legible.

Mu Sicheng, holding his camera in night-vision mode, carefully snapped photos of the gravestones under the eerie green light.

In the darkness, the tombstone photos came alive, revealing elderly faces with white hair and warm smiles, now twisted into cynical expressions. The same faces that had once greeted the living with kindness now stared bitterly at the two uninvited guests disturbing their graves.

Mu Sicheng folded his hands in prayer, whispering, "I am not to blame for disturbing you."

Bai Liu, standing a distance away, waved him over. "Mu Sicheng, come here and take a shot from this angle."

Mu Sicheng carefully stepped over the grave markers and aimed his camera in the direction Bai Liu indicated, squinting. "What's this?"

In front of the graves, three white porcelain wine cups lay, stained with a little ash and wine. Nearby, there were three plates of raw meat, each with distinct colors and textures. A pile of gold paper money was stacked on the ground, and incense pillars burned in the front, surrounded by two candles and a small money garment burning with an eerie glow.

"This is an arrangement for [borrowing Yin wealth]. Someone came here before me and set up these offerings. The villagers of Yinshan, where they were buried, used to perform this ritual to borrow Yin energy and wealth. But now, this place can no longer grant that power. I can’t complete my mission here," Bai Liu explained, looking up at Mu Sicheng.

Mu Sicheng gritted his teeth. "Damn, Kong Xuyang, that bastard is at it again!"

Yinshan Village

"If you can't draw Yin energy here, can you get it from the tomb instead? You're a descendant of the Vampire Daoist, after all," Mu Sicheng asked, looking up.

Bai Liu shook his head. "That's not a good idea. The Vampire Daoist is at a crucial stage of gathering Yin energy. If I cast a spell at its tomb to siphon Yin energy for money right now, it wouldn't be borrowing—it'd be stealing. And that would make us enemies."

"So we're just giving up on this mission?" Mu Sicheng's face darkened, his expression stormy with frustration.

He glanced at Bai Liu—and then froze.

Even though Bai Liu had just had his mission stolen, there was a faint smile on his face. It didn't reach his eyes or the corners of his mouth, yet somehow, it made him look eerily relaxed. Dangerous, even.

"No," Bai Liu said, tilting his head slightly, his smile deepening. "You've been waiting until now to make a move. That takes patience."

Mu Sicheng hesitated, watching Bai Liu's knowing expression before realization dawned on him. His voice turned wary. "You're not... deliberately pushing Kong Xuyang and the others into a corner so they'll have no choice but to take on your mission, are you?"

Bai Liu blinked innocently. "What? How could I ever be so evil as to steal someone else's mission?"

Mu Sicheng: "....."

He had watched every step Bai Liu took, yet he still couldn't tell if Bai Liu was doing this on purpose—or just playing dumb.

"So are we still doing this mission?" Mu Sicheng frowned. "But according to you, it's impossible now."

"No, it's still doable." Bai Liu took two steps to the side and gestured for Mu Sicheng to look at the ground.

Mu Sicheng adjusted the camera, and in its eerie green glow, he saw seven neatly arranged rectangular pits beneath them.

Each pit was uniform in size, with marble headstones in front of them. The headstones bore black-and-white photographs of the seven elderly men from the temple.

Mu Sicheng recoiled in shock, nearly stumbling into one of the pits. He gripped the camera tightly and staggered back, his voice trembling. "Wait… are these… the graves of the seven old men? They were dug out, but they haven't been buried yet?"

Bai Liu nodded. "Kong Xuyang used the Yin energy of the other ancestors buried here. But these seven? He couldn't touch them."

Mu Sicheng quickly put two and two together. "Because they haven't been buried yet!" His eyes brightened as he elbowed Bai Liu, grinning. "You're a quick thinker. So, once they're buried, you're planning to use their Yin energy to make money?"

Bai Liu effortlessly dodged the elbow and smiled. "That's the plan."

"But Kong Xuyang isn't stupid. He must've accounted for these seven, right? He wouldn't leave such an obvious loophole." Bai Liu turned to the empty graves. "Normally, they'd be buried after the first seven days. But after the first seven days…"

Mu Sicheng's face fell as he made the connection. "The Daoist zombie goes berserk!" He cursed under his breath. "Shit. Then what do we do?"

Bai Liu looked up at the sky. "If the normal funeral process won't work, we'll just have to go with an abnormal one. Once daylight comes, we'll head back to the village and bring the coffins here for an early burial."

Mu Sicheng gulped, already dreading the idea of returning to the village. "We're going back at dawn, then. But what do we do until then?"

Bai Liu clapped a hand on his shoulder, smiling lightly. "It's a dark and windy night—perfect for digging graves. Come on, let's figure out which one we need to dig up first."

Even though Mu Sicheng was athletic and used to physical exertion, he suddenly felt weak. Maybe it was from running all night, or maybe…

He let out a deep breath, adjusted his camera, and followed after Bai

Liu like a man heading to his doom.

"Bai Liu, slow down a little. If you step on something…"

Meanwhile—
Kong Xuyang crouched next to Yang Zhi, his brow furrowed. "Bai Liu… you can see this much in just the second layer of memory folds?"

Yang Zhi smiled bitterly. "Bai Liu's memories are incredibly complex. Especially the folded sections—when I try to peer through them, many parts are blurry or disconnected."

He exhaled sharply. "What I do know is that his second memory fold completely erased the existence of that Spades-like apparition."

"So Bai Liu doesn't remember meeting someone who looked exactly like Spades when he was eighteen?" Kong Xuyang narrowed his eyes.

Yang Zhi nodded. "His memories have been rewritten—he would recall studying normally, taking his entrance exams, then heading off to university."

Kong Xuyang grew more puzzled. "So… some top player who can modify and collapse memories went out of their way to make Bai Liu forget an imaginary friend? One that looks exactly like Spades?"

Yang Zhi nodded again.

Kong Xuyang clicked his tongue. "That's weird as hell… Who would waste that kind of effort on a loser who only scored around 300 in high school?"

But he didn't linger on the thought for long. He leaned in eagerly. "What about Bai Liu's third memory fold?"

Yang Zhi's expression tensed. "I haven't fully digested it yet, but I can make out some general details."

She took a deep breath. "The memory fold happened when Bai Liu had just graduated and started working. About a year ago."

Yang Zhi clenched her fists, sweat beading at her forehead as she concentrated. "…Something bad must have happened. His memories are chaotic. It looks like he spent a lot of time in a hospital."

Her breathing grew uneven. "There was a strong smell of disinfectant. Bai Liu was sitting on a bench outside a ward, his hands covered in

blood, his head down. He seemed… very emotional."

Yang Zhi trembled, her voice almost dry. "…It was overwhelming."

Kong Xuyang rubbed his chin, grinning. "A year ago? I was dominating the pre-season tournament back then. Won every match, made it to the challenge round."

He laughed. "Sounds like Bai Liu was having the worst time of his life while I was having the best."

"Maybe that's the difference between a successful person and a loser." Kong Xuyang sighed theatrically, spreading his hands.

Yang Zhi, lost in his memories of Bai Liu, didn't respond.

It felt as if he had fallen beneath the surface of a frozen lake—he could faintly hear Kong Xuyang's smug voice, but the meaning of the words barely registered.

The memory of Bai Liu's chilling indifference surged through Yang Zhi's limbs, paralyzing him. It was as though he were sinking into deep water, eyes wide open, on the verge of suffocation.

Bai Liu sat motionless at the end of the corridor, slumped forward, his hands clasped tightly against his head. Orange juice dripped from the ends of his soaked hair, pooling near a battered bag of oranges at his feet.

His white shirt and shoes were splattered with blood. A bloodstained baseball bat rested against the back of the chair beside him.

The noise of the crowd seemed muffled by an invisible barrier. Yang Zhi could only catch fragments of hushed conversation:

"... hit directly by a motorbike."

"I heard they were a kindergarten teacher..."

"A kindergarten teacher? You mean that incident today, where those bikers sped straight into a kindergarten?!"

"You're remembering it wrong. That never happened. It was a kindergarten teacher who, after work, saw a gang surrounding someone on the road. They stepped in to help, but got hit—sent flying several meters. I heard their intestines were spilling out..."

"They were taken to the ER this afternoon. Haven't come out yet..."

Yang Zhi watched as Bai Liu, still seated on the bench, slowly tightened his grip on his head—so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

The oppressive intensity of Bai Liu's emotions made Yang Zhi's thoughts scatter. The voices around him blurred, yet the details felt eerily familiar.

Bikers. A kindergarten. A crime that happened—and yet, had been erased...

Then, it came back to him.

It was as if Bai Liu's emotions had forced open a locked space in Yang Zhi's mind. The memory unfolded with brutal clarity.

Yes. This had happened.

But against which team? Yang Zhi still couldn't recall.

They had targeted so many people. After every attack, they made sure to erase all traces of it. By the end of the day, remembering the victims' faces felt like a waste of effort.

But they did keep records. They documented their victims through photos—trophies of tragedy, used to mock rivals and stir unrest.

And yet, strangely, this particular kindergarten teacher—the one they had clearly attacked—left no trace in their records.

Yang Zhi finally realized: his own memory had been altered.

But he couldn't remember who had done it.

Now, however, under the force of Bai Liu's emotions, those suppressed memories were unraveling.

Yang Zhi turned his gaze toward Bai Liu.

They had attacked Bai Liu.

Along with that kindergarten teacher.

The two were connected—targets in a strategic assault orchestrated by some warring tactician.

Kong Xuyang always liked to prepare multiple plans in advance. He had sent a photo of the kindergarten teacher to the opposing tactician, making it seem like she was their only target. But in reality, even her friend—Bai Liu, a mere twenty-two-year-old—had been marked for elimination.

It had been an unsuccessful attack.

The woman was nothing like they had expected. A kindergarten teacher, yet absurdly strong and agile—she had jumped from the first-floor window with one hand braced against the frame, landing as if stepping onto solid ground.

Like something out of an action movie, she had snatched a baseball bat from a wall and, with uncanny precision, single-handedly taken down an entire gang of bikers.

They had lost. Humiliated.

To erase all evidence of the attack, they had no choice but to offer points to the system—wiping out any record of the kindergarten incident.

Kong Xuyang, ever the strategist, had already prepared a backup plan: an ambush on Bai Liu.

Shifting their focus, they turned to Bai Liu, who was walking home from work.

But the woman was perceptive. Too perceptive.

She figured out their next move almost immediately.

Revving her electric bike, she sped after them, determined to intercept the attack.

The electric bike was sturdy—almost like a motorbike in her hands. The way she handled it, racing full speed toward them, wielding a baseball bat—it was enough to make even the most reckless of them hesitate.

Still, they had anticipated this.

Their ambush had been set long before Bai Liu turned the corner into a dimly lit alley.

He carried nothing but a bag of oranges.

And then—

A dozen motorcycles, each weighing hundreds of kilos, roared toward him. If they hit, Bai Liu would be reduced to nothing more than pulp on the pavement.

The attack was in motion.

Their side charged forward.

She was still ten meters away from Bai Liu.

Too far.

Too late.

There was no time to shout a warning. No time to stop them.

It was over.

But the woman was relentless.

To protect Bai Liu—

She didn’t hesitate.

She didn’t stop.

At full speed, she swerved her bike, veering directly between Bai Liu and the oncoming motorcycles.

And then—

She crashed. Knocked away in an instant.

Yinshan Village

The red light above the hospital's resuscitation room flickered off. Bai Liu, seated on a bench, slowly lifted his head. His gaze passed over Yang Zhi, who stood in front of him, and landed on the resuscitation room behind him. Their eyes met briefly in a seemingly casual exchange.

In that fleeting moment, Yang Zhi knew Bai Liu couldn't actually see him, yet he still felt an eerie chill crawl through his body, as if his mouth, nose, and internal organs had turned to ice.

He had expected him to rush into the resuscitation room immediately. But he didn't. Instead, he merely glanced at the now-darkened sign, then averted his eyes.

Bai Liu made a small movement that sent a shiver down Yang Zhi's spine—lowering his head, he reached for the bag of oranges that had fallen at his feet, selecting one that remained intact. His long, pale fingers peeled it open, segment by segment, and he placed each piece in his mouth with an almost deliberate slowness.

Drops of juice dripped from his fingers onto the floor.

Then, in a flat, almost indifferent tone, Bai Liu remarked, "What a waste. So few survived the fall… and they weren't cheap."

His words and actions were ordinary, but in Bai Liu's memory, Yang Zhi could clearly sense a deep, underlying malice. A violent intent so visceral it sent a wave of nausea rolling through him. The sheer intensity of it made him struggle to wake from the memory.

He gasped awake, drenched in cold sweat. His face was ashen, his breath coming in ragged pants.

"What's wrong with you now?" Kong Xuyang's irritated voice cut in. "You were talking, then you just stopped. If you've got something to say, say it. Don't just leave people hanging."

Yang Zhi shook his head, trying to open his mouth, but no sound came out. His throat and nose felt as if they were stuffed with damp cotton. His vision blurred, the world spinning in fragmented, multicolored light.

The murderous intent Bai Liu had directed at the killer was

suffocating—overwhelming in its raw intensity. Yang Zhi couldn't process or withstand it. It swallowed him whole, dragging him under like a tidal wave.

...It was terrifying.

Yang Zhi had digested countless memories before, yet never had he encountered emotions this extreme—so powerful that merely glimpsing them triggered a physical reaction of resistance.

But what was even more terrifying was how calm Bai Liu had been.

Despite the sheer weight of his emotions, he carried them with unsettling ease, as if he had long grown accustomed to suppressing such monstrous depths of feeling.

Yang Zhi trembled, bile rising in his throat, before barely regaining his composure. He reached out, gripping Kong Xuyang's arm for support, but before he could speak, his eyes lit up with excitement.

"They're coming," he interrupted.

From the darkness of the cemetery, several mutilated corpses staggered forward. Their heads turned side to side, sniffing at the grave mounds one by one, as if searching for their own resting places.

Kong Xuyang held his breath. Yang Zhi didn't dare breathe.

They had waited here for over an hour, watching for the moment the zombies would return to their graves.

The problem was, there were too many burial sites. No names, no monuments. And not every grave contained someone tied to the main backstory—meaning the village calendars buried with these corpses might not be the ones Kong Xuyang needed.

Digging them up one by one would be inefficient—and dangerous. Some graves contained nothing but empty dirt, while others might hold restless spirits, waiting to attack the first fool to disturb them.

After weighing their options, Kong Xuyang had come up with a plan—watch and wait.

At dawn, the paper daoist would drive these zombies back into their graves, like cattle returning to their pens. Then, at night, the paper daoist would summon them again, pairing them with the lingering

Bridge Martyr ghosts to quell their resentment and reunite them with their lost spouses.

This meant that any zombies returning to their graves now were directly linked to the main plotline. All Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi needed to do was track which graves the zombies entered—then dig up those specific ones to find the calendars buried within.

Kong Xuyang smirked, pressing the talisman of disguise on his forehead. Holding a branch in his hands, he watched with satisfaction as the zombies clawed their way through the dirt under the dim moonlight.

Right on schedule.

“I’ll use a charm to freeze them in place,” Kong Xuyang instructed, holding a yellow talisman between his fingers. “Once they stop moving, go straight for the graves they dug up. Got it?”

Yang Zhi nodded. He was just about to sprint forward when he abruptly halted, eyes widening.

“Brother Kong, look! That zombie already has one of your talismans on it!”

“What? That’s impossible. I haven’t—” Kong Xuyang followed his gaze—and his face darkened.

A zombie, already bound by one of his [Body Binding Talismans], stood rigidly in place, turning in slow, confused circles.

And right next to its grave—digging furiously—was Mu Sicheng, a camera slung around his neck.

Beside him, half kneeling over the coffin, examining its contents, was Bai Liu.

The moment Kong Xuyang and the others stepped forward, Mu Sicheng looked up, baring his teeth in a sharp, mocking grin.

“Well, well. Digging up graves in the middle of the night too? What a coincidence.”

Bai Liu lifted his head, his gaze locking onto Kong Xuyang’s.

His lips curled into a slow, knowing smile.

“Fate really does bring old friends together.”

Yang Zhi broke into a cold sweat.

That smile—it was the exact same one from his memory.

His throat clenched. He struggled to speak, his voice trembling. “Brother Kong! How did they get one of your charms?!”

Kong Xuyang’s expression twisted with rage.

“They got it from the tomb.” He gritted his teeth, eyes burning with fury as he glared down at Bai Liu.

This was supposed to be his trap.

A carefully laid scheme meant to break Bai Liu slowly, to drag out his suffering for the sake of spectacle—to milk every last drop of entertainment from his demise.

But somehow, Bai Liu had turned it back on him.

The situation had spiraled far beyond what Kong Xuyang had planned. And now, there was no more reason to play games.

The zombie daoist had been released. His panel was sealed again. He had no means of escape.

They had only one option left.

Kong Xuyang’s eyes darkened. His fingers curled tightly around the talisman.

“Kill Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng. Now. End the game.”

Several yellow talismans shot forward from between his fingers, sticking to the foreheads of the zombies.

Their movements stopped. Their eyes burned red.

Then, with a deep, guttural hiss, they lunged—fangs bared—straight at Bai Liu.

Mu Sicheng, crouched on the ground, swore under his breath—but he didn’t hesitate.

Bai Liu stood up smoothly, sidestepping a claw that sliced toward him

from the side. His eyes flickered with a calculating light as he took in the battlefield at a glance.

His gaze landed on Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi, who were still knee-deep in their grave-digging, and he spoke in a low, measured voice:

“Avoid the claws and teeth. They’re laced with necrotic poison.”

"Go straight for Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi. They're skilled at setting traps and attacking from a distance, but they shouldn't be good at close combat."

Bai Liu lifted his gaze, eyes cold. "Steal the talisman from his hand, but be careful not to touch that book of proper spells. I suspect it might influence your game path and identity determination."

"Zombies can't bend their legs—go from below," Bai Liu quickly reminded.

Mu Sicheng gave an "OK" gesture, exhaling as he flipped the broken, sharp wooden board in his hand. His eyes locked onto Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi, lurking in the darkness behind the swarm of zombies.

Lowering his stance, a red glint flashed through his pupils. For a fleeting moment, his form shimmered—a monkey-like silhouette flickering around him. His hands, as they landed, seemed to transform into a monkey’s before reverting back when he touched the ground.

In the blink of an eye, Mu Sicheng darted forward, slipping beneath the zombies and onto the path leading straight to Kong Xuyang and the others.

With a sharp twist, Mu Sicheng slammed his foot down, braking hard. He spun, leaped, and brought the wooden board down in a vicious arc, his bared teeth and fierce snarl making him look more beast than man. His crimson pupils contracted into slits, and behind him, something almost like a tail flickered into existence.

"Die for the master!"

At some point, a long, snow-white bone whip had appeared in Bai Liu’s hand. He glanced up at the zombies charging toward him, their teeth bared and claws outstretched. Unhurried, he tightened his grip on the whip, flicking it skillfully left and right.

Like a bolt of white lightning, the whip cracked through the air,

striking the zombie lunging straight for his face.

The force sent the zombie flying backward. Midair, its limbs twitched involuntarily, the attack still half-formed on its hands and mouth. Its expression was one of confusion, as if it hadn't yet processed what had just happened—how it had been launched into the air so effortlessly.

[System..... Zzt..... Notification: Player Mu Sicheng is activating "Monster Book: Capuchin Thief" form.....]

[System Alert: Player Kong Xuyang's skill (Panel Silence) is about to expire.....]

Kong Xuyang's eyes widened in shock. "How is that possible?!"

The spectators watching from the sidelines were equally stunned.

"What's going on?!"

"Kong Xuyang's skill isn't working?! That's impossible!"

On the Silence of the Lambs team, nearly every player shot to their feet, staring at the big screen in disbelief. A few were so tense that the veins in their necks bulged.

However, not everyone reacted with alarm. Among those still seated were Hearts and the players around her, as well as the Reverse God and his companions. Even Wang Shun, though visibly shocked, leaned forward in interest rather than panic.

The Reverse God leaned back in his chair, a relaxed smile on his face, as if he had expected this all along.

Unable to contain his curiosity, Wang Shun blurted out, "Reverse God, why did Kong Xuyang's skill fail this time?"

The Reverse God turned to him lazily, as if only now realizing he had been spoken to. He blinked once before shifting his gaze away. "Wasn't this all part of Bai Liu's setup? He didn't tell you?"

"No!" Wang Shun grimaced internally. "Even though President Bai discusses strategy in advance, he never explains why he does things!"

Most of the time, Bai Liu's logic was impossible to follow. Even when Wang Shun thought he understood, he could never predict how it would connect to the final outcome.

With a bitter chuckle, Wang Shun still politely pressed on. "I've researched every match Kong Xuyang has ever played, and I've never seen his skill fail like this. I really don't see what President Bai did to make this happen."

The Reverse God paused in thought before responding casually, "I gave Bai Liu some first-hand information on Kong Xuyang's skills. He must have started from there."

Muke, intrigued, leaned in closer. "Skill?"

"Exactly." The Reverse God smiled. "Bai Liu exploited Kong Xuyang's skill weakness."

In the audience, Qi Yifang, seated next to Hearts, raised the same question.

"Skill weaknesses?" Qi Yifang frowned. "What kind of weakness could Kong Xuyang have? His skill never failed against us last year. When we played him, our entire panel was disabled from start to finish."

His voice dropped into a mutter. "And our team last year was a lot stronger than Bai Liu's current squad, wasn't it? Kong Xuyang didn't expose any weaknesses against us, but he did against Bai Liu? That doesn't make sense, does it?"

"If Kong Xuyang's skill had a real weakness, Queen, you would have seen it last year, right? That match wasn't easy for us either—it was brutal..."

Hearts reclined slightly, propping her chin on the audience railing, her gaze fixed on the big screen.

"I did see it," she admitted. "But we couldn't take advantage of it."

Qi Yifang stared at her, stunned. "Why not?"

Hearts lifted her eyes, glancing lazily at him. "The Reverse God the year before us should have noticed Kong Xuyang's weakness too, but he still had a tough fight. In the end, he had to kill Kong Xuyang outright to break through."

"So it's not just us," she continued. "None of the major guilds—no matter how strong—could exploit Kong Xuyang's weakness."

Qi Yifang's confusion deepened. "Why?!"

Hearts exhaled, almost amused. "Because against strong teams, Kong Xuyang doesn't have a weakness."

"No weakness against a strong team?!" Wang Shun echoed, completely lost. He struggled to process the Reverse God's explanation. "But... Reverse God, isn't Kong Xuyang the type to crumble when faced with real strength?"

The implication was clear: Kong Xuyang was someone who looked tough on the surface but should have been fragile when up against top players. How could he not have weaknesses against stronger opponents?

The Reverse God propped his elbows on his knees, watching the big screen, before suddenly changing the topic.

"Skills are all derived from desire," he mused. "Wang Shun, your skill makes it easy to investigate Kong Xuyang's background. Based on his life, what do you think his core desire is?"

Wang Shun quickly pulled up Kong Xuyang's profile, scanning through it in an instant.

His gaze locked onto a line he himself had summarized: "To be a man of honor, to erase the shame of the past."

The Reverse God tilted his head toward the screen, about to speak when Liu Jiayi and Muke leaned over from either side.

Liu Jiayi scoffed. "That doesn't sound like him. 'Panel Silence' isn't about proving himself—it's about dragging others down."

Wang Shun continued scrolling. "I noticed that Kong Xuyang rarely uses his skill against weaker teams. He only activates [Panel Silence] when facing strong opponents."

"So far, he's used it in fewer than five pre-season matches."

"Of course he wouldn't use it on weak teams," Liu Jiayi retorted swiftly. "His panel stats are already better than most weak players'. If he disabled his panel against them, he'd be handicapping himself."

"But against a strong team, the situation flips. By silencing their panels, he drags top-tier players down to his level—where he has the advantage. He has more experience fighting without panels, so he can beat them in that state."

Muke's eyes flicked to Kong Xuyang's university history.

"...Extremely resentful and jealous of classmates from wealthier families. He believed that if he had the same conditions, he wouldn't have faced such discrimination..."

Muke fell silent for a few seconds, then turned to the Reverse God.

"Kong Xuyang's core desire isn't success," he murmured. "It's injustice, isn't it?"

The Reverse God nodded, a glint of approval in his eyes. "That's my guess too."

"[Injustice]?" Wang Shun frowned in confusion. "What kind of core desire is that?"

Muke withdrew his gaze from Wang Shun's system panel and tapped on the profile twice with his index finger. "I've seen plenty of people like this. A kind of twisted 'muqiang'—they think they're exceptional and deserve the best, but when they fail to obtain those things on their own, they blame society and their background instead."

"To put it simply, Kong Xuyang feels the world is [unfair] to him whenever he compares himself to those who are better off than him in terms of material conditions."

The Reverse God nodded. "The skill derived from this desire is [Panel Silence]. When Kong Xuyang erased everyone's panels, he effectively reset all initial conditions, achieving the [fairness] he sought."

Muke looked up at the Reverse God. "And Kong Xuyang believes that, under such [fair] conditions, his own excellence will allow him to win."

"But I still don't understand why this skill doesn't work against President Bai." Wang Shun rubbed his temples and let out a wry smile. "Please, explain it in simpler terms for your less-than-brilliant audience."

"At this point, the answer is pretty obvious." Muke reached for Wang Shun's panel and scratched at the Fever Lamb's matchmaking sheet. "Shun, look here—like you just said, Kong Xuyang never uses his skill against weaker teams. He only activates it against stronger opponents."

Wang Shun stroked his chin and nodded. "Yeah, the little witch just explained that to me."

"It's more than that." Muke shook his head slightly. "The fairness Kong Xuyang wants is inherently warped. He doesn't seek true equality—he only wants those better off than him to be brought down to his level. Those beneath him don't even register in his idea of [fairness]—to him, they exist only to be trampled, unworthy of his skill."

"In other words," the Reverse God smiled, "the condition for activating [Panel Silence] is that Kong Xuyang must perceive his opponent as stronger than himself."

"So his skill will always work against teams he considers formidable—teams like ours, the ones he is wary of, determined to surpass, even resentful toward."

Muke added, "But if Kong Xuyang sees his opponent as weaker than him, his skill is likely to fail."

"Like right now."

Wang Shun froze, realization dawning on him. Slowly, word by word, he pieced together the entire setup Bai Liu had orchestrated from start to finish.

"So President Bai, in order to enter the Yinshan Village game, has been following Kong Xuyang's plan step by step. He didn't resist too fiercely when Kong Xuyang sent scouts. He even allowed Kong Xuyang's people to gather intelligence on him. The information he gave me—it was the worst possible version of himself..."

"Even letting himself get injured three times in the game, putting Mu Sicheng in a life-or-death situation, allowing Yang Zhi to eat away at his and Mu Sicheng's memories right from the start—even when he knew there was something wrong with Yang Zhi—all of it was for the sake of..."

Muke, who had remained tense throughout the game, finally relaxed. A small, scattered smile appeared on his face.

His eyes glowed slightly as he looked up at the big screen. "If I'm right, Bai Liu has been deliberately maintaining a [weak] stance."

"He's been baiting Kong Xuyang—appearing vulnerable to create a crack in Kong Xuyang's skill."

"But hasn't... President Bai's memory been swallowed?" Wang Shun suddenly had an epiphany before hesitantly asking, "Can he even remember the plans he made before?"

"Bai Liu doesn't remember." Liu Jiayi leaned back in his chair, resting his face in his hands with a mischievous grin. "But the moment he entered the copy, he used his old method—setting up follow-up arrangements in advance and leaving them behind for his amnesiac self to find later."

Wang Shun frowned, recalling that before Bai Liu entered the copy and lost his memory, he hadn't seen him write any notes, leave marks along the way, or even record a video.

He couldn't understand how Bai Liu had managed to leave himself a safety net, so he humbly asked, "What's this 'old method' President Bai used to secure a fallback?"

"Book fold markers," Mu Ke answered with a smile. "It's something Bai Liu and I used to do back at the orphanage."

Wang Shun was taken aback. "Book fold marks?"

"Yes. Don't you think it's strange how quickly Bai Liu memorized so much from this 'Maoshan Evil Handbook,' given his memory?" Liu Jiayi tilted his head toward Wang Shun.

Wang Shun hesitated. Now that she mentioned it, it did seem a little off. But Bai Liu had spoken about it so naturally that he had overlooked any suspicion.

Liu Jiayi, however, didn't let it slide. She analyzed it carefully: "If the person in the game were Mu Ke, he could indeed read through the book in a short time and extract the key information.

"But with Bai Liu's memory, that would've been impossible."

She raised a finger. "So there's only one possibility—pre-amnesia Bai Liu skimmed the book, picked out the most important sections, folded the pages he needed, and post-amnesia Bai Liu only read those marked pages. That's how he 'remembered' so quickly."

Wang Shun's head started to spin. He hadn't played enough games to

keep up with Liu Jiayi's strategic thinking. His eyes glazed over. "Can Bai Liu really understand what his pre-amnesiac self wanted just from folded pages?"

"Also, what exactly is this 'Maoshan Evil Handbook'..." Wang Shun muttered, still confused. "It wouldn't contain detailed notes on Kong Xuyang's weaknesses or Bai Liu's specific plans, right?"

The Reverse God chuckled. "It doesn't need to be that explicit."

"Because Bai Liu isn't asking for advice—he's giving instructions. He just needs the person following behind him to do exactly what he marked in the book."

Wang Shun finally grasped the concept and let out a bitter laugh. "So it's just like how we usually communicate with President Bai—we don't need to understand why. We just follow the terms he lays out and complete the task."

The Reverse God nodded with a sigh. "Something like that."

"Bai Liu is usually right, but personally, I think he's a little authoritarian." He spread his hands helplessly, then patted Wang Shun's back with a wry smile, as if offering sympathy. "But hey, don't take it personally. He treats himself the same way—just go along with him..."

Mu Ke and Liu Jiayi slowly shifted their gazes toward the Reverse God. Even Tang Erda, who had been silent until now, gave him an extra glance.

"You—" Liu Jiayi narrowed her eyes. "Tactician of the Killer Sequence… Did you just take on the role of our battle group's tactician?"

Mu Ke frowned. "This style... It's too familiar."

Tang Erda's eyebrows rose in suspicion as he looked at the Reverse God with a wary, cold gaze.

The Reverse God: "....."

He coughed into his fist, regaining his composure. "What? It's just an ordinary level of knowledge about a potential future opponent. We on the team know Bai Liu well—don't you agree, Spades?"

Sitting next to him, Spades nodded earnestly, his expression blank. "I know best."

Bai Jiamu and Bai Yi, who had been left out of the conversation from start to finish: "....."

Wait. Do you?

Hadn't they just met Bai Liu last month? Or had these two secretly gone behind everyone's backs to study Bai Liu?

While the Wandering Circus side enjoyed a harmonious discussion, the viewing pool was in complete disarray.

Over at Fanatical Lamb, the atmosphere was chaotic. Many members ran around anxiously, their faces filled with panic. Having previously dumped all their reserve points into list control, they now found themselves in crisis. The audience wasn't stupid—many were pulling out as fast as they could.

Their betting pool's growth rate had just been wiped out.

The audience whispered among themselves:

"Wow, that was close. Good thing I didn't bet on the Lamb—I'd be broke right now."

"…I have a feeling the Circus is going to win. Should we bet on them now?"

"I'm tempted too, but let's wait and see…"

"Yeah, but the longer we wait, the lower the exchange rate. We should get in while it's still high!"

"But Kong Xuyang, even if his skill is temporarily disabled, can still use it later, right? I still think Bai Liu isn't that great. Let's wait and see…"

Wang Shun stared at the system panel, his brows furrowing. "We clearly have such a big advantage, but the betting pool isn't rising significantly. It only spiked a little before cooling down again."

"Because Kong Xuyang's skill is still an option, and he's a veteran who has played in the big leagues three times. Many viewers are waiting to see what happens," Liu Jiayi said calmly. "It's normal. Just wait."

Though she called it normal, her face remained tense, her lips pressed into a thin line as she stared at the big screen.

"Kong Xuyang can't use his skill on Bai Liu anymore." The Reverse God tilted his head slightly, watching Bai Liu wield his whip on the screen. His voice was soft.

Liu Jiayi turned to him. "Why?"

The Reverse God suddenly smiled—softly, yet with a strange, unreadable emotion in his expression. A hazy, smoke-like veil covered his gaze.

"Because Kong Xuyang saw Bai Liu's memories."

"When you believe someone is an all-powerful, heartless, god-like villain, you fear them. You believe they are too powerful to overcome, so you try to kill them before they turn the tables."

"You see them as nothing more than an unstoppable force—an enemy that must be eliminated. And as long as you think they are strong, you push yourself to the limit to defeat them."

"That fear fuels your aggression."

"But once you realize that this 'powerful villain' had a miserable childhood—stepped on ice in the winter, nearly drowned in the summer, struggled in school, dozed off in math class, reached adulthood without ever buying himself a birthday cake, and instead settled for two pounds of oranges because he was too stingy to spend more…"

The Reverse God fell silent for a moment, lowering his eyes.

"At that point, you can't see him as powerful anymore."

"The illusion shatters. You stop fearing him. And without fear, there's no reason to think he's stronger than you."

He suddenly turned to Liu Jiayi, his lips curving in a smirk, his voice filled with quiet, unshakable confidence.

"Of course, personally, I think Bai Liu is far better than Kong Xuyang. That much is obvious to all of us, right?"

Liu Jiayi stared at the Reverse God for a long time, turned his head sideways, and said coldly, "Rubbish is not worthy to be compared with

Bai Liu."

The Reverse God took the words in good faith and smiled, "True."

In-game.

The monkey paws and tail on Mu Sicheng's body flickered like unstable projections before solidifying completely. He swung his board down effortlessly, sending up a thick cloud of dust from the ground.

Kong Xuyang rolled to the side, barely dodging Mu Sicheng's overhead strike. He half-kneeled on the ground, covering his mouth, his eyes so bloodshot they looked like they could bleed. "How the hell did you escape my skill? You're just two losers—!"

"Who the fuck are you calling a loser?" Mu Sicheng landed lightly on his feet and lunged forward, claws raised to shield his face before striking at Kong Xuyang with feral aggression. "You're the loser here!"

His claws slashed down hard, but instead of flesh, they met the resistance of a talisman with a sharp metallic clang, like steel striking stone.

"What the fuck—?!" Mu Sicheng was dumbfounded. "An iron crotch?!"

Kong Xuyang sneered. "Steel and Iron Bone Charm."

"Don't think you've won just because my skill is temporarily disabled." Despite the setback, Kong Xuyang remained composed—he had played mid-season matches before and could adapt quickly to unexpected situations.

Ignoring Mu Sicheng, he turned toward Yang Zhi and barked, "Don't panic! Keep digging! My skills are disabled right now, but once they're back, I'll take control again!"

Mu Sicheng gritted his teeth and lunged forward once more, aiming a sweeping kick at Kong Xuyang. But before the blow could land, Kong Xuyang slapped another Steel and Iron Bone Charm onto his own ankle.

With a snicker, Kong Xuyang took a calculated step back. He knew he couldn't match Mu Sicheng in close combat, so instead, he let the

zombies around them close in, using them as a shield.

At the same time, he bit down on the tip of his tongue, letting blood drip onto a stack of yellow talismans in his hand. His pupils contracted sharply as he raised his arm and performed a quick, precise gesture—his fingers twisting in the air before flicking forward. The talismans shot out, sticking to the heads of the surrounding zombies.

"Steel and Iron Bone Charm—activate!"

The moment the talismans adhered, the zombies' red eyes flared ominously. Fibrous strands of muscle wove together beneath their rotting skin, reinforcing their bodies with layers of unnatural strength. A metallic sheen coated their decayed flesh, and their fangs extended by an inch.

These undead, dressed in half-mattressed pre-war attire, their scalps half-shaved in a traditional style, now gleamed with a coppery luster as they turned to surround Mu Sicheng.

"Are you fucking kidding me?!" Mu Sicheng snarled, failing to break through the encirclement despite multiple attempts. His attacks only left his hands and feet raw from impact. "Is this some bullshit Eighteen Bronze Men Zombie Formation?!"

He shoved one zombie away with his left paw while using his right to block another's attempt to sink its teeth into his neck. His muscles tensed, veins bulging along his throat as he gritted out, "Bai Liu, where the hell are you?!"

A whip lashed through the air, slicing between the zombies, but instead of breaking through, it struck their hardened flesh with a dull ping, as if hitting solid stone. The creatures, now as tough as metal, barely flinched under the attack.

"Looks like I can't help you here," Bai Liu's voice drifted in calmly from outside the formation. "They're too hard. I can't get in. You're on your own—cheer up."

And then, it sounded like he turned and walked away.

Mu Sicheng, trapped in the middle of the formation, stared after him. "????"

"Get the fuck back here, you bastard!" Mu Sicheng's fur bristled, his curly monkey tail standing on end. "Didn't you say you'd take

responsibility if anything happened?! Now I'm stuck with all these men, and you're running away—own up to it, damn it!"

But Bai Liu's voice was gone. Instead, Kong Xuyang let out a mocking laugh. "Dumped, huh?"

Kong Xuyang smirked, his confidence growing. "I studied all the proper spells for this game. The Steel and Iron Bone Charm makes these zombies near invincible. Their attack power might be average, but their defense is ridiculous. And since they were cursed by me, they won't listen to anyone else's orders. There's no counter to this."

He wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth and continued smugly, "Sure, it takes a bit of my essence and blood to maintain them, but so what? I'm about to win. A little blood loss is nothing."

Stepping forward, Kong Xuyang closed in on Mu Sicheng, who was still struggling against the formation. Grinning wickedly, he raised a sharp dagger. "No need to let the zombies finish you off. I'll make it quick."

Just as he was about to strike, a loud bang echoed in the distance, followed by the crashing sound of rushing water.

A bullet whizzed through the air, hitting Kong Xuyang's raised hand with a sharp pop. His dagger slipped from his grasp and clattered to the ground.

Kong Xuyang let out a pained cry as blood spurted from his palm. "What the hell?! Bullets?! In here?!"

He clutched his injured hand in shock, turning toward the source of the shot.

Yang Zhi, who had been focused on digging, snapped his head up in alarm. "What just happened?!"

"Nothing much." Bai Liu's voice remained as composed as ever. He stood at a distance, calmly lowering the revolver in his hand. "I just blew up the weir and connected the grave to this mass grave."

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has switched to Player Tang Erda's personal panel and used the skill (Rose Bullet).]

Yang Zhi paled. "Wait—why the hell would he blow up the weir?!" He turned to Kong Xuyang in alarm. "That connects to the underground

river in the catacombs! Blowing it open like that—"

"It's going to flood this place and draw in every monster from the catacombs!"

His voice cracked in panic. "Brother Kong, there are too many of them —we won't be able to handle this!"

Kong Xuyang clutched his bleeding right hand, his cheek muscles twitching from the strain of his clenched teeth. He hissed through gritted teeth:

"Bai Liu—!"

How could he be pushed to this point by someone like him—a worthless, inferior man with nothing to his name?

Not far from the broken weir, pale limbs emerged from the water, clutching at the shore. The ghosts of tiger demons struggled to crawl out from the muddy bottom, their figures paper-thin, faces once cheerful now smeared with dirt. They leaped erratically from side to side, moving toward the wooded path. Beside them stood a veiled bride, waving a wedding handkerchief with eerie grace.

Directly ahead, the ghosts of the Martyred Bridge advanced, their white umbrellas concealing their faces, water dripping as they walked. The ground was littered with shadows—twisting, writhing, rising, and falling—each one an evil spirit. A cacophony of high-pitched, joyful laughter from men, women, and children echoed endlessly.

At the farthest edge of the procession, paper effigies carried seven open coffins. Inside lay drowned old men, their faces tinged blue and purple, mouths twisted into unsettling smiles.

One of them had his hands folded peacefully over his chest, sharp black nails interlaced. He looked truly dead—until a closer glance revealed that his nails were still growing. Slowly, his smile stretched wider and wider, splitting the corners of his mouth all the way to his ears.

On the damp, narrow road winding through the gloomy countryside, red and white funeral robes overlapped in a ghostly haze. The air was thick with the scent of incense, melted wax, rot, and decay. Funeral coins rained from the sky, their square holes casting shifting shadows. The wailing of dual shawms—one high, one low—blended together, simultaneously festive and mournful.

A hundred ghosts prowled in the night.

Mu Sicheng, ensnared by the bronze vampire, stared at the approaching nightmare in pure horror.

Bai Liu, is this a rescue or a goddamn massacre?!

Yang Zhi's voice cracked with fear. "Brother Kong! What do we do?!"

Kong Xuyang frantically tapped at his panel. Icons flickered in and out, some barely responding. His gaze darted over the sporadic symbols before locking onto the system's alert messages.

[System Alert: Player Kong Xuyang's Personal Skill is about to be completely disabled—5, 4, 3, 2, 1...]
[System Alert: All players in the room have their panels unblocked.]

Kong Xuyang exhaled sharply. Finally.

His skill required precise control through his panel. Earlier, with it stuck in limbo—neither failing nor functioning properly—he had been the most restricted one here. But now that it had completely deactivated, his panel was fully accessible again.

And that meant one thing—

A manic grin spread across his face as he slammed his finger down on the skill button.

[Use (Panel Silence) skill again!]

[System Alert: Loading Player Kong Xuyang's Skill (Panel Silence)...]

Any second now. His advantage would return. He was too good—there was no way he would lose to Bai Liu, that pathetic, underfed orphan who barely scraped by in life. A failure who couldn't even break 400 points on his high school exams.

Given the right conditions, Kong Xuyang was the best. No one could defeat him when his skills were in play—unless they had better conditions than him.

And Bai Liu?

Bai Liu was nothing. A loser from birth, through childhood, adolescence, and youth, surviving only because his memories had been altered.

Kong Xuyang's bloodshot eyes fixated on the loading bar, his gunshot-wounded hand trembling uncontrollably. But his grin only widened.

He was about to win.

[System Alert: Player Kong Xuyang's skill (Panel Silence) failed to load.]
[Reason for failure detected...]
[Target player does not match the skill's usage conditions. Skill cannot be applied across the board.]
[Player Bai Liu is ineligible for this skill.]

Kong Xuyang froze. His breath hitched. The glaring red alert on his panel blurred before his eyes.

A surge of blood rose in his throat, and he choked out a hoarse, disbelieving cry:

"What?! How is that possible?!"

[System Note: You cannot use the skill on Bai Liu because you firmly believe Bai Liu is weaker than you. Your skill conditions do not apply to those weaker than yourself.]

Kong Xuyang's mind reeled. His pulse pounded in his ears.

"What kind of bullshit is that?!" he screamed, slamming his system coin in frustration. "Why can't I use my skills on Bai Liu just because he's weaker than me?! You're rigging the game in his favor! This is unfair!"

"I was about to win!"

[System Warning Note: The game never favors anyone.]

Yang Zhi, trembling, kept backing away from the advancing ghostly horde. He looked at Kong Xuyang in terror. "Brother Kong! They're coming!"

Kong Xuyang clenched his jaw, forcing himself to suppress his rage. His glare snapped toward Bai Liu, who stood not far away. His breaths came in ragged gasps.

A mere Bai Liu… No skills… No power… And yet…

Kong Xuyang spat blood onto his thumb, smeared it onto a talisman, and slammed his palm against his panel. Two incantation slips shot

out, latching onto the backs of the bronze vampires surrounding Mu Sicheng.

He snarled, "Arise! Formation—Bronze Wall!"

The zombies surrounding Mu Sicheng stirred, their stiff limbs moving into position. They linked arms, forming an unbreakable ring, their vacant eyes turned outward.

At the center of the formation stood Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi—safe.

Mu Sicheng, also trapped inside, was bound tightly, his arms forced behind his back.

Blood oozed from the deep bite wounds on his neck, his skin pale with necrotic poison. Panting heavily, he slumped to the ground, his flushed cheeks burning with fever.

Kong Xuyang sneered at Mu Sicheng’s weakened state. "So what if you have skills? Without your memories, you don’t even know how to use them. You’re just another failure."

He crouched down, his breath hot against Mu Sicheng’s ear, his grin widening.

"An hour. That’s all it takes for the poison to destroy your spirit value."

"And Bai Liu—" Kong Xuyang’s voice dropped to a whisper, his eyes gleaming with manic triumph.

"—he'll end up just like you."

Straightening, Kong Xuyang turned coldly to Yang Zhi. "Dig up the remaining calendars. Let's get the True Ending and end this game."

Yinshan Village

Yang Zhi threw himself into the hard labor of digging, his breath ragged. Wretchedly, he wiped the mud from his face with the back of his hand before hurriedly handing the pile of Huang Li he had unearthed to Kong Xuyang. His voice was urgent:

"Brother Kong, this is what I just dug up. Can you take a look and see what's going on?"

Kong Xuyang took the Huang Li and quickly skimmed through it:

"Year of Gengzi, Month of Gengchen, Day of Dechai, March 21—The young and strong men of the village gathered to worship their ancestors. Resolute, they set out as a group, determined to uphold righteousness and fight against the ghosts. Their wives, daughters, and parents knelt by the bridge, tears streaming as they prayed to the gods of heaven and earth to bless the warriors of Yinshan Village and bring them home safely..."

"Year of Gengzi, Month of Xin Si, Day of Xin Chou, May 1—News of war reached the capital. The distant rumble of cannons, the sharp crack of gunfire, could be heard a hundred miles away. Families in the village grew anxious, praying day and night at shrines and temples..."

"Month of Xin Si, Day of Yi Si, Fifth Day of the Fifth Month, Dragon Boat Festival—There were no women to wrap rice dumplings, no elders to raise their voices in celebration, no children to play. The villagers sat in mournful silence at the village entrance, their eyes fixed on a lone, covered body returning home."

"The deceased was named Wang Wu, thirty-eight years old. He left behind a wife, a son, and two daughters. An honest man, hardworking in the fields, and always ready to help his neighbors during harvest. His wife knelt before his corpse, sobbing, her trembling hands unable to form words. When the white cloth was lifted, she saw a body barely intact—flesh torn, bones shattered, his right hand and foot missing, said to have been blown apart by the artillery of the evil spirits, making it impossible to retrieve the remains."

"Wang Wu's son and two daughters shook his lifeless body, their voices rising in bewildered cries—but Wang Wu did not respond."

"…On the eighth day of May, the corpses were brought back. Each was laid on a wooden frame at the village entrance, their faces

covered with white cloth. The villagers stood before them in silence, no one daring to step forward to lift the cloth and identify the dead. Instead, they remained where they were, sobbing quietly, their grief overwhelming.
A few hours passed before Elder Zhang of the village finally stepped forward. With a trembling hand, he uncovered the cloth. The moment his eyes fell upon the body, he let out a heart-wrenching howl, calling out the name of the young one as tears streamed down his face, unchecked. Overcome with sorrow, he collapsed before the corpse…"

.....

"On the 23rd of May, all the young and strong from the village of Yinshan returned—yet none survived."

"On the 27th of May, it was deemed the right time to move the earth, travel, and bury the dead. Most of the bodies of the young and strong who returned home were incomplete. Following customary practice, they were not placed in the ancestral graves but were instead buried at the foot of the opposite hill. The mourning women held the tablets, children wept before them, and the parents carried the coffins, keeping vigil for seventy-seven to forty-nine days. Though the bodies were not interred in the ancestral graves, the rites were performed with great reverence, and the burial was solemn and thorough."

.....

"On July 20th, all the righteous perished. The foreign devils rampaged unchecked, marching to the capital, unopposed. They burned, killed, and plundered, committing unspeakable atrocities. The smoke from the fires hung heavy in the air, and the village of Yinshan was barely visible through the haze."

"The court remained passive, allowing the ghosts to feast on the people. Within three days, they surrendered."

"On the seventh day of the ninth month, rumors spread throughout the capital that the imperial court had secretly negotiated with the foreign devils. As a gesture of goodwill, they handed over the villages of the involved individuals and their families to the invaders, granting them free reign to slaughter, pillage, and defile at will. With this tacit agreement, the invaders were allowed to march deeper into the land, cede territory, and punish the populace—this, they claimed, was a sign of their sincerity."

"The only women left in Yinshan village were Old You, frail and

defenseless. In their sorrow, they preferred death over the shame of humiliation."

"I would rather be a stern ghost beneath the bridge than a disgrace in the halls."

.....

"What's all this nonsense?!" Kong Xuyang's anger grew with each passing moment. "Nothing to do with that Taoist zombie nonsense—anything else?"

Yang Zhi nervously stole a glance at the growing number of ghosts being kept away from the zombies, his body shuddering. He couldn't help but blush, afraid even to shake his head at Kong Xuyang for fear of provoking him. "No, nothing else."

"Then there's no more digging!" Kong Xuyang kicked Yang Zhi in the head, his face flushed with rage.

Mu Sicheng, standing nearby, watched the scene unfold and couldn't help but snort derisively. "Only a fool would take it out on his own teammates."

Kong Xuyang's temple twitched with irritation. He marched over, raising his hand to strike Mu Sicheng, but stopped halfway as he saw the fangs at the corner of Mu Sicheng's mouth.

Mu Sicheng was now a zombie, infected with corpse poison, and if Kong Xuyang went near him, he would risk a bite.

Kong Xuyang's energy was nearly depleted, and he could no longer command the zombies to attack Mu Sicheng. All he could do was have the zombies keep watch over him.

If the zombie failed to kill Mu Sicheng with another bite, and his spirit level dropped below 20 without death, something much worse could happen.

Prioritize, don't waste energy. Find the calendar first!

Kong Xuyang's raised hand paused for a moment, then he took a deep breath, shaking off his anger. He turned to secure the calendars around his waist, squatting down to continue digging the grave with Yang Zhi.

Mu Sicheng's eyes flickered toward the yearbook strapped to Kong Xuyang's waist. The monkey's paw, clipped behind the zombie, twitched, exhaling a slow breath.

He had tried to provoke Kong Xuyang into coming closer to steal the calendar from his waist, but he didn't expect Kong Xuyang, the idiot, to keep his wits about him, not glancing at him even as Mu Sicheng screamed.

Mu Sicheng's gaze darkened as he looked at the bronze wall surrounded by zombies. Though it trembled slightly under the assault of ghosts and monsters, it remained unshaken in the short term.

Kong Xuyang had been right—his stockpile of killer cards would last until he found all the calendars.

If the calendar truly held the key to the game, as Bai Liu had said, then Kong Xuyang might actually win, just as he claimed.

And with Bai Liu and these ghosts outside the walls, who knew how long he could last…?

The fangs around Mu Sicheng's mouth lengthened, his skin taking on a near-corpse green hue. His breathing became labored as he calculated the distance between himself and Kong Xuyang.

It was a distance he could close in a single burst—he could charge, catch Kong Xuyang off guard, steal the calendar from his waist, and throw it outside the zombie wall.

But if he forced the issue, the zombie behind him would surely strike again, and Kong Xuyang would be furious, likely killing him on the spot.

...But would Bai Liu manage to decipher it in time? Could he uncover the secret of the Taoist zombie and come to his rescue?

It was clear that cooperation would be too late. If he tried this the hard way, he'd likely end up unconscious, or worse.

Mu Sicheng took a deep breath.

But for some reason, thinking of Bai Liu outside, no matter how outrageous the plan, Mu Sicheng felt like he could—

—Bet!

Mu Sicheng stared at the calendar on Kong Xuyang's waist, took a deep breath, crouched down, and flashed his right paw to strike Kong Xuyang’s waist with a sharp swipe.

Kong Xuyang’s reflexes were quick. Before his anger could fully rise, the short knife in his hand whipped back and slashed outward, swatting Mu Sicheng’s outstretched claws away.

But what Kong Xuyang didn’t expect was that Mu Sicheng didn’t roll over to block the zombie behind him as anticipated. Instead, he grabbed Kong Xuyang’s short blade with his right paw and yanked it forward, pulling Kong Xuyang right into his path.

In Kong Xuyang’s stunned and unprepared gaze, Mu Sicheng took a vicious bite from the vampire behind him. With his left hand, he hooked the calendar from Kong Xuyang’s waist, then snatched the calendar Yang Zhi had just thrown out of the grave. Without hesitation, he crumpled both into a ball and tossed them out, shouting: "Bai Liu, the calendar’s out! Bai Liu, the calendar’s out!"

The zombie behind Mu Sicheng sank its teeth deeper, and he choked on a mouthful of blackened, bruised blood.

From the bite, a steady stream of corpse poison surged into Mu Sicheng’s body, causing his face to decay within moments.

Propped on his hands, Mu Sicheng panted heavily, his breath foul and rot-scented. His eyes glowed black, his fangs elongated near his jaws, and his throat hissed with an insatiable thirst for blood.

Kong Xuyang watched, fury bubbling up as the calendars he had worked so hard to collect were thrown out by Mu Sicheng. His muscles tensed, trembling with rage. “Mu Sicheng…!”

He lunged, stabbing his knife toward Mu Sicheng’s back, but it met resistance, like stabbing into tough animal hide. The knife bent, unable to penetrate.

Kong Xuyang faltered, his face going pale. No...

Two bites in a row, and Mu Sicheng’s spirit value dropped to 20!

[System warning: Player Mu Sicheng's spirit value has dropped to 17, entering berserk state!]

Mu Sicheng slowly raised his scarlet eyes, his head twisted at an

unnatural angle. He turned his shoulders a few times, cracked his fists, and stood tall against the zombie still biting him on his back. His arms, now more monstrous, lengthened, and he looked down at Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi, who were retreating. A slow, mocking grin appeared as his eyebrows arched.

“No wonder Bai Liu didn’t rush to my rescue when he left me here,” Mu Sicheng mused. “So, this game has a berserk setting.” He flicked his tongue out, licking the bloodstains from his lips, a red glint flashing in his eyes. “That’s funny. I like it.”

Kong Xuyang’s voice rang sharp and piercing as he formed a palm with one hand. “Zombie back! Protect me!”

The wall of zombies surrounding them quickly shrank inward, enclosing Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi.

Kong Xuyang’s face was ashen, drained of color, his energy nearly gone.

Yang Zhi, forced to avert his gaze, dug furiously at the grave, his breathing shallow and quick, driven by a desperate urge to survive.

The only hope now was to dig up the graves and end the game as quickly as possible.

With renewed purpose, Yang Zhi dug with determination, but halfway through, something felt wrong.

The grave was surrounded by fragments of beautiful, antique gold and silver jewelry, as well as Chinese porcelain. At the center, however, lay a small lambskin diary, an unusual find—not a calendar—and written in English, not the familiar brushstrokes.

Confused, Yang Zhi dug a bit deeper, and then his eyes widened in shock as he uncovered a foreign-style hexagonal coffin. He pried the lid open and peered inside, his face pale as he screamed and stumbled back. Pointing a trembling hand toward the coffin, he gasped, “Kong! Brother Kong, look! Look at the person in the coffin…”

Kong Xuyang followed his trembling finger, his eyes falling on the two bodies inside the coffin, and he froze.

The bodies were dressed in foreign clothing, but underneath, Taoist robes lined the coffins. Their attire was strange—neither fully Eastern nor Western—but it was their faces that truly shocked them.

The faces of the two corpses were identical to Yang Zhi and Kong Xuyang's.

Yang Zhi, horrified, stepped back. His voice quivered, "Brother Kong, what is this? How can these corpses look just like us?"

Kong Xuyang stared at the two bodies, his expression frozen as if caught in a nightmare. His face turned blue and white as he muttered under his breath.

"The grave robbers from Yinshan Village a hundred years later, and the fake foreign devils who raided Yinshan Village a hundred years ago…"

"If the evil Taoists from Maoshan are guarding Yinshan Village, then the proper Maoshan warlocks should be…"

A sudden realization struck Kong Xuyang, and he grabbed the copy of Maoshan Daoism he had stolen from the back of the temple, flipping through the pages without finding any notes. As a thought crossed his mind, he folded the book and glanced toward the side.

There, written in English on the pastedown, were these words:

[On April 17, 1901, I request the two masters' assistance in breaking Yinshan Village using legitimate techniques. I will reward you generously.]

Yinshan Village

Kong Xuyang's eyes widened with anger, and he nearly tore the Maoshan Daoist text in half. "Why is this set-up like this?!"

Yang Zhi, startled by Kong Xuyang's manic reaction, took a step back, then cautiously offered the diary. "...Brother Kong, do you want to see what's in the diary?"

Kong Xuyang closed his eyes, taking two deep breaths to calm himself. He then snatched the diary from Yang Zhi and skimmed through it quickly.

No matter what the game throws at them, there must be a way through.

They were playing the roles of the righteous warlocks who had attacked Yinshan Village a hundred years ago. The fact that these warlocks were buried with such honor at the entrance of Yinshan Village proved they had been the victors. If they had won a century ago, they could win now.

And how they won—it had to be written in the two journals buried with these warlocks.

The sheepskin diary was written in English, and because of its age, some of the language conventions were outdated, making the translation a little awkward. But the meaning was clear.

The diary read:

In the year Gengzi, on the twenty-fifth day of the eleventh month, the court held a meeting with the Great Ones. They drew up the outline for the surrender of the Book and formally ordered that Yinshan Village be handed over to the Great Ones.

Foreign soldiers entered the mountain with firearms and searched for Yinshan Village. Only two roads at the village's edge remained. The flat land of the village had disappeared.

The government was in turmoil, with rumors circulating that it might be the Maoshan magic that concealed the village.

The next day, the court summoned my brother and me and ordered us to assist the foreigners in attacking the village, which we did quietly.

The first time I saw this was when my brother and I ventured into the mountains to investigate. It turned out a person with great skill was using an evil Maoshan technique to hide Yinshan Village.

The court then ordered my brother and me to break the law, and after consulting the canon, we found a method:

[The Daoist nature of the heavenly family can be suppressed by the heavenly might of the law, corrupting its righteousness and breaking its formations.]

[Permission granted by the court.]

In the year Gengzi, on the thirteenth day of the lunar month, with Chinese New Year approaching, the court ordered that no foreigner should be harmed. Those who harmed foreigners were seen as disobedient to the Heavenly family and would be severely punished.

The next day, the entire country carried out this decree. Rain poured down, and thunder struck the mountain, breaking the maze and dispelling the spell hiding Yinshan Village. 513 people, including men, women, and children, knelt in front of the village, weeping and cursing the heavens.

A yellow-robed Taoist stood in front of the village, raising his hand to drop the fog, concealing the village once more in poisonous mist and insect miasma. Ninety-one formations lay within the fog. Foreigners forced their way in, killing and injuring over a hundred people.

In April, the people of Yinshan were forbidden from entering the village. The foreigners, growing impatient, pressured the court, which issued a new order:

[No resistance to foreign forces, no refusal to allow missionaries into homes, no harsh words to foreign lords, and an agreement to pay an indemnity of 450 million taels.]

[On that day, the maze of Yinshan Village was broken, and the village gate was opened. The foreigners entered with firearms.]

The yellow-robed Taoist, carrying a century of evil on his back, wielded a ten-thousand-foot thunderbolt, refining hundreds of evil spirits and leading the corpses of the dead to guard the village gate without retreating.

[The foreigners were too afraid to enter.]

The court issued a golden decree, forcing the yellow-robed Taoist to surrender and implicating the nine clans of Yinshan Village. It threatened the death of the Taoists, including me and my disciples, if we did not comply.

[Yellow silk was added to the body, the evil spirits stooped to the ground, and all the people of Yinshan Village were sealed by the holy decree.]

[My brother and I stole the holy decree and changed the date of the surrender to one hundred years.]

When the foreigners entered Yinshan Village with artillery, my brother and I hid the surviving descendants of Yinshan Village in their ancestral graves. We secretly provided them with sacrificial wine and food to ensure their survival.

The descendants, following my request and my brother's guidance, built a law inside the grave, using water as its form. This was done to preserve the Yin corpse within the grave for a hundred years, ensuring the Yin souls of the descendants would not scatter after death, preventing them from being taken to hell or heaven. This was done to avoid the decree from the court, which was intended to disperse them with heavenly thunder.

[After one hundred years, when the evil has been removed, Yinshan Village will be empty, and all descendants will be dead. The surrender will be null and void.]

[Yinshan Village will no longer be a sinner in the world and can enter the six paths of reincarnation to begin anew...]

The more Kong Xuyang read the more his eyes gleamed with understanding. He suddenly turned to Yang Zhi, grabbing his arm. His voice was hoarse, almost inaudible. “I know the zombie’s weakness.”

“It’s the surrender decree! We need to dig quickly! This holy decree must be in the tombs of these two foreign Taoists!”

.....

Bai Liu was also examining the calendar Mu Sicheng had thrown aside, holding it up and flipping through its pages as he stood at the entrance of the village, beside the motionless Taoist zombie.

After Mu Sicheng’s spirit had been broken, Bai Liu pinned him down,

tying him with a whip. Mu Sicheng collapsed against the village gate, slumping against the pagoda nearby.

After a while, Mu Sicheng stopped moving. His eyes stared blankly ahead, a strange expression on his face, as though he had seen something that should not have been there.

Bai Liu held the calendar with one hand while his other was chained to Mu Sicheng. His right foot rested on Mu Sicheng's shoulder, keeping him in place. Bai Liu's eyes dropped to the calendar, quickly scanning its contents as he muttered to himself.

"So, the formation in the tomb wasn't set up by the Taoist inside, but rather by the descendants of Yinshan Village in collaboration with the Taoists from the righteous sect. The gathering of Yin Qi wasn't to refine corpses, but to restore the souls of the Taoist zombies damaged by heavenly thunder, ensuring their souls wouldn't scatter after a hundred years and preventing them from being lost to reincarnation."

"The new bride and the elderly man who drowned in the tomb were once fighting an invading enemy. Desperate, they knelt before the Taoist and begged him to use the most potent dark magic to turn them into fierce ghosts and protect Yinshan Village."

Bai Liu softly read the words on the calendar, "I died tragically because I couldn't protect my country and my family."

"But to die, my generation too must become ghosts with a family, not slaves to the dead."

"The evil arts say that an unmarried woman, who dies on her wedding path, may turn into a Red Fury—an unspeakably powerful ghost. This is true, for in Yinshan Village, fifty-one girls, all unmarried, were brought together for a wedding. Wearing double wedding veils, they sat on a palanquin with scissors in hand, killing themselves on their wedding path. They became Red Furies, the left position guardians of the village…"

"Fifty-one girls named: Yixi Wang (daughter of Wang Wu), Jiangping Green (engaged)…."

"The evil arts also say that elderly men and women who drown in a pond may become fierce ghosts, unspeakably powerful. This is true as well. So in Yinshan Village, two hundred seventy-one elderly men and women were collected to die, wearing white clothes and trousers. They jumped into the water and drowned, legs thrashing as they

refused to surface, turning into White Furies, the right position guardians of the village…"

"Two hundred seventy-one elderly men and women named: Zhang Eshan…"

"The two red and white demons were buried together by the Taoist, who opened his ancestral grave and thickly interred their corpses. He gathered Yin energy and endured excruciating pain, refining himself into a corpse, becoming neither human nor ghost, to protect the village. The villagers revered him, built a temple, and worshiped him as a god, vowing to pay tribute in his honor…"

"In a few days, the village gates will be opened to face the enemy…"

As Bai Liu read, the Taoist zombie beside him, who had been motionless, suddenly opened his eyes.

The charms on its body remained unaffected by the wind, and the hem of its yellow Taoist robe fluttered as if stirred by an unseen breeze. The Taoist raised two fingers to the sky, and the peach wood sword on his back flew from its sheath, landing crosswise in front of the village gate, forming a barrier to prevent anyone from entering.

The Taoist, still in his yellow robe, spoke in a calm voice, looking beyond the gate, "Who is the visitor?"

Outside the dark gates, the hills and forests shifted, as if something large was marching through the night. From the shadows came intermittent, shrill laughter and cries, all blending together in a chilling sound, a malicious aura creeping toward Bai Liu's feet.

From the darkness emerged a man holding a candle: Kong Xuyang.

Half of his face was illuminated by the flickering red light of the candle, a low, muffled laugh escaping his lips. His expression was twisted, almost mad. His right hand clutched the candle, wrapped with torn fabric, still oozing blood, while his left hand held a golden scroll wrapped in cloth, resembling a prop from a Qing dynasty court drama.

Behind him trailed a group of zombies with charms on their foreheads. Further back were rickety skeletons in old-fashioned Western military uniforms, holding rusty guns and artillery, resembling foreigners.

Yang Zhi followed Kong Xuyang, his face calm, no longer showing any signs of the panic he had earlier.

“You didn’t expect this, did you?” Kong Xuyang laughed maniacally, spreading his arms wide. “Bai Liu, look, what do I have now that I’ve played the role of the holy decree?”

“The army, the war effort—everything.”

Kong Xuyang sneered at Bai Liu and the Taoist zombie in Yinshan Village, a wicked grin spreading across his face. “A hundred years ago, you and the zombie next to you were nothing but my defeated foes, surviving only on my mercy.”

“Now, I am no longer so merciful.”

“If this holy decree hadn’t been intentionally tampered with a century ago, your Yin creatures would have had your souls scattered long ago!”

Kong Xuyang’s expression hardened as he raised his hand, striking through the “100-year” period carefully added to the decree. He then read aloud the contents of the decree:

“The people of Yinshan Village are disloyal, unrighteous, and unbelieving. They attack others, cultivate evil spirits, and repeatedly defy the decree.”

“Attack the village and destroy all these demons and monsters that have harmed me!”

Yinshan Village

As soon as the words "hundred years" were crossed out of the decree, the sky darkened with hidden thunder, and a purple light flickered behind ominous clouds. Lightning erupted in a flash, and snow began to fall.

Kong Xuyang laughed furiously, wiping the rain from his face, and held the decree aloft. "The time has not yet come. This decree is still valid. Wait until you are struck down by lightning, you rabble!"

Inside the gates of Yinshan Village, the Daoist zombie remained calm, ringing a bell with his right hand. Raising his eyes, he spoke slowly, "Form up to meet the enemy."

The rain drenched the scattered coins on the ground, extinguished red and white candles, and dampened unburned incense. Dark oil lamps in every house flickered, casting the fragmented silhouettes of people in the windows.

The figures were all men in the prime of life, missing arms or legs, some with half-blown-off heads. They moved sluggishly out of the houses. Just as they were about to be drenched by the rain, a yellowish-white umbrella suddenly appeared above their heads, shielding them from the downpour, which seemed to be a punishment for their sins.

The woman in the white birthday suit, with a cracked head from the bridge pier, silently followed the man, holding the umbrella for him every step of the way. Their hands remained clasped under it.

The bride, in her red wedding dress, held a wedding handkerchief in one hand and blood-soaked red scissors in the other. She was carried by a bow-legged bridesmaid as she waddled out of the woods, laughing freely from beneath the umbrella.

"The Red Furies are listed on the left," the Taoist said, raising his hand. A yellow talisman flew out of his sleeve and landed on the bride's head, placing her at the head of the row.

The bride's bridesmaid lifted her black, empty eyes, laughed, and stood still on the left, her head bowed.

A drenched old man crawled out of the weir, his bruised and swollen face covered in emerald-green puffballs. His mouth was open, and a

steady stream of dark mud and sand poured from it.

"The White Furies are listed on the right," the Taoist said, raising his wrist and gesturing. The old men did not move; their black, cavernous, ebony eyes stared unwaveringly at the village gate.

Kong Xuyang glared at the two golden peach wood swords that blocked the entrance to the village. He cursed through clenched teeth, his heart burning with anxiety.

This century-old peach wood sword was blocking the entrance, preventing him and the Yin Furies behind him from advancing. They had to wait for the lightning to strike and break it.

The clouds rumbled, and purple lightning flashed. A bolt of lightning, more than a foot wide, rumbled down and struck the Daoist at the entrance to Yinshan Village.

In the flash of lightning, the talisman paper on the man's body was instantly obliterated, the peach wood sword shattered into splinters, and the pagoda bearing the name of Yinshan Village trembled under the impact.

The two Red and White Furies, who had stood to the left and right, were pressed to their knees by the force of the heavenly thunder. They straightened their spines in the mud, struggling to stand.

Hundreds of grieving ghosts howled in desolation, their ghostly auras spilling forth. Their wedding clothes were tossed in the cold wind and rain, and their wailing voices grew heavier.

"Heaven and earth are unkind!"
"Heaven is unjust!"

Kong Xuyang sighed in relief, overwhelmed with joy, as he read aloud the words of the decree: "The people of Yinshan Village have used evil magic to cause countless deaths and injuries, their crimes too numerous to list."

As the thunderstorm dissipated, the yellow talisman on the Daoist's face was cleaved cleanly in two, revealing a face identical to Bai Liu's. With a calm expression and a light tone, the Daoist said, "I confess my sins."

"It doesn't matter if you don't recognize it..." Kong Xuyang's smile widened, only to stop suddenly as if struck by realization. "What did

you just say?!"

The Daoist, whose face resembled Bai Liu's, repeated calmly, "I confess my sins."

Both the Red and White Furies on the ground looked up in amazement, and the Martyred Bridge Ghost dropped his umbrella to join the others in staring at the Daoist in deathly silence.

The Daoist looked at Kong Xuyang and spoke slowly, "Over the past hundred years, your ancestor used the grave to accumulate Yin Qi, protecting the souls of the people of Yinshan Village. This nurtured evil spirits and forced the descendants to reincarnate, causing countless innocent deaths."

"This tomb formation has been arranged to such an extent that the Yin Qi now only serves to unite the spirits of us ghosts and restore our sanity. It also empties Yinshan Village of all of us, so that we may avoid the punishment of our spirits flying away under the Holy Decree."

"But over the centuries," the Daoist slowly raised his eyes, "the people of Yinshan Village were transformed into vengeful ghosts by me. Their souls were scattered and lost all sanity. They remembered only the order I gave them—to guard Yinshan Village to the death, preventing any outsider from entering. This caused them to kill many innocent people who passed by."

"You are right. I have indeed used evil magic and killed innocent people indiscriminately."

The Daoist, in his yellow robes, stepped forward, crossed the main gate of Yinshan Village, lifted his robe, and knelt down on one knee in the pouring rain. He took the holy decree from the stunned Kong Xuyang with one hand and looked up at him.

"In the face of the evil effects of my dark arts, I am the only one responsible," the Daoist said in a flat tone. "I should bear the consequences, not the people of Yinshan Village."

"I wish to be executed, to be struck by heavenly lightning until my soul is scattered. In exchange, I offer a hundred years of peace for Yinshan Village and the safety of all beings. Let people walk the path of people, and let ghosts walk the path of ghosts."

"But before that..." The Daoist took the holy decree from Kong

Xuyang's hand, crossed his knees, and slowly rose to his feet. The night gale blew so fiercely that the three golden crowns of hair tied around his head swayed from side to side.

A flash of green and purple lightning tore across the sky, as bright as day.

In the blinding light, the Taoist lifted his rain-drenched face and slowly turned to look at Bai Liu within the village of Yinshan. "Are you my descendant?"

"Judging by the face," Bai Liu replied respectfully, "I suppose so, old man."

The two faces, not far apart, locked eyes across the shifting pagoda of Yinshan Village, battered by the fierce storm.

One stood in a white shirt and trousers, casually watching as if observing a play. The other, wearing a neatly made Taoist robe, stood with a calm brow and righteous eyes. They were opposites—one high, one low, one inside, one outside—surrounded by hissing ghosts and the white bones of foreigners holding foreign guns and artillery, while Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi stood frozen in disbelief.

Had Mu Sicheng been sober, he would have been stunned by the smile that appeared on Bai Liu's face, a rare sight indeed.

"Old master? I was only in my early thirties when I died, and you call me that..." The Taoist smiled, his eyebrows softening. "You're a mischievous young man, aren't you? Born with a naughty nature. Have you borrowed your yin money? Want me to help, old man?"

Bai Liu shook his head honestly. "Not yet, but it would be great if you could help."

"I can help," the Taoist smiled. "You're my descendant. I've accumulated quite a bit of yin energy over the past hundred years, so lending you a fortune before I go wouldn't hurt."

He lifted his feet, as if a swimming dragon flying through the wind, and landed in front of Bai Liu in the blink of an eye. His Taoist robe billowed and scattered in the air as the immense Yin Qi he released filled the space around him.

The three golden crowns of hair on the Taoist's head spread out, and the greenish-black Yin Qi that had lingered for so long on his face

dissipated, revealing a handsome, vibrant face. The black nails on his hands retracted, revealing clean, human-like fingers.

He leaned down, his eyes half-lidded, and whispered into Bai Liu's ear. His words, faint yet tender, were barely audible over the rush of Yin energy.

"A hundred years ago, Yinshan Village was to fall and be handed over. I was at my wits' end when an evil god appeared. He promised to protect Yinshan Village for a hundred years and prevent any outsiders from invading, and in exchange, he gave me this evil art. I agreed to give him my soul and suffer for a hundred years."

"But the hundred years have passed, and the evil god never came. Time in Yinshan Village has stopped. It's frozen, caught in a seven-day cycle that never moves forward. Every day, strange beings begin to enter the village on the first day of the cycle."

"I wanted to end it, but I couldn't."

The Taoist's long, bony fingers reached out and gently touched Bai Liu's forehead. The Yin Qi poured from his body like an oceanic current, flooding into Bai Liu's body.

"Many thanks."

"Whether you entered the tomb without harming the villagers or woke me from my slumber, thank you."

Bai Liu looked at the Taoist. "Don't you hate the evil god who played with and tormented you?"

The Taoist, looking like Bai Liu, closed his eyes. A look of remembrance crossed his face as he whispered, almost to himself.

"...So what if I hate him, and what if I don't? I begged him willingly from the start. I've never regretted what happened. I remember when I knelt before him, turned my back on the faith of my ancestors, and said—"

"But let the dragon city fly, and teach not the horses—"

The clouds in the sky rolled and parted, and purple light gathered. Thunder roared like the crash of a mountain. The rain lashed like a wave. In the gap, a ball of lightning gathered, aimed directly at the indistinct yellow-robed Taoist below, and struck down with the force

of a thousand pounds.

The Taoist in yellow opened his eyes violently, turned to face the heavenly thunder directly, and, with a fierce wave of his sleeve, spread his robe to shield the evil spirits of Yinshan Village and Bai Liu behind him. He bellowed the last three words with authority:

"-Du Yin Shan!"

Yinshan Village

The thunder crashed down, hitting the ground with a deafening rumble. The earth shook violently, throwing everyone off balance, and a blinding beam of light enveloped everything.

In its wake, all spirits and grievances were scattered by the earth-shattering thunder.

The Red and White Furies were reduced to mere shadows in the purple light, while the skeletons of the foreigners turned to ash in the blazing thunder. The pagoda of Yinshan Village shook violently, collapsing under the storm, struck by lightning and engulfed in flames.

The Taoist raised his arms, as though finding relief in the heavenly punishment that burned and melted his soul. He turned to look at Bai Liu, who had been spared the thunder's wrath.

"... I'm fortunate to have a descendant like you in a hundred years," the Taoist said softly, a smile touching his lips. "Listen carefully: the road ahead is long. Don't be stubborn or chase after fleeting illusions. It's better to cherish the person in front of you."

"The moon reflected in the water is still the moon right before you."

After a brief pause, the Taoist gently stroked Bai Liu's head and sighed. "You're still young, but your memory is poor. You keep forgetting things. But some things are better left forgotten..."

With that, the Taoist's figure began to dissolve, transforming into clouds of smoke and stars, disappearing from sight.

When the thunder finally subsided and the rain ceased, only Yang Zhi, Kong Xuyang, an unconscious Mu Sicheng, and a silent Bai Liu remained in Yinshan Village. Bai Liu was lost in thought.

Kong Xuyang, still in a daze, first glanced at his empty palms, then slowly scanned the deserted village, before his eyes settled on Mu Sicheng lying unconscious on the ground. A manic joy crept across his face.

"The boss monster is dead! The entire village has been cleared, and Bai Liu's teammate has passed out..."

Kong Xuyang threw his arms wide, laughing maniacally as the ashes

swirled around him. “This is it! God is on my side!”

Amidst all the chaos, Yang Zhi couldn’t help but drop to his knees, laughing in a trance-like state, as though trying to convince himself. “... We can win. I’m sure we can win!”

Bai Liu raised his gaze, fixing Kong Xuyang with a smile. “Should I congratulate you in advance?”

Thinking Bai Liu was about to strike with his whip, Kong Xuyang instinctively took a few steps back in fear. But when he looked again, Bai Liu was standing still, unmoving.

Kong Xuyang froze mid-step, suddenly realizing something as his eyes fell to Bai Liu’s exposed limbs.

Bai Liu was zombifying, paralyzing him completely.

For a moment, Kong Xuyang stood frozen, then his maniacal grin spread, his hands clapping together as he laughed. “Bai Liu, Bai Liu, I thought you were so smart! You got played by an NPC zombie Taoist!”

“That zombie tricked you into taking in all that yin energy—now you’re turning into one of them, aren’t you?”

Kong Xuyang’s eyes gleamed with malicious delight as he strode over to Bai Liu, who remained immobile. “You and your monkey teammates will become monsters and be stuck in this copy forever.”

Bai Liu, with a calm smile, looked back at Kong Xuyang. “That does seem like the case.”

Kong Xuyang, now certain Bai Liu was immobilized, drew a bayonet from his side and approached him with feigned sorrow.

Imitating Bai Liu’s calm smile, but with raw resentment in his eyes, Kong Xuyang aimed the bayonet at Bai Liu’s heart, preparing to deliver the final blow.

“Let me teach you—losers and winners can’t speak to each other from such a level-headed angle!”

However, just as the bayonet came within a few centimeters of Bai Liu’s chest, Kong Xuyang’s hand faltered. His arm shook, unable to complete the strike.

Bai Liu looked down at Kong Xuyang, his body slightly hunched as he

smiled deeper. “So, you enjoy speaking from a position of inferiority, don’t you, hometown?”

“W-What...?” Kong Xuyang’s eyes widened in shock and fury as he looked down, his gaze landing on the wisps of black Yin Qi seeping from the tip of the bayonet.

The black Yin Qi crawled into his palm, paralyzing it, turning it as immobile as Bai Liu’s.

Nearby, Yang Zhi opened his hands slowly, his palms now covered in the same black aura.

Sharp black nails began to grow from his hands and feet, and he felt his hair thickening and shortening unnaturally, like a corpse.

Terrified, Yang Zhi screamed in panic, trying to escape. But his body had grown stiff, the zombification taking hold. He struggled to move, but only managed to fall face-first into the muddy ground, his hips wriggling in vain as he couldn’t get up.

"Only when both parties agree can one party pass Yin Qi to the other!" Kong Xuyang was frozen in place, on the verge of collapse. "Why can you pass Yin Qi to me? I never agreed to it at all. It's not in accordance with the rules of Maoshan Daoism!"

"Is that so?" Bai Liu raised his hand, rubbing the back of his neck. He tilted his head and stretched his muscles, his smile growing more serene. "I didn’t know there were so many rules to Maoshan Daoism."

Kong Xuyang, rigid with disbelief, stared at Bai Liu, who was moving freely. "Why can you move?!"

"Maybe it’s because..." Bai Liu stepped forward, gently taking the bayonet from Kong Xuyang's hand. He casually moved up to Kong Xuyang's eyes, looking at him levelly and whispering with a soft smile, "You and your good teammate, Yang Zhi, sucked all the Yin out of me?"

Kong Xuyang froze, then quickly glanced down. Bai Liu's body was slowly releasing wisps of black Yin Qi, which moved from Bai Liu's body into Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi's. Their bodies absorbed the Yin energy like two black holes.

As the energy passed, Bai Liu’s previously pale face flushed, while Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi’s eyes darkened and fangs began to sprout.

"Many of the Old Xie Villagers helped me absorb the Yin Qi," Bai Liu smiled, genuinely grateful. "The Old Man's Yin energy was so strong, it all came at once. Without the help of those two old folks, I would've turned into a zombie much sooner."

Kong Xuyang stared at Bai Liu, shocked and confused. "Why would we actively suck the Yin energy out of you?"

Bai Liu feigned surprise. "Don't you know, folks?"

Kong Xuyang's anger flared, blood vessels bursting in his eyes, his pupils bloodshot. His nostrils flared with each breath.

Bai Liu slowly asked, "Old villager, do you remember where all the Yin Qi from the corpses in Yinshan Village gathered?"

"The catacombs," Kong Xuyang replied, grinding his teeth.

Bai Liu's smile widened. "So, who's the one gathering the Yin energy in the tomb?"

"That ashen Daoist zombie on..." Kong Xuyang hesitated, his face changing abruptly. "Is borrowing Yin wealth?!"

Bai Liu's smile deepened. "Right."

"The whole Yinshan Village is a large tomb, and all the Yin energy fed into this tomb converges on that Daoist alone. Wherever you borrow Yin energy, it all comes from that Daoist."

"And that Taoist gave you all the Yin Qi..." Kong Xuyang's face drained of color. "As long as the device we set up to borrow Yin Qi is still in place, and as long as you give it, the Yin Qi will keep flowing from you to us..."

Bai Liu smiled. "And since I'm always generous, since the old folks like Yin energy, I'll lend you all the Yin energy in my body."

Kong Xuyang's eyes turned red, his skin bruising and his nails growing longer. "You deliberately lured me to rob your quest and borrow Yin wealth. You already knew there was something wrong with your character's main quest?!"

"There's no free lunch in this world," Bai Liu said, smiling regretfully as he spread his hands. "Nor is there a perfect character setup. Since my character has the advantage of location and people, the main quest

must have a flaw for fairness in the game." He shrugged. "That's why I never dared to do it. But it was you, homeboy, who dared to be the first to try it for me—covering me so I could try it myself."

Kong Xuyang, his eyes bloodshot with rage, roared hoarsely, "Bai Liu, you beast!!!"

[System Alert: Player Kong Xuyang's spirit level is rapidly decreasing... 31... 17... 9... Warning, warning, player Kong Xuyang is about to become a monster with a zero spirit level…]

[System Alert: Player Silent Lamb's spirit value is rapidly dropping... 27... 19... 6... Warning, warning, player Yang Zhi is about to become a monster with zero spirit…]

[Yang Zhi's panel goes berserk, personal skill enhancement in progress...]

Yang Zhi trembled as Bai Liu's memories flooded his mind, digesting them in mere milliseconds. But as his spirit level continued to plummet, Yang Zhi was instantly submerged in an illusion formed by Bai Liu's memories.

He felt his feet cold and a strange burning sensation, as if they were submerged in a bucket of ice water. Someone's voice echoed nearby, laughing loudly:

"Bad boys, Bai Liu..."

The scene shifted. Now, he was sitting on the edge of a flower bed by his high school playground. A Spades-like figure knelt in front of him, the distant sound of volleyballs crashing and a noisy crowd, though everything felt distant and muted.

The Spades-like figure was hugging his knees, tilting his head, and staring at Bai Liu as though he was the only one left in the world.

Spades spoke softly, with a serious tone, "Can I have one of those ice creams you're holding?"

Yang Zhi heard Bai Liu reject the request, his voice cold and firm: "No."

Spades paused for a moment before asking again, "Can I switch with you then?"

Bai Liu leaned forward slightly, his eyes lowered with a hint of interest, "In exchange for what?"

Spades answered, "In exchange for my newly born soul."

The scene shifted again.

Yang Zhi sat, disoriented, in a hospital room.

On the bed, Fang Dian was eating from a thermos. Two men sat silently on the benches beside her. One of them was Bai Liu, and the other was a man Yang Zhi found somewhat familiar—handsome, with dark circles under his eyes, and the strong smell of cigarette smoke emanating from him.

Fang Dian finished eating, wiped her mouth with toilet paper, and reached out to pat the man's shoulder without a hint of shame. "Old Lu, come and help me. I need to go to the toilet."

Yang Zhi realized this man was Bai Liu's childhood friend, Lu Yizhan.

Lu Yizhan helped Fang Dian walk to the toilet, the thermos bottle in his hand. As they limped toward the bathroom, Fang Dian sighed, "Damn, Old Lu, I'm not becoming a straight man, am I? Eat and shit..."

"No, you're fine. Your gastrointestinal function is good. I've already asked the doctor." Lu Yizhan responded calmly.

Fang Dian gave him a thumbs up with a smile that showed her white teeth, "I asked the doctor that right after I woke up from the anesthetic!"

Lu Yizhan, his face turning red, awkwardly helped her to the toilet. "Next time, ask about something else if you're worried."

Fang Dian's voice floated out from the bathroom, "That's exactly what I was worried about. We haven't even slept together that much..."

It sounded like Lu Yizhan had covered her mouth.

Bai Liu, sitting in the room, couldn't help but let a small smile tug at the corners of his lips before quickly dropping it.

The sound of the toilet flushing was followed by Fang Dian emerging, supported by Lu Yizhan, looking pale and fragile.

She had injured her abdomen, and every time she used the toilet, the

wound would hurt.

But when Bai Liu visited, she never once showed any pain.

"No more blood in the stool," Fang Dian said, relaxing as she leaned back against the hospital bed, patting her bandaged belly. "I'll be out in a few days."

Lu Yizhan, worried, stood up and tried to stop her, "You should stop tapping the wound!"

Fang Dian waved him off casually. "It's not a big wound. Really."

Bai Liu spoke up, his voice calm, "It will certainly affect fertility, won't it?"

Fang Dian and Lu Yizhan froze, their movements stopping in place.

Bai Liu lowered his gaze, averting his eyes before continuing, "It's my fault—"

Fang Dian sat up, propping herself up on the pillows and wrapping her arms around Bai Liu, pulling him close as he tried to avoid her gaze. "It's not your fault!"

"It was the fault of the person who hit me. It was the fault of my rash actions, the fault of the weather, the fault of everything in this world that led me here. But it's not your fault."

Her face was pale, but her voice was firm. "I had to save you. You didn't do anything wrong. Don't apologize to me."

Bai Liu gently opened his mouth, "…Consider it a debt I owe you."

Fang Dian rolled her eyes and laughed. "Since high school, when have we ever counted favors?" She propped herself up and lay back down.

Then, as if remembering something, she looked at Bai Liu thoughtfully before reaching out to touch his head with a slightly wistful expression. "If you really want to say you owe me, it's not a favor you owe. It's something else."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "What do I owe you?"

Fang Dian grinned, reaching out and playfully pinching his cheek. "I'm owed a son. Bai Liu, give me a son. I like kids like you."

Yinshan Village

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I’m serious, I'm not kidding," Fang Dian said with a playful pat on Bai Liu’s head, laughing brightly despite her haggard, pale face. Her eyes sparkled as she looked up at him. "I’ve always raised you like a son, anyway."

Bai Liu fell silent for a long moment before slowly averting his gaze. "I’m past the age of adoption."

Fang Dian blinked in surprise before bursting into laughter.

"I don’t care!" she grinned, her eight teeth flashing in a wide smile. Her happiness was genuine, radiating from deep within. She reached out, grabbing Bai Liu’s head and giving it a playful rub. "Say 'daddy!'"

Lu Yizhan, standing nearby, wiped away a tear as he hurriedly intervened. "Be careful!"

Bai Liu was pinned under Fang Dian’s grip, his face contorted from the pressure. He opened his mouth, his voice strained. "…Get some rest and recover soon."

Once Fang Dian had fallen asleep, Lu Yizhan and Bai Liu walked out of the ward in silence, their footsteps echoing down the empty hallway. They reached the corner of the stairs, where a narrow, high window let in the daylight, casting shadows across their faces.

Lu Yizhan pulled out a cigarette, holding it between his lips, unlit, as he leaned against the wall. The sunlight illuminated his face, revealing the exhaustion of a long night.

His gaze wandered, lost in thought. "…Everything is my fault," he murmured, almost to himself.

Bai Liu glanced at him, his tone cold. "Do you need me to remind you how your wife comforted me?"

Lu Yizhan let out a short laugh, removing the cigarette from his lips. He coughed twice and then turned back to Bai Liu, his expression an unreadable mix of emotions.

For a brief moment, Bai Liu felt as though Lu Yizhan was seeing someone else through him.

Lu Yizhan quickly composed himself, averting his eyes for a moment before speaking softly. "It's my fault for making the wrong decision and letting you and Fang Dian get hurt."

Bai Liu's eyes narrowed as he sensed something off in Lu Yizhan's tone. He asked calmly, "Is this something you're involved in?"

"Sort of." Lu Yizhan placed the cigarette back in his mouth, his head bowed so his expression was unreadable. "The person who retaliated against you and Fang Dian is a prisoner I once chased. He was recently released from prison and wanted revenge. At first, he only sent me Fang Dian's picture, so I warned her to be cautious."

"But you didn't think they'd target me as well?" Bai Liu asked, his voice steady but filled with a hint of accusation. "Why didn't you warn me?"

Lu Yizhan hesitated for a moment before responding. "They're not just criminals," Bai Liu continued, his voice growing sharper as he dissected the situation. "This group is organized, disciplined. This isn't their first time—they attack people in the streets without hesitation, taking pictures like it's a performance, a game. They talk about winning contests, getting something, treating it all like some kind of competitive challenge."

Bai Liu's face grew pale as he connected the dots. "This group… It's more like a terrorist organization, with a unified purpose, a common belief. And those kinds of groups often have religious ties."

Lu Yizhan's face darkened as Bai Liu pressed on. "Terrorist organizations usually attack on a large scale, unpredictably. It's clear now that the target is anyone connected to you. And yet, you told Fang Dian about this but kept it from me."

"Putting all this together," Bai Liu continued, "the only conclusion I can draw is that you're working undercover in some highly profitable, highly staffed, recreational religious group. Or, more accurately, this game. And you've achieved a position of no small importance there."

Bai Liu paused, eyes locked on Lu Yizhan. "Because you know this game involves me, you've been trying to keep me in the dark while the other side knows everything about me, even wants me to join their religious group."

Bai Liu took a deep breath, his voice cold. "I don't know anything about this group or the game. But there are two possibilities for why they're targeting me."

"One," he said, "they want to recruit me as one of their believers."

His eyes bored into Lu Yizhan's. "And the second… They want me to be their god, don't they?"

Lu Yizhan fell silent for a long while before lifting his head and meeting Bai Liu's gaze. He let out a hoarse laugh. "Sometimes, I think it's not a good thing to have a friend who's too smart."

"Now you know this exists," Lu Yizhan said, exhaling slowly. "What will you do?"

Without hesitation, Bai Liu answered, "I'd join the organization."

Lu Yizhan closed his eyes, a look of resignation crossing his face. "I knew you'd say that."

"I can promise you I won't do anything reckless when you go in," Bai Liu said, his tone calm, but his words carried a heavy edge. "But I don't like putting the initiative in someone else's hands. Right now, I'm more comfortable with the scenario where Fang Dian drives her motorbike straight into them, and the other side ends up in the hospital… or the morgue."

Lu Yizhan stared at Bai Liu, his gaze intense. "So you want to kill someone, do you?"

Bai Liu didn't respond, but his silence spoke volumes, and Lu Yizhan understood the unspoken answer.

Lu Yizhan took a deep breath, forcing himself to calm down. "Okay, you're going to kill... How many people are you planning to kill? How do you intend to do it, and what will you do with them afterward?"

"I know that, as I speak, your mind is already working out ways to handle everything. I know you could take control of all of this and use this organization, this tool, to navigate the world with god-like freedom—killing at will, amassing untold wealth, and satisfying every human desire."

Lu Yizhan looked directly into Bai Liu's eyes. "But then what?"

He reached out, placing his hands on Bai Liu's shoulders, his gaze warm and pleading. "Are you really going to keep being that kind of god?"

"Fang Dian and I both want you to be an ordinary person—someone who can go to work, enjoy birthday dinners, have friends, hold a job, cry, laugh, get hurt, love, and be loved."

"I've seen how you've been. Your life seems like it's everything, but that's only because it comes at the expense of others. You wouldn't be happy like that. No one would."

"Bai Liu, I watched you grow up. Don't let me watch you fall down that path again."

Lu Yizhan hugged Bai Liu's shoulder, closing his eyes. "I promise you, one day, you'll be able to bring those who hurt Fang Dian to justice—legally, within the moral framework we both believe in. But not now."

He stroked Bai Liu's head gently, then slowly raised his hand, a strange white light flickering on his palm. His eyes filled with a mix of emotions. "I forgot to say this earlier... Happy birthday, Bai Liu."

[System Prompt: Do you wish to use the Divine Rule Skill (World Memory Folding)?]

[This skill modifies the memory lines of everyone in the world, overwriting special events so that no one can remember or find traces of those events. Everything seamlessly resets—this is the highest-level Memory skill.]

[The memories after the reset become the foundational facts of the world and cannot be erased or altered by any object or skill.]

[System Prompt: The player has used the World Memory Folding skill twice. Only one more use remains. Do you wish to proceed?]

Lu Yizhan closed his eyes: [OK.]

A brilliant white light erupted, and Yang Zhi's mind collided with the skill head-on.

The World Memory Folding skill allowed Yang Zhi's thoughts to shift rapidly, causing his mind to flicker uncontrollably.

Yang Zhi, whose memory skill was only a basic one, couldn't handle

the high-dimensional power of this skill. After devouring so many memories, he was overwhelmed by the force of their modification and folding, driving him into madness.

Yang Zhi collapsed to his knees, clutching his stomach in agony as blood poured from his mouth. The conflicting memories of everyone he had consumed rushed back all at once, swirling in his mind like a violent storm.

In a desperate attempt to quell the pain, Yang Zhi grabbed handfuls of mud and tried to swallow them without chewing, but it only intensified the sharp, glass-like sensation in his gut.

Writhing in pain, he screamed, his limbs spasming uncontrollably, his face streaked with snot, eyes wide and pupils dilated.

[System Alert: Player Silent Lamb has zero spirit value, alienation is complete. Exiting the game...]

Kong Xuyang was still desperately searching for any way to reverse his fate, but no matter how much he struggled, it was futile—his surroundings only grew more and more real.

His mind drifted back to his university days when people mocked him and trampled on him for being poor—saying he'd never amount to anything.

"I won't!" Kong Xuyang yelled, crawling through the mud, his nails digging into the earth, tearing at his own flesh. His voice trembled with frustration, "It's not fair! Why should I be trampled like this when I'm better than them?"

He looked around, seeing those same people, now rich and smug, with expensive shoes on his face, laughing at him. They said, "You've lost. You're the loser now."

"I will win!" Kong Xuyang cried out, desperation in his eyes. His body jerked violently as he reached for the shoes of the men who mocked him, blood spilling from his mouth and nose. "I win! I can afford what you can! Stop looking down on me!"

[System Alert: Player Kong Xuyang has zero spirit value, alienation is complete. Exiting the game...]

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng, Bai Liu won the double match, accumulating 3 points.]

[System Alert: Player Silent Lamb, Kong Xuyang has become a monster and will remain in the game forever due to his spirit value being cleared...]

[... It has been confirmed that his reality is dead. The "Yinshan Village" game is over.]

Chapter End Notes

> Honestly, I translated the entire arc of Yinshan Village, and even after doing that, I still can't wrap my head around what actually happened. It's like the events just don't make sense no matter how many times I go over them.

Pre-season

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The moment the mechanical voice announced the end of the match, Wang Shun collapsed backward, slumping in his chair. Liu Jiayi, whose lips had been tightly pursed, finally allowed them to curl into a smile. Muke let out a long sigh of relief, and Tang Erda, who had been tense throughout, relaxed his shoulders.

The Reverse God smiled and glanced toward the exit beside the big screen, where Spades was also watching intently.

Everything seemed to move in slow motion.

Bai Liu logged out from the side of the big screen, taking his time to straighten his shirt before standing up.

Mu Sicheng logged out shortly after him, slightly wounded and muttering curses, as though accusing Bai Liu of exploiting him unfairly in the game. But a closer look revealed the mischievous grin on Mu Sicheng's face, his eyes twinkling as if he wasn't bothered by the events at all.

It was all for the win.

The crowd's response was a mixture of curses and cheers, interrupted by the frantic screams of the Fanatic Lamb players and their supporters.

"What will we do when the president dies?"
"How can we fight a group battle without a tactician?!"

Bai Liu carefully smoothed the hem of his shirt, lifting his face slowly as the chaotic noise of the crowd gradually quieted. All eyes shifted to him as he looked up, the energy in the air suddenly changing.

In most matches, the tactician of the winning team would take the spotlight to deliver a closing remark—often a moment for self-praise and belittling the opponent. It was part of the ritual to soak up any remaining points from the audience and build hype for the next match.

Bai Liu, however, simply smiled and raised his hand, offering a slight bow toward the audience. "I hope my opponent and I have contributed to an enjoyable viewing experience."

With that, he turned and walked off the stage without any further fanfare, as if the victory had been effortless.

He didn't mock his opponent or glorify his own achievements. He didn't linger on his triumphs or hardships. Bai Liu moved past the victory with a calm, almost casual grace.

This understated yet graceful display of victory was powerful in its own right.

Especially considering this was a rookie tactician facing off against a professional guild for the first time. The audience's fascination with him grew exponentially.

After a brief silence, the noise from the now subdued Fanatic Lamb supporters died down, replaced by murmurs of excited discussion.

The subject of their talk was obvious.

"Bai Liu..."
"I'm betting half my savings on the Roving Circus next time..."
"This tactician feels so strong, maybe even stronger than last year's killer sequence..."
"He doesn't kill as much as last year's Spades, but his field control and pressure? He doesn't play like a rookie. No wonder Charles the old greaser had his eye on him—he's not cheap..."

As Bai Liu returned to the Roving Circus team, everyone stood up to hand him bandages. It was a tradition—a gesture to help teammates recover from their injuries, similar to offering a drink to a boxer during a match.

However, bandages were usually given only to those with minor wounds.

Bai Liu looked at the six bandages handed to him and raised an eyebrow. "I don't, like, take my injuries out of the game, do I?"

Beside him, Mu Sicheng, with a bloodied face, watched the scene and grinned sarcastically. "Six top-tier bandages? That's rich. Why didn't anyone pass me a bandage?"

Bai Liu took Muke's bandage and handed it to Mu Sicheng with a sincere "Thank you for your hard work."

Mu Sicheng took it, his grimace only slightly softened by the sarcasm in his voice. "Don't be nice in front of me. You'll be lucky if you don't screw me over in the next game."

Bai Liu responded with a straight face. "I'll try."

Wang Shun, observing this exchange, retrieved the bandage that Bai Liu hadn't asked for. His gaze shifted between the Reverse God and Spades, who also silently took their bandages. His expression showed confusion.

Bai Liu is the president of our team, and it's only right for us, the four members of the Roving Circus, to give him bandages. But why are you two—killer sequence players—giving him bandages? Isn't that a bit... much?

The Reverse God, without a hint of embarrassment, smiled and extended his hand to Bai Liu. "Well done. You've made a fortune for all of us who bet on you. Thank you, President Bai, for such a great performance."

"Is that so?" Bai Liu swatted the Reverse God's hand away without a second thought, smiling as he looked at him sideways. "If you're that grateful, why don't you share half of the points you earned from your bet? We'll split it 50/50, and I'll call you next time there's another opportunity like this."

The Reverse God paused. "That's not necessary. It would be too much trouble for President Bai."

"How can it be trouble?" Bai Liu immediately turned the tables, patting the Reverse God on the shoulder with a broad smile. "What's our relationship? No need to be so formal."

"Haha, really?" The Reverse God scratched his head in feigned confusion. "I didn't realize President Bai and I were so close. I'm flattered."

Bai Liu nodded with a smile. "Oh? Why else would Reverse God come all the way here to watch my match, bet tens of millions of points on me, and hand me bandages?"

"My best friend hasn't treated me this well. Wouldn't you agree,

Reverse God-sensei?"

The two exchanged words and laughs, their expressions matching, though they'd gone back and forth four or five times by now. Those around them watched in awe.

Was this a battle between top tacticians?

The encounter ended with both sides biting off more than they could chew.

Liu Jiayi stepped forward, her expression serious. "Bai Liu, that Yang Zhi skill hasn't affected your memory, has it?"

"No," Bai Liu replied quickly. "I went over my biography in my head after coming down and was able to recall everything just as before."

"You know you have three memory folds in your mind..." Liu Jiayi began, but her words trailed off as she seemed to remember something. She glanced at the Reverse God beside her, and then, without missing a beat, shifted the topic. "Let's race first. We'll talk after we come down."

Bai Liu gave a casual thumbs-up in response.

"We're currently at four points in the tournament. The Fanatic Lambs have lost too much this time. They might be desperate to force a team game with us to make up for it. Are you still in good shape?" Tang Erda asked, frowning as he squeezed Bai Liu's arm, almost lifting him off the ground. He seriously inspected him from head to toe. "Any hidden injuries?"

Spades watched Tang Erda hold Bai Liu's arm, his gaze intense. The Reverse God smiled at him but kept a firm grip on Spades, who was about to lunge forward. With a low voice, he warned, "These are Bai Liu's family. Behave yourself."

Spades lowered his head slowly, clutching the bandage he had failed to hand to Bai Liu earlier. He sat down quietly in the corner without a word.

He understood the Reverse God's meaning. Bai Liu had just logged out of the game and was deliberately ignoring him by not taking the bandage.

It was the same as before, when Bai Liu had met him in the game pool

and refused to make eye contact.

Bai Liu gave Spades a brief, almost imperceptible glance before turning back to Tang Erda. "Don’t worry. The team won’t play against us."

Tang Erda blinked, confused.

As soon as Bai Liu spoke, the news of the Fanatic Lamb's forfeit was communicated to the system.

[System Alert: Fanatic Lamb forfeits the regatta.]

[System Alert: Wandering Circus vs. Fanatic Lamb, Wandering Circus wins.]

"They won’t be bothering us much," Bai Liu said with a smile, turning to look at the Fanatic Lamb crew, who were visibly shaking. "They’ve spent all their points on this game. They can’t afford props to erase traces of reality."

The Reverse God followed Bai Liu’s gaze, his smile deepening, though a dark gleam flickered in his eyes. "That means their group will soon be in danger."

After the game, the winners and losers were required to shake hands in the center of the large screen.

Kong Xuyang and Yang Zhi were still replaying in their minds the horrific deaths they had suffered at Bai Liu's hands. Just the thought of what they had planned for him made their faces pale with fear.

Not to mention that Bai Liu had now accumulated so many points, he could easily do anything to them.

Bai Liu, ever smiling, shook hands with the Frenzied Lambs team, chatting casually as they did so.

"Oh, I know you. Just had Wang Shun check you out. There's a police station about a kilometer from your house—seventeen minutes by foot, or a minute by motorbike."

"There's another police station five kilometers from your place..."

"Your house is in a good location—three police stations nearby. Which one do you prefer?"

After the handshake, the members of the Fanatic Lambs were frozen in place, drenched in cold sweat and wanting to cry, too terrified to move.

Having worked with Kong Xuyang for so long, they knew all too well that what was even more terrifying than what had happened to them in the game was the fact that Bai Liu knew so much about their real lives.

Players in the game, no matter how crazy they acted, were tethered to someone or something in the real world. Having their reality exposed was a terrifying vulnerability. They'd used this weakness to target their opponents in the game, but now, Bai Liu was doing the same to them with information from his sources.

Earlier, they had exploited others with the paparazzi, and now Bai Liu was using the same tactic against them.

Karma, it seemed, had a way of coming full circle.

Bai Liu didn't leave immediately after the handshake. Instead, he asked casually, "Where is that paparazzi member of yours? I'd like to meet him and make friends."

The men of the Fanatic Lambs inwardly hissed. You're deliberately seeking revenge!

But they didn't dare resist.

The paparazzi member stepped forward, trembling. "B-Bai, President Bai, I am the paparazzi," he stammered.

Bai Liu slowly examined him, his gaze cold. "Did you keep all the pictures of the victims you took?"

The paparazzi hesitated before nodding. "I... I kept them."

"Good." Bai Liu smiled, though there was something chilling in his eyes. "There are two police stations near your house. Put your evidence photos up, hop on your crime prop motorbikes, and turn yourselves in if you don't want to be tortured to death by me in the game."

The men of the Fanatic Lambs froze for a moment, first overwhelmed with relief at surviving, only to quickly realize something was wrong.

"B-Bai, President Bai..." the paparazzi asked cautiously, "We've erased all traces of our crimes in reality. We can't turn ourselves in, even with the evidence..."

"What does that have to do with me?" Bai Liu's smile remained, but the coldness in his eyes deepened. "I just want to see you suffer."

"If you can't recover the evidence, I'll gladly take it upon myself to torture you."

"We'll get it back somehow!" The paparazzi shouted, his voice filled with panic as he took a few steps back, staring at Bai Liu in fear. "We'll definitely recover those marks to turn ourselves in!!!"

Bai Liu glanced up at him, then turned away, offering a faint, cryptic response. "I'll see."

Chapter End Notes

Did everyone catch who the Reverse God is??? 🫣

Pre-season

After a formal handshake with the defeated Frenzy Lamb, the crowd in the viewing pool reluctantly dispersed, though many still craved more of the spectacle.

Amidst them, Hearts lounged lazily in her seat, resting her chin on one hand. Her gaze flickered between Bai Liu, who was communicating with the gods, and Spades, who stood unmoving at Bai Liu's side, his eyes fixed on him. As her curled lashes lowered, a slow smirk tugged at her red lips.

"I know Spades' weakness."

Qi Yifang, who had just stood up to leave, froze mid-step and snapped his head toward her. "What is it?"

Hearts didn't answer immediately. Instead, her gaze lingered fondly on the side of Bai Liu's face. As if sensing her stare, Bai Liu turned to her, offering a polite smile while raising a hand in a small, graceful curtsy of thanks.

So, they had noticed the tens of millions of points Hearts had placed on Bai Liu earlier.

Rising elegantly to her feet, Hearts tipped the brim of her hat lower and waved back at Bai Liu before turning away, her smirk deepening.

"Adjust our tactics for the Slayer sequence," she instructed as she walked off. "Next time we face off, I'll be targeting Spades."

Qi Yifang frowned in confusion. "But Empress, haven't your skills always been ineffective against Spades? He sees through all your disguises. We even tailored our strategy specifically to keep you from facing him alone."

"That was then."

As Hearts strode forward, the sharp click of her heels echoed in the now-empty ornamental pool. Her figure subtly shifted—shoulders broadening, her long skirt tightening into tailored suit trousers, a crisp white shirt tucked neatly at her waist. Her cascading red curls twisted and shortened, morphing into a casually tied ponytail that swayed against her pale neck.

Within moments, she had transformed into Bai Liu.

With Bai Liu's familiar face and a leather-gloved hand gripping a stark white bone whip, Hearts—or rather, the new Bai Liu—turned to Qi Yifang with an easy, knowing smile.

"But Spades is in love with someone."

Qi Yifang stood frozen, eyes wide in shock at the flawless transformation. His heart skipped a beat as he stared at Bai Liu—no, Hearts—who somehow looked even more seductive than before. His pulse pounded as he stammered, "E-Empress... Emperor!"

Hearts chuckled softly, reaching out to pat Qi Yifang's cheek. "A friendly warning—don't look at Bai Liu like that in front of Spades."

Qi Yifang snapped out of his daze, slapping his own face in quick succession as if to knock some sense into himself. I'm not gay. He clenched his fists. I'm not gay. I'm not gay.

Still dazed, he hurried after Hearts, his mind too muddled to process the full weight of her words.

"Wait, Empress—" he hesitated, his brow furrowing. "Spades liking someone... that doesn't hurt you, does it?"

Hearts cast him a sidelong glance, her lips curling. "Why would I be hurt?"

Qi Yifang faltered. Huh?

You like Spades. Spades likes someone else. Shouldn't you be upset?

The confusion must have shown on his face because Hearts let out an amused laugh.

"What a naive little boy." Her voice was rich with amusement. "You don't actually think I like someone just because I say I do, do you?"

Qi Yifang blinked rapidly, thrown by the casual dismissal. "I—I'm almost twenty-six. I'm not some little boy anymore..."

"Oh? Is that so?"

Hearts tilted his head, fingers drifting up to undo two buttons on his shirt. His ponytail unraveled slightly as he casually ruffled it, letting strands fall messily over his face. Beneath the loose fabric, the curve

of a pale collarbone and a sliver of smooth chest peeked through, as if someone had just carelessly stripped it open.

Qi Yifang's mind short-circuited.

Hearts' gaze lowered for a beat before lifting again, his smirk widening as he leaned in, voice dripping with playful teasing.

"Control your reaction before you stand in front of me and insist you're not a schoolboy."

Qi Yifang's entire face flushed red from the base of his neck up. He stood there, utterly shell-shocked.

If anyone had passed by him at that moment, they would have heard the King's Guild's formidable rookie murmuring under his breath, his eyes glazed over in disbelief.

"I'm not gay... am I? Am I gay or not...?"

"... Bai Liu is so pretty."

Bai Liu, unaware that someone was silently admiring his good looks, politely shook hands with the members of the Killer Sequence as a farewell. However, what was meant to be a brief exchange ended up dragging on with no resolution in sight.

He glanced down at Spades, who was gripping his hand tightly, his face devoid of emotion.

Beside them, Reverse God coughed loudly into his fist. "I've come all this way to watch Bai Liu's match, and after all this delay, it's about time we head back!"

Bai Yi immediately jumped in, feigning a cough of his own. "We still have a ton of training left. Right, Spades?"

Bai Jiamu stuffed his hands into his pockets, looking away as if he had nothing to do with the Spades who was currently clinging onto their team's strategist.

Liao Ke, watching the scene unfold with both amusement and helplessness, sighed and turned to Bai Liu. "Please bear with him, President Bai. Our Spades tends to be a bit...persistent, and we still haven't quite figured out what goes on in his head."

Despite the obvious attempts at persuasion, none of them actually

made a move to separate the two. It was as if they had collectively agreed to ignore the situation.

Mu Ke and Mu Sicheng frowned at the sight.

What was the Killer Sequence playing at? Letting Spades hold onto Bai Liu's hand so forcefully—was this some kind of provocation?

Yes, that had to be it. Neither Mu Sicheng nor Mu Ke had ever seen Bai Liu and Spades together before, and they had no trouble interpreting this intense handshake as a blatant challenge.

Meanwhile, Tang Erda and Liu Jiayi—who actually knew what was going on—

Liu Jiayi wordlessly removed her goggles and, without changing expression, began pretending to be blind.

Tang Erda, on the other hand, kept raising his hand as if about to intervene, only to hesitate and lower it again.

Separating them… felt wrong. But not separating them… also felt wrong.

For the first time in his life, Captain Tang found himself torn in an emotional standoff he had no clue how to handle.

Bai Liu finally lifted his gaze and spoke, his tone calm. "Let go. Then we can talk about whatever it is you want to talk about."

Spades was silent for a moment before releasing his grip.

"You guys go on ahead." Bai Liu turned to Wang Shun and the others. "Wang Shun, prepare the debriefing report for the next league match. Go over it with Liu Jiayi and the rest—I'll be there shortly."

Wang Shun nodded. "Understood, President."

Mu Ke and Mu Sicheng clearly didn't want to leave, but Tang Erda and Liu Jiayi dragged them away before they could protest.

Finally, seeing Bai Liu freed, Reverse God let out a long sigh of relief. He clasped his hands together in a mock bow. "Most benevolent President Bai, on behalf of all members of the Killer Sequence, please have a good chat with Spades. We are eternally grateful for your kindness."

With that, he grabbed Bai Yi—who was craning his neck in an obvious attempt to eavesdrop—and hauled him out of the scene as quickly as possible.

Now, only Bai Liu and Spades remained in the empty decorative pool.

Spades fixed Bai Liu with an unwavering stare. "Why are you avoiding me?"

Bai Liu met his gaze, calm and detached. "Why does it matter to you if I do?"

His expression was steady, his eyes cool and unreadable, as if the man before him had never once stirred him. "We've only met twice in the game pool. Is it really so strange that I would avoid a stranger who's been chasing after me?"

Spades went silent. His back straightened, his hand clenching around the whip at his side. His voice was low when he finally spoke.

"Would a stranger grab someone’s hand the first time they met?"

"I can tell—you don’t hate me."

Bai Liu paused, considering, before responding in an almost languid tone, "I suppose I do find it difficult to hate your face."

Meanwhile, Bai Yi—who had been forcibly dragged out of the viewing area—finally stopped craning his neck and turned to Reverse God. He nudged him with his elbow.

"Hey, is it really okay for you to just dump Spades on Bai Liu like that?" Bai Yi frowned. "Spades is completely clueless when it comes to relationships. No matter how you look at it, he's the one Bai Liu is playing with."

He shook his head, reminiscing. "Back in the forest, Spades was so mesmerized by Bai Liu that he couldn’t even tell the difference between four and five. And in the end, Bai Liu just used him. Even after getting out, Spades was still pining for him."

Bai Yi sighed dramatically, stroking his own face with exaggerated sorrow. "What is this world coming to? Good guys like me and Spades, getting deceived by cold-hearted people who don’t appreciate us—"

Bai Jiamu visibly shuddered in disgust. "The hell are you talking

about? What kind of delusion makes you think you and Spades are the same?"

Reverse God, however, remained composed as he gazed toward the ornamental pool. "If Bai Liu actually sat down and examined his own feelings rationally, I wonder if he'd realize how much he values Spades."

Bai Yi blinked. "Wait, what do you mean? Bai Liu looked pretty attached to Spades back in the forest. You're not saying—"

Reverse God met Bai Yi's eyes. "Yes. Exactly what you're thinking."

Bai Yi's jaw dropped. "Shit! Does Spades know? And you still left him with Bai Liu?!"

Reverse God's gaze remained steady. "By now… he should."

Back in the ornamental pool, Bai Liu slowly lifted his eyes to meet Spades'. His voice was quiet, deliberate.

"Because the person I loved a long time ago looked exactly like you."

Spades' fingers tensed around the whip at his side.

"He's dead," Bai Liu continued, his tone devoid of emotion. "So I find it hard to hate someone who looks just like him and still keeps getting close to me."

He stepped forward, reaching out to brush his fingers against Spades' face. His touch was gentle, yet his expression remained unreadable.

"Because it would be such a shame to waste a perfect keepsake."

Pre-season

Bai Yi paced anxiously in front of the Killer Sequence, hands clasped behind his back, like a father waiting for his daughter's first date to end.

"Why isn't he back yet…?"

Bai Jiamu, growing impatient, sighed. "Can you just sit down and calm down?"

Bai Yi spun around, throwing up his hands in exasperation. "Calm down? Our guild leader is acting as someone's body double! How do you expect me to stay calm?!"

"Spades won't be a stand-in," Bai Jiamu said with certainty. "He might seem indifferent, but he's proud. Besides, I doubt Bai Liu would let him. He'll make his move, and Spades will come back after fighting him."

Bai Yi, left speechless by the rebuttal, turned to drag someone else into the conversation. "Reverse God, what do you think Spades will do?"

Leaning against the balcony railing, the Reverse God narrowed his eyes against the breeze. At Bai Yi's question, he turned his head slightly, smiling in vague amusement. "Relationships are matters best decided by the people involved."

Bai Yi, already familiar with the Reverse God's cryptic way of speaking, narrowed his eyes and pressed on. "I don't care about the people involved. I want to hear your opinion as an outsider."

"My opinion?" The Reverse God rubbed his chin. "I don't think there's a contradiction between Bai Liu wanting something other than Spades and him already liking Spades."

Bai Yi frowned. "Huh? What does that even mean?"

The Reverse God's grin widened, as if something about the conversation amused him. "It's like an eighteen-year-old swearing they'll never share their ice cream… but then they end up giving it away anyway."

He glanced out the window, his expression thoughtful. "He may not

remember it now, but I think he's making the same choice this time as he did before."

"Because it's the same person asking for the ice cream."

Spades looked at Bai Liu, his expression serious. "I'm just a souvenir—so you can't like me?"

Bai Liu was silent for a moment before looking away, his voice steady and calm. "The affection given to a souvenir isn't the same as the affection given to a person. It's… lesser."

Spades nodded as if that logic made perfect sense. "Then I don't count as a person," he reasoned, stepping forward to grip Bai Liu's wrist. "So you can like me now."

"In the way you like souvenirs."

Bai Liu tried to pull his hand away, but Spades tightened his grip, refusing to let go until he got an answer.

Turning his face aside, Bai Liu's voice cooled. "You're not even a very good souvenir."

Spades leaned in, his breath brushing against Bai Liu's ear. "What part of me isn't good enough?" His voice was low, almost teasing. "You said I have a good figure. So what doesn't fit…?"

"Enough," Bai Liu cut him off, his chest rising and falling with restrained frustration. "I don't want to—"

"Is it my face?" Spades pressed, lifting his hand to his cheek as if inspecting himself in a mirror. "Am I not good-looking enough?"

"No." Bai Liu's voice was steady, but quiet. "You're just… not enough like him."

Spades froze. His expression remained unreadable, but his gaze sharpened as he stared at Bai Liu. "What's different?" he asked, voice even. "My mouth? My nose? My eyes?"

Bai Liu finally turned to meet Spades' gaze, his own eerily calm. "Your bones."

Spades stilled for a fraction of a second. Bai Liu exhaled, almost imperceptibly relieved.

This was exhausting. He'd much rather Spades just give up.

But then realization flickered in Spades' eyes. He reached for his whip. "Oh. This?"

The whip lashed up, its tip nearly grazing the skin of his face, ready to carve through flesh and expose the bones beneath. "I can cut them out and have them changed."

Bai Liu's pupils contracted. He moved instantly, slamming his hand down to stop the whip—but it was too late. The razor-sharp edge had already traced a deep, bone-deep gash down the left side of Spades' face.

Cold blood dripped from Spades' jaw, landing on the back of Bai Liu's hand.

Bai Liu's eyelids flickered. His voice turned ice-cold. "What are you doing?"

Spades' tone remained natural, unbothered as if he hadn't just tried to carve into his own skull. "Changing the bones you don't like."

Bai Liu's chest rose and fell twice in measured breaths. The warmth of Spades' blood on his skin sent a shiver up his fingers, curling them slightly.

"I don't take souvenirs that have been artificially altered." Bai Liu glanced up at Spades, his gaze lingering on the gash across his face. His expression cooled a few degrees further. "I don't take scraps with scars either."

"I won't have a wound. I heal fast," Spades insisted.

Bai Liu exhaled a long, slow breath and held out his hand. "Bring the bandages."

Spades immediately pressed the crumpled bandage he had been clutching into Bai Liu's palm.

Bai Liu glanced down at it before lowering his eyes. "Keep your head down."

Spades obediently ducked his head. Without breaking eye contact, Bai Liu raised his hand and wrapped it around Spades' face, carefully bandaging his wound. Spades watched him intently, as if Bai Liu

himself were the most fascinating thing in the world.

Bai Liu's fingers paused. The bandage had just covered Spades' eyes.

For a fleeting moment, Bai Liu was lost in a memory.

In the orphanage, Xie Ta had made a doll—a long, thin figure, eerie in its facelessness. It had no features because there were no bandages to shape them. Later, Xie Ta was covered in needle marks, his body a map of drawn blood.

Xie Ta looked at Bai Liu as he bandaged him and whispered: "When these bandages come off, your long, skinny ghost doll will finally have a face."

But Bai Liu had never seen Xie Ta without the bandage mask, in the end.

Now, Spades sat before him, his face wrapped in bandages, only his black eyes exposed. He looked at Bai Liu with unwavering calm, as if offering himself up as the perfect souvenir—flawed, yet entirely devoted.

Bai Liu hesitated.

Spades, despite having his mouth covered, found a way to speak. His voice was muffled, slightly distorted.

"You just looked at me like you wanted to kiss me—"

Bai Liu tugged sharply on the bandage. Spades staggered forward two steps, pulled off balance. Without changing expression, Bai Liu tightened the bandage and pulled it up over Spades' eyes.

A slow, confused pause. "...I don’t have a cut on my eye to wrap."

Bai Liu’s voice was pleasant. "Keep talking nonsense, and you’ll have one soon."

Spades wasn’t sure what he had said wrong, but some instinct warned him to shut up. He wisely obeyed.

Silence settled between them, broken only by the sound of each other's breathing.

Spades, now blindfolded, couldn't see Bai Liu’s face. But he felt the air shift, the almost imperceptible way Bai Liu leaned in. Bai Liu’s breath

brushed lightly against his skin—

And then, through the bandages, Bai Liu pressed a kiss to his face. His tone was light.

"You're now a certified souvenir. Bonus."

When The Reverse God logged back into the game, he was greeted by an unsettling sight.

Three men sat in rigid silence around the coffee table in the killers' lounge, their expressions grim. Across from them, Spades lay motionless on the sofa, facedown against the balcony railing like a lifeless corpse.

The entire scene had the distinct air of a memorial service for a fallen soldier.

The Reverse God hesitated at the doorway before stepping in cautiously. "...What happened? Did Spades try to grope Bai Liu and get smacked into next week?"

Bai Yi slowly lifted his head, his expression dark. "It’s much worse than that."

"I don’t know what Bai Liu said to him," Liao Ke sighed, shaking her head. "But Spades came back with a serious self-awareness crisis. I’ve given him a full round of counseling, and there’s still no improvement."

Bai Jiamu clenched his fists, his face slightly pale. "Falling in love… it’s terrifying."

Hearing that, the Reverse God relaxed slightly and took a sip of tea. "Alright. What exactly happened when Spades came back?"

Bai Yi’s expression darkened further as he recalled.

"The moment he walked in, I knew something was off. His eyes were empty. He was clutching a bunch of bloody bandages. And there was a huge gash on his face. I have no idea what kind of psychological warfare Bai Liu put him through."

"Not just that," Bai Jiamu added grimly. "He kept staring at us and demanding to know what kind of thing would have its whole face wrapped in bandages."

"I just told him that usually, a bandaged face means a mummy." Bai Jiamu looked regretful. "I shouldn't have said that."

Liao Ke threw up his hands in exasperation. "And then Spades said he didn't want to be a lizard anymore. He wanted to be a mummy. I told him that wasn't possible, that it was too cruel. But he insisted. When we refused to tell him how to become one, he got mad and just… stopped moving. We've been waiting for you to come back and sort him out."

The Reverse God stared at them, speechless.

Bai Liu, just what kind of nonsense did you fill Spades' head with?!

Pre-season

Stray Circus Meeting Room

Wang Shun activated the panel, displaying various pieces of information as he explained the process in a clear, structured manner.

"Now that we've won this stage and the pre-season is nearing its end, we're up against higher-ranked teams. They may not be as strong as the Fanatic Lambs, but we can't take them lightly."

As he spoke, Bai Liu pushed open the door and walked straight to the chair at the front of the room. Without hesitation, he sat down and raised a hand, gesturing for Wang Shun to continue.

Wang Shun gave Bai Liu a nod before resuming. "President Bai, Captain Tang, and I have discussed this, and we believe you're nearly ready to begin training. The next step is to focus on team matches."

Bai Liu leaned back in his chair and tapped his fingers on the table in front of Mu Sicheng, who was dozing off. "Do you know what the most important aspect of the tournament is?"

Mu Sicheng, head propped up, was drifting in and out of sleep. He had taken a hit during the last match, exhausting both his energy and stamina. Bai Liu's question jolted him awake, and he blinked in confusion. "… Teamwork?"

"No." Wang Shun sighed, casting a worried glance at Mu Sicheng. "It's stamina, God Mu."

He continued, "From here on, you'll have not just single matches, but also pairs and team matches. Unlike training in the game pool or the smaller pre-season rounds, these matches will be just as intense as today's pairs match."

"Unlike mental and physical strength, which can be restored with potions, your consciousness remains under extreme strain during these high-intensity battles. The exhaustion builds up, and once your state declines, it's hard to recover."

Wang Shun looked toward Bai Liu, his expression serious. "Chairman, after facing two strong teams back-to-back, I'm worried that God Mu and the newcomers won't be able to keep up."

Bai Liu crossed his arms. "That's why I came back—to discuss this with you." His gaze swept across the room. "Liu Jiayi is the most crucial player for the team matches. She needs to maintain her condition, and since her skills aren't suited for singles or pairs matches, she'll only participate in team rounds."

"Muke, you'll play singles when you're in good form. Mu Sicheng and I will handle the pairs match."

Bai Liu met their gazes. "For the regular lineup—Tang Erda and I will rotate in singles. For pairs, Mu Sicheng and I will be the fixed duo. Any objections?"

Tang Erda nodded. "No problem."

"I have a problem with it." Mu Sicheng frowned.

"You're playing in singles, you're in the pairs, and you're the tactician for the team?" He raised an eyebrow. "Bai Liu, you just said the newcomers won't be able to keep up after two games. But you're a newcomer yourself—how are you supposed to last through three?"

The exhaustion weighed on Mu Sicheng. He had only played one match, yet his mind still buzzed from the effects of Yang Zhi and Kong Xuyang's skills. His vision blurred, and he struggled to keep his eyes open. If this was how he felt after one game, he couldn't even imagine what three back-to-back matches would do to Bai Liu.

Tang Erda, listening to Mu Sicheng's argument, suddenly felt a sense of unease.

He hadn't questioned Bai Liu's arrangement at first—after all, in other timelines, Bai Liu had played three consecutive games regularly. But this Bai Liu was still a rookie in his first year of league play. Three matches against strong teams? That was excessive. Even Tang Erda himself wouldn't be able to maintain peak form under those conditions.

Liu Jiayi spoke up. "I'm fine with my role, but Bai Liu, your allocation is a serious problem. I won't argue about singles—Muke, you, and Tang Erda have the right skills to rotate there—but there's no reason you and Mu Sicheng should be a fixed pair for doubles."

Muke considered it. "Couldn't we rotate between me and Mu Sicheng instead?"

Bai Liu shook his head, his voice calm. "Mu Sicheng doesn't have enough coordination to support different partners. The only player who can be fixed in pairs is me—I can adapt to anyone."

"With Tang Erda and Muke rotating in singles, Mu Sicheng is the best choice as my doubles partner."

Liu Jiayi pressed her lips together but couldn't refute him.

They all knew Bai Liu's plan was the most efficient. But it also put the heaviest burden on him.

"If there are no further objections," Bai Liu stood, his tone light, "then the tactical lineup is settled. Everyone's exhausted—get some rest."

The room fell silent. They had objections, but when they looked at Bai Liu—the dark circles under his eyes, the exhaustion in his posture—they swallowed them down.

… The most exhausted person here was Bai Liu. More than anyone, he needed rest.

Wang Shun couldn't help but glance at Bai Liu.

Technically, Bai Liu had already decided on this layout, but convincing Wang Shun had been effortless.

Bai Liu had simply smiled and said they would agree.

At the time, Wang Shun had thought it unlikely that the players were genuinely concerned about Bai Liu—surely they wouldn't let him wear himself out like that. But when it came down to it, Bai Liu had brushed off their concern as if it were nothing.

Sighing, Wang Shun sorted through the paperwork in his hands.

There it was again—the ever-composed President Bai, who pretended to deliberate but had, in reality, already made all the decisions.

And who, Wang Shun wondered, would ever be able to change the mind of this overconfident tactician?

By the time Bai Liu and his group logged out of the game, night had fallen in the real world.

Du Sanying hadn't logged in to watch the match—he had completely forgotten about it. The memory only came rushing back when he saw

Bai Liu return home.

Panicked, Du Sanying bowed at a full 180 degrees. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Bai Liu! I really forgot!"

"Never mind." Bai Liu stepped inside, casually undoing his tie and hanging it on a rack as he walked further into the house. He smiled at Du Sanying. "We won. What did you eat today?"

Winning, to Bai Liu, was something mentioned as lightly as a meal—just another inevitable, everyday occurrence.

And just like that, Du Sanying was swept along by Bai Liu's pace, trying to recall his meals. "Uh... I had beef noodles in the morning and a roast goose lunchbox for lunch."

"You haven't eaten dinner yet?" Bai Liu slumped onto the sofa, pulling his phone from the pocket of his suit trousers. He leaned back lazily, glancing at Du Sanying. "How about hot pot? My treat."

From where Du Sanying stood, he could see Bai Liu's Adam's apple move as he swallowed. The first button of his shirt was undone, revealing the faint line of his collarbone. His shoulders and neck slumped loosely against the sofa, his half-lidded eyes giving him a look of complete ease.

For a moment, Du Sanying was struck by the sight.

For some reason, Bai Liu seemed... relaxed. Even in a good mood.

Was it because he won the game?

But... Bai Liu had won before, and he'd never looked like this.

Bai Liu glanced up at Du Sanying, tilting his phone slightly. "Want to eat? If you're in, I'll invite the others too."

Du Sanying hesitated. "It—it's not too expensive, right?"

"It won't break the bank." Bai Liu smiled. "I'll call someone, then."

Less than a second later, Du Sanying heard Bai Liu's voice over the phone.

"Lu Yizhan, are you off work yet?"

A faint grumble about overtime filtered through the speaker, and Bai

Liu's lips quirked in amusement.

"Mr. Lu, I won the match against the Fanatic Lambs," Bai Liu said offhandedly, his voice as casual as ever. "Let's celebrate—hot pot at your place?"

Du Sanying was stunned.

He had been taught by Wang Shun that in-game stories were meaningless to ordinary people.

Why was Bai Liu suddenly bringing up the game to a normal person?

Bai Liu tapped his fingers rhythmically against the back of the sofa, one by one. Du Sanying unconsciously counted along—seven times.

Seven taps later, Lu Yizhan's confused voice came through the phone.

"...Bai Liu, what did you just say?"

Bai Liu smiled again—a light, fleeting thing, like a cloud drifting across his face, ready to disappear with the wind.

"It's nothing," Bai Liu said. "Just remembered I haven't had dinner with Sister Fang in a while."

Lu Yizhan was silent for a moment before letting out a soft chuckle. "Yeah... Ever since your birthday the year before last, you suddenly seemed to grow up overnight. You stopped coming over for dinner—used to at least bring two pounds of discount oranges when you did."

Lu Yizhan sighed. "Fang Dian and I used to celebrate your birthday every year. Then one day, you stopped wanting to celebrate it at all."

"Speaking of which... isn't your birthday coming up soon?"

Bai Liu let out a vague hum of acknowledgment.

Lu Yizhan's voice turned teasing. "What's this? Nostalgic at 25? Finally willing to come over for dinner and let us celebrate?"

"But it's still a little early for that," Lu Yizhan continued. "Let's keep it simple—just hot pot today. I'm not off work yet, so go buy the ingredients first. Sister Fang's home, and you have the key. Get whatever you want; I'll transfer you the money later..."

"Actually, wait—your Sister Fang can't cook. Maybe you two should

wait for me to—"

"Lu Yizhan." Bai Liu suddenly cut him off.

His voice was even, but something about it made the air still.

"If, one day, there was a game that both you and I really wanted to win," Bai Liu asked quietly, "would you still throw the match for me?"

A long silence stretched between them.

Then, finally, Lu Yizhan let out a soft, breathy laugh.

"No," he said.

"I'd do everything I could to win against you, Bai Liu."

Bai Liu took a brief pause before changing the subject. “Is it okay if I bring someone over for hot pot?”

On the other end of the line, Lu Yizhan was momentarily stunned. He soon let out a helpless sigh. “...You really see me as an endless source of generosity, huh?”

“Pick up some more fruit,” he added, amusement in his voice. “The oranges from the supermarket downstairs are on sale today—get two catties.”

After hanging up, Bai Liu sent a message to the group chat, asking if they wanted to have dinner together. The replies came in almost instantly.

[Music]: Wow, a once-in-a-century event! White Pickle is actually treating himself.

[Muke]: Need help choosing a place? I know some decent private restaurants.

[Tang Erda]: Are we drinking? I’ll bring some wine. @Bai Liu

[Bai Liu]: I’m not treating you. I’m taking you to my friend’s place for hot pot, and I’m buying food later.

[Bai Liu]: @Tang Erda, bring it on.

As soon as Bai Liu sent the message, the group chat erupted.

[Music]: Damn it, what a freeloader! Bai Liu, you have no shame!

[Bai Liu]: So, you’re not eating?

[Music]: No way! I’m in! I want shrimp balls! Tripe! Brains! Duck intestines! Sliced lung!

[Muke]: I’ll bring some common hot pot ingredients. Anyone allergic to seafood?

[Tang Erda]: [photo of a wine cabinet] @Bai Liu, any preference?

Bai Liu glanced at the flood of messages, his fingers pausing briefly on the cracked screen before he typed again.

[Bai Liu]: Do you guys eat oranges?

[Music]: Of course! Who doesn't?

[Muke]: I like them.

[Tang Erda]: Yeah. @Bai Liu, I have two bottles of orange liqueur—not too strong. Want me to bring one?

Bai Liu replied a few more times before calling Liu Jiayi. He told her he'd pick her up, only for her to coldly refuse and warn him not to let anyone ride on the back of his Haro bike. Instead, she told him to send the address, saying she'd find her own way there.

On the way, Bai Liu bought half a catty of mushrooms, a catty each of lettuce and enoki mushrooms, and half a catty of sliced beef. He also grabbed a two-liter bottle of Coke from the supermarket downstairs and two catties of the discounted oranges.

He made sure to get Mu Sicheng's shrimp balls, tripe, and duck intestines, though they were all frozen—no fresh ones were available this late.

Altogether, the pile of groceries cost him 167 yuan.

But in the end, Bai Liu bought it anyway.

He also picked up crispy sausages and meatballs—things a kid would like. He skipped the brains and lung slices, which weren't available in the supermarket, and by now, the wet market was already closed.

After all the odds and ends, the total came to 218.2 yuan.

Du Sanying followed Bai Liu nervously as they entered an old residential neighborhood, Bai Liu carrying several plastic supermarket bags.

The area was lined with clusters of apartment buildings, with a couple of large supermarkets and convenience stores nearby. At the entrance, an elderly man sat on a rusted bench, wrapped in a faded military coat. His legs were crossed as he nodded off, squinting at passersby.

As Bai Liu walked past, the old man's eyes snapped open. He stared at Bai Liu for a long moment before recognition dawned.

"Aren't you Fang Dian's high school classmate?"

Bai Liu offered a polite nod. “It’s me. Long time no see, Uncle Li.”

Uncle Li let out a hearty laugh as he stood up, clapping Bai Liu on the shoulder. “I haven’t seen you in two, three years—I barely recognized you at first.”

“Good thing your head’s still the same shape as in high school. A couple more glances, and I knew it was you.”

His expression softened with nostalgia. “You and Lu Yizhan used to hang out at Fang Dian’s place all the time back then. Lu Yizhan’s been living there these past couple of years, but you—why don’t you come by anymore?”

Bai Liu paused for half a second before replying with his usual flawless, polite smile. “Work keeps me busy.”

Uncle Li shook his head, disapproving. “You young folks always say you’re busy.”

“You and Fang Dian have been friends for years. You shouldn’t just stop coming around like that.” His voice turned more serious. “Back in high school, the three of you had a rough time, but you stuck together and got through it. Friendships like that don’t come easy. If you don’t cherish them now, once the connection fades, where will you find friends who’ve been through thick and thin with you?”

Uncle Li nudged Bai Liu toward the entrance. “Go on in, I won’t keep you.”

“Thank you, Uncle Li.”

Bai Liu continued deeper into the neighborhood, arms full of groceries.

The residential buildings in the district were old, none taller than seven floors, and none had elevators. The electronic locks at the entrances were just as outdated—the displays flickered, barely functioning.

Bai Liu didn’t bother entering a password. He simply pushed the door open and walked inside.

Du Sanying followed, glancing around before asking, “What floor is it on?”

“Third,” Bai Liu replied.

As they climbed the stairs, Du Sanying hesitated before speaking again. “Mr. Bai Liu, did you come here often when you were in high school?”

When the security guard had approached Bai Liu earlier, Du Sanying had instinctively stepped away. He had only caught bits of their conversation, but it was enough to tell that the man was very familiar with Bai Liu.

Bai Liu rounded the next step. His voice was calm. “This is Fang Dian’s home.”

“When I couldn’t stay in the dormitory or return to the orphanage, she would give me the key and let me stay here.”

Du Sanying frowned slightly. “Huh? Why couldn’t you stay in the dorm or go back to the orphanage?”

“I was about to be expelled,” Bai Liu said matter-of-factly. “Someone accused me of luring my classmates into gambling and instigating a fight with weapons. The school was doing everything it could to distance itself from a future ‘criminal,’ while the orphanage was reevaluating my eligibility for financial aid and considering whether to send me to juvenile detention.”

He spoke as if recounting someone else’s life, detached, unbothered.

“I spent a week living in an internet café before Fang Dian found me and gave me her house key.”

Step by step, Bai Liu made his way up to the third floor, carrying a plastic bag. He stopped beside the old, decaying staircase and looked ahead. Just two more steps away stood a red stainless steel security door.

An inverted golden fortune character was pasted at its center, flanked by untouched spring couplets. A bagua mirror hung above the door, and a bunch of dried mugwort rested beside it.

He hadn’t been here in nearly two years, yet everything remained just as it had been back then.

In the dim, chaotic haze of the internet café, amid the flickering screens and suffocating smoke, Fang Dian had grabbed Bai Liu’s wrist

and dragged him from the makeshift bed he had fashioned out of two swivel chairs.

Bai Liu resisted, his body slack as he leaned into the chair, eyelids heavy with sleep. His head lolled to the side, exhaustion weighing down his expression. When he half-opened his eyes, they were cold and distant.

"…I'm not awake yet. What do you want?"

"Back to school," Fang Dian replied, unfazed. "You've missed a week of classes. Lu Yizhan has been searching for you like crazy. I didn't expect to find you hiding in some hole-in-the-wall café."

"He doesn't need me," Bai Liu muttered, eyes closing again as he sank deeper into the chair. "We were never meant to be in the same world."

"Now that you've found me, can you let me sleep?"

Fang Dian crouched down in front of him. "An internet café isn't a place to sleep."

She pressed a set of keys into Bai Liu's palm. "Do what you need to where you're supposed to. Play games in the café if you want, but when you're done, go back to school."

Her voice softened. "Go home and rest."

"Go home, Bai Liu. Lu Yizhan and I are waiting for you."

Bai Liu turned onto his side, pulling his school jacket around himself and burying his face in the couch. His breathing was even, his eyelids still. He was shutting her out, refusing to acknowledge her presence.

That was his way of telling her to leave.

Fang Dian only chuckled. She reached out and ruffled his hair. "Alright, have it your way. I won't tell Lu Yizhan where you are."

"We had a deal, right? I cover for you when you do something bad."

She stood up, her voice turning quiet. "But Bai Liu, I can only hide the bad things you do. I can't hide it when you've done something wrong."

"You don't feel guilty about doing bad things." She looked down at

him, curled up in the chair, and suddenly smiled. “But if it bothers you this much… maybe you didn’t just do something bad.”

“Maybe you did something wrong.”

She left the keys behind and walked away.

Bai Liu didn’t quite remember what happened after that. Maybe he stayed at the café until he ran out of money. All he knew was that, in the end, he found himself standing at Fang Dian’s door, key in hand.

When he turned the handle and stepped inside—

On the sofa across from the door, Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian were fast asleep, too exhausted to hear him enter.

The coffee table before them was cluttered with paperwork—transfers, administrative forms, school regulations, legal documents—mixed with unfinished practice exams covered in handwritten notes. A pile of photocopied petitions and unsent letters lay nearby, all addressed to various welfare organizations and schools.

At the bottom of the stack were two neatly written pledges.

One was a guarantee for the orphanage, arguing that Bai Liu’s actions didn’t warrant expulsion and that he still deserved support.

The other was a letter to the school. There was no argument, no plea —only a single line: If Bai Liu is expelled, I will leave with him.

The guarantor was Fang Dian.

The rustle of papers must have woken them, because the next thing Bai Liu knew, Fang Dian was blinking sleepily at him. Lu Yizhan stirred beneath her, groggy and confused.

But there were no harsh words, no accusations, no disappointment.

Fang Dian simply propped herself up, peeking over the coffee table. Then she reached across it and gave Bai Liu a firm pat on the head.

“Finally home, huh?”

She laughed. “Don’t be afraid to come home just because you messed up.”

“Only kids do that.”

Now, standing in front of that same door, Bai Liu adjusted the plastic bag in his grip and raised his hand to knock.

Before he could, the door swung open.

Fang Dian stood there, trash bag in hand. She froze for a second, then arched an eyebrow, a slow smile spreading across her face.

She reached out and, just like before, gave Bai Liu a firm pat on the head.

“Took you long enough to give up and come home.”

Still smiling, she added, “Don’t be afraid to come home just because you messed up. You’re too old to be acting like a kid.”

After greeting Bai Liu, Fang Dian turned her attention to Du Sanying, who was hiding behind him. She smiled warmly and stepped forward to shake his hand.

"Hello, are you a friend of Bai Liu's?" she asked.

Du Sanying instinctively backed away, waving his hands in a panic. He was afraid his misfortune would rub off on her and looked to Bai Liu for help.

But Fang Dian was quick. With a swift stride, she caught Du Sanying's hand and gave it a firm shake. Du Sanying could only stare, dumbfounded, as she grinned at him.

"Welcome!" she said brightly.

She waved at them before heading down the stairs with a bag of trash in hand. But just as she took a step, her shoelaces came undone—causing her to stumble forward, nearly tumbling down the stairs.

Du Sanying's pupils shrank in horror. "Eh—!!!"

Before he could react, Fang Dian suddenly pushed off the ground, nimbly skipping over six or seven steps and landing with ease. She turned back to them with a cheeky grin and an "OK" gesture.

"Safe landing~" she announced.

Du Sanying was stunned.

She shook his hand… so she should have been affected by his misfortune. And yet—she was fine?

Fang Dian knelt to tie her shoelaces before standing up and waving at them nonchalantly. "You guys go in first. Old Lu is back—he's washing dishes in the kitchen. I'm going to take out the trash."

As she left, Bai Liu, who had been standing quietly beside the dazed Du Sanying, spoke up.

"I'll bring you in, so don't be so nervous. You'll be fine."

Du Sanying looked down, clenching his fingers. "But just now, she still almost fell…" he murmured.

"She wouldn't have fallen," Bai Liu replied, his gaze lingering at the stairwell where Fang Dian had disappeared. "Fang Dian is a national Grade 2 volleyball athlete. She won the provincial team championship twice in high school. She could probably jump straight from here to the ground floor and still land on her feet."

Du Sanying blinked in astonishment. "Eh?!"

Bai Liu glanced at him. "She has the best fitness, coordination, and reflexes I've ever seen."

Then, in a calm tone, he continued, "Your misfortune may still affect those around you." His eyes remained steady. "But these are my friends."

"The fact that they're my friends means they're capable of handling the misfortune that comes with knowing someone whose luck value is zero."

Bai Liu met Du Sanying's gaze. "So, your misfortune—they can handle that too."

"Now, let's go in and eat."

Without waiting for a reply, Bai Liu turned and stepped inside.

Du Sanying lingered at the doorway for a moment. He took a deep breath, exhaled shakily, and then wiped his eyes with the back of his hand before following Bai Liu in, head lowered.

"Thank you, Mr. Bai Liu," he whispered.

"You're welcome," Bai Liu replied. "To each his own."

Inside, Du Sanying carefully sat on the living room sofa while Bai Liu carried the bags to the kitchen.

The sofa was made of soft leather—likely a recent purchase, given its smooth, polished sheen. The whole house looked recently renovated. From the wallpaper to the furniture, everything seemed fresh and new, though a few older, well-worn pieces still remained, standing in contrast to the neighborhood's outdated atmosphere outside.

Across from the sofa, an LCD TV played an anime on loop. The opening theme drifted through the room:

"I awaken the sea..."

"Awakening the mountains..."
"...Even if there are billions of kilometers..."
"One ton of luggage..."
"We don't give up..."
"It takes courage to move forward..."

On the coffee table, a handmade wool blanket lay draped over the surface, partially covering a clutter of children's toys and unfinished crafts—half-completed puzzles, scattered drawings, and scribbled notes.

Du Sanying picked up one of the drawings. At the top, written in large, crayon-scrawled letters, were the words: [Quan Family Fortune].

The picture depicted a father, a mother, and a child, with an additional figure squatting beside them.

The child had drawn this person with an exaggerated grin, showing eight large teeth. Next to the figure was a label: [My favorite Ms. Fang!!]

Beneath it, in red pen, was a handwritten note from Fang Dian herself:

[Nice drawing! I know you like it when teachers visit, but if I joined your family, wouldn't that ruin it? Haha! 😊]

Below that, written in the child's handwriting, was a response with a large crying face:

[Can't the teacher join our family? 😭]

And finally, Fang Dian's reply:

[Nope! Teachers have their own homes too! 🐶🍥]

A small chuckle escaped Du Sanying as he began gathering up the scattered drawings.

It seemed like these were all discarded drafts—perhaps rejected versions of a class project that the children had to redo. But what stood out was how, in nearly all of them, the kids had included Fang Dian in their depiction of the "Quan Family Fortune."

It was amusing to see how the children and Fang Dian playfully "negotiated" through their drawings.

As he picked up more, he saw some creative attempts to include her.

One child had drawn Fang Dian as a pet dog, sitting happily beside the family with a bone in her mouth.

Fang Dian's comment: [I think I'd rather stay human, JoJo! 🐕]

Another child had drawn two families—one being their own, the other being Fang Dian's—though, due to space constraints, Fang Dian's family had been squeezed into the corner, crouching awkwardly.

Fang Dian's comment: [Appreciate the thought, young master! But maybe check with your parents before adopting someone else's family! 🫠]

One particularly… abstract drawing caught Du Sanying's eye.

The child, perhaps influenced by Picasso, had split their parents down the middle—half of each parent looking normal, while the other half had Fang Dian's features.

Fang Dian's response: [If I'm already broken, how can I join a broken family? 🫠]

The more Du Sanying read, the more he wanted to laugh. But as he picked up another sheet, his amusement froze.

It wasn't a drawing.

It was a handwritten wedding invitation.

A guest list filled the page—categorized neatly into colleagues, friends, and family.

At the very top, under [Family], was a single name:

Bai Liu (main table proper).

The kitchen door suddenly swung open. Startled, Du Sanying scrambled to put the invitation back, but Bai Liu had already noticed.

Leaning over, Bai Liu glanced at the paper in his hands. "What are you looking at?"

Du Sanying shrank back, feeling as though he had committed a great offense. "I was just trying to help clean up… and then I saw the invitation…"

Bai Liu casually flipped the paper over. His eyes scanned it briefly before he looked toward the kitchen.

"Lu Yizhan, I'm the best man?"

Halfway through washing dishes, Lu Yizhan peeked out. His voice held no surprise—only mild confusion.

"Yeah. Who else would it be?"

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "Who are the bridesmaids?"

Lu Yizhan thought for a moment. "Fang Dian said she might invite her best friend from high school, but she hasn't decided yet."

Then, as if suddenly remembering something, he called out, "Oh! Bai Liu, write down a list of everyone you brought here this time! Don't forget!"

"I invited my guests, I invited Fang Dian's—but I still haven't invited your best friend."

His tone was so natural as if it went without saying that Bai Liu and his closest people should be present at his and Fang Dian's wedding.

Just then, the door creaked open—someone had returned.

Tang Erda, carrying a bottle of wine, looked serious in his formal attire. Mu Sicheng followed, his hands full with food, his eyes glowing with excitement. Behind them, Muke was accompanied by four butlers and seven large black boxes labeled with Michelin three-star ingredients—contents unknown.

Standing directly in front of them, Fang Dian smiled at Bai Liu and said, "I saw them downstairs while I was taking out the trash and brought them up with me."

"No need to change your shoes, just come in," Fang Dian beckoned.

Tang Erda's jaw was taut. This was his first time stepping into the home of Bai Liu's so-called friend, and an odd sense of nervousness settled over him. With a solemn expression, he handed the wine to Fang Dian. "Please."

Fang Dian took the bottle, barely sparing it a glance before grinning and setting it on the shoe cabinet without a second thought.

“You’re too polite! And you even brought wine! Come in and have a seat.”

A bottle worth more than 60,000, freshly decanted, was left to sit quietly on the shoe cabinet—forgotten. Even Tang Erda, who had handled it so carefully, paid it no mind once he stepped inside.

Meanwhile, Du Sanying sat stiffly on the sofa, his back straight, his mind a haze as he solemnly watched Happy Together on TV.

Mu Sicheng, much more at ease, strode in carrying two large bags and immediately called out to Bai Liu, “You said you didn’t get brains and duck intestines! How are we supposed to eat hotpot without them?”

Bai Liu’s gaze dropped to the plastic bag in Mu Sicheng’s hand. “Take it to the kitchen,” he instructed.

Muke entered next, dismissing the butlers at the door. He looked slightly apologetic, his brows furrowed with dissatisfaction. Turning to Bai Liu, he said, “It was too late to get the best ingredients, so I had to cut a batch from some restaurants. I’m not sure about the quality. If it’s not good enough, just don’t eat it.”

Bai Liu, who had bought 167 yuan worth of frozen goods and two pounds of discounted oranges, nodded calmly. “Alright, same goes for you.”

Pre-season

Lu Yizhan had been working in the kitchen for a while, breathing heavily as he emerged with a steaming pot. “Quick, quick! Get it on the induction hob! It’s hot!”

Fang Dian, quick as a flash, set up a table and directed Bai Liu to bring over the induction cooker. He managed to get the bottom of the pot on the ground just as Lu Yizhan was about to burn himself and send it flying.

A large pot of spicy hot pot simmered on the induction stove, and the pungent, warm aroma of spices filled the room instantly. The surrounding tables and benches were piled high with plates of ingredients and washed lettuce, water dripping off them.

Lu Yizhan let out a long sigh of relief and clapped his hands together in satisfaction. He rested his elbow on Bai Liu’s shoulder, admiring the pot for a moment. “Not bad, huh? I’ve been simmering this bone broth for over an hour. If I had to buy it, I’d be looking at a 168 yuan pot, right?”

He continued, “The keel’s over forty bucks a catty. This pot’s the most expensive thing in the house. If you hadn’t brought me here, I wouldn’t have made such an extravagant base…”

Before Lu Yizhan could say more, Tang Erda looked up at Bai Liu beside him, holding up the bottle of wine worth over 60,000 yuan. “Do you have a corkscrew?”

Muke pulled a lobster with pincers the size of his head out of the chiller, then looked apologetically at Lu Yizhan. “Sorry, we’re not finished with the ingredients. Can I use the kitchen so my butler can help with this?”

The smile on Lu Yizhan’s face froze. “….”

Slowly, he withdrew his hand from Bai Liu’s shoulder and stepped aside stiffly. “… I may not have a knife here worthy of handling that lobster…”

Muke smiled politely. “It’s not an expensive lobster, just deal with it.”

He handed the lobster to the butler, and Lu Yizhan’s gaze landed on the tag hanging from its tail. It displayed a money symbol followed by

five digits in English, $—a price tag more than a little eye-watering.

Muke, with Lu Yizhan's permission, called his team of four butlers into the kitchen. He turned to Lu Yizhan, saying, "We'll use the kitchen carefully, no damage will be done."

Lu Yizhan watched the team disappear into his cramped three-square-meter kitchen, a look of sadness in his eyes. "…It doesn't need to be that careful."

That lobster alone was worth more than his entire kitchen.

Bai Liu casually pulled a bottle opener from the fridge door and handed it to Tang Erda. The faded words "Brave and Bold" were printed on it—a promotional item from a beer brand. "Can I open it with this?"

"Yes." Tang Erda took the opener and was about to use it when Lu Yizhan sharply stopped him. "No!"

"That opener's only ever opened cans of stinky tofu and Lao Gan Ma," Lu Yizhan said, eyeing the wine label and trying to maintain his composure. "… I'll go find you a proper one."

After a long search, Lu Yizhan returned with a new bottle opener, handing it to Tang Erda with a theatrical sigh. "Open it. This should be the most glorious moment of its life."

The bottle opened with a satisfying pop, and at that exact moment, the doorbell rang.

Bai Liu turned to answer the door, and there stood Liu Jiayi, dressed in a small floral dress, her hair tied in two playful ponytails, wearing princess shoes, white lace-trimmed socks, and two pink bow clips. She stood silently, waiting.

Bai Liu smiled lightly, commenting politely, "The way you're dressed today…" He chuckled, "It suits your age."

Liu Jiayi tugged at her skirt, straightened her expression, and took a deep breath. Just as she was about to retort, Fang Dian's surprised voice rang out, "Why is there a little girl?"

Liu Jiayi smiled sweetly for a moment, then blinked her large gray eyes in confusion. "Hello, sister. I didn't bring anything for my first visit. I bought some candy downstairs."

She extended a small bag of candy to Fang Dian, winking playfully.

Fang Dian stared at her for a long time, making Liu Jiayi feel as though her disguise might be giving her away.

Fang Dian's gaze was fixed on Liu Jiayi, standing in the doorway with her head tilted, holding the candy bag, while Bai Liu stood beside her, his arm clutching her tightly. Fang Dian leaned in, lowering her voice in a soft hiss. "She's so cute!!!"

"Do you think her mother would mind if she had an extra mom after coming out to dinner?" Fang Dian's thoughts ran wild.

Bai Liu glanced over at Liu Jiayi, who had gone from nervous to relieved. He smiled broadly and added, "I think her mother would be happy to have a beautiful daughter like her."

Fang Dian quickly turned and rushed inside. "Wait for me! I need five minutes to put on makeup!"

When so many young men came to Fang Dian's house, she regarded them as if they were invisible. They walked around in large slippers, laughing so loudly that the roof might lift off, sitting on the sofa with their legs crossed, casually scrutinizing the Bai Liu team members one by one. A group of people stood before her like minions on parade.

"You're the youngest son of that Wood Group! Wow, that's impressive! How do you know Bai Liu, the poor guy?" she asked.

"A famous university student, huh? Can, can, can!" she continued.

"Wow, those muscles—how did you build them? Teach me!" she exclaimed.

In short, she paid no attention to her personal appearance and seemed to have forgotten she needed makeup.

When a little girl arrived, Fang Dian's long-lost kindergarten teacher instincts kicked in. She rushed inside to change her clothes and freshen up.

As Fang Dian left, Bai Liu squatted down and looked at Liu Jiayi with a smile. "Xiang Chunhua and I said you hated wearing pink dresses. Why are you wearing such a neat and tidy suit today?"

"I suddenly like it today," Liu Jiayi replied. "Don't you know you

should dress formally when visiting a friend's house? It's about being polite."

Bai Liu repeated her words thoughtfully: "So, you're nervous because it's your first time visiting a friend's house?"

Liu Jiayi froze, but the moment was quickly lightened by Fang Dian, who rushed out of the room.

Now dressed up, Fang Dian crouched in front of Liu Jiayi, makeup perfectly applied, wearing a dress, a polka-dotted bow in her hair, and holding a cloth doll. She smiled, looking friendly and gentle, and waved at Liu Jiayi like a strange aunt. "Come here, little one, teacher —no, sister has a lovely doll! Want to play with it?"

Liu Jiayi: "....."

Fang Dian gave Liu Jiayi a careful hug and stroked her fluffy ponytail, her expression nearly bursting into tears. "She's so soft and cute when she lets people hug her."

Liu Jiayi sat stiffly on Fang Dian's lap, her small hands clutching the hem of her skirt, too nervous to move.

Lu Yizhan, amused by Fang Dian's behavior, put his hands on his apron. "You play with children in kindergarten every day, haven't you had enough hugs?"

Fang Dian propped up her chin, sighing. "It's not just about hugging. The kindergarten has surveillance cameras, connected to parents' phones in real-time. If a parent sees me hugging a child casually, I'll get reported."

"Especially with girls," she continued, "Parents are extra cautious. I couldn't touch them much, even if they approached me willingly."

"They're not my children, after all."

Fang Dian said this casually, but Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan both subtly stiffened at her words.

She placed Liu Jiayi down, adjusted her skirt and hair, and knelt down to look tenderly at her. "It certainly feels different seeing a little girl who almost became my daughter."

Lu Yizhan had discussed adopting Liu Jiayi with Fang Dian. She had

seen Liu Jiayi's photographs, but in the end, Liu Jiayi hadn't chosen them.

Liu Jiayi remembered this now, her lips pressing together as if unsure of what to say.

... Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian are really good parents. They're so good that I feel guilty for not choosing them.

Fang Dian smiled and parted Liu Jiayi's hair from her temples. "What a lovely little girl. No wonder we're not the only ones who want to be your family."

"But it's nice to be friends!" she added cheerfully.

Kneeling on the carpet, her eyes level with Liu Jiayi's, Fang Dian solemnly extended her hand. "Hello, Jiayi. My name is Fang Dian. I'm 25 years old. May I ask if you've made any new, unforgettable friends recently?"

Liu Jiayi paused for a moment, then the corners of her mouth began to turn up, two small dimples appearing on her cheeks.

She lifted her chin slightly and put on a condescending face, mirroring Fang Dian's performance. "None."

"But I'll make an exception for you." Liu Jiayi extended her hand to Fang Dian's.

Fang Dian exaggerated her surprise and joy, picking Liu Jiayi up and placing her at the table. "I can't repay you for such a big exception, so I'll treat you to hot pot! Let's eat!"

Bright wine was poured into glasses, and everyone but Liu Jiayi raised theirs in celebration—until the electricity cut out halfway through.

Everyone: "....."

Du Sanying covered his mouth, choking up. "I'm sorry, it's all my fault..."

"It's fine," Lu Yizhan reassured him. "The circuits here are old, so the power goes out often. I'll get the solid alcohol, and we can move the pot to the balcony to eat."

Fang Dian gasped. "Wouldn't that be a lobster candlelight dinner? So romantic!"

Bai Liu, ever calm, poured cold water on her excitement. "Romance is for two people. There are seven of us here, so even if we pair off, there'll still be one extra person."

"Well, Bai Liu, you've become social after working, haven't you?" Fang Dian rolled up her sleeves. "How dare you talk back to me?"

Tang Erda, confused, followed Bai Liu's lead, frowning as he thought hard about the two-by-two grouping idea. "So, who do I team up with? Bai Liu, why don't you and I—"

Mu Sicheng, eating from his bowl, called out, "No, Bai Liu and I are on the same team!"

The lenses on Muke's eyes flickered, but his voice was warm. "Bai Liu, sit over here and I'll get you some lobster slices."

"....." Lu Yizhan sighed dramatically, holding back tears. "Okay, okay, stop it, sit down. I'll get the alcohol."

In the darkness of the night, surrounded by twinkling lights, a family sat on the balcony with dishes and chopsticks, sharing a humble yet lively hot pot meal that cost nearly six figures.

Years later, when asked about the best meal of his life, Du Sanying, whose memory was still a bit fuzzy, would answer in a heartbeat:

—The first time Bai Liu took him to his friend's house for that hot pot meal during the power outage.

At 10 pm, Du Sanying lay on Bai Liu's couch after a shower, scrolling through his phone.

He had added many new friends today, and his social media was full of content. He carefully looked through each post, smiling to himself.

He came across a recent post from Fang Dian—a hand-drawn illustration of them having hot pot that day.

In the drawing, Fang Dian held Bai Liu's head in her arms, her chopsticks reaching into his bowl, while Lu Yizhan scrambled to stop her. Muke was pulling back, Mu Sicheng was laughing, Tang Erda was drinking, and Liu Jiayi, hiding in the corner, was actually taking pictures. She held her glass in the air, giggling and blushing, clearly tipsy.

Everyone was there, and everyone was laughing.

Fang Dian’s caption for the drawing read: ‘Quan family fortune.’

Pre-season

The penultimate day of pre-season and mid-season.

Wang Shun took a deep breath as he entered the Circus meeting room, a stack of documents in hand. His gaze swept over the seated players before he spoke.

"I'm sure you all know our opponents' information inside and out."

He let out a bitter chuckle. "Because there isn't much to analyze."

He tapped on the system panel, pulling up data. "Russell Cemetery Warriors—our final opponents."

"Russell's pre-season strategy has remained consistent with the past two years: they abandon singles and pairs, focusing entirely on team matches. For a newly formed team like ours, this is both a blessing and a curse."

"The good news? You only need to prepare for one match. The bad news? It's a team game—your weakest format."

Wang Shun tapped the panel again, bringing up a small video. As he hit play, a thick, swirling gray mist filled the screen. The footage showed only vague outlines of figures running, their heavy, ragged breathing audible through the distortion.

Wang Shun paused, his expression darkening.

"I've shown you this clip before," he said grimly. "This is footage from Russell Cemetery's last game. And this is what nearly all of their pre-season matches have looked like."

"A fog so dense you can't see a thing."

Bai Liu leaned back in his chair. "We've analyzed this already. To keep their players' abilities hidden, Russell Cemetery has likely assigned a fixed member with a Mist Obscuring skill. This player activates their skill mid-game, blinding their opponents while concealing their own team's tactics from both rivals and spectators."

Wang Shun sighed. "It's been an incredibly effective strategy, and it's nearly impossible to counter. They don't rely on public support, so they can afford this secrecy. After an entire pre-season of matches, all

we really know about them is their death toll."

"Which, compared to last year, has dropped significantly."

He hesitated for a moment. "Actually, 'significant' doesn't even cover it. Russell Cemetery reached the final round of pre-season this year with only two recorded deaths."

"At first, I couldn't understand why a team ranked 10th last year would give up their mid-season spot to compete in pre-season again. But after analyzing everything alongside President Bai, I realized I had fallen into a false assumption."

Wang Shun shook his head, a wry smile on his face. "I always thought Russell Cemetery was a cruel, ruthless guild—one that sacrificed its own members in cold blood for victory."

Mu Sicheng, resting his chin on his hand, spun a pen between his fingers. "Isn't that exactly what they are?" He raised an eyebrow. "They sacrificed over eighty rookies last season."

Bai Liu reached over and plucked the pen from Mu Sicheng's hand. "Not necessarily."

"On the contrary, their guild operates exactly as they advertise—a sanctuary for the desperate. A 'warm, humane' collective cemetery. Russell Cemetery is the textbook example of a tight-knit community guild, bound by solidarity and mutual care—like neighbors looking out for each other."

Mu Sicheng frowned. "Solidarity and friendship? When they send each other to die?"

"You're looking at it the wrong way," Bai Liu said calmly. "The players who join Russell Cemetery do so with full awareness that their deaths are likely inevitable. In other words, these people didn't join the guild hoping to live."

He met Mu Sicheng's gaze.

"They joined because they were prepared to die—but they didn't want their deaths to be meaningless."

"And Russell Cemetery ensures their deaths hold the highest possible value."

Mu Sicheng slumped forward onto the table, staring at Bai Liu. "Even so, how does that translate to ‘solidarity and love’?"

Bai Liu regarded him for a moment, then abruptly changed the subject.

"What do you think is the greatest value of death?"

Mu Sicheng blinked, caught off guard. He sat up straighter, thinking. "Money?" He frowned. "No, I wouldn’t be able to spend it after I’m dead. Fame? But what’s the point if I’m not alive to enjoy it...?"

After a few more moments of silent contemplation, he clicked his tongue in frustration and leaned back in his chair. "I don’t get it. Once you’re dead, nothing is left. No matter what you exchange it for, death has no real value. And in this game, dying means losing points—points that can be traded for actual things. It’s just not worth it."

"That’s because you," Bai Liu said evenly, "are a high-value player. One that top guilds would fight over. In reality, too, you're in a strong position—good family background, top-tier education. You have a firm grasp of your own worth, so you'd never even consider reducing yourself to zero."

He paused, watching Mu Sicheng’s expression shift, then added, "You’ve never been 'rolled,' have you?"

Mu Sicheng frowned. "Rolled?"

"Involution," Bai Liu clarified. "When competition becomes so intense that no matter how hard people try, they still lose. It happens in schools, in jobs—wherever resources are limited. The weaker players in this game have already been ‘rolled’ out of opportunities."

Mu Sicheng exhaled sharply, his frown deepening. "Isn’t that just a job market thing?"

Bai Liu tapped his pen against the table. "It’s the same everywhere."

He glanced at Mu Sicheng. "Think of this game as an economy. Top guilds own most of the resources, making it nearly impossible for weaker players to survive. No matter how hard they fight, they’ll always be at the bottom."

Mu Sicheng’s fingers drummed against the table as he mulled it over. He wasn’t the type to care much about ‘weaker players,’ but he

couldn’t deny Bai Liu’s logic.

Bai Liu continued, "Anywhere resources are monopolized, internal competition exists." He picked up a pen and wrote a single word on the blank sheet of paper in front of him.

"Points in this game are earned through matches, just like a salary is earned through work. In that sense, playing the game is a form of labor."

Mu Sicheng raised an eyebrow, but he didn’t interrupt.

"As guilds evolved, they found ways to optimize this system. They streamlined point-earning strategies, improving efficiency while providing support structures to minimize player casualties—much like how companies operate in the real world."

"Ordinary players join these guilds voluntarily, hoping to earn points more efficiently and increase their chances of survival."

Bai Liu wrote another phrase under the first. "Primitive Mode."

"This is the first stage of development—a functional and reasonable system. Normally, it would remain stable for a long time before breaking down under pressure."

He paused, his pen hovering over the page before he added a final word.

"However, in this game, there’s a unique mechanic that accelerates its collapse."

He slowly lifted his gaze.

"That mechanic," he said, "is gambling."

"Gambling in this game operates as an anticipatory loan system—one that binds your faith, interests, and very life to the guild. This mechanic doubles the cost of your bets. Even when a player knows the odds of being devoured by the guild, the gambler's mentality, sunk costs, and the difficulty of finding a new guild make it almost impossible to leave. This creates the first essential element of an inescapable cycle."

"Binding."

"The tighter the binding, the slower the movement of players between

guilds. As circulation slows, players realize that switching guilds becomes increasingly difficult—eventually, choosing a guild turns into a lifelong commitment. During the initial recruitment period, new players frantically compete to enter the top guilds, often at the cost of lowering their own benefits."

"And once things reach this stage, an astonishing phenomenon occurs." Bai Liu tapped his pen twice against the paper. "Guilds become exponentially more efficient at accumulating points. Games rotate at a faster pace, and more points circulate between pools, causing an explosion in the game's overall economy."

"But for new guild members, the benefits keep shrinking. The guilds no longer have stockpiled points—they're forced to pour everything into the league just to maintain their rankings, leaving little to no reserves."

"So where did all those points go? What swallowed them up?"

Bai Liu set his pen down and nudged it forward with his fingertip, rolling it toward a stunned Mu Sicheng.

Mu Sicheng reached out to catch the pen, a chill creeping down his spine. "…The gambling pool."

"Bingo." Bai Liu smiled. "The pool functions by leveraging points at five times their value with each bet. While this might seem like an opportunity to gain, in reality, the winnings—along with all other earnings—eventually cycle back into the pool. Every transaction, every win or loss, is subject to a five to fifteen percent fee, which quietly devours the majority of the points."

"If the wealthiest guild isn't the Killer Sequence but rather the Gamblers' Alliance, then it's clear—the biggest winner in this game is the gambling pool itself."

Bai Liu glanced at Wang Shun's system panel. "Now, let's consider the perspective of an ordinary player—someone with average skills and stats. They can survive, but they aren't exceptional enough to roll into a major guild or become a star player."

"They're scraping by, barely making ends meet. Then, one day, during the league, they can't resist betting all their savings on a particular team. And they lose everything. It's only in the depths of their breakdown that they realize—they're never getting their points back from the pool."

"Meanwhile, after each league, the inflated point values from leveraged gambling drive up the prices of in-game props. If a player refuses to gamble, their points stagnate, and they can afford fewer and fewer survival items. The game becomes increasingly brutal."

"They have no extra points to exchange for real-world money. The game, instead of fulfilling their desires, traps them in a cycle of misery. After working six grueling days in reality, they're forced to return to the game—not for fun, but to grind for points, just to afford the life-saving props needed for the next round."

Mu Sicheng stared blankly ahead. "…Thanks, I kind of want to die after imagining that."

Bai Liu continued, "Only two types of players have the luxury of using in-game points to buy real-world items: high-level players who have the points to spare, and reckless players who live only for the moment. The former are a minority. The latter—players who gamble everything—have become the dominant group. That's why the gambling league has grown so massive."

Wang Shun nodded in agreement. "But not all guilds operate under gambling mechanics. After President Bai's analysis, I looked into the average investment of players in Russell Cemetery's pool."

"The results were surprising." Wang Shun tapped the panel, pulling up a data table. "The average player there has invested no more than ten points into the gambling pool. They're essentially a non-gambling league."

"Gambling thrives on future expectations. When players stop betting, it signals a deep pessimism about their future."

Wang Shun sighed. "They can't break into the big guilds. They don't dare to gamble. They survive the weekly death trials, only to return to a harsh reality where they work themselves to exhaustion for little pay. And when they finally enter the game, hoping for an escape…"

"Their suffering only deepens."

It was bad enough that even Wang Shun, an enemy investigator, found it difficult to stomach.

"…No way." Mu Sicheng suddenly felt a twinge of pity for the other team. "But didn't they win all the mid-season team games last year? Even if they're stuck at the bottom of the gambling pool, they

shouldn’t be struggling this much, right?"

Bai Liu held up three fingers.

"First, without star players, they receive minimal investments. Their betting pool is shallow, so they can only feed off each other’s losses."

"Second, even when they win, the majority of the pool’s earnings go to the spectators who placed bets. After the pool’s commission is deducted, the team itself only receives five to ten percent of the base pot."

"Third, last year, they were an unknown team. They had little audience engagement during the mid-season, so their matches didn't attract large bets. Their earnings came only from the five percent base gold charge on the big guilds' star players' small TV points."

"In short, they’ve been winning—but they’ve never been able to cash in on the league’s real profits."

Wang Shun sighed. "I've heard that the president of Russell Cemetery donated the pool points they won last year as compassionate payments to the families of those who died."

Mu Sicheng's expression was complicated. "…I wouldn’t have lasted if I were in their place."

Bai Liu lifted his gaze. "So, let's return to the original question. If a person can’t do anything, can’t achieve anything, has worked hard all their life, and in the end, still can’t hold on—what is the maximum value of their death?"

"What holds meaning for the dead when money, power, fame, and fortune are meaningless to them?"

Muke, who had remained silent, finally spoke. "To be recognized as valuable at the moment of death, and for that value to be remembered."

"I studied abroad before, where the suicide rate was very high. Many people would linger in accident-prone areas or wander the streets before taking their own lives. When they encountered a robber or a gangster, they would rush in, trying to do something, hoping to be killed in the process."

"There was an article in a magazine—over seventy percent of people

who have had suicidal thoughts wanted to do something meaningful before they died. Something that would make others remember them."

Muke paused before continuing. "Some suicides form groups to help each other. I've seen them referred to as 'suicide communities.' The leader of such a group is often someone who also wants to die, but paradoxically, they start these communities because they want others to live. They try to help the members, hoping to give them reasons to keep going."

"But the strange thing is," Muke hesitated, "that being in such a community sometimes increases the suicide rate instead."

Mu Sicheng frowned. "Why?"

Liu Jiayi, sitting nearby, answered, "Because someone remembers them. And if they're remembered, they can die knowing they won't be forgotten."

"In an environment like that," Bai Liu's gaze flickered toward the system panel displaying information about Russell Cemetery, "it's easy for a sense of sacrifice to take root. To put it simply—"

His eyes darkened. "I died for you, so I want you to live and remember me in my place."

"The ones who survive might suffer more than the ones who die, because carrying the weight of remembrance is its own burden—even the price of death."

The meeting room fell into silence.

Wang Shun coughed lightly, breaking the heavy atmosphere. "With all this in mind, President Bai and I took a closer look at the Russell Cemetery team."

"Everyone knows a team's most important member is its tactician. But Russell Cemetery constantly rotates its members, with a new tactician for each game. Despite this, their tactical style remains consistent."

"So, we suspect that the real strategist behind their plays isn't any of the frontline players being cycled out—but rather, the president of Russell Cemetery, who has never appeared on the field."

"But this president is incredibly mysterious. He hasn't participated in the league for the past two or three years, and we have very little

information on him. The only thing we do know…" Wang Shun's expression turned grave. "An old player swore to me—on oath—that this president once entered the tournament alone."

"When he stepped onto the field, the system displayed five players registered under Russell Cemetery. The tournament proceeded as if a full team was present."

After the meeting adjourned, Tang Erda, who had been silent the entire time, finally spoke up as Bai Liu was about to leave.

"Can we talk about Russell Cemetery alone?"

Bai Liu, who had just stood up, sat back down. He gestured to Wang Shun, the last person remaining, to close the door behind him. Then he turned to Tang Erda. "What does Captain Tang want to discuss?"

Tang Erda studied Bai Liu carefully. "You think Russell Cemetery operates like a suicide community?"

Bai Liu intertwined his fingers, resting his elbows on the table. "So far, that's what the evidence suggests. And the guild president is its core—the kind of leader typical in mutual aid suicide communities."

Tang Erda frowned. "What psychological traits define that kind of leader?"

Bai Liu met his gaze evenly. "They do everything they can to save their members."

"But Russell Cemetery lost over eighty members in midseason games last year," Tang Erda said, tapping his fingers against the desk for emphasis. "I don't see how sending rookies into a league match has anything to do with saving lives."

Bai Liu suddenly smiled. "Then tell me, Captain Tang—how would you save a group of people who want to die?"

Tang Erda hesitated. "I… don't know."

"You give them hope." Bai Liu's tone was calm. "Winning the league is their hope. This guild doesn't care about points. They don't care about life or death. They just want to win. I believe the president of Russell Cemetery initially wanted to win at all costs—so that he could use the championship reward, a wish, to save them all."

"But they lost to the Killer Sequence and had to go through ninety qualifying matches again."

Bai Liu continued, "Captain Tang, do you remember Wang Shun saying that the Russell Cemetery team broke down and forfeited after a reunion? Do you think a team that ruthlessly sacrifices rookies would fall apart after just one meeting?"

"It was only five deaths." Bai Liu's voice was level. "The lives of bottom-tier players are the cheapest commodity in this game. A midseason victory should have meant they were well on their way to success."

"But they forfeited. They skipped midseason entirely and started over from the preseason. Captain Tang—why do you think they did that?"

Tang Erda fell silent.

He had an answer in mind. But it was hard to believe—and even harder to accept.

Bai Liu provided it for him. "Because of the casualties."

"If they played midseason again, they would face stronger teams. Even if they won, they would suffer another massive loss of players. So, instead, they gave up their ranking, their fame, their hard-earned points. They chose to start over, embracing the uncertainty, just to minimize the number of deaths."

"They just want to win. They just want to live."

Tang Erda reached into his pocket, as if searching for a cigarette, but in the end, he resisted.

Bai Liu lowered his gaze. "A guild like this can only form if its members wanted to die from the very start. I suspect Russell Cemetery was founded by a group of people who already knew each other in reality."

"Communities like that—ones that damage their members' egos—aren't allowed to exist in this country. Which means they likely started out as something else."

Bai Liu's gaze flickered toward Tang Erda, who remained silent. "And you came to me alone because of this group, didn't you, Captain Tang?"

Tang Erda was silent for a long time before he spoke, his voice hoarse. "Your analysis of Russell Cemetery reminded me of something that happened around this time last year."

"The Heresy Bureau received a report about an unusual case. We investigated for a long time, but in the end, we found no evidence of heresy. It was officially classified as a social incident."

Bai Liu tilted his head. "What kind of incident?"

Tang Erda hesitated before answering. "There was a mass suicide at the Sunnyside development. Forty-seven people jumped, one after another, from the upper floors over the span of a month."

"Because we initially suspected supernatural involvement, we suppressed the news. But once the investigation cleared, we let it go public half a day later."

Bai Liu's expression remained unreadable. "And what was the official conclusion?"

Tang Erda lit a cigarette. With Bai Liu's nod of approval, he took a long drag before answering in a muffled voice.

"Sunnyside was a failed development project, abandoned for over three years. The investors took the money and fled overseas, leaving the residents trapped in financial ruin.

"They jumped household by household. After they died, the remaining residents collected the bodies, took them to the funeral home, cremated them—and placed their ashes back in the ruined apartments they once called home."

Tang Erda exhales a slow puff of smoke: "The rooms in that rotten building are now empty, full of urns, like a cemetery."

Pre-season

The edge of the city, glowing in the night.

Amidst the glittering neon lights, a peculiar building stands in total darkness—from the top floor to the bottom—opposite the city's largest shopping center. It looms like a giant monster, devouring the light around it.

Step inside, and you'll see that this 36-story structure, overlooking the booming metropolis, is only half-finished.

Its concrete walls are lined with exposed rebar, much of it left unsealed. The edges of the rooms open directly to the night sky, allowing a clear view inside from the outside.

And yet, strangely enough, these unfinished rooms are not empty. Their furnishings are faintly visible in the obscured, multicolored glow of the city lights.

Some rooms contain little more than a simple mattress, a sleeping bag, a desk, a kettle, and a few rolls of toilet paper scattered on the floor—clear signs that someone is living there.

Others hold only a table, atop which rests a black-and-white photograph of a stack of apples, an incense burner, and an urn arranged like a shrine.

The incense burner still holds four unlit sticks, evidence that someone had recently come to pay their respects.

As wisps of incense curl into the air, a phone rings in the decaying building.

A young man struggles to balance it between his chin and shoulder, his left hand weighed down by a heavy bag of apples, his right clutching a bundle of joss paper and incense. His voice is clear, light.

"Hello? I just finished burning incense for Simone Li. Where are you guys?"

"Seventeenth floor," replies a young woman on the other end. "Shall we meet at Brother Wang's place on the eighteenth?"

He nods instinctively, shifting his grip.

A pause. Then, in a lower voice, the woman continues, "Yuan Guang… we haven't burned incense for the two players who died in the pre-season this year."

Yuan Guang stops cold. His hand trembles slightly, the apples feeling heavier, pulling him downward. His shoulders tense, his head dipping as he exhales slowly.

"……When we win the last game," he murmurs, "we'll all go together to honor them."

The woman hums in quiet agreement before hanging up.

Eighteenth floor, Room 1803.
Inside, a black-and-white photograph of a bearded man sits on a table. The name beneath it reads: Wang Shuqi, aged 42.

Silently, and methodically, Yuan Guang places the apples one by one on the offering plate in front of the shrine. He pulls out four incense sticks, lights them, bows three times, then folds his hands together and mutters under his breath.

"Uncle Wang, we made it to the playoffs again this year. I hope you're watching over us, keeping everyone safe."

His voice falters.

"……Last year…… last year's game……"

He takes a deep breath, his eyelids fluttering slightly, damp at the corners.

"It was hard on you all."

With that, he steps forward and solemnly plants the incense into the burner.

A woman enters the room.

She wears flats, jeans, and a simple t-shirt. Her hair is pulled into a loose bun, and though she looks no older than twenty-seven or twenty-eight—an age of vibrancy and recklessness—her exhaustion is unmistakable. Watching Yuan Guang go through the incense ritual with practiced ease, she sighs and hands him a candle.

"I bought these," she says. "Will you light a pair for Uncle Wang?"

"Don't," Yuan Guang shakes his head. The dim light catches the side of his face as he turns.

His features hint at youthful brilliance—single eyelids, thin lips—but the impression is ruined in an instant.

His hair, long overdue for a trim, is sloppily tied back, lopsided over his right shoulder, with stray strands sticking out in all directions. A deep shadow circles his eyes, as if he hasn't slept in days. His entire posture sags with exhaustion.

A band-aid slants across his left temple. A red smudge—marker ink—streaks his cheek, unnoticed.

The woman is struck by his appearance. Just two or three days ago, he looked fine. Now…

Now, he looks excessively haggard.

Yuan Guang shakes his head again, gathering his things.

"Better not," he says. "Sister Qian and the girls are still staying here. There's no fire safety, and candles aren't worth the risk."

"We'll let the incense burn and then head out."

They stand in silence before the offering table.

Yuan Guang's eyelids droop once, twice—then, suddenly, his body lurches forward.

His head nearly crashes into the incense burner.

The woman gasps, lunging to catch him.

"Yuan Guang!!!"

His forehead slams against the table. He groans, clutching his head, then sways backward in a daze.

Half laughing, half exasperated, the woman steadies him.

"How long have you been awake?"

Yuan Guang leans his head against the wall, exhaling shakily. His

voice is hoarse, barely above a whisper.

"……My company's got a project going on. The lead designer's been making us work insane hours. I wanted tomorrow off for the game, but the boss said I had to finish everything beforehand, so……"

The woman sucks in a sharp breath.

"You haven't slept in two days?!"

Yuan Guang nods weakly, looking utterly pitiful.

"I just finished this afternoon."

He gestures at the band-aid on his temple.

"And that's how you banged your head?" She sighs, exasperated. "You're playing tomorrow. You might die in there. Can't you just let work go for once?"

Before he can answer, both their phones vibrate at the same time.

A text notification flashes across the screen:

[Your debit note (XXXX) will be deducted $6437.96 at 18:00 on September 29th. Please ensure sufficient funds. Your credit history will be updated accordingly…]

They glance down at their screens. A long silence follows.

Yuan Guang cast a wry glance at the woman. "I thought that if I didn't die, I'd have to keep working to pay off the mortgage."

The woman: "……"

Damn. Can't argue with that.

She sighed and sat down next to Yuan Guang, caught between amusement and sorrow. "Other guild leaders call the shots, but look at you, Yuan Guang. You can't even afford your mortgage."

Yuan Guang hugged his knees, resting his chin on them as he gazed at the woman. His voice dropped to a whisper, teasing yet resigned. "And don't ace players from other battle teams have crowds at their feet, millions of fans, and tens of millions pouring in from their livestreams?"

Shi Qian: "..... I play a fog skill. My whole thing is covering the battlefield in mist so no one can see anything. How the hell would the audience even remember my face?"

A silence stretched between them. Then, in unison, they sighed in frustration.

"I'm so jealous," Yuan Guang muttered. "A rich guild and all that."

She was the first to break the silence again. "How long is your loan term?"

Shi Qian thought for a moment. "Equal principal payments for twenty years. What about you?"

"Same. I picked that one because they said the payments would shrink over time." Yuan Guang glanced at his phone, checking his bank balance. His shoulders eased slightly when he saw the number was still above 6,437. "Three years down. My payments have gone down by a little over two hundred per month."

Shi Qian hesitated before asking in a small voice, "How many years did Uncle Wang take out his loan for?"

Yuan Guang was silent for a long moment. Then, softly, he replied, "Thirty years. Uncle Wang and his family didn't have much income, so the Quan family helped cover the mortgage. They barely scraped together the down payment. Just when they finally managed to pay it off, the developer ran off with the money."

"When he entered the game, he was already at his breaking point. He held on for a while, but in the end... he got down on his knees and begged me to let him play in the league, just so he could die with some dignity."

"I refused at first." Yuan Guang's voice wavered. "And then Uncle Wang just... slit his wrists."

"The only reason he survived was because he lived in a shoddy building. The rooms didn't even have proper doors, so the neighbors saw what happened right away and got him to the hospital in time."

He fell silent again, fingers absently rolling an apple in the plastic bag beside him.

"I put Uncle Wang on the roster last year."

“At mid-season, hundreds of people came to me, asking to sign up. Some were owners of this crumbling building, some had joined the guild later... all of them had their reasons. But in the end, it was the same—whether in reality or in the game, they couldn’t hold on any longer.”

“Forty-seven of the players who died last year lived in this building. They entered the game at the same time as me, lasted for years, but in the end, they begged me to put them on the field.”

“I...” Yuan Guang exhaled, poking at the apple with his finger. “I agreed to all of them.”

A dry laugh escaped his lips. “I know they were at their limit because... I’m not going to last much longer either.”

Shi Qian said nothing. Instead, she clapped a firm hand on Yuan Guang’s shoulder. They sat back-to-back, huddled together in the room of an unfinished, abandoned building that was never meant to be lived in.

Behind them, the faint glow of four incense sticks flickered on the altar, the tiny flames trembling in the darkness as if they could go out at any moment. Yet, they were the only lights in this building that sat among a city of bright windows.

Yuan Guang lifted his head, staring out at the neon-drenched nightscape. The lights blurred in his eyes, swirling together like oil paints smearing into a tear that had yet to fall.

He sniffled and suddenly let out a laugh. “It’s funny. All those big guilds analyzing our tactics, saying we were ruthless, cold, willing to sacrifice each other, that only those with a screw loose could handle our rotations and substitutions.”

“But in the beginning, our roster wasn’t decided by strategy. None of them ever guessed the real reason.”

Yuan Guang exhaled, his breath unsteady. A trembling smile tugged at his lips. “It’s because in reality, everyone has jobs. Everyone has bills. Mortgages. They can’t just take time off work to stay in the game full-time. So we had no choice but to rotate our players.”

He clenched his fist at his side.

“And now, it’s become our so-called ‘tactic.’”

His voice softened. “Shi Qian, sometimes I think it’s strange. Every single person in our guild has a job. Friends. Family. People they love. We support each other. No matter how hard life is, we grit our teeth and keep going. We refuse to burden others, even in death. And no matter how bad it gets, we still want to help each other survive.”

“If everyone here is a good person…” His voice cracked. “Why is it so damn hard to live? Why can’t we even make it three years?”

Shi Qian’s hair rustled in the night breeze. She spoke quietly, as if afraid to break the moment.

“Today is the anniversary of Uncle Wang’s death.”

She turned to Yuan Guang. “We go on the field tomorrow.”

A pause.

“Do you think, a year from now, it’ll be the anniversary of our deaths?”

Pre-season

1 AM. Reality. Inside Bai Liu's rented house.

Du Sanying had already fallen asleep. Bai Liu and Tang Erda crouched on either side of the coffee table, which was cluttered with scattered documents.

At Tang Erda's feet sat an ashtray filled with cigarette butts, crushed by a pestle and mortar. A fresh cigarette still burned between his lips as he frowned at the papers, flipping through them.

"These are the documents I just had Su Yang print and send over—information on last year's owners of the Sunshine property." He slid a page toward Bai Liu. "If your theory is correct, then the profile of the victims from the Sunshine development matches the Russell Cemetery Guild."

Tang Erda hesitated for a moment, then added, "But something doesn't add up. If these people were really gamers, their lives should have…" He trailed off, searching for the right word.

Bai Liu glanced down at the documents. "Looked more extreme?"

Work, eat, sleep, take vacations—there was nothing unusual about these people's routines. No hints of secret, high-stakes games happening behind the scenes. Just exhausted, ordinary people trying to survive.

Tang Erda exhaled, nodding. "Exactly. Gamers—at least the ones we've encountered—tend to be desperate, willing to use game props outside the rules of reality to escape its crushing weight. Think of Rabid Lamb." His brow furrowed. "But these people? Even under immense pressure, they showed no signs of that."

"That's why we didn't notice anything unusual last year. They didn't look like gamers at all."

Bai Liu pulled a few documents closer, scanning them. Without looking up, he asked, "Captain Tang, if you were one of these property owners and got dragged into the game, what would you do?"

Tang Erda barely hesitated. "Use my points to track down the developers who fled and bring them back."

Bai Liu slid a newspaper clipping in front of him. “Would you?”

The headline read: Developer of Sunshine Property Surrenders—Claims Embezzled Funds Were Transferred Abroad.

The article was dated last October—one month after the owners had jumped.

“After he turned himself in, all his assets were seized to help cover the financial gap, but it wasn’t nearly enough. He was sentenced to life.” Bai Liu’s voice was even. “So now the developer is caught, but it changes nothing. You still have to pay your mortgage. You still have to scrape together points to survive in the game. What do you do next?”

Tang Erda was silent for a long moment, as if struggling to find an answer. Finally, he murmured, “I… might keep pursuing the developers…” But even as he said it, he stopped halfway, realizing the futility.

“There’s no point,” Bai Liu said calmly. “Even if you kill them, it won’t bring the money back. It’s already overseas—probably laundered multiple times by now. The only thing that could actually solve their problem is money.”

He tapped a document. “Points earned in the game can be exchanged for money, but those points are also what keep you alive. When you’re forced to clear a game every week, you wouldn’t dare touch your savings. The only choice left is to work—work just to pay off the mortgage.”

Bai Liu met Tang Erda’s gaze. “You were right about them. They’re just ordinary people. All they wanted was an ordinary life. But when their world collapsed, that moment of extreme desperation forced them into the game.”

“But instead of helping them, the game only made things worse. The pressure kept building, like a snowball rolling downhill. Balancing both work and the game—it’s not a pace an ordinary person can survive.”

“They tried to escape reality by entering the game, but once they were inside, they found there was nowhere left to run.” Bai Liu’s voice was steady. “So they turned to Russell Cemetery.”

Tang Erda picked up a newspaper with a grim expression. “These

people had stable jobs, families, friends—support systems. Even if things were hard, they shouldn't have broken down so fast. It took just three years."

Bai Liu's eyes drifted to the black-and-white photos of last year's jumpers printed in the article.

"Maybe it wasn't three years that broke them."

He turned over another clipping. The bolded words stood out: Thirty-Year Mortgage.

"Three years of hardship might not be enough to drive someone to despair. But thirty years?" Bai Liu's voice was quiet. "That's a different story."

"For the mortgage, there's still hope—it might take decades, but it's possible to pay it off. But there's no hope of ever leaving the game." He glanced at Tang Erda. "I think that's what really broke them."

"Not everyone has the endurance of Captain Tang," Bai Liu continued, "who's survived hundreds of worlds without a single shred of hope."

Tang Erda put out his cigarette in the ashtray, leaning back on the sofa with his eyes closed. Smoke curled from his lips as he abruptly asked, "Bai Liu, if you were the president of Russell Cemetery, and you wanted to save these people, what would you do?"

Bai Liu didn't hesitate. "Win. Win a game by any means necessary."

He skimmed through the owners' profiles, pulling out page after page.

"One victory is all it takes. With enough points, their financial problems are gone. Their survival in the game is secured. And more than that—"

Bai Liu's gaze lifted to Tang Erda.

"I think that president… wants to make a wish. A wish to get everyone out of this game."

"This isn't a game where normal people can survive. Either they'll go crazy or die," Bai Liu said. "He wants everyone to survive; he has to get everyone out of this game. There's no other way but to win the league."

"This naive thinking shows he's never heard of Captain Tang. He must

be quite young," Tang Erda replied. Bai Liu finally slowed down his search for the owner's information. He pulled one out from the pile, placed it on the coffee table, rotated it 360 degrees, and pushed it in front of Tang Erda. "Can Captain Tang find out more about this person?"

Tang Erda's eyes fell on the information Bai Liu handed him:

[2701 Homeowners: Yuan Guang – The owner of Sunshine Homeowners Victims Group]

The final day of the pre-season and mid-season in the Roving Circus meeting room.

Tang Erda, who had spent the whole night researching, rubbed his temples and closed his eyes. Meanwhile, Bai Liu, who had been reading until after four a.m. the previous night, rested his chin on his hand, half-closing his eyes.

Wang Shun pushed open the door and entered. He surveyed the room and took a deep breath. "Today's match-up team: Russell Cemetery."

"Before we head to the viewing pool, let's broadcast some good news."

Wang Shun clicked on the system panel. "As I mentioned before, President Bai's popularity has risen to 73 after the last tournament, making him the first person on our team to earn an exemption."

"And today, we have a second popular player with an exemption."

Wang Shun's gaze shifted slowly to Mu Sicheng. "The lingering effects of the last tournament, combined with God Mu’s recent outstanding performance, have pushed your popularity to 98. Congratulations, you've earned a death-free medal."

Mu Sicheng was momentarily stunned, clearly unable to process it, before leaping up, clenching his fist, and shouting, "YES!"

"I've emphasized the importance of the death penalty to you all many times," Wang Shun continued. "Your eyes shouldn't just focus on the match in front of you; you need to look ahead and think about the future. If we win today, we will compete against the eight guilds selected for the mid-season tournament and play a challenge match."

"Today is also the last day of the mid-season tournament. Excluding today's matches, the top eight guilds in total points so far are—"

Wang Shun tapped the system panel.

"First: Killer Sequence
Second: King's Guild
Third: Deer Hunter
Fourth: Golden Dawn
Fifth: Gamblers' Union
Sixth: Kabbalah
Seventh: Masons in Paradise
Eighth: Cloak of Invisibility"

Wang Shun turned to everyone. "These eight teams are all top powerhouses, and most of them have exemptions. So, even though we've qualified for the playoff challenge so far, we can't slack off today. We must not only win but win decisively, to gain the support of the crowd and try to get all our players exemption cards in this one game."

Bai Liu slowly opened his eyes. "And in order to do that, we first need to interrupt that Mist skill player."

"If we allow the other team to successfully use their skills to obscure the map and block the view of the spectators, it will make the match harder for us and prevent the audience from seeing the action, not to mention winning their support."

Bai Liu stood up and scanned the room. "When you're ready, let’s move."

Everyone responded in unison, "Yes!"

As Bai Liu started to walk forward, Tang Erda stood up and strutted beside him. Bai Liu turned his head slightly and asked in a low voice, "Did you find anything after reading all night?"

"I didn't find anything," Bai Liu replied flatly. "Except that Yuan Guang and I are peers."

Tang Erda blinked and asked without thinking, "A fellow smuggler? Is he in the smuggling business too?"

"No." Bai Liu gave Tang Erda a quick look and smirked. "He’s an artisan."

Elsewhere, Yuan Guang sat nervously on the bench, shaking his legs. His fists were clenched, and he kept taking deep breaths, though his face still betrayed his anxiety.

Shi Qian, sitting next to him, looked at him with a mix of annoyance and amusement. "As the head of the team, can you at least act like a leader? Is it reasonable to be this nervous?"

"I don't know how many times I've had to get up on stage and give speeches—elementary school, high school, college, work… I'm just as nervous now as I was when I first presented my ideas," Yuan Guang admitted, glancing sideways at Shi Qian. "I get just as nervous when the main beauty introduces me."

Shi Qian looked at him with pity. Unable to resist, she muttered, "We advanced two teams in the pre-season, so why not we just drop out and take the challenge directly against the big guilds? It's a guaranteed loss anyway."

"No!" Yuan Guang's voice grew steady as he looked at Shi Qian. "We can't give up. We need to fight."

"If we give up now and go straight into the challenge against the big guilds, we'll lose a lot of players. We might not even win. The Roving Circus guild, in particular, has been the most well-funded lately. The players who have died and those who will die need pensions, or their families won't be able to pay their mortgages. Some can't even pay this month's mortgage. If we don't win this betting pool..."

Yuan Guang took a deep breath, clenching his teeth. "Anyway, I'll win this match!"

Shi Qian retorted mockingly, "What do you mean, you? We're the ones who are going to win!"

Yuan Guang was quiet for a moment. "Thank you. We were just colleagues, but I dragged you into this."

As the Roving Circus group approached in the distance, Shi Qian clenched her sweaty fists and exhaled slowly. "Real relationships in reality, in-game relationships in the game."

"We're standing here now," Shi Qian said, turning to Yuan Guang and smiling. "Then we're no longer colleagues, we're comrades in arms!"

"We're going to win!" she declared with certainty.

How to Own Five Buildings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mu Sicheng frowned as he looked at the Russell Cemetery team sitting across from them on the bench, ready for the match. "Why are there only two of them? And why are they wearing masks?"

The masks worn by the Russell Cemetery members depicted a sun radiating light in all directions.

Wang Shun observed the two players sitting quietly, his expression tensing. "That's their president on the left. He hasn't played in a long time—why is he playing against us this time?"

"In their usual tactical style," Liu Jiayi analyzed calmly, "These two should be able to handle us with their skills."

Bai Liu briefly glanced at the Russell Cemetery team's masks before shifting his attention to the audience. His eyes scanned the gallery, eventually stopping at a corner where a man in a tall hat, white gloves, and a cane sat. The man seemed to notice Bai Liu's gaze, and he raised his hand to take off his hat, smiling slightly and spreading his hand in greeting.

Wang Shun followed Bai Liu's line of sight, surprised. "Charles? What's he doing here? Didn't he say he wouldn't come to watch us play before the challenge?"

"And if I remember correctly..." Wang Shun quickly tapped on the system panel, "There's a mid-season tournament today with the Gamblers' Alliance guild playing! He's supposed to be playing—so why is he here?"

Bai Liu's eyes locked with Charles. "Because I had a chat with him before I came on."

Wang Shun was stunned. "Talk about what?"

"After this match, the next one will be a challenge match. The opponent's pool and points will be dozens of times larger than ours. To control the field, I need the strong support of Charles, the investor," Bai Liu replied nonchalantly, then withdrew his gaze. "So I

told him to come watch today's game. He'll get a gambling match that will satisfy him."

"So, he decided to forfeit his own game and come watch me bet on the match?"

"To satisfy Charles?" Wang Shun's voice rose slightly before he quickly lowered it, his face tense. "Chairman, Charles is a gambler—he won't be satisfied with anything unless it's a game where he can double his points."

"We're about to play the challenge. There's no point in showing him loyalty now. You shouldn't have rushed to talk to him today. Even if we beat Russell brilliantly today, their pool isn't large enough, and the money from the pool won't be enough to satisfy Charles."

Wang Shun's expression grew more serious. "By giving up his own game to watch ours, Charles is sacrificing his own pool... If he doesn't get the return he's hoping for, he won't hesitate to pull out. He'll withdraw his money without a second thought."

Bai Liu calmly adjusted his leather gloves as he prepared to move forward. "I'm sure of it. Just leave it to me. Don't worry."

Seated in the audience, Charles leaned on the top of his cane, absently tapping his fingers on the orb as he shifted his gaze between Bai Liu and the Russell Cemetery team. The smile on his face grew more meaningful.

"It's been a long time since I've seen a gambling race that's pleased me," he muttered to himself. "I hope my stakes horses don't disappoint this year and deliver a race that satisfies me, instead of wasting my precious racing time."

The audience erupted into discussion:

"Wow, how could the Gamblers' League forfeit the game after just three rounds and give away eight points to their opponents?"

"Anyone who voted for the Gamblers' League must be going crazy right now!"

"Well, what can you do? Charles has done this before—playing fake tournaments to control gambling pool points. He's got the largest reserves of points in the game. He doesn't care about winning; he's here to gamble. It's hard to understand his way of thinking, but there's

no way to stop him."

"I wouldn't dare vote for the Gamblers' League, it’s too unpredictable. I don’t know what the people voting for them are thinking..."

"Want points? One good bet, and you could win hundreds of times more."

"Charles usually abstains, which means he’s voting for his opponent. So, who’s his opponent?"

"The Deerhunters."

"Deerhunters are fierce this year. They’re in third place. If I were Charles, I’d abandon the tournament, too. Their clownish leader has soul-crushing skills. They shoot indiscriminately on the field, and the screams from the players they kill are terrifying..."

"The Deerhunters are only nine points behind the Kings Guild. Do they still have a match?"

"Let’s see... Grrr! —Today’s next mid-season game: Killer Sequence vs. Deerhunters!"

Mid-season Tournament Field

Daniel leaned back lazily in his chair, humming an obscure hometown ditty as his apple-green eyes swept over the men of the Killer Sequence. His gaze was detached as if he were looking at a pile of corpses rather than a top-tier team.

Spades, adjusting his shoes, noticed someone staring at him. He looked up, meeting Daniel’s eyes across the room. For a brief moment, Daniel flashed a smile and playfully waved his hand in a shooting gesture, narrowing one eye as if aiming at Spades and a few of his teammates. The sound of an onomatopoeic “thump” followed his playful move.

The Reverse God, sitting at the front of the bench, bowed his head in silence, while Cen Buming, opposite, straightened up, fixing his eyes on the Reverse God with a gaze full of intent.

The MC, standing in the center, raised his voice: “Will both tacticians please shake hands before the battle?”

The Reverse God and Cen Buming stood and walked toward the large screen in the middle. As they extended their hands toward one another, the Reverse God raised his head, locking eyes with Cen Buming. There was a strange and complicated look in his gaze as he spoke: “You’ve killed a lot of people this year in the tournament.”

Cen Buming grinned, tightening his grip on the Reverse God’s hand. “Is that so? Maybe it's just because there are so many damned people this year.”

Cen Buming stepped closer, clutching his wrist to prevent him from pulling away. He swallowed the word “division” and instead muttered “Reverse God” under his breath.

“Against the gods,” Cen Buming said, his chest rising and falling with emotion. His voice grew hoarse as he added, “Do you think I’m wrong to kill? To kill?”

“These people—” he paused, looking at the Reverse God with intensity. “You know what they’ve done, and what they will do. I know it too. Don’t they deserve to die? Shouldn’t I kill them?”

The Reverse God gazed at him steadily. “They may deserve to die, but not now.”

Cen Buming laughed low and hoarsely, slowly letting go of the Reverse God’s hand. His voice was tinged with sarcasm as he spoke. “So, they’ll die in the future, huh? This world line... it’s already the last future. We don’t have any more futures left to consume, to start over.”

“If they don’t die, Bai Liu—if they don’t die—there will be no future for anyone,” Cen Buming’s voice was sharp, his gaze unwavering.

“Haven’t you and I seen this future six hundred times before?” He gave a bitter chuckle, shaking his head. “Are you really going to cling to that silly philosophy of no wrongdoings, no consequences?”

The Reverse God met his gaze, his answer simple: “Yes.”

The fire in Cen Buming’s eyes flickered and faded as he let out a resigned snort, turning away with a shake of his head, as if the situation amused him more than it should.

“I am his guardian,” the Reverse God’s calm voice followed him. “I will take responsibility for his wrongdoings.”

Cen Buming clenched his fists tightly, his frustration reaching its peak. He spun around, grabbing the Reverse God by the collar, his voice raw with anger. “He’s the one doing wrong, not you! It’s the heretics who are killing people, not you! He’s the one torturing you, torturing Fang Dian, torturing everyone—your friends, your colleagues, your family—he’s torturing us all!”

“Why do you have to be on his side?!”

His eyes, red with fury, narrowed as he hissed at the Reverse God’s emotionless face. “If you continue like this, you’ll die, Lu Yizhan!”

The pre-match exchange between the tacticians took place at the login barrier in front of the large screen, just a step away from logging into the game. While their words were obscured, their heated argument was visible to everyone present.

As the situation threatened to escalate, Cen Buming was swiftly pulled away by his teammates, ensuring the match would proceed without further interruption. He struggled against their grip, his disbelief evident as he stared back at the Reverse God. The Reverse God remained still, his eyes watching him with an unsettling calmness.

Just before being pulled out of view, Cen Buming caught a faint whisper from the Reverse God: “Sorry, Master.”

[System Alert: Killer Sequence vs. Deer Hunter, Match Officially Begins]

[System Alert: Wandering Circus vs. Russell Cemetery, the match has officially begun]

Yuan Guang shakily stood up. He clicked on the [Tactician Permissions] section of the system panel, selecting to abstain from both the single and double matches. He then turned to Shi Qian beside him, silently inquiring with his eyes.

Shi Qian nodded affirmatively, signaling that he was ready.

Yuan Guang took a deep breath, turning his attention to Bai Liu across the room. He clicked on the [Group Match] option.

[System Alert: Regimental match opened...]

[Warning: Only two players remain on Russell Cemetery’s side. Insufficient players detected... Russell Cemetery's tactician skill special

(summon type) allows five players to appear on the field. In accordance with the rules of the regimental match, the match will proceed...]

[Loading game...]

[System Alert: Both players logged into the game "How to Own Five Buildings"]

[System Tip: You are an ordinary laborer in a prosperous metropolis, earning a modest monthly salary of 4,500. You work tirelessly, dreaming of owning a house. But with the average price of housing at 320,000 per square foot, it will take you 592 years of saving every penny just to afford a 100-square-foot home.]

[Activate Main Quest: Find a way to own five buildings in this city within a week!]

Chapter End Notes

> Soooooo, who guessed Lu Yizhan's identity ??? Hahahhahahaha

How to Own Five Buildings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bai Liu opened his eyes.

Before him stretched a forest of steel and concrete skyscrapers, their upper floors so high that they disappeared into the sky.

Between the towering buildings, narrow roadways—only three or four meters wide—and sidewalks of one or two meters were crammed with pedestrians. Low street lamps lined the streets, casting dim light on the scene. Bai Liu stood facing an entrance marked by seven large red neon letters: [Welcome to Sunshine City].

Below the sign, a slogan read: [Chasing the sun, chasing happiness, the future is here for you!]

Inside the entrance, the streets bustled with people dressed in black, white, blue, and grey work uniforms, moving quickly, heads down, eyes glued to the ground. They passed through the vibrant metropolis, but no one looked up at the sun, almost hidden by the skyscrapers, or even noticed Bai Liu, standing there at the city's threshold.

Bai Liu checked his pocket and pulled out a citizen ID card.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has been detected with an important authentication item: Citizen ID Card.]

The Citizen ID card managed everything—daily income, expenses, savings, and even mortgage deductions. Each person had only one card, tied to a unique number. It could not be replaced, transferred, or destroyed at will. If a person died, the card would be canceled instantly, and it was bound to their life, property, authentication, and travel within the city.

[Card balance: $2,700.]

Bai Liu glanced around, confirming that he was alone in the area.

It seemed the others had been dropped off at a different entrance. He made his way into the lane, holding his ID card. A toll collector, looking tired, poked his head out from behind a desk, an unfinished

bucket of instant noodles beside him.

"Going into town?" the toll collector asked.

"Entry fee is 1200," he added, holding out his hand. "ID card, please."

Bai Liu hesitated for a moment before handing over his ID card. The toll collector swiped it through a terminal, his gaze sharp as he looked back at Bai Liu. "You're not a resident of our city, are you?"

"No," Bai Liu replied with a polite smile. "I'm new here."

The toll collector's eyes narrowed in suspicion. He shoved the ID card back at Bai Liu. "Outsiders aren't welcome here."

"But outsiders can still get in, right?" Bai Liu said, pointing to the entry requirements on the toll collector's computer screen. "I see out-of-towners are allowed to register as citizens."

Bai Liu's gaze shifted to the toll collector's license, where a complaint number was listed. "If you're not following the rules, I'll file a complaint, and your job could be at risk. So, are you really not going to let me in?"

The toll collector stiffened, reluctantly returning the ID card. His tone remained harsh. "Fine... Registration fee is 1400. The total is 2016, you still have 100 left."

"You don't have a house in Sunnyside, so you're just a temporary resident," the toll collector continued. "You'll need to pay a land use fee to stay here—$10 per hour. It's deducted directly from your card. If the balance is insufficient, your ID will turn red, and a patrol will evict you within fifteen minutes."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "Land use fees? What's that about?"

The toll collector rolled his eyes. "Of course, it's the fee for using the land."

"Every inch of land in Sunnyside is owned by five major property developers, and you're paying to use their land every second you stand on it."

As he spoke, the toll collector's expression softened slightly, a touch of nostalgia in his voice. "Of course, if you own a house in Sunnyside, it's yours, and you don't need to pay land use fees while in your own

home."

"With 100 dollars, you can stay here for 10 hours, at most, if you don't find a job." The toll collector swiped Bai Liu's ID card again, handing it back along with a printed copy of the [Instructions for Entering the City] notice, his gaze tinged with contempt. "Here, take it and go in."

Bai Liu took the card, noticing an embossed line in the bottom right corner: [Sunnyside Temporary Resident Card].

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Bai Liu for officially entering Sunshine City and starting the main quest - Visit the job market today and find a job that suits your fancy!]

As Bai Liu walked past the toll booth, he could still hear the toll collector's muttered complaints.

"Another outsider trying to take a house from us... Property prices will go up, and competition for jobs will get tougher. So annoying..."

Bai Liu entered the grey, drab Sunshine City. No one gave him more than a passing glance. People moved quickly, making calls or rushing to other tasks, all focused on their own business.

After all, standing outside cost $10 an hour, and no one wanted to waste time helping a stranger.

Bai Liu strolled leisurely through the streets, reading the "Entry Guide" in his hand, feeling out of step with the busy crowds around him.

The [Instructions for Entering the City] outlined three types of residents:

The first type, [Homeowners], had successfully bought property in the city and enjoyed various discounts on public services such as healthcare, education, and shopping. Their land use fee was reduced from $10 per hour to $5.

The second type, [Housing Slaves], had made a down payment and were still paying off their mortgage. While not as privileged as homeowners, they were no longer considered temporary residents. They benefited from slightly reduced land use fees ($8 per hour) and enjoyed priority when it came to employment opportunities.

The final type of resident was Bai Liu—a temporary resident.

The entire [Admission Notice] felt more like a real estate advertisement, focusing on the benefits of owning property and the so-called happy life of homeowners, without ever mentioning the price of the houses.

Bai Liu flipped the notice over to see what was on the back.

On the reverse side was a warning:

Sunshine City strictly prohibits renting housing by individuals, collectives, or companies, the private buying and selling of properties, and the prolonged occupation of public land in fixed locations (e.g., sleeping on the street). Violations result in a minimum fine of 100,000 RMB, with no upper limit depending on the specific circumstances.

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow at this.

The ban on private property sales and purchases effectively cut off the average citizen's ability to buy a home from anyone other than the five major real estate developers, while also preventing smaller real estate agents from entering the market.

This meant that if an average citizen wanted to buy a home, they had no choice but to purchase from one of the five major developers. Additionally, the ban on all forms of renting left no alternative for those who couldn't afford to buy.

Anyone who couldn't afford to buy or rent would have to find somewhere else to live, but the third rule also prohibited occupying public land for extended periods. This meant that non-housing areas were off-limits, leaving people with only one option for survival: to buy a home from one of the five developers.

Bai Liu soon realized that Sunshine City was entirely controlled by these major real estate developers, with a clear monopoly over survival.

Interestingly, such a harsh and tightly regulated city would logically have a small, low-fertility population with few people willing to start families. After all, how could anyone afford to raise children in a place where survival was already a struggle?

Yet, the city's population had reached a permanent 10 million, with a steadily rising birth rate and an increasing number of migrants arriving. What was even stranger was that once people entered the city, few ever left.

Bai Liu noticed a slogan on the [Admission Notice]: [A happy city with a marriage rate of over 50% for three years in a row!]

It seemed completely contradictory to the harsh reality of the city. There had to be something else at play—something Bai Liu didn't yet understand—that was influencing the city's operations.

[System Alert: You have been wandering in the public area of Sunshine City for one hour. The cost of using the land is 10 RMB.]

Bai Liu glanced at the system prompt, then turned his attention to the crowded, bazaar-like area ahead. The place was overflowing with people, and the display sign at the entrance read: [Talent Market].

Upon entering, Bai Liu saw rows of scanning printers along either side of the doorway, with the words [Automatic Resume Generation Instrument for Facial Scanning] displayed above them. Nearby, another sign reads: [Swipe card to print, 10 dollars per use].

There was a queue at the front of the machines, with people anxiously moving back and forth through the crowd. Some were crouching in the corner, drinking mineral water, while others stared blankly at their phones, waiting for replies. The toilets had long lines, and hoarse cries occasionally echoed from inside.

"I didn't pass. They didn't want me. What should I do? I can't find a job!"

"Down to just over 3,000. I passed the written test but didn't make it through the interview. I was all set, but they took someone whose family owns property instead..."

The scene felt strangely familiar to Bai Liu. Having experienced the job market before, he couldn't help but feel a subtle discomfort.

Chapter End Notes

> I honestly find the system utterly cruel. The Russell Cemetery community already endures such harsh poverty in real life, and now there's a game designed to trap them in that same misery all over again. It's heartbreaking to think they have to suffer twice, once in the world they live in, and again in the twisted game they're forced into.

How to Own Five Buildings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bai Liu glanced around and joined the queue for the printer.

In a typical job market, job seekers would print multiple copies of their CVs and distribute them widely. However, the job seekers here were clearly not wealthy, and printing costs were high. Bai Liu noticed that most of them only printed a single "hard card" CV for $10.

The "hard card" CV was an A4-sized cardboard sheet, densely packed with all the CV details. A hole was perforated at the top for easy attachment.

Once they printed their CVs, the job seekers naturally pulled out a string, threaded it through the hole, and hung the CVs around their necks, then made their way toward the job market.

This peculiar resume method caught Bai Liu's attention, and he followed the group as they walked down a long corridor, eventually turning a corner into the job market.

He tilted his head and paused.

After learning about the system here, Bai Liu understood that these temporary residents—who needed to work to survive and pay off their loans—were at the bottom of the social hierarchy in Sunshine City.

With so many residents reliant on jobs to cover their basic living expenses, supply and demand made finding a job difficult. This, in turn, meant that the employer held a high status compared to the job seeker, who was seen as having low status.

The job market here was far from a professional, respectful environment. It was more like a chaotic and raw marketplace.

Job seekers, their CVs hanging from their necks, squatted along the sides of the corridor like beggars. Their faces were pale, their hands clutching half-eaten loaves of bread or cups of noodles, their eyes following the well-dressed, suit-and-tie job seekers walking down the center of the hall. It was as if they were human commodities, their

worth displayed like prices on a product.

Recruiters walked past, indifferent, casually inspecting the candidates as if they were choosing meat at a butcher's stall.

"Hey, you! Stick your head out here for a second."

The job seeker eagerly stretched his neck, trying to present his CV, and greeted the recruiter nervously. "Hello, how are you?"

The recruiter glanced at the CV hanging from the job seeker's neck and muttered, "Secondary university undergraduate degree, three years of experience, previous company... alright..."

"Salary requirement: $5,000?" The recruiter's tone shifted as he read further.

The job seeker immediately responded, trembling, "Negotiable! How much do you think is appropriate?"

"We're offering $3,800 to $4,000 for this position," the recruiter replied flatly.

The job seeker hesitated, his eyes downcast as he nervously adjusted his resume. "Four thousand is too little... This position requires ten hours of work a day, and the land fee costs $3,000 per month. I'll only be able to save $800 to $1,000. Noodles here cost $8 a bucket—if I eat just two meals a day, that's $480 a month. I can't survive on four thousand... Please, can I get $4,500...?"

Suddenly, a red-eyed job seeker jumped up and shouted, "I'll take $3,500! Just give me the job!"

Another man scrambled to get closer, grabbing the recruiter's trouser leg and showing his CV. "Look at me! I'll take $3,200!"

"Three thousand!" someone else called out. "Three thousand, and I'll do it!"

"Two thousand nine!"

"Two thousand eight!"

To the shock of the first job seeker, the salary continued to drop, all the way down to $2,500, where it finally stalled, with numerous others clamoring to offer even lower amounts.

The recruiter, clearly anticipating this, waited patiently until the bidding war subsided. He turned to the initial job seeker and asked, uninterested, "$2,500? Why?"

Tears filled the job seeker's eyes. He lowered his head and stayed silent. The recruiter ignored him and looked at another applicant: "You—stick your head out here."

"Wait!" the job seeker interrupted, his voice quivering with emotion. "Is $3,000 okay? I can't survive on $2,500 here!"

The recruiter glanced at the kneeling job seeker without a flicker of sympathy. "Does it matter to us if you survive or not?"

With a dismissive wave, the recruiter dismissed the pleading job seeker and nodded to another candidate. "You—show me your resume."

The new candidate eagerly approached, saying, "I'll accept $2,500!"

"Hmm," the recruiter nodded, "There are plenty of people willing to work for that amount. It's not like we're handing out money just because you're willing."

The man slumped back down, murmuring numbly, "Yes..."

The recruiter turned and instructed the person next to him, "Distribute the written test papers. Once they're finished, have them submit their answers. Let those who score ninety or higher know they'll be called for an interview."

After that, the recruiter left, his departure under the watchful gaze of the crowd. A few who had finished their tests and handed in their papers began to wait anxiously, phones clutched in their hands, praying silently.

"Please let them call me soon, let them call me soon!"

"Let me get this job!"

The job seeker who had sat down at the start was now clutching his CV in a daze. He clearly was new: "Why are people still fighting for jobs that only pay two and a half thousand? It's impossible to live on that..."

The job seeker sitting next to him, having already finished his test,

shot him a strange look. His bloodshot eyes spoke of a sleepless night. "Of course, you can't live on one job," he replied.

"We all take two or even three jobs."

The man stared at him in disbelief. "Two or three? How do you have time for that when you're already working seven days a week, ten-hour shifts without even counting overtime? Don't you sleep?"

"Sleep?" The other man snorted, his tone bitter. "We don't have a place to sleep. How could we sleep on the street? We sleep in the office." He made a gesture, counting on his fingers. "Besides, if I'm lucky enough to get a job at a real estate company, I only have to pay five bucks an hour for the land I work on! And I get to sneak in a little nap! It's a huge profit!"

"The one who just approached you works under the real estate umbrella," the man continued, clearly sincere. "You're crazy to turn that down. Next time, if they offer two and a half thousand, just take it."

"Two and a half thousand is the standard here," the man muttered, shaking his head. "That's all we're worth to them—just enough to keep us alive."

Bai Liu withdrew his gaze, printed out a copy of his CV, and held it in his hand, not around his neck. He then made his way to the job market.

Most of the people here were temporary residents and laborers, desperately in need of money.

Each person’s eyes were bloodshot, anxiety and desperation lurking beneath their weary expressions. Every time a recruiter passed by, their eyes would momentarily light up, but the spark would fade as quickly as it appeared, leaving them feeling more distant, more hopeless.

On his second lap, Bai Liu found his team members huddled together among the recruiters.

When he spotted them, Mu Sicheng was in the middle of an argument with one of the recruiters.

"You want to hire me for two thousand five hundred?" Mu Sicheng sneered, his resume cardboard in hand. His smile was so hostile it

seemed like he was about to slap the recruiter with it. "So cheap, why don't you hire a dog for your company's front desk?"

"A dog front desk and a dog company? Sounds like a perfect match," he added sarcastically.

The recruiter, now visibly angry, shot back, "I approached you because you have a good image and we need you for the front desk at the sales building. Don't be ignorant. If you don't want this 2,500 job, there are plenty of people who would."

As soon as the recruiter's words left his mouth, the heads of the surrounding job seekers all turned toward him.

Mu Sicheng, who clearly wasn't new to this, immediately recognized the situation. His anger surged. "I already called you a dog for doing this! Don't you feel ashamed of yourself?"

But no one was paying attention to Mu Sicheng. Instead, they all looked at the recruiter, waiting for his response.

The recruiter, chest puffed out, glanced around triumphantly before turning back to Mu Sicheng. "If you don't want it, there are plenty of others who will take it. Not just 2,500—people will even settle for 2,000, 1,500. Plenty of them will do it."

"What's the difference between these lowly citizens who can't even afford a house and a dog?" The recruiter sneered. "Paying them to work, letting them stand on the ground in Sunnyside a little longer, giving them a roof over their heads for a while—it's charity, you know?"

Mu Sicheng bared his teeth. "You—"

Before he could say more, Tang Erda, who had been standing next to him, reached out to stop him. His expression darkened. "Don't do it. If you hurt him, your ID will turn red, and you'll be expelled by the patrol. You won't be able to buy five buildings."

Before Tang Erda could say another word, a sharp bone whip appeared around the recruiter's neck, cutting smoothly to the side.

Blood spurted out, and the recruiter covered his gaping wound, his smug expression quickly turning to panic. Gasping for air, he fumbled for his phone to call the police.

A pair of bloodied hands casually pulled the phone from his pocket. Bai Liu smiled, half-kneeling beside the recruiter, shaking the phone in front of his face. "Is this what you were looking for?"

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu has been detected killing an NPC. The city ID card has been changed to red name status, transitioning from temporary resident to wanted criminal!]

Tang Erda looked at Bai Liu, who was crouched on the ground, tense. "Bai Liu, our mission is to own five buildings. Killing someone will get us evicted and disqualified as residents of Sunnyside. We won't be able to own anything here."

Bai Liu waited until the recruiter had gulped his last breath, then looked up at his team with a wry smile. "Captain Tang, you're missing the point. We're not just going to own five buildings—I never said I'd own five."

"It's impossible to complete this copy the normal way with only five buildings in a week. We'll need to take an unconventional route. This is a regimental copy, so everyone needs to have a role. Only one person in our team has to be a normal resident to qualify for ownership of the house. The rest of us don't need to worry about being residents."

Bai Liu stretched out two fingers, rummaging through the recruiter's body. He found a resident ID card, some recruitment papers, and finally a property deed from the inner compartment.

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Bai Liu for killing a homeowner and obtaining the property deed for a suite on the 18th floor of Block 17 in District A!]

[When the owner dies, they will haunt the room, attacking anyone who enters and turning it into a murder house. This is problematic.]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu must go to the location and deal with the ghost of the house owner before claiming the murder house!]

Bai Liu smiled, standing up and holding the bloodstained property deed between his fingers. "Looks like I'm on the right track."

Chapter End Notes

This work has finally reached 1 million words!!!!! □

When the job seekers nearby saw that the recruiter had been killed, they stared blankly at Bai Liu. He gave them a glance that instantly made them retreat into themselves, burying their heads in their knees and trembling as if they hadn't seen anything.

Some murmured in fear, "We won't say anything, we won't say anything when the patrols come! Please don't kill us!"

"I'm not going to kill you," Bai Liu replied, crouching down on one knee. He smiled calmly at the job seeker and held out his hand, the bloodstained property deed in his grip. "Would you like to live in the house I just... 'acquired'?"

The job seeker was stunned, stammering, "You... you want to rent me a room? People who rent and those who live in Sunnyside without permission—they're breaking the law! I can't..."

"No," Bai Liu's smile deepened. "Are you afraid to live in a murder house if I give it to you for free?"

The man was momentarily confused, shaking his head before muttering, "You're giving me... a free house in Zone A?"

Bai Liu nodded. "Yes."

The surrounding job seekers stared in disbelief, whispering among themselves.

"Is it illegal to live in a house given to you for free?"

"...I don't think it breaks the law if there's no lease involved."

"Oh my god, a house in Zone A! I've dreamed of living there just once..."

"Am I dreaming? A murderer has stolen someone's house for us to live in?"

Suddenly, those who had been frightened by Bai Liu's blood-covered appearance and had previously backed away now quietly gathered around again. Their bloodshot eyes eagerly and cautiously studied him, while a few couldn't help but voice their opinions.

"There are so many of us here, and you only have one murder house. Are you going to choose who gets to live in it?"

As soon as they spoke, those who had endured years of job hunting puffed out their chests, practically shoving their CVs in front of Bai Liu. Others whispered about their strengths.

"You need strong yang energy to hold down a bad house, right? I have an excellent eight-character!"

"I have even better eight characters!"

Tang Erda watched the group with a mixture of helplessness and concern as they began to squabble. "Enough, stop for a moment."

"There's no need to fight over it." Bai Liu smiled, standing up and addressing everyone. "We're going to own five buildings soon, and everyone will get a free house."

A brief silence followed, then an outburst of chatter.

"Five buildings?!"

One person quickly grew concerned. "Are you planning to keep killing people and stealing houses? The patrols here are vicious. I saw them last time at the talent market—they beat up a backpacker who'd been living here for over ten hours without paying the fine for occupying public land."

Tang Erda frowned. "That's against the law. Won't the patrols face consequences?"

The man looked confused. "Why would they be punished? They're hired by real estate agents, and the rules here protect them."

Tang Erda's frown deepened. "Don't your laws allow you to sanction criminal patrols?"

"They would have, but last year, when the opposition exceeded fifty percent, the vote was canceled. They said patrols have the right to deal directly with anyone they deem a threat to public peace in Sunnyside, in order to protect all residents."

"Why was the vote canceled?" Tang Erda pressed. "How did it pass when it clearly undermines your rights?"

The man was increasingly bewildered, about to speak when Bai Liu,

standing next to him, replied nonchalantly, "Because they don't have the right to vote."

"You need to have a house here to be considered a full resident, and they don't have one. That's why they're in the lower class now. And lower-class citizens don't have any rights here," Tang Erda explained.

Bai Liu smirked at him. "Captain Tang, not all laws are made for the benefit of the majority."

"There are places where the law benefits those with the most power, like here," Tang Erda countered.

Bai Liu's expression grew more serious. "I broke the rules not because I wanted to kill anyone, but because I knew the game's main quest couldn't be reached through the rules they set. The rules were designed to protect their interests and exploit others."

"Captain Tang, don't worry too much about me breaking the rules in real life. The Torah protects the rights of regular people like me, especially those who've been laid off. I don't need to break those laws," Bai Liu reassured him.

Tang Erda sighed in relief, still remaining still.

The game's realism had Bai Liu on edge, especially when he started killing people.

Bai Liu patted Tang Erda's shoulder, giving him a reassuring smile. "Relax, Captain Tang. It's just a game."

"You can't live in this house for now. We still need to handle it." Bai Liu turned to the job seekers. "I'll come back to you after we've dealt with this. Do you know how to transfer property titles here?"

One person glanced at the recruiter, who lay dead on the ground, then hesitated. "With this sudden death, you can't just transfer the title easily. The house will be repossessed by the property company, and you'll have to exploit some loopholes."

"Right," another person nodded in agreement. "Go to the [Suicide Estate Auction Centre]. You can transfer there. You should be able to use his ID card to get a death certificate before the patrol registers it."

"A suicide auction centre?" Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "What's that?"

The man seemed surprised. "You don't know? It's where properties are auctioned off after the owner commits suicide."

"The suicide rate here in Sunnyside is high. Many house slaves jump from buildings after they can't pay their mortgages. A large portion of the house is still owed to the property developer, and they repossess the house to foreclose on the loan."

"Those kinds of murder houses are cheap, but still, I can't afford them."

"They say those houses are haunted, with owners dying one after another, but people still buy them because they're cheap."

Suicide Estate Auction Centre.

Two people, heads covered with tarps, hid in a crowded room. Their heads touched as they whispered.

"You don't think they'll spot us like this, do you, Yuan Guang?" one asked.

"I don't think so," Yuan Guang replied. "This replica map of Sunshine City is huge, with a population of ten million. How unlucky would we be to run into them?"

"If you're unsure, I can use my Mist skill to cover us," the other suggested.

"No way! We can use that against other teams, but their team is strong. Two popular players got immunity, your Mist skill CD takes a day to reset, and mine takes seventeen hours. Save them for when we really need them."

One of the people sighed quietly. "Yuan Guang, do you think we're really this unlucky? A game like this... meeting them..."

Yuan Guang looked around cautiously, then squeezed his sun cloth. "Honestly, I don't think we're that unlucky now that I've looked at the people in this game."

Both Shi Qian and Yuan Guang shuddered together and said, "The prices here are insane."

"In real life, I make 7,000 to 8,000 a month, and house prices are

10,000 to 20,000 per square foot. I can still look forward to buying a house, but here..." Yuan Guang shook his head, his face reddening, "The only way to buy a house here is to rob one."

Shi Qian nodded, holding up a linen pouch. "We just robbed eighteen recruiters. They're loaded. Their ID card balances add up to sixty million. We should have no problem buying a dozen small murder houses."

Yuan Guang breathed a sigh of relief, his eyes lighting up again. "At this rate, we might be able to buy five murder houses in seven days!"

"If Bai Liu and the others are using the same method, we'll use our skills to outpace their progress and win!" Shi Qian grinned.

The both of them relaxed at the thought, and Shi Qian glanced up at the auction stand. "320,000 per square foot? With a 4,500 salary and land use fees, that's outrageous! How can people live like that?"

Hearing Shi Qian's exclamation, the man next to her nodded. "Well, the only way to live is in a murder house."

"The Murder House..." Shi Qian and Yuan Guang exchanged a glance, realizing this was a replica of the spirit world. "There are real ghosts in those houses, aren't there?"

"Isn't that what it means to live with the dead? And people are still willing to live there?" Shi Qian asked.

The man shrugged nonchalantly. "People die if they don't live in a murder house. Patrols kill people every day, and a ghost might scare me to death, but at least it's not as bad as being killed by a patrol."

Shi Qian, a seasoned homeowner, couldn't help but ask, "How did the prices get this high? It's outrageous!"

"Speculation?" The man gave her a confused look. "What's speculation on house prices?"

Shi Qian was taken aback. "You know, when people buy something in bulk, hoard it, and then raise the price so no one else can afford it, like speculating in stocks..."

The man's eyes widened in realization. "Oh, that's what you mean by speculation."

He shook his head. "But we don't speculate on property prices here. Most of the properties are set by the top five real estate developers."

Shi Qian was stunned. "What does that mean?"

The man spread his hands. "It means the price is whatever they say it is."

Shi Qian was dumbfounded. "As much as they say?!"

The man nodded. "Yes. They own all the land in Sunnyside, so we can only buy houses from them. That's why the prices are whatever they say."

Elsewhere...

Mu Sicheng, having heard the same information, raised his voice. "What did they say the price was? You'll buy when they say 320,000 per square foot?"

The man who had bought a murder house was shocked by Mu Sicheng's reaction. He scowled, nodded a little, and quickly slunk away.

"Shit!" Mu Sicheng yelled, jumping up and down. "I wasn't finished asking! Why are you running?!"

Tang Erda placed a hand on Mu Sicheng's shoulder. "Calm down."

Mu Sicheng clenched his fist in frustration. "This is a pile of dogshit companies! And these people! They set the price at 320,000 per square foot, and they just accept it? What a bunch of fools!"

Muke, remaining calm, said, "They don't have a choice. They have to buy it."

"320,000 a flat, and they have to buy it?!" Mu Sicheng spun around, incredulous. "On what grounds?!"

Bai Liu spoke slowly, "Because they control all the land."

"Imagine if one person controls all the rice in the world, and you can only buy rice from them if you want it."

Bai Liu looked at Mu Sicheng. "If they're selling rice for a dollar a pound today, you have to buy it. Tomorrow, if they raise the price to five hundred a pound, you'll still have to buy it because if you don't,

you'll starve. It's the same with houses in Sunnyside. Without a house, you can't get a job, you can't access healthcare, you can't go to school, and you'll even be killed."

"Rice is as essential as a house. And when something essential is monopolized, they can price it however they want. They'll set the price high enough for you to barely afford, but low enough to force you to work at your limit, whether it's 320,000, 420,000, or even 500,000 per square foot."

Bai Liu's gaze sharpened. "If you want to live, you'll pay that price. It's your survival on the line."

How to Own Five Buildings

The auction for the murder house began shortly after.

A man in a black suit and red tie, holding a shiny old Little Mu hammer, arrogantly stepped onto the auction stage. He scanned the eager crowd below, his voice drawing out as he declared, "The auction begins."

"As you're all aware, Sunny City is divided into five districts—A, B, C, D, and E. The real estate resources in District A are the best, and today, you're fortunate to have two houses from District A up for auction."

"I'm sure you've all seen the properties for auction today, so I won't go into too much detail. The first one: Zone A, 18 sq ft, turnkey, ready to move in. It's a pleasant home for a family of four, though, sadly, this family of four jumped to their deaths just the day before yesterday."

"We begin, as is customary, by expressing our gratitude to the previous homeowners who've contributed to your opportunity to purchase a bargain property in Zone A. Please, bow your heads and pray that they ascend to heaven in peace."

The auctioneer led the crowd in a false moment of silence, hands folded.

"The starting price for this house—" He slammed the hammer down after the prayer, lifting his eyes to the crowd. "—is three million."

Yuan Guang and Shi Qian, in the crowd, exchanged confused glances. "18 square meters... what's the starting price?"

Before they could even process it, the price began to soar. The people around them scrambled, red-faced, raising their paddles and shouting out bids.

"3.1 million!"

"3.18 million!"

In just three minutes, the price had surged to four million, a scene so lively it almost seemed like a robbery.

Yuan Guang hesitated, ready to raise his hand. He held a card worth

one million but found himself momentarily dazed by the frenzy over an 18-square-meter house, where a family of four had just died.

"Good." The auctioneer, indifferent, dropped the hammer and raised his hand to a gaunt, haggard man who looked like he might collapse at any moment. "Congratulations, Mr. Li. This house is yours for four million, seven hundred sixty thousand."

Mr. Li threw his hands in the air, ecstatic, almost maddened with joy. "I've got a house! I finally own a house!"

"I'd like to invite Mr. Li to come up, collect his property title, and share a few words of gratitude with all the residents of Sunny City still hoping for a home," the auctioneer announced.

The skeletal Mr. Li climbed onto the stage in one breathless step, accepting the title with the auctioneer's slightly disgusted assistance. He beamed at the residents below, as if he had just conquered the world.

"My goal, ever since I started working at sixteen, was to own a house in Sunny City," he said, his voice trembling with emotion. "Full payment!" His eyes gleamed with an eerie wildness. "I'm determined not to be a house slave. I want to be a first-class citizen of Sunny City, right away!"

"To reach this goal, I ate only instant noodle pastries, treated myself to a cup of soup every other day, worked six to ten odd jobs, slept in company bathrooms to save on rent, and saved every penny for thirty years. And now, I've saved enough for four point seven-six million!"

Mr. Li held up the property certificate like a trophy, tears of joy streaming down his face. "Finally, on this day, I bought an 18-square-foot house with full payment!"

The crowd responded with scattered, awkward applause and a few derisive comments.

"Seriously? What's he so proud of? I've worked twelve jobs before, you know."

"Thirty years to save 4.76 million? Just pure luck to grab this unit. Someone like him doesn't belong in District A."

"Can we just get on with it? Waiting for the second house to go up for auction is painful enough."

Mr. Li, sensing the awkwardness, descended from the stage with the property deeds, looking slightly embarrassed.

Yuan Guang stared numbly at his retreating figure. "I feel like my mental values have taken a serious hit."

Shi Qian nodded slowly. "Same here."

Another group of onlookers, equally taken aback by the spectacle, was also reeling.

Mu Sicheng was stunned. "This Mr. Li, looking like a skeleton... isn't he going to keel over the moment he moves in?"

"And then the murder house will get repossessed and put up for auction again," Bai Liu said with a mischievous smile, eyeing the auctioneer. "Feels like a fresh twist to the fairy tale."

Mu Sicheng nervously took two steps away from Bai Liu. "Bai Liu, why do I get the feeling you're being so... aggressive in this copy?"

"Normal," Liu Jiayi, who had been silent until now, glanced at Bai Liu and said coolly, "He was also aggressive with the foremen in The Rose Factory and ended up killing almost all of them. Bai Liu hates the upper class that exploits him, and he didn't like Muke back then."

Muke took a deep breath.

Bai Liu shrugged. "It's natural to hate the class that takes away your interests. No one likes being a leek."

Tang Erda couldn't help but glance at Bai Liu.

Bai Liu smiled faintly. "Captain Tang, I'm just venting in the game. I won't bring it into reality."

With that, Bai Liu handed the completed property certificates to Tang Erda. "Captain Tang, as the most disciplined and strongest member of our team, I've decided to put all the property titles we've obtained in your name for now. Is that alright?"

Tang Erda took the deeds. "Yes."

"So, our current strategy is to kill and take the room?" Tang Erda frowned, clearly uncomfortable with this approach.

"Of course not." Bai Liu raised his eyes toward the hot auction block.

"It’s too inefficient to kill and take the room."

Tang Erda was puzzled. "Too inefficient?"

"Kill one person and get a house? What could be more efficient?"

"Well, I only killed the recruiter to test two theories: that the game should be cleared through unconventional methods, and that people in Sunny City turn into ghosts when they die," Bai Liu explained, unhurried. "It’s unlikely that we’ll get five houses in seven days through murder alone."

Tang Erda frowned and asked hesitantly, "Why not, if... we could kill the owners of five houses?"

Liu Jiayi replied coldly, "Because we can’t tell who the owner is, so how would we know whom to kill?"

"Exactly," Bai Liu nodded. "There are ten million people in this city, and homeowners are a minority. Most are house slaves or temporary residents. Killing them won’t give us full proof of property, and sifting through everyone to find the homeowners is inefficient."

"We could just go to the building and kill the residents," Mu Sicheng suggested, rubbing his chin. "Most people living in a building are homeowners, right?"

"Also house slaves," Muke countered, his voice calm. "And with a building of thirty or forty floors, five to six homes per floor, and decent quality doors, windows, and valves, we’d need to break into at least 150 homes in one night."

Mu Sicheng pondered, "A hundred and fifty households a night isn’t impossible, is it?"

"Of course, killing can be done," Bai Liu replied, lifting his eyes, "but have you forgotten? People here turn into ghosts when they die."

Liu Jiayi thought for a moment before speaking up, "But there’s something that doesn’t add up here."

"When you killed that recruiter earlier, the system prompted that he would turn into a ghost and remain in the house, attacking anyone who entered. So, following this pattern, if people have died in these murder houses, shouldn’t they turn into ghosts as well, haunting the house and attacking anyone who enters?"

Liu Jiayi furrowed her brow. "The system can't lie about the rules of the game. So why are these people still alive if they're living in murder houses?"

"They're not exactly 'alive and well,'" Muke recalled what the previous job seekers had said. "Some of the people who bought these murder houses lived in them for a while, but then something happened to them."

Liu Jiayi glanced at the bustling auction scene behind them. "But there's no denying that many people living in these houses seem to be doing fine. Otherwise, the market wouldn't be so active."

Bai Liu looked down at her. "I thought about that too. But have you noticed something different between these murder houses and the ones we take over?"

Mak Si pondered for a moment. "Aren't they both murder houses after someone dies in them? What's the difference?"

Liu Jiayi paused and quickly realized, looking at the property deed in Tang Erda's hand. "It's about ownership."

"The recruiter we killed was wealthy. He had full ownership of a house, making him the homeowner. But these murder houses being auctioned off were repossessed by the real estate company, which means the people who died in them were basically house slaves still paying off their mortgages."

Bai Liu smiled. "Exactly. That means the homeowner doesn't fully own the house."

"My guess," he continued, "is that ghosts who fully own their houses can only stay in them. But ghosts who don't own their houses can't stay in them permanently—they have to wander most of the time and only return occasionally."

Liu Jiayi quickly caught on. "That's why we have to deal with the ghosts of the owners in our murder houses right away, while some people living in these auctioned houses are having problems, and others seem fine."

Bai Liu's smile deepened. "Not only that, but remember what the auctioneer said? The deceased paid off part of the mortgage for you. I think the ghosts own part of the house too."

Muke paused, slowly looking up as he processed this new information.

"Bai Liu," he said, "are you implying that the living here have to follow the real estate developers' rules, but even when people die and become ghosts, those ghosts still have to abide by the developers' rules? So, even the ghosts must pay the mortgage before they can stay in the house? And their ownership can be regulated too... does that mean—"

Bai Liu lowered his eyes. "That’s right. I suspect that the top five real estate developers here may not even be alive."

How to Own Five Buildings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The auction for the murder house came to a close.

Just as Yuan Guang and Shi Qian lowered their heads, they heard an astonishing figure: "The starting bid for this suite is 300,000."

The two of them looked up sharply at the auction stand, and Bai Liu, having caught wind of the price, glanced over with interest.

The auctioneer looked down at the catalogue and read the introduction in a monotone voice: "- This is a 2.45-square-meter custom-built house on the 18th floor, located on the outskirts of Sunnyside in Area E. The property has a usable area of about 2 square meters after sharing the equalization. There's no toilet, kitchen, electricity, water, or gas connections, and no hospital, supermarket, or transport station nearby. It's intended for one person."

"The previous house slave died suddenly while working, so the property was repossessed."

The auctioneer raised his head, his tone indifferent: "The bidding starts at 300,000..."

Yuan Guang nervously raised his $310,000 sign, scanning the room to see if anyone else would compete with him. To his surprise, very few people raised their signs for such a cheap house. It was a stark contrast to the previous bidding wars. Even when people did raise their signs, there was a clear hesitation and fear on their faces.

"305,000."

"306,000..."

"Thirty—sorry, I'm not auctioning anymore. Count me out for not shouting. Sorry."

Yuan Guang and Shi Qian exchanged puzzled glances. After assessing the probability of winning the house, they whispered to each other.

"Why isn't anyone bidding for this house? It's cheap, only 300,000."

"It’s too small, and there’s no water or electricity. Is that why it’s uninhabitable?"

"That can’t be it. There was a house in Area B, just a bit bigger than this, 3 square meters, a basement, no electricity, and it sold for 470,000."

"Is the location really that bad?"

"They’re all here for the murder houses. I don’t think they care about the location..."

The more Shi Qian thought about it, the more she felt something was off. "I feel like they’re scared of the house."

Yuan Guang grew more confused. "This group is all bidding on murder houses. What other house could scare them?"

Yuan Guang and Shi Qian tried asking the people around them what was wrong with the house, but everyone was too secretive to answer. The only person who spoke kindly advised them, "Don’t bid on it. It’s really bad news if you live there."

"The house houses the undead?" Shi Qian asked, her confusion evident.

The man waved his hand, glancing around before leaning in close to Shi Qian’s ear. "People don’t always die when they live in a murder house, but they definitely will if they live in this one. Don’t put money on it!"

Yuan Guang hesitated, then remembered they hadn’t captured anything that day. Just as they were considering their next move, a low male voice came from behind them.

"Three hundred and twenty thousand."

Yuan Guang and Shi Qian instinctively turned around. When they saw that the person holding the sign was Tang Erda, the tallest person in the crowd, they gasped and quickly shrank back, hiding in the crowd, trying to blend in under the cover of their sunscreen, not daring to make a sound.

"Are you still auctioning, Shi Qian?" Yuan Guang whispered.

"What the hell! Bai Liu and their team are here. If we auction for it,

we'll be spotted for sure!" Shi Qian said glumly. "That house will have to go to them first."

As if afraid Tang Erda would change his mind, the auctioneer quickly struck the gavel. "Will the gentleman please come forward to collect your home, valued at 320,000!"

Tang Erda walked forward with a tense expression, coldly swiping the recruiter's ID card and paying 320,000. He swiftly took the property deed and left with Bai Liu, his movements hurried and awkward, as if he were a first-time thief trying to cover his tracks.

Hidden in the crowd, Yuan Guang glanced at Shi Qian, as if sharing a silent understanding. "How do you think they got the money?"

"If I'm not mistaken..." Shi Qian barely finished his sentence when a loud scream erupted from the auctioneer's side, pointing toward the direction Tang Erda had left. "Patrol! Catch the man who just swiped his card! He used someone else's card!"

Yuan Guang and Shi Qian: "..."

Ah, sure enough.

"Luckily, we forced those recruiters to write the check right away..." Yuan Guang patted his chest in relief. "That was too close, or we might have gotten caught too."

Shi Qian looked in the direction where Bai Liu had disappeared, slowly frowning. "What's going on with that 320,000 house in Area E?"

Zone E

Bai Liu, after a few detours, successfully lost the patrol following them and headed straight for the location listed on the property deed in Area E.

"18 Street 444..." Mu Sicheng spat as he read the address on the property deed. "What a horrible street number. Really unlucky, right? No wonder the house is so cheap."

Liu Jiayi glanced at Mu Sicheng for a moment. "I don't think a street number would affect the price of a house in Sunshine City."

"They shouldn't care about such things anymore," Tang Erda muttered, scanning the area with a stoic expression. "At this point, people will live anywhere as long as they can survive."

Muke furrowed his brow and asked, "But why would they rather live in a murder house? A house so cheap that only a handful of people put up bids—why is that?"

Bai Liu remained indifferent. "We'll see when we get there."

In contrast to the concrete jungle of the city center, the E district was isolated on the outskirts, with potholes and puddles on the road, muddy from the rain. The district's recreational facilities—walkers and slides—were rusted and collapsed, much like the roads.

Although the buildings were tall, they looked ancient, with paint, plaster, and tiles peeling away in patches. Some buildings were even overtaken by green vines, indicating years of neglect.

A sense of decay hung in the air throughout the entire E district.

Most residents of the old houses appeared elderly. From the windows of their homes, grandparents with frail bodies and weathered faces hung laundry, their clothes faded and patched in several places.

The buildings all looked alike, and even the clothes drying on the balconies seemed to match—nothing stood out.

"Let's ask for directions," Tang Erda said, scanning the area. He spotted an elderly couple walking slowly along the rambler. "Excuse me, how do we get to 444 E?"

The elderly pair looked up when they heard the question, and Tang Erda hesitated when he saw their faces.

The two elderly people, a man and a woman, had cloudy, lifeless grey eyes. Their faces were covered with age spots, and a foul stench of decay hung in the air around them. Yellow-green, reddish blood and pus trickled from their ears and noses, dripping onto the ground, where it was quickly absorbed.

These two people looked as if they had reached the extreme of aging, so much so that they appeared almost like… corpses that could still move.

"You're on…" Tang Erda hesitated.

The elderly man trembled as he replied, "I'm sick… just exercising with my wife."

"The old man should rest when he's sick," Tang Erda said, steadying them with his hand and frowning. "Where are your children?"

The grandmother shook her head. "We can't rest. We have to work."

"Work?!" Mu Sicheng, helping to support the grandmother, asked incredulously, "Granny, you're so old and you still have to work?"

The grandmother gave Mu Sicheng a strange look. "Yes, if you don't work, you don't get paid."

The elderly man nodded approvingly. "We both have a mortgage to pay."

Everyone fell silent for a moment, except for Bai Liu, who stepped forward and gently took over from Tang Erda, helping the old man. "How many years did you take out the loan?"

The elderly man raised his hand to indicate a seven. "I took out a loan with my wife for seventy years. I started working when I was fifteen, and now I have ten years left to pay it off."

"You have to be strong to keep working and paying off your mortgage," the elderly man said, patting Bai Liu's hand as if teaching a younger man. "Don't stop working just because you're sick. It's not right. Look, I've worked for sixty years, and soon, I'll finally have my own house."

"It's a pity that there's nothing left here in E. Back when it was filled with young people, it was as prosperous and expensive as Area A. Unfortunately, now it's just us old folks living here," the elderly man said with a sigh.

"We're getting older. We don't have the energy to work seven or eight jobs a day like we did when we were younger. We don't make much money, and places like hospitals and schools that require heavy spending can't stay open anymore. They all moved out a few years ago. These days, there aren't even a few restaurants left in this neighborhood," the old grandfather continued, shaking his head.

"Hospitals and schools moved out?" Mu Sicheng asked, surprised. "But they're supposed to buy storefronts for hospitals and schools. How could they just leave?"

The elderly man nodded. “Of course, they had to leave if they couldn’t continue. Running a hospital or school is expensive. Although the fees are high, we understand—getting a mortgage for a storefront is very expensive. People who work in hospitals and schools are struggling too. Out of the fifty dollars they earn, forty-eight goes straight toward paying off their mortgage.”

“It’s hard to run a business these days,” the grandmother added, shaking her head in agreement. “We’re just earning a little bit here and there. If we can’t keep going and can’t pay off the mortgage, we’ll have to die, and when we do, the property will be repossessed. Isn’t that what moving out means?”

Mu Sicheng opened his mouth to respond but was at a loss for words.

Soon, the old man perked up again. “But even though the amenities in Area E aren’t great right now, there is one thing that’s nice about the houses here.”

The grandmother smiled gratefully. “It’s a good thing we bought early. Otherwise, we’d be chewing on the scraps now.”

The old man nodded solemnly, his beard shaking with anger. “Yes, these young people today… they want to live well, they want nice houses, but they don’t work hard. They just expect the next generation to take care of them. It’s shameful!”

“What do you mean by ‘gnawing on the next generation’?” Mu Sicheng asked, looking confused.

The old man glanced at him, realizing he didn’t understand. “It’s about the length of property ownership,” he explained kindly. “The houses in E were bought early, and they were given a hundred years of ownership. That means we could live here for almost a century. We were able to get a loan for seventy years. But now, real estate agents don’t offer that long of ownership anymore.”

“Yes,” the grandmother agreed, “I remember that now the ownership is only twenty years. After that, the estate agent takes it back. The loan has to be paid off within twenty years, and the monthly payments are very high. Many young people can’t afford it and end up relying on the next generation to pay the mortgage.”

“Relying on the next generation?” Tang Erda frowned. “What do you mean by that?”

“Well,” the old man hesitated, looking around at the young people who seemed so out of the loop. “It’s a new repayment system that five major developers came up with. It’s where you get an advance on your future, so your children can help pay off the mortgage for you.”

“If you’re interested, there’s a new property opening in Area C today. You can go check it out.”

New development in Area C.

When the grand opening of the property sales center took place just three days ago, the response was overwhelming. Now that it had finally opened, the crowd surged in like a group of hungry men who had been starving for days and smelled a feast.

At the entrance, heavily armed patrols stood guard, holding high-voltage electric batons and steel forks to maintain order.

Yuan Guang and Shi Qian were swept into the crowd. For a few seconds, they were disoriented, unable to comprehend what was happening. It took a while for them to recover.

The number of people attending the opening was far beyond what Yuan Guang and Shi Qian had anticipated. They had only heard the news and decided to take a look, but with just $60 million in their pockets, they knew they couldn’t afford to buy. Still, they understood that buying new properties might be the surest way to survive this game, as opposed to auctioning off murder houses, which might not even guarantee a win.

Originally, Yuan Guang and Shi Qian had thought that not many people would show up for such an expensive new development. But as they looked around, they saw a mixture of well-dressed, first-class citizens, worn-out house slaves, and a few temporary residents wearing CV signs on their chests and barely any clothes.

The extremely diverse crowd only deepened their confusion. Why would a first-class citizen want to buy another home when they already owned one? Why would homeowners who were already paying off mortgages come to a new development they couldn’t afford? And why would temporary residents, who couldn’t even pay their mortgages, come to see it?

Before they could fully process their thoughts, an enthusiastic

salesperson approached them, helping them up with a bright smile. “Hello, are you here to buy a house?”

Yuan Guang, a little flustered, replied, “Yes, yes.”

The real estate NPCs here all exude arrogance and condescension. As soon as they notice your clothes and realize you can’t afford to buy a house, they look down their noses at you, waving their hands impatiently and shooing you away like you're a fly.

“The property isn’t available for sale today. Would you like to view the lot and location first?” Xiaodong, the salesperson for Area C, number 1534, smiled brightly. She quickly moved to help Shi Qian and Yuan Guang sit down. “Would you like a drink? Perhaps some tea?”

Yuan Guang replied cautiously, “Do you have Coke?”

Shi Qian: “Chrysanthemum tea will be fine, thanks.”

Xiaodong smiled and nodded, then raised the microphone in her ear. “One Coke and one chrysanthemum tea, please. I’ll get them for you, just wait a moment.”

As Xiaodong walked away, Shi Qian and Yuan Guang exchanged quick glances, observing that all the salespeople were overly enthusiastic, treating everyone—homeowners, workers, and temporary residents alike—as potential customers who could afford to buy a home.

Shi Qian commented dryly, “If they’re this enthusiastic, there’s probably a reason things aren’t going well.”

Yuan Guang nodded gravely.

Soon, Xiaodong returned with a tray, handing Shi Qian the Coke and Yuan Guang the chrysanthemum tea. She opened the property map and began introducing the house types. “What kind of rooms would you like to see today?”

“We have smaller homes here, 12-16 square meters. They’re perfect for a small family, and when you factor in the equalized area, they still come down to about 11 square meters or more—ideal for a family of three.”

“Of course, if you’re planning to have more children, we recommend a flat between 20-25 square meters. After removing the equalized area,

it comfortably fits three to four siblings."

"For example, you could design a layout with two folding beds and an invisible bed, plus a large bookcase to separate the parents' and children's sleeping areas. This way, you can only see each other's feet, not your faces, providing privacy."

Xiaodong added with a slightly awkward smile, "And it won't interfere with your life as a couple."

Yuan Guang and Shi Qian stared blankly at the 20-square-meter apartment. The parents and children, separated by a large bookcase, could only see each other's feet, but still, they were supposed to have a couple's life in this setup?

Meanwhile, a nearby man and woman seemed to nod approvingly as they discussed the apartment. "Yes, this layout is much more private. Our old place was only 12 square meters, and with three kids, we had to sit on the floor while they watched us—quite uncomfortable for my wife and me."

Shi Qian nearly spit out the water she was drinking.

Three kids watching you while you and your wife...? Something is seriously wrong here.

The salesman's eyes lit up at this. "You have three children?"

The man gave a reserved nod. "Yes, we came here because of the kids."

The salesman smiled even more warmly. "Since you have three children, perhaps you'd be interested in this large 28-square-meter home…"

As they continued their conversation, Shi Qian began to notice something odd. Most of the buyers were couples with multiple children—rarely just one or two. The sales presentations seemed heavily focused on family-friendly homes, particularly those capable of housing multiple children. It felt… strange.

In Sunshine City, Shi Qian was sure she didn't want to marry or have children, but the idea of starting a family seemed prevalent here. The most popular house types were those around 25 square meters, capable of accommodating three kids.

Xiaodong finished her spiel and glanced at Shi Qian and Yuan Guang. “So, are you two planning to get married and have children anytime soon?”

Both Shi Qian and Yuan Guang were taken aback. They had worked together for years, and due to their shared cynicism—shaped by their experiences with soulless buildings and games—they had long abandoned any worldly desire for the opposite sex. Their friendship had evolved into a family-like bond, and the sudden question left them both a bit dumbfounded.

Yuan Guang was about to decline, but Shi Qian quickly covered his mouth. She had noticed the focus on children and gave a shy smile, looking at Xiaodong. “Yes, I’m planning to have three children.”

Yuan Guang, who had just finished a can of Coke, let out a long, horrified burp, his eyes wide.

Xiaodong, understanding the implication, smiled warmly. “Since you’re planning to have children, let me introduce you to a special loan service we offer at Sunshine City Real Estate—our Sunshine Nursery Loan.”

Shi Qian raised an eyebrow. “What kind of loan is that?”

“Well, many people in Sunshine City can’t afford a down payment for a home. For instance, a 25-square-meter unit costs around 320,000 yuan per square meter or 8 million yuan total. The Sunshine Nursery Loan requires a minimum down payment of 50%, which is 4 million yuan. The balance can be repaid over 20 years, at 16,000 yuan per month, excluding interest—most families can manage this.”

Shi Qian couldn’t help but reply, “How is a loan interest-free?”

Xiaodong chuckled lightly. “The Sunshine Nursery Loan we offer doesn’t require interest.”

Yuan Guang shook his head. “Even if there’s no interest, a 4-million-yuan down payment is still too high. Who can afford that?”

Xiaodong’s smile deepened. “That’s the beauty of Sunshine Loans.” Her tone was almost patronizing. “The Sunshine Nursery Loan allows you to secure loans for your children.”

Yuan Guang was momentarily silent. “What do you mean, ‘securing loans for children’?”

Xiaodong smiled as she pulled out a contract book. “Here’s how it works. Let’s say you can only pay a 1-million-yuan down payment. For the remaining 3 million, your child can sign a labor contract with our real estate company, pledging their future labor. For example, each of your three children would only need to pledge 1 million yuan in future salary.”

Yuan Guang looked down at the employment contract she handed him, stunned.

[... "Party A agrees that when their child turns 16 and is able to work, they will work 12 hours a day at Party B’s company. Party B will pay them 4,500 yuan per month (average salary level), while deducting 80% of the child’s salary to repay Party A’s mortgage debt until the loan is paid off."]

Yuan Guang’s spine chilled as he slowly raised his head, dizzy from the implications. “80% of his salary? He’ll work 12 hours a day with no breaks… How will the child live?”

“That's not your concern,” Xiaodong replied with a cold smile. “Children are meant to support their parents. Didn’t you have them so they could help pay for your house and let you enjoy your life?”

She continued, unfazed, “Besides, if you’re worried about your child’s hard life, don’t forget—they’ll eventually have kids of their own to care for.”

Chapter End Notes

What the Fuck is wrong with those people!!

How to Own Five Buildings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"So that's why Sunnyside's marriage and fertility rates have been so high for three years in a row," Bai Liu mused. "It's because of the [Sunshine Nursery] loan."

Mu Sicheng, horrified, asked, "A mortgage on a child? Won't these kids run away when they grow up and realize they're being mortgaged?"

The grandmother sighed and shook her head. "You can't leave. Once you come to Sunnyside, there's no way out until you've paid off the loan."

"My partner and I haven't left in sixty years," the old man said, looking out over the E block. The tall buildings blocked most of the sunlight, letting in only a sliver of light. His eyes reflected a brief longing. "Sometimes, I want to go outside, but when I finally take a day off work, I don't."

He paused, his voice softening. "I really hope that, in ten years, after we've paid off the loan, we'll have some money left over to see the outside world."

"In all my time here, I've never seen the sun in its entirety."

The old man sighed, but before he could continue, he broke into a violent coughing fit. Blood and pus spilled from his mouth and nose.

The grandmother, quickly retrieving a small handkerchief from her chest, wiped his face, then turned to Bai Liu and nodded apologetically. "I'm sorry. He and I both work on construction sites. The dust has always been bad for our respiratory health. It's an old issue."

"The monthly medical bills are a huge burden," she continued. "When we were young, we should've worn protection. We shouldn't have rushed to work for so little." She patted the old man's back in a slightly reproachful manner, letting out a long sigh. "You see now, don’t you? You need to go to the doctor, right?"

Tang Erda took out a bottle of water, slowly feeding it to the old man. He frowned, asking, "Is this an occupational disease from working so many hours? Is it a serious workplace injury, and your company doesn't cover it?"

The old man and his wife looked at him, confused. "What work injury? What compensation?"

Tang Erda opened his mouth to explain but stopped. Realizing how the systems worked—or rather, didn't work—he closed his mouth and awkwardly muttered, "Nothing."

After sipping the water, the old man pondered Tang Erda's question for a moment. He seemed to understand, and then, with a chuckle, shook his head. "Eh, young man, after decades of working on construction sites, when you reach my age, everyone ends up with a disease like this."

"The company didn't start to do charity work," he added, waving his hand dismissively. "Do you think they'd mind covering our medical bills after all these years? There's no benefit to them in that."

Bai Liu walked alongside the old man. "I've noticed many new citizens coming to Sunnyside. Are you both natives of this place, or did you immigrate?"

"My partner and I are immigrants," the old man replied, looking at Bai Liu. "In recent years, fewer immigrants have come to Sunnyside, and most of the newcomers are from earlier waves—like us."

Bai Liu pressed on, "Why were there so many migrants to Sunnyside in the past?"

The old man paused, as though struggling to remember. "Ah, we had a loan program back then called [Sunshine New Home]." His eyes glazed as he searched for the details. "I can't remember exactly, but if you came to Sunnyside, bought a house, and brought at least twenty others to buy houses too, you'd get nearly three million in subsidies for the house price."

"At that time, everyone was buying houses around 30 square meters, at about 200,000 yuan each. It was basically a 50% discount!" The old man looked proud. "Even though salaries were low, one or two thousand a month, it was still a great deal!"

The grandmother nodded in agreement. "Buying a house back then,

even though it was a struggle, was the best decision we ever made."

The old man chuckled softly, shaking his head. "We were reluctant to move at first. We were so desperate that I shouted things like, 'If you're a brother, cut me three million off the price!' across the street."

"Yeah," the grandmother added, laughing. "We were coaxed by a friend to come over because they needed twenty foreigners to buy houses to qualify for the [Sunshine New Home] loan service."

The old man's eyes glinted with nostalgia as he remembered. "Under my friend's strong persuasion, I was a man of principle, so I gritted my teeth and bought the house. Then, I called twenty friends to come buy houses too, so we could all get the [Sunshine New Home] deal."

With a proud wave of his hand, the old man said, "Now, they're all grateful to me. Without my help, they could never have afforded a house at today's prices."

Bai Liu's expression shifted slightly. "I see."

No wonder there are so many new immigrants in this sunny city. It turns out it's all part of this pyramid scheme to bring people in.

Once someone buys a house here and pays off their loan, they end up bringing in twenty more people who also buy a house and pay off their loans. Then, those twenty people bring in four hundred more, and so on. Once someone buys a house in Sunshine City with a loan, they can't leave—each wave traps more people here, creating a never-ending cycle.

"Is the [Sunshine New Home] loan program still available?" Bai Liu asked quietly, noticing that there were still quite a few new migrants.

"Long gone," the old man replied, shaking his head. "Now, Sunshine City's population increases significantly each year just through births. There's no need to bring in foreigners anymore. The immigrants arriving now probably aren't well-informed. They don't know that the [Sunshine New Home] loan was canceled long ago, and they missed out."

The grandmother sighed, "These young people came too late. If they'd arrived earlier, they could have bought a nice 20-square-foot house in Sunnyside just by bringing others in."

"Property prices are so high now," the old man lamented. "No wonder

young people are stuck living in cemetery houses. You're basically living with the dead. It's bold of you to buy one and actually live in it."

Bai Liu quickly picked up on the term. "Cemetery house?"

The old man gave them a wry look. "Didn't you know that Road 444, Route 18, in Zone E, is the Sunnyside cemetery?"

Mu Sicheng paused for a moment. "But the property deed says it's the 18th floor. How can it be a cemetery?"

"Right," the old man explained naturally. "Our cemeteries here are also buildings, dug deep underground. The closest floor to the ground is the first floor of the cemetery, and the deeper you go, the higher the floors. Usually, each tomb has 18 floors. The one you have is the top floor—basically, the lowest cemetery level, the worst one."

"The bottom floors have large tombs, typically large enough to hold the bodies of the Quan family, about 3-5 square meters. These are usually bought by the wealthiest citizens. The top floors, on the other hand, are much smaller, around 1-2 square meters, only big enough for one body. They're harder to sell, but yours is a decent size—about 2.5 square meters."

"To the 18th floor of the cemetery?!" Mu Sicheng gasped, a little dizzy from the idea. "What's the difference between that and the 18th level of hell?"

The old man laughed, thinking Mu Sicheng was joking. "This is just how things are in Sunshine City. The cemetery is a high-rise building, just like the other buildings. Otherwise, it would take up too much land, and land here is too expensive."

"But don't live in one of those cemetery houses," the old man added, his tone turning serious as he spoke directly to Bai Liu. "I know some young people buy them because they're cheap, but trust me, don't live in one."

"If you can live in a murder house, why not here?" Bai Liu replied with a raised eyebrow.

The old man leaned in, lowering his voice to whisper in Bai Liu's ear. "There's no elevator in the cemetery building, so if you want to go back to your place on the 18th floor after a long day of work, you'll have to walk up, floor by floor, passing all the tombs."

"And at night..." The old man lowered his voice further, "It's a place for the dead. They come out at night."

"Living in a murder house, you might only encounter one ghost, but living in a cemetery? You'll meet a ghost on every floor. The ghosts on the ground floor... where would you hide from them? You won't even be able to run up to the top in time."

The old man paused to cough, then gave Bai Liu a serious pat on the shoulder. "Living among the dead will slowly turn you into one, too. It's better to work hard, earn money, and try to buy a house on the ground floor in Sunnyside."

Chapter End Notes

> It's not the ghost lurking in the shadows, the zombie clawing at the door, or the whispers of spirits in the dark that scare me.
> It's the thought that this could all happen for real—that something so terrifying, like the cruel system of poverty, could escape the realm of fiction and become a part of our world.

How to Own Five Buildings

At 6 p.m., twilight settled in, and with the towering buildings throughout the sunny town, the daylight quickly faded, casting the area into darkness.

In District C, the streetlights lining the new buildings flickered on one by one, casting a warm, even orange glow. The lights on the top floors of some buildings also came on, sparkling like diamonds, much brighter than the streetlights. They shone like stars against the night sky, making Yuan Guang and Shi Qian pause to gaze up at them.

"It's so bright," Shi Qian exclaimed. "These penthouses are so bright, I haven't seen such a bright light even during the day."

"Of course," Yuan Guang said, taking a packet of bread and a bottle of mineral water. He tilted his head, looking at the top floors. "That's where the wealthiest people in District C live. Usually, they buy the entire floor."

"Each floor is over 320 square feet, and that's just the ground floor," Yuan Guang continued. "Typically, each floor is more than 300 square feet, even after the average share is taken out."

Shi Qian blinked, astonished. "More than 320 square feet for a single suite? If we calculate it based on 25 square feet per person, that means this could house at least 52 people!"

"And the top floors are the most expensive," Yuan Guang added, crunching the numbers he'd gathered from sales figures. "For a ground floor, prices go up to 370-400,000. That works out to around 130 million for a whole floor…"

Shi Qian, who had been listening to Xiaodong all afternoon about Sunshine Seedlings, subconsciously began doing the math. "They can pledge 50 to 1 million per child here, so for 130 million, that's about 130 children…"

The maximum number of people that could live in the house is 52, but it takes 130 children to secure a mortgage, and it's clear that these additional children won't grow up to live there. There's no space for them, and their names aren't even on the property deeds.

According to Xiaodong, these children, who are given loans by Sunshine, will eventually be asked by their parents to leave home

once they’re old enough to work. They'll have to save up for their own homes while paying off their parents’ loans for decades.

This means they will live under the pressure of two mortgages for the rest of their lives.

The thought hung heavily in the air, and both Yuan Guang and Shi Qian fell silent, feeling a sense of suffocation.

Yuan Guang looked down at his 10 yuan packet of discounted bread, squeezing the greasy bag between his fingers. "Without the [Sunshine loan] program, with the average salary of 4,500, it’d take an eternity to live in a penthouse. Not even counting the interest on the loan, you'd have to stop eating and drinking altogether..."

Shi Qian paused, managing a bitter laugh. "It seems like you’d need to work for 2,000 years just to afford a 300-square-foot house..."

Yuan Guang took a bite of the bread, chewing in silence. The bread tasted stale, and he swallowed it with difficulty, his stomach churning.

"This bread is expired. Don't eat it," Shi Qian said, having long since stopped eating it and simply holding onto it.

Yuan Guang looked down at the bread. "But it's one of the hot sellers at the convenience store. Everyone else is queuing up to buy it."

"Because it’s cheap, I guess," Shi Qian sighed softly. "We were late; the eight-dollar instant noodles sold out. Here, a skewer of Kanto costs sixteen dollars, and people can’t afford anything other than the ten-yuan discounted bread."

Shi Qian straightened up and patted Yuan Guang on the shoulder. "It all tastes the same, so don’t bother eating it. I lost a bit of life after one bite. Go throw it away."

Yuan Guang took a deep breath and stood up. He looked back at the darkness of the buildings, which loomed like a steel forest, only the top floors gleaming with an eerie, beautiful light.

"That salesman said the top floor is the closest to the sun in Sunnyside, so it’s always in high demand. The rich people rush to get them."

Yuan Guang muttered in a daze, "It’s only six o'clock, and it’s already as bright as day. There's no darkness anywhere else—only the top floors are lit. No wonder everyone wants to buy a house here."

Shi Qian walked over to the bins and turned around to follow Yuan Guang's gaze. The complexity of her expression was hard to hide. "Because only the residents on the top floors come home from work at six o'clock and leave the lights on, I suppose."

"The other floors are occupied by ordinary residents who are probably still working overtime."

Yuan Guang was taken aback. Her thoughts quickly snapped back. "Yes, they basically work all day without any holidays..."

Just as they were about to toss the bread into the trash, a man suddenly appeared and stared at the bread in their hands with eager eyes. Both Yuan Guang and Shi Qian jumped in surprise.

The woman whispered, "Can I have the bread you're not eating?"

Yuan Guang glanced at the woman standing in front of them. She was well-dressed, with light makeup, and the faint light from the streetlamp illuminated her features. He couldn't resist calling out, "Xiaodong?!"

Standing by the trash bin was Xiaodong, the smiling real estate salesperson who had introduced them to the properties.

Xiaodong didn't seem embarrassed at all and fixed her gaze on the bread they were about to throw away. "Can I have the bread if you're not going to eat it?"

Yuan Guang and Shi Qian exchanged hesitant glances. After Shi Qian gave a small nod, Yuan Guang handed over the bread, still confused. "Xiaodong, you work in real estate sales. Your salary must be pretty good, so... why would you..."

Yuan Guang's words trailed off as they watched Xiaodong finish the bread in two large bites, not even bothering to drink any water.

... It had decayed to the point where both he and Shi Qian nearly lost their lives eating it. Xiaodong, however, showed no reaction, as if she was accustomed to such food.

After finishing the bread, Xiaodong clapped her hands together and flashed Yuan Guang one of her signature business smiles. "I'm just a salesman, like a receptionist. People come from all walks of life; I was just lucky to be chosen because I'm good-looking and can talk."

Yuan Guang asked, "Would you mind telling us how much you make a month?"

Xiaodong answered without hesitation, "Three thousand five hundred."

Yuan Guang's expression faltered. In this world, one couldn't even buy a property with that amount... it was truly surreal.

Shi Qian asked, "Normally, don't you get a commission when a building is sold?"

"What's a commission?" Xiaodong looked confused.

After Shi Qian explained, Xiaodong suddenly understood. "Oh, you mean that. The agent developer takes a commission of 27% on each building sold. We don't get that profit. We just help out the developer's agent."

Yuan Guang furrowed his brow and asked, "You act as the developer's agent?"

In the real world, he understood the concept of an agent developer. But now that the land was privately owned, what need was there for an agent?

Xiaodong nodded. "Yes, every new development has an agent developer. The agent developer is usually a descendant of one of the top five developers who control most of the land."

"The big developers don't come out themselves," Xiaodong continued. "Instead, they contract the development to their heirs as agents. For example, the agent developer for this new development in Area C is the grandson of one of the top five developers."

She wiped her fingers, explaining further, "The agent developer is responsible for studying the needs, desires, and affordable pricing for residents in Sunshine City. They allocate floor space and design different types of houses to fit those needs."

"Affordable pricing?!" Shi Qian couldn't help but curse. "You call this affordable and livable?"

Yuan Guang's eyes twitched, and he asked, "So, the ownership of the new property is in the hands of the agent developer?"

Xiaodong nodded. "Yes."

Yuan Guang hesitated before asking, "Do you know where he lives? Or rather, Xiaodong, do you know if the agent developer for this new development in Area C will be showing up tonight?"

Xiaodong pointed to the brightest top floor in Area C. "No, that's where he lives."

"He'll definitely show up tonight," Xiaodong said, turning to Yuan Guang. "The new property pricing isn't set yet, and he has to come over to finalize it."

Yuan Guang repeated softly, "Pricing?"

"Yes," Xiaodong confirmed. "He'll determine how much the house costs per square foot. He's probably up on the top floor with other agent developers, but he should come down by 7:30 to set the price for the new property."

7:30.

In the bustling, gilded sales hall, the glow of the crystal chandelier suddenly dimmed, and the sound of a soft violin playing filled the air. A halo of white light hit the door as a middle-aged man, dressed in a baggy tracksuit, sneakers, and slightly rumpled clothes, appeared in the center of the light.

Everyone fell silent, respectfully clearing a path for him as he entered the hall. The man smiled and greeted those on either side with a fist and a bow, moving leisurely within the light until he reached the towering bleachers opposite the main doors. He turned to face everyone and gave another polite bow.

"Good evening, everyone," he said.

Xiaodong leaned in to whisper in Shi Qian's ear, "He's the general agent developer for Area C. We usually call him C Dong."

Shi Qian and Yuan Guang exchanged a look, both feeling strangely puzzled.

This C Dong... he looked like a normal person and was quite polite.

This so-called C Dong stood on a red wooden platform more than a

meter above the ground. Behind him hung a large, stepped floating painting with a grid of wooden panels ascending upward, disappearing into the shadows above. These panels protruded from the painting like a ladder, each numbered sequentially from 300,000, 305,000, and so on, all the way up to 580,000.

Each panel represented a price, and the panel labeled [320,000] displayed a blue flag embroidered with the four large golden letters: [Today's Property Price].

C Dong slowly picked up the flag from the [320,000] panel. Shi Qian could hear the collective breath of the crowd, a deep, synchronized intake of air, all eyes turning to the small blue flag.

A child in the crowd whispered, "Mom, you're pinching my shoulder."

Shi Qian glanced over and saw the couple who had inquired about the house earlier that morning. The mother knelt down to hug her child tightly, tears welling in her eyes. She patted his shoulder and whispered, "I'm sorry, it's mommy's fault for bringing you to a place like this."

The child, still holding her hand, smiled cheerfully, "It's okay, Mom. We're here to buy a new home. There's nothing wrong with that."

The mother took a deep breath, burying her face in her child's shoulder with a soft "mmm."

The father, standing nearby, looked at his child with averted eyes. His hand trembled slightly as he guided their other two children, his face full of helplessness.

Shi Qian turned her gaze away, her fist clenched slowly.

Instead of simply dropping the flag, C Dong playfully held it behind his back, flashing a friendly smile as he addressed the crowd. "I believe we all came here for one thing— a home."

He continued, "It's our shared goal to provide a warm home for everyone who comes to Sunny City, and the price of housing is, of course, everyone's greatest concern. That's why I've spent the entire afternoon negotiating with the agent developers from several other districts, without even stopping for a drink of water, just to bring down the price of 320,000 per square foot."

The crowd was visibly riveted, even Xiaodong, who was excitedly

hopping on her heels, trying to catch a glimpse of the action.

A few voices broke through the silence, some already blushing with excitement, "C Dong, are you really planning to lower the price of the new property?"

C Dong smiled, spreading his hands in a mock helpless gesture. "Of course. I already live on the top floor of Sunshine City and make over a billion a month. Does it make sense for me to profit from you all again?"

"Could I earn more and buy a house even higher than the sun?" he joked, and the crowd couldn't help but laugh. The atmosphere lightened as some began to cheer, calling out:

"C Dong, you're the greatest!"

"I'll definitely try to work for C Dong's company in the future!"

The couple, too, were caught up in the excitement, whispering excitedly to each other, their heads pressed together.

"If it drops any further, maybe we should just stay and work here. We can earn it back with a few more jobs."

The man nodded approvingly. "This new development is hiring construction workers, and the pay's decent. If the price drops to under 200,000 per square foot, we could work 20-hour shifts and still make it work."

Xiaodong was almost moved to tears, but Yuan Guang and Shi Qian exchanged looks, sensing something was off.

What happened to conscience this time of year?

C Dong raised his hand to calm the crowd, smiling gently. "Personally, I don't think the house prices should go up any further. I hope everyone in Sunny City can work as hard as I have to live in a penthouse here."

He then took the flag from behind his back, lowering it to the panel marked [300,000], and with great flourish, announced, "After my efforts, the price of this new property has been reduced to 260,000 per square foot."

The room fell into stunned silence for two seconds before erupting

into wild cheers.

"Oh my God! That’s like two-year-old prices!"

"Am I dreaming? Pinch me!"

The couple, still holding their children tightly, exhaled in relief. The wife immediately broke into tears of joy. They had struggled in their small home, working hard to raise three children while managing a loan they had taken out for their children's birth. Now, with prices skyrocketing, the new development in Area C had seemed like a distant hope until today.

But how could they just let go of a child they had nurtured for years and send it to the fire?

"But..." C Dong's brow furrowed with a touch of sadness as he slowly raised the blue flag again, "Although the price has been reduced, my actions have made the agents from several other districts very upset. They're demanding—"

With a serious expression, C Dong lifted his friendly face and continued, "—that we raise the commission from 27 percent to 40 percent."

"So, while the house price is now 260,000 per square foot," he said, moving the flag to the [370,000] grid, "with the new commission, the final price is now 370,000 per square foot. I’ve done my best. I hope you won’t blame me, right?"

Xiaodong staggered back, her face pale. She suddenly covered her mouth and ran to the trash bin, vomiting after swallowing the bitter taste of expired, moldy bread.

The couple, dazed, dropped to the floor, clutching the [Sunshine Nursery] contract in their hands. There was no light left in their eyes as they muttered under their breath, "No blame, no blame on C Dong..."

How to Own Five Buildings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At $370,000 per square foot, the moment the price was announced, some people in the sales office stood frozen in shock, while others rushed forward like crazed shoppers.

"I told you the prices were going to rise again!"
"Buy now! If you wait, it'll hit $400,000 per square foot, and then you'll really be priced out!"
"For sale! This way for a large 25-square-foot unit!"
"Same here! Is there still a unit on the 17th floor?"
"Sorry, the 17th floor is already sold out. How about the 27th floor instead?"

Xiaodong, clutching her stomach, managed a pale, sweat-drenched smile as she led other customers through the property. People lined up, clutching loan contracts and crowding together, desperate not to miss their chance. Faces flushed and hearts racing, they shouted in excitement:

"I want a loan for two Sunshine Nurseries!"
"I need a loan for five units!"

Some onlookers murmured to themselves, "I really can't afford this... I don’t want to mortgage my children," before suddenly turning and running out.

Within minutes, the sound of a body hitting the ground echoed from outside the building. The crowd barely reacted, glancing briefly before looking away.

"Another jumper, huh?"
"Yeah, it happens every time property prices rise. Young people can’t handle the pressure."

The patrol officers moved with methodical efficiency, collecting the bodies and transporting them to two men in white coats who were waiting nearby.

"Let’s see if these two had loans," one of the officers said. "If they did, we’ll take them to a private hospital and auction off their organs,

bones, and corneas to cover the debt."

The corpse collectors nodded, while the patrol officer looked at the bodies with disdain. One officer even kicked a corpse, sneering, "You think you can skip out on your debt just because you die? Nice try!"

"I wonder how much we can get for these corpses," another officer commented. "If they had large loans, the auction might not even cover it. In the end, the big boss, C Dong, might take a loss."

"What a shameless bunch," the first officer grumbled. "The big boss was kind enough to give them an advance, and now they want to die before paying it back."

Amid the chaos, the crowd buzzed with excitement, but Shi Qian and Yuan Guang, standing in the center, felt the cold chill of horror. The patrol officers' casual conversation, combined with the loud noises of people scrambling to close deals, made them feel as though they were trapped on the 18th floor of hell.

Around them, there were people who treated others—and themselves—like mere objects, caught in a cycle of suffering and exploitation, unaware of the torment they were causing or enduring.

Yuan Guang and Shi Qian slowly turned their heads to look at C Dong, who sat proudly in the stands, beaming with a glass of wine in hand, celebrating the success of his new development. As he casually waved his hand, a dangerous silver gleam flashed.

[System Alert: Player Yuan Guang uses his personal skill weapon (Artisan's Knife)]
[System Alert: Player Shi Qian uses his personal skill weapon (Caliper Cone)]

Area E Cemetery

At 8:20, the sky had completely darkened, casting the cemetery opposite Road 444 in gloom. The straight, oval-shaped tombstones stood in the shadows, their forms barely visible through the old, two-opening, carved iron gate. The names on the headstones were faintly discernible.

Aside from the overgrown weeds, the only movement came from one or two crows, fluttering down to rest on the headstones and cawing

hoarsely.

Next to the iron gate stood a dilapidated, half-buried security room with a crooked, swinging door. Inside, there was only a dusty stool, evidence that the place had been abandoned for some time.

Tang Erda's expression was complicated. "That old man said the cemetery on the E side was looted and turned into a part of the E housing development back in the day. Now, there's no one left to maintain it."

"Because everyone in Sunnyside has enough money to buy a house, but who can afford a tomb?" Mu Sicheng sighed, clearly disappointed. "I feel like these tombs are just decoration. Who would buy one, except the rich?"

Bai Liu smiled, "Not necessarily."

Liu Jiayi glanced around before speaking coldly, "These cemeteries aren't meant to be sold to the living. They're sold to the dead."

"Sold to the dead?" Mu Sicheng's face twisted in confusion. "Why would someone buy a house when they're already dead?"

Muke, surprisingly calm, nodded. "Based on what Bai Liu said earlier, and what that old man told us, we can infer that the realtors in Sunnyside built everything for profit—either in money or a currency that could be exchanged for human labor."

"Land is the means of production they control. Through monopolies and manipulation, real estate agents have turned it into something that can be exchanged for labor at an ever-increasing premium."

Mu Sicheng's head spun. "What?"

"Essentially," Muke continued, "human productivity is constantly being devalued through the monetary system. By monopolizing the means of production, they trap everyone in competition, pushing your productivity down while inflating housing prices."

Mu Sicheng looked lost. "I'm not following."

"By monopolizing land, they transform it into a means of extracting productivity at an infinite premium," Muke explained. "And when they build cemeteries, they can use them as tools to extract more productivity. They turn land into something even the dead can work

for."

Muke paused and looked at Mu Sicheng. "Did you skip any foundation classes in college? Like Civic Marxism or something?"

Mu Sicheng, catching the mockery in Muke's tone, scowled and turned to Bai Liu, who was watching the cemetery entrance. "Bai Liu, Muke doesn't speak human!"

Mu Sicheng's voice was filled with mock outrage. "Good grades, a great memory—just remember everything from class like a robot!"

Bai Liu, crouched with his back to Mu Sicheng, was observing the dense footprints on the ground. Without looking back, he spoke in a calm tone.

"Don't you think ghosts are better laborers than people?"

"A person works six days a week, nine hours a day—that's about 54 hours. Take out time for eating and going to the bathroom, and it rounds up to about 50 hours of actual work."

"But ghosts don't need to eat or sleep. They only need a few rooms to house a family. They can work 24/7, up to 168 hours a week."

Bai Liu stood up slowly. "That's the equivalent of 3.4 people working 996 for an entire week."

"In terms of productivity, ghosts are far more cost-effective than people. And if you look at the extreme end—"

Bai Liu turned and locked eyes with Mu Sicheng. "Here in Sunnyside, they've been bringing in more people to stimulate population growth, but they don't care about the death rate. They've raised property prices without considering whether people can survive here. They even encourage things like suicide or euthanasia, all under the guise of 'survival of the fittest.' This helps eliminate the poor, turning them into ghosts—into 3.4 units of productivity."

"In other words, maybe the real estate agents don't care about the living at all. They only care about the dead—the ghosts, the cheap, useful labor beneath the surface of Sunnyside."

Mu Sicheng's face twisted in unease. "So, these people are forced to work, even after they die? They can't even rest in peace?"

Bai Liu glanced at him. "No."

Mu Sicheng gestured helplessly, trying to argue but finding no words. "That's... that's just horrible. I mean, if I were a ghost, I'd just stay out of it. Why would I want to keep working for them after I'm dead?"

Bai Liu, dusting off his sleeve, stood up and walked slowly toward Mu Sicheng. "Have you seen 'Sinister and Ghostly'?"

Mu Sicheng blinked, caught off guard by the sudden change of topic. "Yeah, I've seen it."

Bai Liu let out a faint humph. "Then why do you think Nie Xiaoqian, as a ghost, didn't just leave when she had to work hard every week, cheat two men to feed her grandmother, and finally sell herself to the Black Mountain Old Demon?"

"Do you think she enjoyed working for her grandmother?" Bai Liu asked calmly.

Mu Sicheng was at a loss for words.

What a stupid question! Of course, she didn't stay because she liked it. She was trapped!

Mu Sicheng frowned and pressed on, "Do you think the reason they were trapped is related to the cemetery?"

Bai Liu nodded. "I agree with Liu Jiayi. These tombs were probably not built for the living but for the dead."

"Buy?" Mu Sicheng was even more confused. "Do the developers pay ghosts?"

Bai Liu gave him a sidelong glance. "Would you work if you weren't paid?"

Mu Sicheng groaned. "I guess not."

"I'm starting to feel strange," Mu Sicheng muttered, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "If I were a ghost, stuck in Sunnyside with no way out... I wouldn't work for anyone, even if they offered me a salary."

He gave the cemetery a disgusted glance. "I don't need food, I don't need sleep... why would I need a house or money? Even if the real estate agents trapped me here, after I've worked my whole life to become a ghost, there's no way I'd work for them in the afterlife!"

Bai Liu looked at Mu Sicheng with an approving smile. "Nie Xiaoqian probably thought the same way. Very brave of her."

Mu Sicheng grimaced. "What? You're comparing me to her now?"

Mu Sicheng, now fully frustrated, clenched his fist and raised it in the air. "I'm already dead! What do they think they're going to do to me? I'm not going out there to seduce men for them!"

Bai Liu narrowed his eyes as he studied the cemetery gates. "What circumstances would make someone willing to work like crazy even after death, just to buy a plot in a cemetery that's only two square meters wide?"

Liu Jiayi spoke up. "Could it be that, like the living, the dead still have to pay land use fees? Is that why they hide in flats or cemeteries?"

"But if they don't pay, what can they do?" Mu Sicheng crossed his arms, shaking his legs in a smug gesture. "I'm dead. They can't do anything to me."

Bai Liu slowly turned his head and smiled. "That's not true. The living don't pay for land use, they just get killed. The dead, however... they can't die again. They can be tortured in much worse ways."

Mu Sicheng's expression faltered. "So, they can't die again, no matter how much they're tortured?"

Muke, without moving, added helpfully, "Nie Xiaoqian didn't want to work for Lou Lou, either. But Lou Lou was a tree demon who tortured ghosts by sticking her roots into their bodies, making them work for her. Lou Lou would make them seduce men and rip their hearts out."

Muke smiled gently at Mu Sicheng. "There's always a way to make a ghost work. Don't you agree, God Mu?"

Mu Sicheng sighed in frustration, shaking his head. "Thanks for the perspective. Now it feels like I'm the one being seduced into working."

Chapter End Notes

> If you want to know more, go and see the Wiki for the explication of Nie Xiaoqian:
> https://myths-in-media.fandom.com/wiki/Nie_Xiaoqian

How to Own Five Buildings

Bai Liu pushed open the door of the dilapidated security room and stepped into the cemetery.

The scene before him was typical: rows of marble headstones, each standing in front of a plinth about 1 by 2 meters wide. The inscriptions on the plinths listed the person's date of birth, date of death, and cause of death.

Muke scanned the plinths from side to side, his gaze sharp as if he were collecting data for analysis. He then looked up at Bai Liu and said, "More than 80 percent of the people here died before the age of 60, with an average life expectancy of around 52 years. Most died from various organ diseases or work-related injuries caused by sensory conditions."

"It's not just that," Liu Jiayi said, stopping at a gravestone. "The later the birth date, the earlier the death date."

She spoke calmly, "The average life expectancy is shrinking, and there are more sudden deaths now."

Muke followed Liu Jiayi's gaze to a gravestone marking the death of a woman, just 32, who had died suddenly in front of her computer. "Judging by the headstone data, the average age of death in Sunnyside has dropped to around 30 for women and 35 for men."

Liu Jiayi added, "And both happen to be just past the prime age for childbearing."

Muke glanced at Bai Liu.

Bai Liu walked forward, his gaze distant. "Sudden death after you're no longer able to have children... the real estate developers here in Sunnyside are clearly controlling the average life expectancy, pushing it to a point where people work long enough to remain productive but decline after they have children."

He shook his head slightly. "They're extracting the maximum value from everyone."

Mu Sicheng surveyed the area, his gaze darting from the grass to the headstones. With a frown, he said, "There are only normal headstones here. I don't see any entrance to the 18-story underground cemetery

building, nor any floor numbers."

Tang Erda looked at the paper in his hand. "The number is unit 0812."

Bai Liu halted, his gaze landing on a headstone. "Twelfth in the eighth row. This must be it."

Tang Erda's eyes widened when he saw where Bai Liu had stopped. There was only a headstone with no other buildings around. If Bai Liu was correct, this could only mean one thing.

"Lift the pedestal," Bai Liu instructed calmly. "The entrance is inside the tomb."

Mu Sicheng was taken aback. "Inside the tomb? So our floor is already the ground floor of the cemetery building?"

"But if the first level is the entrance and we have to lift it to get in..." Mu Sicheng glanced at the headstone of a young man who had died at 26. "Then where are the graves of these people?"

Tang Erda frowned, his suspicion growing. "These people died too young to have afforded the first tomb in a wealthy area."

Bai Liu stared impassively at the young man's posthumous photograph. "This isn’t the first level."

He continued, "According to the normal structure, the tomb here would be considered the basement or garage, the cheapest part of the entire building."

He glanced around. "So, the people buried here were likely low-class citizens of Sunnyside, unable to afford a spot in the 18-story cemetery building."

When Tang Erda and Mu Sicheng finally lifted the heavy plinth, they were stunned. The sight beneath was not what they expected. Instead of the ground beneath, there was a narrow, dark staircase leading down, so tight that only one person could pass through. But the real shock came when they saw what was inside the transparent coffin.

A young boy, perhaps in his teens, was curled up inside the coffin, his body squashed into a space too small for him. He clutched his shoulders tightly, his breath coming in short gasps. The mist of his breath condensed against the glass, creating a thin ring of fog. His expression was tense and pained, as though he might suffocate at any

moment.

Without hesitation, Tang Erda lifted the coffin lid and pulled the boy out, slapping his face. "Wake up!"

The boy coughed twice, disoriented, then blinked at the strangers in front of him. "Are you the new residents of the 0812 Cemetery building?" He rubbed his eyes. "Sorry, I must have fallen asleep. But I'll get up now and let you in."

Mu Sicheng stood frozen for a moment, staring at the boy in disbelief. "You were just... sleeping here?"

The boy seemed completely unfazed and nodded. "Yeah, this is my house. I sleep here at night."

Muke stared at the transparent coffin, not even 1.5 square meters in size, which the boy casually referred to as his "home." He couldn't help but feel unsettled.

"If you're the occupant of the ground floor of this cemetery building," Liu Jiayi said, her tone sharp, "then who is the person on the tombstone outside, marked as dead at 26?"

The boy scratched his head. "That's me, but I'm not dead yet."

Mu Sicheng glanced at the posthumous photograph on the tombstone. After a moment, he nodded slowly. "Yes, the photo is blurry, but it's definitely him."

Bai Liu looked at the boy with a calm expression. "You look like you're in your teens. Why did you put a 26-year-old's tombstone on yourself?"

"I'm 17," the boy explained matter-of-factly. "When I bought a cemetery house here at 16, the agent developer offered me a tombstone. I didn't want kids and didn't have any other big goals, so I figured I'd live to 26. I told the agent to just put the date of death on the tombstone until I was 26."

He smiled innocently at Bai Liu and the others. "That's how the tombstone came to be."

Tang Erda was taken aback. "You're 17. Where are your parents?"

"They're all dead," the boy answered casually. "They worked on a

construction site and died young. Not long after they passed, the house we had on loan was repossessed after twenty years."

He shrugged. "Even though we lost the house, I still had to pay off the loan for over ten years. So I couldn't save any money. That's why I had to buy a cemetery house."

Muke noticed the boy's bloodstained hands, typical of someone who worked on construction sites. He paused and asked, "Where are you working now?"

"The new building in C district," the boy replied. "It just opened, and I got lucky. The salary is good, and I've been earning a lot recently."

The boy seemed in a better mood as he crawled back into the coffin, huddling into a corner. He tilted his head, smiling kindly as he waved at Bai Liu and the others. "You have to work tomorrow, so get inside and rest. It's not safe in this building late at night."

His tone was completely ordinary, as if he were greeting new neighbors in a regular apartment building.

"I'm going to rest too," the boy yawned, settling back into the coffin. He pressed a button beside him, and the pedestal closed like an automatic lift door.

The stench of decay grew stronger as the group marched in silence through the darkened hallways of the building.

"The boy... he's only seventeen, not yet an adult," Tang Erda spoke up abruptly, his voice muffled. "What kind of place lets a seventeen-year-old face this reality—sleeping in his own grave, marked as twenty-six?"

Bai Liu's voice was calm. "I don't think 'adulthood' exists here. They measure it by whether someone can work. It seems the base age for that is sixteen."

Tang Erda fell silent once more.

The five of them continued downwards, their footsteps echoing as they reached the ground floor. A faint, eerie blue light flickered to life, casting a cold glow on the narrow, cramped cemetery building. There were five households on this floor, each door designed not for easy access but as a narrow, push-in door, with rusty iron chains hanging from the bolts.

Each door was flanked by three sliding panels, all lined up in a cramped formation. The dark blue light, thick with the stench of decay, added to the oppressive feeling. The tight, dense layout gave the place an unsettling look.

Muke spoke quietly, "- It feels more like an incinerator than a cemetery building."

As they stopped to observe their surroundings, the lights went out again.

In the sudden darkness, there were a few clicks—the muffled sound of a sliding door being pushed from the inside. Metal chains rattled, scraping clothes and tearing flesh. The air grew heavier with the smell of rot.

Without a word, Bai Liu drew a long whip from behind him and snapped it against the floor with a sharp crack.

The sound-activated lights flickered back on.

In the dim, flickering blue light, the sliding doors of all the compartments slowly creaked open. Behind each door sat a man, hunched forward, dressed in tattered, greasy clothes. His hair was filthy, his head drooped, and his arms lay motionless on the tops of his legs. Flies buzzed around them, and a sickly yellow liquid dripped from the edge of the compartment, pooling on the floor and releasing a sour stench.

The metal chains hanging from the bolts swayed back and forth, casting uneasy shadows.

Each of them drew their weapons, instinctively forming a circle with their backs to Bai Liu.

Bai Liu surveyed the group, his expression calm. "This time, we won't waste time searching for monster weaknesses. We go straight for their cemetery property cards. If you find one, head to the next floor. If you encounter any living people, bring them with you. Do not harm the low-class citizens or NPCs here unless absolutely necessary. They don’t have homes and are likely to follow the type of monsters that wander here. Understand?"

The group responded in unison, "Yes!"

The lights flickered again and went dark. In the oppressive silence, an

eerie breathing sound filled the air, as though a group of people were forcing themselves to gasp with hollow, decaying lungs. A whip cracked against the floor, and the lights came on again.

A corpse, its eyes teeming with maggots and its jaw rotting, lunged grotesquely toward Bai Liu's face!

How to Own Five Buildings

Three hours later, at 12:00, Cemetery E.

The eerie silence of the cemetery was pierced by the unsettling sounds of breathing, flesh and bone being torn, and the sounds of death itself. Following the sounds, the group moved past Unit 0812, where a seventeen-year-old boy lay peacefully under his 26-year-old gravestone. They passed through the disarrayed floors 1 to 14, where bodies were strewn across the ground and blood stained the walls. Finally, they reached Bai Liu, who stood at the intermission point: Floor 15.

Tang Erda, his arm's sleeve torn and half of his upper body splattered with blood, stood against the half-open sliding door of a room—more like an incinerator. His head hung slightly, as he stood at the farthest point from Bai Liu. A hot revolver rested in one hand, and between his fingers, a cigarette glowed brightly against the dim, eerie blue light. He took a drag, his expression dark.

The scarlet glow of the cigarette butt was the only source of light in the room.

Liu Jiayi, draped in Muke's coat, leaned against the door, dozing with her head resting against Muke. Muke himself, although slightly squinting, sat with his back straight, alert. Mu Sicheng, on the other hand, was more relaxed, pulling open an incinerator-style sliding door and lying on his back.

Bai Liu, holding his bloodied whip, kept his gaze down as he calmly observed the situation.

Stamina restorers and mental boosters were prohibited in the game, making rest a vital necessity for everyone to maintain their energy. They had cleared through the cemetery building up to the 14th floor, and when they reached the 15th, Bai Liu deemed it relatively safe enough to rest. With few monsters remaining and some distance to the ground, he had decided to alternate shifts for sleep.

In cases of extreme exhaustion, Bai Liu typically placed himself and Tang Erda—his most capable fighter—on night watch for the first half of the night, letting the other three newer players rest before taking their turn on watch. After extensive training, Mu Sicheng, Muke, and Liu Jiayi had all developed the habit of sleeping and recuperating as

soon as Bai Liu and Tang Erda took over the night watch, regardless of how dire the situation.

However, the leader of today's vigil appeared somewhat distracted.

"Captain Tang, what's on your mind?" Bai Liu's voice was soft but insistent.

Tang Erda paused, tapping on the system panel to mute the viewing pool, before slowly turning to look at Bai Liu. "I was wondering what form this copy might take in reality."

Bai Liu, ever the calm strategist, clicked on his own system panel, muting it, and looked up at Tang Erda with a smile. "Is Captain Tang suspecting the login method might be related to me?"

"I'm not sure," Tang Erda muttered, turning his back to Bai Liu as he exhaled a cloud of smoke. "But based on what Su Yang and I have gathered, the copies you've walked through are either ones that have already manifested in reality or ones that will, in the future."

"I'm not sure if it's just a coincidence... or some kind of inevitable... arrangement." Tang Erda's voice trailed off.

He took a sharp drag from his cigarette, his gaze growing more intense. "If Sunshine City truly materializes in reality... it's going to be..." His words faltered as his mind raced.

"It doesn't matter whether it materializes or not," Bai Liu interrupted smoothly, his voice as steady as ever. "What matters is finding the source of the problem in this copy and fixing it before it happens in reality." He met Tang Erda's gaze. "But that's not the only thing troubling you, is it? You've been distracted ever since we entered the copy. Would you like to talk about it?"

Tang Erda's expression shifted, growing serious. "I'm wondering if the Sunshine property where our opponent is located could be tied to this Sunshine City…" He paused, his face darkening. "The Heresy Processing Bureau investigated that area before, but at the time, neither the machines nor we detected any heretics."

"But now…" His voice tightened. "Now, we know that the people living in Russell Cemetery are mostly game players. Before entering the game, I had Su Yang retest the heresy values at Sunshine House—just to be cautious."

Tang Erda's gaze sharpened, his tone becoming grave. "The heretical values have become... unusual."

He clenched his jaw. "Su Yang was already investigating, but it was strange—there was no heresy detected before I entered the game."

His brow furrowed deeply. "Heretics usually influence people in very noticeable ways—like the smell of rose perfume or the bloated form of the blood lingzhi from the Love Welfare Institute. But the heresy at Sunshine House went undetected at first... and now that it's been detected, it's impossible to rank."

"That's not the worst part," Tang Erda continued, his voice low with foreboding. He looked Bai Liu straight in the eye and inhaled deeply. "Last night, Su Yang and the others evacuated the residents to investigate the Sunnyside development. They filed a report to their superiors to request temporary housing for the residents, claiming the building was a heresy that needed shelter, hoping to get the Heresy Bureau's help and funds to resolve the issue."

He exhaled slowly, his eyes narrowed. "But all the residents who were moved—those who signed consent forms to contract the rotting house to the Heresy Bureau—all suffered organ failure within two to three hours."

Tang Erda's eerie blue eyes seemed to flicker like unnatural flames in the cemetery's darkness. "The residents of the Sunshine property... like the people of Sunshine City... are trapped, alive and dead, within this place. They can't escape."

Reality, Sunshine House, 9 AM.

Yellow plastic tape marked with [Cordon] surrounded the abandoned building in layers, while a number of onlookers gathered around the always cold and decaying structure.

"Keep out!"

"There are dangerous items being handled inside! Please maintain your distance!"

Su Yang, looking exhausted, walked briskly through the dust as the man beside him spoke in rapid succession.

"The other side said they could grant funds to deal with the deteriorating building, but they might not be able to swallow the entire cost. The building transaction price is too high—tens of billions. Even though it's become a deteriorating structure, the Authority can't absorb that amount of money."

The man grimaced. "Captain Su, it's just a heresy—nearly 10 billion... that's too much."

Su Yang, who had been awake all night, rubbed his temples and exhaled a deep breath. "Doesn't the Heresy Processing Bureau want to fix the fourth and fifth bureaus? We could use that money to absorb the cost of this rotten building and transform it into the fourth and fifth bureaus, sheltering the heretics here and setting up a new bureau in one go. Killing two birds with one stone."

The man hesitated. "But the money to fix the new bureau..."

"Last year, when we captured those heretics in the third detachment, your finance department leased and lent their assets, making a lot of profit, right?" Su Yang's usual calm gaze sharpened, and his eyes—gentle by nature—took on an intense questioning tone.

"When Captain Tang was there, the third detachment was the most profitable among all the bureaus in terms of capturing heretics. Yet no one raised an objection."

The man, feeling the pressure from Su Yang's gaze, scratched his face awkwardly, offering a forced smile. "Captain Su, this... this is a huge amount of money. You're reporting this, so we'll seriously consider it."

Su Yang cut him off with a cold expression. "If not here, then where? The job of the Heresy Bureau is to shelter heretics. Since there are heretics gathered here in such a densely populated area, endangering surrounding citizens, the priority should be to solve the problem here, to repair the Fourth Bureau in this area."

"When the Third Bureau was rebuilt in such a prime location, I didn't hear you complaining about the costs. The reconstruction was funded by Georgia, the Captain of the Third Bureau, and yet no one objected."

Su Yang's voice grew icier. "The location is just an excuse."

The man considered this for a moment. "True, location is secondary. And fixing it here isn't completely out of the question..." He paused. "But that's assuming you can house the heretics in this deteriorating

building. Without clarity on how to house them, we couldn't have approved such a large sum of money."

Su Yang took a deep breath, swallowing the words "didn't we earn this money," knowing they would lead to an argument. He calmed himself and pressed on. "This heresy has already caused many suicides, and people are still dying. If you don't approve this money, can you take responsibility for the consequences?"

At that moment, a team member rushed over, breathless. "Captain Su! Captain Su!"

Su Yang rubbed his nose and raised his hand. "What is it? Speak."

The team member's face was grim. "Captain Su, the influence of this heresy seems to be spreading."

Su Yang's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"At first, only the residents moving out of Sunshine property were affected. But just now, someone from a nearby neighborhood posed as a resident of Sunshine property and tried to get compensation money for a house demolition." The team member gave a bitter laugh. "Because it was chaotic, the processing staff didn't catch it and gave him the compensation."

"But then something strange happened. The man suddenly... dried up. It was as though the flesh and fat inside his body had been sucked out, leaving only his skin hanging from his bones."

"Is he still alive?" Su Yang asked quickly.

The team member took a deep breath. "He's alive, but he's been taken to the hospital."

Su Yang's expression shifted as realization hit him. His gaze snapped to the team member. "Where does he live?"

"In an old neighborhood about 300 meters from Sunshine property." Just as the team member finished speaking, his communicator rang. He picked it up, said a few quick words, and then turned to Su Yang, his face pale. "There's another plot, 500 meters from here. The people who came to claim the compensation for moving out—" He swallowed, looking at Su Yang with a grim expression. "They've dried up too."

"Captain Su, the reach of this heresy is continuing to expand! Anyone who moves out of here is being drained!"

Su Yang exhaled a sharp breath and gave a quick order. "Move all their houses back immediately and see if we can reverse this. Hurry!"

He turned back, his gaze cold, and looked directly at the Treasury officer, who was still stunned. "Fifteen minutes. I want to see the money approved."

How to Own Five Buildings

In-game.

Bai Liu tapped Tang Erda on the shoulder. "Hurry up and finish this game so you can get back to reality and handle these problems."

"Yeah." Tang Erda took a deep breath, then stood and gripped the handle of his gun. "Don't worry, I won't let it affect my game performance."

Bai Liu averted his gaze and looked at the three men still sleeping. "It's about time. Wake them up for their shift. We need to rest."

Tang Erda nodded, then looked back at Bai Liu. "Actually, I thought, given your personality, you would've chosen a more direct and faster approach to finish this copy."

Bai Liu gave a small laugh. "Captain Tang thought I'd choose to butcher the building, didn't you?"

"Yes, not exactly." Tang Erda hesitated for a moment. "I'm not sure if I'm misunderstanding, but it's true the time cost of seizing the old property owners is high in this copy. But the new property is owned by the acting developer, so why not just kill the developer to take ownership on the day it's sold?"

"For example, this new property in Area C could be yours if you wanted it."

The smile on Bai Liu's face remained unchanged. "Because that's not the right way to play."

Tang Erda blinked. "Not the right game path?"

Bai Liu lifted his gaze and smiled lightly. "It's a horror game, Captain Tang. If you can win simply by killing people, then that's not scary at all."

"If a path looks like it'll complete the main quest without any horror, then it's likely not the correct one."

Bai Liu grinned. "It's more like a horror game design principle."

Tang Erda paused, thinking it over, then wrinkled his nose. "But the

path does seem to work."

"Then there’s only one possibility." Bai Liu smiled. "The horrific elements of that path just haven’t been revealed yet."

Zone C, 3 AM

Shi Qian and Yuan Guang followed C Dong, blending into the crowd. Shi Qian used a small fog skill to stay hidden behind him.

They weren't planning to engage in large-scale snipe attacks just yet. The NPCs would turn into ghosts upon death, and there was a risk of attracting unwanted attention. It was best to minimize damage, strike with precision, and only eliminate the target NPC. Even if C Dong turned into a ghost upon death, it would be just one ghost.

Dealing with one monster was manageable, but a group of monsters? For a two-man team like theirs, that would be a problem.

Abandoning three teammates reduced the risk of death for the group, but the danger to them increased, and they needed to be extra cautious.

After leaving the new building, C Dong attended four or five celebrations in a row, each with no fewer than 100 people. Yuan Guang followed him, dizzy from the long chase. Almost three hours later, they saw C Dong get on a bus back to the C area after attending his last event.

Shi Qian, still trailing behind, was in high spirits. "Looks like he's going home," she said.

A small smile appeared on Yuan Guang's face as he exhaled a long breath, staring at the mansion in front of Area C. "This fool's been partying all night and finally brought us here."

As they waited in the parking lot, C Dong suddenly greeted his bodyguards and walked toward the restroom, leaving only one bodyguard behind.

Shi Qian and Yuan Guang exchanged a look—both understood the unspoken words: this is the perfect moment to strike. They quickly split into two positions. Shi Qian used her fog skill to silently approach and take down the bodyguard.

Yuan Guang circled around quickly, moving against the wall. He pulled the hood of his sweatshirt low to cover his face and readied his utility knife.

When Shi Qian took down the bodyguard without a sound, Yuan Guang stepped out from the corner, lowered his head, and accidentally bumped into C Dong, who was about to enter the restroom.

C Dong, drunk from all the celebrations, slurred his words, barely able to form a sentence. "You, you... why do you have three heads? Are you a family here to buy a house from me...?"

Yuan Guang didn't answer. He lowered his head, drew his utility knife, and wrapped it around C Dong's neck, slashing upward diagonally in one smooth motion.

The sharp blade of Yuan Guang's knife cut through with such force that blood splattered onto the bathroom mirror. C Dong couldn't even react, clutching his neck before collapsing.

[System Alert: Player Yuan Guang used skill weapon (artisan knife) on NPC C Dong.]

[NPC C Dong was killed.]

Shi Qian, using her Mist skill, darted through the cloud of fog and crouched down to collect the corpse. As she searched his pockets, she mumbled, "ID card, keychain, cigarettes, condoms... damn!"

Her eyes lit up as she looked up at Yuan Guang, who waved a stack of certificates in his hand. "The title deeds for the new building!"

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Shi Qian for taking the lead in obtaining the ownership of an entire building in the new District C development!]

[Main Quest (Owning Five Buildings) Completion Progress: (1/5)]

Yuan Guang, kneeling beside her, finally let out a breath. "Let's pull back and find the next proxy developer."

But before their smiles could fully form, a series of system prompts interrupted.

[System Alert: The new property owned by the two of you is currently

under development and requires continuous funding to maintain ownership. Based on the current market price, you need to provide 60 billion within one hour, or the construction will halt, and the property will turn into a building-]

[- Rotten building.]

Shi Qian and Yuan Guang's smiles froze.

[Countdown begins: 59:59]

Shi Qian quickly collected herself and approached a nearby cash machine to check the balance on C Dong's ID card. Her expression darkened. "The balance is less than three hundred million."

Yuan Guang took a deep breath. "They must have other sources of cash. They don't keep it all in their ID cards."

"The ID card of this NPC living on the top floor only has three hundred million in it," Shi Qian said, her nerves fraying as she repeated the word rotten. She took two deep breaths and spoke rapidly. "To gather sixty billion within an hour, we'd need to rob at least two hundred NPCs living on the top floor."

Yuan Guang's realization came quickly. Holding his bloodstained knife, he spoke hoarsely. "It won't come together."

"We couldn't raise ten billion in three years in that better part of reality," he continued, "how can we raise sixty billion in an hour in Sunnyside?"

Shi Qian closed her eyes, gripping the title deed. "The house is already in our hands. We can't run away. We have to get it together, even if it's impossible. We can't give up."

The two of them stood in silence.

Yuan Guang exhaled a frustrated breath and raised his head, his eyes a little red. "I got emotional. You're right. Let's go and figure something out."

Shi Qian nodded, and the two of them left the parking lot.

Behind them, C Dong's lifeless body twitched, his fingers moving as a purple sucker sprouted from his fingertips.

The body swelled and expanded, his hands stretching into enormous,

three-meter-long tentacles tipped with octopus-like suction cups, and a ring of teeth gleamed from inside. His flesh seemed strained, swollen like a Michelin tire made of human skin, its surface shining and ready to burst like a giant blister.

[System Alert: Dead NPC corpse alienation complete. Changed into monster (Hungry Developer).]

[System Alert: The monster will roam the floor it developed, attacking anyone who enters, consuming their skin and flesh, and drinking their bone marrow.]

C Dong's eyes and nose, buried under layers of fat, became thin slits, while his mouth expanded grotesquely, filled with jagged teeth. His throat emitted a strange, muffled sound.

"My delicious houseguests..." it croaked.

Its long tongue flicked out to lick the skin around its mouth, its eyes glowing red. "Where is it?"

The new building in Area C.

Despite it being nearly midnight, the building remained lit, with tenants anxiously waiting outside the sales office for the results of their transactions.

The buyers and sellers of Sunshine City, many of whom had taken out loans to purchase properties, were in a state of limbo, having waited for hours with no qualification for property licenses.

Looking up at the massive, dark silhouette of the building, adorned with LED lights that read Sunshine House, Happy Place to Return, the anxious crowd began to shift their focus. Hope and yearning flickered in their eyes as they thought of their future homes.

One person glanced at their watch and muttered, "It's almost 4 AM. Are the formalities always this slow?"

As if on cue, a massive red countdown appeared on the building.

[00:10]

[00:09]

Confusion spread among the crowd.

"What's that?"

"A light show for a new property?"

When the countdown hit [00:01], the screen flashed a giant [ROTTEN] sign.

Inside the sales office, Xiaodong pushed open the door, her face pale. She forced a smile and bowed apologetically. "Sorry, something has happened to our property, and we need to shut down temporarily. Please come back tomorrow to pick up your certificates."

How to own Five buildings

There was a brief commotion outside the sales office of the new building in Area C. Like a swarm of disturbed bees, the crowd quickly gathered around the half-open door.

Xiaodong was so shocked by the crowd that she stepped back into the office, hastily hung chains on the door to stop anyone from rushing in, and shouted in panic, "Please maintain order, everyone! Tomorrow, our department will provide a solution!"

In truth, she had no idea what the solution was. She had been pushed out to handle the situation by the sales foreman above her, whose face had twisted with frustration. Even now, Xiaodong had no idea what had happened.

Like the others, she had stayed up all night, exhausted, waiting for the deeds to be processed. Then, suddenly, she found the finance department in a panic, shouting that the money had vanished. At that moment, a blood-red countdown had appeared on the building outside.

Looking out from the sales office at the towering new building in the darkness, Xiaodong had a vague sense that the people before her might not get their hands on the house they'd paid for.

Some of the crowd had lost their shoes, but no one cared. They jumped barefoot, shouting angrily.

"Why do we have to wait until tomorrow for a solution?!"

"What's going on with the building?!"

Their voices, full of intense and desperate questioning, echoed in the dark, accompanied by paper balls and stones being angrily thrown at Xiaodong.

"What's with the door? Say something! Tell us what's going on!"

"You're just hiding when things go wrong! Open the door and let us in!"

Xiaodong clutched her sales office uniform as she jammed the door, preventing anyone from entering. She bowed repeatedly, apologizing, her eyes reddening with unshed tears. Her voice trembled with each

sob.

"On behalf of the entire property team, I sincerely apologize to all of you."

The sales director had instructed her not to open the door and let anyone in, but also to apologize on behalf of the company in an effort to calm the growing anger. If the crowd wasn't pacified, something serious would happen, and Xiaodong could be fired, her salary docked for the month.

Desperate to keep her job, she chose to endure their wrath, bowing at a ninety-degree angle over and over again, her head lowered, fighting back the pain and tears.

"A simple apology won't help! Do you know how much I've paid for this house?" someone cried out, voice choked with emotion. "I worked myself to the bone, afraid to eat, afraid to use anything, just to save enough to buy a place to sleep in this city where I wouldn't be evicted!"

"Get out of here! Let C Dong out! He's the acting developer!" someone else shouted.

Then, a tremble ran through the crowd as someone whispered a terrifying question: "C Dong wouldn't run off with our money and let the building fall into ruin, would he?"

This statement dropped like a stone into the boiling pot of anger, sparking a heated discussion among the crowd.

"No way! C Dong is rich; he wouldn't scam us!"

"There have been rotten buildings in E and B, and the developers there were also rich..."

"I thought this was just an issue with the floors?"

"But then they pushed those rotten buildings to be rebuilt, claiming the money went to construction materials, and didn't compensate the buyers of those houses..."

"Some of the troubled house buyers... disappeared. The patrols... handled them. Their bodies were sent to the hospital in pieces, all just to salvage these crumbling buildings..."

The crowd, now in a frenzy, turned their desperate eyes to Xiaodong, who stood behind the chains at the sales office door. "You just told us to come back tomorrow for the certificate. This won't turn into a rotten building, right?"

Xiaodong slowly stood up, crossed her arms, and bit her lower lip, taking a long moment to compose herself. Finally, she managed a strained smile. "No, everyone," she said softly.

"It's just that there were so many sales this time, and they needed to be processed in bulk. That's why things were delayed."

"If Ming doesn't come down tomorrow..." Xiaodong paused, giving a deep bow, her voice trembling as she forced herself to lie with a sweet smile. "It should be sorted out this week or next week at the latest."

"Please, go home and be patient."

She stood up and faced the crowd, her smile in place, though tears slid silently down her cheeks. "You'll all get your homes, I promise!"

The crowd stood in silence for what felt like an eternity. Then, one man, forcing a grim smile, turned and muttered to himself as he walked toward the new building.

"I told you, it's better to buy a house in C — low risk, reliable."

"Just wait? Tomorrow is tomorrow, a week is a week, two weeks is two weeks. I can wait... it's not like I can't."

"I'll just take a look at my future home and come back and wait calmly."

The man, lost in thought, stumbled toward the new building under construction. Slowly, a quiet group of other buyers, equally lost in their thoughts, followed behind him.

They climbed the unfinished building, step by dangerous step, through parts where concrete steps were missing, and only steel frames remained. They dragged their families, wives, and children up to floors where construction hadn't yet finished, searching through piles of unmarked concrete foundations.

"I'm 1305... I think this is it?"

"I looked at the floor plan; I think yours is 1304."

They stood in cramped concrete spaces, just a few dozen square feet, surrounded by exposed beams and steel. Tentatively, they touched the rough walls, eyes lighting up with the faintest hope.

"It’s not like a rotten building can’t be lived in if they don’t repossess it, right?"

One person stood by the edge of a half-built home, gazing out at the darkened expanse of Area C. The only light was from the sales office and the upper floors of surrounding buildings. Far in the distance, a faint outline of the moon could be seen against the backdrop of the brightly lit city center.

The moonlight reflected in his eyes, a faint white shimmer that flickered like tears.

"It's beautiful," the man murmured, looking up at the night sky. Leaning against the empty wall, he added, "I've lived in the cemetery room for so long. Did you know the moon is visible at night from the ground?"

"I had forgotten what the moon looked like," came the soft reply.

"It’s nice, isn’t it?" the man said wistfully. "To live in a place so high up, where you can see the sun during the day and the moon at night."

The light in his eyes quickly faded, and his voice grew as light and fleeting as smoke, carried away by the night breeze. "It's a shame I can’t afford a house this high up."

"This beautiful moon... A lowly person like me, I probably only deserve to see it once in my life."

He stepped forward, his toes brushing the edge of the roof. Slowly, unsteadily, he stretched his arms out into the icy night air, then closed his eyes and leaned forward, about to fall into the darkness below.

Area E, Cemetery Building.

On the 18th floor, Mu Sicheng wiped the sweat from his forehead, let out a long breath, and turned to Bai Liu with a smug expression. He waved the cemetery property deed in his hand. "Efficient, right?"

"Pretty good," Bai Liu smiled as he accepted the deed. Just then, a

beep from the system echoed in the room.

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Bai Liu for soon acquiring ownership of Cemetery Building 0812 in Area E.]

[We are still short of the entrance and ownership of the cemetery room on the floor where the headstone is located.]

Bai Liu glanced around at the others. "Let's go, we're just missing the cemetery room at the entrance."

Tang Erda couldn't help but ask, "Are you going to rob that 17-year-old of his cemetery room?"

"No, we'll trade," Bai Liu replied with a smile, giving Tang Erda a quick look. "Captain Tang, don't you have a murder house property deed that's far superior to this cemetery room? Let the boy keep it after we sort things out tonight."

"We'll swap the deed to the murder house with him for the cemetery room."

Bai Liu's smile widened. "Captain Tang, go ahead and make the exchange."

Tang Erda paused for a moment. "Thank you."

Bai Liu nodded. "You're welcome."

As the group made their way out, Tang Erda hesitated. He walked back to Bai Liu, who was at the rear of the group, and leaned in, lowering his voice. "Bai Liu, you mentioned earlier that there was a horror element in Russell Cemetery that hasn't been uncovered yet."

"Yes," Bai Liu continued, not slowing his pace. "The bodies of dead developers—based on the city's setting—those higher-ranked citizens who die and mutate into monsters with stronger attack powers. The monsters the developers turn into shouldn't be easy to handle."

Bai Liu paused for a beat before adding, "If I were the designer of this game, I'd design it that way to increase the horror and difficulty of the path."

Tang Erda furrowed his brow. "How would you design it?"

Bai Liu's tone remained steady. "If the Sunshine Property is a projection of this copy landing in reality, then based on what's

happened in the Sunshine Property, the money the developers made probably didn't stay in their hands. It was most likely transferred for other investments. Killing or arresting the developers would only lead to one thing—"

"—It's a dead end," Bai Liu concluded, glancing sideways at Tang Erda. "The rotten buildings in reality are the result."

Tang Erda went silent for a moment, then spoke slowly. "You're saying the residents of these rotten buildings commit suicide."

Bai Liu nodded calmly. "Yes. After the suicides, the residents will likely turn into ghosts, and if I'm right, their hatred will be transferred to the player who killed the developer—the new developer."

"If those two from Russell Cemetery killed the developer," Bai Liu added, looking at Tang Erda, "and if they don't stop the residents from committing suicide, they'll eventually be hunted down by the ghosts from the rotten buildings."

Zone C.

Two figures dashed through the darkness, their faces bruised, running against the wind, teeth clenched. They carried bags full of ID cards.

He and Shi Qian had just finished a robbery, but after an hour of searching, they still hadn't accumulated enough to reach their 60 billion goal. Now, they were headed toward the new building, hoping they could make it before time ran out.

Yuan Guang couldn't understand why they were running toward the building. The system had already declared that the rotten building had become a ruin. Even if they watched it, they couldn't just make six hundred billion appear to save the people living inside.

But...

He knew what would happen when a rotten building was created.

Even if nothing changed, even if the people here were just data—meaningless NPCs—it didn't matter. Yuan Guang couldn't bear to watch them jump, one by one, from the edges of the building.

He had seen enough.

Yuan Guang ran, breath ragged, his lips cracked and his hands trembling from the cold wind as he sprinted faster.

Why do people need a house to survive?

He had asked himself this question countless times—when he was lying awake at night, when he was working late...

And he had asked Uncle Wang when he nearly jumped off the edge of his own rotten building, only to be pulled back and slapped twice.

Uncle Wang had scolded him, "Didn't you say your mother never lived in a nice house after your father left? That you'd buy her a flat? What's this, you're in such a hurry to join your father in a small flat?"

"I'm over thirty now," Yuan Guang had said. "I'll be over sixty when I pay off the mortgage, and I don't feel like jumping off this roof yet." Uncle Wang slapped him again. "You have a twenty-year mortgage! You can't even pay it off in time! You still have time to turn things around and buy your mother a house!"

Uncle Wang grabbed his shoulder, pleading, "Yuan Guang, don't do it. If you die, you'll have nothing."

Yuan Guang ran faster, tears streaming from his eyes, as he neared the crumbling building.

The people in the buildings nearby seemed like the living dead—moving like zombies, staring blankly into the night, their lives long gone.

Just like Uncle Wang, about to jump.

One by one, they stepped forward, falling silently into the abyss below.

Yuan Guang's heart broke. "Don't die!"

"Please, live! There's nothing left if you die!!!"

He shouted desperately, "Please, live!!!"

How to Own Five Buildings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[System Alert: Player Yuan Guang has equipped the "Monster Book: The Painter Who Hates Himself" identity.]

The fog spread from Yuan Guang's feet as he ran, hissing and crying. The art knife in his hand transformed into a pixelated brush, slashing fiercely at those who fell.

[System Alert: Player Yuan Guang uses the Identity skill (Layer Drawing).]

"Stay alive!!!"

"There is hope only if you live!!!"

A pixelated grey layer, invisible to the naked eye, caught the falling players. They bounced softly on the strange, cottony layer before landing gently on the ground.

No casualties.

Realizing this, Yuan Guang sat down in stunned silence. Then, in the next moment, he rushed forward, grabbed one of the men by the collar, and punched him in the face without hesitation.

With tears streaming down his face, he beat the surviving NPC, shouting, "Why did you have to die?!"

"If you die, you leave nothing behind!"

Yuan Guang choked out between sobs, "You're dead, but we're still here. We'll be so sad... so upset..."

"Because you're not here anymore..."

Year after year, the rituals of those who had died continued. But Yuan Guang never despaired because he knew that those who remained were holding on, waiting for the day they couldn't anymore. Then, they would apologize to him, "Little Yuan, I can't hold on any longer."

They weren't truly gone; they just needed rest. They died with hope.

[Little Yuan, I'll take a break and wait until you win before bringing me back!]

[Eh, I'm so tired. You all go ahead. Pop a resurrection armor for me, will you?]

[President Yuan, you're up next!]

Uncle Wang knelt before him, slowly lifting his head. A tear-stained smile appeared as he patted Yuan Guang on the shoulder, "Why are you crying? Don't cry."

"I'm just taking a break in our cemetery building for a while. With you around, Little Yuan, one day..."

"Everyone will come out of the cemetery."

"We who got tired halfway through, we're just temporarily storing our deaths there. We sleep, and when the sun rises, we wake up. When the light shines on our neighborhood, the old misfits rise again!"

As each person fell in the game, pulled down from the edge of the building in reality, they turned to Yuan Guang. No tears, no despair—just trusting smiles and waves, signaling him to carry on.

"Goodbye, Little Yuan."

[We believe Little Yuan will carry us to victory one day.]

[It's hard for Little Yuan to keep our deaths for now.]

More people jumped from the building. Yuan Guang looked up, watching in slow motion as he and Shi Qian ran toward each other. Teeth clenched, brushes swinging, hot tears streaming.

"No dying!!!" Yuan Guang roared, his voice hoarse and trembling. "No dying in this despair!!!"

"Hang in there!!!"

Everything in front of him blurred.

Yuan Guang remembered the first time they entered the league. They had all sat in meditation around the system's registration screen, brainstorming names for their team.

Someone jokingly suggested that their obscure guild should be called

a cemetery.

Everyone laughed, and then another person asked, "What should the cemetery be called?"

Uncle Wang scratched his head, turned to Yuan Guang, and said, "Little Yuan, what do you think of Sunshine Cemetery?"

"... It’s too corny, Uncle." Without waiting for Yuan Guang’s reply, someone else spoke up.

"Sunshine? It sounds a bit old-fashioned, doesn’t it?" Uncle Wang thought for a moment and asked seriously, "Wouldn’t it be better to have a name that’s sharper, something more aggressive?"

He looked at Yuan Guang. "Little Yuan, do you know of a form of light more aggressive than sunlight?"

Yuan Guang blinked, stunned. "... Lasers?"

"Laser Cemetery?" Uncle Wang chuckled as he mulled it over. "Hmm... that sounds a little strange..."

Someone else suggested, "What's the English word for laser?"

Yuan Guang slowly recalled the word, "Laser."

"La-Seer?" Uncle Wang repeated the word with an accent, bursting into laughter. "That's a good one! A cool name! That’s it!"

Yuan Guang ran through the night, layers spreading out above his head. His teeth ground against the pressure of everyone falling, veins bulging, but he refused to move an inch.

His eyes locked on a distant point, and he cried out in a voice that tore at his heart, his chest and soul speaking as one.

"Lasers are the most offensive form of light!"

"As long as we live, as long as we exist, we will never lose to the sun!!!"

At the ornamental pool, the people of Russell Cemetery stared at Yuan Guang on the big screen, sweat and tears mingling. They knew he had shouted those words for them.

Slowly, they stood. Someone took a deep breath, raised a loudspeaker, and shouted at the screen, "Russell Cemetery, a sure win!"

"Russell Cemetery, first!"

"Go, President!"

"We believe in the President!!!"

"We'll hang on until the last second!"

They shouted until their faces trembled, as if they wanted their voices to reach Yuan Guang through the barrier of the screen, to help him hold up those heavy layers.

"This is the first time I've seen a tactician cheering for players who can't hear them," Charles, sitting on the sidelines, mused with amusement. "But it's also the first time I've seen someone in the viewing pool, cheering on a player who can't hear them."

"Russell Cemetery: The Magical Guild."

Wang Shun watched with mixed feelings as the members of Russell Cemetery cheered for Yuan Guang. He glanced at the system panel, noting that Russell's betting pool support was rising, but still falling.

... The audience is always realistic. When you're at a disadvantage, you're at a disadvantage. No amount of effort changes that. The audience never sympathizes with the underdog.

But Wang Shun glanced back at the members of Russell Cemetery, roaring with determination.

They weren't struggling for sympathy.

Even if reality crumbled, even if the game wasn't in their favor, they didn't fight to please others or become stars. They were just ordinary people fighting to survive.

--They fought for themselves, for the "people" who had placed their hopes in them, those living in the cemetery.

Shi Qian stepped forward and leaned against the layer with Yuan Guang. Yuan Guang's legs weakened, nearly causing him to fall, but Shi Qian helped him back up, his teeth clenched as he held the layer in place.

"It will be okay."

"It will all pass."

"One day..." Yuan Guang, his face smeared with mud and his hands covered in cuts, held the man who had jumped down to see the moon. He tilted his head, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "Even if we live in the cemetery for a while, one day we will see the sun shining again."

The man leaned against Yuan Guang's shoulder, his tears flowing freely. "Really?"

Yuan Guang closed his eyes and held the man close. "Really."

"I, and all my friends, believe in this prophecy."

Chapter End Notes

> While there is no direct, obvious connection between "laser" and "Russell," they both symbolize resilience and the ability to cut through adversity in their respective contexts. The laser is the metaphorical tool of power, and Russell may be the community or group fighting to break through their own despair.

How to Own Five Buildings

Zone E

After Tang Erda handed the property deed to the child, Bai Liu heard the familiar beep of his system.

[System Alert: Congratulations to Player Bai Liu for obtaining a cemetery building in District E 0812. Main quest completion progress: (1/5)]

Once the deed was safely in Bai Liu's hands, Tang Erda turned to the child. "Shall we move on to the next one?"

"Wait!" The child hesitated, gripping Tang Erda's sleeve. "Did you get rid of all the ghosts in the building? Did you take their deeds too?"

Tang Erda glanced at Bai Liu, who nodded in agreement. Turning back to the child, he replied, "I took the property deeds, but I didn't evict them."

The boy sighed with relief. "At least they weren't kicked out."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "Aren't you afraid of these ghosts?"

"I don't think they're ghosts," the child answered, looking into Bai Liu's dark eyes. "They're just people who live underground."

Bai Liu's curiosity was piqued. He stepped closer. "I'm curious—if you know that when people die, they become ghosts but still keep working, why do you only want to live until you're 26?"

"It's harder to die than to live. So, what's wrong with living on?"

He fell silent for a moment, looking down at his nails, before continuing softly, "Because... I'm alive and I don't have a home."

"My parents are dead, and when I die, after paying off the mortgage, I'll become a ghost and live in the cemetery with them. It might be hard, but as long as we stay together as a family, we can get through anything."

Bai Liu's expression remained calm as he asked, "You wouldn't mind dying for this?"

The boy met his gaze, his voice earnest. "I don't think I'm dead."

"Even though we can't eat like corpses, and we sleep in cramped cemetery rooms every day, I feel that as long as we're together—helping and supporting each other—no matter where we are or how hard it is, we won't perish."

He laughed softly, his eyes shining with a strange hope. "One day, we'll walk out of the cemetery and see the sun again."

"Even if we die and our bodies rot, as long as we, the living ghosts, exist and roam the underground, that day will come."

Bai Liu's curiosity deepened. "Why were you worried the ghosts in the cemetery building would be cast out?"

The boy blinked in confusion. "Don't you know?"

"People walk outside, and living developers charge land management fees. Ghosts walk outside, and dead developers charge land management blood."

"Land management blood?" Bai Liu echoed. "What's that?"

The boy glanced around cautiously, then leaned in close, whispering, "-Developers turn into ghosts after they die, and they suck the blood of lower- and second-class citizen ghosts."

Bai Liu's expression darkened. "Ghost blood isn't renewable, is it? What happens if it's drained?"

"When the blood is drained, the marrow is sucked. When the marrow's gone, they eat the flesh. When the flesh is gone, there's nothing left." The boy shuddered, his shoulders trembling. "If you get sucked that far, you're really dead. There's nothing left of you."

Bai Liu looked at the boy, who was clearly shaken. "Do you know where these ghost developers hang out?"

The boy shook his head slowly. "I don't know. I've only lived here for a year, and most of what I know came from my dead parents, with some of it from my own observations."

"But if you're looking for dead developers..." The boy glanced up at Bai Liu. "You might want to try the rotten buildings in the districts."

Bai Liu thought for a moment before nodding his thanks. "The developer of this cemetery building—was he dead too?"

The boy blinked, surprised. "This cemetery was developed by one of the five major developers a long time ago, the landowning developer of this side of E. He's been dead for many years."

Bai Liu's eyes darkened further. "Are all the cemeteries in each district developed by big developers?"

The boy nodded. "The cemeteries are part of the infrastructure, developed by the big developers in the early days. But now they're all long dead, and their assets have been passed down to their descendants. All the properties in Sunny City are now controlled by the descendants of the five major developers."

Bai Liu's voice was cool as he asked, "Is there any further development or transfer of ownership for this cemetery?"

The boy thought for a moment. "I don't think so. It's always been like this..."

Bai Liu paused, his gaze sweeping around the area quickly. Then, he gave a swift order, his tone urgent. "Captain Tang, take the kid. We're leaving now. Something's coming."

[System Alert: Congratulations to Player Bai Liu for taking the property rights of Cemetery Building 0812 in Area E from the major developer of Area E.]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has disturbed the developer of Area E. He is furious about the loss of his assets and is about to wake up from the ground to hunt you down!]

[The (E Zone developers) are about to attack!]

The ground shook violently, as if the heavy footsteps of a monstrous creature had slammed into the earth. A hissing, muffled sound erupted from the ground, accompanied by a nauseating stench of decay.

Bai Liu and the others quickly retreated. Muke and Mu Sicheng, who were at the rear, glanced back at the mist in the middle of the cemetery, which was quivering behind them. They reported in unison, "The monsters are moving slowly. No one is following us!"

"No," Bai Liu murmured, glancing down at the green veins on the back of his hand, which were rapidly pulsating and filling with blood. The veins bulged slightly, then deflated. "The monster has caught up with us."

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu is being drained of blood. His life value is dropping dramatically! ...87...73...]

Liu Jiayi quickly handed Bai Liu a bottle of antidote. He took it and drank, but just as he did, a violent coughing sound came from behind him. The seventeen-year-old boy being carried on Tang Erda's back whimpered and struggled in pain.

Tang Erda quickly rolled him off his back. The boy's face had turned blue. His mouth and abdomen were caving in, his skin drying out rapidly. Veins bulged from beneath his skin, and his blood seemed to be flowing out at an alarming rate, as though being sucked away.

Mu Sicheng and Muke's faces darkened. They quickly turned their heads, trying to identify the source of the vibrations chasing them. After confirming that it was still a distance away, they turned back to Bai Liu and reported, "The source is still far from us."

"Which means the monster's attack doesn't require direct contact." Bai Liu turned to the others. "Is anyone else besides me and the NPC showing signs of being attacked?"

Mu Sicheng, Muke, Liu Jiayi, and Tang Erda all answered in unison, "No."

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu is being drained of blood. His life value has dropped below 80 again...]

The boy in Tang Erda's arms was being drained of blood so quickly that his scalp had started to dry out. He was in agony, barely able to make a sound. His body twitched uncontrollably, his eyes rolling back, large, unconscious tears slipping down his face as he whispered about his mother.

Tang Erda's grip on the boy tightened, his face tense as he looked at Bai Liu.

"I can't give my antidote to the NPC," Liu Jiayi said, her face pale as she glanced at the child. She handed Bai Liu another bottle of antidote. "At the rate this monster is sucking blood, my stock of antidotes will be gone soon."

"We haven't figured out how this monster attacks!" Mu Sicheng growled, looking at Bai Liu, whose face had turned pale, blood rushing wildly beneath his translucent skin. "It started attacking without making contact—it's a judgment-based attack. This monster is

very high level."

Muke analyzed calmly, "Definitely high. The E developer is likely the top boss in this area."

"A monster that uses a judgment-based attack only needs the player to meet certain criteria or range for the attack to trigger," Liu Jiayi continued quickly. "We've only got this NPC and Bai Liu being attacked. What's the difference between you and us?"

Bai Liu bent down and lifted the child NPC, whose hand was slowly dropping. "Housing issues."

Liu Jiayi's reaction was swift, her head snapping up. "You mean—!"

Bai Liu explained succinctly, "I own a cemetery building in E district. This NPC is essentially a house servant tied to that cemetery. According to the setting, the land in E district is owned by the E district developer, which gives him the ability to drain our blood through the house."

"The house acts as a conduit, channeling the blood drain from us."

Bai Liu stopped his backward steps, looking ahead with focused eyes. "But lifting this curse won't be easy. If the house switches ownership, it will still drain blood from you. We don't yet know the full range of this developer boss monster's influence. If his reach covers the entire map, running won't help. The best way to avoid being drained is—"

"-to kill the monster."

Bai Liu drew his whip and, with a cold gaze, ordered, "Stop the retreat. Mu Sicheng, Muke, move forward and engage the enemy. Liu Jiayi, guard me and the wounded NPC—heal and defend. Captain Tang, maneuver and wait for an opportunity to strike."

Both Mu Sicheng and Muke drew their weapons in unison—one cold and calculated, the other baring his teeth—and rushed into the mist.

There was nothing in the roaring fog.

No ghosts, no developers—just an empty, still expanse with no bodies in sight. The only signs of movement were the distant vibrations and the sticky growls coming from deep below the ground.

Mu Sicheng dug into the earth with one claw, but the ground

remained solid beneath his hand.

Muke gripped his dagger tightly, his face darkening as if the very air around him was heavy, and stepped forward, placing a hand on Mu Sicheng's shoulder to stop him from digging any further. "Stop. With our senses, we can detect nothing beneath or around this land."

Mu Sicheng tilted his head, his eyes reddened with frustration as he stared at Muke. "Then why does Bai Liu keep getting his blood drained?"

"What the hell is this monster?"

"What the hell is this heresy?!"

In reality, Su Yang's eyes were red as he watched people being drained of life and carried away from the Sunnyside property. He took a deep breath, leaning his hands on the table of his makeshift tent, almost hoarsely questioning himself and the team around him.

The players exchanged uneasy glances, silent.

Su Yang closed his eyes, propping his forehead up, then opened them again, taking a deep breath as he combed through the test reports presented by the team.

"Unit 1 to 6 test results: Heresy values detected fluctuate between 7,340 and 134,212, with a total of 5,793 objects in the building. No abnormalities detected in objects leaving the building."

"Unit 6 to 9 test results: Heresy values fluctuate between 7,106 and 12,985, with a total of 6,903 objects in the building. No abnormalities detected in objects leaving the building."

"Unit 9 to..."

Su Yang read through to the last test report, then paused for another deep breath to steady himself. He adjusted his emotions before speaking. "The fluctuations in heresy values are similar across all the flats, but no heresy has been detected in the objects or building materials."

He slowly stood up and addressed the group, his gaze hardening. "This means that all objects within the entire Sunnyside property show no

heresy, but the land itself is saturated with heresy values ranging from 7,000 to 13,000. These values are expanding outward in a circle at a rate of 13 to 15 meters per minute, affecting the surrounding area."

Su Yang clenched his fists, his expression blank for a moment before he quickly regained his composure. "Have all the surrounding tenants been evacuated?"

"Yes, all occupants within a one-kilometer radius have been evacuated," a team member replied, his smile bitter. "But Captain Su, at this rate, the heresy will reach a kilometer in about an hour or two, and by then..."

Su Yang cut him off, his gaze sharp. "So, we're going to contain this heresy within an hour. Understood?"

The team members nodded solemnly. "Yes, Captain Su!"

One of the team members raised his hand and spoke quietly, "Captain, could it be a form of heresy that doesn't exist as an entity, like air or something?"

Su Yang shook his head slowly. "Unlikely. If it were air, the diffusion rate of 13 to 15 meters per minute would be far too slow. For example, rose perfume would spread across the city in an hour."

"And this heresy affects only certain areas, unlike air, which spreads indiscriminately." He nodded firmly at the report. "It's the buildings themselves."

"Neither the passersby nor our team members have shown any symptoms, only the residents who bought houses here."

Su Yang’s fingers traced down the electronic report on the tablet, pausing as he absorbed the information.

"Ten minutes ago, the hospital sent me this report," he continued. "At first, only those moving out of the building showed symptoms of desiccation. But over time, all residents who primarily lived here showed varying degrees of desiccation."

Su Yang exhaled slowly. "And with this change, we’ve detected that the heresy is expanding outward at an increasing rate."

"It seems that the heresy initially targeted those who intended to move out, those trying to escape. But as we processed the eviction

certificates, the heresy began feeding on their marrow and flesh while expanding outward."

He paused for emphasis. "One could say our efforts to evacuate the residents from this decaying building triggered and intensified the heresy, causing it to begin drawing in every resident here without restriction."

A team member grimaced. "Won't this make the heresy more powerful, killing more people?"

Su Yang gave the team member a sharp look. "It's the Heresy Handling Bureau's job to contain this before it becomes too powerful."

Just then, a team member knocked and entered with a report. "Captain Su, the information you requested on the developer of the Sunnyside property—I've got it!"

Su Yang reached for the report and glanced at it, his frown deepening.

"This developer, surnamed Li, didn't develop the land right away. Instead, he secretly contracted part of the land to four other developers. They injected capital and started developing the Sunnyside property together in his name, making it a joint venture with five developers."

The team member nodded. "It was illegal and later exposed, but by then, this Li guy had already fled."

Su Yang turned the page, his frown growing more intense. "Li was arrested and imprisoned last year. During his time in custody, he exhibited unusual behavior—disappearing suddenly during roll call."

"He frequently went to the library to borrow horror books and games, studying them like preparing for an exam, and muttering to himself, 'I'll be out soon. I'll get that land. It's a priority for the guards...'"

"And that's not all." The team member pointed to the report. "He was very bold, provoking the guards, claiming he could change the world. He even confessed that the private contract he signed with the four other developers stated that the land lease was for 9,999 years."

Su Yang's frown deepened. "Normal contracts last 45 to 75 years. His private contract isn't even valid."

The team member nodded. "That's what the wardens told him, but he

just laughed wildly. He said he had a way to make those contracts work, a way to make every piece of land his. He claimed he could make the tenants who turned him in work for him for the rest of their lives, just to buy a suite from him."

"The man said that if he wanted to, he could make it happen. A true materialist."

Su Yang remained silent as he turned the page, his brow furrowing again. "This man had contact with Li Gou, the rapist who was stabbed to death by an inmate in prison last year?"

"That's right," the team member nodded, a subtle expression crossing his face. "During the trial, the evidence mysteriously vanished. The Heresy Processing Bureau intervened to investigate, but nothing unusual was found. Eventually, the evidence inexplicably reappeared and went through the usual trial process."

"But before the trial could proceed, Li Gou was bizarrely stabbed to death in prison."

The team member pointed to the information. "This developer, surnamed Li, had brief contact with Li Gou while in prison. Afterward, Li Gou exhibited the same strange behaviors as the developer—talking to himself, disappearing during roll call, provoking the prison guards, and ranting that one day he'd be able to kill anyone who sued him."

Su Yang lifted his gaze, his expression stony. "Where is this developer now?"

The team member replied, "He's dead. His body suddenly appeared in the playground after disappearing from prison for an hour, back in August this year."

"Dead?" Su Yang asked, his voice almost rhetorical, his nose wrinkling. "How?"

"After the autopsy, we found his stomach was full of dirt—from his stomach to his mouth—and it had ruptured. He was still alive when it happened."

In the game, Muke and Mu Sicheng returned, grimaces on their faces. Muke shook his head at Bai Liu, "No monster found."

Tang Erda exchanged a glance with Bai Liu before giving orders. "Switch defenses. You two will guard the wounded NPC and Liu Jiayi. Captain Tang and I will investigate."

Liu Jiayi looked at Bai Liu, took a couple of deep breaths, and handed him a few vials of antidotes. "I won't use my skills anymore. If you need something, you can heal yourself using my panel, but be mindful of the bloodline."

Tang Erda nodded to Mu Sicheng and Muke, who had returned. "I'll guard Bai Liu. You two watch the rear."

Bai Liu nodded and, with Tang Erda, entered the mists of the cemetery. Soon, all that could be seen was the fog.

Tang Erda held her gun against her leg and turned toward Bai Liu with a grim expression. "Are your life levels still dropping?"

Bai Liu, pale and nearly transparent, nodded. "65. Still above the safety line."

"What do you think this monster is?" Tang Erda's expression grew more serious. "I've encountered colorless, odorless, invisible monsters before—difficult to deal with unless you can find their source."

"As long as you locate the origin and can hurt it, there’s nothing to fear from such monsters."

Bai Liu crouched, deep in thought, then looked up. "Captain Tang, what kind of monster could move through a house without touching the tenants? Wherever the victim runs, whether human or ghost, it can drain blood and marrow from them at will?"

"What do property developers trying to maximize profits want to deposit most?" Bai Liu lowered his gaze to the earth, which trembled after Mu Sicheng had dug there twice.

Tang Erda paused and followed Bai Liu’s gaze.

Bai Liu smiled. "I think it’s the land."

Without hesitation, he lashed down with his whip, splitting the thick earth to a depth of four or five meters.

The ground gave a shrill hiss as it shook from side to side. Black and red clay-like slurry seeped out of the fissure, and the broken mouths of

pipes twisted and writhed, forming blood clots on their fleshy, greenish-gray surfaces. A strong smell of blood emanated from the flowing slurry.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has attacked with a skill weapon (Developer in Area E).]

Bai Liu observed the blood-red "slurry" and the soft pipes wriggling like capillaries trying to reconnect. He raised an eyebrow. "Wow, this is the first time I’ve seen blood vessels growing in the earth."

Tang Erda exhaled. "The physical deposit of the five major developers here is the land itself, beneath the ground."

How to Own Five Buildings

The edges of the fissure in the ground, split open by Bai Liu's whip, twisted and stretched like tentacle veins, pulling and connecting with one another. The fleshy earth slowly began to close the fissure, as if it were healing itself.

The land let out a contented, hoarse gasp.

Bai Liu glanced at his system panel and realized that, after striking the land-like developer, his own blood was now draining faster.

Tang Erda noticed this as well, his brow furrowing. "What's going on?"

Bai Liu explained calmly, "The damage is transferred. When I attack the monster developer, it can quickly heal itself by drawing blood from me and the other tenants on E Land after it bleeds out."

"Attacking it is the same as attacking you," Tang Erda said, his gaze sharp as he looked at Bai Liu, whose lips were devoid of color. "Won't it just suck your blood endlessly at this rate? Why don't we transfer the houses in E to me first?"

Bai Liu shook his head, his tone even. "What difference does it make? Whether it sucks my blood or yours, it's still the same."

Tang Erda fell silent for a moment.

Bai Liu continued, "If owning a property attracts major developers to the region and the game requires us to own five buildings, one of us will have to hold a building and be drained dry by the developers."

"This is a game," Bai Liu added, "and if a monster like this exists, it must have a weakness. We need to find it." He met Tang Erda's gaze with calm eyes. "Since attacks are useless against the land this monster is attached to, we need to sever its connection to the land and force it out."

"A connection between the land and this monster?" Tang Erda asked, almost rhetorically. "What do you think it could be?"

Bai Liu's lips curved into a slow smile. "I don't know much about this game yet, but thanks to you, Captain Tang, you reminded me that this is likely a game that's tied to reality. So, the game's basic settings must align with the rules of reality."

"For example," Bai Liu lifted his eyes and smiled, "how can the land and the dead be connected... It makes sense that a dead person would still own the land after their death, and that's why they're attached to it."

"In reality, what would make a person own land?" Bai Liu asked lightly.

Tang Erda snapped, "A land-use right certificate?!"

Reality, Sunshine Properties.

Su Yang scanned through the information on the developer named Li and looked up at Captain Xiang. "Apart from this developer, Li, who's in jail, what about the other four?"

"It was last year," a team member sighed, handing over a report. "As soon as Li was interrogated, the other four developers ran off. We only found out about them again in July this year."

"And they're all dead?" Su Yang's voice darkened as he took the report with a heavy expression, raising his eyebrows. "Last June, they took their parents, wives, and mistresses on a low-key trip to the border under the guise of a company reunion. But they were caught in a bizarre series of rear-end collisions involving a high-speed truck. The out-of-control truck kept ramming forward, and all four buses tipped over the guardrail. No one survived."

The team nodded. "They used fake IDs and altered appearances. The explosion and the burns left on the bodies were so severe that no one could identify them at first. The people related to them also died in the crash, and the bodies went unclaimed until May this year. That's when we finally traced them back to that bus."

Su Yang's eyes narrowed as he looked up. "I remember that traffic accident. If I'm not mistaken, there was one survivor, an eighteen-year-old boy who had just finished his high school exams."

"Yes," the team member replied, surprised. "Captain Su, how did you know? The survivor's name is Du Ying."

Su Yang closed his eyes and took a deep breath, his chest rising and falling with each shaky inhale.

He knew, of course, that Tang Erda had instructed him to look into the accident two months ago, specifically asking him to track down a person named Du Ying.

He hadn't expected to encounter it here, nor had he anticipated it to be tied to the deaths of these four developers...

All these strange coincidences seemed to form an invisible web, pulling them all in a certain direction.

It was as if some unseen force—like a god fiddling with the world's nodes—dropped a card or a pawn, arranging it as it pleased. These seemingly insignificant actions could leave a profound impact, creating deep dents in the ground, scattering ordinary people in pieces, their screams echoing in the air.

This chaotic, uncontrollable thing that befalls a person is called fate.

But what is it called when it strikes a whole group of people?

One might rationalize their misfortune by saying, "It's just fate, I'm simply unlucky," and endure it, looking at the fortunate ones and holding on to the hope that happiness is possible for them too.

But what about a group of people?

What happens when everyone around you suffers from the same event? Does the pain of one person get diluted by the collective understanding of the group, or does the group's shared pain intensify each individual's suffering due to mutual empathy?

Can people continue to endure under these circumstances?

Su Yang found himself in a daze for a moment, unsure of the answer.

Just then, a team member burst into the room, slamming the door open. His face was broken with distress as he shouted, "Captain Su! Seven newly recovered patients at City Six Hospital have grabbed the nurses' blades and committed suicide!"

City Six Hospital, Inpatient Rooftop

Seven people in hospital gowns, their wrists bloodied, turned their backs to the rooftop. Their pale, numb faces were a stark contrast to the frantic group of paramedics, security guards, members of the

Bureau of Heresy, and police officers standing before them.

The healthcare workers exchanged anxious glances.

"One of them suddenly grabbed the blade I was using to remove stitches. It gave me a real scare!" one nurse said.

"Thankfully, the bedside doctor acted quickly and snatched the blade back. The cuts weren't deep," another nurse responded.

"Now they've all run to the rooftop..." a third muttered.

A police officer stepped forward, bending slightly and speaking gently, "Guys, we can talk about this. Don't make any rash decisions."

An older woman in a hospital gown, her lips dry and hair thin and yellowed, stared at him with a vacant expression. Before she could speak, tears began to fall from her eyes.

"It's no use... What good will talking do?" she whispered, her eyes unfocused. She suddenly laughed, wiping her own tears away.

"I don't blame you. I know you've done your best. You were getting us relocation certificates today, and then, suddenly, this strange thing happens and we have to be relocated back..."

She paused and looked toward the rooftop, muttering to herself.

"We're doomed, stuck in this blood-sucking mess..."

Her voice trailed off as she turned her back to the group and moved toward the edge of the rooftop, her head lowered, eyes distant.

"Little Yuan has carried us for three years. With him on the field today... that kid can't hold out either..."

She shook her head, tears welling up again.

"It would be selfish to keep living, relying on him to carry us while we die..."

She closed her eyes, smiled faintly, and spread her arms before collapsing backward.

"Don't die! Work hard and stay alive today too!" a male voice shouted from below.

The woman, about to fall, suddenly opened her eyes wide and twisted her head to look down. "Little Yuan?!"

Other patients with bloodied hands leaned over the edge, their faces filled with disbelief. "Did you hear that? Little Yuan!" one of them cried.

"But isn't Little Yuan in a race?" someone else wondered aloud.

"Is he the winner after the match?" another voice chimed in.

The same voice called up from below again. "Don’t die! Work hard and stay alive today too!"

By the second time the voice echoed, the people on the rooftop realized something was wrong—it had an electronic tone, like a recording.

Su Yang stood below, holding a speaker shaped like a SpongeBob SquarePants alarm clock. He pressed the play button once more: "Don’t die! Work hard and stay alive today too!"

Then, he moved the speaker closer to his mouth, speaking calmly: "The sound you’ve just heard is from Yuan Guang’s alarm clock. I know he’s very close to all of you, and he's been fighting on your behalf with the developer's representatives."

"Yuan Guang plays this alarm clock sound every morning to remind himself to live well and fight for your benefits. I’m sure he wants you to live well enough to enjoy the fruits of his efforts."

Su Yang looked up at those on the rooftop, his gaze steady. "Please trust us. We will do everything we can to address whatever is troubling you."

His voice rang with resolve. "Whoever brought this misfortune upon you, we will fight for your lives and solve this!"

The woman on the rooftop gripped the fence tightly, her eyes bloodshot, before slowly loosening her grip and taking a step back.

At that moment, officers rushed forward and pulled her and the others away from the edge.

Su Yang exhaled deeply, a wave of relief washing over him.

A team member, standing next to him, looked at him with a

complicated expression. "Captain, how did you know about the alarm clock?"

Su Yang finally allowed a small smile to form. He tapped the team member lightly on the head with the speaker. "I found it when I was testing the object. The alarm clock screams when you press it—extra loud and mid-air. It caught my attention, and I remembered it."

Su Yang pondered as he walked back, his thoughts heavy.

Could it be... that this group could change its destiny? Perhaps, if they meet someone whose fate is strong enough to alter things, they might escape this cruel path, seemingly laid out by the gods.

His mind drifted to Bai Liu at the Rose Factory.

Bai Liu, too, had changed the fate of everyone around him—himself included.

The team member followed Su Yang, checking a news report as they walked. "Captain Su, regarding the search for the four cars involved in the accident, we haven't found anything substantial yet. But we did find several bags of documents at the accident site—almost all of the developers' real estate information, except for the four illegal secondary contracting contracts for Sunshine Properties."

Su Yang's steps slowed as he turned his head, intrigued. "Where is the body of the developer named Li?"

"The body of the developer surnamed Li was taken by his son after the cremation. His son hasn't reported the burial location yet, saying the body was kept at home instead of being buried," the team member replied, quickly searching his notes. "But our people discovered that after Li's death in August, his son frequently visited a certain cemetery."

Su Yang's expression grew more serious. "Surround that cemetery and don't let anyone in or out!"

In-game, Area E.

Bai Liu and Tang Erda quickly returned to the spot where Liu Jiayi and the others had stayed. Mu Sicheng, Muke, and the others were half-crouched on the ground.

On the ground lay a dying NPC, barely breathing. His skin was thin and dry, clinging to his cheekbones and forehead, more like a mantis than a person—fragile and out of shape.

Tang Erda averted his gaze, unable to look away.

"Is it still alive?" Bai Liu asked softly. "Can you determine the rate of blood loss from this NPC?"

Liu Jiayi shook her head. "It's almost dead, but it's still alive for now. I can't calculate the rate of blood loss, but if you want to know the death rate, this creature should be able to drain someone dry in about an hour."

Muke frowned. "The blood loss is too fast."

Mu Sicheng looked at Bai Liu. "Did you solve the monster?"

"No," Tang Erda replied, tensing his jaw. "That monster is tricky. We'll have to stay here for now and look for weaknesses. Bai Liu thinks you should take this NPC and move to the other zones first."

Muke and Mu Sicheng were both surprised.

Especially Mu Sicheng, who jumped up. "Shit, Bai Liu! You're carrying a blood loss buff that can kill someone in an hour, and you want us to split up? Don't you know splitting up in a horror story is a death sentence?"

Muke also frowned, disapproving. "Bai Liu, at least let Liu Jiayi stay."

Liu Jiayi looked up at Bai Liu, about to speak, but Bai Liu's eyes scanned the room briefly before he remained silent.

Everyone fell quiet.

Finally, Bai Liu spoke, his voice calm and methodical. "This isn't a game pool where we play against each other. This isn't some horror movie either. This is a competitive horror game, and I'm your tactician."

He paused, then continued, "Now, I need you to split up, and you will split up."

Liu Jiayi, Muke, and Mu Sicheng all bowed their heads in acknowledgment. "Yes."

Bai Liu continued, "Mu Sicheng, go to Area A. Liu Jiayi, head to Area B. Muke, go to Area D. A new property has appeared in Area C. It looks like a new branch line and should provide more information. Captain Tang and I will go there after we finish in Area E. For now, avoid exploring it."

"First, go to each area and sweep the cemetery building. Once you've cleared it, don't take the title for the cemetery house. Keep sweeping until you provoke the developer. That cemetery is the developer's, so go inside and look for the land ownership certificate. Once you've found it, meet me in Area C."

Bai Liu looked at everyone. "Now move."

How to Own Five Buildings

When the others had left, Tang Erda turned his head toward the cemetery under the night sky before shifting his gaze to Bai Liu, his expression darkening. "Are you really sure that the body of the major developer in Area E was buried in one of the cemetery buildings?"

"If my suspicions are correct, that should be the case." Bai Liu nodded calmly. "According to my theory, these developers died long ago but used the land contracts to anchor their partially alienated bodies to the land. Given that, the most likely scenario is that their actual bodies were buried along with the contracts."

"Considering that most of Area E, aside from the cemetery, has been overdeveloped, I suspect that the bodies of the five major developers were originally buried in the cemetery buildings—on the land they owned from the start."

Tang Erda frowned. "But there are too many cemeteries here, and you're carrying a blood-sucking debuff. The medicine Liu Jiayi gave us won’t last long enough for a slow, step-by-step search through every building. We need a faster, more precise sweep."

Bai Liu looked around before speaking softly. "Captain Tang, if there are rotten buildings above ground, wouldn’t there also be rotten cemeteries below ground?"

Tang Erda was momentarily stunned by the abrupt question. "Why would there be a rotten cemetery underground—"

He stopped mid-sentence as realization struck him. His gaze snapped to Bai Liu. "You mean—?!"

"Exactly." Bai Liu met Tang Erda's eyes and continued without hesitation. "Have you forgotten what that NPC and I talked about? Developers linger around decaying buildings."

"From the information we received at the start, a dead homeowner returns as a ghost and attacks anyone who tries to enter their house. Following that logic, a dead developer would naturally do the same—enter the cemetery where their body is buried and attack anyone who intrudes into their domain."

"A homeowner's haunting range is their entire house. By extension, a developer's range should be a specific building or area. The closer they

are to their buried body, the more aggressively they defend it. Their influence could even go so far as to prevent further construction on their resting place, leading to the cemetery building where their body lies to decay over time."

Bai Liu raised two fingers. "That leaves us with only two possibilities for the developer's burial site."

"First, a separate, isolated cemetery."

"Second, a decayed building with signs of halted construction around the cemetery house it's in."

He smiled. "Captain Tang, now that we've narrowed it down, as the main attacker, do you think you can pinpoint and eliminate the target before I die?"

Tang Erda exhaled sharply, then drew the gun from his back, his gaze turning resolute. "It's my duty."

Area C, Beneath the New Development

After rescuing the residents from the upper floors and forcibly sending them home, Yuan Guang and Shi Qian were exhausted. The long night had drained them, and just as they were about to collapse onto the floor of the new development for a few hours of rest, an eerie sound echoed behind them.

A wet, sickening boing boing—the sound of countless tentacles pulling free and slapping against the ground as they moved.

Leaning against a railing, half-dozing, Yuan Guang slowly turned his head—only to come face to face with C Dong.

The developer's face was twisted beyond human recognition, his grin unnaturally wide, saliva dripping from his slackened jaw.

"Found you."

His voice was hoarse, thick with hunger. A long, writhing tongue slithered from his mouth, lined with tiny, questing tentacles. He licked his lips.

"Delicious tenants."

Yuan Guang inhaled sharply. In one swift motion, he grabbed Shi Qian—who was still sound asleep beside him—and bolted.

"What the hell are you still sleeping for?! The monsters are at our door! Run!!!"

Shi Qian, yanked upright, stumbled forward. Saliva trailed from the corner of her mouth as she glanced back drowsily—only to jolt awake in terror.

"Shit! Why didn't you say so earlier?!" He struck Yuan Guang with a backhanded slap before launching into a full sprint.

Behind them, C Dong surged forward in a mess of frenzied tentacles. His half-decayed face split open, his grotesque tongue unfurling. The writhing tendrils on it elongated and sharpened into a mosquito-like proboscis.

"Come and buy my house!" he rasped, his voice warping into a distorted sales pitch.

"Don't you want a home of your own?"

Shi Qian's legs blurred with speed, her breath ragged.

"Yuan Guang! Should we use our skills against this thing?! If we waste another big move on this monster, we won't have a trump card left for the Wandering Circus!"

Yuan Guang was yanked to a stop, his expression grim.

"I can't use my skill unless it's the last resort," he said tightly. "You know my summoner attacks everyone on the field—except me. That includes you."

"You shouldn't have followed me into this game."

Shi Qian didn't answer immediately. Instead, he pulled Yuan Guang into a narrow alleyway. Pressed against the wall, they gasped for breath, their bodies stiff with tension.

"You shouldn't have come with me," Yuan Guang murmured again, as if convincing himself. "I always play alone because, the first time I entered a game… I used my skill, and then…"

Shi Qian bowed her head and finished the thought for him.

"…And after your summoner killed your opponent, it turned around and wiped out everyone except you."

She exhaled slowly. "From that day on, you never entered a team match again."

Silence.

Then, Shi Qian suddenly smacked Yuan Guang over the head.

"That's bullshit!" she snapped. "How is a one-man team match a team match?!"

Her voice softened, but her words carried weight.

"Instead of standing on the sidelines, watching you suffer alone, we'd rather risk being killed by you—and stand beside you."

Shi Qian looked up, her eyes slightly red.

"Russell Cemetery isn't a guild that sacrifices its own."

"Aren't you the one who keeps telling us that even if we die, we should die with hope?" She clenched her fists. "So what—are we supposed to just stand by and watch you die alone? Trapped on the battlefield, surrounded by those… things?"

She shook her head. "I can't do that."

Yuan Guang said nothing, his fingers curling at his sides.

But there was no more time to dwell on it.

The squelching footsteps of C Dong drew closer.

Shi Qian cursed under her breath before seizing Yuan Guang's wrist and yanking him forward.

"Wasn't this bastard supposed to be limited to his development?! Why the hell is his range so huge?!"

"Cemeteries aren't restricted," Yuan Guang recalled. "At the Exchange, I saw that the cemeteries in each district are original support facilities—they weren't developed by the agent developers behind this. You can go there!"

Shi Qian shot him a quick thumbs-up before sprinting toward the

cemetery.

Then, suddenly—

A figure stepped into their path.

A firm grip landed on Shi Qian's shoulder, steadying her before reaching up to pull a gun from their back. The movement was crisp, practiced.

Two sharp gunshots rang out.

Bang! Bang!

Behind them, C Dong let out a strangled, infuriated roar—before it faltered, his grotesque form shuddering. A sickening thud followed as his body hit the ground.

Shi Qian spun around instinctively—then froze.

C Dong's corpse lay sprawled out before them.

But her eyes weren't on the body. They locked onto the man holding the smoking gun.

Two clean shots—no wasted effort. To take out a monster of this level so easily…

There was only one kind of person who could pull that off.

A chill ran down her spine.

Even with her face heavily camouflaged, the raw threat of imminent death made her tremble.

The man, still holding his gun at the ready, glanced at her.

"Are you a resident of District C?" he asked. "Are you injured?"

Shi Qian felt her breath catch.

If he sees through me—if he realizes who we are—he could kill us both on the spot. We wouldn't even have time to run.

She clenched her jaw, forcing herself to stay composed.

Taking two steadying breaths, she turned her head.

Tang Erda leaned forward, his brow furrowed as he grasped her arm and asked politely, "Is the ghost haunting the decayed building in your district the developer?"

"Yes—cough—yes." The overwhelming disparity in combat strength made Shi Qian choke on her words, coughing twice as her face paled. "We just bought a house in a new development, and—I don't know why we're suddenly being chased."

Yuan Guang was still in shock, staring blankly at Bai Liu, who stood beside Tang Erda. Shi Qian elbowed him sharply, snapping him out of it. "Yes, yes! I just bought a house, and it's already falling apart."

Bai Liu's gaze flickered between the two before he smiled. "Are you a couple?"

Shi Qian forced a grin and yanked Yuan Guang closer. "Yes, yes! We just got married and took out a loan to buy a house."

"Oh? Is that so?" Bai Liu slowly pulled out a blood-drenched document from its protective bag. "Well, here's the thing. We just discovered a decayed building in the cemetery district of Area E. And, as luck would have it, we also found the remains of the district's biggest developer inside. After… eliminating him—or rather, destroying his ghost—we unearthed this land certificate."

A faint smile played at Bai Liu's lips. "Interested in buying property in E now that the land is back under normal management?"

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has obtained the District E Land Certificate, extracted from the corpse of the Area E developer, triggering the true ending quest—find and destroy all five land certificates in Sunshine City.]

[Completion progress: 1/5]

Bai Liu casually waved the certificate, his light gaze settling directly on Yuan Guang. "Mr. Russell, who just got married—have you considered abandoning that worthless property and investing in E instead?"

Yuan Guang's pupils shrank to pinpricks as he stared at the document. "How did you—"

Before he could finish, Bai Liu moved—so fast his figure blurred.

In a single motion, he gripped the handle of his whip and drove it into Yuan Guang's abdomen before the man could react. As Yuan Guang staggered, Bai Liu leaned in close to his ear, his voice soft, almost teasing.

"Yuan Guang, if you don't want to be recognized next time, control how you look at your enemies."

"Your killing intent is too obvious."

In the next instant, Bai Liu struck him again, sending him hurtling backward. Yuan Guang slammed into the wall, cracks spiderwebbing in all directions. He collapsed to his knees, clutching his stomach as he vomited blood in heavy, ragged heaves.

Bai Liu didn't pause. With cold precision, he raised the whip once more, its serrated bone spikes gleaming, and lashed it down toward Yuan Guang, who was barely able to push himself up, blood streaming down his face.

Shi Qian's pupils contracted in horror. "Yuan Guang!"

Dazed, Yuan Guang looked up just in time to see the snow-white whip descending upon him.

Without hesitation, Shi Qian lunged forward, throwing out her caliper cone to intercept Bai Liu's whip. The force of the impact was so strong that she was dragged to her knees, gritting her teeth as she slid backward, bracing her shoulder against the cone to counteract the blow.

Cracks splintered through the metal, shards breaking off and scattering to the ground. Shi Qian’s knees trembled, blood pooling beneath her as she struggled to steady herself. Her breath came in uneven gasps, her pupils shaking.

...So strong.

This wasn’t the Bai Liu she had seen in past game footage. His growth was terrifying—already at the level of those monster-star players from the top guilds. They weren’t even playing in the same league.

If they didn’t escape now, they were going to die.

[System Alert: Player Shi Qian has activated personal skill (Misty Forest).]

[Effect: The player's perception is reduced to a 50cm radius. Beyond this range, vision, hearing, touch, and smell are severely diminished.]

[Additional Effect: Beyond 50cm, the player's eyesight deteriorates to the equivalent of 1,800 degrees of nearsightedness without glasses—making it nearly impossible to distinguish humans from objects.]

[Note: This skill becomes ineffective if Shi Qian’s life level drops below 50.]

Thick, grayish smoke surged from the ground, swallowing the city in an instant. The towering steel and concrete buildings blurred into the fog, their rigid shapes reduced to faint silhouettes—like trees looming in an endless forest.

[System Alert: Player Shi Qian has activated personal skill (Misty Eyes).]

[Effect: This skill extends perception to 50 meters for all teammates, allowing them to navigate the mist barrier.]

A faint luminescence coated Shi Qian's features, the glow clinging to her like mist. As her vision cleared, she spotted Yuan Guang kneeling not far away, his own features now glowing with the same eerie light.

Relief barely had time to settle in before she noticed him slowly lifting his head, his gaze locked onto the land certificate in Bai Liu's hand.

Yuan Guang planted his hands against the ground, swaying unsteadily as he began moving—deliberately, unflinchingly—toward Bai Liu.

Shi Qian's eyes widened in shock.

Yuan Guang wouldn't…

He wouldn't actually try to steal the land certificate from Bai Liu, would he?

That was suicide!

His vision wavered between clarity and haze. Though Shi Qian's [Misty Eyes] allowed him to see within the fog, the damage from Bai Liu's earlier strike left his eyes bloodshot and swollen, his sight blurred with dark spots. Pain throbbed behind his skull, his ears filled with an endless ringing.

Blood and sweat dripped from his chin as he focused on Bai Liu's hands.

Bai Liu had triggered the True End Route, altering everyone's main quest. The land certificate was now the key to survival—one that Bai Liu had likely obtained more than once.

Which meant Yuan Guang had only two choices if he wanted to clear this game.

1. Kill Bai Liu and his entire team.
2. Steal the land certificate.
Either way, retreat was no longer an option.

There was no way back.

Yuan Guang closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and with a slight tremor in his hand, pushed the blade of his hobby knife to its maximum extension. Then, without hesitation, he opened his eyes and lunged at Bai Liu.

Shi Qian gritted her teeth and followed suit, using the caliper cone to

maneuver behind Bai Liu, forming a pincer attack with Yuan Guang.

Their weapons struck in unison—utility knife and caliper cone slashing toward the seemingly oblivious Bai Liu at the center of their encirclement.

Bai Liu tilted his head slightly, a faint, knowing smile curling his lips. “I’m a little curious—where did you two find the courage to come up here just to die by my hands?”

The knife and caliper cone grazed past Bai Liu’s neck in succession, the force of their swings stirring his hair. A loose strand fell over his shoulder.

His gaze lowered to the trembling weapons hovering just a centimeter from his carotid artery. His voice remained calm. “If you want to kill someone, it’s best not to let your hands shake.”

He chuckled lightly, but his grip on the whip was ruthless. “Let me demonstrate—this is how you use a murder weapon.”

In one swift motion, Bai Liu seized Yuan Guang’s wrists and yanked him into his 50cm visible range. With practiced ease, he looped the whip around Yuan Guang’s arms and pulled downward without hesitation.

Yuan Guang’s pupils contracted sharply. A sickening crack rang out as the tendons in his arms tore from flesh and bone. Blood spurted violently, and his throat tightened with a strangled hiss—too pained to even scream.

“The first step,” Bai Liu murmured, lifting his pale, blood-speckled face, “is to disarm your opponent.”

Shi Qian didn’t hesitate. As Bai Liu leaned back to evade another attack, the blade of her caliper cone slashed past his eyes, close enough to graze his lashes. She pressed forward, unwavering. Her gaze locked onto Bai Liu as she twisted her wrist, sending another blade spinning toward his shoulder.

Bai Liu shifted his weight, rolling his shoulder back just in time to dodge. At the same moment, he retracted his whip from Yuan Guang’s now-useless arms.

Shi Qian barely glanced at Yuan Guang—she already knew he was out of the fight. Without missing a beat, she kicked him into the mist,

creating distance between him and Bai Liu. Then, teeth clenched, she braced herself for the next exchange.

Yuan Guang is a summoner, not a melee fighter! What the hell was that idiot thinking, charging at Bai Liu—someone who specializes in mid-to-long-range combat?!

In her hands, the oddly constructed caliper cone shifted like a living weapon, moving with the fluidity of a military knife. She spun it through her fingers, sending a flurry of sharp blades toward Bai Liu's shoulders from all angles, cutting off his movements and preventing him from raising his whip.

Bai Liu smirked, effortlessly weaving through her attacks. A few slashes landed, leaving razor-thin cuts on his face, blood trickling down his cheek. He met Shi Qian's gaze, his smirk deepening.

"A solid tactic," he mused, sidestepping another strike. "Whips are, after all, mid-to-long-range weapons. Close-quarters combat—targeting my arms to disarm me—is a clever method of suppression."

Shi Qian's expression remained cold. "We're enemies, Bai Liu. No need to be so kind as to teach us," she snapped.

The caliper cone in her grip spun rapidly, its shape shifting mid-air. In an instant, it transformed into a brutal corkscrew-like stabbing ball.

"Until the very last moment," she hissed, "it's not certain who will disarm whom."

Bai Liu arched backward just in time to evade the cone aimed at his back. Shi Qian anticipated his move. Without hesitation, she swung her knee up toward his face.

But Bai Liu was faster. His whip lashed around her ankle, stopping her leg mid-strike.

Shi Qian found herself yanked off balance, one foot lifted off the ground. She tensed her core, keeping herself steady despite the precarious position—one leg stretched to ninety degrees, the other barely keeping her grounded. Cold sweat dripped from her jaw as she locked eyes with Bai Liu, her breath coming in sharp, shallow exhales.

Bai Liu, face streaked with blood, met her stare with a bemused expression.

Bai Liu's face was obscured by the mist, his eyes unfocused on his own body as he stood fifty centimeters away.

This guy—he wasn't just strong as a tactician; he had the melee prowess to back it up. Even with his limited perception, he was overpowering her, a melee-based attacker with skilled precision.

What kind of monster is this guy? Definitely not a newcomer!

Just as Bai Liu was about to fling Shi Qian away with his whip, Shi Qian gritted her back teeth, braced herself, and instead used Bai Liu's own momentum to propel forward. He pushed off on one foot, letting the whip drag her in.

The moment Shi Qian's foot trapped the whip, rendering it useless, Bai Liu raised his hand without hesitation.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu retrieves his weapon (Siren Bone Whip)]

The instant the whip disappeared from her leg, Shi Qian—now on one knee, her skin torn and bruised by the whip's bone spikes—saw her chance. Her eyes flashed, and without hesitation, she lunged forward, caliper awl in hand, aiming to sever Bai Liu's arms.

—So close. Such an obvious opening. Right now!

The sharp tip of the awl pierced Bai Liu's shoulder, sinking in with a sickening creak as flesh and bone peeled away. Blood spattered, instantly drenching most of Bai Liu's body.

A gun pressed against Shi Qian's abdomen.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu loads the player's (Rose Hunter) panel and uses the opponent's skill weapon.]

Bai Liu lowered his gaze. "When you're this close to me, I can see your flaws very clearly."

He'd left an opening on purpose. Just to bait her into closing the distance, escaping the mist cover of her skill, and then—

"BANG—!!!"

Shi Qian didn't even have time to finish the thought. Her pupils dilated, then quickly lost focus. Her grip on the caliper awl slackened, and she toppled backward.

Her eyes were unfocused. Blood bubbled from her mouth and nose as she choked, coughing weakly. The crimson pool beneath her body spread rapidly before being absorbed into the earth.

[System Warning: Player Shi Qian's life expectancy is dropping dramatically! 89… 73… 69… 57… 48…]

[System Alert: Player Shi Qian's skill disarmed.]

The mist shrouding the city began to lift. The first pale light of dawn filtered through the clouds.

Yuan Guang, kneeling, raised his head. Against the backlight, Bai Liu flipped his hand, replacing the gun with the bloodstained white bone whip. Then, without urgency, he began dragging the whip across the ground as he walked forward. Shi Qian lay motionless behind him, her vacant eyes staring into nothing.

The bloodied bone whip trailed behind, scraping against the ground with a sound like a rattlesnake slithering—a slow, ominous hiss.

Yuan Guang's breath hitched.

[That skill is dangerous. If I use it, I might be killed by my own summons. I won't use it lightly.]

[But I'd rather risk death and stand on this battlefield with you.]

Armless, Yuan Guang lifted his face, his gaze locking onto Bai Liu as he approached.

Bai Liu's expression was calm as if he were a god granting a final chance at life. "Withdraw from the game now, and both you and she will live."

Yuan Guang's voice was slow but unwavering. "She and I, and all the people of Russell Cemetery, will live." His eyes burned into Bai Liu's. "But not at the cost of my surrender."

Tears welled in his eyes, unbidden. "I gave up many times—on many things—to escape the pain. But every time I surrendered, someone else died." His voice wavered. "I thought it would lessen the suffering, but all it did was force others to bear even more. The living and the dead alike."

His breathing hitched. "I'm the one who condemned them to this

torment. A pathetic, cowardly wretch."

"I've had enough of giving up—whether it's on myself or on others."

"This time, I will absolutely, positively not give up!"

Yuan Guang roared, veins bulging in his neck. His face was flushed with desperation, and resolve. "I'm going to win this tournament alive and bring them all back!"

[System Alert: Player Yuan Guang equips Monster Book: "The Painter Who Hates Himself" identity and activates the Personal Skill (Evil Self-Portrait).]

[This skill allows the summoner to call forth the most evil version of themselves from all parallel world lines where each pivotal choice led to the darkest path. The summoner's total life expectancy is divided equally among the summons. If all summons perish, the summoner's life expectancy drops to zero, resulting in instant death.]

[System Alert: Apply this skill to all players in the opposing team?]

[System prompt: Confirmed.]

[…… Five summons arriving from alternate world lines at rapid speed. The summoner (Player Yuan Guang) has 51 life points remaining. Each summon will receive 10.2 life points……]

[Warning: The summoner (Player Yuan Guang) will be immobilized while the summons are active. This skill does not guarantee victory. Use with caution.]

[Summons loading… Warning! The number of summons exceeds the copy's maximum tolerance! Instability detected—system intervention required……]

[Summons successfully loaded.]

As the mist dissipated, four figures emerged, walking at a steady, unhurried pace.

A deep, lazy voice spoke first. "Boss, why the hell are you in this book?"

The voice was unmistakably Mu Sicheng's, but it carried a heavier weight—older, more mature as if he were in his thirties.

Another voice replied, unhurried. “Could be Daniel’s prank.”

A more reserved, measured tone chimed in. “President, you’re too indulgent with Daniel.” The speaker was Muke, but calmer—colder.

A faint chuckle followed. “He’s useful. And useful children earn privileges with me, just as Jiayi does.”

A teenage girl’s voice, laced with disgust, snapped back, “Don’t act like my spiritual father. I’d rather throw up.”

The last of the mist finally cleared.

At the forefront of the group stood a man—his age indeterminate, his long ponytail reaching his waist. He wore a crisp white shirt, knee-high black boots, and black leather gloves. A coiled black whip rested in his gloved hands. His dark eyes, calm and pale, were lined with the faint traces of time. There was an air of intimidation about him, the kind that made people instinctively avert their gaze.

But most importantly—

He looked exactly like Bai Liu.

Or rather, he looked like Bai Liu, only ten years older.

Their eyes locked.

The older Bai Liu regarded his younger counterpart, raising an eyebrow in faint amusement before letting out a soft laugh. “Well, well… This doesn’t seem like one of my godson’s little games.”

Bai Liu's gaze swept over the surroundings, pausing briefly on Shi Qian, who had collapsed behind him, and Yuan Guang. His expression remained unreadable.

"The enemies... who summoned us with their skills?"

"How amusing."

Bai Six smiled as he studied Bai Liu, his gaze dropping to the slightly worn white shirt clinging to Bai Liu's frame. "With that cheap attire, I take it you haven't finished accumulating enough points for the first round? Is this your first time playing in the league?"

He dragged a black whip behind him, his smile widening as he took two leisurely steps forward. His whip swayed. "Want me to help you win?"

Bai Six tilted his head. "How about we make a deal? I'll take out our summoner—your enemy—in exchange for—"

Bai Liu finished the thought for him, calm and detached. "My soul, right?"

Bai Six raised an eyebrow, amused. "Looks like we're thinking along the same lines."

He sighed, shifting his weight. His left elbow propped against his right hand, fingers clad in black leather resting against his jaw. A smirk played on his lips.

"It's a shame," Bai Six mused. "If only you had this strong sense of territory and ambition back when we were kids. Things might've turned out differently." His gaze darkened. "But now that you've formed your own interest group, you're not so easy to fool anymore. I suppose that means we can't work together."

"I suppose so," Bai Liu replied indifferently.

"In that case..."

Bai Six turned his head, casting an idle glance toward Yuan Guang. After a brief moment of thought, he dropped to one knee, crouching beside the immobile figure.

Leaning in, he whispered, "Your teammate is dying. You summoned me because you wanted to save her—to kill your opponent and win this game, didn't you?"

Yuan Guang struggled but managed a weak nod.

Bai Six lowered his gaze. With deliberate slowness, he tapped a points note against Yuan Guang's forehead, covering his eyes. "Then I'll grant your wish."

His voice was almost gentle. "I'll give you ten thousand points. In return, you sell me your soul."

Yuan Guang's chest heaved. He took a shuddering breath, then closed his eyes. A single tear slipped from the corner of his eye before he gave a final, resolute nod.

Bai Six smiled, his eyes glinting with satisfaction. "That settles it. Since we can't cooperate, I'll have to stand against you."

He straightened, his tone light.

"After all, in my games—"

"Profit comes first."

With practiced ease, Bai Six folded the soul note between his long, slender fingers. It vanished as he gave his orders with crisp efficiency:

"Jiayi, heal the summoner's injured teammates. Secure the summoner and then head to point B—retrieve the land certificate and eliminate your kind."

"Mu Sicheng, move to point A. Take Tang Erda and clear the field. Muke, you're on point D—same mission as Jiayi's. Move out."

—The same tactical arrangement Bai Liu had used earlier.

The others responded lazily with a drawled "Okay," then dispersed within moments.

Bai Liu barely registered their departure before catching a sudden shift in the air—a blur of movement, a fleeting afterimage at the edge of his vision.

Shi Qian, who had been lying behind him, was gone.

It happened too fast for him to react.

"I'll take care of the extras first," a voice drawled from above, half-teasing. "Make sure to play the game well with the boss, yeah, little boss from another world?"

Mu Sicheng.

Bai Liu lifted his gaze, spotting a tall figure perched atop a streetlight pole, half-crouched. The pole groaned under his weight. His hands—long, apelike, ending in massive, bloodstained claws—gripped the metal tightly.

Through the thinning mist, his scarlet eyes gleamed with amusement.

In his grasp, a struggling woman dangled helplessly, her fate hanging by a whim.

Mu Sicheng bared his teeth in a wide grin, locking eyes with Bai Liu below.

"Don't die at the boss's hands too quickly," he added. "I still want to have some fun with you after the mission."

With that, he disappeared in a few swift leaps. The rest of the figures melted away just as quickly.

The alley fell silent.

Bai Six, now alone, strolled toward Bai Liu with unhurried steps.

Wisps of gray-white mist coiled around him—clinging to his face, waist, and boots, shrouding him in a surreal haze. At first glance, his figure seemed blurred, like a half-finished sketch stepping out of its own frame.

The sharp click of his boot against the cold, solid ground echoed through the damp alleyway.

Step by step, he approached, finally stopping less than a meter away.

Fully emerged from the mist, he smiled at Bai Liu and asked, almost playfully,

"You're not escaping?"

Bai Liu met his gaze levelly, unwavering. "Running wouldn't change

anything for either of us, would it? You should already know what I'm thinking."

"That's right." Bai Six nodded in easy agreement. "For example, you must be wondering why your main attacker, Tang Erda, hasn't moved yet."

His smile deepened, teasing.

"I have to admit, I didn't expect you to pull off something I never could—turning Captain Tang, of all people, into your teammate. The man who's always been against me..." Bai Six tilted his head, intrigued. "Now I'm curious—what exactly happened between you two?"

Bai Liu's tone remained even. "Naturally, something that never happened between you."

"My, how hostile." Bai Six's grin grew flirtatious. "This might be the most hostility I've ever seen from a version of Bai Liu toward me."

He let out a soft, exaggerated sigh. "To get along with Captain Tang, I was even kind enough to spare his dear friend, Captain Su. Didn't kill him. Even left him a little instructional video—on professional ways to torture bad guys." His eyes glinted with mock disappointment. "But alas, Captain Tang didn't seem to appreciate my gift. What a shame."

Bai Liu's gaze flickered, unreadable. "Perhaps Su Yang would've appreciated it more... if you hadn't left the tape inside his stomach."

Bai Six feigned surprise. "Is that so?" He didn't seem to care, only curling his lips in amusement. "Then I do hope Captain Tang enjoys the little gift I left for him this time."

Amidst the Mist

Tang Erda clearly felt the ground beneath him begin to sink and shift. Almost simultaneously, a thick, glassy barrier shot up around him and moved at an alarming speed. Instinctively, he tried to rush toward Bai Liu, but the barrier blocked his path. His eyes darkened, and without hesitation, he fired two shots at the glass—only for the bullets to pass through uselessly.

His expression shifted. He recognized this item. A Magic Space. A prop that restricts movement.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu uses the prop (Magic Space) on (Rose Hunter) and (Rose Hunter).]
[(Magic Space) Rule: Only one person can leave the Magic Space alive.]

Tang Erda tensed and glanced across the confined space. A humanoid figure crouched on the ground, partially obscured by the thick mist. He slid his gun under his palm, keeping it steady as he moved cautiously along the barrier's edge.

As the mist gradually lifted, Tang Erda's pupils contracted sharply.

He was staring at himself.

Or rather, a disheveled, wretched version of himself—his hands bound behind his back in a pair of handcuffs. His jaw and shoulders were pressed against the cold floor, his body convulsing in a desperate struggle. A videotape had been forced into his mouth, stretching his lips to the point of tearing, blood trickling from the cracks. Yet, despite his agony, he didn't dare bite down.

Tang Erda immediately aimed his gun at the handcuffs, ready to shoot them off, but his bound counterpart thrashed wildly, preventing him from taking the shot.

Through muffled gasps, the bound man managed to force out a broken warning:
"Su… Yang's… handcuffs… Don't… move!"

Tang Erda flinched. His gaze snapped to the handcuffs, where a pattern of roses, guns, and tentacles intertwined along the metal's surface.

—Su Yang's skill weapon.

How did it get here?!

Tang Erda reached down and yanked the tape from the man's mouth. "How did you get here?" he demanded. "Su Yang didn't die in your world? Why does his skill weapon still exist?!"

How could there be a world where Su Yang was alive—where he still had all his skills and weapons—when in every single world Tang Erda had been to, Su Yang had already died?

The other [Tang Erda] coughed violently, then lifted his head. His

gaze was grim and piercing.

“Su Yang is dead.”

Tang Erda’s brows knit together. “Then how did these handcuffs—”

“The soul of Su Yang…” the bound man rasped, “was bought by Bai Liu.”

With a sharp, deliberate motion, he twisted his fractured hand with his other, crushing the bones and wrenching his mangled palm free from the ring of the cuffs. He had chosen to break himself rather than harm Su Yang’s skill weapon.

“This,” he said, flexing his ruined hand with a cold smile, “is the skill Bai Liu used on me—with Su Yang’s panel.”

Tang Erda’s face paled. “Su Yang sold his soul to Bai Liu?”

The bound man leaned against the wall, his breath unsteady. Then he let out a low, mocking snort. “What’s so surprising about that?”

“More than half the souls in the entire Heretics Authority… belong to Bai Liu.”

A chill ran down Tang Erda’s spine. “More than half…?” His expression darkened completely. “I know my players. There’s no way they would willingly do that.”

He turned his gaze back to the man before him, standing up and leveling his gun. His voice was sharp. “And I already jumped from that world line long ago. By all logic, I shouldn’t exist there anymore. So how are you still alive in a world line I abandoned over a decade ago?”

The other [Tang Erda]—haggard, wounded, but still smiling—tilted his head slightly. His deep blue eyes locked onto Tang Erda’s with something unreadable.

Then he smirked.

“Do you remember the wish you made to the evil god?”

Tang Erda’s grip on his gun tightened.

“The power to keep going back… to change events… to stop everyone from entering the game. That’s what you remember, isn’t it?” The

bound [Tang Erda] exhaled sharply. “But have you forgotten the price you had to pay?”

Slowly, he braced himself against the wall and pushed himself to his feet. Blood dripped from his fingers, staining the floor beneath him. He lifted his head, his deathly gaze locking onto Tang Erda.

“You were never meant to be human anymore,” he said hoarsely.

“You’re nothing but a monster caught in a perpetual jump through time.”

His voice dropped to something eerily calm, eerily certain.

“You’re just a memory. A fragment of consciousness. And we—the real Tang Erdas of each timeline—are the ones actually living. You’re nothing but a parasite, an aberration that hijacks our minds and wears our lives like a suit.”

He took a staggering step forward.

“You’re not even human.” His lips curled into a grim smile.

“You’re Heretic 0002: The Time Hunter.”

Tang Erda’s breath caught. He instinctively took two steps back, unable to find words for a long moment. Then he shook his head. “Even so… I don’t believe the Heretics Authority would have willingly sold their souls to Bai Liu.”

“Not willingly,” the other [Tang Erda] admitted.

He leaned against the wall and pulled out a cigarette. Then, extending his cuffed wrist, he raised two fingers. “Got a light?”

Tang Erda stared at him, unblinking. “No.”

“Tch.” The bound man clicked his tongue. He stuck the cigarette between his lips and, instead of lighting it properly, raised his gun and pressed the butt of the cigarette against the overheated barrel.

The smoldering heat lit the cigarette instantly. He took a sharp drag, exhaled, and then coughed twice before continuing.

“It wasn’t intentional.”

“After you left, the Heretics Authority went to war with Bai Liu. Then

a game called Five Buildings surfaced."

Tang Erda stiffened. His eyes widened with a sudden, terrible realization. "It can't be—"

The bound man exhaled another lungful of smoke, his lips curving into something between a smirk and a grimace.

"Oh, but it is."

"Bai Liu—an absolute lunatic who lives for money—got his hands on the Five Buildings, dragged it into reality, and pushed for full-scale commercialization. He added a clause to the contracts stating that when Party B's assets were insufficient, Party A had the right to repossess all fixed and unfixed assets—including, conveniently, 'certain deep, unique assets.' Assets Bai Liu alone had the right to interpret."

"That agreement should have never passed," Tang Erda snapped. "No one would have signed it."

"Under normal circumstances, no." The bound man's eyes gleamed darkly. "But once Five Buildings landed in reality, plenty of desperate people—who had no idea Bai Liu was behind it—did."

He took another slow drag. "That included a lot of people from the Heretics Authority."

Tang Erda stood frozen.

"They didn't even realize," the bound man murmured. "Not until it was too late."

He exhaled softly. The cigarette burned low between his fingers, but he didn't seem to notice.

"Even death wasn't enough to escape Bai Liu's grip."

Tang Erda stared at the cold metal shackles. A sick feeling twisted in his stomach.

And in a quiet, almost broken voice, the bound man whispered: "…I never dreamed these handcuffs would be used on me."

How to Own Five Buildings

The evil [Tang Erda] leaned against the invisible wall of the prop [Magic Space], lighting another cigarette with the still-hot barrel of his gun. Lowering his head, he took a slow, deep drag, letting the smoke fill his lungs before speaking abruptly:

"You haven't escaped this world line yet. The situation here—still under control?"

He bit down on the cigarette, pausing. "Su Yang is still alive, isn't he?"

"Alive," Tang Erda replied. He was quiet for a moment before adding, "There haven't been any devastating copies landing in the real world either. Everything's… still going well."

The man on the other side of the table was silent for a beat before he scoffed. "After all these do-overs, you finally did it."

He leaned back, exhaling a trail of smoke. "Well done. How'd you pull it off? Show me the ropes."

Tang Erda's fingers tightened around the barrel of the gun hanging at his thigh. He opened his mouth to respond, but before he could, the man opposite him caught sight of the pattern engraved on the silver revolver's handle. His expression shifted instantly.

His dark blue eyes sharpened with suspicion, and a murderous edge crept into his gaze as if interrogating a prisoner.

"The pattern on your gun handle... why does it bear The Wandering Circus' emblem?"

Before Tang Erda could answer, the man pushed up from his seat and closed the distance in an instant. He yanked the gun from his back holster and leveled it at Tang Erda without hesitation, his hostility barely concealed.

"You sold your soul to Bai Six?!"

"He's not Bai Six. He's not the same as Bai Six." Tang Erda slowly lowered his own raised weapon, then raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. "The Bai Six of this world line is called Bai Liu—the White Willow. He—"

"That's what everyone who sells their soul to him says." The man across the table let out a sharp, derisive laugh. "You should know better than anyone what it's like to fall under his spell."

He exhaled, cigarette smoke curling around his narrowed eyes as he flicked the safety off. "I'll give you one last chance to explain yourself. Why did you sell your soul to Bai Six? Were you forced?"

Tang Erda struggled to find the right words to describe the Bai Liu of this world line, to convince his other self that Bai Liu wasn't like that.

Law-abiding? No criminal record? A good citizen?

None of it was accurate enough. Deep down, Tang Erda knew Bai Liu still had the potential to cross the line at any moment. And yet, somehow, he never did. Somehow, he had remained in this deceptively harmless state all this time.

And for some reason, Tang Erda believed he always would.

Taking a deep breath, he lifted his gaze. "There was no coercion. I trust him."

The man on the other side of the table went completely still—then pulled the trigger.

"Then you die."

BANG—!!!

Zone D

Muke cautiously searched the cemetery, moving floor by floor. Two hours earlier, Bai Liu had sent a message through his communication device, instructing them to focus their search on the central area of the solitary grave and the rotting cemetery.

Muke had yet to find the solitary grave, but after an exhaustive search, he finally located the rotting cemetery.

Turning over a headstone, he exhaled a long sigh of relief at the sight of an access point to the cemetery building below. The structure was clearly unfinished, with steel bars protruding from the walls.

His thoughts drifted to Bai Liu, who was burdened with a blood-loss

debuff. With his task complete, Muke could finally regroup with Bai Liu and the others in Area C.

Drawing the short double-bladed knife from his back, he gripped it between his teeth, braced his hands on either side of the entrance, and deftly maneuvered through the steel framework in a series of swift, fluid movements, descending toward the central floor below.

Upon reaching the vast cemetery chamber, Muke's sharp gaze swept across the room. Unlike the 'incinerator '-styled spaces he had previously encountered, this one was built in a markedly different architectural style. Using the steel bars as footholds, he propelled himself inside with a precise leap, landing in the upper left corner.

Bracing his feet against the wall, he shifted into a crouch, his body taut like a gecko clinging to a surface. The knife he had held between his teeth now rested in his grip, while three fingers pressed lightly against the wall. He scanned the room with calm, calculating eyes.

The chamber, approximately two hundred square feet, was lavishly decorated—luxurious, even, as if meant for the living. This starkly contrasted with the adjacent burial chambers, which barely measured three to five square feet. In the center stood a mahogany table, upon which rested a shrine with a black-and-white photograph. Next to the photograph, the cause of death was inscribed: "Died in a car accident."

Beneath the shrine sat a white porcelain urn.

If Bai Liu’s deductions were correct, the land certificate would be inside the urn.

Muke was just about to leap down to retrieve it when he abruptly halted. His fingers, previously pressed against the wall, retracted slightly as he glanced at them.

Only a thin layer of dust clung to his skin.

A subtle sense of wrongness crept over him. Some areas of the room were thick with dust, while others had only a light coating—particularly the corner where he had landed, the floor beneath him, and—

Muke’s gaze shifted slowly toward the mahogany table—the shrine that held the urn.

If the developer monster inside the urn had crawled out, the room

wouldn't be so pristine. There would be clear disturbances in the dust—trails where it had moved. Yet the only path where the dust was noticeably thinner led directly to the urn.

Which meant—

Someone had approached the urn in the exact same way he had. And they had deliberately brushed aside the dust to conceal their tracks.

A voice, cool and detached, spoke from the shadows at his side.

"Only just noticing?"

The rhythmic sound of something heavy being dragged echoed through the room, accompanied by the deliberate, unhurried steps of leather shoes striking the wooden floor.

"What a disappointing world line. I can't believe I'd be this slow to react to my surroundings."

From the darkness, a delicate profile emerged.

"If I were facing an opponent like me, that sluggish reaction would be enough for me to kill your president thirteen times over."

Muke dropped from the wall, his muscles tensing the instant he saw the figure before him.

Standing across the room—was a much older version of himself.

The older [Muke] dragged a developer monster's corpse behind him, its lifeless body leaving a long, bloodstained trail. He was taller, and broader than Muke, dressed sharply in a fitted black waistcoat. A pale-colored rose peeked from the right pocket of his suit.

Gold-rimmed glasses rested on the bridge of his nose, a delicate chain linking the frames to his ears. A reversed cross earring swung slightly in his left ear. He was dressed impeccably, exuding the elegance of a refined socialite who had just stepped out of a grand soirée.

Expressionless, the older [Muke] let go of the corpse. With his free hand, he retrieved a folded document from his pocket, holding it up.

"Is this what you came for?"

Muke instinctively put distance between them. This man—this version of himself—radiated an unmistakable sense of danger.

He couldn't have been created by Bai Liu. Even if Bai Liu made independent decisions, he always informed the players of their outcomes.

Which left only one possibility—

Muke's voice was tight. "Were you summoned by Yuan Guang's skill?"

"Summoned?"

The older [Muke] finally met Muke's gaze head-on.

"The only one who has the right to define my existence is my president."

He lifted his chin, an air of restrained arrogance in his posture. His speech was measured, unwavering.

"And you—what gives you the right to judge me?"

With that, he released the document. The land certificate fluttered toward the ground.

Muke's gaze locked onto it.

At the same time, the older [Muke's] attention fixated on the black dagger in Muke's hand. His expression darkened slightly.

"The president of this world line found you a personal skill?"

Muke caught the shift in his counterpart's emotions, his sharp eyes flicking toward the older [Muke's] hands—both wrapped in white bandages from fingertips to wrists, disappearing beneath his suit cuffs. His neck, too, was bound in layers of bandages.

A slow, deliberate step forward. The dim lighting obscured his eyes as he raised his hands and, with meticulous precision, began to unwind the bandages from his fingers. His voice was soft, unhurried.

"The president does not waste time or energy on a player without skills. Nor would he train someone with no value."

"Those who have no value—do not deserve to survive."

In the muted light, his refined face took on a somber hue.

"It's the same way heart disease has no place in a lasting social

structure. It's a fundamental rule of the world. As a Muke, you should at least understand that, shouldn't you?"

Muke's breath hitched for a split second—but he quickly regained control, stepping back cautiously as the older [Muke] advanced.

"To be of greater value to the president. To stand on the same battlefield as him. To win for him as a team member."

The bandages unraveled further, draping past the older [Muke's] elbows.

"I trained relentlessly. I fought ruthlessly. I killed countless players, trying to seize their skills. But either they wouldn't give them up—or they didn't have the abilities the chairman wanted."

"In the end, I became the only unskilled member of the Wandering Circus Team."

The last of the bandages fell to the floor. With careful precision, he folded them and placed them on the mahogany table beside him.

Muke's brows furrowed. No matter how composed he was, he couldn't suppress the unease that settled over him.

From fingers to wrists to his throat, the exposed skin was riddled with scars—deep bruises, cuts, bullet wounds. A grotesque, chilling tapestry of injuries.

"Perfect combat skills. Precise environmental awareness. Predicting enemy behavior."

His voice took on a near-pleased lilt. "That's how I became the president's alternate primary attacker."

"Every time I finished a fight, every time new wounds appeared on my body, the chairman himself bandaged me. Proof that I had created value for him on the battlefield."

"The more scars I bear—the more valuable I am to the president."

"And you—"

Opposite him, Muke raises his hands, his leather-clad feet spinning against the ground.

Almost instantly, the older, more mature [Muke] appears before him.

In a seamless motion, he lifts a hand, snatches the dagger from Muke’s grasp, and slashes it toward his neck.

Muke reacts instantly, leaning back to evade the strike while flipping his palm in a swift recall of his weapon.

[System Alert: Player Muke recalls his skill weapon.]

The dagger in [Muke's] hand flickers, its form wavering as if on the verge of vanishing. Yet in the split second before it does, the man moves—so fast that even the system struggles to register his motion.

At the exact moment Muke recalls his weapon, [Muke] grips his own dagger and reverses the strike, carving a deep, bloody gash across his counterpart’s neck.

Blood spatters onto the surface of [Muke's] gold-rimmed glasses.

Lowering his gaze, he speaks in a tone laced with cold disdain. "Your mediocrity and incompetence have squandered the President’s favor."

He tilts the dagger, the blade gleaming with fresh blood.

"I will kill you myself—with the weapon he entrusted to me."

How to Own Five Building

Zone B

Liu Jiayi crawled out of the cemetery building, her face tense. She crouched low, hands and knees on the ground, then sprang forward in a sudden burst. She rolled midair, narrowly avoiding a tentacle that lashed out from the cemetery, aiming for her ankle. As she landed, she struck with precision, severing the tentacle. It recoiled violently, retreating back into the darkness.

In her right hand, Liu Jiayi clutched a white land certificate, its edges slightly crumpled from the fight. Blood stained her face—whether her own or the enemy's was uncertain. Her lips pressed into a thin line as she turned her sharp gaze toward the cemetery's exit.

Behind her, the cemetery exhaled a thick, black mist laced with poison. From within, the eerie hissing of a monster's corroding body echoed, distorted and agonized.

Liu Jiayi was the first of her team to secure a land certificate.

She had used her Poison Fountain ability to kill the developer monster lurking below. It wasn't ideal—she had wanted to conserve her ability for later, waiting for the cooldown to reset. Given enough time, she could have whittled the monster down through other means. But Bai Liu had been out of contact for too long. Something must have happened to that guy.

She took two sharp breaths, adjusted her grip on the land certificate, then strapped on her skates. Without hesitation, she shot forward, heading at full speed toward Zone C.

A lone figure, a small girl racing through a graveyard at night, arms swinging as she moved—it was a strange, eerie sight. But what was even eerier was the silent, creeping mist that had begun to gather behind her.

It moved unnaturally, as if alive. A shadow trailing her every step, closing in like Death itself, cloaked and patient.

Liu Jiayi came to an abrupt stop. Her instincts screamed at her. She reached behind her, fingers curling around two vials of poison. Without turning her head, she swiftly slid backward, dodging the encroaching mist. Her gaze locked onto a point within the cemetery.

“Who’s there?” she demanded, her voice sharp and cold.

A voice answered, hollow and amused.

"Finally, I've waited until you used your big move."

From within the mist, the faint silhouette of a woman emerged. Her voice was slightly slurred, as though she were chewing on something, and a teasing smile laced her words.

"Not that I couldn’t have killed you earlier," she continued lazily, "but I like to maximize enemy casualties while minimizing effort."

She chuckled. "It's basic witchcraft, isn't it?"

Liu Jiayi wasted no time. She threw a vial of poison directly at the mist.

The two poisonous mists—hers and the enemy’s—collided, forming a stark dividing line between them. A powerful wind erupted from the point of impact, blowing outward in both directions. The vegetation caught in the crosswinds withered instantly, blackening and curling in decay.

The opposing mist was swept back, revealing the woman standing inside it.

The moment Liu Jiayi got a clear look at her, she didn’t hesitate. She turned on her heel, stomped twice on her skates, and shot off in the opposite direction.

A light, appreciative laugh followed her retreat.

"A good decision," the woman mused. "A witch's first rule of survival—when faced with an opponent beyond your ability, secure an escape."

Her tone turned sly.

"But what if your opponent is just as clever?"

A crisp snap of fingers echoed in the darkness.

"Like this."

One by one, the cemetery buildings around Liu Jiayi erupted with toxic fog, converging inward. Every escape route was sealed, until only a small, empty patch remained at the center—her last safe zone.

Liu Jiayi tried twice to break through. Both times, she was forced back, gritting her teeth in frustration.

Eventually, she stopped, turning toward the woman who was now strolling leisurely toward her.

Now fully visible, the woman's appearance was eerily familiar.

She was Liu Jiayi—an older version.

Her short hair was cut in two layers, one framing her ears and the other at her nape, tucked back casually. She wore a clashing red-and-blue athletic top over matching shorts, but layered it with an oversized sweatshirt that hung loosely to her waist. Graffiti-colored sneakers and white socks—pulled just high enough to stand out—completed the look.

Her figure was lean and muscular, toned from intense physical activity. A black thigh strap wrapped around her right leg, a belt slung diagonally across her waist. Poison-filled test tubes were clipped to both, their inky liquid shifting ominously under the dim light.

On the skin beneath her leg ring, a reversed cross tattoo, palm-sized, was etched in dark ink.

She chewed bubble gum absentmindedly, blowing and popping bubbles in a lazy rhythm. Slung over her shoulder, she dragged an unconscious woman—Shi Qian.

With an easy smile, she raised a hand in greeting.

"Hello, little blind girl who can't run away."

She tilted her head. "You've figured out who I am, right?"

Liu Jiayi slowly hid a poison vial behind her back, her expression impassive.

"Isn't it a little sad to be your own enemy when you're only eight years old?" she asked coolly.

The older [Liu Jiayi] grinned, casually tossing Shi Qian aside like discarded baggage. She crouched down, meeting Liu Jiayi's gaze at eye level.

Her left hand lifted, cupping Liu Jiayi's face with a gentle, almost affectionate touch.

"Isn't it only natural for a big sister to bully her little sister?"

Liu Jiayi leaned away, barely avoiding the contact. Out of the corner of her eye, she checked the poison vials in her right hand.

“Big sister,” she said icily, “don’t you think this is overkill? You’ve got five poison test tubes ready—I’ll be dead in one hit.”

“Ehh? Is that so?” The older [Liu Jiayi] smirked, tilting her head.

"But that’s how my brother and I used to play before he died."

Her voice was casual, almost playful.

"He had so much fun. In the end, he even plucked out his own eyes and begged me to use them before he died."

She opened her eyes wide, showcasing their pristine condition. A slow, joyful smile spread across her lips.

“Well, he gave me these eyes. Not bad, huh?”

Liu Jiayi’s breath hitched. Her fingers instinctively curled around the rag doll at her side, gripping it tightly—then just as quickly, she forced herself to release it.

Across from her, the older [Liu Jiayi’s] gaze flickered downward.

She saw the doll.

Her pleasant smile vanished in an instant.

"You still have that disgusting thing?" Her voice was lower now, more dangerous.

Her eyes darkened. "You’re not still keeping Liu Huai alive in your heart, are you? Bai Six didn’t help you execute him?"

Liu Jiayi inhaled sharply. "He’s dead."

She exhaled. "Bai Liu never helped me kill my brother. He kept saving him."

The older [Liu Jiayi] let out a sharp, derisive snort.

"That guy helped you save someone? Bai Six?" She sneered. "Please. He was just playing you. Luring you into killing someone for him."

Liu Jiayi looked up, her expression shifting as if she had just realized something. She raised her small face and smirked nastily at her older counterpart across the room, pulling a slight grimace.

"Because my brother is hell-bent on dying for me."

She tilted her head, her voice carrying a hint of derision. "My brother is different from yours. He died after killing a bad father for me."

Across the room, [Liu Jiayi]—her older self—stared at the younger girl's tense expression for a few seconds. After seemingly confirming that she wasn't lying, her face went blank. Then, without hesitation, she backhanded five test tubes of poison, smashing them onto the floor.

The air instantly turned noxious. Liu Jiayi moved quickly—holding her breath as she secured his mask, connecting the antidote spray to its nozzle. She pressed the canister twice, inhaling two deep breaths of the antidote.

Even so, her life bar flickered downward before climbing back up at an agonizingly slow pace.

Just one breath and it's already affecting me. This woman's poison is terrifying!

From within the thickening mist, an eerie voice echoed from all directions, ethereal and taunting—like a witch chanting a curse.

"Like me, you had a foolish father and a brother who believed until the very end that he loved you. And a Bai Six who keeps using whatever is left of your worth—your anger, your emotions—to bait you into helping him kill, into doing his dirty work.

"And since we're creatures bound by the same fate, my last scraps of sympathy compel me to make your death a little easier."

The toxic fog clung to Liu Jiayi's dress, corroding the fabric along with the doll strapped to her waist. She glanced around warily before responding, her voice cold.

"Thanks for your compassion, big sister, but you should save your pity for yourself."

Her expression remained unreadable as she continued, "Before my brother died, he made a soul deal with Bai Liu—to make sure Bai Liu

would treat me as family."

"And Bai Liu has done just that."

"He got me out of the orphanage. He found me adoptive parents. He introduced me to his friends."

Liu Jiayi spoke evenly, her tone unwavering. "Whatever the circumstances, Bai Liu has never once asked me to kill anyone."

She tilted her head slightly. "Sympathy usually comes from those who are better off, looking down on those who aren't."

"So from that perspective, Big Sister... shouldn't I be the one sympathizing with you?"

The swirling poison mist shuddered—stunned into stillness. But only for a moment.

Then, in the next breath, it surged.

The older [Liu Jiayi], standing in the center of the room, met her gaze with an unreadable expression. Slowly, she spread her hands, then closed them into fists.

"Poison Fountain."

In an instant, the black mist thickened—solidifying into a liquid mass—and erupted from the ground, rushing forward to engulf Liu Jiayi!

Zone A

Mu Sicheng spat out a mouthful of dirt, grumbling as he pulled himself up. "Damn, the cemetery buildings in Area A are way too crowded! And full of big family plots, too."

He dusted himself off with a scowl. "Do rich people really like keeping their whole family together from life to death? So many monsters around—how the hell am I supposed to find that rotten cemetery building Bai Liu mentioned…?"

Muttering to himself, he pushed off the ground with one hand, flipping upright with practiced ease, ready to land firmly—

A slow, teasing whistle cut through the air behind him.

"Hey, is this what you're looking for, kid?"

The moment Mu Sicheng's foot touched the ground, his hands morphed into sharp claws. Instinct kicked in—he flipped back, retreating a dozen meters in an instant, widening the space between himself and the voice. His eyes locked onto the source. "Show yourself!"

A chuckle followed, dripping with amusement. "Nice reflexes. I thought the little boss of this world was so pampered he'd turn you soft."

Mu Sicheng's gaze snapped to a figure crouched lazily on a gravestone.

The moonlight silhouetted the man’s form, casting his features in partial shadow. All that was visible was the curve of a smirk and one eye, gleaming red under the pale glow.

That face—it was familiar. And yet, unnervingly foreign.

The man leaped down effortlessly, striding toward Mu Sicheng with one hand tucked in his pocket. With the other, he waved a piece of paper.

"You’re looking for the land certificate, right?" He smirked. "I've got it."

As he stepped fully into the moonlight, Mu Sicheng's breath hitched. His entire stance stiffened before he barked, "Who the fuck are you?!"

The man was draped in an oversized brown fleece, the hem of his dark yellow woolen coat flaring as the wind caught it. It was unbuttoned, revealing a sports-style top underneath—a mismatched combination as if he'd grabbed whatever was closest in his wardrobe.

His canvas pants were tucked neatly into high boots, and his hands glinted with seven or eight silver rings, each bearing a reverse cross turned at different angles.

"Who am I?" The man laughed like he'd just heard the funniest joke in the world. "You’re looking right at me, and you’re still asking?"

He took another step forward.

The night breeze ruffled his coat as he walked with a lazy, unhurried

gait, but every movement was precise. His muscles shifted beneath his clothes, the kind of controlled strength that reminded Mu Sicheng of a lion—casual, but always ready to strike.

Then, in the moonlight, his red eyes gleamed like embers.

"Obviously, I'm you, Mu Sicheng."

A crushing wave of pressure rolled off the man, instinctively forcing Mu Sicheng back two cautious steps. His mind raced.

If I can't fight, I have to run.

That was Bai Liu's first rule for survival—preserve your strength. Find an escape route. With his speed, he could still make it out—

The man tilted his head, watching him with amusement. "Running off would be boring. I'm not here to fight you."

Mu Sicheng faltered mid-step, eyeing him warily.

The man smirked, lifting the land certificate between two fingers—then let go.

Mu Sicheng's eyes followed it as it fluttered toward the ground. Then the man's boot came down on it.

It felt like the sole of his shoe had pressed right onto Mu Sicheng's nerves.

"I haven't had a fun run-in with a boss like this in a while," the man mused, his grin sharpening. "Meeting in the guild every day is getting dull. How about we play a game?"

Mu Sicheng narrowed his eyes. "What kind of game?"

The man's grin widened. "One that you and I would both enjoy."

"Steal the Game."

Mu Sicheng's breath hitched slightly. His pupils darkened, and this time, he fully turned to face the other man. "How do we play?"

"Simple." The other [Mu Sicheng] rolled his shoulders, stretching like he was just getting comfortable. He exhaled a slow, relaxed breath before meeting Mu Sicheng's gaze.

"I'll stand right here. No skills, no monster book form, no moving my feet. I'll only use my hands."

He pointed at the ground beneath his boot. "And you—" his smirk turned downright taunting, "—can use any trick you want. If you manage to steal the land certificate from under my foot, I'll let you go. Deal?"

Mu Sicheng hesitated for a beat. Then he rolled up his sleeves, a sharp grin breaking across his face.

"Alright then," he said, eyes burning with challenge. "Let's play."

Zone C

The two whips, one black and one white, collided mid-air for a moment before bouncing off to either side with tremendous force. They slammed into the sides of the building, creating two deep dents. The building struck by the black whip cracked along its fracture and slowly collapsed, like tofu being sliced in half with a knife.

Dust and debris filled the air as buildings around the clearing toppled inward, adding to the chaos.

In the center of the destruction, two men flew toward each other. They whipped their weapons through the thick smoke and dust, creating a clear space around them. In the next instant, they met on the ground, their whips clashing with such force that a black crack appeared in the air, quickly closing again.

Bai Liu and Bai Six, both wearing leather gloves, gripped their whips in one hand while using the other to block their opponent's attack.

The black and white whips nearly ignited as they met. In the faint glow of the fire, Bai Six raised his eyes, catching sight of the cold-faced Bai Liu. He suddenly let out a soft laugh.

"How about we make a bet?" Bai Six suggested. "How about a bet on which of my team members will kill your team member first?"

As soon as the words left his mouth, Bai Six slid upward, retracting his whip. In one swift motion, he dropped his body low and thrust upwards, aiming to strike Bai Liu.

The whip in Bai Liu's hand vanished, and his gloved hands transformed into sharp monkey claws. His fingers meshed together to form a clawed blade that grazed diagonally across Bai Liu's shoulder.

Bai Six narrowly avoided the blow, then swiftly countered with a claw strike. He dropped his gaze to Bai Liu, his smile softening. "I'd guess the first one will be Mu Sicheng."

Bai Liu's evasion speed wasn't fast enough to avoid Bai Six's attack. The claw pierced his shoulder, and before he could react, Bai Liu swung his whip outward, forcing the claw from his flesh.

The monkey claw was violently pulled from Bai Liu's shoulder, and blood instantly soaked through his shirt at the wound.

Bai Six, now a distance away from the swing of Bai Liu's whip, nonchalantly withdrew his dripping bloodied monkey paw. He continued his approach through the dust, asking casually, "Who do you think will be the first to die?"

Bai Liu didn't answer. The only sound in the haze was the steady drip of his blood falling to the ground.

[System Warning: Player Mu Sicheng's life expectancy continues to drop, now at 27!]

Mu Sicheng was thrown, crashing into four or five tombstones. He coughed up a mouthful of blood and staggered, clutching at the tombstones to pull himself up. His knees were weak, and he failed to stand twice, eventually collapsing into a half-kneel. His blood-stained eyes locked onto the distant figure of his other self, who carelessly stepped on a land certificate.

"...This is terrifying," he thought, barely able to grasp the extent of the power behind the hands that had just struck him. Can his hands really have this much strength?

Across from him, his other self stood—left foot on the land certificate, the ground beneath him untouched, even as he yawned, a tear leaking from his eye. "71 attempts… still going?" he muttered.

Mu Sicheng swallowed the blood rising in his throat, and with difficulty, he forced himself to his feet. His head hung low, and his fists clenched. What would Bai Liu do? he wondered. If he were here, after losing forty points of health, would he keep fighting or retreat?

Was the decision I just made the right one? Should I keep going?

"Hey, no choice, huh?" Across the room, his other self waved lazily. "I'll fall asleep if I don't get this over with."

Mu Sicheng gritted his teeth, drawing a deep breath, and just about turned away.

"Running away?" the other [Mu Sicheng] taunted, hands behind his head. "Not so smart to know how to defend yourself. If it were me, I wouldn't be dumb enough to complete Bai Six's mission."

"He's an inhumane guy, just like Liu Huai. They're not worth all the effort you've put in."

"Don't waste your time with people like that."

Mu Sicheng, half-turned, froze. His eyes flared with anger as he snapped his head up. His fist clenched tight, and he charged forward. "Don't you dare talk about my friend like that!"

"They're not the ones who suck!" he shouted.

[System Alert: Assassins and thieves, what a lousy name!]

[Eh? Does it suck? I think it's fine!]

Liu Huai scratched his head, smiling awkwardly at Mu Sicheng. "I thought it'd be cool to bring along Fourth Brother's Thief for the title."

[Rangers and Monkeys, what a shitty name. Bai Liu, go to hell!]

[Can we even win in the end?]

Bai Liu, calm as ever, turned to him. "That's not for you to worry about."

"Just do what you need to do. I'll take care of the rest."

"We're going to win."

"I don't care! Let's bet on it! Just die already!!!"

Bai Liu was always able to find a way to save the situation.

Tears filled Mu Sicheng's eyes as he lifted his fist and hurled it at the other [Mu Sicheng's] face. "For the 72nd time!!!"

The older [Mu Sicheng] easily dodged, his shoulder shaking with the movement. When Mu Sicheng's fist landed, it shifted into a monkey's paw. His eyes burned with focus as he aimed for the land certificate beneath his opponent's feet.

This was just a diversion—his real goal was still to steal the certificate.

The older [Mu Sicheng] raised an eyebrow, squatted down, and moved his knee to block Mu Sicheng's paw. He grabbed it effortlessly, folding Mu Sicheng's arm inwards as if snapping chopsticks.

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng's life value has dropped to 20!]

Mu Sicheng gritted his teeth, blood rushing in his throat. He rolled over to try again, but the older [Mu Sicheng] swiftly grabbed his monkey paw and threw him out, just as he had before.

One more throw, and Mu Sicheng might be dead.

But as he was thrown, Mu Sicheng managed to cling to the older [Mu Sicheng's] shirt, the pain from his broken monkey paw unbearable.

The older [Mu Sicheng] raised an eyebrow and then seized Mu Sicheng's shoulders, twisting them as if to snap him in half.

"All those times your arms have been broken, and you still haven't learned," the older [Mu Sicheng] said coldly. "This time, I'll teach you a hard lesson."

Mu Sicheng gritted his teeth, his body squirming. He dug deep and bucked against the older [Mu Sicheng's] grip, his shoulders dislocated by the force. When they came free, Mu Sicheng's pupils widened, and he fell straight to the ground.

"You've had your monkey paw taken so many times by your so-called friends, and you still don't get it. Now you don't have one at all," the older [Mu Sicheng] said, crouching over him and poking his face in boredom. "The game is over."

Mu Sicheng's shoulders brushed the ground as he struggled to move, inching forward toward the older [Mu Sicheng] as if he planned to try again.

The older [Mu Sicheng] finally looked mildly bored. "I'm sick of your so-called friends. Come at me again, and I'll really kill you."

Bruised and battered, Mu Sicheng looked up, a smug grin on his face despite the dirt that covered him. He had the land certificate in his mouth. "I stole the land certificate from under your feet. I won!"

The older [Mu Sicheng's] pupils narrowed in shock.

He did it on purpose.

Mu Sicheng knew that the breaking of his arms was a psychological weakness between them. Every time his arms were broken, not only did he suffer, but his tormentor did too.

And in that moment of psychological negligence, Mu Sicheng had played dead, gnawing at the dirt beneath him with his mouth, all to retrieve the land certificate.

Mu Sicheng knew that no version of himself, no matter the timeline, would ever lie at another's feet to let Bai Six claim a land certificate from under him.

But in this worldline, how had he become so willing to do this to Bai Liu?

The older [Mu Sicheng] pondered for a moment.

When he didn't respond, Mu Sicheng—still lying on the ground—grew uneasy. He clenched his teeth, still fearful of losing the land certificate. He called out, "Hey! Are you going to let this slide?"

Across the room, the older [Mu Sicheng] snapped back to his senses. He lowered his head, locking eyes with the slumped Mu Sicheng. After a few seconds, he broke into a low, disdainful laugh. "I may be a fool, but you did win."

Mu Sicheng's eyes lit up as the older [Mu Sicheng] slapped him on the head, stood up, and turned away, casually waving at him with one hand in his pocket.

"I failed my mission. I'll go collect my punishment from my boss. He's probably going to whip me to death."

"Your boss is good," [Mu Sicheng] muttered.

The older [Mu Sicheng] glanced back at him. "He taught you well. Even after what you did, you pulled it off quite handsomely."

Mu Sicheng blinked in confusion. "????"

Is that a fucking compliment or is that a slur?

How to Own Five Building

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Zone C

The black whip slithered like a cobra, its head raised, slipping between Bai Liu's cuff and the skin of his wrist. It wound its way from his wrist bone up to his shoulder. With a swift motion, bone spines shot out from both sides, embedding into his flesh and bone.

Bai Six yanked the end of the whip, pulling it forward with a downward pressure of his wrist. It seemed gentle at first, but the force was enough to lift Bai Liu's entire body off the ground.

The whip tightened instantly around Bai Liu's arm, spinning like a leaf blade in a juicer, tearing the flesh and bone of his left arm to shreds.

Dragged toward Bai Six, Bai Liu was forced to meet his gaze. Bai Six smiled softly and spoke, “The first step is to disarm and pull out your opponent’s arms, right?”

This was what Bai Liu and Yuan Guang had discussed before, but now Bai Six said it with a casual, almost teasing tone.

“But surrendering our weapons won't do much for us, will it?”

As Bai Six’s words left his lips, Bai Liu darted away. Bai Six smoothly sidled up to him, producing a bottle of antidote from his shirt pocket. He drank it down coolly, and in moments, his shattered arm began to heal.

“It’s hard to make an enemy of yourself,” Bai Liu said, his smile thin as he watched Bai Six retract his bloodied black bone whip. "I can usually get the upper hand with experience, but it doesn’t seem easy to beat you.”

“I’m sure you feel the same way.”

Bai Liu wiped the blood from his lips, returning a faint, “Fine.”

The smile on Bai Six’s face deepened. “Because you knew from the start you couldn’t beat me, so you didn’t even try, right?”

“You’re just stalling for time. What are you waiting for?”

“You didn’t use your own team’s moves from the start, leaving room for them to survive. You’re not waiting for them to win and come to your aid, are you?”

Bai Liu didn’t deny it. His voice remained calm. “They’re more likely to beat your men than I am to beat you, at least.”

Bai Six’s expression turned playful. “You think they’re better than my players?”

“No,” Bai Liu replied steadily. “I think they’re nowhere near as strong as your players—no comparison at all. But compared to the difference between you and me before, if this match must be a bet—”

“I’m betting on them to win.”

“So that’s it?” Bai Six chuckled, his lips curling with amusement as the whip in his hand morphed into a short, dark dagger. He twirled it casually between his fingers before holding it firmly in a backhand grip. “That sounds like a pretty good plan.”

Bai Liu’s gaze flicked to the dagger. He recognized it. It was Liu Huai’s dagger.

In this world, Bai Six hadn’t passed Liu Huai’s skills on to Muke, but had instead claimed them for himself.

Bai Six smirked. “I thought it was you who had developed a strange sense of protectiveness over these useless players who sold their souls to you?”

Bai Liu met his gaze without flinching. “Isn’t it natural for an owner to protect their property?”

Bai Six took a step closer, his expression hidden as dust kicked up around them. His soft laugh filtered through the air.

“Is it just a desire to protect property?”

“Property is most valuable when it’s properly consumed, just like money,” Bai Six mused. “Circulation and consumption give it value.”

His laughter seemed to echo from all directions.

“I’ve never seen a Bai Six who just collects possessions without

spending them. That kind of miserliness isn't something a smart person would do. You know that better than anyone—"

"The intense protectiveness you feel goes beyond that. It's irrational. It stops you from seeing them as mere property."

[System Alert: Player Bai Six has loaded player Liu Huai's panel. Note: Player Liu Huai is in a death ghost state in reality, self-aware, and can use this player's panel. Bai Six can use Liu Huai's personal skill, Flash Strike, to instantly move anywhere on the map.]

As the words faded into the air, Bai Liu heard the crack of something sharp cutting through the air from just behind his ear.

A black-gloved right hand rested lightly on Bai Liu's shoulder. Bai Liu's face broke through the fog, and his eyes locked with Bai Six's, a smile lingering just behind his ear.

Bai Liu's left hand gripped his neck as the tip of the dagger rested against his skin. Bai Six slowly raised the blade, forcing Bai Liu to lean back against his shoulder, forcing him to listen.

Bai Six whispered, his voice tinged with amusement. "You don't want to spend these possessions, do you?"

"You've got feelings for them, Bai Liu."

Before Bai Six could finish his sentence, Bai Liu's hand snapped back, gripping the dagger. Warm blood gushed, staining the crooked reverse cross pattern drawn on his collarbone.

The pattern absorbed the blood, faintly glowing, turning ever so slowly.

Bai Liu swiped the dagger upwards behind him, breaking free from Bai Six's hold. Without missing a beat, he followed through, using the whip to smash through the five surrounding buildings.

In the chaos that followed, Bai Liu took shelter in one of the buildings, clutching his bleeding throat. He leaned against the wall, calmly pouring the last bottle of antidote into his mouth.

This was his final antidote. If he needed more, he'd have to access Liu Jiayi's panel—meaning Liu Jiayi couldn't use her skills.

Bai Liu closed his eyes and took two deep breaths, hearing Bai Six's

footsteps growing closer as he entered the building.

Bai Six wiped the blood from his dagger, his tone casual. “Still stalling?”

“If I’m right, that antidote was your last. But of course, you could always use one of your teammates’ skills to get more.”

Bai Six’s laughter was almost mocking. “But I can’t guarantee your little teammate’s survival. She doesn’t seem too good at poison skills, does she?”

Bai Liu remained silent.

“That’s pretty cool,” Bai Six continued, his tone almost complimentary. “You’re clearly driven by emotion, but you look so calm, as though you don’t care about her at all. If I weren’t you, I might even believe you.”

“But this choice of yours—letting your players go against me—is the only one that could flip the tables and win me over.”

“They have a weakness. I don’t anymore.”

Bai Six smiled. “God has no weaknesses, and what has no weaknesses is invincible. You’ve made the right call.”

“But do you want to hear my judgment?”

Bai Six moved closer, the dagger vanishing once more and turning back into the black bone whip. Bai Liu stepped slightly aside from the wall, his eyes darkening. He gripped the bone whip firmly, and as Bai Six spoke again, Bai Liu struck the wall with a brutal swing.

A black and white bone whip lashed out almost simultaneously, shattering the wall with a deafening crash. The force of the impact sent the whips meeting in midair as the wall crumbled.

Bai Liu yanked the bone whip back sharply, his eyes cold. His left hand moved swiftly, blocking the whip’s trajectory just in time. Bai Six, however, was quick—he spun the whip, launching it at Bai Liu with a speed almost too fast to follow.

The impact slammed Bai Liu into the wall, a deep dent forming in the structure behind him. Blood pooled rapidly, staining his shirt a dark red.

Bai Six dragged the whip toward Bai Liu, who now lay with his head bowed, blood pouring from his wounds. Pools of it gathered around him.

“My verdict,” Bai Six mused, “is that your second dead teammate will be Muke.”

Zone D

Muke was struck by a powerful backhand to the sternum, sending him crashing into the wall. After two violent coughing fits, he staggered, struggling to get back on his feet.

Before Muke could even rise, [Muke] stepped on his shoulder with a crushing force. His leather shoe pressed down little by little, forcing Muke's shoulder to the ground. Eventually, the pressure was so intense that Muke's entire body was pinned, his face forced into the floor, and [Muke] didn't stop, still pushing harder.

Muke's shoulder cracked audibly under the weight, and spasms of pain shot through his back. He braced himself against the floor, gritting his teeth as he tried to push himself up, only to be stomped on again by [Muke].

Looking down at Muke’s struggling form, [Muke] sneered, his voice cold and contemptuous. "What a fragile, ugly body. So worthless it makes me sick just looking at it."

He continued with a mocking tone, "I don't know how you had the nerve to stand next to the president with that pathetic body, reaching for the dagger he handed you."

Still pressing down hard, [Muke] crushed Muke's shoulder further. In agony, Muke curled up, choking and coughing twice.

The pain surged through Muke's body, clouding his thoughts. His vision blurred, and he felt his consciousness slipping away.

Without warning, [Muke] grabbed Muke by the hair, yanking him up so their eyes met. His voice was icy. "Where is your dagger? Show it to me."

"You better take it out now, or I'll end your worthless life quickly," [Muke] threatened.

Muke, battered and bloodied, was momentarily disoriented. His hazy vision flickered across the room as he tried to focus. Then, he remembered—his dagger, his weapon of skill.

If he could just draw it, he could fight back.

Muke fumbled desperately for his dagger, but his movements were sluggish and uncoordinated compared to [Muke's] speed and combat experience. Before he could make his first strike, the dagger was ripped from his hands, already in [Muke's] possession.

Realizing the dagger was nothing more than a weapon taken by [Muke], Muke stopped trying to summon it. His opponent was far more skilled, and the dagger, in his hands, was useless.

It was a gift from Bai Liu. And yet, it had been taken from him over and over again.

The realization hit Muke: he truly was as worthless as [Muke] claimed.

The broken fingers of Muke's right hand twitched weakly, blood dripping from his shirt as he spat a mouthful of blood into [Muke]'s face. With a hoarse voice, he growled, "I will never use the dagger again. You can torture me all you want."

"Even if you torture me to death, I'll never let you touch the dagger Bai Liu gave me."

The sneer on [Muke's] face deepened as he tilted his chin slightly, staring down at the bloodied Muke.

Muke struggled to twist his lips into a cruel grin. "Because that's what Bai Liu gave me."

"The one you don't deserve in that world, and the one you don't deserve to touch in this one."

"Bai Liu thinks I have something worthy of it. So I do." Muke's laughter grew louder, more unrestrained. "You, jealous and unskilled, are worth no more to your president than one of my daggers, aren't you?"

The look on [Muke]'s face darkened, his expression icy with rage. But, as if mastering himself, he returned to his calm demeanor. He slowly took a silk scarf from his suit pocket and wiped the blood from his

face. His eyes narrowed dangerously. "It seems my patience has given you the confidence to speak out of turn."

"In that case, the game ends here."

With a swift motion, [Muke] ripped the bandage from around his neck, using it to wrap around Muke's throat. His gaze burned with fury. "Die."

Muke clutched at the tightening bandage around his neck, his airway constricting as the pressure nearly crushed his slender neck. His vision darkened, his struggles becoming weaker.

The shadows on the walls shifted as Muke's feet thrashed in a desperate attempt to break free. But slowly, those movements faded.

And then—

The headless body of the shadow collapsed, its head rolling twice across the floor before it came to rest near the leg of a mahogany table. Blood poured from the severed neck, pooling beneath the lifeless torso.

Unmoved, [Muke] lowered his gaze, retrieving the bandage and speaking softly into his cufflinks, now adorned with jeweled gems. "Chairman, mission accomplished. I'll be back shortly."

The headless body, still lying in a pool of blood, twitched twice. The hand of the corpse moved feebly as if trying to grasp something.

[System Alert: Player Muke's life expectancy is rapidly decreasing! 22... 17... 13... Warning! Player's life expectancy is below 10!]

Muke's head rested against the table leg as he stared deathly at the retreating [Muke]. His eyelids fluttered, slowly closing, as a thousand memories collided in his mind.

"What are the essentials of an assassin?" Muke nervously folded his legs together, sitting in the conference room at the Wandering Circus. "Sorry to waste your time, but I'd love to ask: what does Bai Liu think makes the best assassin? I want to know where I fit in."

The meeting room was empty except for Muke and Bai Liu, sitting across from him.

Bai Liu leaned back in his chair, his hand resting thoughtfully on his

chin. "I don't really like assassins."

Muke was about to tear up. "Eh? Bai Liu doesn't like assassins?!"

"Well, most of the time, an assassin means sacrifice," Bai Liu continued, meeting Muke's gaze. "Using everything to lower your opponent's guard, waiting for the final blow in humiliation. Even the best assassins often end up in the same boat." He paused, then added, "That's not my style. I wish there was more left to it."

Muke bit his lower lip. "Then... I'll give up... being an assassin, I guess... for a different path."

Bai Liu interrupted him calmly. "Do you like being an assassin?"

Muke froze, lowering his head. Slowly, he clenched his hands on his knees and whispered, "I didn't like it before... because it meant living a little longer..."

He paused, his voice faltering. "But seeing Liu Huai fighting so desperately for what he wanted... It made me think..."

Muke hesitated again, his tone softening. "The person I was before never had anyone or anything I wanted to fight for... I just lived in fear of death." His voice dropped lower, barely audible. "But... if I could give everything to protect the people I cared about, like Liu Huai did... I don't think death would seem so terrible."

A tear slipped down Muke's cheek, landing on his hand. "I think being an assassin like that is... handsome," he whispered, almost to himself. "Not like me, so cowardly, so afraid of death... shining. I want to be the kind of assassin who faces death bravely for something important."

"Hmm." Bai Liu responded flatly, "Then go ahead and become one."

An assassin must be inconspicuous, unnoticed—minimizing the enemy's awareness, making them feel harmless, and then—one strike.

There is nothing like a headless corpse to put others on their guard.

[System Warning: Player Muke's life expectancy continues to drop... 8... 6...]

The headless body rose slowly from the ground, smoke swirling from its hands, forming a short, sharp black blade.

With no head, it was devoid of sight, hearing, and smell. The only

thing that allowed it to sense its surroundings was touch.

The ground trembled with each step of [Muke] as he walked away, holding the dagger in one hand, his other palm flat on the ground, sensing vibrations. His twisted index finger pointed toward his target.

Muke counted silently in his mind—one step, two steps...

Patience was key. The assassin waits for the right moment.

The layout of the room was clear in Muke's mind. He knew that [Muke] had gone to retrieve the land certificate from the southeast corner, where a monster lay. Based on [Muke]'s style, Muke knew that the monster and its body would be completely destroyed before leaving. This meant [Muke] would eventually return.

Before [Muke] could turn back to deal with the headless corpse, he would first deal with the monster.

Muke paused. Now.

[System Alert: Player Muke uses Flash Strike! The player’s blood triggers a blast, doubling the damage!]

The headless body leaped from the ground, its blade driving into the adult man’s back, striking hard into his heart. [Muke]'s pupils widened in shock, an overwhelming pain spreading through his chest, causing him to freeze for a brief moment.

Sure enough!!!

He didn't treat his heart condition! That was [his] weakness, and Muke had won the bet.

Muke twisted the dagger in vengeance. If he had a head, he would have screamed, but he didn’t. Instead, he silently delivered the final blow, his entire body shaking with the force of it.

Only when [Muke] was completely motionless did Muke roll limply off his back.

Weakly, he crawled to his headless body, lying down beside it. He rummaged through his pockets until he found a half-empty bottle of antidote, pouring it down his neck.

The wound at the base of the head began to heal slowly. Muke choked and coughed, his face pale as he collapsed to the ground. The system

beeped in his ears.

[System Alert: Player Muke has killed (Summoned Muke) with Muke's skill.]

Muke exhaled deeply, gripping the dagger tightly. A small, satisfied smile crept across his face as he closed his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

> Don't ask me how Muke was still alive without his head. I don't know!!!!!!

How to Own Five Building

The black bone whip grazed the side of Bai Liu's face, leaving a large gash across the lower half of his left cheek, staining it with crimson.

Bai Liu casually wiped the blood away, a faint laugh escaping him as he raised his eyes to meet Bai Six's gaze, responding to his earlier words. "Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda, won't you continue with your prediction?"

Bai Six smiled. "So pleased to be on the receiving end of your dominant subject?"

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "As far as Captain Tang is concerned, yes, it's true. His physical condition is top-notch, he's mentally stable and determined—he's at the peak of his game."

He continued, his tone shifting slightly. "With his suicide bullet skill aimed at me, it looked like he was in perfect shape to take me down, so I made sure to send him away first."

Bai Six chuckled softly. "I've never seen Captain Tang fight so well before. It's hard to look away, and you can't help but—"

He flicked his whip, which turned into smoke and dissipated into the air. Four test tubes filled with poison materialized in his fingers. He lifted his gaze to Bai Liu, his smile growing darker. "—covet such fine property you have."

With a quick flick of his wrist, he released the test tubes, which spun rapidly in the air before landing at the four corners of Bai Liu's feet, one in each direction: southeast, northwest, southwest, and northeast. The test tubes exploded on impact, releasing a dense black fog that spread and confined Bai Liu's movement.

"It's enviable," Bai Six's voice echoed from the poisonous mist, his words dripping with malice. Like a predator savoring its prey, he toyed with Bai Liu, aiming to provoke him with insults and irritation.

"Your witch seems to listen to you well enough, but mine? She's incredibly hostile toward me, and believes men are the most disgusting embodiment of desire in the world."

He paused, his smile widening. "And I'm the worst of them all."

A sharp sound sliced through the air from the left. Without glancing away, Bai Liu raised his left hand, using the handle of his whip to block the black whip that lashed out from his blind side.

The clash sent a burst of air sweeping through the poisonous fog, clearing it momentarily.

Bai Six stood less than a meter away, a relaxed smile on his face. Both hands gripped his whip, pressing it down toward Bai Liu. "It's rare that you're willing to speak with me. Although these two predictions didn't go the way I wanted, I'll share them for your benefit."

He leaned forward slightly. "The odds are that Captain Tang and the Little Witch will be seriously injured, but in the end, your Captain Tang will prevail. And as for [Jiayi], she won't kill the Little Witch."

Bai Six's smile softened, his eyes lowering. "Because [Jiayi] doesn't kill girls."

Inside the magic space.

Both Tang Erda and [Tang Erda] had gunshot wounds, but [Tang Erda] was obviously much more seriously injured.

With a complicated look in his eyes, Tang Erda glanced at his defiant self before slowly lowering his gun.

[Tang Erda]'s gun shattered and fell to the ground. He covered his right shoulder, still bleeding from the shot. His eyes darkened, and his voice became hoarse. "…Don't look at your enemy with those pitiful eyes. If you're going to do it, just kill me and get it over with!"

Tang Erda bowed his head in silence for a long time before speaking abruptly, "Su Yang's baby is 100 days old."

"I... went to see it. It was so light to hold. It didn't feel as heavy as my gun. The eyes—just like his. It was quite cute."

[Tang Erda]'s pupils contracted in disbelief, his eyes reddening almost instantly. "What are you talking about?!"

"No one from Team Three is in the game, either." Tang Erda took a deep breath, letting out a low chuckle as if something amusing had occurred to him. "These brats have been living too comfortably.

They’re a bit useless. When I had them catch the humanoid heretics before, they struggled all night and almost blew up the main office."

"Bai Liu saved the survivors from the Love Welfare Home, blew up the Rose Factory, and is now handling this copy."

Tang Erda lifted his head, locking eyes with [Tang Erda], his gaze firm. He smiled softly. "Nothing you feared ever happened."

"Everyone’s living happily, unaware of anything."

"It’s because of this happiness that I sold my soul to Bai Liu."

[Tang Erda] sneered. "This fleeting happiness is nothing more than a sugar-coated bomb Bai Six uses to buy your soul... One day, it will be taken back and shatter."

Before he could finish, tears streamed down his face.

"But even so..." Tang Erda slowly raised his gun toward [Tang Erda]. "It’s the first time I’ve seen this kind of happiness, the kind I can only dream of."

Tang Erda smiled with relief, as if he’d let go of everything. "Did I pay the price of my soul, traveling through time, hoping it would bring such fleeting happiness to everyone?"

[Tang Erda] closed his eyes, tears slipping from the corners of his eyes. He scoffed. "…You’re pathetic. I can’t believe you let... what’s his name, in the end?"

Tang Erda replied seriously, "Bai Liu."

[Tang Erda] scoffed again. "Let this Bai Liu solve all your problems for you."

"Maybe." Tang Erda smiled as he opened his clear, dark blue eyes and pulled the trigger without hesitation. "So I’m going to rush over there and fix him up now too."

"I’m sorry."

"Bang-!"

[System Alert: Player Tang Erda has killed (Summoned Tang Erda)]

[System Alert: (Magic Space) Restrictions Lifted]

Zone B.

As the mist cleared, Liu Jiayi slumped to the ground, her face pale. She coughed weakly, her elbows propped on the ground as she struggled to rise.

[Liu Jiayi] crouched beside her, poking her forehead in annoyance and confusion, knocking her back down. "Hey, what the hell are you holding on to, you little blind girl? Just admit defeat."

Liu Jiayi glared up obstinately with her grey eyes, her mouth still defiantly moving. "Then why are you insisting on this? You've been fooling me all this time, showing me mercy more than once."

[Liu Jiayi] rolled her eyes and looked at Liu Jiayi. She suddenly saw the dirty little blind girl grin wickedly and shout in a long, drawn-out tone.

"You don’t even want to kill me, do you, big sister?"

The moment Liu Jiayi called out "Big Sister," the little girl, who had been pretending not to fight back, flung a spray of poison at [Liu Jiayi]'s face.

In response, [Liu Jiayi] pinched the spray's nozzle with a grimace, yanking it aside and tossing it away.

Liu Jiayi slammed her fist into the ground in frustration.

"You really think you can sneak attack me? And is it fun comparing poisons with me?" [Liu Jiayi] sat down, crossing her legs and dragging her cheeks with her hand. "Sure, I'm a killer, but my usual targets are grown men like Bai Six—guys with a stench of lust. I don’t kill girls."

Her eyes shifted down, locking onto Liu Jiayi’s. "And I’m not like that psycho Bai Six. I’m not interested in torturing my other self."

Sensing a chance for communication, Liu Jiayi quickly sat up, raising her hand as if to ask a question. "So why did you make such a big deal out of it in the first place?"

[Liu Jiayi] rolled his eyes. "Little sister, I’m an adult. I have to work to survive, and I work for that old beast Bai Six. He told me to kill you, and I need to give him something in return, right?"

With a click, she brought up the system panel. Liu Jiayi noticed it was playing a video—one showing [Liu Jiayi] trying to kill her.

Bored, [Liu Jiayi] gestured toward Liu Jiayi. "No, as long as you admit defeat, I'll be able to deliver soon enough."

Liu Jiayi fell into a deep silence for a moment. She subtly sensed something in [Liu Jiayi] that reminded her of Bai Liu's attitude when he was slacking off at work, doing something random just to please his boss...

"Your Bai Six would've noticed that you didn't kill me, right?" Liu Jiayi asked rhetorically. "Aren't you worried he'll come after you?"

[Liu Jiayi] shrugged, unconcerned. "Big deal, I'll die. If my soul weren't in Bai Six's hands, I wouldn't want to work for him."

"Eh." [Liu Jiayi] sighed with a weary air and continued, speaking as if recounting an old, painful memory. "When I was younger, I didn't know any better. I was so simple, tricked by that dog of a man, working my ass off for him in the league for years. All I did was earn money for his sick career, and in the end, people like me and the monkey couldn't even live freely. We couldn't escape."

Liu Jiayi's sharp eyes caught a key detail. "Monkey?"

"Yeah." [Liu Jiayi] rested his chin on his hand, humming lazily. "Mu Sicheng, my team's on good terms with him. We both want to escape. A while back, the monkey tried to sneak up on Bai Six, trying to steal back his soul note. Almost got killed by Bai Six. He was smoked and spent two months in bed."

Liu Jiayi was shocked. She tried to piece together the situation, asking with a complex tone, "Mu Sicheng, stealing Bai Six's soul note? That's crazy."

[Liu Jiayi] nodded, letting out a sultry tsk. "Only a monkey would do something that stupid. After that, I gave up completely."

Liu Jiayi narrowed her eyes. "Mu Sicheng did this, and you didn't instigate it, did you?"

[Liu Jiayi] shot her a playful look. "How can you call it reckless when it's between teammates? I just gave the monkey some 'sound advice.'"

Liu Jiayi: "…"

It was definitely something she could've done herself.

Liu Jiayi tilted her head slightly as she studied [Liu Jiayi], her gaze sharp as if searching for something. "There's something off about what you just said."

"Even if you didn't get the soul note, with your abilities—especially Mu Sicheng's movement skills—it wouldn't be hard to escape from Bai Six, would it? Why would you need your soul note stolen in order to run? It doesn't make sense."

"You're even turning away from death," Liu Jiayi pressed. "It's impossible to make a mistake here, right?"

Without missing a beat, [Liu Jiayi] turned her face slightly, resting one hand casually on her knee. She began to play with the poison test tube as if to distract herself, her lips parting slightly as she spoke.

Her long, curly eyelashes were half-lidded, obscuring the strange clarity in her eyes. Her hair fluttered gently in the breeze, and her voice, soft and almost fragile, whispered, "… It wasn't our soul notes the monkeys went after."

Liu Jiayi paused, sensing something, and abruptly looked up. "Is it my brother's?"

[Liu Jiayi] twirled the test tube in her hand, her head down, expression unreadable. Her voice was flat, devoid of emotion.

"At first, the monkey and I... we attacked Liu Huai in a fit of rage, stirred up by Bai Six. I gouged out his eyes, and the monkey cut off his hands."

"There was no regret, just the thirst for revenge, and then... emptiness."

[Liu Jiayi] slowly clenched the test tube, her voice so quiet it seemed to be carried away by the wind.

"… The emptiness, the confusion, it stretched on, lasting until we died, yet we never wanted to bring him back. But... always feeling like... something was missing…"

[Liu Jiayi] curled up on her knees, hugging herself as she murmured, "It felt like from that point on, I was living in a world where no one

would ever love me again."

"We were lost in that void for years, until Bai Six found this copy of the Five Buildings, and logged us into it. The copy covered the original campus where the monkey and I had been living..."

[Liu Jiayi] slowly raised her head, her face emotionless. "That's when the monkey and I encountered a ghost—Liu Huai, with his eyes gouged out and hands severed."

Liu Jiayi pursed her lips, asking, "And then, what did he... say to you?"

"The monkey and I expected him to curse at us, or at least run away in fear, since we'd killed him so horribly," [Liu Jiayi] said, her voice trailing off as if recalling something amusing. "But instead…"

"He couldn't see or use his hands and was bullied by other ghosts. The monkey and I chased them off, and he kept bowing to us, saying thank you."

"He didn't recognize us."

"Then the monkey stepped forward and said, 'Hey Liu Huai, even after you died, you still have some spirit. I brought your sister to see you.' And that's when he broke down, crying so desperately that he could hardly stand. He asked, 'How did you die?'"

"And I said, 'You're the one who died. We're still alive and well.'"

[Liu Jiayi] lowered her head, her voice muffled as she buried her face in her lap. "Then, he laughed through his tears and said, 'It's good that you're alive. It doesn't matter if I die... as long as you're okay.'"

"The monkey and I didn't say anything on our way back. Then, suddenly, he asked me, 'Can we bring him back to life?' And I told him that Liu Huai's soul was in Bai Six's hands, and there was no way he would give it to us."

"The monkey said, 'I can't stand seeing him like this, being a ghost, a bum. I'll steal it—big deal, I'll get killed.'"

[Liu Jiayi] was quiet for a long time, her gaze fixed on Liu Jiayi, who seemed shocked. "Bai Six also came to me after the monkey was beaten, but he didn't hurt me. He knew that this kind of punishment wouldn't affect me."

She closed her eyes. "He brought Liu Huai's ghost back and handed it over to Daniel's men, so they could torture him. I watched through the glass as he was tortured in the chamber, screaming in agony the whole time."

[Liu Jiayi's] voice trembled. "He never screamed like that when I killed him."

"Bai Six stood next to me, watching calmly, and said, 'Jiayi, I know this was your idea. It won't happen again.'"

When she finished speaking, they both fell silent, the weight of the words hanging in the air.

[Liu Jiayi] let out a breath and suddenly burst into laughter. "Here's some advice, little sister: Don't work for Bai Six. It never ends well."

"But… between that and the fact that I sold my soul to him too quickly in every world line, I guess there's no point in talking to you now. It doesn't seem to help."

"Enough talking. I've had my fill of fish for today. I'll leave first."

She stood up, patting her back as if shaking off the conversation, but just as she began to walk away, Liu Jiayi grabbed her coat from behind.

[Liu Jiayi] turned around, confusion in her eyes. "What are you doing...?"

Liu Jiayi rushed up to her and hugged her tightly.

[Liu Jiayi] froze for a moment, then quickly tried to push Liu Jiayi away, teasing, "Hey, hey, little sister, don't fawn over strange big sisters. I'm a cold killer, the type who killed her own father and gouged out her brother's eyes..."

"I have a lot of people who love me now," Liu Jiayi interrupted quickly. "When I was in the orphanage, everyone called me 'Little Blind.' No one wanted to adopt me. My brother was always worried like he might leave me at any moment."

"It felt like living in constant fear of being abandoned."

"But!" Liu Jiayi exclaimed. "After meeting Bai Liu, two families fought over me, wanting me as their daughter. There is no Daniel in the team

like you said, but there was a silly monkey who would buy me dresses, and a very rich young master. I had a brother from the regiment of Hearts, and they all cried when I left the team."

"They were all so nice to me. They loved me a lot."

Liu Jiayi hugged [Liu Jiayi] around the neck. "So, big sister, you're not unloved."

"You just haven't met them yet. Live well, and you will."

"Sounds..." [Liu Jiayi] responded softly, returning the hug slowly. She lowered her head and laughed quietly. "What a happy life."

"You're the happiest of all the [my] stories I've heard."

She closed her eyes. "Then, for a moment, I'll reluctantly trust you."

Zone C

Amid the rubble, Bai Six stands unharmed, his white shirt untouched by dust or blood, smiling. At a distance, Bai Liu stands with bruises marking his skin, the collars and hems of their shirts fluttering in the turbulent wind.

Around them, the buildings are collapsing slowly, steel and concrete crumbling to the ground. Dust fills the air, creating a surreal effect as the earth seems to lift while the sky falls—an apocalyptic scene, the world unraveling.

The building they are in gives way to the daylight, and golden rays of sunlight slice through the fine dust and smoke, bathing Bai Liu and Bai Six in an ethereal beam. Their faces glow in the radiant light, creating an almost unreal reflection in their eyes.

The mists behind them part.

[Mu Sicheng] and [Liu Jiayi] appear behind Bai Six—Mu Sicheng with his hands in his pockets, Liu Jiayi rubbing the back of her neck. Neither reports on their mission.

Bai Six doesn't seem surprised by their return. He simply smiles, remarking, "Looks like you didn't finish."

"MuKe should go back under the death-free card's effect. Hard work

for him," he adds.

[Mu Sicheng] glances at Bai Six, yawns, and then looks away indifferently. "Been tired from sleeping too much lately. No strength to fight, so didn't finish. Boss, you gonna punish me?"

[Mu Sicheng] barely waits for a response before turning away, clearly uninterested. Liu Jiayi, on the other hand, is more respectful. She bows her head slightly, admitting fault, "I couldn't use my ranged skills well because of Shi Qian and Yuan Guang, so the opponent escaped. Sorry, I only managed to bring back the land certificate."

"Hmm," Bai Six responds, unfazed, his smile widening. "It must be nice to interact with your younger self, huh?"

Both [Mu Sicheng] and [Liu Jiayi] shift uncomfortably.

"What are you talking about, boss?" [Mu Sicheng] mumbles sleepily, pretending not to care. "What's going on?"

[Liu Jiayi] silently judges [Mu Sicheng's] poor acting while continuing to bow. "There was no exchange on my side. The other side resisted fiercely."

"Is that so?" Bai Six's gaze drifts away slowly. "I thought you'd all be in a better mood in this world line."

His eyes flicker to Bai Liu, and his smile deepens. "At least I am."

"It's been a long time since I've met someone so interesting... so worthwhile."

The atmosphere shifts. [Mu Sicheng's] expression darkens completely.

Bai Six's judgment of a person often ends with either their soul being bought by him or their life extinguished. Or, as is often the case, both.

Behind Bai Liu, four other players emerge slowly. But these four are not as pristine as Bai Six and his crew, who remain spotless.

Tang Erda looks a little better, but Liu Jiayi's clothes are blackened from the poisonous mist, her face grimy. Muke and Mu Sicheng are in far worse condition, nearly covered in blood.

"They're all here," Bai Six says, lifting his eyes, his lips curving into a smirk. "The most interesting part of this game is about to begin."

[System Alert: Player Bai Six is using player Daniel's panel to access his opponent's personal weapon.]

The whip in his hand vanishes, replaced by a grass-green sniper rifle.

The moment the gun appears, Tang Erda, [Mu Sicheng], and [Liu Jiayi] all freeze, their faces shifting with alarm.

—This is Daniel's weapon, the Soul Crusher.

"This is a gun that shatters the soul of any player it hits, with no possibility of resurrection in any world line," Bai Six says, his smile growing eerie. Holding the gun, he mimics a 'bang' gesture with his hand. "Once you're hit like this... [bang], you're gone. You no longer exist."

"The cooldown for this gun is fifteen minutes."

Bai Six looked across at Bai Liu and the circus members behind him, his smile growing. "Bai Liu, how about we play a game?"

"I have a land certificate here, which means you can't end this game of five buildings by collecting all the land certificates. The only way to end this game is through reunion—either you reunite, or your opponent does."

"Now, I'll give you two options."

Bai six gestured at [Liu Jiayi], signaling her to throw Shi Qian and Yuan Guang—both unconscious—into the middle, then raised his gun, aiming at the two people, his smile still directed at Bai Liu.

"Every fifteen minutes until the end of the game, my gun will shatter the soul of one person. But you can make a choice."

"If you decide to shatter the souls of Yuan Guang and Shi Qian, I'll give you the gun. You can shoot them yourself. If you do, the game ends, you win, and I get what I want."

Bai Six's gaze flickered between Bai Liu and the tightly tense Tang Erda. "Or, if you choose not to kill them, then I'll pick one of your team members at random every fifteen minutes."

As soon as the words left his mouth, Tang Erda raised his gun to his head, glaring at Bai Six with burning, fierce eyes.

[System Alert: Player (Rose Hunter) uses skill (Suicide Bullet).]

The silver bullet flew through Tang Erda's head in a brilliant arc, striking Bai Six's skull.

His head jerked back from the blow, and for the first time, Bai Six's white shirt was stained with blood. However, he casually righted his head as if nothing had happened. With a tap of his finger on the gun's muzzle, he let [Liu Jiayi] cast a healing skill before smiling again, unfazed. "Alright, your turn is over. The Suicide Bullet skill is on cooldown. Now, it's my turn."

Bai Six raised his gun, pointing it directly at Bai Liu's emotionless face. "Choose."

"The countdown begins… 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, time's up."

Without hesitation, Bai Six raised his gun and aimed at Mu Sicheng.

But [Mu Sicheng] stepped forward, gripping the barrel of the gun and locking eyes with Bai six. "Boss, forget it."

Bai Six's eyes slid to him, a soft laugh escaping his lips. "That's interesting. The first time I've seen you plead for your other self."

"And what's the reason?"

Mu Sicheng took a deep breath. "It's not like they have any stake in us. There's no need to go this far."

Bai six's expression turned playful, eyes narrowing. "Is that really the reason? I thought it was more like, 'At least let me see a world line where I get the friends I want.'"

[Mu Sicheng] froze for a moment, then slowly raised his bloodshot eyes to meet Bai Six's. "Even if I think that, what's wrong with it?"

"At least have a world line where they're spared," [Mu Sicheng] added, his voice strained. "Bai six, you already have so much. Allow others a little too."

Before [Mu Sicheng] could finish his sentence, his hands morphed into deadly claws, launching toward Bai Six's throat with murderous intent.

Bai Six easily evaded and then looked at [Mu Sicheng] with pity. "Once you let feelings cloud your judgment, you become a pathetic creature, clinging to misplaced values."

His eyes grew cold. "And now, there's no value left to you."

Bai Six grabbed [Mu Sicheng's] shoulder with one hand and aimed the soul-crushing gun at his abdomen with the other. Then—

"Bang!"

"Monkey!" [Liu Jiayi] cried, her pupils shrinking in horror.

Blood sprayed across Bai Six's face.

[Mu Sicheng's] eyes widened as the impact of the shot turned part of his body grey, spreading like a fire consuming him. He collapsed to the ground, convulsing, his dry, raspy screams filling the air.

Bai six casually retrieved a shattered soul note from his glove, featuring [Mu Sicheng's] eyes, now bloodshot and full of anguish.

The note slowly crumbled into dust, just like [Mu Sicheng], who dissolved into nothing.

Letting the powdery remains fall from his fingers, Bai Six said flatly, "Good work, Mu Sicheng."

[Liu Jiayi] stood frozen, her hands trembling, eyes brimming with unshed tears. Without thinking, she took a step forward.

Before she could move further, the sniper rifle in Bai Six's hand transformed into a dagger, silently pressing against her neck.

Bai six raised his eyes, offering no emotion. "Jiayi, I said it would never happen again."

The cold steel of the dagger was a sharp reminder.

—This was Liu Huai's dagger.

Bai six's silent warning hung heavy in the air.

[Liu Jiayi] clenched her fists, struggling to maintain her composure. Her voice barely steadied as she lowered her head, replying respectfully, "…Yes."

Bai six turned his attention back to the quiet team, his smile unwavering, as if the pile of ashes before him meant nothing. "One of my team members just bought you another fifteen minutes to think."

"Bai Liu, you now have fifteen minutes to choose who to kill."

How to Own Five Building

"Then you have fifteen minutes to think about it." Bai Six's wrist dropped, releasing the gun from his hand. It hit the ground and bounced slightly before he looked up at Bai Liu with a smile. "Let's play another game."

The gun struck the ground, bouncing and dissipating in a flash. In its place, a multitude of thorns erupted from the earth, growing in all directions to form a circular wall around Bai Liu and the others.

[System Alert: Player Bai Six loads player Fang Hongye's panel, using personal skill (Cage of Thorns)]

[Map-wide capture skill. Can capture all living creatures on the map and attach them to the thorns, restricting their movement for one hour.]

The weakened Liu Jiayi, Mu Sicheng, and Muke were all ensnared by the thorns, which burst from the ground and bound their limbs.

Tang Erda reacted quickly, dodging out of the way in time and drawing his gun to shoot at the thorns that had bound the wrists and ankles of the other team members.

Bai Six gave Tang Erda a disinterested glance, then twirled his index finger in the air. A pair of handcuffs appeared above him, spinning through the air.

[System Alert: Player Bai Six loads player Su Yang's panel, using personal skill (Seal Handcuffs)]

[This skill blocks all of a player's skills, reduces the panel value to half, and restricts movement for thirty minutes.]

The moment Tang Erda holstered his gun, Bai Six appeared behind him.

Before Tang Erda could react, Bai Six grabbed both of his shoulders, sliding his hands down his arms before gently pulling them back.

The handcuffs snapped with a sharp click, and Bai Six smiled. "Sorry, Captain Tang. You're under arrest for now."

Tang Erda's shoulders popped with a sickening crunch as his joints

were twisted out of place. His hands were locked behind him at an impossible angle, his left hand jammed into the right-hand cuff, and his right hand tightly bound in the left-hand cuff, rendering him immobile.

The muscles in his forehead tensed as he tried to bend backward, stomping his heels into the ground in a desperate attempt to free himself. But before he could move, a thorn shot from the wall of thorns behind him, wrapping around his hands and binding him further.

Tang Erda was dragged into the thorny wall, hanging from his bound arms. A dark, hateful fire burned in his eyes as he glared at Bai Liu, who stood calmly on the ground, approaching Bai Six. He hissed, "Bai Six—! Bai Six—!"

These skills—the Thorn Cage and the Sealing Cuffs—belonged to members of the Heresy Handling Bureau! They were created to capture heretics and seal away evil. And now, Bai Six had taken them from them, using them to torment his own comrades.

Bai Six walked toward Bai Liu, his smile widening as he asked, "I haven't restricted your movement. Are you still not going to run this time?"

Bai Liu didn’t respond, merely staring at him with a quiet, steady gaze.

Bai Six nodded as if in a daze, his eyes wandering over the team members struggling in the thorny wall. His smile grew even wider. "There are no physical shackles to hold you back, but there are mental ones, aren't there?"

"You can't leave without your team."

"Bai Liu!!!" Mu Sicheng shouted from the wall of thorns, his voice frantic. He stomped his feet in rage, his face contorted. "Whatever this idiot wants to play, don't play along! It's all about death!"

Muke, bound by the thorns around his neck, struggled for breath, his body weakening. He could barely open one eye to look at Bai Liu. "Bai Liu... leave me..."

Liu Jiayi, her eyes fixed on the dissipating ashes of Mu Sicheng's form on the ground, spoke through clenched teeth. "Bai Liu, we can abstain."

“The little witch has come up with a good idea—abstain.” Bai Six nodded approvingly, his eyes crinkling into a smile. “What do you think, Bai Liu?”

There was a cacophony of voices around him, but Bai Liu slowly lifted his blood-stained eyelids and calmly ordered, “Stop struggling.”

The struggle ceased immediately. Everyone on the wall held their breath, waiting for Bai Liu’s decision.

Bai Liu paused for less than a second. “What game do you want to play?”

Mu Sicheng’s voice broke as he roared in excitement, “Bai Liu—!!!”

“A wise choice,” Bai Six said, gazing at Bai Liu with a smile. “Indeed, you could have avoided me for a moment by abstaining, so why didn’t you choose that path?”

“But as long as we’re still in this game, you’ll always be able to find us through Yuan Guang, right?” Bai Liu responded calmly. “As long as Yuan Guang exists in this world line, even if he dies, once the copy of the five buildings hits reality, you can still manipulate Yuan Guang’s panel after he becomes a ghost, and then use him to summon you. There’s no point in escaping if it doesn’t solve the problem completely.”

Bai Six raised an eyebrow, his smile widening. “But there’s a permanent solution, isn’t there?”

The green sniper rifle appeared in his hand again, and he aimed it at the head of Yuan Guang, who lay unconscious on the ground.

Bai Six smiled. “If you choose to shatter his soul, this world line of yours will escape my control forever.”

Bai Liu’s gaze briefly lingered on Yuan Guang’s face before he withdrew his eyes and asked flatly, “This choice is for the game in fifteen minutes. What’s the game now?”

Bai Six repeated Bai Liu’s words with a smirk. “There’s no point in running away from a problem that can’t be solved completely?”

Bai Liu stared at him, unmoved.

Bai Six raised his hands in a friendly gesture of surrender and smiled.

“Okay, no more jokes. Only ten minutes left.”

“I didn’t use the soul note you lack when we sparred earlier, out of fairness. But now—” Bai Six slowly and methodically took off his gloves, flipping them inside out to put them on. “I find that practice of holding back some of your strength disrespectful.”

Bai Liu glanced down at the gloves.

One side of the gloves gleamed slightly, as if it had been used regularly. A faint streak of blood could be seen near the silver buckle on the back of the hand, as though it hadn’t been wiped off properly.

Bai Six raised the back of his hand to Bai Liu’s face and smiled. “You may now draw a random soul note from my wallet as if it were a card.”

“You have two choices—”

Bai Six’s eyes lifted. “The first option is for me to use the skills on this soul note on your players.”

“The second option is for me to use the skills on this soul note on you.”

He offered a friendly reminder. “Don’t worry. No matter how offensive the skills on this soul note are, I’ll make sure each of you survives before the next game.”

“It’s just a simple, fun little warm-up game.”

“Let’s start now.”

Bai Liu lowered his eyes, touching the edge of his glove and pulling out a note.

He smiled, holding the note between two fingers and standing it up for Bai Liu to see. “It’s a Queen’s card, which I prefer.”

Bai Liu saw the face of Hearts on the note.

“Now, choose. Is it your teammate—” Bai Six asked with a smile, as the soul note in his hand morphed into a sharp-edged playing card, “—or yourself?”

Bai Liu looked at him calmly.

“Although I had guessed it,” Bai Six sighed, “I have to say, what a regrettable decision.”

“Do you know how poker can make people suffer the most?”

Without missing a beat, Bai Six changed the subject, his flawless smile still intact. He spoke in a tone as if sharing knowledge. “There are 78 joints in the human body, each thick enough to insert a playing card, and a dozen of those can be instantly fatal if touched.”

“A 52-card deck is just perfect for inserting into the body’s non-lethal joints.”

“What a natural, perfect set of torture tools.”

In the next moment, cards flew from the wall of thorns, their edges flashing and spinning as Bai Six’s fingertips elegantly lifted towards the center, sending the cards hurtling toward Bai Liu.

Muke’s pupils dilated.

Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda stood frozen, wide-eyed.

Mu Sicheng’s heart-wrenching voice echoed across the map: “Bai Liu —!!!”

How to Own Five Building

Mid-Season Viewing Pool

At the big screen, the host was commentating rapidly, his voice edged with tension:

"We can see that the situation on the field is incredibly tight. The Killer Sequence has been employing a multi-pinning strategy since the start of the match, consistently keeping at least two players on the Deer Hunters' Joker. It’s clear they are wary of his skill weapon—the Soul Crusher."

"So far, with constant skill interruptions, the Joker has yet to land a single successful Soul Crusher strike."

The host’s eyes stayed locked on the screen as his voice rose with urgency:

"The Killer Sequence has switched defenders! They've assigned the Joker’s containment to Invincible and Spades—the most powerful and popular duo in the entire mid-season tournament. This time, they’re going all in to take him down!"

"But with sixty-three life points remaining, the Joker still holds the highest HP on the Deer Hunters’ side. While the entire Killer Sequence is focusing their fire on him, the Deer Hunters are desperately covering him, absorbing most of the damage to keep him in play."

"In a rare tactical move reminiscent of Russell Cemetery's infamous forfeit last season, the Killer Sequence has opted to bypass the one-on-one matches, heading straight into the team battle. This is likely a strategic decision to preserve their team’s immunity for the final showdown."

"After all, a player’s immunity can only be used once per tournament. If expended in a single match, it won’t be available for the team fight. But in this era of star-driven gameplay, it takes guts for Reverse God to make a tactical call that prioritizes the team over individual spectacle."

"Audiences typically prefer to see star players in high-stakes one-on-one duels, and such a direct forfeiture risks hurting popularity—a stark contrast to Russell Cemetery’s strategy last year, which resulted in a high win rate but abysmal audience appeal."

"For spectators, a match where a top player is eliminated in dramatic fashion is far more thrilling than a clean sweep. A high-profile takedown spikes engagement and instantly affects the betting pool—doubling or tanking it within moments."

"The reason the Deer Hunters' stakes remain so high this year is largely due to the Joker's ability to bypass the Death-Free Gold Medal and directly shatter souls—a skill that delivers pure, adrenaline-pumping spectacle."

"Now, in this decisive game leading into the playoffs, the Killer Sequence is betting everything on their team cohesion. Whether Reverse God and Spades can land the finishing blow on the Joker could very well determine the trajectory of their entire postseason run!"

The host barely blinked, eyes darting across the screen before he suddenly shouted—

"Reverse God is making his move!"

Inside the big screen.

Amid the shifting yellow sands, The Reverse God and Spades encircled Daniel. The Reverse God backhanded his heavy sword with a cold gaze, while Spades calmly drew his whip, the two of them cutting off all of Daniel's escape points. Then, in perfect sync, they struck.

[System Alert: Player Daniel's life value has dropped to 33.]

The announcer shouted excitedly, "Beautiful! Both attacks landed! It's a success! The clown's life has been cut straight to half!"

Daniel was sent flying into a dune, crashing hard before bouncing against the sand. Blood smeared his face mask. A strained, low laugh rattled from beneath it as he stretched out his broken arm. In his grip, a green sniper rifle materialized, the muzzle swirling with gathering points of light.

"Joker is building up his Soul Shattering Gun again! Will he succeed this time?" The host's eyes locked onto the screen. "If he does, he'll be able to shatter the soul of one of the Slayer Sequence's top players or tacticians—essentially deciding the fate of the Slayer Sequence in the playoffs!"

Without hesitation, Spades flicked his whip forward, cracking it like a lizard's tail against the gun in Daniel's hand.

At the moment of impact, Cen Buming burst out from the sand in front of Daniel, dropping to one knee. With one hand, he caught Spades' whip midair, the force of the blow driving him half a meter into the ground. His other hand pressed into the sand as he slowly lifted his gaze to meet The Reverse God and Spades.

[System Alert: Player (Buming's Executioner) uses Personal Skill (Water Well).]

[This skill traps a prisoner identified by the player in a deep well, torturing them endlessly in darkness. The prisoner remains bound until the executioner retrieves them for judgment. No prisoner has ever escaped. Judgment skill. No time limit.]

The ring on Cen Buming's middle finger flickered with an eerie black sheen, spreading outward in a circular formation.

Without warning, the sand beneath The Reverse God and Spades collapsed, revealing a deep, bottomless well. They plummeted into the abyss with a double thud.

Dark water rippled below, and an unsettling hissing sound rose from the depths.

"It's the Executioner's Water Well skill!" the host roared. "The situation has shifted once again!"

"According to public records, this well binds players, restricts movement, and drains mental value. Players who enter either die, abandon the game, or are driven to zero mental value—transforming into monsters!"

"The Executioner had never used this skill before this year, but now he's unleashed it on the mid-season circuit! His popularity has soared to fifth place!"

"Last year, Spades barely survived a similar skill from Russell's rookie player. But this—this is on a whole different level. Can Spades withstand it?"

Daniel, still grinning beneath his bloodstained clown mask, staggered toward the well. He leveled his sniper rifle at the water, about to fire —

But before he could, Cen Buming reached over and gripped the muzzle.

Daniel raised an eyebrow. Cen Buming didn't look at him. His gaze remained fixed on the well.

"Wait," he said.

The host hesitated.

"With both the Slayer Sequence's Ace and Tactician trapped, and Joker free to act, the Deer Hunters hold a complete advantage… so why is the Executioner stopping him?"

The presenter's eyes widened in sudden realization.

"Could it be… the Executioner doesn't want to kill his former tactician?!"

"Is he waiting for him to escape the well?!"

"Are the Executioners trying to poach The Reverse God back to the Deer Hunters before next season?!"

"No one has ever escaped an Executioner's well while its user was still alive… But maybe—maybe he's waiting for the well to do the killing for him?"

A hand emerged from the water.

It opened.

A heavy sword materialized in its grip.

With a single, thunderous spin, the blade cut through the well's depths in a sweeping 360-degree arc, sending all the dark water hurtling over the edges. The monsters lurking below shrieked as they were exposed, their grotesque forms writhing at the bottom.

Standing atop the heap of twisted creatures, their wet hair clinging to their faces, were Spades and The Reverse God—whip and sword poised for battle.

The Reverse God lifted his gaze, locking eyes with Cen Buming.

Cen Buming's expression was unreadable. "At my side," he said, voice low but steady. "Brother, you were never meant to be a prisoner. The

well cannot hold you."

In response, The Reverse God didn't hesitate. With cold determination, he swung his sword down at Cen Buming.

Cen Buming tilted back, dodging the strike. He released his grip on the Joker's rifle, his voice cutting through the chaos—

"Kill Spades."

Instantly, Cen Buming raised his left hand. The well water surged upward, submerging the pit once more and trapping Spades beneath the rising flood.

Daniel grinned lazily. "Okay," he said, lifting his gun. Without hesitation, he pulled the trigger.

The Reverse God flinched, pivoting to intercept the shot. But Cen Buming's ringed hand locked onto the edge of his heavy sword, holding it back.

The Reverse God's gaze sharpened. With a burst of strength, he wrenched the sword free. The blade scraped against Cen Buming's ring, igniting a small burst of sparks.

Cen Buming's eyes remained cold. Without missing a beat, he lunged forward, fingers forming an eagle-claw strike aimed at The Reverse God's throat.

"Brother," he murmured.

"Didn't you teach me that basic execution etiquette demands silence? That the condemned should not interrupt their own judgment?"

The Reverse God ducked low, narrowly evading Cen Buming's attack. His sword slipped from his grip, sinking into the sand.

Gritting his teeth, he kicked the hilt—sending the heavy blade hurtling upward in a diagonal spin. The sharp edge arced through the air, aimed straight for Daniel's outstretched hand.

But Daniel only laughed.

"You fool," he teased, tilting his head just enough to dodge the incoming blade. His rifle, once aimed at the well, shifted direction in an instant—now pointing directly at The Reverse God.

"You really thought I'd just follow orders?" Daniel smirked, finger tightening on the trigger.

"Naturally, it's much more fun to kill whoever they don't want me to kill."

A green bullet shot from the chamber, hurtling straight for The Reverse God's face.

Cen Buming's pupils constricted. Without thinking, he lunged—

The Reverse God, however, didn't move.

He simply stood there, watching.

His expression remained unchanged. Calm. Almost amused.

That faint, knowing smile unsettled Daniel more than he cared to admit.

For the first time in the match, he realized—

He hadn't landed a single shot since the second half started.

It was as if…

As if The Reverse God had known all along.

As if he had already foreseen that, at this moment—

Cen Buming would step in to take the hit for him.

The Reverse God's blade slashed through empty air, missing Daniel's neck by a fraction. The heavy sword spun away with barely a pause, as if he had never aimed for Daniel in the first place. Without hesitation, the Reverse God dipped his head, letting the massive blade arc over his shoulder in another half-circle.

The sheer speed of the rotation whipped his hair across his face, obscuring his eyes. Only the faintest smile curved the corners of his mouth.

A split second before the bullet could strike Cen Buming, the Reverse God's blade, now swinging down from his left shoulder, collided with it midair. A deafening metallic clang rang out.

The green bullet split cleanly in two and fell harmlessly to the sand.

The sword's momentum didn't stop there. It carried through, slicing relentlessly forward until it plunged straight into Cen Buming's chest, pinning him to the ground.

Cen Buming grasped at the heavy sword embedded in his torso, blood seeping from the wound. His gaze, dark and unwilling, lifted to the Reverse God—the man who had just killed him.

Blood spattered across his face, the Reverse God lowered his eyes and murmured, "Rest well for now, senior brother."

[System Alert: Player (Judge Against God) has killed player (Buming's Executioner)]

A one-dimensional silence stretched across the viewing pool. The host stared, dumbfounded, at the big screen, momentarily lost for words. When he finally found his voice, it stumbled slightly, "Jedi—Jedi comeback!"

"A double kill for the Reverse God! He slashed through Soul Crusher's bullet—one of Joker's fifteen-minute skill CDs—and took down the Deer Hunter's Tactician at the same time!"

The presenter's voice shook with excitement. "All this time, we thought the Reverse God was limiting the Executioner's play, but now it seems the Deer Hunter was just as much of a restriction on him!"

"We've never seen the Reverse God this aggressive before."

"And that heavy sword—it's just... just—" The host struggled for the right word. "Its attack determination is insane! It cut through Soul Crusher's bullet! You know, Spades' bone whip is the strongest weapon known to do that, and even it can't!"

"Given the results of this match, the Reverse God's transfer was clearly beneficial for both sides. But I wonder—why did he change his name? Was it just to fit the Killer Sequence's theme? Is that why he became [Reverse Cross Cultist]...?"

The Reverse God turned his gaze toward the fleeing Daniel. Drawing his heavy sword free, he smiled kindly. "Minors really shouldn't play with dangerous heavy equipment."

[System Alert: Player (Judge Against God) has killed player (Joker)]

The well that had trapped Spades vanished. Drenched from head to

toe, Spades turned to the Reverse God with his usual impassive expression. "Is it over?"

"More or less," the Reverse God replied, smiling faintly. "But the real main event isn't happening on this side."

Spades paused. The careless posture he'd held all match disappeared as he straightened, fixing the Reverse God with an unblinking stare. "Can we go there now?"

The Reverse God: "..."

Whose team are you even on?

One month earlier – The Killer Sequence Office

The Reverse God lounged on the sofa, tapping a piece of paper against his knee. His half-lidded eyes scanned the document as he muttered to himself, "Forty-one years old… Damn, that's tough. That's practically sending himself in person. This is just blatant cheating in Werewolf Killing - Bai Liu could end him..."

Suddenly, Spades' voice cut in from beside the couch. "What Bai Liu?"

The Reverse God nearly jumped. "The hell—?! Aren't you supposed to be training with the team in the play pool?!"

"I got away." Spades shook his head and stared intently at him, pressing the question. "What Bai Liu?"

The Reverse God: "..."

First time I've seen someone justify skipping training like this.

He sighed. "Fine. I do need your help if I'm going to interfere." He leaned back, rubbing his temples. "There's a big bad guy who's got his eyes on Bai Liu. I'm playing a game against him, trying to beat him at his own rules. We have an agreement—not to interfere in Bai Liu's affairs directly. I can only influence him using the cards I hold."

His expression darkened. "But that bastard exploited the system. He cheated—adjusted the world line, forced an ordinary person into the game, and backed Bai Liu into a corner until he had no choice but to summon him to win. And in doing so, he managed to interfere with Bai Liu."

Spades nodded as if he understood, then said flatly, "Then kill him."

"No," the Reverse God murmured, his gaze turning distant. "That's exactly what he wants—to be killed by Bai Liu, so Bai Liu can take his place."

Spades frowned. "Is he sick?"

The Reverse God choked on a laugh before sighing. "Not exactly. His real goal is to find the most valuable version of himself across all world lines—to have that version replace him."

The paper in his hand crinkled as he lowered it over his eyes. His voice dropped to a whisper.

"The Evil God's standard for a worthy successor isn't desire or evil—it's pain."

"But he can only create evil and desire. Every successor he's chosen was flawed, riddled with black-hole-like greed. They all failed. Corrupted. Fell into monstrosity before they could replace him. And he's sick of it."

"He wants something better—a human soul with insatiable ambition, but one that never falls for it."

"In this world line, he finally found one." The Reverse God's fingers tightened over the prophecy. "That person is Bai Liu."

"So he's going to keep pushing Bai Liu, torturing him, refining his soul through suffering. Testing him. Seeing if he can resist temptation—if his desires can be honed into something worthy enough to replace him."

"He never wanted to be an Evil God in the first place. But an existence like his—where all world lines converge into the most extreme embodiment of desire and sin—can only be replaced by something even greater."

A pause.

Spades, silent until now, finally asked, "And did he ask Bai Liu if he wanted to become an Evil God?"

The Reverse God blinked.

Spades' gaze was calm and steady. "If Bai Liu doesn't want to, then kill

him."

"If Bai Liu can't kill him—then I will."

For a moment, the Reverse God just stared at him. Then, he let out a breath of laughter.

"You really are something else. No wonder Bai Liu has no idea what to do with you..." He smirked. "Hua Ganzhong told me you're so desperate to compensate Bai Liu for a Reverse Cross that it's driving him insane."

Then, abruptly, he changed the subject. "Do you know why I changed my name to [Reverse Cross Cultist]?"

Spades thought for a second, then deadpanned, "What does it have to do with me if you change your name?"

The Reverse God: "..."

It's a miracle Bai Liu puts up with this guy.

"Does my reverse cross mean a reverse cross?" The Reverse God sat up, casually grabbing a marker. He drew an inverted cross on a piece of paper, then transformed it into a standard cross with a few strokes. Smiling, he turned to Spades. "My reverse cross means to reverse the cross."

"I have a skill I haven't used in a long time. It's called [Worldline Overlap]. It's probably not all that useful anymore..."

The Reverse God's gaze dropped, his voice trailing off into a daze. "After all, the man who passed this skill on to me before he died... I can barely remember his face."

"Over six hundred worldlines... That's a long time."

He quickly snapped back to reality, turning his attention to Spades. "That's why I need your cooperation. I can't break the rules of Werewolf Killing and deliberately interfere with Bai Liu. The game needs an element of surprise—just like the other side."

"So, you tear open a spatial rift, I activate the skill, and for a brief moment, Bai Liu's game worldline overlaps with ours. That's how we break through."

"The skill only lasts about six or seven minutes in the overlapping

dimension. And since I haven't used it in ages, it'll be even shorter—probably down to three or four minutes."

Spades looked at him. "What do you need me to do?"

The Reverse God smirked, spinning the marker between his fingers. "This skill needs coordinates to work." He tilted his head. "If you're so eager to give Bai Liu a reverse cross… why not draw one for him?"

End of recollection.

The Reverse God looked at Spades. "Three to four minutes—that's all you'll have. That guy is a god, and he's dangerous. He has the same sniper rifle as the Joker, but he's much better with it. I'm not sure if it'll work on you, so you'd better be careful."

He took a deep breath. "But he's forcing his way into the worldline process, which means he's more restricted than we are. Hopefully, the two of us can handle it."

"Are you ready?"

Spades didn't respond. His gaze remained cold as he swung his whip down, tearing a massive black rift through the air.

Inside the Five-Building Copy Bai Liu lay collapsed at the bottom of the aquarium, his eyelids barely open. Tiny, transparent bubbles drifted from his face, his wounds soaked pale—so bloodless that nothing leaked into the water.

"This is the thirty-eighth skill," Bai Six murmured, watching Bai Liu beneath the water. He lowered his eyes. "I remember you hating water. It's impressive you've endured this long."

The four teammates hanging on the thorn wall had gone from anger to despair, sinking into a deathlike silence. Only their eyes moved, locked on Bai Liu in the aquarium.

Liu Jiayi had cried once—her eyes were still red. But Muke, usually a crybaby, hadn't shed a single tear. He only stared blankly.

"It's been fifteen minutes," Bai Six remarked, withdrawing the aquarium.

The moment Bai Liu spilled out of the water, nearly everyone let out a long, shuddering breath.

Bai Six's weapon shifted into a sniper rifle. He aimed it at Bai Liu, smiling. "Now, let's play the second game."

"I'll choose one of your teammates. Or you can pick—Shi Qian or Yuan Guang."

From the thorn wall, Muke suddenly spoke, his voice hoarse. "Bai Six, kill me."

"I'm the weakest member of his team. If you kill me, he'll get a better replacement. He'll be closer to your ideal—more perfect."

"Wow." Bai Six's smile deepened, his rifle never wavering from Bai Liu. "Someone already can't stand watching and would rather have their soul shattered to set you free, Bai Liu."

His gun shifted toward Muke. "Do you want me to grant his wish?"

Bai Liu slowly lifted his head, his face drained of all color. He reached up, gripping the barrel of Bai Six's rifle, and pushed it away as he stood. Then, with a measured motion, he turned the gun to aim squarely at Bai Six instead.

"There's a faster way than killing Yuan Guang," Bai Liu said coolly. "I can just kill you."

His index finger rested on the trigger, his expression unreadable. "Every game has an exploit, doesn't it, Bai Six?"

Bai Six raised his hands in mock surrender, his amusement undiminished. His gaze flicked to the crumpled soul note of Daniel, now held between Bai Liu's fingers, the Joker's mark faintly visible.

"You stole Daniel's soul note using Mu Sicheng's skill while I was playing with you?"

His grin widened. "You're really going to kill me? You're going to shatter my soul?"

"Then go ahead—try."

The players on the thorn wall were stunned by the reversal. Tang Erda immediately thrashed against his restraints, shouting, "Kill him, Bai Liu! Don't hesitate!"

"Kill him!"

A faint, unplaceable sense of wrongness gripped Bai Liu. He hesitated for a second—but then the dizziness from blood loss reminded him he couldn't afford to wait. He pulled the trigger.

The bullet struck Bai Six. He crumpled to the ground, blood quickly pooling beneath him. His eyes fluttered shut, a smile still etched on his face.

Muke looked dazed. Mu Sicheng leaned back, laughing uncontrollably. Liu Jiayi glanced toward herself—her gaze landing on [Liu Jiayi], who stared at Bai Six's body in shock, looking almost relieved.

Only Bai Liu remained standing, rigid and unmoving over Bai Six's body.

His pale face was unreadable as he raised his gun again. He fired several more shots into Bai Six, his pupils contracting with each pull of the trigger. In the expanding reflection of Bai Six's fallen form, something didn't add up.

This body…

Not turning to ash like [Mu Sicheng] before...

I don't think this guy…

Bai Six's eyes snapped open.

He sat up, unsteady, blood drenching his back. Raising both hands in a mock surprise gesture, he grinned. "Surprise!"

"I don't have a soul, Bai Liu."

In an instant, Bai Six lunged. Before Bai Liu could react, he snatched Daniel's soul note from his grasp. His hand morphed back into the green sniper rifle as he aimed it at Bai Liu's throat.

Lowering his gaze, he smiled. "I forgot to mention—evil gods don't have souls."

His voice softened into a chuckle. "Now it's my turn."

"Tell me, Bai Liu—do you have a soul?"

Bai Liu's pupils shrank. Bai Six pulled the trigger.

The [reverse cross] at Bai Liu's collarbone flashed, inverting into a true cross, emitting an intense white light. Within it, Bai Liu heard Bai Six's voice whispering in his ear, soft and close.

"I've decided the life and death of so many people… So why don't we end this with a game between us?"

"I hope it's me who dies."

How to Own Five Building

The moment the bullet was about to strike the cross at the center of Bai Liu's collarbone, a flash of white light emanated from it. A whip and a heavy sword materialized from the cross, intercepting the bullet before it could reach him.

The heavy sword cleaved the bullet in two and, without pause, slashed outward—straight toward Bai Six's neck.

Bai Six sidestepped, leaping back two steps. His gun slashed left, his right hand raised to intercept the weapon as it shifted into a black bone whip in his grip. His gaze flicked toward Spades and the Reverse God, who had suddenly appeared in the distorted air and were now plummeting toward the ground. He smirked.

"Coming?"

The moment his feet touched the ground, he lunged forward, his heavy sword flashing midair. Steel met bone with a fierce clash.

Bai Six, holding the bone whip in both hands, pressed it against the god's heavy sword and slowly raised it. A sly smile curled his lips.

"Aren't you always known for your mild-mannered tactics? Today, you reek of blood."

"Killed your master?"

The Reverse God's eyes flickered. He clenched his heavy sword, pressing down hard against Bai Six's whip, his false smile unwavering.

"That is none of your concern, Lord Evil God."

"Didn't you give me the prophecy so that I would come here?"

"I simply thought that, with a full house, Bai Liu might have a more... comprehensive set of choices." Bai Six glanced past the Reverse God, eyes landing on Bai Liu, who was being helped up by Spades. His voice was light, almost amused.

"Friends, family, people of interest—all present."

His smirk widened.

"This game about him is what makes it fun." Bai Six lifted his gaze to

the Reverse God, whose expression had darkened. "Don't you think so, Prophet?"

The Reverse God suddenly released his heavy sword. It twisted midair around Bai Six's bone whip, its blade flipping upward in a deadly arc —aimed to stab straight through Bai Six's jaw.

Bai Six's neck snapped back at an unnatural angle as he abruptly let go of the whip. The weapon, borrowed from the Reverse God, vanished in a flash.

The Reverse God's gaze sharpened. He kicked off the heavy sword, flipping in midair as the weapon shot toward Bai Six. In one swift motion, he landed on it, using the momentum to propel himself forward—sword poised for a killing strike.

"How fierce," Bai Six remarked, half his body pinned down by the heavy sword. The blade pressed into his shoulder, blood seeping through his clothes. Yet, even as crimson spread, he still found the breath to tease. "It's rare to see you this angry."

Their conversation was eerily casual, like old friends catching up. Bai Six didn't even acknowledge the sharp dagger now gripped in his own hand. Instead, he used his wounded shoulder to trap the heavy sword in place—preventing it from moving—before angling the dagger under its cover, aiming straight for the Reverse God's eye.

Blood trickled down the gleaming blade.

But the Reverse God reacted instantly. Realizing he couldn't free the heavy sword from Bai Six's bones, he abandoned it altogether. He shifted into a tai chi stance, his eyes blazing as he jammed his hands against Bai Six's wrist, redirecting the dagger just moments before it could reach his eye.

The blade wrenched off course.

Yet, Bai Six moved with fluid precision. In a seamless motion, the dagger flipped in his grip. He shifted it to a backhanded hold and jerked it upwards—carving a deep, bone-deep gash across the Reverse God's jaw. Blood gushed out.

In the span of twenty seconds, they had exchanged blow after blow.

The Reverse God pulled back, breathing slow and steady despite the crimson beading at his jaw and dripping onto the ground.

"There aren't many in this world line who can fight me evenly," Bai Six remarked, stepping through the settling dust. Casually, he flicked blood from his shoulder, his smile sharp. "But, Prophet, making an enemy of me outside a game?"

His tone turned almost lazy.

"That's a mistake."

The moment those words left his lips, Bai Six vanished.

He reappeared before the Reverse God in a flash—dagger in hand, knees bent mid-air, his downcast eyes cold with intent. Without hesitation, he plunged the blade toward the Reverse God's heart.

The dagger met steel.

But just as it was about to make contact, it flickered—and transformed.

Between Bai Six's fingers, the blade turned into a playing card. He flipped it, revealing Fang Dian's face on its surface.

In an instant, Bai Six became Fang Dian.

The Reverse God instinctively turned his gaze to his sword, but the reflection in its snowy blade made his pupils constrict. Staring back at him was Bai Six—now Fang Dian.

[System Alert: Player Bai Six uses Player Hearts Queen's Personal Skill (Transformation Playing Card) with Charm and Stun effects.]

For a fraction of a second, his mind wavered.

And in that fraction of a second, Bai Six struck.

The Reverse God barely managed to react. He shoved Bai Six away—less than a second of hesitation, and yet...

Bai Six flicked the card between his fingers.

In the next heartbeat, his weapon changed again.

A thin thread unfurled in his grasp.

[System Alert: Player Bai Six uses Player Puppeteer's Personal Skill (Puppet Silk) to control the opponent's actions when inserted into a

joint.]

[System Alert: Player Bai Six attaches the (Evil God) panel, turning the (Puppet Silk) skill on full, covering the entire map.]

[You can manipulate everyone on the field to your heart's content.]

He smiled as he spread his hands wide, releasing threads that shot out in all directions. They burrowed into the joints of Shi Qian and Yuan Guang, unconscious on the ground, as well as into Tang Erda, Muke, and Mu Sicheng, still suspended against the walls.

Liu Jiayi, having been knocked off the thorn wall by Spades and Bai Liu, turned her head sharply. She stared at the rest of the team, now ensnared by puppet silk, the shock on her face barely concealed. Her gaze flicked toward Bai Six standing in the field—so unnerving that she couldn't help but cough.

It was terrifying.

This man had just been playing that game of skill selection with Bai Liu—thirty-eight skills in ten minutes, perfectly executing the most destructive combinations. And now, he was actually applying it.

He hadn't even used all his skills or panel values.

Was this man… a monster?!

Bai Six lowered his eyes as countless sharp, transparent threads crisscrossed around him. Then, as if playing a musical instrument, he raised his wrist slightly before pressing it down again, his fingers gracefully manipulating a few select strands.

In their unconscious state, Shi Qian and Yuan Guang clutched a utility knife and a caliper cone, their heads hanging limply. Meanwhile, Spades and Bai Liu were surrounded by Mu Sicheng, Muke, and Tang Erda—all under Bai Six's control.

"Reverse God," Bai Six said, amusement flickering in his eyes, "I recall you don't like harming ordinary people." He tilted his head. "And Bai Liu seems to hate hurting his teammates."

He smiled as he pressed down slightly on the puppet silk. "Your weaknesses are so blatantly exposed—don't you know that in the game of the Evil Gods…"

Bai Six's smirk deepened as he tugged on the threads.

"...weaknesses are meant to be exploited?"

Shi Qian and Yuan Guang surged forward, their weapons in hand. The Reverse God dodged, a scowl twisting his face.

Mu Sicheng's fingers moved against his will, tapping at the skill panel before him. He strained against the control, muscles bulging, veins standing out against his neck. He wanted to scream—curse, anything—but the puppet silk sealed his mouth shut.

Zhang Gui's puppet silk had once nearly ensnared him, but this—this was nothing like that.

Not even close!

Desperate, Mu Sicheng activated his skill, his hand shifting into a monkey's claw as it lashed toward Bai Liu's throat.

Muke turned his summoned dagger against himself.

Tang Erda clenched his teeth so hard his knuckles popped, but his gun remained unwaveringly aimed at Spades.

Spades sidestepped a bullet fired by Tang Erda, narrowly avoiding a thread that flicked past his ear. In the same instant, he caught sight of Muke lunging at Bai Liu from behind. Without hesitation, he swung his whip handle, effortlessly deflecting the attack.

The Reverse God, cornered by Shi Qian and Yuan Guang, dodged fluidly as he lifted his heavy sword. But—

Bai Six struck from the side.

A poker card sliced through the air, forcing the Reverse God to twist away at the last second. The afterimage swept past him, Bai Six smirking as he murmured, "Reverse God, if you were willing to kill these two yourself, you might actually be able to fight me on equal footing—even with me holding back."

"Pity." Bai Six's gaze darkened with something akin to regret. "You have weaknesses too."

As he severed a thread, Bai Six flicked his fingers without even glancing back. A new strand seamlessly replaced the broken one, gliding from his sleeve like a living thing.

"Now that everyone's here." Bai Six sidestepped the Reverse God's sword thrust and clapped his hands, his tone pleasant. He cast a courteous glance toward Bai Liu, who was now cornered.

"Let's continue the game."

As he clapped, the puppet silk quivered in response.

Tang Erda, Mu Sicheng, and Muke instantly converged, cutting Spades off from Bai Liu.

Spades frowned and was about to break through when Bai Six flicked his fingers again—Muke's grip slackened, and his dagger dropped.

A split second later, his body was sent hurtling toward Spades' bone whip.

The whip pierced through Muke's torso. Blood bloomed.

Muke gave a weak, relieved smile. "...Kill me."

"If we don't want them to die, we'd better not move carelessly." Bai Six reminded with a smile, his gaze settling on Bai Liu. "What do you think, Bai Liu?"

Bai Liu's face was pale as he met Spades' eyes, then shifted his focus to Bai Six.

"You want me to keep playing that game?"

Bai Six's grin widened. "Yes. What's your choice?"

"Of course, you could always choose to let me kill your teammates, Spades, and the Reverse God," Bai Six mused, idly tapping his fingers. "Or you could do it yourself—eliminate Shi Qian and Yuan Guang."

Bai Liu's voice was steady. "Your gun fired a minute ago. It's still on cooldown."

"Oh, that's no problem." Bai Six slowly lifted both hands—one with his index finger curled inward, the other mimicking the motion of drawing a bowstring.

"I'll make sure you have all the conditions necessary to make your choice," he said, "if you're willing to choose."

[System Alert: Player Bai Six loads player Georgia's panel and

activates the personal skill (Bow of Rewind) — Reverting the target's physical state to what it was three hours ago while retaining all memories.]

A brilliant golden bow materialized in Bai Six's hands. With a flick of his wrist, he aimed the arrow at himself and let it loose.

The moment the golden arrow struck, it dissolved into shimmering dust. All of Bai Six's wounds vanished, leaving only the dried blood on his white shirt as evidence that they had ever existed.

"Three hours ago," Bai Six mused, flexing his fingers. "Skills are now available again."

A nightmare-green sniper rifle appeared in his grasp. He lifted it, aiming lazily across the room.

"Now," Bai Six said, his gaze gleaming with amusement, "who do you choose?"

"You had this skill before," Bai Liu observed, his voice level. "Its cooldown was reduced. Why didn't you use it sooner?"

Bai Six chuckled. "Because then, everyone important to you would have died at once."

His smile widened, eyes alight with malicious amusement. "And that would make our game much less fun, don't you think?"

He tilted his head. "Besides, our dear guests only have about five or six minutes left before they have to go."

The barrel of his gun hovered for a brief second over the Reverse God's head.

"It's only polite to let them finish the game before they leave, right?"

Even Tang Erda's expression turned utterly lifeless.

...This guy.

He actually obtained Georgia's soul.

With time reversal stacked onto the Soul Crusher, that meant—

Bai Six's sniper rifle no longer had a cooldown.

An unrestricted soul-crushing gun.

No wonder Bai Six only played with Bai Liu and didn't use the Soul Crusher until they returned. Bai Six had been stalling for three hours, ensuring that the Soul Crusher remained unused until the exact moment he needed it.

"Since my side started with Mu Sicheng, why don't your side start with..." Before Bai Six could finish his sentence, he abruptly raised his hand and turned his gun, aiming a shot at Mu Sicheng.

Bai Liu seemed to have expected this, raising his hand before Bai Six. He transformed into the Tang Erda skill, coldly lifting his revolver and firing at the still unaware Mu Sicheng.

The two bullets thundered from the chamber, flying out in fiery streaks.

Mu Sicheng, unable to discern who fired, leans forward and slowly collapses.

Bai Liu paused, his breath catching for a moment. His shoulders subtly tensed, his hand gripping the gun until he heard the system beep, signaling his release.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has killed player Mu Sicheng.]

"Nice judgment," Bai Six commented with approval. "You guessed I would kill him first, so you lowered Mu Sicheng's health during the siege, setting him up for a single fatal blow."

"With Mu Sicheng's immunity from death, it was indeed a smart move to have him killed first and removed from the field."

Bai Six smiled as he twirled the Soul Crusher, pointing it at Liu Jiayi. "So, want to guess who I'll target next?"

Bai Liu and Liu Jiayi locked eyes across the Spades. Liu Jiayi took a deep breath, pointing to Yuan Guang across the room and giving him a subtle "OK" gesture. Bai Liu exhaled softly, feeling a cold sweat trickle down his back.

...There had never been anyone who gave him such a powerful sense of oppression.

"It's a bit boring to guess one by one," Bai Six smiled slightly, his hand

sweeping through the air, sending three trajectories aimed at Spades, the Reverse God, and Bai Liu himself. "Let's do this together."

Everything after that unfolded in slow motion.

Three green bullets shot from the chamber as Liu Jiayi, with her head down, rushed towards Bai Liu, five land certificates gripped in her hands. Bai Liu also had a land certificate ready.

Bai Six's eyes caught the scene, his eyebrows raised slightly, and then he laughed lightly.

Well done, Bai Liu, distracting me and stealing the land certificates.

But—

Spades and the Reverse God moved from their original positions almost simultaneously. Spades' whip lashed out, intercepting the whip meant for Bai Liu, while the Reverse God's heavy sword descended from the sky, splitting one bullet in two.

"Bang! Bang!" Two more green bullets flew, both aimed at Bai Liu, while golem wires thickened and expanded, forming a dense, windless barrier that wrapped around the Reverse God's falling sword and Spades' renewed whip.

The Reverse God grits his teeth, recalling his weapon. His eyes darted to Bai Liu, who was about to be hit by the bullet—but it was too late to recall his weapon and block it again!

Spades' expression darkened as he released the whip and dashed through the cutting silk threads toward Bai Liu.

Bai Six swung his whip again, the force striking Bai Liu's wrist with precision, snapping it in one clean motion.

—Land certificates must remain concentrated in the hands of a strategist!

The next second, the little girl snatched up all five land certificates in a single, swift motion, not even glancing at Bai Liu, who was tangled in layers of puppet silk. Her eyes welled up with tears as she sprinted toward Yuan Guang.

She had to make it before the bullet hit!

Looking at Liu Jiayi, running toward Yuan Guang, and Bai Liu, whose

expression remained cold and unmoved, a faint surprise flashed across Bai Six's face before he burst out laughing.

So that was it.

From the start, Bai Liu had been playing a game to let Yuan Guang win. That was the one thing that surprised Bai Six—Bai Liu was willing to forfeit his victory for someone else.

Having lost here, Bai Six now accepted that he hadn't guessed correctly.

Bai Liu stared at the bullet hurtling toward him, his expression indifferent. His hands and feet were tangled in puppet silk, leaving him unable to move.

The Reverse God rushed to him, summoning his heavy sword, his gaze determined as he raised it to block the first bullet that flew from the left.

The heavy sword shattered under the impact, grazing the Reverse God's shoulder. A greyish-white flame spread from the wound, creeping toward his heart.

Just as the second bullet was about to hit Bai Liu, Spades lunged, throwing himself at Bai Liu. He embraced him tightly, absorbing the impact of the bullet with his own body.

—It was the force of the bullet hitting Spades' body.

The Reverse God and Spades closed their eyes, collapsing slowly in front of Bai Liu, whose eyes had lost focus.

The grey on the Reverse God's shoulder spread to his neck, his brow furrowing in pain. Spades fell to the ground, motionless, like a frozen corpse, his body temperature plummeting, and frost forming around him.

Liu Jiayi gritted her teeth, shoving the five crumpled land certificates into Yuan Guang's hands.

[System Alert: Player Yuan Guang has obtained five land certificates and achieved the true end achievement. Game over.]

Everything on the ground dissolved instantly, and everyone was ejected from the game.

Bai Liu, his consciousness fading, heard a voice laughing in his ear. "That's the end of this game. I look forward to seeing you step forward to face me in the next one."

"I hope you keep winning in your games with me, Bai Liu."

Pre-season

Wang Shun stared at the big screen, his forehead slick with sweat, his hands clenched tightly in anxiety.

The moment Bai Liu cornered Yuan Guang and raised his whip to strike, the big screen suddenly flickered into a blurry snowstorm. A system prompt lagged on the screen, further adding to the confusion.

[System Alert: Due to the presence of a summoned item in the arena beyond the replica's capacity, the system is undergoing full maintenance. The content in the arena cannot be broadcast on the big screen for the time being.]

We apologize for the disruption to your viewing experience.

Since then, the big screen, which was supposed to broadcast the match, had been nothing but static.

Russell Cemetery's tendency to fog up the screen had already deterred many spectators from attending the game. Combined with the system glitch and the high-stakes mid-season match between the Deer Hunters and the Killer Sequence, half of the already sparse crowd had left.

Wang Shun's chest felt heavy with worry as he surveyed his surroundings. His gaze occasionally flickered over to Charles, who sat with his chin propped up in his hands, staring at the snowstorm on the screen.

What should he do? Even if the president won, Russell Cemetery's meager pool points wouldn't satisfy Charles...

It wasn't even close to what Charles had spent on Bai Liu's weapon modifications. Most of it was pool money generated by their diversions since the tournament began.

Wang Shun, full of concern, was frustrated by how much he cared about his opponent’s pool.

On top of that, there was another issue that weighed on his mind: popularity.

He had greatly underestimated the impact of Russell Cemetery's low popularity and unconventional tactics. The audience mainly consisted

of the base board they had brought in, and even their pool growth was stunted. With such low betting odds, even if spectators bet on their win, the payout would be minimal. There weren't many new viewers betting either.

It was supposed to be a pre-season final, but the betting pool wasn't growing at even a tenth of the rate seen during the double-header against the Raging Lambs.

Wang Shun had entered the tournament optimistic, hoping to secure the popularity gold medal for the entire team right away, only to realize how naive he had been.

As the mid-season drew to a close, the top eight teams' points totals were more or less locked in. These teams had performed exceptionally well, their betting pools growing astronomically. The Killer Sequence and Deer Hunters had particularly impressive pools.

Compared to last year, the Killer Sequence's pool base had grown seven times, while the Deer Hunters' had grown eleven times. Teams like Golden Dawn and Kings Guild had attracted new players with impressive performances and looks, boosting their base by four to six times.

With the mid-season ending and playoffs fast approaching, it was nearly impossible for the popularity of pre-season teams to increase. The points circulating among players were bound to be absorbed by the top eight teams' betting pools.

To think that a pre-season game with a low-popularity team would somehow increase their popularity was foolish.

Wang Shun smiled bitterly, realizing how hasty he had been.

He couldn't even sleep at the thought of facing these monsters—fully equipped, supremely powerful, as if favored by the gods—while they held no death warrant.

As Wang Shun sighed and reflected, a commotion from the audience behind him broke his focus. The murmurs grew louder, and spectators began exchanging words.

“The screens over at the mid-season tournament are suddenly under maintenance...”

“WTF?! What happened to the league this year? The big screen rarely

goes wrong unless there's a bug!"

"Who's playing in the mid-season match now?"

"Killer Sequence and Deer Hunters. During the fight, the screen went black halfway through. They said a player used a rules skill to force compatibility with multiple copies, which the system couldn't handle. The audience exploded, going crazy over it."

Wang Shun's curiosity piqued as he sensed a connection between the black screen in the mid-season match and the snowy screen here. He quickly opened the system panel to check on the tournament.

The moment he opened it, a blood-red headline jumped out at him.

[Damn! The results are in and I lost the bet! The Killer Sequence won! Shit! How could this happen?!]

At the same time, a mechanical beep echoed in Wang Shun's ears.

[System alert: Game over.]

Wang Shun's heart skipped a beat. He jerked his head up to look at the big screen, and the next moment, his breath caught in his throat.

[The (Roving Circus) vs (Russell Cemetery) match is over.]

[Congratulations to the (Russell Cemetery) team for winning the tournament.]

The members of Russell Cemetery stood frozen for a moment before exchanging stunned looks. Then, they embraced each other, tears of joy streaming down their faces, shouting in exhilaration.

"The President won!"

"I almost thought Yuan Guang and Shi Qian were going to die!"

"The President didn't lie to us! He said he would bring us back alive!"

The snowy screen flickered and faded into darkness, with figures slowly emerging on either side of the screen.

The crowd at Russell Cemetery rushed to greet Yuan Guang and Shi Qian as they appeared, disoriented. They were embraced by the crowd, lifted into the air amid cheers, tears, and jubilant wishes.

On the other side, the battered figures of Mu Sicheng, Muke, Tang Erda, and Liu Jiayi appeared, silent, with Bai Liu trailing behind them.

Wang Shun rushed forward in disbelief, his mind still numb from the unexpected outcome. The first question he asked, still stunned, was, "How did you lose?"

Bai Liu met Wang Shun's gaze for a brief moment, his lips parted as if to speak. But before he could, his eyelids fluttered shut, and his body collapsed toward the ground, as if drained of every last bit of energy.

"Bai Liu!!!"

"President!!!"

The panic-filled shouts from one side and the laughter from the other side mixed in Wang Shun's ears. Yuan Guang's eyes reflected the slow fall of Bai Liu, thrown into the air by the laughing team.

The memories that had blurred after using the skill began to resurface in Yuan Guang's aching mind.

His hands clenched, the texture of paper from the land certificates forced into his palms, and the heart-wrenching cry of a little girl echoed in his ears. "Bai Liu—"

Yuan Guang’s memories sharpened. He remembered the young man, draped in a bloodstained white shirt, his thin shoulder blades visible, standing calmly as he smiled, raising his gun. He had asked Yuan Guang to choose: kill him and Shi Qian, or kill his team members—choose no one.

Before the game ended, Yuan Guang recalled falling to the ground, seeing in the background of the dissipating ruins of the game, the young man who resembled him but older, smiling as he approached, speaking to him.

[One day, he will come to me of his own accord].

The man had looked down at Yuan Guang, pity in his eyes, a smile curling his lips.

[After all, in this world, it’s a big, big price to pay for a natural villain like him to try to be good].

Yuan Guang staggered violently from the hand that had held him up,

rolled to the ground, then stood up in front of the astonished onlookers. He stumbled forward, toward Bai Liu, who had collapsed.

He remembered.

Yuan Guang's eyes turned red, his breath sharp as he gasped. The name tumbled from his throat.

The man had bowed his head, smiling as he whispered in Yuan Guang's ear, [Do you know why?]

[For God did not want to see him as a good man].

"Bai Liu---!!!"

Mid-season viewing pool.

The black screen blinked.

[The (Killer Sequence) vs (Deer Hunter) match is over.]

[Congratulations to the (Killer Sequence) team for winning the tournament].

As the big screen shifted, the Deer Hunter and Killer Sequence players emerged.

Cen Buming took a slow, grim step from behind the screen, his face dark, while Daniel seemed unaffected by the loss, still grinning lazily.

The atmosphere on the Killer Sequence side was surprisingly relaxed, even after their victory.

Bai Yi crossed his arms and pointed at Spades and Reverse God, "What did you two do? You disappeared from the field without even telling us about the strange skills you used."

Bai Jiamu, usually surprised by these things, frowned for the first time, "If it was a tactic, shouldn’t we have been informed in advance?"

Liao Ke, always the joker, smiled, "Well if you win, it means the tactics were fine, right? What do you think, Reverse God?"

They turned to look at Reverse God and Spades, who had been trailing at the back, motionless since they had logged out of the game.

Liao Ke was the first to notice something was wrong. He stepped forward, tapping the two on the shoulders. "Reverse God? Spades?"

The bodies of Reverse God and Spades collapsed through the gap in the screen as if unconscious.

Liao Ke quickly stopped Reverse God's fall with an open hand, and Bai Jiamu braced Spades' body. The weight of Spades' limp form caused Bai Jiamu's shoulders to sag.

Realization struck him suddenly, his face hardening. He barely managed a joke, "Hey?! You two don't have to fake it and play dead just because you got scolded, do you?!"

The Reverse God's body began to fade, becoming translucent from his shoulders. Meanwhile, frost spread quickly where Spades' body touched Bai Jiamu's, turning him as cold as ice, so much so that Bai Jiamu had to lower him gently to the ground.

Bai Yi froze, staring in disbelief. "What's going on?"

Liao Ke, the only one still composed, had a dark look on his face. "Move Spades back to the Killer Sequence warehouse. Hand him over to the Golden Dawn people. Don't let anyone touch him for now."

"I'll stay here with Reverse God."

Bai Yi finally panicked, his eyes darting to Reverse God, whose form had faded to a shadow. "What's wrong with Reverse God and Spades?"

"Spades' condition will have to be monitored further; his situation is unique, and I'm not sure for now." Liao Ke took a deep breath, trying to steady himself. He clenched his fist. "As for Reverse God... he must have carried over his serious injuries from the game, traumatized into an unconscious state, which is why he automatically logged out."

"He should... be fine."

Liao Ke glanced at Reverse God's fading form, his gaze darkening.

If you die here, your wife will surely remarry, Captain.

This was the last world line where you could've been with her.

Pre-season

Killer Sequence Warehouse

Bai Yi and Bai Jiamu poked at Spades, who had collapsed on the ground, face down. With a long sigh, Bai Yi looked at the ice shards on his fingers and muttered, "...If this Spades guy wasn't normal, I'd almost suspect he'd be stiff as a corpse by now."

Bai Jiamu shot him a bemused glance. "Can you say something a little more uplifting?"

"That's the best I can come up with," Bai Yi replied, resting his face in his hands, his gaze drifting downward. "I really don't like seeing dead people."

"My wife was the same when she passed," Bai Jiamu said quietly. "One moment she was fine, and the next, she was just lying there, motionless."

"It's so sudden when someone's gone."

Bai Jiamu paused, then said, "Don't dwell on it."

"If I could stop thinking about it, I wouldn't be in this game now," Bai Yi murmured, tilting his head slightly. "Back then, I kept wondering what I'd do after she died, but I couldn't figure it out. So, I just ended up sitting by her grave every day, until the old man guarding it chased me away."

Bai Jiamu fell silent for a moment before asking, "Why didn't you go home?"

"I didn't want to go home," Bai Yi responded, his head bowed. "...A place without her isn't home, it's just a house."

"When Spades took us to win the tournament last year, each member of the team was granted a wish. Two of us made it, and I wanted to wish for her to come back... but Spades stopped me."

"Yeah," Bai Jiamu replied, lowering his gaze, "he stopped me too. It wasn't allowed."

Bai Yi let out a soft, indistinct chuckle. "...That guy's instincts are scarily sharp sometimes."

“The two who made wishes disappeared from the world not long after,” Bai Jiamu continued. “I spent a long time trying to find them—in the game, in reality— but no one seems to remember them, or even know they were part of last year’s championship team.”

“So, I went to investigate on my own,” Bai Yi said, his voice soft. “I didn’t find much, but I did make a general deduction—”

“—All the people from the championship teams who made wishes over the years have vanished without a trace,” Bai Jiamu interrupted. “Any information they left behind, whether in the game or in reality, has been erased. I can’t even find a single video from their time playing.”

“It’s like they never existed.”

Bai Yi sighed again. “Although I probably suspected this whole ‘wish’ business was a scam, it still feels pretty sad to confirm it. The god who made us wish said we could store our wishes if we didn’t want to make them right then.”

“The Deer Hunters, Golden Dawn, and the King’s Crown—champion guilds all—did the same thing,” Bai Yi added. “They must’ve sensed the risk of the wishes and decided to store them for now.”

“I’m not sure whether wishing is good or bad. We train so hard every day, and then we have to face the death of our teammates. Sometimes, I wonder…” Bai Yi turned to Bai Jiamu, his voice quiet, “Why do you think we keep going?”

“I’d really like to ask the Grand Guild presidents who got their wishes why they stick around,” he added.

Bai Jiamu tilted his head slightly, not meeting his gaze. He responded calmly, “Didn’t you ask the Reverse God? He was once considered half president of the Deer Hunters and had wishes in his hands.”

Bai Yi snapped his gaze back to him, falling into a long silence. Finally, he spoke. “The reason the Reverse God gave... is too strange.”

Bai Jiamu glanced at him, his curiosity piqued. “What did he say?”

“The only reason the Reverse God wants to keep getting wishes,” Bai Yi said slowly, looking up, “is to prevent someone else from getting a wish from God’s hands before he does.”

A hospital ward.

Bai Liu lies on the bed, eyes closed, breathing steadily. His complexion is almost as white as the sheets, with one hand resting on the quilt, palm facing up. A pulse pressure restraint is tied around one wrist, while an IV is attached to the back of his other hand.

The collar of his shirt is slightly open, and the connector attached to the ECG leads out from beneath it to the machine beside him. The waveform on the ECG screen ebbs and flows gently.

"It's been two days... why hasn't he woken up yet?" Mu Sicheng murmurs, lying beside Bai Liu's bed. "Didn't the doctor say it was nothing...?"

"Blood tests, brain CT, MRI... everything we could do," Muke responds, his fists clenched against his knees. Sitting up straight on the bench, his eyes fixed on Bai Liu in the bed, he continues, "Apart from some minor external injuries, there's not much to go on right now."

Mu Sicheng suddenly grows furious, shooting Muke a sidelong glance. "How can you say it's just minor injuries after all that torture?"

At that moment, Tang Erda, who had been leaning against the wall with his head down, speaks up abruptly. "Bai Six pushes people to the limit of both pain and mental capacity."

"It's just pain, nothing fatal. Not too many wounds. Even if someone's captured, it's hard to determine," he continues, his voice low. "Usually, people go mad from the torture."

The mention of Bai Six's name casts a heavy silence over the ward, and no one speaks for a moment.

Seeing the somber expressions around him, Tang Erda shifts uncomfortably and changes the subject. "Liu Jiayi, did you discuss making a game for Russell Cemetery to win with Bai Liu earlier?"

"Yeah," Liu Jiayi responds quietly, sitting on the bench with her head bowed, hiding her expression. "I don't know what Bai Liu and Charles talked about, but they came back and told me about it—about creating a game for Russell Cemetery to win."

"I didn't agree at first. It's too messy. A fake tournament like that can

only be pulled off by a powerful guild like the Gamblers Club. A fledgling guild like ours would see a serious drop in popularity," she continues. "But Bai Liu eventually convinced me."

Liu Jiayi glances at Bai Liu in the hospital bed, takes a deep breath to focus, and then continues. "First, there's the issue of popularity. We need to gain immunity before the challenge, but practically, that's unlikely."

"Our last game was against Russell Cemetery. Their low popularity and cover-up tactics made it a game that, no matter how well we played, wouldn't draw much attention. In terms of profitability, we didn't get much for winning, just a five percent cut of Russell Cemetery's small pool."

"The most valuable part of the game was our own betting pool," Liu Jiayi explains. "When the challenge begins, both sides' pools will be emptied and recounted. The best way for Bai Liu to get our pool was to set up a game where he could secretly win against the opponent. But this is easy to detect, so to cover up the trick, Bai Liu decided to involve Charles."

Muke furrows his brow. "But Charles... can he even see our guild's pool?"

"Of course not. Charles's Gamblers Club has a pool hundreds of times larger than ours, and in terms of points, we're nowhere near his level." Liu Jiayi replies calmly. "But Charles isn't like Bai Liu."

"It's not the money he's after—it's the gamble itself. He enjoys the thrill of taking risks, flipping dozens of times, and winning big with little. Otherwise, he wouldn't be spending so many points every year discovering newcomers, instead of nurturing his own guild."

"From that perspective, Russell Cemetery's win over us perfectly matched Charles's gambling aesthetic. Once Bai Liu set the hook, Charles bit immediately."

"Bai Liu planned to open the game with a big match advantage, press the Russell Cemetery team to the limit, and create a difference between the two pools to give Charles a satisfying pre-season gamble. At the same time, he hoped to strike a deal with Russell Cemetery—a three-birds-with-one-stone plan."

Liu Jiayi pauses, then withdraws her gaze from Bai Liu's face and takes a deep breath. "Although, in the end, it turned out pretty much

like Bai Liu expected... the process was just too far off."

Mu Sicheng suddenly realizes what happened and mutters, his voice filled with frustration. "Shit! No way! Is that why you said so little during the match? You and Bai Liu knew we'd lose?"

"You didn’t even consult with us about this huge deal?" he continues, his eyes stern. "That really shows you didn’t consider us at all!"

Liu Jiayi rolls her eyes. "Well, if one of you three adult males was a bit better at acting, Bai Liu wouldn’t have had to come to me, an eight-year-old girl, to help with his game."

The three adult males, all terrible at acting, fall silent in unison.

A quiet knock on the door breaks the tension.

"Knock, knock."

Tang Erda subconsciously glanced at Bai Liu in the hospital bed, his hand instinctively reaching for his gun. But he quickly realized this was reality, not a game, and no one would harm Bai Liu here.

Liu Jiayi noticed Tang Erda's movement as he reached for his weapon, and she paused for a moment. Even Tang Erda was affected by this.

After witnessing Bai Liu being tortured by Bai Six, it seemed that everyone needed some time to recover.

Tang Erda lowered his hand and spoke softly, "Come in."

The door slowly opened, and Yuan Guang stood awkwardly in the doorway, holding a large, heavy fruit basket in both hands. He bowed slightly, saying, "Excuse me, I'm here to visit Bai Liu."

The expressions on everyone's faces shifted when they saw Yuan Guang. Even Tang Erda, typically so easygoing, stared at him without any intention of inviting him in.

Under the weight of four intense glares, Yuan Guang internally thought, QAQ. I want to get down on my knees and apologize a million times!

It was Muke who finally broke the silence, speaking first. "Thanks for the visit. Come in."

Yuan Guang nodded stiffly, thanked them, and stepped inside as if

walking on thin ice. He gently placed the fruit basket next to the bed, then looked at Bai Liu with a worried expression. "Still not awake? What did the doctor say?"

"Didn't you ask this yesterday?" Mu Sicheng snorted, not even looking at him. "The doctor said the same thing today that he said yesterday. Can't you remember after one day?"

"If you're going to play the good guy, at least commit to the act," he added, sarcastically.

Yuan Guang's face turned increasingly embarrassed, his fist clenched as he coughed awkwardly. Muke interrupted, speaking in a calm voice, "The doctor said that today's situation is similar to the previous one—nothing serious. But if he doesn't wake up soon and can't eat, they'll have to consider a gastric tube for nutrition."

"I'm still asking the doctor if there's anything else we can do at the moment," Muke continued. "We want to avoid the discomfort of a stomach tube if possible."

Yuan Guang fell silent. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but he knew that nothing he could say would be enough.

Now, he understood everything about Bai Liu.

This young man—three years younger than him—was a fellow worker in the internet industry, recently laid off, living in a small, rundown rental. His apartment was barely forty square feet, and he grew up in an orphanage.

Bai Liu’s favorite meal was cheap hotpot, often discounted by less than fifty percent. His phone was an old model, bought by a friend when he graduated three years ago. Two years ago, a speeding driver had shattered the screen, but Bai Liu hadn’t replaced it.

When one person is far better off than another, the one with more resources might help out of condescending sympathy or to balance things out. But when someone is doing much worse, and they still reach out to help...

What drives that?

Yuan Guang took a deep breath, recalling the blankness in his mind when he saw Bai Liu on the ground, pale and drained, slipping away in Tang Erda's arms.

He had called out Bai Liu's name, his tears falling uncontrollably, his mouth full of questions. But in the end, all he could do was cry and plead, "Don't die!"

He felt so ashamed.

"Mr. Charles came to see me," Yuan Guang continued, sitting on the bench with his head bowed, his hands clenched tightly on his knees. "He said Bai Liu bet on us and won his own pool. Since the initial betting ratio was three to seven, with Charles getting three and Bai Liu seven, the pool allocation was 70% for Bai Liu."

"He told me Bai Liu wanted to make a deal with me for the 70% of the points, to buy Russell Cemetery."

Yuan Guang paused, taking a deep breath before letting it out slowly. "I came here today to tell Bai Liu that I am not for sale."

Mu Sicheng's expression darkened instantly, and he opened his mouth to curse, "You fucking—"

Yuan Guang pressed on, "I spoke with the others at Russell Cemetery about what happened during the tournament. We've decided to take only 20% of the points to handle our real-life situation. We don't want the rest. We'll work hard to pay Bai Liu back later. We'll treat it as a loan from him."

"We don't want to be bought. We want to voluntarily merge with the Wandering Circus."

Mu Sicheng's angry words faltered, his surprise evident. "Well... that's actually pretty sensible."

Before leaving, Yuan Guang politely said goodbye to the others. He then took a long, meaningful look at Bai Liu in the hospital bed and said earnestly, "Good things come to those who are good."

"Bai Liu will wake up soon."

It was only after Yuan Guang had left that Mu Sicheng let out a grunt. "Now that's something human to say."

Muke's face softened slightly from his previous indifference as he looked over at Tang Erda. "How are things progressing on his side of the property?"

“Su Yang and I have already confirmed it's been handled,” Tang Erda nodded. “As soon as I stepped out, I instructed him to search every cemetery for the secondary contract certificates. They’ve all been destroyed so far. The land beneath the building is still being tested, but the heresy levels have dropped significantly. The patients who were drained are slowly recovering.”

“If nothing else, this copy of the Five Buildings shouldn’t spill over into reality.”

“True, but the problem of the dilapidated building is still tough to resolve. The Heretic Processing Bureau can only allocate a small portion of the funds to these people,” Tang Erda frowned. “Actually, Bai Liu’s contribution of 70% of the gambling pool credits should have been enough to resolve their issues without the Bureau’s intervention.”

“But from what I’m seeing, Yuan Guang and the others probably won’t take the other 50 percent.”

Muke’s eyes remained steady as he glanced over at Bai Liu lying in the hospital bed. “The funds approved by the Bureau of Heresy, along with the 20% of the pool points Bai Liu contributed, will be sufficient.”

Tang Erda blinked in surprise. “Sufficient for what?”

Muke smiled and looked at Tang Erda. “The rest of the money chain is enough for my side to benefit.”

Tang Erda furrowed his brow. “Isn’t that a substantial amount of money for your father to let you use?”

“But we're not just a small guild anymore,” Muke’s expression was stoic as he looked over at Bai Liu. “Simply put, we’re already a highly profitable public company, with the points flowing from our gambling pool converting into cash. From a business standpoint, in both numbers and size, we need a base in reality.”

“I can easily put together a report for my father based on our guild’s profitability and convince him to invest a sum into our company.”

“And I also think it’s about time our president moved out of that tiny rental house of his,” Muke added calmly.

Mu Sicheng, sitting nearby, was stunned by this statement, staring at

Muke with wide eyes.

...Bought an entire plot of land just to get Bai Liu to move out... Is this what the world of the rich looks like?

“Your father won’t question what this company really is?” Tang Erda’s brow furrowed. “We don’t have anything in reality.”

Muke looked over, a smile playing on his lips with an enigmatic air. “He got to where he is because he never looks too closely into things, Captain Tang.”

“Sometimes, the fuzzy areas are the most profitable. He just needs to trust that I won’t harm him.”

Tang Erda: “...”

Mu Sicheng: “...”

Liu Jiayi: “...”

It always seems like... Muke has changed somehow, and it sends a chill down your spine.

Knock, knock, knock--

There was another knock on the ward door. This time, the person outside entered without waiting for an invitation.

Fang Dian came in holding a stainless steel lunchbox, smiling. “Good afternoon! I took a break to bring Bai Liu his lunch!”

Muke immediately stood up, offering Fang Dian a seat, but she raised her hand and gently pushed him back. “I don’t have time to sit. You can sit; I need to get back to work soon.”

She glanced at Bai Liu lying in bed, placing the lunchbox on the bedside table with mild surprise. “Didn’t the doctor say he was fine? Why hasn’t he woken up yet?”

“Oh, well.” Fang Dian shrugged. “Looks like I’m giving this meal away for nothing again today. You all can open it and eat it later.”

The group glanced wistfully at the lunchbox on Bai Liu’s bedside table, their tone wavering.

Fang Dian had come the past two days to deliver meals, and the

menus had been...

- Spicy stir-fried watermelon rind (with a slight bitterness—Tang Erda's words).

- Steamed mango and tomato rice (steamed too badly, tomatoes not peeled, a bit... unappealing—Liu Jiayi's words).

- The skin was so chewy that Mu Sicheng finished a bowl of rice with a mouthful of pork skin and still hadn't managed to chew it.

...

If they didn't know that Fang Dian had no ill intentions toward Bai Liu, they'd almost suspect that she wasn't bringing him food, but trying to make him sick.

Fang Dian sat at the head of Bai Liu's bed for a while after placing the lunchbox, casually starting to talk to Bai Liu, who was still unconscious. "Mr. Lu's been away on a business trip, and I can't reach him on the phone. I don't know what he's up to..."

"But, you know, he's always so busy that he's hard to get in touch with. Don't blame him for not coming to see you. Your illness came on too suddenly."

"The last time you were hospitalized was in high school. Mr. Lu and I took turns watching over you. We stayed in the hospital for a week, spent three or four hundred dollars after reimbursement, and didn't even eat meat that month."

Fang Dian smiled softly as she looked at Bai Liu's pale face, his eyelids closed. "Now, so many people are watching over you, competing to spend money on you. I saw two fruit baskets by your bed just now—I don't know who brought them. Maybe I'm sick too, but honestly, it makes me happy to see you like this."

"Wake up, or you'll miss seeing them anxious for you."

She chuckled softly. "It makes me happy for you to see that look on their faces."

"So many people like you now, Bai Liu."

After chatting with the still-unconscious Bai Liu for a while, Fang Dian waved and left the ward to go back to work, smiling at the others and

giving them a thumbs-up. “I saw you all finished your meals the other day. I made a little extra today!”

Once Fang Dian left, everyone turned their attention to the large four-layer stainless steel lunchbox she’d left behind on the bedside table. Their throats went dry as they swallowed in unison.

…This is at least half as much as yesterday…

It took a long moment before Mu Sicheng rolled up his sleeves, his eyes filled with determination. “I’ll be the first to test the poison today!”

Pre-season

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The night after Bai Liu fell into a coma, Tang Erda stayed behind to keep watch.

Fang Dian had initially planned to stay as well. She didn't mind the gender difference at all. Back when Bai Liu was in high school, she and Lu Yizhan had taken turns keeping watch over him. However, she had work the next day. After a firm request from Tang Erda, Fang Dian smiled widely and agreed, assuring him that Bai Liu would be fine.

Muke went home to handle the handover of the Sunshine property, and Liu Jiayi was picked up. Mu Sicheng wanted to stay but—

"Shit, I have a make-up exam tomorrow?!" Mu Sicheng opened the group chat, and his face fell when he saw the timetable for his make-up exam sent by his tutor. "I haven’t finished studying for this subject yet. Damn it!"

The tutor had politely reminded him, "Mu Sicheng, your absenteeism this semester has been high. If you don't want to make up exams next semester, I suggest you play fewer games and attend classes properly."

Mu Sicheng clutched his head in agony and, with a frustrated scream, returned to his revision.

1:00 AM.

Tang Erda felt a sense of relief when the nurse came to remove Bai Liu’s IV. But his expression quickly darkened when he noticed a small white scar in the center of Bai Liu’s collarbone, just under his slightly open shirt.

The marker markings hadn’t faded yet, so the scar was barely visible under the black ink. Tang Erda had only spotted it by chance.

His frown deepened as he examined the scar, which formed the center of a black, reverse cross. It was unmistakably a burn mark—a sign that

a bullet's heated tip had grazed Bai Liu's skin.

Bai Liu wasn't the type to remain unconscious after a minor injury, so the fact that he was still out cold raised suspicion. Tang Erda now suspected that the bullet might have grazed Bai Liu's heart when Bai Six fired the first shot at him, leaving this scar behind.

Had the gods and Spades not intervened in time, Bai Liu would have been struck by that bullet.

But even a grazed wound from that soul-crushing bullet… the effects would be incalculable.

... Bai Liu, don't you dare leave us.

Tang Erda rubbed his temples, one hand resting on the hospital bed and the other on the chair beside him. He leaned wearily against the bedside table, his eyes half-closed in shallow amusement.

Bai Liu's breathing was weak, and his right hand, resting on the quilt, was suddenly gripped by a cold, translucent hand, bruised all over.

Bai Liu's right finger twitched faintly.

But Tang Erda, ever vigilant and wide awake, didn't notice the sudden appearance of the ghostly Spades. The translucent figure didn't open his eyes.

Bai Liu's eyelids fluttered open, his gaze falling on Spades. His fingers curled slightly as though attempting to hold Spades' hand, but they passed through Spades' translucent form and only grasped at the empty air.

Spades bowed down, resting his head against the spot on Bai Liu's chest where the burn mark from the bullet remained. He rubbed against it, side to side, before closing his eyes in contentment.

Bai Liu could hear Spades' thoughts: "Is this what Bai Yi said about human dreaming?"

"So this is what dreaming is like… so dreaming can even be about Bai Liu…"

Spades closed his eyes again.

"Then I want to keep dreaming."

A faint glow emanated from Spades' body as his eyes closed and his form grew increasingly transparent, almost vanishing entirely. His ethereal body encircled Bai Liu, becoming more and more intangible.

"No." Bai Liu whispered hoarsely, his voice faint yet calm. Tears slipped from the corners of his eyes, but his expression remained composed. "I hate it when people sleep in front of me all the time."

"So, wake up and meet me, Spades."

Spades opened his dark eyes and gazed at Bai Liu, his voice serious: "Yes."

For a brief moment, Spades' transparent body solidified. The ward around him swirled into a cold, wind-like vortex. Then, with a sudden gust, Tang Erda was jolted awake as the whirlwind dissipated, and Spades' ghostly form disappeared into the air.

Tang Erda, startled, scanned the room, his hand instinctively reaching for his gun. His eyes quickly locked on Bai Liu, who, to his surprise, was now sitting up in the hospital bed.

Bai Liu, still looking a bit frail, smiled at Tang Erda. "Good evening, Captain Tang."

Tang Erda, still on high alert, slowly lowered his gun as he let out a long sigh. "Not exactly a good night. You woke up really late."

"Is that so?" Bai Liu glanced toward the spot where Spades' ghost had just stood next to his bed and let out a soft chuckle. "I probably just had a rather time-consuming beauty dream."

Killer Sequence Warehouse.

Bai Yi and Bai Jiamu, who had been poking the frozen Spades one by one, seemed to have realized something.

Bai Jiamu narrowed his eyes at Bai Yi. "Didn't Liao Ke tell us never to let anyone near Spades?"

"Yeah." Bai Yi poked at the ice cube on Spades' shoulder with a bored expression. "But how are we supposed to stop people from getting close if we don't keep watch?"

Bai Jiamu's forehead twitched, and he took a deep breath. "I mean,

aren't we human? Shouldn't we be keeping our distance from Spades too?"

Bai Yi suddenly paused as the realization hit him. "Right!"

But just as they had this thought, it was too late.

A blast of frost exploded from Spades' body, swirling around in a storm that sent Bai Yi and Bai Jiamu flying into the air. The wind ripped at the warehouse door before they were both slammed against the wall.

Bai Yi's mouth was caught in the gust of wind, making it puff out into a jiggling, wavy pocket of air, and he couldn't help but make chortling sounds. "Fuck~ so~ cold~ ah~!"

Bai Jiamu grit his teeth, turning sideways against the wall, trying to shield himself from the freezing frost with one hand. He squinted at Spades, who was slowly rising in the center of the blizzard.

He could hear the unmistakable crack of the ice crust on Spades' body as it shattered and fell to the ground.

By the time Bai Yi felt his face freeze solid, the wind finally subsided. He shook off the ice covering his face and looked curiously at Spades, who stood unmoved in the center.

Bai Jiamu brushed the broken ice off his shoulder and grabbed Bai Yi, who was about to walk toward Spades, pulling him back with a wary shout. "Spades?"

Spades turned around, his expression neutral. "Bai Yi, I just had a dream."

Bai Yi and Bai Jiamu froze—one shocked by the abruptness of the conversation, and the other by the content of it.

"Wait—Spades, you're actually dreaming?!" Bai Yi exclaimed in disbelief. "You're a lizard! How can you dream?!"

Bai Jiamu rolled his eyes, exasperated.

Sometimes, Bai Jiamu wondered if Bai Yi really had the basic intelligence of an adult.

—The only person in the entire Killer Sequence who truly believes that Spades is really a lizard is Bai Yi.

But Bai Jiamu did find it odd that Spades was talking about dreaming. He had always been aware that Spades' status was different. Unlike their human-formed counterparts, Spades were more like monster-formed players—no origins, no home, no access to reality.

Bai Jiamu sometimes woke up in the middle of the night only to find Spades staring wide-eyed at something in the room, thinking that a monster had attacked. It wasn't until later that he realized Spades couldn't sleep with his eyes closed.

It had taken Spades quite some time to learn how to sleep with his eyes closed, but even now, he sometimes fell asleep with his eyes wide open, staring straight ahead in an eerie way.

For someone who had to learn how to sleep, dreaming was an entirely foreign concept.

There had been one time, during a game involving monsters and dreams, when several of them entered the dream world and were chased half to death by terrifying creatures. But Spades couldn't dream and wasn't able to join them in the dream world. He had to stay awake and keep watch over their bodies while they were tormented by the dream monsters.

Spades concluded that humans looked ugly when they dreamed.

So when Spades mentioned having a dream, both Bai Jiamu and Bai Yi's first reaction was disbelief.

Bai Yi immediately asked about Spades' health, and after confirming he was okay, his eyes narrowed. Given that Spades was known for having the ugliest sleeping posture, Bai Yi couldn't help but make a jab. "Dreaming is complicated—it's a higher level of human consciousness. You're a lizard, how are you even dreaming?"

Bai Yi smirked. "First off, what did you dream about?"

Spades paused, recalling the dream. "I dreamed that Bai Liu was lying in front of me in very loose clothes, his collar open. I took his hand, and he took mine. I was lying on top of him, and he held me and smiled at me. Then, I buried my head in his shoulder..."

Bai Yi immediately cut him off. "That's enough! You're supposed to be dreaming. We have minors here, you need to pause."

Chapter End Notes

Hahahaha

Pre-season

Private Practice of a Community Psychologist Consultation

Liao Ke smiled as he sent the last patient away for counseling, closing the door behind them. He removed his white coat, hanging it on the back of the door. As the smile faded from his face, he turned toward the back of the clinic and pulled aside a blue sanitary curtain.

Behind the curtain was a cramped, narrow compartment.

The small space contained an old trundle bed, barely 80cm wide, its wheels rusted. Piles of debris were scattered beside it, obscuring the face of the person lying on the bed.

The man lay so still, his breathing so faint that it was nearly undetectable, hidden behind the curtain.

Liao Ke gently pulled the curtain back, revealing Lu Yizhan, unconscious on the trundle bed. He sighed deeply.

Lu Yizhan’s face was half buried in a pillow. The exposed half was so pale that it lacked any color, his lips dry and cracked. His eyes were sunken, and his body trembled uncontrollably. The quilt covering his shoulders had been pushed aside, and blood continued to seep through.

In silence, Liao Ke undressed Lu Yizhan, noticing that the bandages on his shoulders, which he had changed earlier in the day, were soaked with blood.

The bed was too small for comfort, and Lu Yizhan’s left hand hung limply over the side. Liao Ke carefully placed it back on the bed, then adjusted the anti-inflammatory drip and placed an ice pack on Lu Yizhan's forehead. He sat on the opposite bench, hands resting on his knees, letting out another long sigh.

"You can't go to the hospital, you can't go home, you can't let anyone know you're hurt. You have to stay here, in my little clinic, and hide your injuries," Liao Ke muttered to himself.

As he shifted Lu Yizhan's shoulder to change the bandage, he sighed again. "Fang Dian never had it this bad when she was captain of a detachment working directly against Bai Liu."

He shook his head, looking at Lu Yizhan's unconscious form. "It's still your own fault, Lu Yizhan..."

"Why did you have to try to save everyone?" he continued, his voice tinged with frustration. "You're just one person. It's enough to save most people. But no, you had to go and try to save even the heretics, the monsters, the gods—especially that Bai Liu. You tried to bring him back."

Liao Ke discarded the bloodstained bandages into the medical bin and found a clean piece of gauze to wipe the sweat from Lu Yizhan's face. After turning off the clinic lights, he sat quietly, watching over Lu Yizhan in the dim, quiet night. His gaze was distant, lost in thought, as he murmured to himself.

"There's no way for a human to do all that, Lu Yizhan."

"If you don't stop Bai Liu from winning the league this time, even if you don't die now, you'll meet a horrible fate in the future."

"Lu Yizhan, do you even realize what you're doing?"

Lu Yizhan remained motionless on the trundle bed, deep in sleep, offering no answer.

Deer Hunter Guild Meeting Room

After the game, it is customary to review the footage to analyze the results, but this process has already been completed.

Now, the meeting has ended, and only Cen Buming remains, sitting alone at the far end of the room.

The lights are off, leaving the room in darkness except for the glow from the front screen. Cen Buming, his eyes shadowed, watches the clip of the Reverse God killing him over and over again. His right hand rests on the back of his chair, while his left hand absentmindedly turns the ring on his finger.

Brother, why did you defect from the Heretical Authority?

The eight Inquisitors led by Captain Fang Dian were reduced to seven failures. Over the course of more than six hundred rounds, these seven Inquisitors were repeatedly seduced, deceived, and tortured by Bai

Liu. The evil gods reveled in their suffering, pushing them to the brink until they could bear no more.

Ultimately, the seven Inquisitors lost the game and surrendered, shedding tears and selling their souls to Bai Liu. Their agony transformed them into the seven stone statues that Bai Liu used to decorate his temple.

Brother, you are the last Inquisitor.

Are you going to follow the same path as the first seven? Kneel before some world-line evil god, sell your soul, and become just another ornament in Bai Liu's collection?

I can't believe you've made it this far, brother. You're the only Inquisitor to survive more than six hundred games against Bai Liu.

So, brother—

Cen Buming taps the system panel, and the screen shifts to a snowy backdrop. The video of the [Wandering Circus vs. Russell Cemetery] appears in the bottom right corner. He watches it intently as it reaches its end, and the system prompt flashes: [Russell Cemetery won the match].

Were you really so close to Bai Liu that you'd set him up to lose?

The Temple of Laleje

In the sound of endless dark waves, the stone-speckled seer sits on a stone bench, eyes closed, head bowed. Across from him sits the evil god in his hood, idly teasing seabirds that have landed on the stone table, the cards in front of him rustling in the breeze.

The cards flutter but remain in place, held by an unseen magical force. The prophet’s side is empty, while the evil god's side is piled high with cards. The top card depicts a grand, retro opera house perched on the sea, resembling the Temple of Lalaye.

“All it takes is one win for Bai Liu, and our game is over, Prophet,” the evil god sighs with a hint of regret. “Unfortunately, you no longer have the cards to stop him from securing his victory.”

He looks up at the sleeping prophet with a mocking smile. “Except for

yourself.”

“But it’s hard to say how much your crippled prophet card will do to prevent Bai Liu’s inevitable win.”

The prophet's head remains bowed. The evil god gently raises the seabird's beak, and it flaps its wings, briefly taking to the air before landing again, its feet gripping the prophet’s now petrified shoulder.

The stone shoulder cracks, splintering like a bullet had struck it, mirroring the soul-shattering wound inflicted on the Reverse God by the soul-shattering gun.

The seabird tosses its head back with a hiss and flaps away, disappearing into the dark clouds.

The evil god extends his slender finger and places it on the forehead of the stone statue. He whispers softly, eyes lowered.

“The game isn’t over between us. Wake up from your dreams, Prophet.”

A drop of water falls from the prophet’s hair, rolling down the side of his neck.

The sea breeze blows fiercely, carrying the droplet away just before it hits the table. The seabirds cry out from the clouds, their wings spreading as if to break the faint sunlight that shines through the Temple of Laleje.

The prophet’s eyelids twitch.

It’s as if the wind, carrying the drop of water, sweeps him away, sending him through time and space. He sails across more than six hundred dark timelines, finally returning to where it all began.

The very first line of the world.

“Lu Yizhan!” Someone calls out from a distance, cupping their hands around their mouth to amplify their voice. “The training registration point for the first branch of the Bureau of Heresy Processing is here! You’re going the wrong way!”

He stops, turning as the landscape shifts and reverses around him. Time flows backward, pulling everything into colored, abstract lines. Lu Yizhan runs through this tunnel until everything snaps back into

place.

He halts in his tracks.

Turning his head, Lu Yizhan now appears to be seventeen or eighteen, scratching his head in confusion. “Am I going the wrong way?”

The man sighs helplessly. “Of course, you’re going the wrong way! The second team registration office is over there. The first team is here.”

Lu Yizhan glances curiously at the second team registration desk. There, he sees a stern-faced but youthful boy, standing with perfect posture. The boy looks up at the desk and reports, “Cen Buming, seventeen years old.”

“My ambition is to join the second team, and once I do, I will assist you in eliminating all the heretics in the area.”

Lu Yizhan turns away as the man beside him whispers, “Team Two is a field team—high risk. The kids who aspire to it are usually those who’ve been severely persecuted by the heretics, had their families torn apart, and were left on their own. They’re adopted by the Heresy Bureau and placed in training camps.”

“This Cen Buming is probably one of those.”

“I prefer the first team,” the man continues. “Your ambition is the first team, right?” He nods approvingly. “The first team isn’t as dangerous.”

Lu Yizhan thinks for a moment before asking, “Aren’t both Team 1 and Team 2 field teams? Aren’t they both dangerous?”

“It’s not the same!” the man exclaims, his arms flailing in excitement. “The captain of Team One is incredibly strong! She takes us on missions that are nowhere near as dangerous as those on Team Two. Her squad is top-notch—the best in the whole Bureau of Heresy Processing.”

“They’re called The Army of the Righteous Cross of Judgment.”

The man places a hand over his heart, his face full of admiration. “I only wish I could join the Crusaders one day.”

Lu Yizhan smiles slightly and pats the man on the shoulder. “If we

work hard, we can make it!”

The man instantly dropped to the ground in frustration. "How is that possible? Ordinary members like us are lucky just to squeeze into the first team and go on missions with the Cross Judgement Army!"

"Do you want to join the first team that badly?" Lu Yizhan scratched his head and smiled indifferently. "I don't have any particular attachment. I can go anywhere."

The man glanced over at the registration desk for the other detachments and spoke in a low voice. "Lu Yizhan, you should try for the first team if you can. I heard from them that the culture in the other teams isn’t great. Unlike the first team captain, who looks out for newcomers, they’ll just bully them."

"Go for the first team's written exam, huh?"

Lu Yizhan nodded but quickly dismissed the matter from his mind, not giving it a second thought.

It wasn't until after lunch that he was blocked in the alley behind the canteen by a group of people with disgruntled looks on their faces. Lu Yizhan, not wanting to cause trouble, scanned their faces briefly and immediately recognized them. They were from the group that had been brushed off during the written test earlier that morning.

The first team didn't want trainers with bad records, and these trainees had likely been involved in more than a few fights. They were upset about being eliminated and decided to target Lu Yizhan, who had passed the exam with high marks.

"Well, well," one man said, his hands casually tucked in his pockets, eyeing Lu Yizhan with scorn. "I can’t believe it, Lu Yizhan. You’re still a schoolteacher."

Lu Yizhan raised his hands in a gesture of surrender, smiling as he responded, "Just lucky."

"If you guys just hate the idea of me being in the first team, I can change my mind this afternoon and join the second team instead," he added.

The group paused, clearly taken aback. They hadn’t expected him to give in so quickly. However, they weren’t ready to let it go just yet and picked another bone with him. "How do we know you’ll actually

change?"

"Here's an idea," Lu Yizhan suggested, "The captain of the first team is conducting interviews this afternoon. She doesn't like players who smoke, so if she smells smoke on you, she probably won't let you through."

One of the men pulled out a crumpled cigarette and handed it to Lu Yizhan with an evil smile. "Smoke it, and we'll let you go."

Lu Yizhan, who had never smoked before, glanced at the cigarette and weighed his options: smoke it or spend more time with these people. He sighed and accepted it, leaning forward to signal to light it for him.

The man lit the cigarette, but as soon as Lu Yizhan took his first puff, he began choking and coughing violently. He had never smoked before, and the taste was worse than he had imagined.

Should've known better than to pick smoking.

As he struggled, the group jeered. By his third puff, Lu Yizhan couldn't continue, but they wouldn't let up and forced him to keep smoking.

"Hey, what's going on over there?" A lazy female voice called from the alley entrance.

The group froze. Lu Yizhan, still holding the cigarette and blinking through his tears, looked up at the figure standing in the light. The woman was tall and muscular, carrying a heavy sword that was almost as tall as she was. She stood there casually, leaning against the wall, but her presence was so imposing that Lu Yizhan could almost smell the bloodlust emanating from her.

One man shook and stammered, "Captain Fang! Yes!"

The others quickly shifted uncomfortably, and the woman responded with a lazy, "Good day," as she walked into the alley, dragging her heavy sword behind her.

When the light shifted, revealing her fully, Lu Yizhan could see her distinct features. Captain Fang was striking, with an effortless beauty that seemed to radiate danger. She had a languid, almost bored aura, yet there was something about her—like she was ready to draw her sword at any moment.

Her gaze swept over Lu Yizhan's watery eyes and the half-smoked

cigarette in his hand before settling on the shivering trainees. "I'm considering sending your files to the Third Branch."

(The Third Branch was notorious for its terrible conditions.)

The group fell silent, but one brave soul spoke up. "Captain Fang, we were just teaching him how to smoke. We didn't break any rules. Why should our files be sent to the Third Branch?"

Fang Dian chuckled, leaning against the wall. She turned to Lu Yizhan. "They said they taught you to smoke. Is that true?"

Lu Yizhan met the men's glares and, adhering to his usual principle of avoiding further conflict, paused for a moment before reluctantly agreeing. "Yes."

"But I don't think they've taught you properly," Fang Dian said, turning her attention to the cigarette in Lu Yizhan's hand. "Looks like they didn't do a great job. Let me show you how it's done."

She casually plucked the cigarette from Lu Yizhan's lips, took a puff, and exhaled slowly.

Lu Yizhan's eyes widened, fixated on the way she held the cigarette.

"If you want to learn, you should demonstrate first," Fang Dian said, lifting her eyes and meeting the group's gazes. "Anyone who wants to learn in the future, come to me personally. Don't try teaching people yourselves."

She gave the group a cold look. "And if I catch anyone forcing someone to smoke again, I won't hesitate to help them quit."

The group stared in stunned silence before hastily agreeing and scampering off like frightened rats.

After her lecture, Fang Dian didn't wait for any further response from Lu Yizhan. She casually handed him the cigarette back, which he still hadn't smoked, and turned to leave. As she walked away, she waved at him casually, almost as if it were an afterthought.

Lu Yizhan suddenly called out, "Captain Fang!"

Fang Dian stopped and turned back, raising an eyebrow. "What is it?"

Lu Yizhan, his face flushed, took a deep breath and straightened his back. Holding the now-extinguished cigarette in his hand, he tried to

speak clearly. "My name is Lu Yizhan. I’m eighteen years old."

He paused briefly, then continued, "Since I was a trainee, my ambition has always been to join the first team. I was first in the written test this morning, and I’ve always looked up to you, Captain Fang."

Fang Dian smiled slightly. "That’s good. That’s excellent."

"The first team welcomes you."

The First World Line

Lu Yizhan sat in the cafeteria for an hour, his cheeks flushed, his mind replaying the image of Fang Dian: the way he smiled softly, pursed his cigarette, and exhaled a puff of smoke. Then, in the afternoon, before his interview, he gave himself a quick primping and donned a formal-looking posture... only to find that—

The interviewer was not Fang Dian.

Lu Yizhan could barely contain his disappointment when he saw the large, burly interviewer slump his shoulders in a way that almost made him sigh inwardly.

The interviewer, Dong Chenglong, was a member of the [Cross Judgement Army], tasked with assault duty. He wielded a pair of meteor hammers, said to weigh a ton and a half, and stood at an imposing 2.21 meters tall. His body was so muscular that he could probably run a horse on his biceps. His eyes glared at everyone, and his hair was wild, spreading in all directions like a sunflower in full bloom.

During training, Dong Chenglong often complained privately about his hyperthyroidism, which caused his bulging eyes.

...He’s nothing like Captain Fang.

Dong Chenglong gave Lu Yizhan a brief nod and gestured for him to step forward. "I’m handling all the newcomers this year. Come up and introduce yourself."

Lu Yizhan, wearing a dejected expression, introduced himself: "Hello, my name is Lu Yizhan. I’m eighteen, and I’m subject to transfer."

"No spirit!" Dong Chenglong frowned as he looked at the slumped figure of Lu Yizhan. Then, glancing down at Lu Yizhan’s file, his expression subtly shifted before returning to the downcast trainee.

Lu Yizhan's previous training results had been unremarkable, but there was something oddly consistent about his mediocrity.

For example, if he scored 80 in a shooting class, he would consistently score between 80 and 85 in every session. If he aced a heresy information recording class with a score of 85, he'd maintain grades between 85 and 90. All his subjects fluctuated by five points or less,

except for the actual vs. Heresy training session, where his scores varied a bit more.

His results were shockingly consistent.

The highest-scoring trainee this year was Cen Buming, who had been assigned to the second team, though his performance had been less steady.

Dong Chenglong folded his hands on the table and looked solemnly at Lu Yizhan. "I see that your grades are average, but you came first in this year's written exam with a perfect score—two points higher than Cen Buming, who had the highest overall score before."

Lu Yizhan scratched his head and giggled awkwardly. "Good luck, instructor."

Dong Chenglong's eyes widened, and he tapped his fingers on the table twice before asking sharply, "Lucky enough to get a perfect score? Stop pretending, Lu Yizhan. Why do you usually act so mediocre?"

Lu Yizhan quickly shook his head, his voice rising in denial. "No, no! That's not it!"

"The Bureau of Heresy Processing doesn't force anyone to hide their abilities, does it?" Dong Chenglong pressed.

"No, no!" Lu Yizhan quickly corrected himself.

"The captains here are all very level-headed," Lu Yizhan said, thinking it over. "Honestly, I expected to be noticed, so I'm not embarrassed. But... the Bureau of Heresy Processing doesn't really need me to be excellent, does it?"

Dong Chenglong blinked, taken aback by the unexpected reply.

Lu Yizhan smiled faintly. "There are enough talented people here. As for someone like me—just a little clever but without big ambitions or a desire to save the world—I should just be ordinary and make space for people like Cen Buming, who really have big goals."

Dong Chenglong stared at Lu Yizhan for a long moment. Then, with a firm motion, he picked up the large seal beside him and stamped it on Lu Yizhan's file with a resounding thud: "The interview was not approved."

"An ordinary person has no place in a detachment."

Dong Chenglong's voice rose with fury as he slammed his hand on the table, standing up with such force that the floor seemed to tremble.

"Anyone who stays in a team, even if they're just a loser, must have the resolve to save the world!"

Lu Yizhan flinched at the noise, and as he glanced at the huge red "NOT APPROVED" stamped on his file, he sighed inwardly. Yet, with acceptance, he rose, took his file, and bowed to Dong Chenglong.

"Thank you for your guidance, instructor. I'll take the initiative and join the third team in logistics."

Dong Chenglong fixed him with a piercing gaze. "Only in a world without God are there ordinary people."

"In a world that can be turned upside down at any moment, there are only heretics and those who fight them. There's no place for ordinary people."

"One day, you will regret your inaction, Lu Yizhan."

Lu Yizhan waved in farewell, unmoved. As he walked away, he thought quietly to himself:

--Let's wait for that day to come.

But that day came much sooner than Lu Yizhan had expected.

While staying at the third detachment, Lu Yizhan had been clearing heretics from the warehouses, one by one. After finishing with a particularly slimy one, he stepped out, shaking his hands, only to see people running through the corridors in a panic, talking loudly.

"What is dried rose leaf gas?!"
"None of the men from the second detachment who went there have returned!"
"The large force of the Cross Judgement Army hasn't returned from their field trip! Now there's no way out. It'll have to rotate to the three detachments for cover!"
"Oh my God, I'm not ready to go out in the field—are we going to die...?"

Fear spread like wildfire.

Lu Yizhan, who had been cleaning heretical warehouses, was hastily transferred to an impromptu squad that was about to go into battle.

The team consisted of fifty-three men, seven of whom were from the third detachment, including Lu Yizhan. The man leading the team was none other than—

Dong Chenglong.

Dong Chenglong, dressed in his bulging, muscular Heretic's Authority uniform, scowled at everyone, his arms crossed. His imposing presence exuded both pressure and—

a sense of security.

Lu Yizhan clearly overheard three of his teammates sigh in relief. "What? So, it's Instructor Dong from the [Cross Judgement Army] leading the team? Then it's okay."

Dong Chenglong's voice, deep and commanding, rang out. "A group from the second detachment encountered a special heresy in a perfume factory. By the time they discovered it, the perfume heresy had already spread on a large scale throughout the city."

"The Cen Buming crew risked their lives investigating a potential link to something buried beneath the field of roses in front of the perfume factory. At that point, contact between them and us was completely cut off."

Dong Chenglong's eyes widened. "Our mission has three objectives—"

"First, capture the heretic known as Rose Dried Leaf."

"Second, bring back the entire second detachment."

"And lastly—" Dong Chenglong shouted, "Whatever happens, come back alive! Do you hear me?!"

Everyone responded loudly, "I hear you, instructor!"

Dong Chenglong growled, "No spirit! Speak louder! Do you hear me?!"

The team took a deep breath and shouted in unison, "I hear you—!!!"

By the time they arrived outside the perfume factory, night had fallen.

The factory was shrouded in a rose-colored haze. With breathing

masks on and carrying multiple oxygen tanks, they cautiously marched through the flower fields, careful not to alert anyone inside the factory or inhale the bizarre perfume fumes.

The men of the third detachment, including Lu Yizhan, were tasked with avoiding the heretics in the flower fields and instead searching around the factory for the missing members of the second detachment.

It seemed like a simple enough task, but as Lu Yizhan searched intently, the whereabouts of the missing men grew increasingly mysterious. Based on the clues he uncovered, it became clear that the second detachment had most likely been captured inside the perfume factory.

An uneasy feeling settled in as Lu Yizhan made contact with the team about the scent paper.

These team members... Could they have been taken to make the so-called fragrance testing paper?

Pausing his search, Lu Yizhan contacted Dong Chenglong, who was dealing with the heretics: "Captain Dong, we've reached the outer entrance of the perfume factory. We suspect the second detachment may be in the basement, imprisoned by the people here. Should we continue the search?"

Dong Chenglong's voice came back sternly, "Stop searching. Wait for me to come."

But before his voice had fully faded, a slow, unhurried sound of leather boots echoed from the entrance, followed by a man's slightly amused voice: "It's rather rude to show up uninvited at someone's factory this late, isn't it?"

Lu Yizhan instinctively took a cautious step back, his gaze locking onto a grotesque creature at the entrance. Its limbs and head were covered in a sticky substance as it held a paraffin lamp in its tentacles, lighting the way for the man approaching.

The creature was wearing a factory uniform with a sign pinned to its chest: [Generation Director of the Rose Perfume Factory].

The man's face slowly emerged from the shadows, his long hair tied loosely in a ponytail, cascading down his back. He was dressed in a long black trench coat, holding a black bone whip. His dark eyes curved into a smile, the dim light from the paraffin lamp reflecting in

them.

Lu Yizhan stepped back warily while trying to keep the man's attention. "You're not from here either, are you? Aren't you just another guest like us?"

The man smiled. "Me? I'm not uninvited. I'm a guest of the factory manager."

The creature that was apparently the factory manager wriggled its tentacles and, with an unsettling laugh, spoke through multiple mouths: "Yes, Mr. Bai Six is my honored guest."

"If I hadn't happened to find what Mr. Bai Six left in the harbor and planted it in my rose fields, my fields wouldn't have grown such beautiful roses. I wouldn't have been able to make such wonderful perfume, and the factory wouldn't have been able to operate."

The creature's face dripped mucus as it laughed more unnervingly. "I had to invite Mr. Bai Six over to thank him for such a big favor."

Bai Six smiled, his expression dim and ambiguous in the dim light. "Personally, I'm not a big fan of the deal," he said, lowering his eyes and waving a finger in the air.

Lu Yizhan's pupils dilated. Immediately, he turned to the team with a sharp command, "Protect the oxygen tanks and masks!"

But it was too late.

Except for Lu Yizhan, who quickly shielded the oxygen tank on his back, the other men's tanks were all wrapped in thorny tentacles, slowly shrinking inward as the tanks deflated. The edges hissed with gas leaks, and the rose-colored perfume fumes instantly poured back into their masks.

In the blink of an eye, the pupils of the other six men, excluding Lu Yizhan, turned to roses, their eyes dropping in disbelief as they collapsed to their knees.

Lu Yizhan jumped back twice to avoid the constant barrage of thorns rising from the ground. Gritting his teeth, he gasped, his eyes locking on Bai Six's dimly lit face. He quickly pulled out his communicator. "Captain Dong! There are people here! Team 3 has failed in their mission to rescue the members of Team 2…"

Before he could finish, a sledgehammer narrowly brushed past his side and came crashing down on Bai Six, who stood at the entrance. A deep, angry male voice snapped a rebuke, “No spirit—!”

“—No aborting the mission before the lead man has arrived!”

Bai Six deftly sidestepped the sledgehammer, which struck the factory manager's head with such force that it reduced him to a pile of writhing flesh, his screams echoing.

Dong Chenglong stood before Lu Yizhan, legs apart in a defensive stance, holding an unconscious Cen Buming in his left arm. He tossed Cen Buming to Lu Yizhan, then grabbed the sledgehammer with both hands, straightening his back. He locked eyes with Bai Six and bellowed, “Bai Six—!”

Bai Six smiled politely. “Captain Dong, it’s been a long time. You’re still in good spirits.”

Dong Chenglong, without a word, prepared to throw the sledgehammer again. But just as he moved, Bai Six reached out with his left hand. In the dim light from a paraffin lamp, he revealed a still-beating heart in his glove.

He grinned at Dong Chenglong. “Captain Dong, this is the heretic at the heart of the rose perfume you’ve been looking for. If you strike now, the heart will shatter along with me.”

“—And in that moment, the world will be tainted by the rich rose-scented water flowing from this heart.”

Dong Chenglong paused, lowering the sledgehammer. His glare at Bai Six was fierce. “What game are you playing this time?”

Bai Six laughed lightly. “Captain Dong, you know me well.”

“You have two choices,” Bai Six continued. “The first: Eat this heart, and let the rose thorns permeate your body, turning you into a vessel for this heresy.”

“Second option—” He glanced over at Lu Yizhan, who stood quietly by his side. He smiled. “—Let the little player next to you swallow it.”

“My personal advice? Let the junior member swallow it. After all, you’re the main attacker of the [Cross Judgement Army]. You’re far more valuable than that junior member. If you die and become a

vessel—" Bai Six shook his head with a mock-pitying expression. "—Your captain, Fang Dian, will have a difficult time against me in the future without a main attacker."

"I'm sure your little team member agrees." Bai Six flashed a knowing smile at Lu Yizhan, who kept his head down, silent. "Letting this ordinary junior member die here might be the most productive use of his time for you."

Lu Yizhan clenched his fist, feeling the oxygen in his tank running low. He knew that if they continued, both he and Dong Chenglong would die here.

Bai Six was right. An ordinary team member like him would have been a valuable sacrifice for the Heretic Authority.

A main attacker of the [Judgemental Army of the Right Cross] and a caretaker of the third detachment—any fool could see how this would play out.

Lu Yizhan slowly rose to his feet, only to be immediately shoved back down by a heavy slap from Dong Chenglong.

Dong Chenglong, looking as hale and hearty as ever, swung his hammer and charged at Bai Six. He snatched the heart from Bai Six's hand, tilted his head, and swallowed it in one swift motion. After a slight roll of his throat, he raised his hammer and hissed, "I've finished!"

Bai Six laughed. "What a... surprising choice."

His shadow and voice vanished into the rose-colored smoke the instant the sledgehammer struck him.

The thorns erupted from the ground, wrapping around Dong Chenglong's ankles and pulling him back, immobilizing him. More thorns hovered in the air, their sharp points aimed at him, and then they rained down like a million arrows, piercing him.

Lu Yizhan's pupils contracted into tiny dots, his face splattered with Dong Chenglong's blood, his own oxygen tank nearly empty as he struggled to breathe.

Dong Chenglong was nailed to the ground by the barrage of thorns, his body crisscrossed with the lethal strikes. With his bloodied palms, he removed his face mask and inserted his oxygen tank into Lu

Yizhan's.

"Why..." Lu Yizhan asked, his voice hollow, "Am I just a... worthless common... waste?"

Dong Chenglong lifted his blood-streaked face, his eyes once full of anger now unfocused. With a final, rasping breath, he spoke in a hoarse voice.

"... The only value of our existence is so that you, one day, will have the freedom to choose to be an ordinary person."

"Now—" Dong Chenglong's voice grew louder as he roared with his final breath, "—Run like a normal person under my protection, Lu Yizhan!"

"Use all your strength and run like a wreck!!!"

The First World Line

Lu Yizhan had never run so fast in his life. He panted heavily, sucking in the oxygen Dong Chenglong had hooked up to him, all while carrying an unconscious Cen Buming on his back.

The rose-colored smoke blurred the world around him, turning his frantic sprint into a fever dream.

Then, through the haze, he saw the familiar figure—the one carrying the heavy sword.

Lu Yizhan's legs nearly gave out. He stumbled forward, barely staying upright before collapsing into Fang Dian’s waiting hand.

His breath came in ragged gasps, and only now did he realize that tears had begun to fall, silent and uncontrollable. He couldn't find his voice.

Fang Dian’s order rang loud and clear in his ear.

"Lu Yizhan, member of the third detachment led by Dong Chenglong, of the [Cross Judgement Army], has successfully rescued members of the second detachment!"

Then, without hesitation, Fang Dian turned toward the Rose Factory. Dust-covered, battle-worn, her grip on the heavy sword was firm as she drove it into the ground.

"Mission handover!" she declared.

"[Cross Judgement Army], clear the battlefield!"

—

Lu Yizhan didn’t remember how he made it back to the Heresy Bureau. He must have blacked out. But no—he remembered everything. Every detail was burned into his mind as if he were a hollow shell, his soul drawn out of him.

Cen Buming was taken from his back and placed on a stretcher. Lu Yizhan himself was bedridden for only half a day before he forced himself to return to the main office.

Chaos reigned within the Bureau. The air was thick with the scent of

roses, their reflection visible in the dazed, pain-stricken eyes of those who had inhaled the gas. Everywhere, people writhed in agony.

With every step against the wall for support, Lu Yizhan felt as though he was crushing petals of flesh and blood beneath his feet. The building echoed with cries of pain, a cacophony of suffering that made it feel like he had stepped into hell itself.

It felt like the end of the world.

And Fang Dian was the one standing between them and that end.

She returned like an unshakable pillar, her presence alone calming the storm. Standing tall, her bloodstained heavy sword in hand, she met the eyes of every soldier in the room.

"We took care of the Rose Factory," she announced, voice unwavering. "And we've found a way to contain the dried leaf rose gas."

She didn't wait for a reaction.

"Get the team members who are mentally stable and resistant to heresy over here. We need to extract the antidote—now."

Hands shot up, but Lu Yizhan's was the first.

—

He followed behind Fang Dian, his head bowed, steps quick to match hers. His throat tightened around the question he had been afraid to ask. He opened his mouth, hesitated, and then finally forced the words out.

"Captain Fang… has Captain Dong… come back yet?"

Fang Dian's grip on her sword clenched violently. She lowered her head, strands of hair falling over her face, her expression unreadable.

"...Back."

Lu Yizhan soon learned exactly what she meant.

He stared, numb and silent, at the body of Dong Chenglong in the heretical storage room. His eyes, once so full of life, had faded to a stormy grey. His mouth was frozen open in a silent scream. His heart had been pierced—no, consumed—by a thousand rose thorns.

A voice recited the grim report.

"Heresy 6071, Dried Rose Leaf Gas. Reception: the body of Dong Chenglong, member of the [Cross Judgement Army]."

Fang Dian hesitated for only a moment before continuing.

"Weakness and mitigation. Weakness: the heart. Mitigation: stripping the rose thorns growing from the corpse and having contaminated members ingest them."

Lu Yizhan barely heard the rest.

"One hundred and twelve members of the Heresy Processing Bureau have been contaminated," Fang Dian said, voice clipped and firm. "Retrieve the thorns from Captain Dong's body and transport them to the hospital for administration."

A sharp pause. Then—

"Do not tell them where the thorns came from. I'll classify the Rose Perfume file as a first-class secret."

"Move quickly."

She turned to leave.

Lu Yizhan stood frozen, fingers clenched so tightly around the oxygen mask in his pocket that the plastic bent under the pressure.

"Captain Fang." His voice came out hoarse, barely above a whisper. "If you had to choose… between me and Captain Dong… who would you have saved?"

Fang Dian's steps halted.

"I have no right to make that choice," she said quietly.

Then, after a moment—

"But Dong already made his."

Her voice softened, carrying the weight of something unspoken.

"Don't question his decision in front of his body." A wry smile, barely there. "Besides… if you do, he might just come back to scold you for it."

She glanced back, eyes unreadable.

"Because you were worth it."

Lu Yizhan bit down hard, trying to hold back the tears burning in his eyes.

Then, before anyone else could move, he reached for his knife.

And with shaking hands, he sliced open Dong Chenglong's skin, extracting the still-writhing thorns from his fallen captain's body.

"Come on, cut it out!" Lu Yizhan turned his head and snapped at the team members who stood frozen in place. "No spirit!"

Three days later, the Rose Factory incident had settled.

Lu Yizhan lingered at the corner of a hallway for a long time, hesitating. When he finally saw Fang Dian passing by after dinner, he took a deep breath, mustered his courage, and stepped forward, holding out a file. "Captain Fang, I want to join the First Team!"

Fang Dian raised an eyebrow in mild surprise. "But recruitment season is over for this year."

"I'm not applying through the usual channels." Lu Yizhan straightened his back. "I want to enlist directly into the [Cross Judgement Army] to fill Captain Dong's vacant position."

Fang Dian glanced at him, then smirked as she waved another file in her hand. "That's rare. [The Cross Judgement Army] hasn't received a single application in years, and now, suddenly, we have two."

Lu Yizhan blinked. "Two?"

"Apart from you, Cen Buming from the Second Team has also applied," Fang Dian explained. "And we can only take one this year. You might want to talk it over with him first."

So, Lu Yizhan made his way to Cen Buming's ward.

Just before he stepped inside, he overheard voices from within. A young, dry-sounding voice spoke first.

"...Am I the only one who made it back from the Second Team?"

Lu Yizhan recognized Cen Buming's voice immediately.

A moment of silence followed before another, more mature voice answered hesitantly.

"...The others didn't survive the incense test paper. They didn't last until reinforcements arrived. They were alienated into monsters... and killed by the [Cross Judgement Army]."

A breathless pause. Then, the second voice added gently, "Cheer up." A pat on the shoulder, the sound of footsteps approaching—Lu Yizhan quickly stepped aside as a man exited the ward.

Just as Lu Yizhan was about to enter, he heard the sounds inside. Suppressed, ragged cries. Desperate fists hammering the bed, muffled sobs barely holding back anguish.

Lu Yizhan hesitated at the door. "..."

He understood the feeling. He had been through the same thing just days before. If anything, his own crying had been even less dignified.

But after twenty minutes, when the sounds still hadn't stopped, Lu Yizhan began to reconsider his timing. Just as he turned to leave, his foot landed on a loose tile, making an audible crack.

Inside, the crying abruptly stopped.

"Who's there?" Cen Buming's voice was sharp, alert.

Lu Yizhan exhaled and, pretending he had just arrived, pushed open the door. "Hello, Cen Buming. I'm the other candidate competing for the [Cross Judgement Army] alternate spot. Lu Yizhan, Third Team."

He extended a hand in greeting.

Cen Buming glanced at him coolly and didn't take it. "You're the one who scored two points higher than me on the written test."

Lu Yizhan picked up on the edge in his voice and sighed inwardly. Clearly, this wasn't the best timing. "Yeah, pure coincidence."

"Coincidence?" Cen Buming scoffed. "You 'coincidentally' passed me on the written test? And 'coincidentally' got a perfect score? Even though you usually only get 70 or 80?"

Lu Yizhan replied matter-of-factly, "Yeah, it's a coincidence. Because if it weren't, I would've beaten you in every exam."

Cen Buming: "..."

His red-rimmed eyes darkened. Meanwhile, Lu Yizhan, who had barely held back his own tears moments ago, scratched his head and added, "I didn't mean to insult you. I just thought the test was easy. I figured you'd get a perfect score too."

His brow furrowed slightly. "Didn't you usually get full marks? How'd you end up with 98?"

Cen Buming, who had, in fact, barely missed two points, clenched his jaw in fury. His bloodshot eyes sharpened as he spat, "Get out."

Lu Yizhan figured this probably wasn't the best day to talk, so he gave Cen Buming a pat on the shoulder. "Get some rest," he said before turning to leave.

"Wait."

Cen Buming's voice stopped him, his tone suddenly dark and heavy. "I just spoke to someone from the Second Team. They told me... you were the first to run from the factory. That you left Captain Dong behind."

Lu Yizhan stilled.

"Captain Dong got me out," Cen Buming continued, voice shaking. "I was too unconscious to help him. But you—" He took a step forward, fists clenched. "Why did you run? When you had the strength to fight?"

His red eyes bore into Lu Yizhan, filled with grief and accusation. "If you had stayed, maybe you could've saved another from the Second Team."

"Maybe Captain Dong wouldn't have had to protect me alone. Maybe he wouldn't have had to die in that place!"

Lu Yizhan opened his mouth but hesitated.

Cen Buming didn't know the truth. He thought Dong Chenglong had sacrificed himself for Lu Yizhan. That was why he was so desperate to join the [Cross Judgement Army]—to make up for what he believed was his own failure.

But looking at the raw, self-loathing pain on Cen Buming's face, Lu

Yizhan swallowed back the truth. [I couldn't have saved anyone behind your back.]

Instead, he gave a small, tired smile. "Because I'm just an ordinary coward." He scratched his head. "I ran away out of fear. Guess I'm just greedy for my own life."

Cen Buming's breath hitched. His face contorted with rage. "Coward! Deserter! Get the hell out!!!"

Lu Yizhan barely dodged the water cup thrown at him, quickly shutting the door behind him before it could hit his head. He patted his chest, exhaled, and walked away.

—

Much later, Cen Buming would ask, "Brother, why didn't you tell me you were the one who carried me out?"

But back then, standing outside his ward and listening to his heartbreaking cries, Lu Yizhan had only thought—

[If you keep hating yourself like this, you won't last much longer.]

[So why not hate me instead?]

The First World Line

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

While Lu Yizhan was waiting for Cen Buming to calm down before attempting a more peaceful conversation, he overheard Cen Buming applying to Fang Dian for a duel, citing a "fair decision."

Whenever there are multiple individuals vying for a position or task, the [Cross Judges] are responsible for assigning the challenge. The process involves a set of questions, and ten randomly selected members of the Board serve as the [Jury] to ensure fairness and prevent cheating.

The first person to solve the puzzle is awarded the position or task.

This method has been the standard for selecting members of the Crusaders, so Fang Dian quickly approved it.

Soon, Lu Yizhan received his set of questions.

The task was straightforward—complete it on his own within half an hour. Whoever finished first would secure a place in the Crusaders.

If an emergency arose, a team member would intervene to assist, and the affected participant would be disqualified.

Upon receiving the challenge, Lu Yizhan’s expression darkened slightly. The dried-leaf rose was classified as a heretic of the red danger class.

The test was clear: it would assess their familiarity with the heretic’s weaknesses, their adaptability, and possibly... a psychological profile.

Cen Buming didn't hesitate and submitted his consent form on the same day he received the exam questions.

The next day, Lu Yizhan also submitted his form.

On the third day, the test began. The Crusader member assigned as the safety officer was Yu Fu, the team’s medical expert in charge of accidents. Yu Fu was well-known for her skill with scalpels and surgical threads. With her sweet, gentle demeanor, she often wore a close-fitting white coat or sometimes a nurse’s uniform. Her shoulder-

length hair completed her caring appearance.

Lu Yizhan, who wasn't particularly fond of such situations, was well aware that Yu Fu had earned a reputation as the "flower" of the Heretics Authority, with many crushes on her.

Though Yu Fu always greeted people with a saintly, concerned look, her first words to a new patient were typically: "Why are you hurt again? Come, let me take a look."

The team members, not keen on her treatment methods, would usually try to excuse themselves, but Yu Fu would simply smile and say, "I'm a doctor; it's my job to treat you." And before they could protest, she would drag them into her treatment room.

After a thorough (and often painful) treatment, the members would leave Yu Fu's care, healed but emotionally exhausted. With a cheerful wave, she'd always say, "See you next time."

Yu Fu had a peculiar habit: she refused to use anesthesia when treating patients.

Captain Fang, who preferred to remain anonymous, once asked Yu Fu why she avoided anesthesia, knowing it made the treatments so much more painful. Her response was simple: "Only pain, real, deep pain, will make one remember not to repeat their mistakes."

"Pain is not fatal, but mistakes can be," she added.

On the day of the trial, Fang Dian was the one to release the heretic. The venue for this was the Heretics Directorate's field practice base.

When Lu Yizhan was a trainee, he had handled various heretics released by instructors for training purposes, as part of a field exercise for new trainees in the Bureau of Heresy.

The heretics at that time were relatively tame, with the most dangerous ones being of the orange danger class. The instructor leading them then was still Dong Chenglong.

But now, everything had changed.

As Lu Yizhan donned his protective gear and secured his gun on his belt, he glanced over at Cen Buming, who was also preparing in his gear at the other end.

Yu Fu approached them to introduce the jury members: four from the third branch, three from the second, one from the first branch, and finally, two trainees who appeared to be around 15 or 16 years old.

The gentle smile on Yu Fu's face shifted to a look of mild helplessness. "Captain Fang insisted on adding them in. She said the quality of this year's trainees was outstanding and that they should get exposure to the battlefield earlier. So, she chose two of them to come and, uh, watch the show—no, I mean, watch the battle."

She covered her mouth, giggling softly. "Sorry, slip of the tongue. You guys don't mind, do you?"

Lu Yizhan and Cen Buming exchanged glances.

Lu Yizhan: "..."

Cen Buming: "..."

We actually don't mind too much, Captain Yu.

Cen Buming, however, continued speaking to the second team. One of them was the same person Lu Yizhan had seen earlier, visiting him in the ward and telling him that the Crusaders had killed his alienated teammate.

The man tapped Cen Buming on the shoulder, speaking to him with a complicated expression.

When Lu Yizhan witnessed this exchange, a strange feeling flashed through his heart.

...Would a normal Heresy Authority Team 2 member use the [Cross Judgment Army] to kill someone like that?

The two trainees seemed to sense that they weren't very well-liked, and both looked a little tense and unsure. The slightly taller trainee was the first to step forward, introducing himself: "Tang Erda, sixteen years old. My current ambition is to join the second team. I want to kill all the heretics in the world who hurt people."

The other trainee took a deep breath before introducing himself: "Su Yang, sixteen years old. My current ambition is to join the third team."

Lu Yizhan, a former member of the third team, smiled warmly at Su

Yang. “The third team is a great place to be. Keep at it, you can do it.”

Su Yang let out a long sigh of relief and nodded shyly at Lu Yizhan. “Thank you, Brother.”

Cen Buming returned at that moment, clutching his chest, casting a sorrowful glance at the trainee named Tang Erda before sneering. “The second team doesn’t welcome over-ambitious fools who talk about saving the world.”

Lu Yizhan vaguely remembered when Cen Buming had volunteered for the same reason.

Tang Erda raised an eyebrow and opened his mouth to retort, but Yu Fu intervened, smiling at Lu Yizhan and Cen Buming. “Enough pleasantries. Let’s head in.”

Lu Yizhan and Cen Buming exchanged a brief glance. Cen Buming turned away coldly and entered the training ground.

The field was shrouded in artificial fog, with shrubs and low grasses scattered across the terrain. Visibility was limited, and cameras and speakers were hidden throughout the area, broadcasting the sounds of insects and birds, effectively masking the sounds of any heretics approaching. This made both sight and hearing unreliable, leaving them with only their knowledge of heretics and their combat reflexes to rely on.

Lu Yizhan crouched on the grass and lowered his head, sniffing a blade of grass. It had a distinct fishy smell, with a milky white substance clinging to it, resembling mucus secreted by human eyes.

It was bitter and slightly salty, reminiscent of the taste of tears.

There were over a hundred heretics with eyes, and about thirty-two heretics who shed tears.

With his features fixed, Lu Yizhan drew out a forked probe and began carefully tapping the grass beneath him.

Excluding the six plant-like heretics growing nearby, he focused on the animal heretics next.

Yu Fu, observing from the safety room via the big screen, gave a small, appreciative smile. “Excellent knowledge of theory and a very thorough detection procedure.”

“But here...” Tang Erda glanced reluctantly at the monitor showing Cen Buming. “This one, Cen Buming, seems to have found something.”

“How can he be so fast?” Yu Fu turned her head toward the screen, her expression shifting as she saw what Cen Buming was holding. “Cen Buming, how is he using that?! Who gave that to him?!”

In Cen Buming’s hand was a mirror, roughly the size of his palm. He was using its reflection to locate something wriggling nearby, about to approach it for further inspection.

From the surveillance footage, it was clear that the back of the mirror featured a subtle, raised square cross.

Yu Fu immediately recognized it: it was because Cen Buming was holding the mirror backward. The person who gave it to him must have instructed him to use the reverse side, with the cross relief on the front and back.

—This was Bai Six’s item, known as the Murphy Theorem Magic Mirror, which allowed the user to see their worst fears.

Yu Fu wasted no time in pressing the alarm. “Test aborted! Call the Commander of the Crusading Army!”

A frantic, jumbled reply came over the communication link: “Captain Fang can’t be reached right now!”

“The Directorate is in chaos! Something has caused all the heretics to flee simultaneously! The Crusaders are dealing with the incident, please have Captain Yu handle it on your own for now!”

Yu Fu immediately ended the call, closed her eyes for a moment, and then opened them, scanning the faces of the eight team members and two trainees behind her. With a calm, steady voice, she issued orders: “I’ll go into the training ground to handle the heretics. Stay put and don’t move, no matter what happens.”

“And especially... don’t look into the mirror.”

She put on her uniform and briskly headed toward the training ground, intercom in hand. “Cen Buming, put the mirror face down in your hand—”

Inside the Training Ground

As the loudspeakers around Cen Buming crackled into an ear-splitting tinkle of static, blocking all sound from the control room, he gripped the mirror in his hand warily. His eyes fixed on the heretic in front of him, who had its back turned. Cen Buming took two cautious steps back, closed his eyes, and blended into the grass, trying to hide.

With its bulging, tear-filled eyes and unsettling ocular discharge, Cen Buming immediately identified the heretic.

Heresy 0573: Eyetun Food.

This heretic's entire body was covered in eyeballs. The moment any of its eyes met yours, your own eyeballs would vanish, appearing in its body instead. But this wasn't the most dangerous part of the heretic. The true threat was that the stolen eyes remained connected to the victim's nervous system. The stolen eye could still feel pain, as if it were still on your own body. If all the eyes of the Eyetun Food focused on you at once, they would parasitize you in an instant.

No one knew exactly what happened to a host once parasitized, but the screams of the last victim, recorded in the Heretic Authority's sound files, were said to be unbearable, with victims dying in agony within an hour.

The heretic's main weakness was obvious: if you didn't look it in the eyes, it couldn't detect you.

Cen Buming crouched low in the grass, eyes shut tight. He could feel the heretic crawling closer, its massive form writhing, its eyes desperately searching for his. But it was clear the heretic hadn't found him yet and seemed ready to move on.

His breathing slowed, ready to slip away undetected, but then something changed. The heretic darted toward him suddenly, its many eyes locked in his direction. Cen Buming's heart raced.

He soon realized the cause—his mirror had somehow turned around. Now, the reversed cross on its back faced the heretic. As the heretic saw its reflection, it mistook it for an eye, wild and disorienting.

In a flash, Cen Buming tossed the mirror aside. It flipped through the air, landing on the ground with a soft thud. It transformed into a large, ornate antique mirror, the size of a dressing mirror. In the reflection, a figure of Lu Yizhan appeared in the distance, faintly

visible through the mirror's surface.

By the time Lu Yizhan saw the strange mirror in the exam room, it was too late. Despite his quick reflexes, the mirror's rippling mercury surface had already caught his attention.

A ripple spread from the center of the mirror, and what it reflected was something entirely out of place. A man, dressed in leather boots and a white shirt, with a black whip in hand, stepped through the mirror's surface with a smile.

"Thank you for summoning me here with your fear," he greeted, his voice smooth.

Lu Yizhan's pupils dilated as realization hit him. This man had used his fear—and the mirror—to infiltrate the Bureau of Heresy Processing.

Behind him, a sharp silver scalpel flew at the man, who dodged it with a swift dip.

"Your metaphorical examiner is as good as ever at destroying my personal belongings," the man, Bai Six, said, his smile never fading.

Yu Fu, watching from a distance, smiled warmly in return. "Mr. Bai Six, still as adept at dirty tricks as ever."

"Now even the fear of our trainee team members is being exploited," Yu Fu mused, her eyes closed. A faint smile played on her lips. "You've been setting this up since Big Dragon's death, haven't you?"

"If you're referring to the current riots in the Bureau and my arrival here, then yes," Bai Six replied, his grin widening. "One game has to be linked to another to make it interesting, doesn't it, Captain Yu?"

Yu Fu remained calm for a long moment before speaking. "What game do you want to play with me?"

"The game between a quality player like you and me is best saved for last," Bai Six responded, turning his attention to Lu Yizhan and Cen Buming standing nearby. "Why not let your Crusaders' reserves have a go at me first? I've been a villain you've been targeting for so long."

He waved a hand as if choosing a game. "Let's see who gets to play the next round with me."

Yu Fu raised her hand and shot another scalpel, but Bai Six quickly raised his own hand, creating a wall of shifting water patterns that absorbed the scalpel before it could reach him. The other side of the wall remained faintly visible, revealing Bai Six's calm smile.

"Best seat in the house for game viewing, Captain Yu," Bai Six remarked.

"Since you're new players, let's play something simple," he continued, clapping his hands together. He turned his gaze toward Cen Buming and Lu Yizhan. "The game is called 'Please Open Your Eyes in the Dark.'"

He explained the rules: "I count one, two, three, and then say it's dark. Whoever opens their eyes first wins."

"You two novice players will be playing this game, along with the heretic [0573]. We'll all close our eyes and sit face to face."

The scalpel that Yu Fu had previously shot disappeared into the water wall and emerged from within it, now aimed directly at Cen Buming. It passed through his shoulder blade, pinning him to the ground.

Cen Buming's anger flared, but before he could react, Lu Yizhan's calm voice reached his ears: "We'll play with you."

"How does that count for us?" Bai Six's eyes scanned Lu Yizhan, who, like Cen Buming, had his eyes closed. The smile on Bai Six's face deepened with amusement. "It's simple. If one of you opens your eyes before the heretic [0573], the moment I say it's dark, you win."

"But it also means that one of you will lose an eye."

Bai Six tapped his chin thoughtfully. "It would certainly be impressive if the player who lost both eyes still won the game and protected the other. But at the same time, that person would never be able to join the [Cross Judgment Army] again."

He grinned wider. "And they'd be forced to leave the Bureau of Heresy Processing entirely, becoming nothing more than an ordinary, worthless person."

Cen Buming and Lu Yizhan's breaths hitched as the weight of his words sank in.

"So," Bai Six said with a small smile, "the game is on. It's dark, time for

bed. Everyone, please close your eyes."

The eyes above seemed hypnotized by Bai Six's words, closing one after the other.

"Now, on the count of one, two, three, werewolves, open your eyes."

Cen Buming, pinned to the ground by a scalpel, opened his crimson eyes without hesitation. But before he could see the [eyeball-tuned food], a man darted to his feet, blocking his path right in front of the eyeball-filled monster.

Cen Buming's mind went blank. All he could hear was a "buzzing kong" sound, like something being gouged out. Blood steadily dripped from the left side of Lu Yizhan's face, seeping into the grass around him.

"Now that the game is over, do I win?" Lu Yizhan asked in a hoarse voice.

Bai Six glanced at Lu Yizhan, who was in Cen Buming's way, raising an eyebrow slightly with a smile. "You win."

Lu Yizhan was breathing heavily, his right eye tightly shut, his left open—gouged out, leaving only broken blood vessels leaking steadily from the empty socket, dripping down his jaw.

"That was quite a warm-up game," Bai Six said, snapping his fingers. The water wall that had stood between Yu Fu and him rippled and fell away. He turned to Yu Fu with a grin. "Now it's the official game, Captain Yu."

He snapped his fingers again, and the ten members of the [Jury] who had been watching from the communications room appeared on the training ground.

"Captain Yu, have you ever played Werewolf?" Bai Six asked, stepping toward the group. His smile grew friendlier. "It's a game I really like."

"We're going to play a variant of Werewolf called [Open Your Eyes When It's Dark], which has different rules from the game we just played."

"Since Lu Yizhan and Cen Buming, two new players, just cleared the first game, they'll be spectators for now. We'll play with just the twelve of you."

Bai Six looked up and smiled. "There's one heretic among your twelve players, a God Zhang card. Captain Yu, that's you, and the rest of you are villagers."

"You may choose to sacrifice yourselves and allow the heretic to parasitize you, ending the game. Or, you can actively become werewolves and kill the God Zhang or slaughter all the villagers. The game ends when one side is wiped out."

Bai Six's smile became almost misty. "Either way, you don't have to worry about the consequences. As the judge, I'll erase everyone's memory after the game ends. No one will remember who killed who, and you can still remain an innocent survivor in the Heretic Authority."

"Or, after becoming a werewolf, you can choose to leave with me, away from this dangerous Heretic Authority, and become an evil villain, free to make others feel dangerous."

"Bai Six—!!!" Cen Buming braced his bruised shoulder and tried to stand.

Bai Six raised a hand gently without looking back, and the watery wall separated them. He said with a soft smile, "This is the wall that isolates all attacks. Heretics' attacks are ineffective here, so you can watch Heretic 0573 from behind the wall."

"Now, stay well back as a spectator and watch everything."

Lu Yizhan felt himself being pulled downward, forced to sit on the floor. He looked up at the blurry view beyond the watery wall, feeling like he was watching a small television show.

This is ridiculous.

Tang Erda scowled in anger. "Are you fucking serious? I'm not playing this game!"

Yu Fu calmly ordered, "Trainee Tang Erda, match his game."

Tang Erda turned sharply to Yu Fu, clenching her teeth before lowering her head in obedience. "…Yes, Captain Yu."

Bai Six smiled again. "So, the game begins. It's dark, everyone close your eyes, please."

The eyes of everyone, including Heretic 0573, closed.

Bai Six's eyes scanned the three members of the second team whose hands trembled. He smiled. "Now, open the wolves' eyes."

As Cen Buming watched in disbelief, the three second-team members opened their eyes one after the other, hesitantly standing up. They gripped their guns behind their waists and cautiously walked toward Yu Fu, raising them to point at her.

Yu Fu's breath caught, but she quickly calmed herself, her voice soft but steady.

"...Bai Six, the riot at the Heresy Handling Bureau—did you turn the second detachment's captain to get him to release all the heretics?"

"Before the Rose Factory, you had the second detachment investigate it. You lured Captain Dong Chenglong there, killed him, and deliberately freed Cen Buming and Lu Yizhan. Through Lu Yizhan's fear of what you planted in the Rose Factory, and the magic mirror given to Cen Buming by the second team, you managed to get inside the Bureau of Heresy, didn't you?"

Cen Buming's breath stopped.

Yes. When the second team came to see him earlier, they gave him a mirror with a cross engraving, claiming it was a relic from Captain Dong related to the [Positive Cross Judgement Army], meant to check for heretics. They told him to use it well—to honor Captain Dong for saving his life.

He never imagined that everything he had endured was just part of a game orchestrated by Bai Six and the second detachment's men, that he was nothing more than an NPC.

Bai Six smiled. "Yes, very clever, Captain Yu. But I followed the rules of the game with Captain Fang and didn't force my way into the Heretic Authority."

"Not everyone is as dedicated to their ideals as the people in [the Crusaders]. Some just want to be ordinary."

"But ordinary people have such easily satisfied desires, and it's too simple to betray them. I'm honestly amazed at how much trust you put in them."

"Evil and lust, after all, have a natural attraction for humans."

Bai Six lowered his eyes to Yu Fu, almost sighing as he whispered, "Wolves, kill."

The three second-team members raised their guns at Yu Fu. She opened her eyes just before they could shoot, slashing at the closed-eyed Heretic 0573 before Bai Six could order, [Violate the rules of the game, kill everyone].

Heretic 0573 opened all her eyes to look at Yu Fu. The moment their gazes met, Yu Fu's gentle smile vanished. She collapsed to her knees, her body bloating and deforming, with oddly shaped eyeballs sprouting from her skin. Still, her smile remained, her tone light and graceful as she whispered, "I'm sorry."

"I'll go with God's brand of self-destruction."

The next second, Yu Fu was fully parasitized, her beautiful face transforming into a mass of eyeballs. Blood spilled from her mouth, and she became disoriented, thinking of Fang Dian.

The big-hearted captain had sat before her, bruised, and asked, "Yu Fu, what's the most painful way to die?"

Yu Fu had smiled gently and replied, "Of course, when it hurts, Captain."

Fang Dian, grimacing as her face was twisted by Yu Fu's treatment, gave a thumbs up and smiled brightly. "Yu Fu, you only make people die in pain. How can you die in pain yourself?"

"You're our healer, and I'll always protect you."

Yu Fu slowly closed her vacant eyes, about to speak, but no words came out before an eyeball grew violently in her throat.

She had always believed that mistakes were fatal. And that it was pain that could kill.

Bai Six clapped his hands together, smiling at everyone. "That was quite a nice comeback."

"The God's mark explodes, saving everyone. As expected of a healer, Captain Yu."

"Even the traitors want to save them." Bai Six glanced sideways at the

three second-team members whose expressions were blank. He smirked. "Not bad for the [Cross Judgment Army]."

Chapter End Notes

I know that both games have the same name. The author made it that way.
One is Please Open your Eyes When it's Dark and the other is the same game with a Werewolf variant.

The First World Line

Cen Buming was readmitted to the hospital the day after his discharge, this time in the same ward as Lu Yizhan.

The two men lay there, staring at the ceiling in silence from the darkness of night to the break of dawn. The faint noise of soldiers' cries and commands drifted in from outside the ward.

"Third detachment, second small regiment killed!"

"Where did the men of the 5th Regiment of the 1st Detachment go?!"

"2nd New Regiment, 3rd Defection!"

Lu Yizhan eventually drifted into sleep, the distant noise playing like a backdrop. He was abruptly awoken by the urgent shouts of Cen Buming, who, dazed and unaware of his surroundings, called out Yu Fu’s name hoarsely in his sleep.

Lu Yizhan sighed inwardly, rolled over, and covered his head with the blanket. My roommate's having Captain Yu’s wet dreams again, he thought.

But Captain Yu is dead.

The thought hit Lu Yizhan like a bolt of lightning, dragging him from a peaceful routine into a nightmare. He sat up with a cold sweat on his back.

He slowly turned his head to glance at Cen Buming in the other bed. His eyes were closed, his brow furrowed, and sweat beaded on his forehead. Cen Buming was clearly trapped in a nightmare.

Though Lu Yizhan didn’t know the specifics of Cen Buming’s dream, the sound of his hoarse, dry voice calling for Yu Fu—Captain Yu—broke through the silence. Cen Buming’s hands clenched and unclenched as if trying to hold onto something. Tears slipped from the corners of his eyes.

"Captain Yu..." Cen Buming murmured hoarsely, his voice laced with a sob. "Don’t die..."

"Lu Yizhan, don’t you die..."

Lu Yizhan was silent for a long moment before calmly replying to Cen Buming's dream, "Well, I'm not dead."

After Cen Buming settled back into sleep, Lu Yizhan tossed and turned, unable to rest. The bandage around his left eye was still bleeding, and the doctor had sternly warned him not to move around. Yet, sleep eluded him, and he eventually got up to wander the medical ward.

The corridors were filled with injured soldiers, and the sharp smell of disinfectant hung heavy in the air, though it did little to mask the overpowering scent of blood.

Lu Yizhan overheard whispered conversations from the injured team members.

"The fleeing heretics are basically under control... Things should be over soon."

"The head of the second team of traitors, the captain of the second team, has been captured and will be tried by Captain Fang himself tomorrow."

"The captain of the second team... he's a contemporary of Captain Fang, right? I remember they were quite close before."

"The contemporaries who had the best relationship with Captain Fang were Captain Yu, right? Eh... now one defected to be tried, and one..."

"Captain Yu is dead, Captain Fang is seriously injured... I don't know what face I'll be able to show when I walk past Captain Yu's medical office."

Lu Yizhan paused, then turned toward Yu Fu's medical office.

The area around the office was eerily quiet, save for the door, which was slightly ajar. As he wondered who had used the key to open it, he overheard Fang Dian's cheerful laughter from inside.

"Yu Fu, I've come to see you for treatment. I was especially badly injured this time; that animal from the second team nearly severed my arm. I'm lucky I had you, or this broken arm probably wouldn't have healed."

"When we were trainees, that animal and I always fought, and you were the one who helped stitch us up. You always moved so gently,

then sewed us up while we grimaced in pain. Ha."

"Tomorrow," Fang Dian's voice faltered, the amusement draining from her tone. "I'm going to cut that animal's head off."

"He betrayed the Heretical Authority."

"The fool who talked big about going into the second team to slay evil, yet defected to Bai Six."

Fang Dian's voice dropped to a near whisper, her frustration palpable. "Yu Fu, what do you think he was thinking? He hated Bai Six so much, hated the heretics so much, but he told me the heretics are impossible to defeat and Bai Six is undefeatable."

"He said... I'm just filling the black hole of heresy with the lives of second team members, and he asked me if I knew how many of them died every time we went out. He called me a cruel bitch."

"He yelled at me, questioned me, said those who didn't understand were insulting our team members, the ones whose lives were being sacrificed for the sake of ordinary people. He asked me why I should sacrifice these young men's lives to save the lives of people who are 'worthless.'"

Fang Dian's voice was nearly inaudible now: "Yu Fu, you're a doctor, you've been saving lives... Tell me, please. I want to know..."

"Why would someone feel such hatred for the one who saved them?"

Lu Yizhan hesitated at the door, unsure whether to enter or leave.

A gust of wind blew the door open, and Fang Dian turned around, startled. "Who is it?"

Lu Yizhan stood there, uncertain. Was this my luck? It always seemed to happen.

But as his eyes landed on Fang Dian, all his thoughts fell silent, and he stood frozen.

Fang Dian's hair was loose, dark and damp, partially covering her face. Her lips and face were unmistakably pale, and her eyes were slightly red from crying. Her left arm was in a triangular bandage, and she wore a captain's uniform draped over her shoulders with a blue-and-white striped hospital gown underneath, making her appear much

thinner than when she was in full uniform.

Hanging next to Fang Dian was Yu Fu's white coat, the badge pinned to it.

Fang Dian seemed to be pouring out her confusion over the uniform that had lost its owner.

The faint light of dawn struck her shoulders, but it no longer gave Lu Yizhan the same sense of oppressive strength she once had. Instead, it seemed as if... the all-powerful Captain Fang was about to shatter in the first light of day.

"It's Little Lu," Fang Dian smiled again. "I heard you had an eye injury. Why don't you take a rest and come here?"

Lu Yizhan clenched his fist, bowing his head before speaking, "Captain Yu and Captain Dong died because of me, Captain Fang, I—"

"There's no need to apologize," Fang Dian interrupted calmly, her gaze fixed on the empty white coat hanging across the room. "This goes back to the beginning. It's Bai Six's fault, it's my fault, and anyone involved in this world's accidents is to blame for you bearing the responsibility for both of their deaths."

"But it's not your fault, Lu Yizhan. You're a victim too."

Fang Dian continued, her voice softening. "One thing to remember when dealing with Bai Six is that you don't have to defeat him to win. The victory for us is simply about surviving. Yu Fu did her part perfectly, and the fact that you survived is the greatest tribute to her. That's her win."

She smiled, her teeth glinting as she patted Lu Yizhan on the shoulder. Her long hair caught the light, shining as it moved. "You've done well."

"Keep it up, Lu Yizhan."

Lu Yizhan's fists clenched, his fingertips going white as he held back a choked sob, responding loudly, "Yes, Captain Fang!"

The next day, the second team of rebels was tried, with both Lu Yizhan and Cen Buming staying in the ward.

Cen Buming stared blankly at the ceiling. Lu Yizhan, concerned that

his companion might be losing his mind, decided to strike up a conversation. "What kind of rules do you think Bai Six plays by in these games?"

Lu Yizhan wasn't sure what kind of response he would get, but to his surprise, Cen Buming answered almost immediately.

"Disgustingly regular," Cen Buming replied, his eyes glazed over.

"Uh..." Lu Yizhan tried to keep the conversation going, "What's so disgusting about it?"

Cen Buming snorted in a daze. "Those three divisions that wanted to kill Captain Yu, the traitors... they thought no one would remember them. They assumed Bai Six would erase everyone's memories, but in this case, Bai Six forgot to erase his own audience."

"The memories of our two viewers weren't erased, so in the end, we came forward and identified the three traitors. They deserved to die anyway."

Cen Buming took the lead in identifying the traitors, with Lu Yizhan adding details as they went.

Lu Yizhan paused for a moment. "These three men from the second detachment, they were close to you, weren't they?"

"Bai Six erased everyone else's memories. As long as you and I stay quiet, those three could have escaped punishment. They wouldn't have been found out and could have avoided trial, they could live."

"But Bai Six erased the memories of those three traitors too. They didn't even know what they'd done and thought you were framing them when you identified them. They kept looking at you, confused, wondering if it was you..." Cen Buming clenched his teeth and fell silent.

After a long pause, Lu Yizhan spoke again. "I don't think they're bad. Maybe they wouldn't have done what they did if Bai Six hadn't forced their hands. Ultimately, they didn't do anything worse, and if you hadn't identified them, maybe they would have slowly turned...?"

Cen Buming, his fists still clenched on the bed, slammed them down hard, turning to stare at Lu Yizhan with bloodshot eyes. "But what's done is done!"

"Even if they forget, even if everyone else forgets, I won't forget!!!"

"Would it be fair to Captain Yu Fu, who's dead, if we let them go? Is it fair to all the team members who were seriously injured or killed in this incident?!"

Lu Yizhan remained silent for a long time, the only sound in the ward the harshness of Cen Buming's ragged breathing. Finally, Lu Yizhan spoke calmly, "But they didn't do it. They didn't cause this—Bai Six did."

"Captain Yu did what she did to keep them alive. It always felt wrong to punish them for something they didn't do."

"But in my mind, it's already done!" Cen Buming retorted bitterly. "Lu Yizhan, I really still hate you."

With those words, Cen Buming leapt off the bed and stormed out, slamming the door behind him.

Alone now, Lu Yizhan stood with his back to the incessant gunfire echoing from the courtroom. Cen Buming ran frantically, his shoulders trembling with each gunshot as he fled the sounds of violence, moving through the wards, the training ground, and finally to the heretics' shelter.

Cen Buming came to a stop, panting heavily, his expression vacant.

A team member guarding the shelter recognized Cen Buming and asked him what he was doing there. Cen Buming was silent for a long time before answering, "I came to see Captain Yu."

The guard, confused, replied, "You came to see Captain Yu here at the heresy shelter?"

Cen Buming hesitated, then realized the ordinary team members knew nothing. He spoke again, "I came to see the heretics—[0573]—whom Captain Yu took in."

The guard hesitated for a moment, glancing at Cen Buming. He recalled Fang Dian's instructions not to treat the remaining members of Team 2 too harshly and added, "Due to the previous incident, for security reasons, any entry to the heresy shelter requires direct approval from Captain Fang. For anyone from the second team, that means Captain Fang's explicit permission."

He paused before continuing, "However, you're technically only half a member of the second team right now, since you're still in the assessment period for the [Cross Judgement Army]. You've also taken it upon yourself to report your mutinous team members. So, if you're eager to enter, you can do so with restricted movement handcuffs, but you'll be limited in what you can do."

Cen Buming fell silent for a long moment, then slowly extended his hands. "Cuff me," he murmured.

Led by a guard, Cen Buming walked through several winding corridors. He was blindfolded before being brought to the heretic [0573].

The guard, also blindfolded to protect against being seen by [0573], explained, "As a reserve member of the [Cross Judgement Army], you have fifteen minutes to observe each high-risk red heretic. After that, I'll have to forcibly remove you."

Cen Buming nodded, still wearing the black blindfold, and the guard left. He opened the door to the room where [0573] was being held, stepped inside, and removed Cen Buming's blindfold.

Inside the glass case, [0573] was housed behind one-way visible glass, meaning Cen Buming could see the heretic's movements, but it couldn’t see him. This setup ensured a measure of safety for the observer.

Cen Buming stood in silence, staring at the heretic for a long time. Then, with his hands still cuffed, he reached out and gently touched the glass, his voice hoarse as he spoke quietly, "Captain Yu, do you want them to survive?"

He paused before asking, almost pleading, "Did I do wrong when I did that?"

Inside the glass case, more than half of the eyeballs on the eye-tunnel food were closed, the heretic's fat body undulating rhythmically as if in deep sleep.

Cen Buming bent slightly, pressing his closed eyes against the glass. If he pressed close enough, the heretic inside would sense his presence. Sure enough, all the eyeballs suddenly opened, and the heretic began to stir inside the glass case.

The glass case clicked open with a crunch, and the heretic inside

slowly began to step out.

Cen Buming took a deep breath, closing his eyes as he backed away, his hands held up in a defensive posture. His voice trembled as he spoke, "Captain Yu, you know how to open this glass case... You still have some consciousness, right?"

The heretic's many eyes blinked slowly, as if contemplating Cen Buming's words.

"If Captain Yu thinks what I'm doing is wrong," Cen Buming's voice grew calmer despite the tremor in his words, "I'll open my eyes later, and you can parasitize me."

"On the count of one, two, three—"

Cen Buming opened his eyes.

All the eyes of the heretic blinked, but none seemed to harm him. Instead, they twitched, trying to open but held shut by some internal force.

Slowly, an eyeball, growing from the end of one of its tentacles, was pushed out of its body and reached out toward Cen Buming. The eye was closed, peaceful, almost as if it didn't want to open at all, preferring to remain unseen and dormant within the heretic's body.

It was Lu Yizhan's left eyeball—the one that had been taken from him.

Now, Captain Yu wanted to return it.

"I'll exchange this eyeball with you," Cen Buming said slowly, tears streaming down his face. "Please, Captain Yu... take my eyeball."

As he received Lu Yizhan's eyeball, Cen Buming felt an emptiness in his left eye. Tears and blood dripped down his face.

So this was the pain that Captain Yu and Lu Yizhan had felt?

With the eyeball in hand, Cen Buming rushed Lu Yizhan into surgery, hoping to return his lost eye using the unconventional powers of the heretic.

Later, Cen Buming found himself alone in the courtroom, his freshly bandaged, bleeding left eye burning with pain. He gazed at the pigeons, startled by the sound of distant gunfire, their snowy wings fluttering in the rising morning sun. Slowly, he turned and walked

toward Fang Dian, who had just emerged from the courtroom after the execution.

"Captain Fang," Cen Buming said quietly, looking up at her, "I want to stay with the second team."

"I renounce my entry into the [Cross Judgement Army]."

The First World Line

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After Lu Yizhan's eye healed, one competitor was no longer a threat in the Judgement of the Cross.

Now, there was one-eyed Cen Buming, who had become the deputy leader of the second detachment.

Lu Yizhan had also risen from a junior member in charge of cleaning to a full-fledged member of the third detachment. His rapid advancement, including a triple jump after two major accidents, had helped him pass the [Cross Trial Army] test.

However, there was gossip behind Lu Yizhan's back. Many felt his new position was undeserved. Had it not been for the loss of two top Crusaders and Cen Buming's decision to take over as second vice-captain during the Second Brigade's collapse, Lu Yizhan would never have earned his promotion.

But Lu Yizhan paid little attention to the rumors. There was simply too much information to absorb.

"Listen carefully," Wu Ruishu, the deputy leader of the first detachment, said seriously as he sat across from Lu Yizhan. "The appearance of the [heretics] is a game between Bai Six, an evil god, and us."

Wu Ruishu, responsible for paperwork, logistics, and organizing all heretical data for the First Squad and Crusaders, had become an unlikely mentor to Lu Yizhan.

Despite his position, Wu Ruishu wasn't very coordinated. Lu Yizhan had learned that the man could accidentally drop his glasses while sitting on a toilet or slip into a seated position when standing.

That day, Lu Yizhan witnessed Wu Ruishu's glasses being taken from his posterior, only to be rushed to the medical room. The moment drained Lu Yizhan's admiration for him.

Wu Ruishu's weapon was said to be a pair of family heirlooms, but Lu Yizhan had never seen him use them. Most of the month, Wu Ruishu

had been telling Lu Yizhan about their primary enemy, Bai Six, instead of joining field operations.

"Originally," Wu Ruishu began, "the Bai Six devolved heretics randomly, causing widespread casualties. We had to house them and clean up their messes. But one day, Fang Dian caught Bai Six on the trail!"

Wu Ruishu pushed up his glasses, his tone excited, and his eyes sparkled when speaking of Fang Dian. "Fang Dian and Bai Six agreed to a game: if Fang Dian won, Bai Six would no longer be able to devolve heretics at will."

Lu Yizhan leaned forward. "What kind of game?"

Wu Ruishu hesitated. "...A tower defense game. Ever heard of it?"

"The Heretic Authority is our side's tower, and Bai Six has his own towers. Whoever breaches the other's tower first wins."

Lu Yizhan's curiosity deepened. "Where is Bai Six's tower?"

"We're trying to find that out," Wu Ruishu said softly. "Each time Bai Six devolves a heretic, he gives us a clue, a hint to locate his tower."

"The more dangerous the heretic, the more detailed the information about the tower."

"Information?" Lu Yizhan asked, frowning.

Wu Ruishu's eyes remained calm. "It's coordinates. Some special heretics have numerical data encoded into them after being interred. We've gathered twelve digits. After some experiments and speculations, I suspect these represent the coordinates of Bai Six's tower. If we arrange them properly, we should be able to pinpoint the location."

"We'll help Captain Fang win this game and put an end to this madness."

Wu Ruishu exhaled deeply, a smile creeping across his face.

"What's so funny?" Fang Dian appeared in the doorway, putting on her coat. Upon seeing Wu Ruishu's smile, she grinned. "So happy?"

Wu Ruishu immediately straightened up, his body tense as he gave a stereotypical nod. "Hello, Captain Fang."

Lu Yizhan did the same, straightening his posture nervously. "Good morning, Captain Fang!"

Fang Dian smiled, casually arranging her half-length hair and tying it back. She patted their chests with enthusiasm. "You too!"

As Fang Dian left, Lu Yizhan, still blushing from the pat on the chest, covered his heart. He glanced at Wu Ruishu, who was also flushed red.

"..."

The people who loved Captain Fang.

Lu Yizhan wasn't surprised. Before joining the Crossroads, he'd heard Wu Ruishu's path to the team was unusual. Wu Ruishu was from a well-off family, his father a collector who had once bought a strange auction item—a stalk of blood lingzhi, said to grant immortality when consumed.

The blood lingzhi was divided into eight pieces and auctioned off. Wu Ruishu's father obtained one. Since then, Wu Ruishu has been determined to join the Heretics Board.

Although a nerd by nature, Wu Ruishu had endured the hardships of being a trainee in the Heretic's Bureau. His intelligence and determination had earned him a place as Fang Dian's second-in-command.

However, Wu Ruishu's admiration for Fang Dian was more akin to an idol's worship than romantic love—a deep faith, an unconditional hope. It was more amusing than anything to Lu Yizhan, who never felt jealous.

"Captain Fang will lead us to defeat Bai Six!" Wu Ruishu said, shaking his fist with glowing eyes. "Good will triumph over evil!"

Lu Yizhan couldn't help but think, "...Right now, for example."

Although it was a bit rude for Vice-Captain Wu to laugh out loud, he couldn't help himself.

"Lieutenant Wu, the Cross Judges are incredibly strong. It almost feels like their abilities go beyond what a normal human can achieve," Lu Yizhan said humbly, seeking advice. "Is there some kind of special training involved? Should I be undergoing similar training?"

Wu Ruishu paused for a moment. "No, the reason we can do things that seem beyond the norm is because we have personal skills."

"Personal skills?" Lu Yizhan furrowed his brow. "What does that mean?"

Wu Ruishu was quiet for a moment before responding. "It's a certain power that Bai Six has granted us, based on our desires."

"When Fang Dian found Bai Six, she fought him with everything she had and almost died. Bai Six saved her, saying that he hadn't seen a human with such a strong desire in a long time—one that approached the level of a [god]."

Wu Ruishu paused, then continued. "If you weren't so good and pure in your desires, you might have already killed me and become the next evil god. That's how Bai Six described Captain Fang."

Wu Ruishu took a deep breath. "Captain Fang says that good will always triumph over evil and that we can defeat him with our desire for goodness."

"Bai Six agreed to play a game with her," Wu Ruishu went on. "He told her that if she won, he would withdraw from this world line. He materialized her desires for good and gave her the power to resist him."

Wu Ruishu clenched his fist. "Captain Fang will win!"

Lu Yizhan opened his mouth to ask what would happen if they lost, but when he saw the intense expression on Wu Ruishu's face, he decided not to ask.

Wu Ruishu was a good lieutenant. In the year since Lu Yizhan joined the Crusaders, Wu Ruishu had identified twelve coordinates around the world that could be the [tower] of Bai Six. The Crusaders had then taken turns eliminating them one by one.

But even when they didn't find Bai Six's tower at these coordinates, they were still forced to play a "game" with him when they arrived.

The casualties from the game were heavy, but it wasn't all bad. During one of these encounters, Bai Six recognized Lu Yizhan as a Crusader and granted him skills derived from his desires.

However, Lu Yizhan wasn't entirely thrilled about this. He felt a little

embarrassed.

That was because his skill weapon turned out to be a heavy sword—exactly like Fang Dian's.

After winning the game with Bai Six, Lu Yizhan was awarded his skill. The heavy sword snapped out of Bai Six's hand and struck Lu Yizhan in the face. Bai Six raised an eyebrow, subtly observing before the weapon vanished.

Lu Yizhan was knocked to the ground by the heavy sword. Struggling to lift it off, he turned his head and saw Fang Dian crouching next to him, poking at the sword that was almost deflating him. "Lu Yizhan, why do you have the same weapon as me?"

Almost everyone in the Crusaders, including Wu Ruishu, wore knowing smiles.

Lu Yizhan scratched the back of his head, his face turning red. He hurriedly hid the heavy sword behind him. "Ah! It's because... I'm envious of Captain Fang's weapon! I really admire Captain Fang!"

Fang Dian looked puzzled. "But Wu Ruishu already worships me enough, and his weapon is a taijitu, not a heavy sword."

"Ahem," Wu Ruishu interjected with a straight face, "Maybe it's a weapon born from a deeper level of worship and desire."

Lu Yizhan could only sigh internally. There's no need to explain it to me, Lieutenant Wu.

Fang Dian rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "But my heavy sword is heavy. Lu Yizhan, can you even lift it?"

Lu Yizhan, straining under the weight of the sword, could barely respond. "..."

Damn it! I just can't lift it! I'm such a loser!

"Well then," Fang Dian smiled, walking over to him. She casually took his hand and, with ease, drew the heavy sword, swinging it smoothly forward. The night breeze tousled her hair, and she looked back with a playful smile. "You'll train with me later. I'll teach you how to use the heavy sword!"

Lu Yizhan's mind went blank for five full minutes before he finally

muttered, "Good."

That night, Lu Yizhan fell asleep with the heavy sword in his arms, tears of happiness in his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

SIMP!!!

The First World Line

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Now it's down to the last two coordinates," Wu Ruishu said solemnly, pushing up his glasses. "My personal preference is to target this isolated island on the surface. That will be our next mission."

"If my suspicions are correct, we'll face Bai Six and his captive heretics directly on this island," Wu Ruishu continued. "So, I hope you'll be prepared. Get some rest tonight—we leave tomorrow."

"Yes!" came the collective response.

Once the meeting adjourned, Lu Yizhan was left alone with his thoughts.

After more than two years of relentless searching, Lu Yizhan had grown accustomed to the rhythm of his life—always jumping from bed to battle-ready in an instant. There was barely a second to himself.

But tonight, when he finally had a chance to rest, Lu Yizhan found himself at a loss for what to do.

Without thinking, he walked toward Yu Fu’s infirmary.

The infirmary was empty now. Lu Yizhan occasionally came by to tidy up, stand quietly, and smoke a cigarette to calm his nerves.

Yes, that’s right—he’d learned to smoke.

Fang Dian once caught Lu Yizhan in the infirmary, hiding behind a corner with a cigarette. She stood still, silently observing him for a moment, as if sizing him up.

Lu Yizhan froze, terrified that he might be reprimanded. But after a few seconds, Fang Dian reached out and smiled. "Got any more? Give me one."

She took the cigarette, lit it with ease, and leaned back against the wall of the infirmary. They smoked together in silence, the smoke curling up around them, drifting past her uniform’s lapels in a hazy cloud.

After a while, Fang Dian spoke softly, a smile tugging at her lips. "The order to ban smoking in the first detachment came from Yu Fu and the others, behind my back."

She paused, looking at the cigarette between her fingers. "They actually gave me that order because they thought I smoked too much. They always said I wasn't done in by the heretics but by my own smoking."

Fang Dian turned to Lu Yizhan with a smirk. "Didn't expect that, huh? They were taken out by the heretics before I could smoke them to death."

She finished the cigarette quickly, then held her hand out to Lu Yizhan. "Have another one."

"No, no more," Lu Yizhan stuttered, waving his hand. "That one was the last one."

Fang Dian raised an eyebrow, her smile faint as she looked at the untouched cigarette in his mouth. Then, without a word, she took it from him and waved it in front of his face. "Mind if I smoke this one?"

"Uh, no! I don't mind!" Lu Yizhan's expression went blank, feeling almost lightheaded.

"Thanks!" Fang Dian gave him a broad grin, clapping him on the shoulder before taking the cigarette and gently holding it between her teeth. She lowered her head and lit it with a lighter.

The flickering light of the flame cast a soft glow on her face, giving her a serene, almost ethereal look.

"Smoking is a pretty degenerate act," Fang Dian murmured softly. "I often wonder if cigarettes are a low-risk, addictive heresy, a gift from Bai Six, slowly and silently corrupting people."

She exhaled a puff of white smoke. "Like me."

Fang Dian lowered her head and laughed quietly to herself. "It's hard for people to fight their negative desires. I understand that. It's a bit ridiculous to think we can defeat Bai Six when I can't even quit smoking."

Her laughter was gentle as she added, "But as long as there's someone in this world who wants me to quit smoking, there's someone for

everyone who smokes. As long as that person exists, I won't lose."

She took the last drag, smiled, and waved her hand at Lu Yizhan. "Quit smoking, Lu Yizhan."

After that, Lu Yizhan didn't sneak a cigarette for a long time. But perhaps because the night before they left was so chaotic, Lu Yizhan couldn't resist and found himself back in the infirmary, lighting up.

As he turned around with a cigarette between his lips, he saw Fang Dian standing there with a smile, walking up to him effortlessly. "Got any more? I want one."

Lu Yizhan: "....."

Why did this woman, who claimed she was going to quit smoking, always take it for granted to ask him for a cigarette?

Fang Dian looked up at him, her eyes reflecting the moonlight outside the window, bright and shining, a faint smile playing on her lips. The wind gently ruffled the ponytail at the back of her head as she spoke. "You've grown a lot, Lu Yizhan. When you first joined the team, you were about the same height as Little Wu. Now, I have to look up to you."

"The team's done well, too," she added. "You've really grown."

Expecting Fang Dian to ask for a cigarette, Lu Yizhan had brought a pack with him. But when he heard her words, he quickly checked his pack and muttered, "I'm out. There's only one left."

He knew exactly what Fang Dian would do when there was only one cigarette left.

She would take it right from his lips to smoke it, thus indirectly claiming...

But before he could finish the thought, Lu Yizhan's pupils widened in shock.

Fang Dian reached out with two fingers to draw the cigarette from his lips, then stepped forward. Standing on tiptoe, she wrapped one arm around the back of his neck and closed her eyes, kissing him.

Kissed.

The wind blew in through the window, brushing against Lu Yizhan's

blank face and Fang Dian's closed eyes for about fifteen seconds. Then, she pulled back, casually lifted her hand from his pocket to retrieve the new cigarette he'd brought, and put it to her lips, taking a slow drag before tucking the cigarette back into Lu Yizhan's mouth.

Lu Yizhan stood dazed, his thoughts slowly catching up.

Ah, Fang Dian must have seen that I brought new cigarettes...

So she must have known I lied when I said there was only one left. She must've figured that out and decided to kiss me directly instead of indirectly with the cigarette...

This doesn't make sense! What kind of logic is this?!

So, why kiss me?!!

"How long have you liked me?" Fang Dian suddenly asked.

Lu Yizhan stood up straight without thinking. "Two years, three months, and eight days!"

Fang Dian rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "So, at that time... you fell in love with me at first sight?"

Lu Yizhan broke into a cold sweat, his face turning red. "Yes, yes! When did you know, Captain Fang?"

Fang Dian glanced down, pondering. "When you joined the team, I think."

Lu Yizhan: "!!!"

That early?!

A strange sense of shame rushed through him, and he covered his burning face with both hands, wishing he could disappear into the ground. "Then why did you pretend not to know I liked you, especially when my weapon was that heavy sword...?"

"It's not like you were saying it outright," Fang Dian scratched her head. "And you didn't seem like you wanted to. I've never been in a relationship, so I wasn't sure if I should respect your space and not poke around."

"So... that was just...?" Lu Yizhan trailed off.

Fang Dian gave a straight-faced reply, "I kissed you because I thought I might die tomorrow, and you seemed so willing."

Lu Yizhan froze, covering his face, motionless and silent.

Fang Dian held the cigarette next to her, not smoking it, and after a long pause, she lowered her eyes and whispered, "I'm sorry, if you don't want me to say sorry to you."

Lu Yizhan took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. "There's no reluctance..."

He was the one who had his heart set on it first—Fang Dian just noticed it...

Get out of your head! How embarrassing!

Fang Dian glanced at him sideways for a moment. "Want to kiss again? In case you die tomorrow and don't get one?"

Lu Yizhan dropped his arms, pulled Fang Dian close, and kissed her, cutting her off mid-sentence.

Fang Dian went quiet for a moment, slowly closing her eyes.

After she left, Lu Yizhan opened the window of Yu Fu's infirmary, letting the cold breeze in to cool down. But it didn't help. He ended up walking out of the medical room, trying to reassure himself that it was just a kiss, no big deal.

As soon as Lu Yizhan stepped out of the infirmary, he saw Cen Buming waiting outside, a subtle expression on his face.

Lu Yizhan: "..."

Seeing that Lu Yizhan was about to embarrass himself, Cen Buming mercifully averted his gaze. "Tomorrow, the second team will be responsible for clearing the perimeter of the stronghold coordinates you're headed to."

Lu Yizhan snapped back to business. "What do you need from me?"

Cen Buming paused for a moment, then asked, "What are the chances of you surviving tomorrow?"

Lu Yizhan froze.

Cen Buming had been working with him for a while now, but their interactions had always been strictly professional. They had shared a few experiences together, but they never really saw eye to eye. Lu Yizhan usually didn't socialize with people he didn't click with, and Cen Buming was one of those people.

That's why Lu Yizhan was surprised by the personal nature of Cen Buming's question.

Cen Buming put his hand over his chest and turned his face away, his tone cold. "Don't give me that look. I'm just checking if I'll need to collect your body on the way."

Lu Yizhan smiled, thinking for a moment before replying, "Chances of survival? Honestly, for now, we haven't found a chance of survival yet."

Cen Buming was silent for a moment, his hands tightening around his body. "… Lu Yizhan, if you don't want to go tomorrow, I can apply for a transfer to replace you…"

"Lieutenant Cen, why are you suddenly doing this for me?" Lu Yizhan asked, scratching his head in confusion. "I don't think we… have reached this point in our relationship yet, have we?"

Cen Buming snapped his head around, stepping forward to grab Lu Yizhan by the collar and pin him against the wall, his voice seething with anger. "Then why did you carry me out of the Rose Factory in the first place? Why did you stand in my way during the trial?"

"Why did you lie to me and make me hate you, even though you saved me back then?"

"Our relationship back then wasn't anything like this, Captain Lu Yizhan!"

Lu Yizhan looked down at Cen Buming, who was wearing a blindfold over his left eye, his face flushed with anger. Slowly, Lu Yizhan pushed Cen Buming off his chest and leaned back against the wall, speaking softly, "You knew?"

"I've known for a long time," Cen Buming replied, looking away, his tone icy. "I still hate you, Lu Yizhan, but I can't stand owing people. If you need me to die for you, I can take your place."

Lu Yizhan raised his head slowly. "What if I need you to live well for

me?"

Cen Buming's pupils twitched.

"It's true that we were strangers at first, but I'm a year older than you, so I'm at least half your senior brother." Lu Yizhan straightened his uniform and smiled warmly. "It's only natural for a senior brother to save a junior brother, right?"

Cen Buming scoffed. "One term senior? Lu Yizhan, you're shameless. My real senior brothers should all be from the second team, according to the rules…"

Both men faltered as they spoke.

Almost all of Cen Buming's brothers had been executed during the rebellion.

"And I'm not forcing you to acknowledge me as your senior brother," Lu Yizhan continued, looking up with a smile. "If your real senior brother isn't around, then if you don't mind, let me fill that role for you, even if it's just temporarily."

Cen Buming slapped Lu Yizhan's hand off his shoulder with a cold look. "Go away, don't take advantage of me with your words. Who needs a brother?"

Lu Yizhan pondered for a moment. "Really? I was in the same ward as you back then, and I'd hear you crying at night, wishing you had a brother to come and take you with him…"

Cen Buming narrowed his right eye. "I'll kill you if you spread any more rumors."

"Eh, you used to be someone who cried under the covers. Why are you like this now?" Lu Yizhan shook his head in mock regret. "It's true—children become mean when they grow up."

Cen Buming, feeling manipulated by Lu Yizhan, sighed in exasperation. "…"

He shouldn't have bothered to care about this man.

After Lu Yizhan finished speaking, he turned to leave. Midway, he heard a soft voice from behind.

"Brother."

The sound of Cen Buming's voice made Lu Yizhan stop in his tracks.

Cen Buming remained quiet for a moment before continuing, "If you die, I won't cry for you."

Lu Yizhan smiled without turning around and waved his hand. "That's good."

The following day, the Judgment of the True Cross army flew to the island. One team was tasked with clearing the inner perimeter, while another team cleared the outer perimeter.

The island stood isolated in the vast black sea, surrounded by fierce waves and winds that prevented any ships from approaching. Beneath the surface, enormous, unidentifiable creatures swam, capable of swallowing a yacht whole.

By the time Fang Dian landed on the island, many had already been killed or injured.

The island housed a magnificent temple, where Bai Six sat with his chin propped up on a rocky card table in front of it, smirking at them. "You're here at last. I was starting to fall asleep waiting for you."

Fang Dian fixed her gaze on Bai Six and stepped forward. "We won the game against you."

"No," Bai Six replied, raising his eyes with a smile. "You've lost. The condition for winning was capturing my 'tower,' and you've only just arrived."

"This is my temple. You cannot take it, and I, myself, cannot destroy it."

Wu Ruishu's face flushed with anger. "You're cheating! That wasn't even a way to win!"

Bai Six lazily fiddled with the cards on his table. "No, I was hoping you'd beat me and destroy this temple. Unfortunately, you failed."

"But I didn't lose either," Fang Dian replied calmly. "You can't take over the Heresy Handling Bureau because I've brought all the heretics and players here."

"Are you trying to say that you've moved the Bureau of Heresy

Handling into my temple, risking so many lives?" Bai Six's grin widened. "I can't destroy my temple, so you haven't lost the game either."

"Beautiful game, Fang Dian," he continued. "You are the finest human I've ever seen—cruel and merciful in equal measure."

"You've never won against me, but you've never lost either. You've always been determined in your goals." Bai Six's smile widened. "You want to keep me, the evil god, trapped in this game so that more people from other world lines can survive."

"I'm curious—when did you know about the other world lines? You've already entered the realm of [God's] sphere, how did you know about it?"

Fang Dian grinned broadly. "Guess so! Seeing as you keep trying to run, I figured there must be other places for you to have more fun."

"Even though the people from these other world lines have never met you and have no emotional connection to you, you still want to save them." Bai Six took a step down from the high stairs of the temple, looking at Fang Dian with a sardonic smile. "You're risking your life and the lives of those around you to save them."

"Why is that, Fang Dian?"

"You have no basis for empathy for them. Why would you have such a strong desire to save everyone when you're so close to becoming a god?"

Fang Dian met Bai Six's gaze as he descended the stairs. She tilted her head, looking him directly in the eye. "I don't actually want to save them."

"I just don't think they should be reduced to your playthings."

"But what if this is what they want?" Bai Six spread his hands. "I receive countless prayers every day, asking me to go to that world and fulfill their desires by bringing evil."

The sea breeze whipped through Fang Dian's long hair as she replied calmly, "Want to play a game with me?"

Bai Six raised an eyebrow. "What game?"

Fang Dian laughed. "Even if you let everyone in the world enter your game, derive weapons from their desires, let them kill each other, encourage them to gamble, commit crimes, and fill the game with as many heretics as you like—eventually—"

"You'll lose to them," Bai Six interrupted, "to their humanity."

Bai Six fell silent for a moment, then curled his lips into a smile. "Fine, I'll grant your wish and play this game with you."

"I'll take the game out of reality and bring them into it only when someone in their heart desires it and prays to me, the evil god, for their wishes to be granted. I'll grant them personal skills, allowing those good-quality humans, like yourself, to survive in my dangerous game for a long time."

"And to facilitate what you, Captain Fang, call mutual help among humans, I'll let them see each other's games and share their resources to help one another."

Bai Six smiled. "From now on, all world lines will devolve into this game."

"The rules will be simple. If any of the heretics in the game enter reality and taint the world, I win. If not, you win. The entire world will be the [Tower] for both of us. How does that sound?"

Fang Dian retorted shrewdly, "Winning this game is harder for us because there's no time limit on the defensive period."

Bai Six nodded. "That's true." He propped up his jaw thoughtfully for a moment before smiling again. "Tell you what, I'll take myself out of the game. I won't be entering any of the games or reality."

Fang Dian's eyes lit up. "Really?"

It would be so much easier without Bai Six's bug-like presence!

"Yes, but with a condition." Bai Six turned his head and smiled. "I'll place a coordinate-derived creation of mine in each world line. Like you, this derivative will have a mortal body with mortal fighting abilities, and it will look exactly like me so you can easily find it."

"This derivative is the hourglass for both of us. He is your time limit—the game ends when you kill him. If, by that time, the world hasn't been tainted, you win. Otherwise, I win."

The terms of the game seemed almost too good to be true, but Fang Dian knew Bai Six's cunning ways. She asked warily, "What's the catch for us?"

"A request?" Bai Six smiled with arched eyebrows. "Naturally, you must sit across from me—the evil god who has descended—and play the game."

"In all world lines, I'll ensure your presence. Normally, each of you will have a different role, but I will unify your souls. This means—" Bai Six smiled mysteriously. "You will experience the reincarnation of all world lines with one soul."

"If any of you is tempted by one of my derivatives and sells your soul to him, your soul will be nullified, turned to stone, and placed in my temple, never to return."

"I'll project your souls into the world lines as if they were my derivatives, but you'll be like NPCs—your archives erased and your memories wiped. Each world line will be a brand-new game."

Bai Six stood on the dais, his gaze fixed on Fang Dian below. "Captain Fang, as a reward for invoking the gods, and to add to the fun of this game, I can grant the members of your [Cross Judgment Army] skills that only gods possess, to help them fight me."

"But each world line will come with a price, and you'll pay a price for each world line in which your people gain these godly skills."

Fang Dian asked, "What price do I have to pay?"

Bai Six smiled. "Pain."

Wu Ruishu and Lu Yizhan exchanged a quick glance, but Fang Dian silenced them with a raised hand. She nodded, "Yes, I accept your terms."

"Then give us the skills," she commanded.

Bai Six nodded slightly, addressing the air. "Wu Ruishu, I grant you the skill of Taiji, a force that nullifies all attacks and strikes with powerful force."

"Su Lan, I grant you the skill of Worldline Overlap. You can briefly merge two worldlines that you know."

"Ren Yuxin, I grant you a memory fold that alters the memories of all creatures in a worldline, completely erasing the memory of an event. However, it can only be used three times per worldline."

"…"

"Lastly," Bai Six's smile deepened, "I grant you two rule skills that can determine the course of the game."

"The first, [Listen to Just a Word from God]."

"For each worldline, though I won't be playing, I will design a game script, using heretics to guide the entire worldline on my predetermined path."

"But it would be boring to always follow my path," Bai Six added, nudging Lu Yizhan. "So you can use this skill to spy on my actions and stop me. It's essentially a prophetic skill."

"The second skill—Judgment of the Evil God."

"This skill can be used to judge any heretics associated with me in every worldline, including me."

"After the trial, the heretic's weakness will be exposed to you, leaving them vulnerable. No matter how strong they are, you can use this skill to defeat them."

Wu Ruishu quickly responded, staring at Bai Six. "You just mentioned six skills, but you didn't give Captain Fang any."

Bai Six's lips curled. "She gets no skills."

"Because, like me, she is in the [God] position and doesn't enter the game."

As if expecting this, Fang Dian gripped her heavy sword and stepped forward onto the steps of the temple. "You grant good skills, and I will pay the price."

"Captain Fang—!!" Wu Ruishu, in a hurry, tried to follow.

Fang Dian didn't turn around. "Lieutenant Wu, stay here. I'll be back soon."

Wu Ruishu stopped, clenching his teeth.

"This Worldline game hasn't started yet. I'll let you and Captain Fang take the cost after a proper goodbye," Bai Six yawned slightly. "Please."

Lu Yizhan stood motionless, watching Fang Dian's back as she ascended the temple steps. The sea breeze tousled her ponytail, and it reminded him of the wind he felt last night.

He clenched his fists slowly.

Inside the darkened shrine, a vast swimming pool connected to the deep sea spread before them, filled with unknown underwater creatures. Pillars surrounded the pool, chains hanging from them.

"It's been so long," Bai Six remarked, "You're the first person, besides me, to have the right to step foot in here."

Fang Dian looked out over the pool and asked calmly, "Is this where you plan to keep me?"

"Of course not," Bai Six smiled. "That would be disrespectful to a being as close to a god as you. I wouldn't lock you in a pool at the bottom of the ocean."

"Of course, this physical torture won't hurt you at all, Captain Fang," Bai Six continued. "You're incredibly tough. The death of close teammates, betrayal, the endless stream of heretics—you've endured it all and still persisted."

Bai Six's tone turned slightly wistful. "I thought long and hard about a game that would bring you pain."

Fang Dian looked up at Bai Six with bemusement in her eyes. "What game is it?"

"In each worldline, I will erase your memories and make you appear as a normal person, with loving parents, a perfect appearance, an excellent mind, and everything a normal person would desire."

Bai Six's smile widened. "Then, I will make you lose again."

"At the end of each worldline, if the Crusaders lose, and you have someone you love at that time, I will bring that person here, to the temple. Their soul will be trapped at the bottom of the sea with yours. I'll tell them that because you love them, I'll shatter their soul and turn them to ashes—"

"—and they'll never be reincarnated, for all eternity."

Bai Six watched Fang Dian as she hung her head, unreadable. He smiled. "And at the start of the next worldline, I'll wipe your memory again and make you fall in love with someone new, only for me to destroy their soul as well."

"I'll stand by, enjoying your pain as the next round begins."

Bai Six smiled. "Captain Fang, are you willing to pay the price?"

Fang Dian looked up, her face emotionless. "Fine, I'll pay the price."

Lu Yizhan waited outside the temple for what felt like an eternity, finally seeing Fang Dian emerge from the temple, her expression calm.

He saw her ponytail swing lightly in the air, but when she reached the bottom of the steps, she suddenly darted up, jumping into his arms.

Lu Yizhan stumbled back several steps but caught her steadily.

Fang Dian held him so tightly, burying her head in his shoulder. Lu Yizhan felt pain from the hug, but at that moment, he realized that Fang Dian's pain was a million times greater than his own.

But that feeling was fleeting, and Fang Dian eased her grip on him.

She whispered softly in his ear, "Lu Yizhan..."

"You must remember to hide from me when you see me in the future worldlines."

"Never, ever let me fall in love with you again."

Chapter End Notes

And so the system was born

The First World Line

Bai Six stood at the highest step of the temple. Lu Yizhan held Fang Dian in his arms, staring up at him in a daze. Bai Six's expression was hidden beneath the collar of his shirt, which was tossed by the wind and his long, flowing hair.

Lu Yizhan could only smile, chuckling softly. "I'll design archive points in each world line and drop you off there."

"Are you ready?"

Lu Yizhan heard Fang Dian whisper softly in his arms, "Get ready."

Bai Six smiled. "Then, the game begins."

"Worldline 0002, landing."

The temple beneath Lu Yizhan's feet sank into the sea. They all fell into the water, and as Fang Dian drifted from his grasp, Lu Yizhan struggled to hold onto her hands. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't.

He always felt that if he let go now, he would never be able to be with her again.

When Lu Yizhan regained his senses, he found himself sitting in the office of the Bureau of Heresy.

Everything around him was both familiar and foreign, like a dream he couldn't quite grasp. His mind went blank. He stood up, stumbling as though something important was slipping through his mind, but he couldn't remember what.

Around him, players hurried past. When they saw him, they nodded and bowed respectfully. "Hello, Lieutenant Lu!"

Lu Yizhan blinked, his gaze drawn to the badge pinned to the left breast of his uniform: [First Detachment Vice Captain: Lu Yizhan].

Something didn't seem right.

He didn't feel like he should be a vice-captain.

Who was the vice-captain again?

Confused, Lu Yizhan entered the office of the First Detachment captain. As the door swung open, he saw Wu Ruishu sitting behind his desk, which bore the sign: [Captain of the First Detachment: Wu Ruishu].

“Deputy Lu, what can I do for you?” Wu Ruishu asked, adjusting his glasses with a serious look.

Lu Yizhan shook his head in confusion and withdrew, a strange electronic tone buzzing through his mind.

[System Alert: Desire detected. Congratulations to player Lu Yizhan for logging into the game.]

[Game loading...]

By the time Lu Yizhan cleared the first game after nine deaths and earned his personal skill, he sat in the crowded lobby, a dazed expression on his face as tears slid down his cheeks.

He remembered everything.

Fang Dian’s presence was completely erased by Bai Six.

The army of the Cross of Judgement no longer existed in this world. He didn’t even know where the rest of the team had gone. Everyone he encountered seemed to be enjoying the game with the evil god who smiled while writing the prophecy handed to him.

[At the 658th worldline, all of you Inquisitors will sell your souls to my derivatives, Bai Six.]

[– That will be your last world line.]

Lu Yizhan stood on his knees, head bowed, eyes red.

He had to find Bai Six and kill him immediately.

He would never let this prophecy come true.

“Lieutenant Lu.” Wu Ruishu turned toward him with a serious expression. “Focus. We’re searching for a major heretic with a danger rating close to red today, at the orphanage.”

Lu Yizhan, still exhausted from an all-night gaming session, nodded vigorously. “Yes!”

Wu Ruishu frowned at him. “Lu Yizhan, have you been working too hard lately?”

“After leading a team that captured 127 high-risk red-level heretics in a week, maybe you should rest if you’re not feeling well?”

“No way!” Lu Yizhan interrupted, his voice tinged with frustration. “I absolutely cannot rest!”

He knew the most about Bai Six’s plan. If he rested, everyone could be in danger because of it.

Wu Ruishu pushed his glasses up in silence. “As your captain, I still hope you’ll find a reasonable work-life balance. And besides, I’ve compiled the information you requested about [Bai Six] and sent it to you.”

“There’s a child named Bai Six at the orphanage we’re visiting today. I’m not sure if it’s the person you’re looking for.”

Lu Yizhan frowned. “Do you have a photo?”

“All I have are group photos, and they’re from four or five years ago,” Wu Ruishu explained. “If you go today, you can check in person.”

Lu Yizhan nodded, still frowning.

Wu Ruishu paused as he opened the door to leave. He turned to Lu Yizhan with a serious expression. “I sense that you harbor great ill will toward this person you’re searching for, Bai Six. I need you to verify if this child is truly the one you’re looking for.”

“Whatever Bai Six has done, remember, you have a duty as the captain of the first detachment,” Wu Ruishu continued, his voice firm. “Don’t let your hatred and malice spill over onto innocent people.”

“Never let yourself become a heretic, Lu Yizhan, consumed by hatred.”

Lu Yizhan stood frozen, taken aback by Wu Ruishu's words.

With a final glance, Wu Ruishu calmly exited, leaving Lu Yizhan to reflect.

Outside the Caring Orphanage, Wu Ruishu and Lu Yizhan, along with

three other team members, slipped in through a side door. In the distance, they spotted a church, the strong stench of blood unmistakable in the air.

Lu Yizhan's heart raced as his eyes fixed on the inverted cross atop the church.

Wu Ruishu explained quietly, "This orphanage is a private one. The Bureau of Heresy discovered that children and other items were being auctioned off here in stages, but what exactly was being sold is unclear. The auctions tend to happen on Wednesdays."

He paused, giving orders to his team. "Lieutenant Lu, the auction is behind the church. Our first priority is to save lives; we'll deal with the rest later."

Lu Yizhan nodded, his focus intense.

As they entered the church, the sight that greeted them shocked Lu Yizhan to his core. Investors, dressed in human-like attire but with grotesquely long limbs, sat as if waiting for something. Deformed children in white christening gowns stood at the baptismal font, holding candles, connected to tubes that siphoned their blood.

The largest pool of blood was in the baptismal font, where a teenager, his wrist slashed, bled profusely.

Without hesitation, Lu Yizhan charged into battle against the monstrous investors.

Wu Ruishu, meanwhile, jumped onto the platform. He quickly instructed the team to evacuate the remaining children, then rushed to the baptismal pool. Gently lifting the frail teenager from the blood-soaked font, he hurried outside. "Call an ambulance!" he shouted anxiously.

The weak teen in Wu Ruishu's arms opened one eye, his voice dry and barely audible. "Uncle, are you here to save me?"

Wu Ruishu's jaw tightened as he reassured him, "It'll be okay. You'll be alright."

But as he spoke, Lu Yizhan's mind went blank, overwhelmed by a series of evil prophecies echoing in his ears.

"[The evil god's derivative pretends to be weak, curling into the arms

of the judgment army that's lost its memory—what a righteous soul, a greedy smile...]"

"[So he stole the other man's soul.]"

Lu Yizhan's pupils contracted as he heard the boy speak again, his voice a faint whisper. "This is all the money I have. I'll give it all to my uncle... Thank you, Uncle Xie, for saving me."

Wu Ruishu took the money with a calm smile, saying, "You're welcome. It's what I should do."

Then, the bloodied child's smile turned sinister. "Then ask your uncle to take the money."

"Just sell your soul to me."

In an instant, Lu Yizhan's gun was drawn, aimed at the child. "Wu Ruishu! Let him go! Let me kill him!"

"He's the one I'm looking for—Bai Six!"

Without waiting, Lu Yizhan fired, but Wu Ruishu, quick as ever, threw himself in front of Bai Six, using his own body to shield him from the shot.

Blood splattered as the bullet struck Wu Ruishu in the back.

Bai Six, agile as ever, leaped from Wu Ruishu's arms, raised an eyebrow, and held up a soul note before him. With a derisive laugh, he vanished into the game, leaving behind only the words:

"Stupid lord who thinks he can save everything."

Lu Yizhan rushed to lift Wu Ruishu's body, running out of the church, his forehead beaded with sweat and tears. "Captain Wu, hold on! The ambulance will be here soon!"

But Wu Ruishu's weak smile was all too knowing. "It's no use, is it?"

"I remember, Lu Yizhan. I went to the shrine when my deal with Bai Six succeeded. He unsealed my memory and made me remember everything."

"I saw my soul begin to petrify," Wu Ruishu's voice softened. "Bai Six is so cunning. It's not fair for you to be the only one to remember all of this."

“It’s been hard on you, Lu Yizhan.”

Lu Yizhan clenched his teeth. “It’s all my fault. If I’d known earlier that the child was Bai Six—if I had realized sooner—this wouldn’t have happened.”

Wu Ruishu stopped him, smiling faintly. “I don’t regret saving him.”

Lu Yizhan faltered.

“I was a bad kid in my family. When Fang Dian saved me, the Quan family gave up on me. They all said I was worthless and would end up in jail, so I might as well use my blood to create the Lingzhi to extend my father’s life. It was the only contribution I could make.”

Lu Yizhan felt the warmth of blood seeping through Wu Ruishu’s chest, his voice faltering as he stopped him. “Stop…”

Wu Ruishu’s smile remained, even as he continued. “But Captain Fang saved me.”

“She and I decided that if we didn’t bring the person down, how would we know if they were good or bad?”

“There’s no good or bad in the dead.”

“From that point on, I hoped I could be like Captain Fang—one day, I’d be able to save people others thought couldn’t be saved.”

His voice, almost a whisper now, was fading. “... If I had to do it all over again, I would still save him, too.”

“What if Bai Six in this worldline is a good person?”

“Until he kills me and proves to be a bad person, I want to believe he’s a good guy.”

With his final breath, Wu Ruishu closed his eyes and drifted away from Lu Yizhan, his body sliding from his shoulder.

“... Don’t let hatred change your beliefs.”

“Good will surely triumph over evil.”

Lu Yizhan’s expression blanked, his body stiff as he fell to his knees beside Wu Ruishu’s lifeless form. A system beep sounded in his ears.

[System Alert: Inquisitor Wu Ruishu's soul is petrified, confirmed dead, disqualified from the game.]

[Before death, Inquisitor Wu Ruishu transfers his rules skill (Taiji Bagua) to player Lu Yizhan.]

The First World Line

Less than a week after Wu Ruishu's death, Lu Yizhan discovered that the blood lingzhi, which had been circulating from the Love Welfare Home, was spreading around the world at an alarming rate. Despite all of Lu Yizhan's efforts to stop it—despite warning people that it was made from the blood of children and was a dangerous heresy—his efforts were in vain.

The planters simply looked at him lazily, shrugging. "What? The blood of a child was used? We thought it was pig's blood. Honestly, we don't know anything about it."

"All we know," they added with a grin, "is that it's worth a lot of money."

No one would cooperate with Lu Yizhan's investigation. Even if he had managed to find all the blood lingzhi, there were always hidden spores being cultivated again, spreading further. The world, it seemed, was being silently transformed into a vast, invisible network—a blood vessel carrying the lives of abandoned children, feeding into the hands of wealthy investors.

These children, for their part, were strangely grateful to their investors, who had given them a "good life" before they were chosen as "blood bags."

No matter how much Lu Yizhan tried to stop it—how many times he tried to sever this bloodline—countless people continued to support it. They looked at him with arrogance, sneering at his attempts to intervene, dismissing him as insensitive and foolish. They scoffed, saying, "Do you even know how much this is worth?"

The chosen "blood bags" had no objections. It was their choice, after all. Most of these children lived in relatively good conditions. They didn't resist at all—just endured a little pain each week in exchange for good food, fun toys, and soft beds.

"Mr. Investor is very nice," said a child with small pinpricks on his hands and a thin face, smiling sweetly at Lu Yizhan. "He buys us milkshakes."

Lu Yizhan stood alone outside the orphanage, staring at the sign for so long that the sunlight almost made him dizzy. He heard a beep in his ear.

[System Alert: 0002 world line contaminated, game over, archive point generated.]

[The Judges of the Cross lost the game.]

……

Third world line.

[System Alert: Inquisitor Ren Yuxin's soul is petrified, confirmed dead, and disqualified from the game.]

[Before death, Inquisitor Ren Yuxin transfers his rules skill (Memory Folding) to player Lu Yizhan.]

[System Alert: 0003 world line contaminated, game over, archive point generated.]

……

Fourth World Line.

[System Alert: Inquisitor Su Lan's soul is petrified, confirmed dead, and disqualified from the game.]

[Su Lan, Inquisitor, Before Death, transfers his Rules skill (Worldline Overlap) to player Lu Yizhan.]

[System Alert: 0004 world line contaminated, game over, archive point generated.]

……

By the time the fifth world line failed, only Lu Yizhan and two other Inquisitors remained alive. It was then that he returned to the Temple for the first time since the tournament.

Bai Six sat at the card table, propping his chin up with one hand, smiling at him. Surrounding him were five grotesque stone statues, all completely petrified.

Lu Yizhan calmly took a seat across from Bai Six. "What do you want from me?"

"There are only two Inquisitors left." Bai Six smirked. "The game ended faster than I expected. Your unwavering execution of justice—sometimes bordering on stupidity—is so useful for keeping things in

check."

Lu Yizhan met Bai Six's gaze without flinching. "So, what do you want to play?"

"Can you play werewolf?" Bai Six placed a pack of cards on the stone table, still smiling at Lu Yizhan. "How about we play an identity-set version of werewolf?"

"I'll set up the characters with werewolf identities, assign them to a certain number of people in the next world line, and then we'll see who they're drawn to, who they'll gather next to."

"The deck includes witches, hunters, thieves, and others," Bai Six continued, nodding toward a card depicting a little girl in a witch's costume. "From what I know about your tastes, you'll be partial to fringe characters who've had a miserable time. So, to keep you in the game, I'll choose such characters—those who haven't had it easy and whose experiences and skills fit the werewolf kill-card set."

"And, according to the logic you believe in, these marginalized figures will naturally be more attracted to the light."

Bai Six raised an eyebrow, smiling wickedly. "Let's see if they are more drawn to your light or my evil."

Lu Yizhan regarded him coolly. "How do you want to play?"

"How about a team match?" Bai Six placed a few cards face down on the stone table, his smile widening. "We'll add an in-game team competition to the existing rules."

"If you lose the world-line match but win the in-game team match against my derivatives, I'll grant you a wish."

Bai Six lazily lowered his eyes. "In simpler terms, it's a rivalry between villains, and I want you to be competent enough to sharpen my team of villains to a fine point."

"Otherwise, this game will be boring. The sooner it ends, the better."

Lu Yizhan was quiet for a few seconds before finally agreeing. "Okay."

But Lu Yizhan had no idea that Bai Six would choose the hunter's deck.

Lu Yizhan's pupils contracted as he saw Cen Buming standing in front

of him, his eyes intact. He clearly heard a cold, mechanical beep in his head.

[System Alert: You have found the (Hunter) deck. Please take him under your wing as soon as possible.]

Cen Buming frowned at him. "Lu Yizhan, you're the leader of the first detachment now. Don't make me scold you. Why are you staring at me like that?"

Lu Yizhan quickly looked away, his silence betraying a moment of hesitation. He clenched his fists and opened his mouth as though about to speak, but ultimately said nothing. "Nothing..."

Cen Buming grunted and swept him off his feet. "I lost the competition for the First Squad Leader position, but I won't hold it against you. Any position is for those who can handle it. Now I'm the Second Squad Leader, so I'll do my part."

Cen Buming lowered his head, starting to read some paperwork. "Recently, we discovered that students in the high school have suddenly had their eyes gouged out. Afterward, these students scream in pain, claiming they feel something. Someone reported this to us. I suspect it's a red-level heresy. It may require a captain to lead a team and apprehend the heretic."

"Are you going, or should I?" Cen Buming asked.

"I'll go with you!" Lu Yizhan immediately responded.

"A red-level heretic, that's all." Cen Buming began to grow irritated. "One detachment leader is enough. Are you insulting me, Lu Yizhan?"

Lu Yizhan struggled to voice what he truly thought—that if this heresy, this message, hadn't been deliberately arranged by Bai Six, he would have torn his own eyes out on the spot.

But Cen Buming was stubborn—one of those men who would dig up Lu Yizhan's ancestors' graves if he dared say anything beyond his rank.

Actually, telling Cen Buming everything wouldn't be impossible...

But Lu Yizhan hadn't yet decided whether to bring Cen Buming into the fold.

Cen Buming narrowed his eyes at Lu Yizhan, who seemed torn and hesitant. "Captain Lu, do you know something you're not telling me?"

Lu Yizhan immediately waved his hands, panicking. "No, no, no!"

Cen Buming stared at him for a moment before sneering. "You'd better be telling the truth."

With that, Cen Buming turned and walked away. Lu Yizhan sighed, conflicted. As Cen Buming's back stopped, he added, "I'll handle this heresy. You can follow if you want, but don't cause any trouble."

Lu Yizhan blinked, then nodded. "Okay, Captain Cen."

The next day, Lu Yizhan, accompanied by a group from the second team led by Cen Buming, went to the high school where the incident had occurred.

Lu Yizhan sat nervously among the second team members, cold sweat covering his body.

Many of the people here had rebelled in the first world line. Could it be true that nothing would happen to him if he stayed among them?

He stole a glance at the three men standing beside Cen Buming.

Cen Buming was whispering to them, his head down. Lu Yizhan felt somewhat detached from the world around him.

These three men had been executed in the First World Line after being reported by Cen Buming's brother.

Sometimes, Lu Yizhan thought that reincarnation wasn't all pain—there were brief moments that made him feel as though nothing had happened, and that there might still be a chance to start over.

For example, right now.

It was a Sunday, and Lu Yizhan had already contacted the school to clear the site.

The sound of footsteps at this hour felt out of place.

Lu Yizhan turned warily. The footsteps came from different parts of the school, echoing intermittently. The scrape of soles against the ground suggested they belonged to the same pair of shoes—running with slightly deeper thuds and a faster pace.

But then—

A high-pitched "squeak" of footsteps echoed above his head. The sound quickly moved to the third floor of the opposite building, and Lu Yizhan's eyes narrowed.

If he was right, the heretic here would be 0573, the Eyeball Tuner Eater. But what was this strange footstep noise?

The heresy value was 0, indicating this was likely not a heretic, but a human.

A man appeared above him, ran two steps, and then reappeared on the opposite side?

That could only mean one thing.

The moment the footsteps reappeared on the first floor, Lu Yizhan leaped, flipping over and landing on the first floor, his feet meeting the ground with a soft thud. The area was empty, save for a few footprints. Lu Yizhan’s eyes scanned the ground as he spoke calmly, "You’re a player, aren't you?"

"You’re logging into the game from different locations around this school," he continued, "using the coordinates of those locations to move freely around the building."

"Why disturb us with the sound of footsteps?"

Before he could react, the air in front of Lu Yizhan twisted, and a black, hole-like gap appeared.

First, a head with monkey-themed headphones emerged from the gap, followed by a young man in a school uniform. The man grinned wickedly, his eyes glinting maliciously. "Of course, it’s because the boss ordered that you should never leave here alive."

"You think I’ve only sent one heretic into the school?"

Lu Yizhan’s pupils contracted.

[System Alert: You have found the (Thief) deck. Regrettably, (Thief) has been subsumed into the Bai Six camp.]

The loud sound of a bombardment filled his ears, and without thinking, Lu Yizhan jumped off the building, rushing towards the area where Cen Buming and the second detachment were.

Behind him, the twisting eyeball tunnels of the food heretic floated, and a small toy helicopter slowly ascended. At its lower end, miniature toy bombs dropped, each growing larger as they hit the ground, exploding with splashes of mud and dirt.

Lu Yizhan's expression stiffened when he saw the toy helicopter—Heresy [0922]!

[Equally scaled bomber]!

The higher the helicopter ascended, the more destructive the bombs would be when they fell. If it was far enough from the ground, the explosions would be strong enough to obliterate the campus and leave no trace of the people inside.

"Shit!" Lu Yizhan couldn't help but swear.

The helicopter must have just been released by the [Thief] card. The second detachment's earlier investigation didn't reveal any information about Heresy 0922, leaving them completely unprepared for the blast. They were almost wiped out on the spot.

Cen Buming managed to react in time to shield them, but he was impaled by a steel bar that shot through his lung, blood pouring from his mouth as he choked.

At the same time, a host of eyes slowly rose behind him—eyes not looking at Lu Yizhan, but at Cen Buming.

If all the eyes locked onto Cen Buming, he would have been parasitized immediately!

Lu Yizhan took a deep breath, then shouted, "Cen Buming, close your eyes!!!" With that, he closed his own eyes, drawing his heavy sword and swinging it down at the two heretics.

[System Alert: Player Lu Yizhan uses Evil God's Judgment.]

[Heresy 0922, 0573 have stopped moving and are in a brief sheltered state. After using Evil God's Judgment, player Lu Yizhan will enter a seven-day stasis.]

Lu Yizhan rushed toward Cen Buming, his eyes cold as he thrust his sword at the eyed heretic behind him. After both heretics stopped moving, his mind went blank. He released his grip on the sword and slowly collapsed forward.

Cen Buming, still pinned by the steel bar, caught him. His mouth was covered in blood, and as he glanced at the unconscious Lu Yizhan and the heavy sword beside him, as well as the two motionless heretics, he coughed and sneered, "You really are hiding something from me, Captain Lu."

Seven days later.

Lu Yizhan awoke with a start, sitting up in bed as he noticed Cen Buming watching over him with a bandage over his left eye.

Before Lu Yizhan could speak, Cen Buming spoke first, as if simply reporting a task: "The heretics have been contained. When I sensed something was wrong, I called for backup, and they arrived quickly."

"What's wrong with your left eye?" Lu Yizhan asked, concerned.

Cen Buming absentmindedly touched the bandage over his left eye. "I'm blind in that eye. A piece of cement pierced through it when the explosion hit."

Lu Yizhan was about to respond, but Cen Buming shifted his gaze toward him, his right eye sharp and piercing. "Now it's my turn to ask. You said you're a hunter—what does that mean?"

Lu Yizhan's scalp tingled at the sudden question. "How did you know?" he asked.

Cen Buming shrugged. "I've been watching over you for the past seven days. You had nightmares every night, shouting about no hunters."

Lu Yizhan fell silent, realizing further concealment was pointless. With a deep sigh, he scratched his head. "I'll leave the decision to you. You can decide whether you want to join after you hear what I have to say."

Cen Buming sneered, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "You think I'll call you 'brother'? You're dreaming."

Lu Yizhan could only blink in surprise at his response. This man has such strange priorities.

After a brief pause, Cen Buming turned his gaze to the window, silently watching the world outside. He waited until Lu Yizhan was

almost asleep before speaking again, his tone thoughtful. "So, you're saying the Hunter card is something that both you and Bai Six can compete for?"

Lu Yizhan nodded slowly, still processing the information. "That's how the game works."

Cen Buming's voice was steady as he continued, "And if I don't join you and instead go over to Bai Six... you'll kill me, won't you?"

Lu Yizhan froze, fully awake now. "Why would you have to be killed?"

Cen Buming didn't look at him. His gaze remained fixed on the window. "Because I find it disgusting—being used like that, trapped in a camp. Those who serve the tiger deserve to be tortured."

He stood up, his posture resolute. "But right now, I'm in your camp, Captain Lu. I'll be a good card in your hand, a skilled trap hunter."

Without another word, Cen Buming turned and left, closing the door behind him.

Lu Yizhan lay back in bed, staring at the closed door. He muttered quietly to himself, "Fang Dian... Is this really the right choice for me?"

Unsurprisingly, the sixth worldline continued to fail.

Lu Yizhan was summoned back to the temple.

Bai Six was sitting at the stone table, idly playing with cards when he saw Lu Yizhan approach. He smiled. "Long time no see, Prophet."

Lu Yizhan responded without skipping a beat, "Actually, I just met with your derivative three minutes ago. I killed him."

Bai Six's smile widened, his eyes curling. "The first time you've killed one of my derivatives, isn't it? It feels different when you have a hunter's help, doesn't it?"

Lu Yizhan didn't respond, the unease in his chest growing.

Bai Six tapped the cards on the table. "Hunters are not like the absolute righteous Inquisitors. Once they understand everything, they actively interfere with the world line."

He paused, his tone turning serious. "But, it's hard for me to influence something like the Inquisitors—those who don't change their beliefs due to events outside my design. The hunters, however, I can affect."

Bai Six leaned back, smiling. "Protect your hunter's faith. Don't ever let him fall away."

Lu Yizhan took a deep breath, staring directly at Bai Six. "That's none of your concern."

Bai Six chuckled softly and stood. "As a reward for your first kill of one of my derivatives, I'll take you to meet someone you've been wanting to see."

Lu Yizhan froze, his heart skipping a beat. "What are you talking about?"

Bai Six's smile deepened. "I know you've been listening to her, even though you've never checked on her during these worldlines, no matter how much you miss her. Now, we're outside the worldlines."

"You can see her now."

Lu Yizhan followed Bai Six silently up the temple steps. It was the first time he'd ever entered this place, and with each step, a creeping fear settled in his gut. The unknown, the uncertainty, was the most terrifying thing of all.

The thought of meeting Fang Dian, the one who had paid the painful price and was now beyond his reach, sent a shudder through him. What could possibly make Fang Dian suffer like this?

Bai Six's voice broke the silence. "Are you wondering what could cause someone like Captain Fang pain?" He smiled, a knowing tone in his voice. "I've wondered the same. What could make someone close to God experience pain?"

They arrived at the dark, underwater pool within the temple. Bai Six raised a hand, parting the waters to reveal a strange green marble pathway beneath the surface. The sounds of distant waves echoed, empty and haunting, adding to the eerie silence. The darkness was suffocating, and being trapped here was a torture in itself.

Lu Yizhan's heart thudded in his chest as they approached.

There, in the depths of the pool, hung Fang Dian by her hands in

chains, her head drooping, her hair cascading to the ground.

Bai Six raised his hand again, and the sea floor lit with an eerie white glow. A wall of water appeared between Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian, allowing Bai Six to walk through.

Fang Dian slowly lifted her head, her eyes unfocused. She saw Bai Six and opened her mouth as if trying to speak.

But before she could say anything, Bai Six chuckled. "Captain Fang, I regret to inform you that your team lost another Worldline."

He snapped his fingers, and with a sudden flash of gray-white flame, the man who had been pulling at Fang Dian's chains screamed in agony before bursting into ash.

Fang Dian’s clenched fists tightened as she lowered her head toward the ashes, tears slowly dripping down her face.

Lu Yizhan stood motionless, his face blank, his mind in turmoil. His eyes glazed with confusion and disbelief.

Bai Six’s voice broke through the silence. "That’s the price Fang Dian pays," he said, almost casually. "I found it."

He smiled coldly. "Only something like [love] can make [God] feel pain."

The First Word Line

"Lu Yizhan, do you know why I'm taking you into the temple today?" Bai Six chuckled softly, enjoying himself. "Only those with desires at the level of [God] can enter this place."

"Both you and Fang Dian share such desires, though yours are not evil. You are almost qualified to replace me as the next generation of evil gods."

Bai Six sighed regretfully, raising his hand. A wall of water formed between them and Fang Dian, who hung her head in silence.

"It's a pity you don't wish to become an evil god."

"Then I'll have to charge you the price for participating in this game of evil."

Lu Yizhan slowly looked up, starting to realize something.

Bai Six smiled, continuing, "Lu Yizhan, if you win a world line, it will continue on as it did after your victory."

"That is, if in that world line, Fang Dian fell in love with someone and even married him..."

Lu Yizhan's eyes widened slowly, and tears welled up at the corners of his eyes.

Bai Six added, "Then she'll live happily ever after with this man. She won't remember you. You'll be just another irrelevant person who won the game."

"If you lose the game, you'll witness her suffering as her soul is destroyed before you, and you'll suffer because she suffers." Bai Six's smile grew colder. "If you win, you'll lose her, and she'll live happily ever after with someone else."

Lu Yizhan's voice came out hoarsely, "...That's the price you want me to pay for the pain, isn't it? You've set all this up from the beginning, to make Fang Dian and me pay for it."

Bai Six smiled faintly, "Yes."

"In a sense, I'm charging every judge with [pain], but only your soul

and Fang Dian's have been hardened in it. The pain you two have given me is the most valuable."

Bai Six turned his head slightly, his smile light. "I'm curious what you'll choose." He paused. "Will you continue trying to win by any means necessary, or will you choose to lose the game and possess the one you love?"

"Will you truly lose because you can't win, or is there a part of you deep down that desires to lose?"

Lu Yizhan remained silent.

When the next world line began, Lu Yizhan was in a daze, having been pulled from his mission by Cen Buming, who had been injured and was now recovering in a hospital room.

Cen Buming frowned at Lu Yizhan, who was clutching his chest while sitting on the bed. "What's wrong with you?"

Only then did Lu Yizhan realize that the world line had been won as soon as he landed.

Lu Yizhan used [World Line Memory Overlap] on Cen Buming, letting him know everything that had happened from the first world line to the present. Now, Cen Buming had memories of the first world line and all the others—except for what happened at the shrine.

Lu Yizhan kept his head down in silence.

Cen Buming raised an eyebrow. "Something to do with Fang Dian?"

Lu Yizhan's fingers curled for a moment.

Cen Buming grew impatient. "Don't make me torture you with heresy to get you to talk. Be honest, I'm busy saving the world, Captain Lu."

Understanding Cen Buming's personality, Lu Yizhan took a deep breath and finally gave a full account.

Cen Buming grimaced as he commented on Bai Six's behavior. "Bitch."

Lu Yizhan nodded in sympathy.

"You don't care, do you?" Cen Buming shot Lu Yizhan a cold look. "And you wonder if you're mean enough not to want to win? Do you even have what it takes to win?"

Lu Yizhan winced, feeling the sting of the words. "..."

"It's not about doubting yourself, is it?" Cen Buming pressed. "Isn't it that time when you heard Fang Dian was getting married and saw that man burn to ashes because of her love..."

"There was actually a moment—ridiculous as it was—when I felt... jealous of those ashes." Lu Yizhan's voice dropped, his gaze turning inward. "Because I'm not even qualified to be turned into ashes. I can't... get close to her."

He was the last of the Inquisitors.

"So sometimes, I'm not sure whether I was affected by that moment of emotion," Lu Yizhan continued, forcing a smile. "After all, it's hard enough for a loser like me to beat Bai Six. One moment of emotional turmoil could be enough to make me lose."

Cen Buming fell silent for a moment, then suddenly said coldly, "I'm taking a day off to go with you to see Fang Dian in this world line."

Lu Yizhan's eyes widened. "What?!"

"Emotional choices, that kind of thing." Cen Buming gave Lu Yizhan a cold stare. "You'll understand once you see it, won't you?"

Day 2.

Despite Lu Yizhan's reluctance, Cen Buming dragged him along.

"Captain Fang in this world is still in high school, in her senior year, and she has a boyfriend," Cen Buming said flatly, describing the gossip he'd gathered. "Captain Fang chased after someone. Her boyfriend is a popular high school student. She fell in love with him at first sight and pursued him for two months. He didn't say yes, so she gave up."

Lu Yizhan couldn't help himself. "Aren't you supposed to be studying in your senior year? Why fall in love?" He held back a laugh. "How handsome must he be for her to chase him for two months?"

"And yet, she gave up—so why is he her boyfriend now?"

Cen Buming glanced at Lu Yizhan, raising an eyebrow. "Because he started falling in love with her."

“The other party seemed to come to their senses, realized they loved Captain Fang, let go of all pretensions, and pursued her relentlessly for four months. Before the second module, Fang Dian said she’d consider it if the other person could match her grades. So, the other party studied hard.”

“The results came out, and he was only ten points behind Captain Fang, who took first place. So, Fang Dian agreed.”

Lu Yizhan was stunned. “…Damn it! Why the sudden awakening?!”

Cen Buming dragged him up a hill near the school, and from the top, they could look down on the high school playground.

Cen Buming crossed his arms and coldly explained, “I asked about their class schedule. The next class is PE. You should see Captain Fang here.”

As soon as the bell rang, Lu Yizhan tensed.

He saw Fang Dian—her hair tied up in a high ponytail, wearing a fitted white T-shirt, gym shorts, and white socks that rose slightly above her sneakers. She held a volleyball and wore a bright, sunny smile.

Lu Yizhan remained frozen, eyes fixed on her.

It’s a smiling Fang Dian.

As Fang Dian walked down the steps, someone called her name from the playground. She turned, her ponytail swishing in the air as she looked back, her smile widening when she saw someone. She handed the volleyball to the person next to her and seemed to respond to them.

She ran up and, in three steps, leapt off the high steps, smiling and opening her arms wide.

Without thinking, Lu Yizhan instinctively stepped forward, opening his own arms at the same time as the man at the bottom of the steps.

Fang Dian landed in the man’s arms, her bright and joyful smile lighting up her face as he lifted her high and spun her around.

Lu Yizhan slowly lowered his arms, staring blankly at Fang Dian.

Cen Buming asked calmly, “What does it feel like? Jealousy so painful

it makes you want to lose the game?”

“It’s jealousy,” Lu Yizhan said, his voice calm, yet his eyes flickered with a faint light. “But she’s happy.”

“Seeing her happy brings me more joy than the pain jealousy causes.”

Lu Yizhan turned away. “Let’s go back.”

His expression hardened. “Even if I’m the only one left, I’ll keep going.”

“Brother.” Cen Buming’s voice cut through the moment as he called out behind him. Lu Yizhan turned to see him, his voice quiet. “You won’t be alone. I’ll be with you until the last world line.”

“Until then, no matter what, I won’t admit defeat to Bai Six.”

Lu Yizhan smiled and turned back. “Well, thank you in advance, hunter friend.”

Cen Buming noticed the tear stains on Lu Yizhan’s face for a moment before snorting. “The prophet cries at every turn. So, I guess you do need to rely on the hunter.”

“Don’t laugh at me…” Lu Yizhan wiped his face helplessly and muttered softly, “Anyone in this situation would cry, right?”

The First World Line

The world line continued to move forward.

In the next world line, Cen Buming became his lieutenant—calm, stern, and possessing an exceptional memory, remarkable information processing skills, and the deadly expertise of an executioner.

With Cen Buming's help, the time required to lose each timeline began to stretch backward, and the chances of killing Bai Six grew increasingly likely. Though they didn't win the game in the end, they were getting infinitely closer to that moment.

Yet, Lu Yizhan always carried a deep-seated unease.

Cen Buming adapted swiftly after each world jump, quickly synthesizing the information from the entire world line once given the prophecy. He would then detect the heresies Bai Six had planted in advance, waiting to spread from the prophecy—and deal with them decisively.

Or, in many cases, decimate them.

Lu Yizhan frowned deeply as he walked briskly toward the interrogation room.

From a distance, he could hear hysterical screams from inside the torture chamber, followed by the weak voice of a man, choking and coughing. "I really... don't know anything."

"I didn't do anything. Please, leave me alone."

Lu Yizhan pushed the door open violently.

Cen Buming leaned back in his chair, legs crossed, his stiff, thick-soled black boots pressed against the face of a dying man on his knees. A bloodied thorn fork was held loosely in his hand.

When Lu Yizhan entered, Cen Buming glanced up, greeted him casually, and then returned to his work. "Captain."

Lu Yizhan's expression darkened as he glared at Cen Buming. "Cen Buming, you've gone too far! Let him go!"

"Good." Cen Buming obediently withdrew his foot and shot Lu Yizhan

a meaningful look. "I hope you won't regret this in a week."

"This man was the factory manager of the former Worldline Rose perfume factory."

Lu Yizhan met Cen Buming's gaze, unwavering. "But not anymore."

Cen Buming raised his hands with a sarcastic smile as he lifted his shoes, his tone dripping with mockery. "Yes, whatever, brother."

"Don't come looking for me to clean up your mess when things go wrong." Cen Buming gave Lu Yizhan a cold, unfeeling look. "Sometimes, I wish you'd stop with this untimely benevolence. Maybe we'd actually win."

Lu Yizhan's fists clenched, his frustration evident.

This wasn't the first time such an argument had broken out between them. The further back Cen Buming was able to trace the heresies Bai Six planted, the more ruthless his methods became. And the more Lu Yizhan disagreed, the harsher his actions were.

Lu Yizhan had suggested monitoring potential heretics instead of erasing them, believing that the team could oversee those who might bring the heresies into reality. Cen Buming had mercilessly mocked him for the idea—Captain, how many people do you think are in the Bureau of Heresy Processing who could actually oversee Bai Six's heretics? Thousands?

"If we had handled the heretics with more players than they had, we wouldn't have lost so badly every time."

Cen Buming was right. There was no way they could handle the heresy Bai Six threw at them with their current manpower.

There were so many ways, or people, that a heretic could land in reality that normal surveillance was impossible. No one could predict who might be compelled by the heretic to bring evil to the world.

Lu Yizhan's idea was nothing more than a fantasy—there were no conditions for its implementation.

Cen Buming's voice turned cold. "Captain, your self-righteous, unrealistic approach is just a sacrifice of the Bureau's team members to fill the endless black hole of heresy."

"Do you know how many of our people die every time we go out into the field when the heretics land in reality?"

He shot a brief, sharp glance at Lu Yizhan, who stood silent, before his voice turned mocking. "Is this the hypocrisy and cruelty of those in power?"

[He said... I'd sacrifice the lives of the second-team members of the Bureau of Heresy to fill the black hole of heresy that could never be filled…]

[He asked me if I knew how many second-team members had to die every time we went out into the field.]

[He called me a cruel bitch.]

Lu Yizhan's pupils contracted. Without thinking, he grabbed Cen Buming's wrist, his voice low. "...Don't go down that road."

Cen Buming shook off Lu Yizhan's grip and brushed past his shoulder. Lu Yizhan stood still, unable to move, and without another word, Cen Buming lowered his eyes and pushed open the door, leaving without a glance back.

A week later, the Rose Factory appeared.

After much difficulty, the director of the Rose Factory was finally captured.

Lu Yizhan had sent people to monitor the situation, but Bai Six was too quick, dropping heretics and concealing them with various tricks.

Lu Yizhan personally brought the factory manager back. As before, the man pleaded for mercy, crying and kneeling on the ground, repeating, "I didn't do anything, I know nothing."

Lu Yizhan remained silent for a long time before asking, "Did you know that perfume, when broken, can kill a person?"

"You were told about the dangers of this perfume when Lieutenant Cen interrogated you. So why did you take it once you were free?"

The factory manager's eyes shifted nervously for a moment.

An absurd thought rose in Lu Yizhan's mind, and he asked incredulously, "You didn't know what rose perfume was at first, but after hearing Deputy Cen's description, you saw the profit in it. So, as

soon as you got out, you immediately started growing roses, intending to make the same perfume?"

The factory manager lowered his head and suddenly laughed twice. "Profitable, is it human nature?"

"Besides, I don't kill people. As long as they keep buying my perfume, nothing will happen."

"Don't blame me. Change places with anyone, tell them about the profits of this perfume, then send them the recipe, and see if they don't start growing roses."

Cen Buming took the man from Lu Yizhan's presence.

Before leaving, Cen Buming turned back to look at Lu Yizhan, who was sitting silently at his desk. "Brother, you must wait until the other side has caused irreversible damage to know that this man will be a threat."

"Is this the justice you believe in?"

Lu Yizhan slowly lifted his gaze. "Pre-emptive execution is unfair to those who haven't done anything wrong yet."

Cen Buming raised an eyebrow mockingly. "But it would be equally unfair to those who die from these people's wrongdoings if we don't act first."

Cen Buming was about to leave when Lu Yizhan suddenly called after him, "The prophecy Bai Six showed us... is not necessarily true."

Cen Buming's voice was cold as he replied, "His prophecies are always more accurate than your theories, Captain."

With that, Cen Buming closed the door and left.

Left alone in his office, Lu Yizhan slowly slid out of his chair and stared blankly at the ceiling. He muttered, "Did I really make the right choice, Fang Dian..."

He always felt that Bai Six's prophecies were becoming more relevant.

It was as if Cen Buming, who could have detected these traps and heresies, was unknowingly being driven to eradicate them himself.

And with each step of the eradication, Cen Buming grew more

paranoid, cold, and... like the second team leader who had defected to Bai Six's side.

Lu Yizhan closed his eyes, slowly reaching behind him to grip the gun at his back. He took a deep breath, then slowly released it, as if all his strength had been drained.

...If that day comes...

Can he really do it to Cen Buming?

Fang Dian, what was it like when you killed the captain of the second team?

That night, Lu Yizhan worked the second half of the night shift at the Heretic's Bureau. He could have rested earlier, but he couldn't stop thinking. Realizing he wouldn't be able to sleep, Lu Yizhan took the first half of the night off and went on patrol after dinner.

He finished patrolling the heresy shelter and somehow found himself at the training ground.

Lu Yizhan stared at the training ground, feeling a sense of nostalgia. It felt like he had just graduated from this place in this world, but he hadn't been there for a long time.

The detachment leaders didn't handle training duties—the deputy team leaders were responsible for coaching.

Lu Yizhan had just withdrawn his gaze and was about to leave when he saw a group of panting trainees running across the training ground. He paused, surprised.

It was almost midnight—long past the time for night training. Why were these trainees still practicing?

He soon found out. The group lay on the ground after running laps, gasping for breath and complaining.

"What's wrong with Cen Jiao? He just showed up with a grim face to give us extra night training? Does he even know what time it is?"

"Ugh, the old devil instructor, Cen Jiao, isn't this always extra practice?"

"But this extra practice has been outrageous lately! Is he the one running it?"

Lu Yizhan couldn't help but chuckle. His own trainers in his first year used to do the same thing with Dong Chenglong.

Now it was Cen Buming's turn.

A gentle boy interrupted another's tirade with a mixture of amusement and helplessness, "Tang Erda, you talk too much. Cen Jiao is doing it for our own good."

Tang Erda snorted, "Bullshit, Su Yang. Don't defend him. He's just taking it out on us because he's pissed at his senior brother!"

"I love it when Captain Lu gives him a hard time! Fuck, it's better to piss him off!" Tang Erda, still angry from the training, punched the ground.

Both Su Yang and Lu Yizhan couldn't help but laugh.

Su Yang, increasingly frustrated, added, "Why do you always call yourself 'Brother' like Cen Jiao?"

"He always yells at Captain Lu every time." Tang Erda, lying on all fours, gasped for air, his chest muscles bulging, sleeves soaked through. "It's so unpleasant to watch. Captain Lu is so nice, capable, and kind, but Cen Jiao looks like he wants to take his place. Watch me..."

At that moment, Cen Buming's calm voice interrupted, "How does it look to you?"

Tang Erda jumped in surprise. "Holy shit!"

Lu Yizhan, who had been listening with great interest, was also taken aback. "Holy shit!"

"Are you two having a nice chat?" Cen Buming's gaze swept over the two men who had screamed in terror, his expression barely shifting.

Lu Yizhan sheepishly stood beside Tang Erda, and together they bowed their heads in silent apology.

Cen Buming clutched his chest, his voice flat. "Slandering your instructor behind his back while adding your own training, huh?"

Tang Erda gritted her teeth and stormed off. Lu Yizhan instinctively tried to follow, but Cen Buming's eyes flicked over to him, and with a swift tug, he yanked Lu Yizhan back by the collar. His anger was

barely restrained. “You’re not a trainee anymore, Captain Lu.”

Lu Yizhan scratched his head, offering a nervous smile. “I thought you were talking to me.”

Cen Buming stared at him for a moment, then sighed, clearly questioning why he had worked with people like this for three hundred worldlines.

Cen Buming and Lu Yizhan stood off to the side, watching the trainees run laps with weights.

Lu Yizhan’s eyes landed on Tang Erda, who was gritting her teeth as she pushed through the laps. He smiled suddenly. “You remind me of the Dong Cult.”

He paused, his smile growing. “I didn’t particularly enjoy teaching Dong as a trainee either, but now, I think maybe having one of those instructors wouldn’t be such a bad thing.”

Cen Buming finished the thought flatly. “There’s nothing wrong with that, is there?”

“If an obnoxious instructor increases survival rates for everyone,” Cen Buming continued, “then it’s fine for me to be the obnoxious instructor.”

“If an annoying lieutenant can keep more people alive,” he added, “then it’s fine for me to be the annoying lieutenant.”

Lu Yizhan was taken aback.

Cen Buming’s tone remained light. “Captain Lu doesn’t need to be so bitter about me. I know what I’m doing.”

“In a game of werewolf killing, the seer is the card that doesn’t stain its hands with blood but only tests the werewolf; it’s always the hunter who shoots and executes.”

Cen Buming’s eyes lowered slightly, and the cool night breeze ruffled his hair. His expression was difficult to read.

“So, I, the hunter, will do everything I can to keep you, the foolish prophet who wants to protect everyone, alive until the end.”

“I won’t mess with the principles of the Dong Cult, Captain Yu, or all those who’ve died for us.”

Cen Buming's voice dropped. "I didn't torture the factory manager. I simply asked if he'd had any contact with Bai Six. When he said no, I threatened him with a thorn fork soaked in the blood of a team member who'd used it before. Not his."

Lu Yizhan fell silent for a long moment.

From that point on, he never visited Cen Buming's torture chamber again.

The worldlines continued to spiral forward.

Lu Yizhan thought that the fragile peace they had managed to maintain might last for a few dozen more worldlines, but in worldline 0317, the peace—held together by little more than a spider's thread—finally shattered.

In this worldline, Lu Yizhan captured Bai Six alive for the first time.

Cen Buming immediately moved to interrogate him, but Lu Yizhan stopped him, insisting on speaking with Bai Six first. Cen Buming, though reluctant, agreed.

This was the first time Lu Yizhan was so close to Bai Six's alleged derivative—a young man of twenty-four, with a clear, handsome face, a gentle smile, and an unsettling air of both danger and familiarity.

It felt strangely familiar—the same feeling Bai Six, the evil god, had once given him.

"You're Lu Yizhan, aren't you?" Bai Six said, his hands cuffed and folded neatly in front of him. Despite being in the position of the interrogated, he sat with an air of casual relaxation, almost as if he were the one doing the questioning.

He smiled and continued, "I've got the rules, skills, and worldline props in the game. I've become a believer in the evil gods, and I know about your bet—and everything that's happened between you."

Lu Yizhan's instincts kicked in. "You came to us voluntarily."

Bai Six smiled more meaningfully. "In what I see," he said, "You're quite the intriguing man, Captain Lu."

Bai Six's smile deepened. "I know you have a lot of questions you want to ask. So, how about we play a game?"

Lu Yizhan hesitated. “What game?”

“Truth or Dare,” Bai Six said, the corners of his mouth lifting lazily. “If you win, I’ll answer one question truthfully. If you lose—or refuse to do what I ask—then I won’t answer.”

Lu Yizhan agreed.

“Okay, round one. Truth or Dare?” Bai Six tilted his head and leaned back, propping himself up on the interrogation table.

“Truth,” Lu Yizhan replied.

Bai Six lowered his gaze, his smile still present. “In this worldline, have you ever been to Fang Dian?”

Lu Yizhan’s jaw tightened. After a long pause, he answered hoarsely, “…I’ve seen it.”

He had watched from the sidelines for a long time before leaving.

“It’s your turn,” Bai Six said with a smile. “Does Captain Lu want me to be truthful or daring?”

Lu Yizhan’s gaze seemed distant. “How is it that you’re so composed in every worldline?”

“Composed?” Bai Six absentmindedly toyed with the handcuffs hanging from his wrists. “Composed enough to do something that would undermine human values in this worldline?”

“If that’s what you’re asking, I’ll give you a little hint,” Bai Six added, his smile widening.

He leaned in slightly. “In terms of human society, there are key age points where personalities and tendencies are shaped. The first is from 0 to 4 years old, the second from 6 to 8, then 14, 18, and 24.”

“As a derivative creation, I just need to keep my experiences stable at these age points. Then my character remains stable.”

Lu Yizhan’s eyes narrowed. “I won’t continue if you don’t give me a clear answer.”

Bai Six sighed dramatically, as if regretful. “Alright, alright. Let me explain a little more so Captain Lu can play another round with me, the poor prisoner.”

“For instance, Captain Lu, your kind nature developed because of key people and experiences at the age of 18. As long as those things stay the same, and your overall experiences fluctuate without affecting your core character, you’ll remain the same person.”

“You’ve kept that character even after everything you’ve endured from me.”

“In simple terms, these people and experiences are your [anchor]. As long as your [anchor] stays the same, you won’t change.”

Lu Yizhan responded almost immediately, “What’s your [anchor]?”

Bai Six smiled, “That’s your next question.”

Lu Yizhan took a deep breath. “You ask first.”

“No, this round is a dare,” Bai Six said, his grin deepening as he looked up at Lu Yizhan. “Now, I want Captain Lu to open the doors to the torture chambers where all prisoners, like me, have been brought in and are suspected of crimes but not yet convicted.”

Lu Yizhan met his gaze steadily for a moment, then stood up to give the order. “Make sure to watch them, but don’t harm them.”

Cen Buming furrowed his brow. “Release them all? Most of these are people who are prophesied to be linked with major heretics.”

“What are you doing with Bai Six?” Cen Buming’s sharp instincts kicked in as he quickly stepped in front of Lu Yizhan, who was heading back to the torture room. “Don’t play his game.”

Lu Yizhan gave Cen Buming a brief look before pushing him aside and continuing toward the door.

Cen Buming stopped him again, his eyes dark. “Brother, you know all too well that playing games with him comes with a price.”

“I’ll pay for it,” Lu Yizhan said with a long sigh. “I’m on the brink of finding the breaking point.”

Cen Buming was silent for a moment before stepping aside and allowing Lu Yizhan to pass. “If there’s a [pain] price to be paid for this game, I’ll take it for you.”

“Thanks,” Lu Yizhan waved a hand. “But I’d rather have done it myself.”

Once inside, Lu Yizhan sat down and immediately asked, “What’s your [anchor]?”

Bai Six raised his eyes, smiling faintly. “My [anchor] formed at the age of fourteen, in the body of someone named [Xie Ta]. He was a creation cast by the evil god Bai Six to determine the course of my character.”

“Once he dies, my character’s direction is largely set.”

Bai Six observed Lu Yizhan’s agitation, resting his chin on one hand as his eyes softened in mock compassion. “But alas, Captain Lu will never be able to touch my [anchor].”

Lu Yizhan paused. “Why not?”

Bai Six smiled, his eyes gleaming. “Haven’t you noticed? The evil god doesn’t allow you to land in the worldline before I was fourteen.”

“By the time you arrive in the worldline, my [anchor] has already been destroyed by the evil gods. The moment that happens, I log into the game and start bringing the heretics into reality.”

“Now, it’s my turn,” Bai Six said, shifting his focus. “And this one’s a dare too.”

Lu Yizhan’s gaze darkened. “What do you want me to do?”

Bai Six smirked at the one-way glass of the interrogation room, then looked directly at Cen Buming through it, as if seeing him on the other side. He grinned. “Not Captain Lu this time.”

“The one who’ll complete this Dare is Deputy Cen.”

The First World Line

The moment Lu Yizhan heard Bai Six's words, he turned sharply and reached for the door of the interrogation room.

Bai Six, propped up on the torture table with one hand, snapped his fingers with a smile.

[System Alert: Player Bai Six has used a Magic Space on player Lu Yizhan, restricting his range of movement to the current torture chamber.]

Lu Yizhan froze when he realized he couldn't escape. He turned to face Bai Six, still behind the table, and said, "You broke the rules of the game."

"I never said it was a game between the two of us," Bai Six smiled. "And Lieutenant Cen agreed to pay the price and join me."

Trapped within the magic space, Lu Yizhan stared at Bai Six through the transparent walls. He took a slow breath, then asked, "What dare are you going to make me do this time?"

Bai Six twitched his fingers, and Lu Yizhan noticed several transparent threads wrapped around his fingers. The threads stretched from his hands, reaching out toward whoever was standing outside the door.

Lu Yizhan's heart sank. He realized what Bai Six was trying to do. "Trapping an opponent is no way to play a game," he warned, his voice steady.

"But it's not your turn, Captain Lu." Bai Six grinned, looking up at the ceiling. "It's Deputy Cen's turn."

Bai Six casually flicked his index finger, and the threads began to tighten. "This is a skill I've been using a lot lately—puppet strings. I've attached them to all the suspects you, Captain Lu, have put out there."

He looked back at Lu Yizhan, a smirk on his lips. "Now, Captain Lu, imagine this: What if I open the door and use these puppet strings to incite a riot, with the suspects attacking you while you're trapped in the Magic Space, unable to resist?"

Bai Six's grin deepened as the door to the chamber began to creak open. "I promise these suspects won't hurt you. But I can't guarantee

what Lieutenant Cen will do with them."

Lu Yizhan’s pupils constricted in realization.

As the door opened, chaos erupted outside. The suspects, drawn by the puppet strings, were yanked into the room. Their faces twisted in greed and malice—some already transformed into heretics, weapons raised high, ready to strike.

Outside, Cen Buming raised his gun without hesitation. His eyes were cold, filled with a sharp, lethal bloodlust.

"Drop the gun, Cen Buming!!!"

"Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!"

Lu Yizhan watched, his pupils unfocused, as the figures in front of him fell under Cen Buming's fire, blood splattering across the floor. The warm liquid spread toward his feet.

Lu Yizhan remained silent, staring blankly at Cen Buming, who still held the smoking gun, unwavering.

"Call a doctor..." Lu Yizhan gasped. "Call a doctor...!!!"

Cen Buming’s voice was calm. "There’s no need for a doctor. Every shot I fired was fatal."

Lu Yizhan’s breath faltered. Slowly, he sank to his knees, closing his eyes in defeat.

Cen Buming, still alert, did not drop his weapon. He was fully aware of what he had just done.

Bai Six folded his arms, satisfied with the outcome. "Game over. Props recovered. Players, please leave the field."

Lu Yizhan thought he would break down, shout at Cen Buming, maybe even fight with him. But when he stepped out of Bai Six’s magic space and looked up at Cen Buming, his mind was blank. He couldn’t find the words.

The agreement they had maintained across countless world lines, something they had both worked so hard to preserve, had finally shattered.

For a long time, Lu Yizhan stood alone on the training ground,

watching the trainees running laps. His mind was empty, yet full at the same time—like he was thinking of everything and nothing all at once.

Then, Cen Buming appeared at his side.

Cen Buming's voice was steady. "I killed Bai Six."

"This world line is ending soon."

"But we won't win," Lu Yizhan replied, his gaze distant. "He must have set something up. When I captured him, there must have been some heresy already spreading in the world."

Cen Buming nodded, acknowledging the grim truth.

After a moment, he added, "Five of the six men I killed that day were involved in the heretical smuggling for Bai Six."

"There's one left who wasn't."

Lu Yizhan fell silent, his fingers curling into fists. He spoke quietly, "If you had to do it again, would you still shoot?"

Without hesitation, Cen Buming answered, "Yes."

"In my case," he continued, "the lives of good people are more valuable than the lives of these bad people."

Cen Buming looked away, his gaze fixed on the training ground. "Lu Yizhan, I may not be able to do what you do. I hate these people who skirt the line, where one wrong move can cost the lives of countless innocents just trying to survive."

"If it wasn't for their own greed, they would never have crossed paths with Bai Six. And they wouldn't have ended up with us."

"Once more, I would shoot."

His gaze hardened as he stared at the fluttering flags of the Bureau of Heresy Disposal. "Because your life is more important to me than the lives of these six men."

Lu Yizhan looked at him for a moment before replying softly, "My life is no more important than any of theirs... especially when we all face death at the same time."

He turned to leave.

Cen Buming's voice called after him, but Lu Yizhan didn't stop. "Brother."

Lu Yizhan paused briefly, but didn't turn back.

Cen Buming fell silent for a moment before speaking again. "You won't come for me in the next world line, will you?"

Lu Yizhan didn't answer, standing still without turning around.

"Then kill me," Cen Buming said with a dark chuckle. "A hunter who can't stand in the prophet's camp, I'm just a monster wandering the grey fringe."

Lu Yizhan continued walking, his back never wavering.

Cen Buming remained in place, his eyes slowly closing as he watched the trainees running beneath him.

After the world line ended, Lu Yizhan sat in the temple. For the first time, he took the initiative to propose a deal that could change the course of things: "I want to revoke Cen Buming's hunter status."

"Revoke his hunter status?" Bai six raised an eyebrow and smiled slightly. "It can be revoked, but you must have noticed by now that Cen Buming has been reincarnating with you across so many world lines."

He leaned back, continuing, "Cen Buming has already paid the price for his involvement in this game. He has long since become a heretic. Each world line regains the memory of all past lines when you arrive and loses the memory of all past lines when you leave. Cen Buming has become a piece of consciousness that can only follow you, the prophet."

Bai six smirked, "If you revoke his hunter status now, you'll need to ensure you can house him properly, preventing him from interfering directly with my game or meddling with my plans. Otherwise, I'll simply erase his consciousness."

Lu Yizhan took a deep breath. "I'll shelter him and make sure he doesn't interfere with the game."

"Well then," Bai six said, reaching for his deck of cards, "I'll choose a second-generation Hunter card for you." But before he could shuffle, Lu Yizhan stopped him.

With a determined look in his eyes, Lu Yizhan addressed Bai six directly, "I know you're deliberately interfering with Cen Buming's hunter card, pushing him to break down mentally and descend into heresy without self-awareness."

He leaned forward slightly. "Bai six, don't you want the game to be more interesting? How about I make a deal with you this time? I won't interfere directly with the second-generation hunter cards, and you won't either. Let's see how he chooses his camp."

Bai six smiled softly, his eyes downcast. "Interesting. I promise."

"The second-generation hunter I've chosen is very hunter-like," Bai six continued, "I won't directly interfere with torturing him. I'll simply give him the qualification to become a hunter and let him reincarnate through the world line with you."

Lu Yizhan's voice was quiet but resolute. "I'll give him my prophetic authority directly, but I will never see him or interfere with him."

"Then we'll see what this wild-growing hunter will become?" Bai six raised his gaze, his smile widening. "But Captain Lu, you're all that's left."

"There are still over three hundred world lines," Bai six said, his tone taunting. "Are you going to face it alone?"

Lu Yizhan nodded. "I can."

Bai six's choice for the second-generation hunter was Tang Erda, a trainee Lu Yizhan had met twice before.

Tang Erda quickly surpassed Lu Yizhan's expectations, growing rapidly and even managing to win a game against Bai six in a later World Series, qualifying as a hunter at the start of the round.

However, Lu Yizhan soon realized that, even if Bai six kept his promise not to directly interfere, Tang Erda was becoming paranoid and irritable. As she reincarnated through the timeline, she started to hate those who were about to commit crimes in the previous world.

Tang Erda was becoming more and more like a carbon copy of Cen

Buming's original self.

And Lu Yizhan soon discovered why.

Bai six never directly tortured Tang Erda. Even when he caught her, he let her go on purpose. But he tortured Su Yang, Tang Erda's second-in-command. Tang Erda fell deeper into the trap as she witnessed Su Yang being tortured and killed by Bai six again and again.

By the time the countdown of world lines was nearing its end, Tang Erda was nearing the breaking point.

Lu Yizhan sat next to the stone table, looking at Bai six with flat, emotionless eyes. "You've driven Tang Erda crazy."

Bai six smiled, unbothered. "I haven't touched a second-generation hunter."

"But you've touched his [anchor]," Lu Yizhan retorted.

Bai six lowered his gaze, and the smile on his face became even clearer. "It seems you've fully grasped the definition of [anchor]."

"Yes," Lu Yizhan said calmly, "The derivatives of each of my world lines continue to torment the hunter who's chosen you. By torturing Su Yang, you drive him to mentally descend. He can last at most one more world line."

Bai six's eyes gleamed with amusement. "Are you going to change hunters again, prophet?"

Lu Yizhan was silent for a moment. "No more changes."

"And rightly so," Bai six said, crossing his arms with a satisfied smile. "There are only three world lines left, and there's no point in changing them now."

For the first time in the penultimate worldline, Lu Yizhan tracked down Fang Dian's location and went to see her before she logged into the game, before she became entangled with the Heresy Authority.

It was raining heavily when he arrived. With a black umbrella shielding him from the downpour, he searched for her through the endless sea of umbrellas, each one blending into the curtain of rain.

He found her soon enough—standing outside a grocery store without an umbrella, holding her briefcase over her head in a half-hearted attempt to stay dry. But she didn't keep it up for long. Within moments, she let out an exasperated sigh, dropped her briefcase, rolled up her sleeves, and prepared to dash straight into the rain.

Lu Yizhan chuckled at the sight and took a step forward, intending to walk over to her—but then he stopped.

Through the veil of rain, the shifting umbrellas, and the endless crowd, he stood frozen, watching.

Fang Dian ran past him without noticing, her briefcase clutched in one hand, her head slightly bowed, a carefree smile on her lips. She didn't look back. And beside her—when had he appeared?—was a man laughing as he ran with her, matching her reckless dash into the rain.

Lu Yizhan remained standing in the middle of the bustling street, his black umbrella still open above him. He did not turn to watch her go. Rain slid down his jaw, mixing with something he couldn't name.

Memories flickered in his mind—Fang Dian's bright, joyful smile, and that same face bowed in silent grief, worldline after worldline.

[Because Lu Yizhan lost the game this time, the person you love is going to die.]

[Because Lu Yizhan lost the game again, so…]

"Fang Dian…" His fingers tightened around the umbrella handle before he slowly lowered it, letting the rain wash over his face. He murmured to himself, "Was I really right to choose this path?"

"If you were still here… wouldn't you have already won?"

"I really do suck at this."

Over and over again, he lost. Over and over again, they all suffered because of his choices.

The rain blurred his vision, or maybe it was something else. His voice was so soft that the downpour nearly drowned it out:

"If only the people who met you… hadn't been losers like me."

"Just one last worldline left." Bai Six smiled at Lu Yizhan. "I can give you all the cards you had before—all over again."

Lu Yizhan raised his eyes. "What's the price?"

Bai Six let out a quiet laugh. "The price is simple—if you lose this game, the souls of all these cards will be destroyed."

He tilted his head slightly. "Of course, if you refuse, the outcome is the same. I don't accept worthless things like a loser's cards here."

Lu Yizhan exhaled slowly. Then, with quiet resolve, he said, "I'll pay the price. Let the game continue."

"The game continues only with the consent of both you and the other player," Bai Six reminded him, standing up. He glanced sideways at Lu Yizhan, raising an eyebrow. "Wanna go see her?"

Lu Yizhan was silent for a moment. Then, softly, he said, "Yeah."

Seafloor.

Through the shimmering wall of water, Lu Yizhan saw Fang Dian. Her hands hung limply at her sides, her head bowed.

Bai Six crouched before her. "The last worldline."

"The first 657 worldlines—you lost them all."

"The final worldline… will you keep paying the price to continue?"

Bai Six looked down at her. "If you stop now, you can still walk out of this temple. But if you lose the last worldline, then all your games are lost."

"Your soul will be mine."

"At this rate, Lu Yizhan isn't going to beat me on this last line, either."

Fang Dian suddenly lifted her head. Her long, unkempt hair tumbled over her face, half-hiding her exhaustion. She looked worn, frail. But her eyes still shone with an unshaken determination, and the smile on her lips did not waver.

"He'll win," she said.

Lu Yizhan, watching through the watery barrier, stared in shock.

Bai Six raised an eyebrow, amused. "Where does this blind faith of yours come from?"

"It doesn't cost anything to believe in Lu Yizhan, so why not?" Fang Dian arched a brow. "Let the game continue."

"I believe he'll beat you." Her voice was steady, unwavering.

"Just like I believe—"

Her gaze sharpened.

"—that good will always triumph over evil."

Bai Six stood up, his expression unreadable. Then he smiled.

"As you wish, then."

With a snap of his fingers, Lu Yizhan was sent hurtling backward.

For the 658th time, he descended onto a new worldline.

He braced himself, expecting the familiar sights of the Heresy Authority. But this time—

Something brushed past him in the water. A glimmering, silvery-blue tail.

The world tilted.

And instead of the Heresy Authority—

He landed in an orphanage.

Lu Yizhan blinked in disbelief at the figure sitting in the far corner of the orphanage's dining hall.

Thin. Pale. Dark-eyed. A small plate of food in front of him.

Bai Six.

Not the all-powerful Bai Six who ruled over the game.

A fourteen-year-old Bai Six.

A Bai Six who had not yet logged into the game.

This worldline was different. Strangely peaceful. The presence of heretics was minimal, as if it had been untouched by the corruption of the evil gods.

A miracle. A worldline untainted.

For days, Lu Yizhan quietly observed this version of Bai Six—a lonely, ostracized child.

And as time passed, an unbearable thought took root in his mind.

If he killed Bai Six now, before he ever entered the game…

He could win.

Lu Yizhan followed Bai Six to the small pond he visited daily, blade hidden behind his back, waiting for the boy to resurface.

But the water remained still.

Too still.

Something was wrong.

Lu Yizhan leaped into the pond—and found Bai Six at the bottom, unconscious, gripping something tightly.

Dragging him out of the water, Lu Yizhan saw what he was holding.

A body.

A beautiful, delicate-looking boy, eerily lifeless.

Then—

A voice, directly in his mind.

"My name is Xie Ta. I am the corpse before you."

"I used everything I had to pull you into this worldline early. I know you’re a good person, and I know you’ve suffered."

"But Bai Six—he’s different here. He’s not like the others. He’s a good kid."

"Please… don’t kill him."

Lu Yizhan's grip on the knife tightened.

Bai Six knelt beside Xie Ta's body, head bowed, drenched, pale as death itself.

He was choking on sobs.

Powerless. Defenseless.

An easy target.

Lu Yizhan stepped forward, fingers clenched around the hilt. Images of all the people he had lost—Tang Erda, Fang Dian, Cen Buming—flashed through his mind.

If he killed Bai Six now, their sacrifices wouldn't be in vain.

Then—

Softly, hoarsely, Bai Six whispered,

"…Whoever you are, please. Save Xie Ta."

"I'll pay any price."

His voice overlapped with Xie Ta's in Lu Yizhan's mind.

"Please, help Bai Six."

"I'll pay any price."

For the first time, Lu Yizhan saw Bai Six cry.

And after a long, long silence—

He let go of the knife. The blade hit the grass soundlessly.

Lu Yizhan exhaled.

And then, clear as day, he answered, "…Yes."

The Challenge

Drops of seawater, carried by the wind and restless waves, lashed against the decaying shrine on the lonely island.

The dark tide surged, the sky heavy with storm clouds, the air thick with the scent of impending rain.

Seated at a stone table, the evil god gazed across at the prophet, whose head hung low.

With his jaw propped against one hand and his body tilted slightly, the evil god lowered his eyes, devoid of emotion. "Six hundred and fifty-eight world lines—a long dream for humans."

"Lu Yizhan, three times you've altered the memories of everyone, even my devolved derivatives, covering up the tragedies that truly occurred in this world. You whitewashed a conflict on the verge of eruption, dressing it in the illusion of peace."

"Do you even remember what the world’s truest trajectory looked like?"

"Or have you, too, become so lost in this fabricated reality that you've forgotten everything that once was?"

Bai Six lifted his gaze, his voice calm. "No matter how long you delay or how much you hide, you will have to face it in the end."

"Wake up."

The prophet seated across from him inhaled sharply.

Lying on a narrow bed, Lu Yizhan's fingers twitched ever so slightly. His eyelids fluttered as though roused from a troubled dream. His dry lips parted, voice barely a whisper.

"... Don't go down that road."

"Bai Liu."

Bai Liu was discharged from the hospital the day after he woke up.

Of course, this decision was met with unanimous opposition. Everyone

insisted he should stay a few more days, but Bai Liu—who had never been one to take advice on such matters—simply stated the night before that he wanted to be discharged. By the next morning, he was already gone.

By the time Mu Sicheng rushed to the hospital after his makeup exams, Bai Liu's bed was empty.

Furious, Mu Sicheng immediately called Tang Erda to voice his outrage.

"How could you let Bai Liu leave the hospital on his own? Why didn't you stop him?! If anything happens to him, can you even afford the consequences?! You were supposed to be his bedside companion! If it were me, I would've—"

Tang Erda's cold voice cut him off. "With how much you spoil Bai Liu, he probably would've been discharged last night instead."

Mu Sicheng: "..."

Fuck.

Tang Erda sighed, clearly exasperated. "I actually had to stop him from leaving even earlier. But you know how he is—when Bai Liu decides to do something, the only thing you can do is go along with it."

Mu Sicheng clicked his tongue. "Why the hell was he in such a rush to leave today?"

"There's a controlled explosion happening at the Bureau of Heresy Disposal. They're demolishing some rotting floors in the Sunshine Property complex where heretical traces were detected," Tang Erda explained. "According to the developer's son, after his father died, he had a bizarre dream. In it, if he mixed part of his father's ashes with the real estate contract and scattered the rest over the land, his father's vengeful spirit would bind to the property, ensuring their family would own it forever."

Mu Sicheng's expression darkened. "That's some next-level haunting."

"The contract was burned, and the Heresy Disposal Authority excavated and purified the ashes on the ground. But some of the remains ended up inside the building, and residual heretical readings were detected on the upper floors. Just in case, Su Yang and his team

decided to carry out a targeted demolition."

"And Bai Liu wants to watch this demolition?"

"Yeah."

"Blasting?!" Mu Sicheng nearly choked. "What the hell is he doing getting involved in this? Isn't directional blasting dangerous and complicated? Can you even trust the Heretics to handle it properly?"

Tang Erda's voice remained steady. "In certain emergencies, we use special heretical abilities to ensure safety."

Mu Sicheng hummed in understanding. "So... unconventional methods, huh?"

Tang Erda paused for a moment before adding, "The developer's son had that dream... Bai Liu thinks it might have something to do with Bai Six. He wants to check it out himself."

Mu Sicheng frowned. "Bai Six again? What's with that guy?"

Tang Erda fell silent before answering, "You'll realize soon enough—everything is connected to him."

"The world is just a game to him. And the Sunshine Property? It's just another map in his game."

Sunshine Property

The surrounding residential buildings had already been evacuated by the Heresy Disposal Authority. The buildings marked for demolition were cordoned off with yellow tape, and Heresy Authority personnel patrolled the perimeter, strictly preventing ordinary citizens from approaching.

Technically, Bai Liu should have been stopped outside the restricted zone. But Tang Erda made a call, and soon, Su Yang personally came to escort him in.

Su Yang shot a deep, assessing look at Bai Liu before offering his hand in greeting. "Mr. Bai, thank you for your insights. If not for your guidance, we would have only investigated the real estate contract and never considered the ashes."

Bai Liu smiled and shook Su Yang's hand. "No need to thank me. Captain Tang has helped me plenty as well."

Su Yang withdrew his hand and returned the smile. "What brings you here this time, Mr. Bai? Is there something I can do for you?"

Bai Liu glanced past him at the building slated for demolition, then turned back with a grin. "Captain Su, can I go inside before the blast?"

Su Yang hesitated. "That building isn't safe. It's already prepped for detonation."

"Don't worry," Bai Liu said easily. "Captain Su, your team has unconventional means to ensure a precise demolition. And I have unconventional means to ensure I get out safely."

Su Yang exchanged a look with Tang Erda. After a brief pause, Tang Erda gave him a subtle nod—an indication that Bai Liu could be trusted to handle himself.

Reluctantly, Su Yang stepped aside. "I strongly advise against this. But if you insist, you have at most thirty minutes. The blast is scheduled in an hour."

Bai Liu smiled. "Thank you, Captain Su."

Tang Erda escorted Bai Liu to the entrance of the building, frowning. "Are you sure you don't want me to come up with you?"

"No." Bai Liu's tone was calm. "The person I'm meeting wouldn't want you there."

Tang Erda hesitated before exhaling. "If anything happens, go straight into the game. I'll be waiting for you."

Bai Liu nodded, then turned and stepped into the dusty, decayed building, making his way up the stairs.

Su Yang watched him disappear into the darkness, his expression tense. He turned to Tang Erda with clear disapproval. "You should have stopped him. It's not safe."

Tang Erda let out a slow breath, fishing a cigarette from his pocket and lighting it. His dark blue eyes curved into a half-smile. "Nothing he does is safe."

Su Yang's frown deepened. "But you're his guardian, at least

nominally. That means you should be keeping him from reckless decisions like this."

Tang Erda looked away subtly. "……He has his reasons. We'll talk about it if something actually goes wrong."

Su Yang let out a helpless laugh. "You're too soft on him! Where are your principles, Captain Tang?"

Before Tang Erda could reply, a team member rushed over. "Captain Su! The owner of the Sunshine Property is here. They're asking if we've seen their owner's group leader, Yuan Guang. He was supposed to come by this morning."

The team member's face was grim. "We checked the surveillance—he entered the site, but never left. Now he's nowhere to be found."

Su Yang's face paled. Tang Erda immediately pulled out his phone and called Bai Liu.

"Bai Liu, have you seen anyone in the—"

"Yuan Guang?" Bai Liu's voice interrupted, calm and detached. He was holding up his phone, eyes fixed on a man slumped motionless in a chair, head hanging down as if asleep. "I see him."

A pause.

"Don't worry, I'll handle it."

Bai Liu hung up and glanced around the dimly lit room.

"I'm already here," he said evenly. "Aren't you going to come out and greet me, Bai Six?"

A soft laugh echoed from Yuan Guang's arms.

"I kept my promise," came the low, familiar voice. "If you hadn't sought me out, I wouldn't have come to see you."

Across the room, Yuan Guang stirred. Slowly, he lifted his head, though his eyes remained closed. In his arms, he clutched a self-portrait.

The painting depicted Bai Six lounging in a chair, one leg crossed over the other, chin resting on his hand, amusement glinting in his eyes. In his gloved hands, he held puppet strings, trailing from the frame's

edge and wrapped tightly around Yuan Guang's limbs.

From within the portrait, Bai Six smiled.

"I knew you'd come to find me eventually, but I must say, I didn't expect you to track me down so quickly." His voice was rich with amusement.

"How did you know it was me?" he asked. "Or rather, how did you figure out that I used Yuan Guang to cross into reality?"

Bai Liu's gaze lingered on the puppet strings. "You controlled Yuan Guang at the end of the last tournament. The strings didn't disappear when you left the game, which means you've had full control over him since then."

He continued, tone steady. "And since you also possess his soul note, you only needed to zero out his mental value to use him as a vessel in reality."

Bai Six chuckled. "Zeroing mental values with ease? You already know I can't directly interfere with the real world's timelines. What makes you think I can just erase someone's sanity like that?"

Bai Liu met his gaze without hesitation. "You already gave me the answer."

Bai Six's lips curled. "And what answer is that?"

"Dreams," Bai Liu replied.

"You manipulated the developer's son into dreaming that dream."

"That's not entirely accurate," Bai Six murmured, half-closing his eyes. "I can only influence the dreams of those who believe in me."

Bai Liu's eyes flickered toward Yuan Guang. "Yuan Guang doesn't believe in you."

"No." Bai Six's smile deepened. "But he believes in you."

"For an ordinary man like him, it's not so easy to tell, in a dream, whether it was me or you standing before him."

Bai Liu said nothing.

Bai Six tilted his head, amusement dancing in his gaze. "It's

unpleasant, isn't it? Being backed into a corner like this?" His voice was soft, almost teasing. "Unless, of course, you kill Yuan Guang now."

"If it wasn't him, it would've been someone else," Bai Liu replied evenly. "If you wanted to find me, you would have found a way."

Bai Six laughed lightly, curling his fingers. "That's true."

Bai Liu's tone remained indifferent. "What do you want from me? Are you planning another game?"

"No." Bai Six lifted his gaze, his smile almost languid. "I just had a very long, very dull dream."

"I woke up feeling a little lonely. I simply wanted to see you."

Bai Liu, unfazed, glanced at the quivering walls around them, dust trickling from the ceiling. The building was shaking, the demolition imminent.

"In the middle of an explosion?" he asked dryly.

Bai Six, still within the portrait, raised a gloved hand and tugged on the strings.

Yuan Guang collapsed to the floor, the painting in his arms shifting back into a lifeless image, its colors frozen in a permanent, knowing smile.

"The more catastrophic the backdrop," Bai Six murmured, "the more interesting our game, don't you think?"

The Challenge

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shortly after Bai Six was transformed into a portrait, Yuan Guang choked, coughed twice, and woke up in a daze. He propped himself up against the chair, trying twice to stand but failing.

Bai Liu stepped forward and extended a hand.

Yuan Guang, realizing someone else was in the room, blinked at him in confusion. "Bai Liu? What are you doing here?"

"You don't need to worry about that right now." Bai Liu's voice was calm. "What did you dream about last night?"

At the mention of his dream, a sharp pain lanced through Yuan Guang's head. He groaned, nearly collapsing backward, but caught Bai Liu's hand just in time. Bai Liu helped him up with an effortless pull.

"Thanks," Yuan Guang muttered, settling into the chair. He ran a hand through his hair, frowning. "A dream...?" He hesitated. "I think I had one after watching you leave last night."

Bai Liu's gaze remained steady. "What did you dream about?"

"I dreamt that..." Yuan Guang trailed off, rubbing his temples. "That you woke up and came to play a game with me. I lost. Then you controlled me, my mental value dropped to zero, and I turned into a monster. After that..." His brow furrowed. "I don't remember what happened next."

He paused, then asked, voice low, "Did I get controlled again? Did I summon Bai Six?"

"You did." Bai Liu confirmed, his tone unreadable. "I just saw him."

Silence stretched between them. Yuan Guang clenched his fists against the chair's backrest, his knuckles turning white. After a long moment, he lowered his head and murmured, "...I believe you can lead Russell Cemetery to victory."

His voice hardened with quiet resolve. "If Bai Six ever uses me to enter reality again, you have permission to kill me."

Before Bai Liu could respond, his phone rang. Tang Erda's voice came through, tense and urgent.

"Bai Liu, the building's going to explode. Get down here. Now."

Bai Liu remained unshaken. "I'll take Yuan Guang and go straight into the game. You can proceed with the detonation."

A brief pause. Then Tang Erda sighed. "...Alright. Take care of yourself."

In the background, Bai Liu could hear Su Yang's outraged yell: "We can't just blow it up before they're out!"

Tang Erda responded quickly, brushing him off. "Leave it to Bai Liu. He'll handle it."

Su Yang's frustration only grew. "You let him get away with too much! This is life and death! No—give me the phone, I need to—"

" Tang Erda!!"

The line went dead. Tang Erda had hung up.

Bai Liu pocketed his phone and turned to Yuan Guang. "You heard them. The building's about to go. Are you coming down?"

Yuan Guang shook his head. "No. I'll log into the game directly. You go ahead."

Bai Liu didn't move. Instead, he stepped toward a large opening in the crumbling wall. From there, he could see a glimpse of the thriving city beyond—the world continuing as if nothing was amiss.

"President Bai." Yuan Guang's voice was uncharacteristically quiet. "How did you know Bai Six would be here?"

Bai Liu didn't turn around. His voice was smooth, unhurried. "I didn't."

Yuan Guang stilled.

"I only guessed where you were going to kill yourself."

A sharp inhale. Yuan Guang's body locked up.

Bai Liu continued without a flicker of hesitation. "Bai Six can only

manipulate dreams. But you? You climbed this building alone, awake. Then you fell asleep on the floor." His gaze didn't waver. "The only explanation for that is suicide."

Behind him, Yuan Guang didn't move, didn't make a sound.

"You only accepted twenty percent of the points I gave you," Bai Liu went on, his tone calm, clinical. "And I was told you spent it all instead of keeping anything for yourself. When Muke tried to help you, you refused and sent all the compensation for your house to your mother instead."

"You settled everything. Arranged for what came after. And now, you've come here—back to where it all started—to die."

Bai Liu finally turned, eyes meeting Yuan Guang's. "Everything is getting better. Why choose to die now?"

Yuan Guang slowly lifted his head. His eyes were red, the kind of red that came from unshed tears. His voice trembled when he spoke.

"All this—this turn for the better—we only got it after so many sacrifices."

His lips parted, his breath unsteady.

"Why am I the one who gets to enjoy it?"

The black-and-white photo of Uncle Wang on the tabletop behind Yuan Guang showed him smiling warmly, his expression generous and kind. In front of the photo, four sticks of incense had just burned out, leaving faint trails of smoke curling into the air. Yuan Guang's tears finally fell. He choked back a sob, clenching his fists.

"I'm just a worthless piece of shit who gave nothing!"

"They built all of this with their lives! Why should I be the one to have it?"

"I couldn't do anything. I killed all my teammates in my first league because of my skills. Even you—who ended up helping me—almost died at my hands!"

"I've worked so hard, but I'm still living such a pathetic existence. I can't make money, I can't help anyone, I can't even win a game when my opponent practically hands me victory! I've spent my whole life

hurting people—what's the point of me being alive?"

His back was straight, but his voice cracked with raw grief.

"Why am I the one who's lived this long?"

Bai Liu, watching him cry in pain, spoke calmly. "If you take the world at face value, then yes, you are living for nothing."

Yuan Guang sobbed harder.

Then, Bai Liu suddenly chuckled, a quiet sound. "But the one who chose to keep you alive wasn't you."

"It was the people who made you president—the ones you think should be here instead, the ones who were willing to die for all of this. You took on their desire to live and never ran away from it. That's why you're still here."

"You're living for the very thing they wanted—for all of this to exist."

Bai Liu smiled faintly. "To carry the weight of so many people's desires and not break… in my book, that makes you incredibly valuable."

Yuan Guang looked at Bai Liu, tears spilling down his face. His voice was hoarse.

"I really… I really want to sell my soul to you."

"But it wouldn't work." Yuan Guang let out a pained laugh, lifting his arm to roughly wipe his face. "I've tried so many times before. But that damned system keeps telling me I've already sold it."

Bai Liu glanced at the offering table behind Yuan Guang. "Did you move all the ashes out?"

"Yeah." Yuan Guang's voice was low and drawn out. "But I left the offering table and the photos behind."

"Why?"

Yuan Guang was silent for a few moments before answering hoarsely, "Because everyone wanted the dead to see this—the rotting building finally being blown up."

"They've been waiting for this day for a long, long time."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow and looked out at the decaying structure, which had begun to tremble under the force of the detonation. "Then let's show them."

The neglected building shook violently as the explosion erupted, sending a thick cloud of smoke billowing into the sky. But strangely, the dust didn't spread beyond a certain area. The debris, instead of scattering freely, hit an invisible barrier and bounced back.

This was why the Heresy Disposal Authority had deemed the explosion hazardous.

The only thing that passed through that strange, controlled space was the wind.

A powerful gust, thick with the scent of gunpowder, rushed over them. It whipped Bai Liu and Yuan Guang's hair back from their foreheads, clearing the smoke in sharp streaks across the air.

The towering structure that had once blocked the sunlight came crashing down, and for the first time in years, golden light streamed through the wreckage. It poured into the forgotten corners of the city —into the broken, rotting rooms of the condemned building.

Sunlight illuminated every offering table, shining over the incense burners and black-and-white photos, as if, under its warmth, the people in those cold, lifeless portraits were smiling once again.

Yuan Guang squinted against the brightness, tears slipping down his face as he looked at Bai Liu standing at the edge. The wind whipped at Bai Liu's coat, making it look like he might be carried off at any moment.

Had sunlight always been this bright?

Then, at last, the explosion reached them.

The foundation of their building cracked with a deafening boom, and the entire structure began to sway.

Yuan Guang stepped up beside Bai Liu, taking a deep breath as he tilted his head slightly to let the sunlight touch his face. In a voice barely above a whisper, he asked,

"President Bai..."

"Yeah?" Bai Liu responded without turning around. "What is it?"

Yuan Guang hesitated, then finally asked, "...In our guild, do we follow the 996 work schedule?"

For a second, there was silence.

Then Bai Liu let out a soft laugh and finally turned to look at him.

"No," he said lightly. "We don’t use 996 here."

Yuan Guang exhaled, relief flooding his expression—

Until Bai Liu continued, his tone utterly steady:

"Our guild is 007."

Yuan Guang: "……"

A single tear fell.

Chapter End Notes

> The 007 schedule is 0 am to 0 pm for 7 days a week.
> Under this work culture, an employee would have to work from 0 am to 0 pm 7 days per week, in other words, 24 hours a day, which means he or she would have to be available online all day.

The Challenge

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In-Game: Wandering Circus Guild

Wang Shun sat in the conference room, waiting anxiously, his eyes fixed on the door. The moment Bai Liu pushed it open, he finally exhaled in relief and smiled.

"Welcome back, President."

His relief quickly turned into exasperation. "You and Charles really pulled a stunt with that plan," Wang Shun couldn't help but grumble. "It's a great way to completely wreck our guild's trust. Russell Guild got the lion's share of the bargain—it's hardly worth it—"

Before he could finish, Bai Liu stepped aside, revealing the nervous figure standing behind him.

"This is a new member of our guild," Bai Liu introduced with a smile. "Explain the rules to him."

Then, as if casually mentioning the weather, he added, "By the way, Russell Cemetery is merging into our guild."

Wang Shun's eyes flicked to Yuan Guang, who looked tense and unsure. He froze for a moment before laughing in disbelief. "Yes, President, I understand."

This was just...

He sighed inwardly, taking in Yuan Guang's nervous greeting.

Expecting their President Bai to take a loss? In another lifetime, maybe.

A mere mortal like him should just follow a god like Bai Liu.

Before leading Yuan Guang to familiarize himself with the guild, Wang Shun turned back. "Chairman, Captain Tang and the others have gone to the game pool for training."

"Are you planning to take a break, or...?"

Bai Liu was already rising from his seat with a natural ease. "I'll train with them."

"When's the challenge?"

Wang Shun hesitated. "President, if you're not feeling well, you can rest a few more days. There's been a rule change for this year's challenge, and the exact schedule hasn't been announced yet."

Bai Liu's gaze sharpened. "Rule change?"

Wang Shun nodded. "Yeah, the system sent out a notice last night. But there are always slight adjustments to the challenge and playoff rules each year—it's a normal process. Nothing to worry about."

"Got it." Bai Liu turned, pushing open the conference room door and heading straight for the game pool.

Wang Shun hesitated. "President... there's something else. Not about the competition, but I thought I should bring it up."

Bai Liu glanced back. "What is it?"

Looking away awkwardly, Wang Shun's eyes wandered, clearly reluctant to meet Bai Liu's gaze. "...Spades has been coming over every day for the past few days asking to see you."

Bai Liu remained silent.

"I wasn't sure whether to let him in or not, so I kept him outside," Wang Shun continued. "But then he... uh, loudly mentioned that he slept with you."

There was a heavy pause.

Wang Shun coughed, trying to maintain composure. "And, well, a lot of our members were around at the time. Including Spades' fellow players from the Killer Sequence. They probably overheard."

Another pause.

"Now there's a rumor going around that Spades is your lover."

Wang Shun forced a neutral tone. "Personally, I don't think it's a big deal. It shouldn't affect our schedule, so you don't need to worry, President."

Next to him, Yuan Guang—hearing all this on his first day—felt his pupils shrink in shock. He snuck a quick glance at Bai Liu before hurriedly lowering his head, cold sweat breaking out on his back.

...Holy shit.

His first day at work and he was already overhearing gossip like this?!

So the number one-ranked player and his new boss... on day two of the competition...?!

Serious injury ward gameplay??

Yuan Guang's head spun. This was way too exciting.

High-ranked players... were they all this unhinged?! Did they just play this wildly?!

Bai Liu was quiet for a few seconds, leaning against the door, eyes lowered. "Don't mind him."

"Next time he comes—"

"Should I just send him away?" Wang Shun suggested.

"No."

Bai Liu turned slightly, closing the door behind him with an almost imperceptible chuckle.

"Let him come next time. If he refuses to leave, let him wait inside for me."

The door clicked shut.

Wang Shun and Yuan Guang stood frozen in place for several minutes.

"…Just…" Wang Shun's pupils trembled as he gripped Yuan Guang's shoulders, his voice unsteady. "Did the Chairman just say to let Spades in?"

Yuan Guang frantically waved his hands, shaking his head in sheer horror. "What sleep? What serious injury ward gameplay? I didn't hear anything! I don't know anything!"

Wang Shun: "……"

Yuan Guang knew way too much.

Game Pool
By the time Bai Liu arrived, Tang Erda and the others were already training on their own.

The vast pool was empty, its surface reflecting shifting waves of multicolored light. Bai Liu didn't jump in. Instead, he sat at the edge, back against the pool's tiled wall, watching. Light danced on the water, casting fleeting colors across his half-lidded eyes and long, dark lashes.

For once, he indulged in a rare moment of idleness, neither eager to submerge himself in another horror game nor interested in joining the others. With his chin resting lightly on one hand, he looked as though he were either dozing off or waiting for someone.

Steady footsteps approached.

A figure stepped into Bai Liu's line of sight, casting a shadow that blocked out the pool's colorful glow and fully enveloped him.

Bai Liu tilted his head away as Spades bent down, leaning in to study him. His tone was light but pointed.

"I seem to remember putting up signs prohibiting Slayer Sequence players from entering the game pool."

"Oh." Spades knelt down, meeting Bai Liu's gaze without hesitation. "I'm not very good at reading."

Bai Liu: "……"

Right. He'd forgotten about that.

Spades could recognize the basic characters on the system's game panel, but anything beyond that was still a struggle.

"The words Slayer Sequence and game pool are ones you know," Bai Liu pointed out.

Spades nodded, then added, "But I didn't recognize the two characters in the middle."

Those two words? [Prohibited Entry].

Bai Liu's lips quirked up. "And what do you think they mean?"

Spades stared at him, utterly unfazed. "I don't know. I didn't think about it. I just saw you inside and came in."

Leaning in slightly, his deep gaze reflected nothing but Bai Liu. "So… does that mean I wasn't supposed to?"

Bai Liu was quiet for a few seconds, then averted his eyes and murmured, "…Not anymore."

At that, Spades settled against the pool wall beside Bai Liu without hesitation, their shoulders lightly touching.

"I went to your guild looking for you," he said. "They wouldn't let me in."

"You could've forced your way in," Bai Liu noted, shifting subtly to create some distance.

Spades moved just as naturally to close it. "Yeah. It would've been easy."

"But they said you weren't there, so I left."

Bai Liu stilled for a moment before sliding a little further away. "What do you want from me?"

This time, Spades didn't just follow. He leaned in, pressing one hand against the pool wall beside Bai Liu's head. His other hand held the black bone whip loosely as he bent his knee, bringing them even closer.

His voice dipped into a low murmur.

"I've learned how to dream, Bai Liu."

His eyes glimmered. "Only people dream, don't they? The people you like—they're human too, aren't they?"

With a rare, almost wistful softness, Spades asked, "Am I more human now? Closer to the kind of souvenir you wanted?"

Bai Liu's breath hitched. He instinctively shifted aside again.

Spades chased the distance effortlessly. His gaze flickered toward Bai Liu's lips, then lower. His tone was quiet, teasing, but unwavering.

"Can I claim my reward?"

"The same as last time."

His hand remained braced against the wall by Bai Liu's ear, but he leaned in further, his entire frame surrounding Bai Liu in a way that left little room to escape. With his eyes half-lidded, he brushed his lips lightly against Bai Liu's—cold, fleeting—before pressing a kiss against the side of his neck, then his collarbone.

"You never washed off the cross I drew for you," Spades murmured against his skin.

Bai Liu exhaled sharply, his breath unsteady. His fingers curled around Spades' shoulder in an attempt to push him away.

"…Enough."

But Spades didn't stop. Instead, he bit down—not hard, but deliberate—right where he had once traced that cross. Bai Liu's body jolted, his breath catching.

Instinctively, he tried again to shove Spades off.

Spades simply caught his wrist and pressed it against Bai Liu's chest, holding him there as he murmured, "No."

"You told me to wake up and find you. But I woke up ages ago, and you never came."

"You lied."

Bai Liu felt the hem of his shirt lift. A cold hand slipped underneath, pressing against his waist, pulling him closer.

This was getting out of hand. His skin flushed, his chest rising and falling harder than before as he opened his mouth to tell Spades to stop—

Then he heard Spades' next words.

"I dreamed that I held you like this… and was shot."

"I turned to ash and died next to you."

"And then—" Spades' voice was calm, but his grip tightened slightly. "You cried for me."

Bai Liu stiffened. His fingers brushed against a scar in the center of Spades' back—one from a bullet wound. A wound Spades had taken while standing in front of him.

Spades continued quietly, "I asked Bai Yi about dreams. They told me I don’t have a soul, that I wouldn’t die from that kind of gun."

A pause. Then, softly—almost contemplative:

"I never thought a soul was something I needed."

"But if I learned to be human properly—if I had a soul of my own—"

Spades tilted his head, watching Bai Liu intently.

"Would you cry for me if my soul was shattered?"

"I want you to cry for me."

Bai Liu closed his eyes. Then, to Spades’ surprise, he laughed. Soft. Amused.

"Then you’d better dream faster."

Spades frowned slightly, about to ask what that meant—

But Bai Liu shifted forward, threading his arms around Spades’ neck. He tilted his head up, closed his eyes—

And kissed him back.

For a moment, Spades forgot whatever question he was going to ask.

Instead, he lowered his head and focused entirely on embracing Bai Liu, deepening the kiss as their figures blurred in the shifting light of the game pool.

The Other Side of the Game Pool Tang Erda climbed out of the play pool after finishing his training, pushing himself up against the wall—only to freeze at the sight before him.

Spades had Bai Liu locked tightly in his arms, completely covering him.

If Tang Erda wasn’t mistaken, they were kissing. And Bai Liu wasn’t

resisting.

Spades lifted his gaze and met Tang Erda's eyes, giving him a slow, deliberate, and undeniably provocative look.

Tang Erda: "……"

Without a word, Tang Erda sat back down in the pool, his mind utterly blank.

Five Minutes Later Muke emerged from the water, glancing suspiciously at Tang Erda, who was sitting unnervingly still. He was about to step out when—

Three seconds later.

Muke dropped back into the pool, his expression crumbling as if the world itself was collapsing. Clenching his fists, he muttered under his breath, "I have to get stronger. I must kill Spades…"

Another Three Minutes Later Mu Sicheng surfaced and immediately let out a string of curses—only for Muke and Tang Erda to slap their hands over his mouth the second he opened it.

Mu Sicheng's glare was murderous as he struggled against them, stomping his feet in the water, clearly about to storm out—

But then, mid-struggle, his gaze drifted toward the other side of the pool.

Mu Sicheng's pupils dilated.

Without another word, he sank back into the play pool, wearing the same shell-shocked expression as Tang Erda.

One More Minute Passes The moment Liu Jiayi emerged, three pairs of hands immediately covered her eyes and ears with unrelenting force.

Liu Jiayi stood still for almost ten seconds before speaking, completely deadpan.

"…With a reaction like this," she said, voice eerily calm, "Bai Liu isn't doing something with Spades, is he?"

Chapter End Notes

Tang Erda literally stared for 9 minutes straight

The Challenge

After sitting still for a few seconds, Tang Erda nearly bolted back into the pool.

By the time they came out again, Bai Liu was the only one still outside the play pool.

He gave them a calm nod, but Tang Erda had to fight to keep his gaze steady on Bai Liu's slightly red lips. He clenched his fist, coughed awkwardly, and quickly looked away. "...You should rest. You don't need to join the training right now."

Mu Sicheng stood there, his mouth still slightly open, his expression blank. Muke had his head down, silent, hands gripping a pair of bloodstained short knives—proof of his recent violent kill in the game pool.

Liu Jiayi raised a hand in greeting to Bai Liu, his tone odd. "Have you and Spades started talking?"

Mu Sicheng, Tang Erda, and Muke, all desperately wanting to avoid the subject, exchanged uncomfortable glances.

Bai Liu paused for a moment to think, then replied casually, without hesitation, "I think we've just started talking."

Liu Jiayi cupped his face in mock thought, moving closer, clearly enjoying the gossip. "I remember who tricked you into marrying Spades in the game of Forest's Edge. And once he came out of the game pool—"

Liu Jiayi's expression abruptly hardened. The smile that had been on his lips now shifted to a mix of coolness, sarcasm, and indifference. "—It's just a game. I don't take it seriously."

Bai Liu: "....."

Muke jerked his head up to look at Bai Liu, while Mu Sicheng's pupils flickered with confusion, stumbling over his words. "What marriage?!"

"You're married to that idiot, and you're just now talking?!" Mu Sicheng slapped the side of the pool in frustration. "What the hell, does a relationship start after marriage?"

Liu Jiayi casually grabbed the edge of the game pool, flipping out of it with a smooth motion, and landed gracefully on the ground. With a light tone, he replied to Mu Sicheng's outburst, "Marriage before love. Haven't you heard of it?"

Mu Sicheng: "....."

What the hell is this?!

This definitely isn't how relationships are supposed to work!

Tang Erda, clearly exhausted from all the noise, sighed and interrupted the chaotic chatter. "This is Bai Liu's personal matter. Let's focus on the task at hand."

"The challenge is coming up soon."

Everyone fell silent and turned to Bai Liu. He nodded in agreement. "Let's head back to the meeting room first. We'll go over the teams for this year's challenge."

Meeting Room of the Wandering Circus Guild

A few of the men who had finished training took showers, changed clothes, and sat down in the meeting room.

Wang Shun walked to the front of the room, his gaze steady as he clicked on the system panel and began explaining the rules and teams for the upcoming challenge.

"As in previous years, the first-place pre-season team will draw against a team from the eight playoff teams. After that, the second-place team —our team—will draw from the remaining seven teams to determine who we'll face."

"But this year's situation is special," Wang Shun continued, rubbing his temples with a weary expression. "The president of our guild... abducted the president of another team's first-place team into our guild."

"I just spoke with Yuan Guang, and he told me they weren't planning to compete this year and were going to forfeit. But—" Wang Shun looked over at Bai Liu, who was sitting at the end of the long table. "Chairman, did you tell Yuan Guang not to forfeit just yet?"

Bai Liu nodded. "I have other plans for him."

Wang Shun raised an eyebrow. "Are you trying to get Yuan Guang to forfeit after they win the challenge and enter the playoffs against us—like we did in the pre-season?" He shook his head disapprovingly. "President, that's unlikely."

"All eight teams this year are very strong. Yuan Guang will probably not win the challenge, and even if they do, the playoffs use a draw system, and it will be hard for them to face us."

Wang Shun glanced at the panel. "In the playoffs, the top four ranked guilds draw first to determine their matchups. Then, the winning teams in each round will draw for the next round's matchups."

"Unless Yuan Guang makes it all the way to the final, there's no way they'll end up playing against us in the playoffs."

Wang Shun frowned. "But you should know, President, that Yuan Guang and his team don't even have an exemption death warrant. It seems unlikely."

Mu Sicheng rested his chin in his hand, his eyes wandering as he snuck glances at Bai Liu. He casually asked, "Yuan Guang is so skilled—can we get him to join our team and help us out?"

"No," Wang Shun replied quickly. "All players who've signed up as independent guilds this year are not allowed to join another guild's team during the tournament."

Mu Sicheng frowned. "Not even if we annex Russell Cemetery?"

"Nope." Wang Shun shook his head. "Even if we annex the Russell Cemetery guild completely, Yuan Guang and his teammates will still be considered former Russell Cemetery players. They can only sign up with us for next year, not this one."

Mu Sicheng scratched his head in frustration. "Damn, so Bai Liu's injured, hospitalized again, and in the end, we get nothing but a guild name."

"No," Bai Liu said, folding his hands together on the table and raising his gaze. "We've gained a chance for tolerance."

Wang Shun was puzzled. "What does 'tolerance chance' mean?"

Bai Liu lowered his eyes. "I'm not sure my guess is right, but I started down this path hoping to gain a challenge tolerance opportunity from Russell Cemetery."

Liu Jiayi paused, then glanced sideways at Bai Liu, speaking thoughtfully. "After Russell merges with us, Russell Cemetery will become a subordinate guild of the Wandering Circus. All the spots will go to us—except for the warband members, who can't be used by us."

"It's like us being both first and second in the league at the same time. We'd have two chances at the challenge. Is that what you're after?"

Bai Liu smiled. "Yes, a place in the challenge is the most valuable thing Russell Cemetery can offer."

Liu Jiayi furrowed her brow, still confused. "But the effort and energy you've put into this opportunity seem to outweigh the reward."

"Aside from the twenty percent of the points, our squad has taken a dip in popularity since the last game, plus you're still injured. This opportunity doesn't seem worth the effort you've put into Russell Cemetery."

"Even though the playoff teams are strong, from what I've learned, our win rate against the bottom four teams isn't bad. I think we have around an eighty percent chance against two guilds, the Kabbalah and the Paradise Masons."

"If Du Sanying handles the draw, we'll easily get over ninety-five percent of these two bottom teams. We'll cruise into the playoffs with a challenge win."

Liu Jiayi looked up at Bai Liu. "I know you like to have a backup plan, but you wouldn't prepare one when the normal process has an eighty percent win rate."

"You usually reserve your backup plans when there's less than a one percent chance of winning."

"Why now..." Liu Jiayi met Bai Liu's calm eyes, a realization dawning on her. Her expression shifted. "Do you think...?"

She didn't finish her sentence under Bai Liu's watchful gaze, but her face grew unreadable.

If Bai Liu had gone this far, it could only mean one thing.

Their chances of winning the challenge were less than one percent.

Bai Liu's gaze dropped to the reflection of his shadow on the smooth tabletop. He lingered there for a moment before slowly lifting his eyes to meet the others.

"This time, I hope I'm wrong in my guess."

After the Meeting

Wang Shun remained behind with Bai Liu.

He looked at Bai Liu, sitting at the end of the table, a mixture of apprehension and confusion on his face. "President, I don't quite understand why our guild needs a second chance at the challenge so badly."

"And I agree with the little witch. In situations where the chances of winning are less than one percent, you rarely make backup plans. Why this time..."

Bai Liu rested his hands on his knees, his gaze distant for a long moment before he asked, "Looking at the major guilds this year, do you think the current Wandering Circus—"

"—Has a chance of winning against the killer sequence?"

Wang Shun's pupils dilated, and he froze, unable to breathe for a few seconds. It took him a long time before he responded hoarsely, "...The odds are no more than 0.5%."

"Is that so?" Bai Liu propped one hand on the backrest of his chair, his body lazily tilting to one side. He half-closed his eyes, his tone calm. "In that case, let's pursue maximum profit."

Wang Shun was stunned by Bai Liu's words. It took him a moment to react before he jumped up in a panic. "Chairman, we drew Du Sanying! No matter how unlucky we are, we couldn't have drawn the killer sequence!"

"How unlucky would that be?"

Bai Liu glanced at Wang Shun, a subtle, knowing look in his eyes. "It's possible if the captain draws the lots himself."

"Have the rules for the challenge been finalized yet?"

Wang Shun fell silent, his mind racing.

After a moment, goosebumps covered his arms. He stumbled back and fell into his chair, his voice low with disbelief. "...No, it can't be..."

Wang Shun sat alone in the conference room, as though struck by lightning, while Bai Liu calmly left the room.

Outside the door, Liu Jiayi stood waiting. She didn't look up when Bai Liu exited but nodded once, her tone serious. "Are we going to face the killer sequence?"

"It's just a guess," Bai Liu replied lightly.

Liu Jiayi pursed her lips. "Have you checked with Spades about Reverse God?"

"He'll be fine," Bai Liu said with a calm expression. "He's Bai Six's important bargaining chip, one that can restrain me. It won't be so easy."

Bai Liu's eyes turned cold as he continued. "From what Bai Six showed me in the future—"

"He would have wanted me to kill Reverse God on the field."

Liu Jiayi's breath caught.

Day 2

Wang Shun entered the conference room in a daze, his eyes unfocused. When he saw the team waiting, his voice was hoarse.

"The rules for the challenge have come down. No major changes."

"...But they've asked the presidents of the pre-season guilds to personally draw their playoff matchups."

"For our guild, it's President Bai."

Everyone turned to look at Bai Liu, who was sitting at the end of the table.

Bai Liu lifted his eyelids slightly, propping one hand on his jaw. He gave a faint hum.

Living Together (Extra)

＜6 AM.

Bai Liu was half asleep when the person next to him kissed his neck. He wasn't fully awake, but in his drowsy state, he lazily draped his arms around the man's neck, touching it and kissing him back naturally with his eyes still closed.

The other man rose, pinning Bai Liu's slender wrist against the bedside table. His body pressed down heavily on Bai Liu, who kissed him in return. The man's hand slid under the hem of Bai Liu's loose blouse.

"It's a little ticklish," Bai Liu murmured, his voice muffled with sleep. "What time is it?"

The man, breathing slightly faster now, responded with a steady voice. "Six eleven."

"I'm not working today." Bai Liu finally opened his eyes a little, his hand trailing down the man's back, pressing gently against his firm shoulder blade. He let out a soft gasp. "Want to do it?"

There was a pause before the man answered, his voice low but certain. "Yes."

Bai Liu chuckled softly, sitting up on his knees and stripping off his shirt, dropping it at the foot of the bed. He moved forward, positioning himself on the man's coiled knees. He lowered his eyes, then leaned down to kiss him gently.

Bai Liu's hands, large and steady, slid up Spade's waist as his feet curled around the man's waist, securing him in place.

With a dark, drowsy voice, Bai Liu said, "This position again…"

"You really like this one."

Bai Liu tilted his head back as the man buried his face in the crook of his neck, wrapping his arms tightly around him. His voice was muffled against Bai Liu's skin. "This way, I can touch you the most."

Bai Liu let out a small laugh, finding it amusing. He touched the side of the man's face, lowering his head to kiss him again, his eyes fluttering closed as he whispered, "And you care about the area of

contact.”

"Childish," the man muttered, his breath hot against Bai Liu's skin.

9:30 AM.

Bai Liu wiped his hair and stepped out of the bathroom, shaking his head to clear the water from his ears. He dried his hair with the towel draped around his neck, lifting his eyes to see smoke rising from the kitchen.

Spades, freshly showered, was crouched outside the smoky kitchen, wearing a $30 black cotton vest that Bai Liu had bought him. He looked like a large dog that had gotten into trouble and didn’t know how to take responsibility.

Bai Liu quickly yanked the towel from his neck and covered Spades' smoke-blackened face. "I just got out of the shower. Don’t get me dirty."

Spades, his face pressed into the towel, let out a muffled "ooh," but still leaned into Bai Liu, his body tilting towards him.

Bai Liu held the towel in place for a few seconds before giving up and letting it fall.

Spades, still covered in smoke residue, was now pressed up against Bai Liu, who sighed with slight aggravation. "The kitchen is exploding again."

"What did you do this time?" Bai Liu asked, taking the lizard pendant hanging from his neck and using it to pull Spades toward the kitchen. "Microwaving Mu Sicheng's motorbike helmet again?"

"No." Spades subtly avoided Bai Liu’s gaze. "You and I both agreed the helmet isn’t edible."

"Hmm." Bai Liu lifted the pot lid, and a pungent smell immediately hit him. He raised an eyebrow at the blackened mess inside. "This is Tang Erda’s belt, isn't it?"

Spades wrapped his arms around Bai Liu’s waist and rested his head on his shoulder. Without saying a word, he gently stomped on Bai Liu's heel twice.

Bai Liu calmly used two chopsticks to remove the ruined belt from the pot, then picked away the blackened portions with careful precision. He turned and pushed Spades away, looking up at him with a raised brow. "Why are you taking revenge on Tang Erda this time?"

"Last time you retaliated against Mu Sicheng by blowing up his helmet, I understood. He provoked you by making fun of you for not being able to drive a Harrow bike while he could race one. But Tang Erda... he didn't mess with you, did he?"

Spades averted his eyes, staying silent.

Bai Liu crossed his arms, voice firm. "I told you, it's no use playing games. If you do it again, I won't even come home today or tomorrow. You'll be left alone to think it over before I return."

Spades shifted his eyes back to Bai Liu, his lips pressed into a thin line. Then, he collapsed against Bai Liu's shoulder, his body going limp like clay, before wrapping his arms around Bai Liu's waist and tilting his head against him. His voice was low, almost a whisper. "No."

"I don't like it when you don't come home," he muttered.

Bai Liu remained unfazed. He'd been fooled by Spades' antics before but had realized that the man could do anything if Bai Liu indulged him.

"So, why the revenge on Tang Erda?" Bai Liu asked, his voice quiet but persistent.

Spades was silent for a moment before replying in a barely audible voice, "He advised you to think about living with me."

Bai Liu paused, surprised. "You heard that?"

Spades nodded, mumbling, "Mm-hmm."

Tang Erda wasn't hostile toward Spades. He simply thought Bai Liu was too busy and that it would be inconvenient for someone as unstable as Spades to stay with him, even as a couple. In fact, Tang Erda had suggested Bai Liu ask Spades not to stay at home when he was free, or to leave him in the care of the Heretic Authority, fearing that Bai Liu's home would be torn apart by Spades once he returned.

"He did say that." Bai Liu replied calmly. "But did I promise?"

Spades hesitated. "No."

Bai Liu's gaze sharpened slightly. "What did I tell him?"

Spades was quiet for a few seconds. "You said I was a heretic to you alone."

"You said I would take good care of you, and no one else should bear the consequences of my presence in reality."

"Even though I'm not their captain anymore, I'm not the kind of person to be swayed by someone else's decisions," Bai Liu continued, leaning forward slightly to cup Spades' face. He kissed Spades softly, eyes half-closed. "I don't like you living in someone else's house either."

"You're my monster."

They cleaned up the kitchen quickly, with Bai Liu supervising while Spades, wearing an apron and dishwashing gloves, took care of the mess. Bai Liu firmly believed that whoever caused the trouble should clean it up, so Spades always took charge of the messes he created.

Even if Spades made a bigger mess than necessary, Bai Liu wouldn't intervene and would leave him to clean up on his own.

Afterward, Spades, now covered in grime from head to toe, looked at Bai Liu and gestured to himself. "Should I take a shower?"

Bai Liu paused as his eyes lingered on the smooth, strong lines of Spades' shoulders and neck muscles exposed by his vest. He met Spades' gaze and answered in a natural, even tone, "I'm going to take a shower too. You just got dirty again."

Spades' eyes twitched, and he looked at Bai Liu with a slightly more composed expression. "We'll wash together."

Bai Liu leaned casually against the edge of the kitchen, folding his arms and smirking at Spades. "Just washing? Or do you want to do it again?"

Spades didn't hesitate for a second. "To do it."

The Challenge

The Day of the Challenge
Mu Sicheng woke up in his dormitory, groggy from sleep. He dressed absentmindedly, squeezed toothpaste onto his toothbrush, and went through his morning routine with sluggish efficiency. After washing up, he yawned, a tear slipping from the corner of his eye. His gaze drifted to his cluttered desk—left in disarray after a late-night study session.

In the corner of the desk stood a small calendar, a gift from Liu Huai.

Mu Sicheng had never been one to keep track of dates, often forgetting even crucial exams. But Liu Huai, ever meticulous, had carefully marked deadlines for lab reports and tests in Mu Sicheng's calendar, placing it where he would see it.

The last marked date had long passed. Below it, in Mu Sicheng's own handwriting, was a note reminding him of the makeup exam.

He walked over, picked up a red pen, and tapped the date lightly. His lips moved as he counted under his breath.

"One, two... seven. Seven days."

Seven days since he had stolen anything in reality.

His pen hesitated.

Ever since meeting Bai Liu, his kleptomania had faded into the background, drowned out by all the chaos that had followed.

If Bai Liu were still around, he'd probably notice immediately that Mu Sicheng had gone a full week without stealing. And knowing him, he'd get all smug and childish about it—maybe even draw a little red flower in his discipline book as a reward.

Mu Sicheng's grip on the red pen tightened. He lowered his gaze, let out a quiet snort, and, on impulse, drew a small red flower under the date himself.

Then, pulling up the hood of his jacket, he pushed open the door and stepped out.

A breeze slipped in through the open window, rustling the pages of

the calendar. The page with the hastily drawn red flower fluttered but didn't turn.

Beneath the flower, another note was scrawled in messy handwriting:

[Rangers and Monkeys] Challenge—First Show Date!

Muke sat at the dining table, sipping porridge with deliberate slowness. Across from him, his parents sat in uneasy silence, exchanging glances.

His father was the first to break the quiet. Clenching his fist slightly, he cleared his throat.

"Muke, about that money you asked for before—I gave it to your company. I don’t care if you make it back or not. As long as you're happy."

Then, after a pause, he added, "There's something else I want to talk to you about."

Muke set down his porcelain spoon, wiped his mouth with a tissue, and looked up at his father, who was watching him expectantly.

For as long as he could remember, his father had given him whatever he wanted, never holding him accountable for his choices. Even when he strayed into gray areas, into places that could bury a person, his father never stopped him.

Muke had once believed that such indulgence must mean love. That was what others told him, at least.

But another possibility existed—his father had never expected anything from him in the first place. He had simply laid out a safety net, prepared to let him fall however he pleased.

And yet, for the first time, his father was looking at him with something akin to hope.

"Muke," his father said slowly, "I have a child out there—a year younger than you. I want to bring him home."

Muke let out a soft laugh. "Only a year younger?"

His father coughed awkwardly. "Xiao Ke, don't misunderstand. I didn’t

have this child because of your congenital heart disease. It was... an accident. I had too much to drink..."

Muke said nothing.

"Your mother knows," his father continued, glancing at his wife. "I admitted my mistake as soon as I got back. She was furious—wanted to divorce me. But in the end, she forgave me. She couldn't bring herself to let the other woman... get rid of the baby."

His mother finally spoke, her voice tinged with complex emotions. "He's a good boy. About your age. I just... couldn't bear it."

Muke lowered his eyelids, his tone light. "If you liked children a year younger than me so much, you could have just had another."

He lifted his eyes, smiling. "But you didn't, did you? Because you were afraid a second child would be another cripple like me. So you went and found someone else."

Silence blanketed the table.

His father took a deep breath. "Xiao Ke, you're our first child. We love you. We've given you everything. For years, we've raised that child in secret, shielding you from the truth, afraid that if you found out, you'd take it too hard. But now... now you're doing better. So I thought it was time to tell you."

"I've never denied you anything. I've given you money, supported your ambitions. Do you know how many people in my position would have done the same?" His father fixed him with a deep stare. "Do you know how many people with your condition have died long ago?"

Muke's smile widened. "If you ever considered denying me, it must have been at the very beginning—when I was born."

"You must have thought, more than once, that if only I had died young like the others..."

"Muke—!" His father slammed the table, his face twisting with anger. "How dare you say something so—!"

The slap landed hard.

Muke's face jerked to the side. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth, and the skin on his cheek burned.

But he only let out a low laugh. Slowly, he ran his tongue over the blood, then turned back to face his father with an eerily gentle smile.

"But I didn’t die, did I?"

"That’s the real tragedy for you."

"You must have wished, over and over, that your illegitimate son had been as exceptional as I am. Then you wouldn’t have had to make such a painful choice."

"But unfortunately"—Muke rose from his chair, pushing it back with slow, deliberate ease—"he’s no match for me."

His voice was almost amused as he added, "In the end, the one who lived long was just a mediocre failure. And the one who lived short was too gifted to be allowed to exist."

"And yet, despite everything, you've made your choice."

Muke lowered his lashes, his tone steady.

"Longevity matters more, in the end."

"Go ahead. Bring him home."

With a small, polite bow, he turned toward the door.

"Xiao Ke." His father's voice, now slower and heavier, called after him. "I was wrong to hit you just now."

"But you have to understand... You don’t know which day will be your last. Your mother and I—how could we put all our hopes, all our emotions, on a dying man?"

"No one would bet too much on you, Xiao Ke."

"We have to think about the future."

His father’s voice trembled as he finished.

"You should be content."

Muke's back stiffened for a fraction of a second. Then he let out a quiet "hmm" and stepped forward.

"I’ll go find someone willing to bet on me."

With that, he opened the door and walked away.

Tang Erda was the first to arrive in the conference room.

Liu Jiayi followed shortly after, her entire appearance neat and put-together—except for the high ponytail on her head, pulled so tight that her eyes were practically stretched sideways.

Tang Erda hesitated for a moment before giving the ponytail two slightly awkward tugs.

Liu Jiayi immediately protested, sucking in a breath. "Pause! It's tight enough!" Her eyes had been reduced to two thin slits.

Xiang Chunhua adored this kind of high ponytail and had fussed over it for a full ten minutes, but Liu Jiayi wasn't nearly as enthusiastic. Still, every time Chunhua approached her with a comb in hand, eyes expectant, she found herself unable to refuse.

At the very least, it was better than when her brother tried to do it.

Three minutes later, Mu Sicheng kicked open the door. The moment his gaze landed on Liu Jiayi's tortured-looking ponytail, he burst out laughing. "You look ridiculous! What an unconventional fashion statement!"

Liu Jiayi shot him a deadpan look. "Blame Tang Erda. Come fix it for me—I have to go on stage with Bai Liu later for the lottery draw."

Mu Sicheng cast Tang Erda a look of disdain before rolling up his sleeves. "Captain Tang, you can't even tie a little girl's ponytail properly? Watch and learn!"

Fifteen minutes later.

Liu Jiayi stared at her reflection with a blank expression. Her hair was now a complete disaster—frizzed, tangled, and looking like a bird's nest. The corner of her mouth twitched. "You call this tying a braid?"

Mu Sicheng sheepishly stepped out of her line of sight, eyes shifting away. "Everyone has their weaknesses..."

Two minutes later, Muke pushed open the door.

Tang Erda and Mu Sicheng both turned to him with pleading looks.

Muke locked eyes with Liu Jiayi, who sat in the chair radiating an ominous aura, her hair a complete wreck. Without a word, he stepped forward. "Let me do it."

One hour later.

Liu Jiayi, now resting her chin on her hand, watched as Muke meticulously combed through her hair, strand by strand, with the patience of a saint. "Are you still not done?"

Muke shook his head solemnly. "Another three hours, at least. I'm applying a hair mask first. If I don't treat the split ends, it won't be smooth when I tie it up later."

"....."

Liu Jiayi slumped forward onto the table, staring hollowly ahead. "I just wanted a simple ponytail..."

Muke, unfazed, continued his careful work. "You're a public figure. Every strand of hair should be styled properly."

"I'll just wait for Bai Liu to do it." Liu Jiayi abruptly jumped out of the chair, spinning away from Muke. With a complicated expression, she sighed. "How is it possible that three grown men—average age over twenty-five, capable of killing monsters in seconds—can't even tie a decent ponytail for a kid?"

She crossed her arms. "Are all men this uncoordinated?"

Tang Erda frowned. "Su Yang's good at it."

"Yeah, well, he's married with kids. Of course, he's good at it," Liu Jiayi retorted. Then she paused, her expression shifting subtly. "...Inverse God is also good at this. He even ties different styles."

A realization dawned on her.

"Wait—is this a special skill only married men have?"

Right as she finished speaking, the door swung open, and Bai Liu walked in. His gaze flicked over to Liu Jiayi, who was sitting cross-legged in the chair, then trailed up to the state of her hair—a high ponytail yanked to the side by Tang Erda, nestled in the disaster Mu Sicheng had created.

Without a word, Bai Liu stepped forward, untangled the ponytail with

ease, ran his fingers through Muke's half-finished conditioning job, gathered the strands, and deftly braided her hair.

In under three minutes, he was done—a simple, clean, and perfectly loose braid.

Liu Jiayi: "....."

Tang Erda: "....."

Mu Sicheng: "....."

Muke: "....."

Bai Liu glanced at the entire room staring at him in stunned silence and raised an eyebrow. "Why are you all looking at me like I'm some kind of perfect housewife?"

The Challenge

Wang Shun was the last to enter the room. He took a deep breath, scanned the faces of his teammates, and finally fixed his gaze on Bai Liu.

“Chairman, we’ve received the match draw.”

The relaxed atmosphere in the conference room vanished.

Bai Liu gave a slight nod and said calmly, “Go on.”

Wang Shun stepped forward, gripping a pen and panel in both hands as he tried to steady his voice. “The draw will take place at the mid-season viewing pool, where all eight playoff teams will be present.”

“The pool will open immediately after the draw, and the matches will begin.”

“All of these teams are strong, and every one of them has an exeption Death Warrant.” Wang Shun hesitated before continuing, “But we only have you and God Mu.”

“There’s no mercy in the playoffs. Every team has fought their way here for their own core desires.” Wang Shun took another deep breath. “Going into a team match like this means risking everything—including death.”

“Unless…”

Bai Liu finished his sentence indifferently, “Unless I win my first solo match so spectacularly that I outshine the opponent’s star player, steal their popularity, and elevate myself to a high-ranking star player—granting our team a free pass.”

“But that’s nearly…” Wang Shun’s voice faltered, “…impossible.”

If Bai Liu was drawn for a solo match, he’d inevitably be up against the Killer Sequence. And if it was a singles match against the Killer Sequence…

He’d be facing their number one-ranked player.

Wang Shun forced himself to push that thought away. “Chairman, as I’ve mentioned before, the playoffs are different from the pre-season

and mid-season."

"Playoff matches rarely consist of singles or duos."

"By this stage, most teams have already secured their individual benefits through the earlier rounds. Almost all of them have obtained an exception Death Warrant, which can only be used once in a match. If they use it in a singles or pairs match, they won't have it for the team match."

"As long as their team members don't drop below the top 100 in the popularity rankings, the major guilds follow a phased abandonment strategy—sacrificing singles and duos entirely to conserve all of their exception Death Warrant medals for the team matches."

Wang Shun turned back to Bai Liu. "That means if the Killer Sequence also forfeits singles and duos, we'll be forced straight into a team match—without exemptions for our three main players."

"And if they don't forfeit singles," Wang Shun's expression darkened, "you'll have to compete in both the solo and team matches back-to-back. Since you only have one forfeit, you'll have to choose one match to fight without protection."

"If you lose in a match without exemptions… you'll actually die."

Bai Liu's tone remained flat. "That's a possibility, but a worthwhile gamble is still worth taking."

"The odds of winning that gamble are slim!" Wang Shun was exasperated, his head pounding. "It's the Killer Sequence! If they don't forfeit, you'll be facing the strongest offensive player in the game—Spades—in the singles match. And in the team match, you'll be up against the top tactician— The Inverse God!"

"So should I give up now?" Bai Liu turned his head, his gaze steady. "Should I lead these people—who have given me everything, even their souls—into this match just to kneel and admit defeat?"

Wang Shun was stunned.

Bai Liu withdrew his gaze, his dark eyes devoid of light. "Never."

"I'll keep winning until the end."

As they walked down the corridor leading to the mid-season viewing

pool, Wang Shun paused in a daze. Bai Liu passed him, head slightly lowered, and in an uncharacteristically quiet tone, he murmured,

“The game between God and me… is just beginning.”

A flash of white light illuminated Bai Liu’s face as he stepped into the vast viewing pool. He narrowed his eyes slightly.

The deafening roar of the crowd surrounded them. The massive arena distorted under the weight of thousands of spectators, their figures overlapping in the packed space. Fireworks exploded in dazzling bursts across the sky, showering down onto the audience.

At the center of the viewing pool stood an enormous silver-white screen. Around it, eight teams sat in distinctive uniforms, their supporters behind them waving flags and chanting slogans in unison.

Mu Sicheng leaned toward Bai Liu, glancing around. He had seen his fair share of major matches, but the sheer scale of this one still shook him.

“…Is it just me, or is this viewing pool even bigger than during mid-season?”

“It’s the post-season viewing pool.”

Liu Jiayi answered coldly, arms crossed. “Obviously. After the pre-season and mid-season, all the viewing pools merge into one. Of course, it’s bigger.”

The presenter stood on an elevated platform above the massive screen, his arms gesturing animatedly as his passionate voice carried through the loudspeakers to every corner of the viewing pool.

“Today, the eight great teams that performed exceptionally well in the mid-season tournament are gathered here. However, the Tactician of the Killer Sequence, the Inquisitor of the Reverse God, is regrettably absent for unknown reasons. Still, this does not hinder the proceedings of our challenge…”

Bai Liu’s gaze swept past the Reverse Cross flag of the Killer Sequence, lingering briefly on the vacant tactician’s seat before shifting away. He turned to Spades, who was staring directly at him from the adjacent position. Bai Liu blinked softly.

Without hesitation, Spades leaped to his feet and dove toward the

lower viewing pool. Liao Ke, having anticipated his reckless move, grabbed hold of him, pressing a hand to his forehead in exasperation while murmuring something under his breath. Spades, however, didn't seem to be listening—his head tilted, eyes locked on Bai Liu, the banner above him swaying gently.

Bai Liu lowered his gaze, choosing to ignore him.

The presenter carried on.

"I'm sure we're all excited for this year's playoffs! Unlike the stagnation of previous years and last season's one-and-done Killer Sequence, this year is a true spectacle. Talented newcomers have emerged across all the major teams."

He gestured dramatically.

"First up, the youngest newcomer—Phoebe of the King's Guild! Ranked 27th! A remarkably high ranking!"

With a flourish, he pointed toward the King's Guild. "Right from the mid-season, Phoebe captivated the audience with her stellar individual performance and doll-like appearance."

Phoebe curtsied gracefully, her nun's skirt held delicately in her hands. Her emerald-green eyes drifted toward Liu Jiayi in the Circus procession. With a sweet smile, she bowed slightly, then clasped her hands together under her chin, whispering a prayer with closed eyes.

"May the Lord grant that the witch may never go to hell."

Liu Jiayi's expression remained unreadable as her gaze shifted from Phoebe's face to the swaying white Crown Club banner before her. Beyond it, she locked eyes with the languid Hearts seated at the front.

Hearts lowered his eyes and lifted a fan, concealing his face. He did not look at Liu Jiayi again.

Liu Jiayi's lips pressed into a thin line.

The presenter's voice regained its liveliness.

"Next up—Golden Dawn's Armand! Sharing the same golden looks as President Georgia, yet wielding a butterfly that can create a hurricane in every match!"

"Ranked 21st!"

He chuckled. “But don’t be fooled by Golden Dawn’s president and vice president’s sunny appearances. These two are anything but warm. The last person who made light of their looks… well, let’s just say they were swiftly sent to another world.”

Dressed in a pristine white uniform trimmed with gold, a golden seven-stringed lyre nestled in his hair, Armand let his gaze drift past the fluttering golden banner—straight to Mu Sicheng, who was peeking nervously from behind Bai Liu.

The presenter, now visibly excited, continued.

“And finally, last but certainly not least—the strongest newcomer of the year!”

“The Joker, who has won thirteen consecutive singles matches! Ranked 11th!”

His words picked up speed and intensity. “This masked player made his debut by killing a spectator mid-match and declared that revealing his true face was beneath him. Ever since, he has appeared only with a clown mask, often painted with the blood of his last opponent. Even on such a grand occasion today, he refused to remove it—and almost killed a staff member for trying to make him do so…”

He trailed off suddenly, his voice faltering.

Something was wrong.

The presenter stared in disbelief as Daniel, seated among the Deer Hunters, slowly stood. Hands trembling as though suppressing excitement, he reached up and removed his bloodstained mask.

“…The clown has removed his mask,” the presenter murmured, bewildered.

Beneath it was a baby-faced youth with apple-green eyes, his stare fixed unwaveringly on Bai Liu, who was walking toward the stands.

Humming softly, Daniel propped himself up on the spectator’s fence with one hand. With a swift flip, he attempted to jump down—only for Cen Buming to intercept him, grabbing his collar mid-leap.

Daniel didn’t even glance back. With a smirk, he pulled out his sniper rifle, aiming it directly at Cen Buming’s head.

“Stop me from reaching him, and I’ll kill you.”

The presenter gawked. “Joker has a gun on his own tactician! The Deer Hunters have suddenly erupted into infighting!”

Unfazed, Cen Buming remained still. “No harm can come to anyone in the hall,” he stated evenly.

Then, in a casual tone, he added, “I already told you—I can make Bai Liu come to you on his own. Do you really need to rush this?”

Daniel hesitated before exhaling sharply. With an irritated scoff, he withdrew his gun, flipped back over the fence, and slumped back into his chair. He refused to look at Cen Buming, his voice petulant.

“You better be telling the truth.”

The presenter, somewhat shaken, forced himself to continue. “A-And next, we have the two pre-season teams.”

“One is Russell Cemetery, which forfeited last year after near-total destruction. They’re back with the same roster—no new stars, no major shakeups.”

“The other is a rookie team—respectable compared to Russell Cemetery but far from playoff material. Notably, two of their players received exemptions.”

“First, Mu Sicheng, the roaming player—ranked 97th. This is a precarious spot. If their single matches don’t perform well, they could be replaced by a reserve player from a playoff team.”

“And their tactician—Bai Liu. Ranked 67th.”

“A solid all-rounder, though nothing particularly outstanding. His tactical style is… unconventional.”

There was a beat of hesitation before the presenter muttered, “Though speculation suggests that this rookie tactician may very well have rule-type abilities.”

Then, with exaggerated flair, he announced, “Now, before we proceed with the challenge draw, we invite the tacticians of the eight playoff teams to engage in a friendly exchange with the tacticians of the two pre-season teams!”

His voice turned lazy. “Of course, an unfriendly exchange is fine too.”

Historically, playoff tacticians rarely bothered with this formality. Last year, when Spades had been the ultimate dark horse, most refused to even shake his hand.

And this year?

The presenter was prepared for similar indifference. Executioner, Hearts, and Georgia were all cold, distant figures—unmoved even by the adoration of millions. It was unthinkable that they would pay any mind to a newly risen tactician…

His eyes widened.

He rubbed them.

Then rubbed them again.

The scene before him remained unchanged.

"…What the hell?"

The presenter shut off his mic and collapsed onto his seat in a daze.

The notoriously arrogant presidents of the three major guilds were approaching Bai Liu.

And queuing up to shake his hand.

The audience, caught in the same state of disbelief, had fallen eerily silent.

Georgia stepped forward with dignified poise. He removed his white elbow gloves and extended a slender, bony hand.

"Golden Dawn President—Georgia."

Bai Liu's gaze lingered briefly before he smiled and took his hand. "The Wandering Circus—Bai Liu."

Hearts curved his lips, extending his hand with an elegant dip of the wrist.

"We've known each other for a long time. You may call me Hearts."

Bai Liu dipped his head slightly in acknowledgment. "I'm grateful to Queen for her willingness to bet on me that day. I hope you'll continue to enjoy my performance."

Cen Buming stepped forward last. He looked at Bai Liu for a long, long time before extending his hand.

His voice was hoarse. “Bai Liu. I am the Executioner.”

Bai Liu met his gaze. “Executioner. I am the Poor Vagrant.”

Their hands briefly clasped before Cen Buming turned away without another word.

Evil God Festival - Boathouse

The presidents of the major guilds shook hands with Bai Liu in turn before departing.

The moderator, still in shock, continued his commentary: "According to standard procedure, the first-place pre-season player should draw the team first. However, since the presidency of the first-place pre-season team, Russell Cemetery, is in transition, the president of the second-place team, Wandering Circus—"

"—Bai Liu, step forward to draw the team!"

In front of the massive screen in the viewing pool, a raffle table slowly emerged. At its center stood a black curtain-covered box with an opening just wide enough for an arm to reach through. Three steps led up to the dais where the table stood.

Bai Liu moved forward unhurriedly, stepping onto the platform. With his gaze lowered and the entire room holding its breath, he reached into the box, grasped a ping-pong ball, withdrew it, and handed it to the waiting staff member.

The staff member carefully cut open the elastic ball with a knife, extracting a small slip of paper. Without looking at it himself, he held it up and turned it toward the audience for all to see.

For a brief moment, the noisy crowd fell into stunned silence.

Even the guild members of the eight seated teams looked visibly shaken, some so dazed they dropped their banners.

Hearts raised an eyebrow slightly. Phoebe cupped her face and grinned playfully. Cen Buming, looking composed, clutched his chest as if he'd seen it coming. Daniel sat up straighter, his expression grim. Georgia tilted his head, whispering something to Armand, who looked equally serious beside him.

Charles, his arms crossed with his cane resting at his side, glanced away from Bai Liu. A rare flicker of intrigue crossed his face as he curled his lips.

This gamble was about to get interesting.

Liao Ke’s grip on Spades' shoulder tightened abruptly. Bai Yi, staring

in disbelief at the label, muttered, "Shit, we can't be this unlucky..."

"The Reverse God isn't here," Bai Jiamu snapped his head toward Liao Ke, his expression dark. "How the hell are we supposed to fight without a tactician?!"

The host's voice trembled with barely contained excitement as he gestured wildly, his voice echoing across the viewing pool.

"What an unbelievable twist of fate! Our newly promoted team, stepping right into their first match, has drawn the number-one team —The Killer Sequence!!!"

On the slip of paper, a reversed cross was drawn—the unmistakable emblem of the Killer Sequence.

Regardless of the outcome, drawing the Killer Sequence guaranteed one thing: they would play. And whether they won or lost, the sheer volume of bets placed on this match would cause an explosion in the betting pools on opening day.

The crowd erupted into a frenzy!

"The battle is about to begin! Spectators, take your seats! Get your chips ready and place your bets!" The host's face contorted with excitement as he continued, "Now, the Tactician of the Killer Sequence will step forward for the traditional declaration of war against the Tactician of the Wandering Circus!"

Liao Ke took a deep breath and raised his hand to speak. "Our team's tactician is currently absent. I will be acting as the interim tactician for this match."

A beat of silence passed before the host and audience collectively lost their minds.

"The Reverse God isn't here?!"

"Changing tacticians at the last minute—what a disaster! This could sink the entire team!"

The host's voice cracked. "Ladies and gentlemen! Can our newly promoted team repeat last year's legend—Challenge the Dragon Slayer?!"

"If they succeed in slaying the dragon, the payout for bets on the

Wandering Circus will skyrocket over a hundredfold! Seize this chance! The earlier you bet, the greater your return! Hurry! Place your bets!"

Seated in the aisle lounge chair, Wang Shun stared at his system panel, his eyes reflecting the rapidly rising numbers. Though he'd seen plenty while working under Hearts, he couldn't help but inhale sharply.

"…37 times the payout…"

"That's terrifying…"

With so many points being wagered, a loss in the first match would leave a damning impression on the audience. Retaliation would follow—people would refuse to bet on them in future matches, making it significantly harder to secure the popularity rush exemption.

Wang Shun cast a worried glance toward the players in the field before finally settling his gaze on Bai Liu.

"…President."

Liao Ke turned to head toward the back passage.

Bai Jiamu suddenly grabbed his wrist, his expression unreadable, his voice low. "The Reverse God… he's always planned ahead. He can foresee the future. He'll be fine, right?"

Liao Ke, already descending the steps, didn't look back. "He'll be fine."

"He said he'd come to stop Bai Liu from winning himself."

Liao Ke exhaled slowly, then stepped into the communication cubicle before the massive screen. With a complex expression, he extended a hand toward Bai Liu, who stood waiting.

"I didn't expect to face you this soon."

Bai Liu looked up calmly, taking his hand in a firm handshake. "Neither did I."

A pause.

Liao Ke hesitated, then said, "Thank you for letting us use the game pool earlier."

"You're welcome," Bai Liu replied flatly. "And thank you for putting me in a solo match. I needed this to boost my popularity."

Liao Ke's eyes darkened. "So you've already guessed our match strategy."

With the Reverse God absent, team matches couldn't proceed immediately. Problems would arise. As the interim tactician, Liao Ke would have to stall using singles and doubles matches.

Bai Liu was quiet for a moment before speaking. "The Reverse God will come, won't he?"

Liao Ke's tone was unwavering. "If the opponent is you, then yes. No matter how badly injured he is, he'll drag himself here to fight you."

Bai Liu lowered his gaze and withdrew his hand. "I know."

"I'll wait for him."

As Bai Liu turned to leave, Liao Ke called out, "This time, he won't let you win again. Even if it kills him, he'll make sure of it."

Bai Liu halted, let out a faint chuckle, then walked off the stage.

Liao Ke watched him go, then turned and exited the cubicle as well.

The host, practically vibrating with excitement, leaned forward. "Now that the tacticians have concluded their exchange, it's time to announce the singles matchup—"

"As expected from the Killer Sequence, their singles player will be none other than their ace starter—Spades!"

The moment the words left the host's mouth, Spades, who had been leaning on a fence with one hand, flipped over effortlessly and strode toward the stage. A black bone whip was loosely tied around his waist, and numerous props were strapped to his pants—several of which were already coming loose as he walked.

One fell off.

Spades glanced down at it. He didn't move.

Liao Ke groaned, covering his face. "…I know you hate carrying props, but for the love of god, just this once, don't throw them away on purpose. I saw you kick that off. Pick it up…"

—The props had just been forced onto Spades by Liao Ke.

Spades had never used any props in matches or games. His personal record for keeping them on? Fifteen minutes—tops—before they somehow “accidentally” fell off.

But this time, Liao Ke had insisted.

Their opponent was Bai Liu.

And against Bai Liu, any extra safeguard was necessary.

Liao Ke was propped up against the fence, his gaze locked onto Bai Liu, who approached with an unsettlingly calm expression.

Of all the formidable opponents he had faced, none had ever pressured him as much as Bai Liu—who strolled onto the field with an air of ease, as if the game itself bent to accommodate him.

Liao Ke's heart pounded so violently it felt like it might burst from his throat.

Wang Shun felt the same.

Clutching his pen and paper, his eyes remained fixed on Bai Liu, standing on the stage. He took deep, measured breaths, trying to steady the lightheadedness creeping in—as if he were the one about to enter the match, not Bai Liu.

Seated on the bench with the other players who were not yet on the field, Wang Shun still looked better than most of them.

Muke’s face was ghostly pale, his fingertips pressing into his palms unconsciously. Liu Jiayi's lips were pursed, her calves tensed. Tang Erda’s brow furrowed—his fingers twitched toward the gun on his back before he let out a slow, controlled exhale.

Mu Sicheng gritted his teeth and shook his leg frantically. "Fuck, I'm so nervous I might throw up."

Tang Erda clapped him on the shoulder. "Relax and get yourself together. You have a doubles match later, and Bai Liu has an exemption—this one won't be a big deal."

Liu Jiayi, however, did not look reassured. Instead, her tension only deepened. "Bai Liu does have an exemption," he admitted.

"But he won’t necessarily use it in this match."

Muke’s lips were bloodless. "Or rather, to take care of us—who don’t have an exemption in the regatta—and to add excitement and stakes to the game—"

He took a breath.

"—Bai Liu probably won’t use the get-out-of-jail-free card this time."

Mu Sicheng looked stunned. "What the hell does that mean?! This is a fucking fight against Spades! He’s not using the exemption?! Is he insane?!"

Muke shook his head grimly. "No. It’s because he’s fighting Spades that he won’t use it."

"He wants to break Spades' undefeated singles streak once and for all—and in doing so, catapult himself into stardom. The moment a team has a star player, the audience is far more likely to vote the entire group into the top 100 to ensure that their favorite player advances."

Muke turned to Mu Sicheng, whose pupils had shrunk in alarm.

"If he wins this high-risk match without the exemption, his popularity boost will all but guarantee that our entire team benefits—and we’ll all get a free pass into the next round."

Mu Sicheng's eyes reddened, his fists clenching. "This isn't eating his popularity bonus—this is eating Bai Liu's fucking life!"

The presenter’s voice rang out, almost trembling with excitement. "Here we go, here we go! Both contestants are stepping onto the stage!"

"Players, please declare war!"

Bai Liu stood across from Spades, meeting his gaze levelly. His face betrayed no emotion. "Do you want to win?"

Spades nodded without hesitation. "I'm going to beat you."

Bai Liu smiled. "I want to win too."

He reached up, grasping something at his collar. A golden medal slipped from the chain around his neck, catching the light. A similar medal, identical in design, gleamed against Spades’ chest.

The host clicked his tongue. "Oh? Both players have an exemption medal. Looks like they'll be using them—takes some of the excitement out of it."

Then Bai Liu calmly removed his medal.

A system notification flickered above him.

[System Alert: Does player Bai Liu choose to forfeit the use of the Exemption Medal for this match?]

The presenter's voice shot up an octave. "Oh my god! What did I just witness?! This is a standard move to waive immunity! This rookie tactician has just decided to give up his exemption against one of the most aggressive players in the league!"

"I take back my previous statement! While the outcome is still likely to favor Spades, this match is suddenly a hell of a lot more interesting!"

The host let out a low chuckle. "I just hope our rookie tactician doesn't live to regret this moment of recklessness—assuming he does live through this match."

Spades, expression unreadable, tugged the exemption medal from his own neck.

He raised his arm—then, just as Bai Liu had, moved to the side.

[System Alert: Does player Spades choose to forfeit the use of the Exemption Medal for this match?]

Silence hung in the air.

Then the host roared: "Spades has accepted the challenge! He's forfeiting immunity too!"

"IT'S A BATTLE TO THE DEATH!"

Liao Ke's expression twisted in horror as he slapped the railing. "SPADES! WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?!"

Spades ignored him. His gaze remained fixed on Bai Liu, his eyes carrying a strange weight. "I'm going to beat you—on equal terms."

Bai Liu smiled. "The guy I liked before used to say the same thing."

"I played countless horror games with him—but I never won. Not

once. He was so good at them, and I could never get past the fact that he always, always beat me."

"I wanted to beat him—just once."

"But I never got the chance. He got away before I could."

Spades' gaze sharpened. "Then I'll win against you the same way."

Bai Liu's eyes glimmered. The smile on his lips deepened.

"Well, let's see if you're really good enough for that."

He let go of the medal.

At the same time, Spades did too.

"Ding—!"

The two medals hit the ground in unison, bouncing once before spinning midair—then, with a shimmer, dissolved into gold dust and vanished.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu and Player Spades confirm they will not be using their Exemption Medals in this match.]

[..... Game screening in progress ..... Game loading in progress .....]

[Game loaded successfully.]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu and Player Spades have entered the game instance—'Evil God Festival: Boathouse.']

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has acquired the identity of the duplicate (Heir to the Evil God).]

[Player Bai Liu activates the main quest.]

[Main Quest: The successor of the Evil God must find two anchor bodies carrying the spirit and flesh of the old Evil God within seven days and sacrifice them at the boathouse on the day of the Evil God Festival to complete the ritual.]

Bai Liu slowly opened his eyes.

He stood on the shore of a dark, endless sea. The waves lapped against the harbor, breaking with an eerie, rhythmic sound. Suddenly, from behind him, a heavy drumbeat echoed in the darkness.

"Thud—!"

To his left, a lantern flickered to life, its round belly glowing with flat white characters against a red background. The candle inside swayed, casting unsteady light. Then, the drumming intensified, a deep, resonant thumping, accompanied by a low, masculine voice humming an unfamiliar, haunting melody.

The scene brightened. What had been obscured in darkness emerged in the warm orange glow of candlelight.

Bai Liu glanced around. Above him, thin cords stretched across the sky, interwoven into a vast network, suspending countless lanterns at regular intervals. Well-cut confetti decorations dangled from the lanterns, fluttering in the sea breeze. They swayed and clinked like delicate bells, their flickering shadows blurring the bustling scene.

Flanking him on either side stood dozens of drummers—young, strong men with muscular builds. Thick white cloth ropes looped around their broad necks, trailing forward over their shoulders and securing to gilt rings on the red-bodied taiko drums in front of their waists, each drum as large as a grindstone.

The drummers chanted in unison, their voices reverberating in an odd, rhythmic cadence. As the chant intensified, they raised their drumsticks high and brought them crashing down with force.

One by one, the lanterns ignited, illuminating the sea like daylight in the dead of night.

The streets beyond were alive with activity. Stalls lined the roads, selling small bells tied with red threads, amulets of various blessings, scented candles, candy apples, and masks depicting gods and spirits. The finest among them was a mask of an Evil God—its expression compassionate yet eerie, with white hair and piercing blue eyes.

Vendors bustled about, hawking new and festive trinkets. Visitors in elaborate ceremonial dress strolled through the streets, laughing and chatting excitedly.

"This year's Evil God Festival is livelier than ever."

"Of course! The Evil God Festival is the grandest event in town every year. Thanks to the Evil God's blessings, our wishes come true, and life here keeps improving."

"It's already been ten years since the Evil God-sama came to our town, hasn't it? That's when we built the shrine for Him."

"This year marks the tenth anniversary of the festival, so it’s especially grand. And the one leading the ritual… they say he’s the most likely successor to the Evil God..."

"Wasn't he originally just a sacrificial offering sold off in town? And now he gets to preside over the ceremony? Talk about a meteoric rise. I even heard he tried to run away once. Can you believe it? The gods bestowed such favor upon him, and instead of cherishing it, he wanted to escape. Honestly..."

"Enough about him. I’m more interested in which children will be chosen for the sea shrine offering this year. I want to see for myself. Maybe I’ll even get lucky and draw one of my own offerings! I have so many wishes I want the Evil God to grant."

"Greedy much? Didn’t you get your wish granted last year?"

"Last year was last year. This year is this year. And it’s not like I have to pay anything for my wishes to come true, hehehe."

Bai Liu stood alone on a wooden platform near the sea, a stage meant for divine rituals. He was dressed in a ceremonial black-and-white robe, intricate and layered, reminiscent of a wabi-sabi kimono but far more elaborate.

In his hand, he held a kagura bell adorned with round golden chimes. The wide, flowing sleeves of his robes billowed as the cold sea breeze passed through, tousling the loose strands of his dark hair. The bell in his hand swayed with the wind, producing a crisp, melancholic chime.

The wind was cold.
The water was colder.
The golden bell trembled.

Below the high platform, festival-goers bustled about, laughing, arguing, calling out to one another. In the distance, beyond the endless black sea, faint orange lights flickered on the horizon—perhaps a ship anchored offshore.

"Knock, knock, knock—!"

A sudden movement—Bai Liu turned just in time to see a hand swinging toward his face in a fierce slap.

He moved instinctively, dodging to the side—

[System Warning: Resisting action is against the player's (Heir of the Evil God) identity setting. Please do not resist!]

Bai Liu felt his body freeze in place, unable to move. The man's slap landed hard across the left side of his face, splitting the corner of his pale lips. Beads of blood welled up, rolling down and dripping onto the ground.

"Useless bastard!" the man scolded sharply. "How dare you stop in the middle of a divine rehearsal? That is a grave disrespect to the Lord of Evil!"

Bai Liu lowered his gaze, head slightly bowed. He didn't raise a hand to wipe the blood from his lips, nor did he speak.

His silence only infuriated the man further. He lifted a foot, ready to kick Bai Liu's waist, but at the last moment, his eyes flicked to the sacred ceremonial robes Bai Liu wore—priceless garments embroidered with intricate patterns. He barely held back his kick, instead jabbing a finger at Bai Liu's face.

“The first act of the Evil God Festival’s ritual performance is in seven days, and you still can’t remember the steps of the opening dance. If anything goes wrong in this decade’s Great Evil Festival, even if you are the one most likely to inherit the title of the Evil God’s Heir, we will sink you in chains and use you as the shrine’s anchor at the bottom of the sea!”

The man sneered. “I know you fear water the most. If you don’t want to suffer that fate, practice properly.”

With that, he turned sharply on his heel, flinging his sleeves as he strode away. His voice was cold as he ordered the two young attendants at Bai Liu’s side, who stood with their heads bowed in quiet fear.

“Take him down, change his clothes, and treat the wound on his face.”

Then, his gaze darkened. “Don’t let him sleep tonight. Make him practice the divine sacrifice dance a thousand times. I want to see him perform it flawlessly before he steps onto the stage tomorrow.”

One of the young attendants hesitated, then gathered his courage and spoke, his voice trembling. “But Lord Gosho… Bai Six hasn’t rested in three days. And after being punished yesterday, he hasn’t had a single sip of water since. If he doesn’t rest now…”

Lord Gosho turned his head, casting the boy a cold, sidelong glance.

The attendant flinched, shoulders stiffening. He immediately bowed his head. “Understood. I will supervise Bai Six’s training through the night and ensure he meets your expectations, my lord.”

Satisfied, Gosho snorted and strode off the platform without another glance at Bai Liu. The two attendants stepped forward to support him.

The one who had spoken earlier hesitated, cautiously looking around to ensure Gosho had disappeared into the town. Only then did he let out a breath of relief and turn back to Bai Liu with visible concern.

“Are you alright? Can you still stand?”

Bai Liu shook his head slightly. “I’m fine.”

It was only after Gosho left that he regained control of his body. A moment ago, when he tried to resist, he had been forcibly immobilized.

This dungeon had stricter role-playing requirements than his previous one in Yinshan Village. Even the slightest deviation from his assigned role wasn't tolerated. If he acted out of character, the system would immediately override his movements.

They were forcing him to follow the designated path of the Evil God's Heir. And with the festival as the central theme… Bai Liu could guess what was coming.

"How can you be fine?" The attendant, now unrestrained by fear, started fussing over him. His worried face betrayed his frustration. "Yesterday, you stepped off beat, and Lord Gosho made you dance all day without food or water. Today, you didn't even close your eyes before going back on stage. You've been rehearsing since this afternoon—of course you swayed a few times. I thought you were going to collapse right then and there."

Now that he mentioned it, Bai Liu did feel lightheaded. The lack of sugar and water left a deep, gnawing weakness in his body, and a faint dizziness clouded his mind. He closed his eyes, taking slow, deep breaths while using the attendant's hand for balance.

The young attendant panicked at the sight of Bai Liu closing his eyes and quickly pulled something from his sleeve. "Here! This is golden flat candy I bought at the festival earlier. I hid it in my sleeve and snuck it up here. Eat some—it'll help."

Bai Liu's eyelashes fluttered as he opened his eyes slightly. He accepted the candies and swallowed a few.

The sticky sweetness of the sugar scraped against his dry throat, making him cough a few times as he swallowed. The attendant's expression twisted with concern. "Later, we'll sneak back to the boathouse where there's no supervision. You can rest and eat something there."

"The boathouse?" Bai Liu's eyes darkened slightly. "Where is that?"

The attendant frowned, reaching out to touch Bai Liu's forehead. "Bai Six, do you have a fever? Are you confused?"

"You don't remember the boathouse?"

"That's where we—where the bought offerings—lived as children." The attendant sighed. "I suppose it makes sense that you've forgotten. You haven't been back there since Lord Gosho took you away five

years ago. You've lived in the shrine ever since, being trained as the Evil God's Heir."

Bai Liu's tone remained flat as he lied, "I remember. But wouldn't the boathouse, where the sacrifices are kept, be heavily guarded this close to the ritual? Why would it be unsupervised?"

"It is usually under strict guard." The attendant exhaled, shaking his head. "Bai Six, you've been so caught up in rehearsals that you forgot —tomorrow is the first day of the seven-day-long Evil God Festival."

His voice grew colder. "There won't be any supervision at the boathouse tonight."

Bai Liu's expression didn't change, but his fingers curled slightly around the golden bells in his hand.

The attendant lifted his gaze, his face unreadable.

"Because tonight, the entire town will go to the boathouse and steal the offerings like crazy."

"This is the true beginning of the Evil God Festival—the Funakamiya Night Jubilee."

Chapter End Notes

> Bai Liu and Bai Six are pronounced the same way in Chinese, and the only difference between them is in the written form. The two names are distinguished solely by a single character change in the writing, which is why people refer to him as Bai Six instead of Bai Liu.

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

Bai Liu was led by the junior valet to a coastal townhouse.

The building was a single-story structure—low but sprawling. It had a wooden and thatched spire, with teru teru bozu dolls and wind chimes hanging from the eaves. Beneath it, wooden beams and stone blocks lifted the house slightly off the ground, leaving a hollow space below. When Bai Liu peered into the darkness, a damp chill seeped up from the void, carrying the eerie sensation that something might crawl out at any moment.

The stone supports were moss-covered, the wooden frame blackened and rotting. As Bai Liu stepped forward, the floor creaked and trembled beneath his feet, making it clear just how old the structure was.

Inside, a row of rooms stretched along the corridor, resembling the hot spring lodges Bai Liu had seen in reality. Each room was divided by sliding doors made of pine wood and paper screens. In the upper right corner of every room, a wooden plaque hung—polished black with lacquer—bearing inscriptions that labeled the room's purpose, such as [So-and-so's Room], [Kitchen], or [Living Room].

As Bai Liu walked down the corridor, he could clearly hear the sounds coming from within—wailing cries of despair mixed with disjointed laughter. The paper doors cast faint silhouettes: figures slumped in disorderly heaps, half-dressed; some knelt, rhythmically banging their heads against the floor; others laughed as they unbuckled their belts, fastening them into loops and slipping them around their necks while whispering desperate prayers.

"It would be good to die… Let the evil god choose me as a sacrifice… I want to die this year…"

Soon, three or four figures entered the room, pulling the suicidal ones back. Their wailing and laughter twisted into a cacophony of sobs and choked screams.

"Haven't I suffered enough? Why won't the Lord of Evil choose me?!"

Bai Liu had stopped in his tracks, gazing sideways into the adjacent room. Noticing this, the valet leading him turned back. His expression tensed, his smile becoming forced.

"Oh, right. Bai Six, you don't know yet…" The valet hesitated before explaining, "There are three or four people assigned to restrain each sacrifice now. Back when you were here, there was only one. But more and more sacrifices broke down, so the town assigned more overseers to prevent escapes and suicides."

He glanced around before lowering his voice. "The sacrificial children who live here… they pity you." His tone was strange as he added, "You were chosen to be the heir of an evil god—never to be a sacrifice again."

With that, he lowered his head and continued walking. "Come with me. There's not much time for you to rest. Don't look at them."

After weaving through a long, winding corridor, the valet finally stopped at an old room. A wooden plaque outside read [Beiyuan Cang Tai]. Standing on tiptoe, he removed the sign and replaced it with a new one.

Bai Liu watched as the discarded plaque was flipped over, revealing its new inscription: [Imperial Boat Bai Six].

"This was the nameplate you used when you were housed in the boathouse for the offering," Beiyuan Cang Tai murmured as he slid open the door. A wave of damp air rushed out, thick and cloying. "I kept it. Now, I'm using it again for you."

The room was cramped and damp. In the center of the floor lay a narrow tatami mat, covered by an old, single-person bedding set. A wooden tray sat half a meter from the bed, bearing unwashed oil stains—likely remnants of past meals. Directly opposite the tatami was a short mahogany desk, about 40 or 50 centimeters high.

A large ukiyo-e-style painting hung on the wall beside the desk. The vibrant illustration depicted waves crashing against a shrine-like vessel, its mast partially obscured by a wind-tattered flag. Bai Liu recognized the symbol immediately—it was an inverted cross.

Beiyuan Cang Tai continued rambling as he stepped inside. "If you want to claim a room to rest in, you have to hang a wooden sign with your name outside. Otherwise, the overseers here at the boathouse will mistake you for a sacrifice later. And if it's your turn to be sent to the Bitter Chamber for training, well… let's just say you wouldn't want to be mistaken for one of them…"

Mid-sentence, he abruptly stopped. His words died in his throat, his

gaze frozen on the interior of the paper door he had just pushed open. His face drained of color, turning deathly pale.

Bai Liu followed his line of sight and saw a piece of paper affixed to the door.

[As the sacrificial victim Beiyuan Xiaokui has completed the required level of Bitter Chamber Cultivation, today, the Beiyuan family transfers the training to the sacrificial victim Beiyuan Cang Tai.]

"Xiaokui… passed the standard?" Beiyuan Cang Tai reached out, peeling the notice from the door with trembling fingers. His entire body quivered, even his voice shaking. "I only trained yesterday… for half a day… and now they're sending me again today…?"

Bai Liu, kneeling on the tatami, gazed up at him calmly. "The Bitter Chamber Cultivation…" he asked. "What is it?"

"Oh, Bai Six, back when you made the sacrifice, you had never undergone training in the Bitter Chamber."

Beiyuan Cang Tai knelt naturally behind Bai Liu, his posture straight. He raised a hand and gently hooked his fingers through the dark ties fastened around Bai Liu's ears, his tone as light as his touch. "After you were captured and brought back from your escape, this side of the boathouse was reorganized—everything was restructured into the formal practice of the Bitter Chamber."

The dark cloth ties fluttered to the floor, and Bai Liu's long hair cascaded down to his waist.

It was only then that he realized—his hair wasn't the shoulder-length cut of the outside world. Instead, it had been gathered and tied up to make it appear shorter.

"It's been five years since you left the boathouse and became the heir of the Evil God. As His heir, you are responsible for divine rituals—your body and hair belong to the gods, so you are forbidden from cutting it."

Beiyuan murmured in a daze, running his fingers through Bai Liu's hair. "It's grown so long… even longer than Xiaokui's."

Bai Liu turned his head slightly, glancing at Beiyuan, who was kneeling behind him. "Beiyuan Xiaokui—she isn't actually your sister or elder, is she? You just share the same surname."

"No." Beiyuan shook his head with a gentle smile. He reached under the pillow, took out a wooden comb, and knelt back down behind Bai Liu, carefully brushing through the strands. "You've been away from the boathouse for too long—you've forgotten how we get our surnames."

"Don't move," Beiyuan murmured as he gently held Bai Liu in place, continuing to comb his hair with careful strokes. "If you do, you'll be punished again when the Lord of the Imperial Ship sees you."

"I haven't forgotten," Bai Liu replied lightly, his gaze fixed straight ahead. "Our surnames—the surnames of the people who chose us."

"My surname was Gifune. I was originally meant to be a sacrifice for someone from the Gifune family. Since you and Xiaokui both have the surname Beiyuan, it means you were both sacrifices chosen by the same Beiyuan family. All the children with the same surname were given to the same clan."

Beiyuan's hand stilled in the middle of combing. He paused for a long moment before continuing, his voice dropping to a near whisper.

"But you… you haven't been Gifune Bai Six for a long time. You were never successfully sacrificed. You became the heir to the Evil God, no longer a mere offering. They took the surname Gifune away from you."

His gaze lowered, the wooden comb following the downward motion of his eyes as it brushed against the floor. His voice was quiet but certain.

"You are the one chosen by the Evil Lord. You should bear no name but His. The surname Gifune is not worthy of you."

Beiyuan picked up a silk ribbon and hooked a strand of Bai Liu's hair from each temple with his little finger. He let the strands fall loosely over Bai Liu's ears, then tied them at the ends, finally securing both pieces together at the center of Bai Liu's head. The ribbon draped down over Bai Liu's ceremonial robe.

Bai Liu's gaze flicked upward, turning slightly to look at Beiyuan. The strands of hair caught in the ties slipped down, curling softly over his shoulders.

His eyelashes were long, his pupils dark. As he lifted his eyes, the golden paint dusted over the waves in the ukiyo-e painting behind

Beiyuan caught the dim light, shimmering like the scales of a fish beneath the sea.

Softly, Bai Liu asked, "Is it done?"

Beiyuan stared at Bai Liu in quiet awe before suddenly smiling. "You're beautiful, Bai Six. No wonder God chose you from among us."

He pressed his forehead against Bai Liu's shoulder, careful not to let his tears stain the ceremonial robes. His arms wrapped around Bai Liu in a restrained but firm embrace, his voice shaking as he choked back a sob.

"…God is cruel."

"Why must the most beautiful child among us be made to suffer the most? Why must you be denied even the right to be a sacrifice?"

"For us, there is only one Bitter Chamber in this world."

"But for you, Bai Six, there is no escape. The whole world is your Bitter Chamber."

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

Bei Yuan rested his head against Bai Liu's shoulder, suppressing his sobs as he took two deep breaths. "...I won't keep you any longer. You need to rest—you still have to go to the Luming Shrine in the mountains to practice."

When he finished speaking, Bei Yuan took two steps back on his knees, bowed his head, pressed his hands together before his forehead, and slowly prostrated himself. His voice trembled slightly.

"Bai Six, if you truly are the Lord Heir of Evil… if your dance can really reach the Lord of Evil, then I beg you—please, ask Him to choose Xiaokui as the sacrifice this time."

"I can hold on for another two years, but Xiaokui… she's really running out of time."

Bei Yuan's voice choked up, but he quickly raised a hand to wipe away the tears gathering at the corners of his eyes. Without another word, he bowed once more to Bai Six, lifted the hem of his robe, and stepped toward the door. He reached up and peeled off the [Notice of Practice in the Suffering Room] posted on the inside, then shut the door behind him. His departing figure was bleak, his back turned to the peace room as he walked away.

Bai Liu withdrew his gaze from the door Bei Yuan had closed, slowly shifting his attention to the painting of waves directly in front of him.

In horror games—especially Japanese ones—decorations inside narrow rooms often contained hidden clues, particularly in the innermost chambers where the inner walls didn't directly connect to the outer rooms.

Rising to his feet, Bai Liu reached out and touched the shrine-like vessel being tossed by the waves in the painting. His fingertips moved inch by inch over the ship's intricate details, studying its design with careful scrutiny, until they came to rest on a half-obscured, inverted cross emblazoned on its flag.

His fingers paused for a moment before he took down the painting, tracing the faint indentations left on the wall beneath it.

Expression unreadable, Bai Liu curled his fingers and pressed down firmly against the wall.

A concealed mechanism clicked—the wall where the painting had been mounted suddenly flipped, revealing a recessed, frame-sized shrine built into the surface.

At the center of the shrine stood an exquisitely carved statue of the Red God Mu.

The statue was aged—the mahogany wood at its knees and shoulders had been worn smooth and darkened by countless reverent touches. It wore a hunting suit similar to Bai Liu's, though more elaborate in its detailing.

The hem of its long, flowing robe draped down to its slender, crossed ankles, which were carved with faded golden chains, as if bound above the rippling sea beneath its feet.

The statue sat in a languid posture, its head tilted slightly beneath the raised eaves of the temple. In its hands, it held an open book, appearing deep in study. A coiled rope of rough twine encircled the top of its face, and a piece of soft, fluttering Gosho paper was threaded through the bindings, obscuring its features.

On the paper, two words were written in elegant brush strokes:

[Wishless]

An incense burner rested inside the shrine, its embers smoldering. With the faint breeze stirring in the room, the Gosho paper shifted slightly, as did the rising smoke curling from the burner. A clear, pleasant sandalwood scent filled the space.

Bai Liu's gaze lingered on the wooden book cradled in the idol's hands. His eyes narrowed slightly.

The pages of the book were cracked, bearing jagged, uneven grain—like they had once been roughly torn apart by hand, then pieced back together.

Bai Liu knew a book with this exact texture.

The Long, Thin, Ghostly Book of Murder.

He had placed it in Xie Ta's arms when he sank into the pond. It should have drifted away with him…

Yet now, it appeared in the hands of this idol. And given the theme of

this copy…

This idol was likely Xie Ta. One of the old Evil God offerings within the game.

Without hesitation, Bai Liu reached out and lifted the Gosho paper covering the statue's face.

The instant the paper was pulled away, a deafening crash erupted from the waves in the painting he had set on the floor. A violent sea wind roared from within, billowing Bai Liu's kimono up over his eyes.

A raging storm and surging waves spilled out of the painting, swallowing Bai Liu whole.

By the time the storm settled, the painting had been restored to its place on the wall. The room looked exactly as it had before—except for one detail.

The great ship that had once been depicted on the rolling waves?

It was gone.

The room stood silent, untouched. Only the wooden plaque hanging beside the door of the peace room and the lingering scent of sandalwood remained.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has triggered the main storyline of (Old Evil Gods - Spirit Offerings) Collection Branch]

Bai Liu's eyes slowly opened, his consciousness swimming in a wave of dizziness so intense it nearly unsettled him to his core.

The dimly lit cabin before him was shrouded in darkness, the outlines of bunk beds barely visible. The air was thick with the sound of retching—people vomiting from seasickness—interspersed with the hysterical sobs of children breaking down.

"I want to go back!!!"

"I want to stay at the orphanage! I don't want to be here!!!"

"The people who bought us are crazy! They're going to abuse us! Let us off this boat!!!"

Bai Liu lowered his gaze to his hands—thinner, smaller than before. His body, too, felt shorter, compact enough to stretch his legs fully in

the narrow confines of the bed.

A rough estimate, based on his current height, placed him at about sixteen or seventeen years old.

He shifted slightly, only to realize his hands and feet were tightly bound, secured to the bed frame. The boat rocked violently with the waves, his body rising and falling in rhythm with the sea, yet he remained completely immobilized.

A flash of lightning split the night sky. For a brief moment, the illumination seeped into the cabin, revealing the full extent of his surroundings.

Three rows of narrow bunks filled the space, densely packed with pale-faced children. Their ages ranged from barely a few years old to around seventeen or eighteen. Every single one of them was bound, wrists tied to the bed frame, just like him. Some curled up into themselves, whimpering. Others sat still, numb and motionless. Many were doubled over, overcome by nausea, retching from seasickness.

Behind Bai Liu, someone dry-heaved, their frail body shuddering from the exertion. Nothing came up—evidence that they hadn't eaten in a long time. Their labored gasps and exhausted coughing made it clear: they were growing weaker by the second.

Bai Liu's voice was calm, almost indifferent. "If you're seasick, you'd best give up on trying to escape."

His words seemed to catch the other person off guard.

"There's nowhere to run. No matter where you go, you'll still have to cross the sea. If you can't even handle the boat, you won't make it far."

The struggling behind him stopped. After a long pause, a hoarse voice finally spoke.

"My name is Cang Tai. What's yours?"

"Bai Liu."

Cang Tai hesitated, then asked in mild surprise, "Are you that Bai Six?"

Bai Liu's fingers twitched slightly. "You know me?"

"I wouldn't say I know you," Cang Tai admitted, voice uncertain. "But

you're the most talked-about kid here. Everyone knows about you."

"Oh?" Bai Liu's tone was light, almost amused. "And what about me is so interesting that it warrants discussion?"

Cang Tai hesitated before lowering his voice. "They say… you killed a child named Xie Ta at the orphanage. Pushed him into a pond. Is that true?"

For a moment, Bai Liu was silent. When he finally spoke, his voice was detached, almost emotionless.

"As one of the main characters of this story, may I have the privilege of knowing how the tale is told?"

"So you didn't kill anyone? They're just making things up?" Cang Tai asked cautiously. He shifted, moving slightly closer, lowering his voice even further. "The version I heard goes like this: They say you were always a strange kid. That back at the orphanage, you liked playing with eerie things. That you—"

Cang Tai swallowed. "—killed small animals. A lot of them."

Bai Liu's expression remained unreadable. "For example?"

Cang Tai exhaled shakily. "Kittens, rabbits, hamsters. They said you'd skin them and tuck their pelts between the pages of fairy tale books."

"Always on the happiest page," he continued, voice wavering. "So when the kids turned the page, excited to see the ending, they'd find bloody animal skins falling into their laps instead. They'd scream in terror, and you—"

Cang Tai hesitated before finishing, "—you'd stand there. Head tilted. Laughing."

Something stirred in Bai Liu's memory. A long-buried fragment surfaced—strange yet familiar.

A long time ago, while cleaning the orphanage's library, he and Xie Ta had discussed pulling a prank like that. He remembered the mischievous spark in his own eyes, the idle amusement in his voice.

But Xie Ta had shut him down immediately.

Bai Liu could still recall those silver-blue pupils looking straight at him, calm and unwavering.

"You wouldn’t do that," Xie Ta had said.

"Why not?" Bai Liu had asked, tilting his head.

Xie Ta had been quiet for a moment before answering softly, "Because I’ve seen the Bai Six who would."

"That’s not you."

Bai Liu had smirked. "Is there another Bai Six in this world besides me?"

Bai Liu approached Xie Ta with amusement, "You don't seem to like this Bai six much."

Xie Ta lowered his gaze. "It’s not a matter of like or dislike."

"He and I were born as opposites. He chases desire—consumes it. He would draw power, wealth, and madness from anything he could sink his teeth into."

Bai Liu had hummed thoughtfully. "Sounds like me."

Xie Ta had met his gaze then, his expression unreadable. "No. You’re different."

"He would…" Xie Ta had hesitated, then spoken carefully, "…own me."

"You wouldn’t."

At that moment, something outside had interrupted them—a ball slamming against the window, the loud crack drowning out the rest of Xie Ta’s words.

When Bai Liu had tried to ask again, Xie Ta had only turned away, offering no answer.

Cang Tai’s voice pulled him back to the present.

"Then, after that, things got worse," Cang Tai murmured. "You became obsessed with Xie Ta. Followed him everywhere. But he never acknowledged you. It was like… you didn’t exist to him."

"One night, you went looking for him at the church. He was always there, reading by himself. That night was no different. He had this weird book with him…"

Cang Tai trailed off, struggling to remember.

Bai Liu's lips curled faintly. "A Documentary on the Murder of a Long, Thin, Ghostly Shadow."

"Yes, yes, yes! That's the name!" Cang Tai exclaimed excitedly, his words flowing smoothly. "They say you killed Xie Ta that very night and returned with a blood-stained copy of The Long, Thin, Ghostly Book of Murder, then sat alone by your bed, humming a little tune, as if you had been reading the book with pleasure all night—terrifying the boy who lived next to you."

"Then that boy, despite his fear, mustered up the courage to ask if you had really killed Xie Ta."

Cang Tai swallowed nervously before continuing. "You looked up at him, your face covered in blood, and smiled. Then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, you said—'Yes. I killed him.'"

"The boy broke down, crying, and asked, 'Why? Why did you kill Xie Ta? He never did anything to hurt you!'"

Cang Tai's voice trembled as he spoke. "And then you said—"

His breath hitched.

"You said..."

'I wanted to read The Long, Thin, Ghostly Book of Murder too. I stood behind Xie Ta and waited for a long time, hoping he would turn around and invite me to read with him.'"

"'But he never did. It was as if I didn't exist to him—as if he couldn't even see me standing there, waiting.'"

Cang Tai's voice dropped to a whisper.

"And then you laughed. Almost regretfully. You spread your hands and said—"

"'So I had no choice but to kill him... and invite his corpse to read with me instead.'"

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

Waves rose and fell, whispers trembled.

Cang Tai's voice grew thinner, as if he feared the Bai Six in this story. He dared not speak too loudly behind him. "...They said the teachers at the orphanage threw a huge tantrum when they couldn't find Xie Ta, but no one dared to accuse you of killing him. They were afraid you'd kill them too."

"And... as much as they're scared of you, they're also terrified of Xie Ta. They believe that after the two of you—like monsters—clashed, only the stronger one remained. So now, they're even more afraid to cross you."

"A while after Xie Ta's death, something happened at the orphanage where you lived. The investors withdrew almost entirely, refusing to continue funding it. The orphanage declined, and one by one, the children disappeared—no one knows if they ran away or..."

"Eventually, the orphanage shut down. Those of you who hadn't caused trouble were sent to this ship under the guise of charity. The director claimed an overseas orphanage would take you in."

"'Sent?'" Bai Liu echoed, his voice calm. "You mean trafficked."

Cang Tai sighed. "Sending sounds better, but in the end, it's the same. You're not being taken to an orphanage. Like me, you were trafficked —to a small seaside town called Luming County."

"This isn't your country anymore. It's always been poor. There's no such thing as an orphanage. You were probably bought to do hard labor."

"We weren't bought for hard labor."

A girl's voice—soft, trembling—came from the lower bunk.

Cang Tai was startled. He struggled forward, peering down. "Who are you...?"

"My name is Xiaokui."

A slim girl, about eleven or twelve, raised her pale face from the bunk. She looked clean, but there was a dazed, disoriented fear in her eyes.

"I'm from Luming County."

Cang Tai frowned. "Then how did you end up on this boat with us?"

"I escaped from Luming County... from being a sacrifice. But they took me back." Xiaokui's face was ashen. Desperation seeped into her voice. "This time, I won't get another chance. The torture is driving me insane."

Bai Liu asked, "Is Luming County poor?"

—It didn't match what he had seen before.

Even the abandoned boathouses along the coast had been well-maintained. It didn't look like a town so destitute it needed to sell people for labor.

Xiaokui shook her head, whispering in a daze, "Luming County was poor before. But not anymore."

"Ever since the shrine there began worshiping the evil gods three years ago, the town has been growing richer—wealthier by the day. When I escaped, they were even dressing the sacrifices in silk."

Cang Tai was stunned. "Silk clothes? They're treating the laborers they bought that well?"

"I told you—it's not labor." Xiaokui's voice weakened. "It's sacrifice."

Bai Liu pondered. "What happened three years ago? Why did Luming County suddenly start worshiping evil gods?"

"I don't know the details." Xiaokui struggled to sit up, looking at Bai Liu in the upper bunk. "But my mother told me it all started when the fishermen salvaged a young man's body from the sea."

"The corpse was... unnaturally beautiful. He had silver curls draped over his forehead, long, graceful limbs, and wore loose, flowing robes. He didn't breathe, but he didn't seem dead—more like a siren."

"My mother saw him too. She said she had never seen such a breathtaking man."

"And then?" Bai Liu asked. "Did they bury him?"

Xiaokui shook her head, her expression clouded. "No. All the adults opposed burying him. I didn't understand why they insisted on

keeping the body, but my father said someone with that kind of appearance..."

Bai Liu's tone remained flat. "Even if it's just a corpse, they thought they could squeeze value out of it."

Xiaokui hesitated, then continued. "The governor saw it as a business opportunity. He proposed restoring the county's abandoned hotel and turning it into a museum—where they would display a wax figure or sculpture of the body. He suggested branding it as 'the captured siren' to attract tourists, boosting the town's economy."

"As soon as the proposal was made, everyone agreed enthusiastically. They even wanted to erect a statue of the governor in front of the museum to honor him for coming up with the idea."

...A poor, remote fishing town, struggling for generations, suddenly stumbles upon a beautiful 'siren.' The local officials seize the opportunity, planning to use his image to develop tourism, build a museum, and revitalize the economy.

The entire process—down to the mayor and governor's statues in front of the museum—was almost identical to Siren Town.

But for some reason, Luming County didn't follow through with that path.

Or rather, the original version of Siren Town might have been this—the 'Evil Ritual - Boathouse.'

The first copy Bai Liu was supposed to encounter in this worldline was The Evil God Ritual – The Boathouse. But at the last moment, for some reason, he altered his landing point, allowing the simpler and more distant Siren Town to take its place in his timeline.

It was only now, deep into the playoffs, that Bai Six was finally able to place The Evil Sacrifice – Boathouse onto him.

Bai Liu glanced sideways at Xiaokui, who lay in the bunk below. "You didn't actually go through with it, did you?"

Xiaokui tilted her head slightly, surprised. "How do you know?" She hesitated, then continued, "Everything was set to start at the museum in the prefecture. But the night before, something happened—something changed on the fly. By morning, everyone had made up their minds. They abandoned the museum and decided to restore the

shrine instead."

Bai Liu lowered his gaze. "Did many of you dream?"

Xiaokui froze, utterly stunned. She strained to see his face, her voice growing agitated. "How do you know that?! Are you a sacrifice from Luming County too?"

Bai Liu's tone remained flat. "I'm not. But I've heard a few things about your county."

If an entire collective could be swayed overnight, then Bai Six must have been involved. And since the rules of the game prevent him from directly interfering with reality, there was only one explanation—

—Bai Six entered their dreams. He compelled them. He made Luming County follow the path he wanted the game to take.

Xiaokui's voice dropped to a whisper. "……That makes sense. It's well-known. Outsiders must've heard about it—the Luming County 'Gods in Dreams' phenomenon."

"Gods in dreams?" Bai Liu echoed. "What is that?"

Xiaokui hesitated. "The day before the museum's groundbreaking, many people gathered to observe the siren's corpse, which was meant to be displayed there. That night, every single person who had seen the siren during the day had the same dream."

"They dreamed of a divine being—dressed in white hunting robes, its face obscured—sitting high above the shores of Luming County. It looked down on them with a smile and spoke:

'I sense your evil desire for wealth. As a reward for capturing the Evil God, I will take a journey with you and grant you two choices.'

'The first option: I do not interfere. You follow your own path. Your town becomes a modest tourist attraction. Some of you leave this remote place and build new lives, while the rest remain—fishermen laboring at sea, entertaining fewer and fewer visitors, until this county withers and fades away.'

'At the same time, you will suffer the influence of the old Evil God's remains—the siren's corpse you have captured—and slowly become something… inhuman.'

‘The second option: I grant you the right to become my followers.’

‘You will restore my shrine in Luming County. Each year, you will make offerings to me. From among them, I will choose my favorite, and in return, I will grant a wish—equal in price to the sacrifice you offer.’”

Xiaokui’s voice turned hoarse. “Everyone chose the second option.”

“They knelt in their dreams. Lord Evil One, they asked, what is the sacrifice?”

“The Evil God laughed.

‘The sacrifice I desire is human suffering,’ it said. ‘The purer and more extreme the pain, the more valuable it is to me. And the greater the suffering, the greater the wish I will grant.’

“So they bowed again, looked up once more, and asked, Lord Evil One, what are you? How shall we offer ourselves to you?”

“The Evil God smiled.

‘My incarnation walks among you—the siren’s corpse you have captured.’

‘He is the embodiment of evil, the bearer of desire. At the sight of him, your flesh will overflow with greed, your humanity will decay, and your souls will be squeezed from your bodies—turned into notes I can collect with ease.’

‘You will enshrine his body in a shrine of the highest order. You will kneel before him, day and night, torturing sacrifices and offering them to him—so that he may taste every kind of pain this world has to offer.’

‘If he wakes from death to accept the agony you offer, I will come to grant your wish.’

‘If he does not, then your suffering is not yet enough to rouse him.’

“The Evil God laughed in delight. ‘Then,’ it said, ‘you must intensify the pain of your sacrifices—until this old, slumbering god finally opens his eyes, gazes upon this mortal world once more, and steps down from his high throne to receive the suffering you have prepared for him.’”

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Xiaokui continued in a daze.

"Since then, the prefecture has held a grand annual festival for the evil gods. And because the gods of dreams demand pure suffering, the prefect and the village men deliberated for three days and nights before unanimously deciding that only a child's suffering was pure enough. So, the sacrifices had to be children."

"In the beginning, Luming County wasn't as wealthy. The sacrifices weren't purchased from outside but were chosen from among the village children—just like me."

Cang Tai, taken aback, asked, "You had parents. Didn't they stop you from being chosen as a sacrifice?"

Xiaokui's voice caught in her throat. "It was my parents who offered me and my brother up as sacrifices," she said, trembling. "The prefecture's rule was that if a family's child was chosen, that family was granted a wish."

"My father sacrificed me and one of my brothers, hoping that at least one of us would be chosen. That way, our family could make a wish—to never have to struggle for food again, to never be forced to go out fishing every day just to survive."

"At that time, nearly every poor family offered up their children. The wealthier ones, unwilling to sacrifice their own, bought children from the poor, trained them well, and used them as their own offerings."

"Since no one knew who the gods would choose, some families sold a 'spare' child, just in case."

Xiaokui's voice wavered. "I was sold by my father to the Bei Yuan family," she whispered. "My name is now Beiyuan Xiaokui."

Cang Tai sighed sympathetically. "A sacrifice to the evil gods? I wonder which is worse—this or hard labor."

Xiaokui turned her head slowly, wet strands of hair clinging to her

gaunt, miserable face. Her gaze locked onto Bai Liu, who was leaning against the side of the bed.

"You have no idea what it means to be a sacrifice to an evil god."

"You will be whipped. Tortured. Left in agony—begging for life and death alike."

Cang Tai frowned, still puzzled. "But isn't hard labor the same? The moment you arrive, you're beaten and forced to work."

Xiaokui let out a short, nervous laugh. "Being a sacrifice doesn't start that way."

"At first, they give you a warm houseboat. A cute little dog or cat. Servants who treat you exceptionally well. Delicious meals. Parents who visit you every day."

"For a moment, you almost forget—you can't tell if you've been chosen as a sacrifice or a princess."

Cang Tai hesitated. "That... doesn't sound so bad?"

Xiaokui opened her mouth to respond, but before she could speak, the door to the boathouse was thrown open with a loud bang. She flinched, shoulders tensing.

The wind and rain carried in a deep, mellow voice, belonging to a middle-aged man.

"It's pouring. The perfect time for the newly chosen pups to feel unstable and insecure. Let's give them their animals first, so they can hold them through the storm—let them bond and develop feelings."

Another man, his voice thinner, echoed, "Yes, Lord Gosho."

A dim oil lamp flickered as seven or eight men entered, carrying a long, wide cage draped in black cloth. From within came the trembling cries of young animals.

"Mee-mee-mee-ooo!"

"Ow-ow-ow... woof!"

A man placed a gas lamp by Bai Liu's bedside, then reached out with a calloused, fish-scented hand and gave him a firm pat.

Bai Liu opened his eyes as if just waking, his gaze falling on the cage.

Inside, bathed in the dim glow, sat a strikingly beautiful white cat with silvery-blue eyes.

The kitten—no more than a few months old—was soft and fluffy, a golden bell jingling around its neck. Its pupils widened in the gray light as it sat upright, delicately lifting one paw to groom its slightly muddy fur, as if dissatisfied with its untidiness.

When Bai Liu looked at it, the cat tilted its head, its small pink nose pressing against the bars. It rubbed affectionately against Bai Liu's bound hand and let out a sweet, whiny mewl.

The man carrying the cage chuckled. "This one's been well-trained. Clings to people the moment it sees them."

He smirked. "I'll let it out now. If you can't hold it steady in this storm, well... such a cute little thing could tumble right off the bed and have its guts spilled open."

As soon as the cage door opened, the kitten wasted no time. It burrowed into Bai Liu's arms, kneading itself into the warmth of his chest until it found a perfect spot.

Purring in satisfaction, the kitten nuzzled against Bai Liu's chin, tail curling around his wrist, utterly content in his embrace.

The man, seeing this, nodded. "Good. They always take to their owners fast." He turned to leave but paused at the door, as if remembering something.

"Oh, right. Every animal has the same name as its owner."

"This cat—he's called Bai Six."

Bai Liu lowered his gaze.

The kitten nestled comfortably against his chest, eyes fluttering shut. But sensing Bai Liu watching, it let out a soft mewl and leaned forward, pressing its tiny head against Bai Liu's bound wrists.

It stretched out a paw, resting it against Bai Liu's palm, purring as it gently licked the tip of his nose.

A sudden, sharp cry shattered the moment.

"Don’t give me—!!!"

A woman's shrill voice rang out from the bunk beside Bai Liu.

"I don’t want this dog!!!"

The kitten’s eyes widened at the sound, and she and Bai Liu looked down together.

On the bed, Xiaokui thrashed desperately, her face blotchy with tears and snot, her voice sharp and hysterical, broken by ragged sobs. "I don’t want this dog!!!"

Beside her, a small, round-eyed Shiba Inu stood hesitantly. It was orange-colored, barely reaching a man's calf, with perked ears and an alert gaze. Though startled by Xiaokui’s outburst, the dog lingered by her leg, pausing before timidly licking her tears.

Xiaokui let out a cry of sheer devastation, flailing her hands mindlessly. "Get away! Don’t lick me! Don’t come near me!"

"I don’t want any more pain! I don’t want a dog!"

Her wild movements struck the little Shiba Inu, sending it stumbling back with a frightened yelp. It tried to seek refuge behind a man’s legs —only to be kicked away with chilling indifference. The force of the blow sent the puppy crashing into the bedpost with a sickening thud, as if a tiny boat had been flung into a raging wave.

A sharp, brittle crack echoed through the room.

The puppy let out a short, pitiful whimper—then fell silent. Its small body curled in on itself where it landed, head and tail nearly touching, eyes wide open yet utterly still.

Xiaokui, who had been sobbing into her hands, suddenly froze. Her pupils dilated as she turned, staring at the motionless Shiba Inu. The lingering warmth of its tongue against her cheek sent a shudder through her.

Tears slipped from her vacant eyes as she reached out, hand trembling toward the lifeless body. Her voice was barely a whisper. "...Xiaokui."

The man watching her broke into a pleased chuckle, his previously impatient expression giving way to something almost delighted. He clapped his hands.

"Crying!"

His grin widened. "Didn't expect that. Crying over an offering already? That's a good start." He turned to the figure beside him, waving a hand. "Bring in more. A few cats, another Shiba Inu."

Soon, more animals were brought in.

The man crouched beside Xiaokui, his voice unnervingly gentle. "Xiaokui doesn't like dogs, does she? What about cats?"

Xiaokui's breath hitched. Her tears wouldn't stop, her voice hoarse and brittle. "No..." Her head shook weakly. "...I don't want a dog. I don't want a cat."

Her shoulders trembled. "I don't want to see another Xiaokui die just for being my friend."

The man exhaled in mock disappointment, then reached into a cage, plucking out a kitten by the scruff. He dangled it in front of Xiaokui. "Really? Pushing them away so coldly?"

He smiled. "You used to love animals the most out of all the sacrifices."

The kitten, oblivious to the tension, let out a soft mewl. It hesitated, then arched its back, nuzzling against Xiaokui before curling up against her shoulder.

Xiaokui's fingers curled into fists. She forced her gaze away, her voice cold and detached. "Even if you kill them in front of me, I won't feel anything anymore."

The man sighed, shaking his head as if disappointed. He leaned in, his breath ghosting against Xiaokui's ear.

"Xiaokui should know by now, shouldn't she?" His voice dipped into something almost tender. "Animals that can't make you suffer… have no value on this ship."

Without hesitation, he tightened his grip around the kitten's tiny neck.

The soft mewls of playfulness turned to strangled cries. The kitten writhed, paws scrabbling weakly against his hand, trying to leap free —but it was helpless, its body so small it could fit entirely within his palm.

Xiaokui clenched her jaw, refusing to look.

The kitten's desperate gasps grew fainter. Its black-and-white eyes bulged, blood vessels bursting red. Its paws, which had clawed and kicked so frantically, slowly fell limp.

Then, as the final, choked sound left its throat—

Xiaokui broke.

She spun toward him in a frenzy, hands reaching. "Give it to me!"

The man let go, letting the near-lifeless kitten drop into Xiaokui's arms. It let out a muffled whimper, curling against her as though seeking comfort, as though it had been wronged.

Xiaokui clutched it tightly, her tears soaking into its fur. "I want this kitten. I want this Xiaokui. Please—please let me keep it!"

Her voice cracked. "I promise—I'll feel pain for it. I'll suffer. Just let me have it!"

The man studied her for a moment—then suddenly laughed.

"Ah… I see. Xiaokui was never chosen by the evil gods before, was she?" He mused, eyes gleaming. "Guess it wasn't painful enough."

Casually, he reached down, prying the kitten from Xiaokui's trembling hands.

She stared in blank horror as he cradled it gently, almost affectionately, stroking its fur twice, then placed his fingers back around its fragile neck.

He whispered.

"Then… let's make it hurt more, Xiaokui."

The kitten let out a strangled cry, but this time, the man did not stop.

Xiaokui didn't scream. She didn't move. She sat, numb, as he clapped his hands and carelessly discarded the tiny, lifeless body beside her.

Then, without looking back, he turned to leave. "Bring her another Shiba Inu," he ordered flatly. "If she won't take it, crush it and bring in another cat."

His voice was light, almost amused.

"Keep going—until she stops crying."

Chapter End Notes

> Every word, every action, reeks of cruelty—a calculated, deliberate violence meant to break something sacred.
>
> How dare they? How dare they make something so small, so helpless, suffer for their own twisted satisfaction? How dare they strip Xiaokui’s grief bare, turn it into a game, force her to watch the things she loves die, again and again, until love itself becomes a source of terror?

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After the imperial ship departed, silence settled over the cabin, broken only by the occasional sob of a frightened child and the clueless barks and meows of small dogs and cats.

Cang Tai, clutching the small black kitten he had been given, stood behind Bai Liu in silence for a long time. When he finally spoke, his voice trembled, as if the words were difficult to force out.

"Bai Liu… can you see Xiaokui? How is she?"

Under the faint light, Bai Liu glanced down at Xiaokui. She lay on the bed, her head buried in her arms, fingers pulling absently at the bandages on her wrists. With her other hand, she stroked the kitten resting beside her, her voice hoarse and barely audible.

"Good kitten… so good."

Cang Tai froze.

"...Xiaokui is so good."

He fell silent for a long moment, his gaze dropping to the black kitten in his arms. His hands trembled, fingers clenching and unclenching around the small body.

The kitten, sensing the shift, lifted its head in confusion. It mewed softly, uncertain, gazing up at the boy who was suddenly reluctant to hold it close.

Cang Tai turned his head away, his breath coming heavy and uneven.

So that's why they give the offerings pets.

It is the dream of nearly every child to have a small animal of their own—one that shares their name, one that clings to them with unconditional affection.

But it can't be that. That would be too... cruel.

The realization filled Cang Tai with a terror far worse than hard labor

ever had.

And then the inevitable happened. As Cang Tai huddled on the bed, he watched helplessly as the two kittens named Xiaokui, along with the Shiba Inu, were killed. Xiaokui's screams tore through the air, raw and agonizing, until Cang Tai could no longer tell whether the one dying was the kitten or the girl herself.

He curled into himself, hands pressing over his ears, desperate to shut out the sound.

I don't want to be the next Xiaokui.

If he never grew attached to the pet they forced into his arms, if he distanced himself now, maybe—just maybe—he could survive.

Then another wave struck, sending the entire cabin lurching. Cang Tai, already bracing for impact, watched as the black kitten lost its footing. It slid off the bed, paws scrabbling against the floor, yelping in panic.

Without thinking, Cang Tai turned sharply, his breath catching.

"Cang Tai!"

His voice startled him. Before he could process what he was doing, his hands shot out, gathering the small creature into his arms. He held it close, cradling it against his chest, as if protecting it could somehow protect him.

By the time he realized his mistake, it was too late. He stared down at the kitten in his arms, frozen, his grip tightening involuntarily. Tears welled in his eyes, spilling over before he could stop them.

Why… why is it like this?

He had only just met this kitten, and yet, the thought of watching it die was unbearable.

All around them, in the dimly lit cabin, small children clung to their pets the moment the waves struck, sobbing as they whispered the same name—their name—over and over again.

Drifting in a vast ocean, on a journey where only pain and death awaited them, these children—destined to be sacrifices to the evil gods—reached out for the only warmth they had left. The small

creatures, soft and trembling, latched onto them in return, too innocent to understand their shared fate.

"You won't be able to let go," Bai Liu murmured. His voice was flat, devoid of comfort. "Not once you know it has the same name as you."

Cang Tai choked on a sob, pressing his face into the kitten's fur. "Why?"

Bai Liu remained as calm as ever.

"Because like you, it is an animal cub raised by adults. Like you, it is alone, adrift in the ocean after being abandoned. Like you, it is nothing more than a tool, soon to be tortured for the sake of increasing suffering."

"By all accounts, you are kindred spirits, sharing the same fate."

"In the world you came from, you should never have met a creature that was kind to you. Every being you've ever encountered—every human—has brutalized you. Otherwise, you wouldn't have been trafficked onto this ship."

"But here, under these conditions, you have been given a companion—one carefully selected, one that must like you, one that shares your name. How could you not become attached?"

Bai Liu tilted his head slightly, his sharp gaze falling on Cang Tai.

"In other words," he concluded, "the cat in your arms is no longer just a cat."

"It is another you."

"It is another Cang Tai."

"You won't be able to stand watching it die—just as you won't be able to stand watching yourself die."

Cang Tai looked straight into Bai Liu's dark eyes. He suddenly recalled the rumors and shuddered. His lips parted as if to ask something, but he hesitated and fell silent.

Bai Liu spoke calmly. "Are you asking why, if someone in the orphanage had the capacity to empathize with an animal in distress, they would also abuse one?"

Cang Tai hesitated, then glanced at Little Bai, who was curled up in Bai Liu's arms, belly flopped over. He explained hesitantly, "I don't actually think you did it. But if—if someone like the person described in the rumors did exist, why would they do something like that?"

Bai Liu was silent for a long time before speaking. "A fundamental aspect of empathy is the recognition of shared emotions."

"The first step is perceiving that another being experiences emotions like yours. For example, you and the black cat in your arms both feel pain, awe, and fear under the same circumstances. That recognition—that you share something in common—is the foundation of empathy."

"But if someone undergoes experiences that cause emotions different from those of the people or animals around them, they lose that commonality. Without shared emotions, they cannot empathize. It's not that they refuse to—it's that they are simply incapable of it."

"If there is no emotional connection, they won't see others as similar to themselves. And if something isn't like you, then harming it won't feel like hurting yourself."

"He was raised in an orphanage, just like us," Cang Tai pressed, his voice carrying an edge of disbelief. "So why can't he feel the same emotions as we do? Is it because his brain is different?"

"I don't think so." Bai Liu's tone was light. "Plenty of people who are perfectly rational are capable of empathy—until they choose not to be."

"For example, Lord Gosho—Luming County's prefect, as Xiaokui calls him—seemed like a kind man before. He should have been kind to Xiaokui. But now? He has no empathy for her at all. He doesn't even see her as a person—just as a sacrifice."

Cang Tai murmured in a daze, "...Right. Why is that?"

"I think it's because of desire." Bai Liu's voice remained steady. "When a person is consumed by desire, the first instinct upon seeing another living being isn't connection—it's exploitation."

"Extreme desire makes people see themselves inside a grand social food chain, where every other person is simply another rung in that hierarchy. They reduce those around them to two categories: those who can exploit them and those they can exploit."

“To them, weak creatures—kittens, puppies—exist only to be trampled underfoot. And the highest power exists only to be served.”

“In their world, the weak perish, the strong survive, human nature is inherently cruel, and people devour those beneath them to gain more wealth and power. They take it as a given that empathy is a sign of weakness because beasts do not empathize with their prey.”

Cang Tai’s voice was barely a whisper. “But we’re human. We’re not beasts.”

Bai Liu paused. “A human who remains in the food chain of self-indulgence for too long can devolve into a beast—or even a monster.”

“Only humans who desire too much are capable of cannibalism.”

Cang Tai fell into a trance-like daze, repeating Bai Liu’s words as if spellbound. “...Cannibalism?”

From the bunk, Xiaokui let out two small, nervous giggles. She murmured in a trembling voice, “Xiaokui, Cat, that’s a good girl.”

The sea finally calmed, and Bai Liu’s ship, laden with its cargo of sacrificial offerings, docked in Luming County’s harbor under the afternoon sun.

At the dock, a figure stood fully dressed, a bamboo cane in hand, gazing down at the offerings—heads bowed, feet unsteady, bodies frail—as they disembarked.

The sacrifices were young, no older than fifteen—the ideal age, according to Luming County’s standards. Bai Liu, nearly seventeen, was an outlier. Normally, offerings that old weren’t taken—they were harder to break in—but he was small and thin, his face delicate enough to pass for fifteen. That was why he had been sold here without issue.

Clinging desperately to the weak little creatures in their arms, the sacrificial children trembled. Some were barely able to stand, but their only concern was the tiny animals they carried. They checked their puppies’ and kittens’ paws over and over, pressed their faces against their bellies to feel them breathing. Silent tears streamed down their cheeks, but none dared make a sound. None dared ask for help.

The imperial officer overseeing the docking nodded in satisfaction at the sight of the tearful offerings. He tilted his head toward his

subordinate. “Take them to the boathouse and tend to their pets.”

From the corner of his eye, Bai Liu noticed how the children’s eyes lit up at this command, even those who had been terrified of Gosho after the Xiaokui incident.

A few of the younger ones even whispered, “Thank you, Lord Gosho.”

At fifteen, when the concept of right and wrong was still forming, many of these children had grown up in cramped, dysfunctional environments. Presumably, they had little real understanding of the world.

How convenient.

Lord Gosho softened his expression. “I’m very pleased with you, children. You are all good children—kind, affectionate, compassionate to both animals and people.”

“I know some of you were frightened when I disciplined Xiaokui on the boat. But let me be clear—Xiaokui is a bad child.”

His face darkened sharply. He gripped his cane and struck it against the ground. “She doesn’t love small animals. She failed the ritual test multiple times. She even injured her own squire and dog before escaping from us. A terrible, terrible child.”

“We do not treat bad children kindly. So I hope you won’t follow Xiaokui’s example. Strive to be good children instead, and we will treat you well.”

All the children turned toward Xiaokui. She stood motionless, her expression numb, as if she hadn’t noticed the wary, disgusted glances thrown her way. She simply held her cat, silent and still.

Gosho withdrew his gaze from her and turned back to the group of sacrificial children, their faces tilted up toward him.

“The place where you will stay is called the Boathouse,” he continued smoothly. “It sits on a beautiful coast, where you can wake each morning to the sight of the sea.”

“But before you reach the Boathouse, there is a small task you must complete.”

Gosho’s tone grew darker, more unsettling. “You must pair off and

become good friends. One of you will be the squire. The other—the honored sacrifice."

His smile was almost serene.

"Children chosen as offerings will receive only the best. The finest food, clothing, education—everything Luming County has to offer. Your pets will receive the best care, and no one will ever dare harm them again."

"We will assign you prestigious foster families. You will become the noblest beings in Luming County, above the common people. And if you succeed in enduring the pain required for the sacrificial rite… all of this will be yours forever."

A spark of longing flickered in the children's eyes.

"But those who become squires," Gosho sighed, his voice filled with mock sympathy, "will remain just that. Squires."

"You will live as you have before. Disposable. Worthless."

"If your best friend ever decides they don't like you anymore…" His smile widened, warm and reassuring.

"We'll send you back."

"But your pet will stay here."

Chapter End Notes

Fucking piece of shit

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I'm sure everyone listening would rather be a sacrifice than a squire," Gosho said, clasping his hands behind his back. A meaningful smile curved his lips. "But here's the good news—in Luming County, sacrifices and squires aren't fixed roles. Every six months, you're tested."

"In this test, sacrifices who fall short will be demoted to squires, while those who excel will be promoted to sacrifices."

He paused, letting the words sink in before continuing, "I'm sure you're all wondering—what determines who is a sacrifice and who is a squire?"

The children's eyes shimmered with anticipation.

Gosho swept his gaze over them, then spoke slowly, deliberately:

"Pain."

"The one who suffers more will become the sacrifice."

A murmur rippled through the children. Some shrank back, their expressions flickering between confusion and fear. The vague yet ominous concept of pain unsettled them.

From the imperial ship, a woman observed their reactions. She exhaled sharply through her nose and said, "Of course, the pain of being a sacrifice is sharp—but brief. You endure it once, and it's over. But the pain of being a squire? It lingers. It may not be as intense, but it stretches on for a lifetime."

She glanced down at them with an air of indifference. "A short agony or a long torment. The choice is yours."

Gosho checked his watch, then spoke carelessly, "For those who become sacrifices, your pets will receive the best medical care available."

"For those who become squires, however, we can only take them to a regular vet. Whether they survive or not… will depend on their own

luck."

At that, the children hesitated, instinctively grouping themselves into two factions—sacrifices and squires—before forming teams. Expressions shifted: some children trembled, tears slipping down their cheeks; others clenched their fists, determination burning in their eyes.

Bai Liu observed the scene without expression, unmoving.

The food chain of desire had taken shape. Under the subtle guidance of the imperial boat, the children had willingly divided themselves into two unequal classes: sacrifices, who would bear the pain once and rise above, and squires, condemned to lifelong servitude.

Cang Tai, pale-faced, darted glances around before stepping behind Bai Liu. He folded his hands in front of him and bowed his head respectfully—the traditional posture of a squire submitting to a sacrifice.

Bai Liu turned slightly, his gaze sliding toward Cang Tai. "Have you made your choice? Are you sure you want to follow me?"

Cang Tai nodded slowly. His eyes flickered toward Xiaokui, who remained motionless in the crowd. His voice was muffled as he admitted, "…I can’t be a sacrifice. Xiaokui scares me too much."

Gosho, watching from the side, gave a cold command. "Beiyuan Xiaokui—return her to the original boathouse."

His tone remained indifferent as he added, "Let her see what happened to the good friend who took responsibility for her. Show her what she abandoned when she ran away without a word."

Xiaokui flinched. Moments later, two adults stepped forward and dragged her away.

"The rest of you," Gosho announced, sweeping his coat aside as he turned, "follow me to the boathouse. You will receive your shelter there."

Bai Liu followed the group, his steps unhurried. It wasn’t long before they arrived at the boathouse.

Compared to the one Bai Liu had seen seven years later—when he would be forced to perform the Evil God’s ritual dance, this boathouse

was pristine. Facing the shimmering sea, its hull gleamed in the setting sun, golden scales catching the light. The edges were painted a deep crimson, and the intricate designs adorning the entrance reflected brilliantly in the waves.

It did not resemble a place of suffering.

It looked like a gilded palace.

The children gawked. One pointed at the boathouse in disbelief. "Is this… really where we'll be staying?!"

"Yes," the imperial ship's captain confirmed. He gestured toward a side entrance. "Go there to collect a wooden token with your name on it. Once you have it, enter the boathouse and insert the token into the wooden niche beside an available room. That room will be yours."

The children's excitement bubbled over, and they prepared to rush toward the entrance.

But before they could move, the captain's voice cut through the air, sharp and cold:

"Sacrifices choose their rooms first. Squires wait until every sacrifice has chosen."

The eagerness drained from the squires' faces. They stood frozen, their hands tightening around their wooden tokens as they watched the sacrifices run ahead, cheering as they picked their rooms.

The voices of the sacrificial children echoed through the boathouse:

"This place is amazing!"
"It's so big! Look at my room!"

The squires, left waiting, clenched their fists harder.

Bai Liu stepped inside, his wooden token in hand. A row of neatly arranged boathouses stretched before him, bathed in warm, golden light. Yet as he looked closer, he noticed—

The rooms grew smaller the deeper they went.

The largest, most spacious rooms were near the entrance. At the farthest end, there was only one left—the width of two doors.

The realization dawned.

The children who had once bonded over their shared struggles on the boat—their so-called comrades—immediately turned on each other.

They ran.

They shoved.

They fought.

"This room is mine!"
"I got here first! I put my token in first!"

The largest room had become a battlefield.

Bai Liu swept his gaze over the remaining rooms before withdrawing it, passing by the largest ones without a second glance. The scene reminded him of his orphanage—children scrambling to grab toys.

But such things had never been of much relevance to him. The toys the others fought over rarely interested him, just as in this case. Without hesitation, he walked straight to the last room, lifted his head, and flatly inserted his wooden sign before pushing the door open.

Sure enough, the layout was identical to the one where Cang Tai had taken him to rest earlier. Even the picture of waves still hung on the wall. The only difference—this time, there was no shrine hidden behind it.

Bai Liu retracted his hand from where he had been absently stroking the wall.

It seemed there was no idol in the last room. That meant the next key idol for this branch should be on [Old Evil God - Spirit].

—In other words, as it had been in the Siren copy, the idol should be on Xie Ta's body.

Outside the door, footsteps echoed as children poured in. Then, abruptly, they stalled.

Bai Liu lowered his gaze.

It seemed the [squires] had realized the truth.

The children stood motionless for a long time, staring blankly at the boathouses they had longed for—places they had believed they would

get to live in. One of them hesitantly asked, "Where are we supposed to stay if all the boathouses are full?"

All four rows of boathouse rooms already had wooden signs beside them. Not a single one was unoccupied.

"You will, of course, have a place to stay."

Gosho's tone took on an eerie edge, laced with an unsettling excitement as he watched the children's stunned expressions.

"But there is still a space in this boathouse where you lowly squires can lie down and get some rest."

He stepped forward unhurriedly, moving through the townhouse until he stopped beside an open-air masonry water tank. Turning back, he smiled at the children.

"This is it."

The children who had chosen to become [squires] stared at the water tank in disbelief.

The ground around it was damp and dark, covered in barnacle-like growths. Blood from slaughtered fish, discarded oyster and clam shells, and rotting seafood lay scattered, the scent of decay mixing with the thick, pickled stench of mud.

But that wasn't the worst of it.

Cang Tai stared dazedly at the row of spiked wire cages lined up beside the tank, each only half the size of a human body. A tattered plastic water shelter sagged over them, while in front of each sat a filthy water bowl and feed dish, filled with murky sludge.

Inside these cages, chickens and ducks clucked and squawked—meat walkers waiting for slaughter.

—This was a kennel. A pet cage.

Hanging above each cage was a nameplate, long since inscribed. Whether those names belonged to the squires' pets or to the squires themselves was unclear.

Gosho lifted a hand and pointed at the cages.

"This is where you will live."

The children stared in stunned silence. No one spoke.

Gosho continued in a practiced tone, as if reciting instructions he'd given a hundred times.

"Every morning at 5:30, you will crawl out of these cages alongside your pets. Then, you will grab an animal from the cage next to yours, slaughter it, and prepare it for the kitchen. By 8:00, the freshest and most delicious offerings will be ready for the sacrificial lords."

He paused, then added carelessly, "Keep in mind—morning light only fully arrives every five and a half days here. Until then, it's still dark. If you happen to grab the wrong animal and accidentally kill someone else's pet…"

Gosho smiled.

"Well, that's none of our concern. You'll just have to handle it yourselves."

His tone was light, indifferent, almost amused.

"But really, that might not be a bad thing for you," he continued. "After all, the last squire who lost their pet—because someone next to them killed it by mistake—ended up being promoted to Lord of the Sacrifice in their very first test."

"Such an industrious, motivated boy," Gosho said, his voice dripping with satisfaction. "I liked him quite a lot. After earning his place as a priest and securing the privileges and reverence that come with it, he was terrified of falling back into the squire ranks in the next round of examinations."

"So, to consolidate his suffering—"

Gosho smiled, as if recalling something delightful.

"—he forced himself to eat his own pet."

Chapter End Notes

> The idol can refer to an artifact or a relic of importance for the conclusion of the game

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

"This is where you'll be staying from now on." Without glancing back, Gosho turned away. "Tomorrow morning, at 7:30, you and the offering adults will travel together to the homes of some of the largest clan families in Luming County."

"Make sure your appearance and dress are in order. I don't want to see any indecent attire or behavior."

Once the imperial boat had departed, the [squires] stood stunned, staring at the rusted cages. Soon, a man in grey squire's clothes emerged wearily from the boathouse, holding a bony puppy in his arms. With practiced ease, he pushed open one of the cages, climbed in, and dumped part of a plastic bag of leftovers from the Lord of the Offerings into the dog's bowl, eating the rest himself.

The dog eagerly devoured the scraps, then retreated, curling up in the narrow cage to sleep. Cang Tai stood frozen, almost in disbelief.

Soon, more attendants emerged from the boathouse, feeding their pets the leftover food and eating the rest themselves. They curled up in their cages, settling into various positions to keep each other warm as they slept.

Some of the new [squire] children recoiled in fear and retreated, while others, seemingly resigned to their fate, reluctantly opened the cage doors and entered.

The older squires watched them closely. One spoke up, breaking the silence.

"Are you the new squires this year?"

"What are the sacrificial lords like this time?"

The others were unsure how to answer, but Cang Tai hesitantly replied, "They're all pretty good... I think."

A squire with his back to them sneered. "How can we know what the sacrificial lords are really like? If they torment us squires, we'll have to wait for the test in six months."

Another squire whispered to him, "He fell from his squire position during the first half of this year's exam because his pain wasn't as bad

as that of his own squire."

"He broke down when his squire killed his own kitten, holding its body and crying for a whole week. Somehow, he managed to get promoted to sacrifice in the test."

"But I think he'll be back for the second half of the year." The squire glanced over at the one who had spoken earlier. "Apparently, he and his squire were close friends, and he never let his squire or his squire's cat live in a cage or eat leftovers. They ate and lived with him."

"But his squire was soft-tempered. When he ascended to the position of sacrifice, the first thing he did was force him and his dog to live in a cage here."

Cang Tai was taken aback. "A squire can live with the sacrifice?"

The squire nodded. "Yes, a squire can stay with the Lord of the Offerings as long as the lord wishes, but..."

"Few sacrificial lords are willing."

Cang Tai was confused. "Why?"

Before the squire could respond, the one curled up in the cage with his back turned spoke coldly, "It's simply disrespectful. After all the pain the sacrifice has endured to earn a boathouse, to just give it to a squire is a slap in the face."

The squire next to him added softly, "That's what this man's squire told him when he came to power. He said that if he allowed him to share a room with him so easily, he would dishonor the kitten who died at his hands and helped him get promoted to sacrifice."

Cang Tai was left speechless, unsure of how to respond.

When the squire saw Cang Tai's face turn pale with fear, he sighed and kindly reassured him, "Being a squire isn't as terrible as you think. We are the lowest rank among the squires, and many others are treated better than us."

"You're supposed to be taken tomorrow by the Lord of Offerings to the Great Houses for selection. If you are chosen by them to bear their name, the Lords will provide you with a room in the boathouse, and you won't have to live in a cage."

Cang Tai looked confused. "The Great Families? Why are we being taken to them for selection?"

The squire seemed surprised. "Don’t you know the rules of Luming County's evil rituals?"

He continued, "There are two evil god festivals here each year: one in winter, one in summer, held in August and January. A month after the Winter Festival, Lord Gosho, the Prefect of Luming County, will begin purchasing sacrifices for the next round of conditioning. In about six months, around June or July, your batch will be semi-mature enough to be offered to the evil gods during the Evil Festival. If your pain is sufficient by then, your sacrifice will succeed. If not, it will fail."

The squire paused, recalling, "But historically, less than half of the sacrifices manage to reach the required level of pain within half a year. More often, they have to wait until the Winter Festival again to be offered."

"In general, the chances of a sacrifice succeeding in the Winter Festival are much higher than in the Summer Festival. If any sacrifices remain unsuccessful, they go to the next year's Summer Festival and continue the process."

The squire shrugged. "But usually, if a sacrifice isn’t successful in the first year, it’s unlikely to succeed later on."

"Of course, it won’t work again." The squire, facing away from the crowd, spoke in a hoarse voice. "If the pain lasts too long, people become numb."

He sighed again. "But if a sacrifice endures the pain for a long time, overcoming the numbness and becoming even more painful, then it can be successfully sacrificed at an evil god festival. Such a sacrifice would supposedly please the evil god, and the wishes granted would be of much higher quality. That's why many great families intentionally store such sacrifices and avoid offering them too early."

"The Beiyuan Xiaokui from the Bei Yuan family is one such offering."

"Each year, Luming County distributes the offerings and attendants based on the previous year's contributions. The top eight tax-paying families in the county get to choose two offerings or attendants each, in order of rank."

"The leftover offerings are then distributed randomly to the people

during the Funamiya Night Celebration Festival, just before the Evil God Festival."

"These leftover sacrifices are typically less willful and of inferior quality, often unable to endure the painful cultivation. Even if they are successfully sacrificed, the wishes granted are of lesser quality, which is why the great families do not value them."

The squire looked at Cang Tai. "The Bei Yuan family came first in taxes last year. They sacrificed a young boy, only a year and a half old, at the Winter Festival, and I heard it was Beiyuan Xiaokui's younger brother. They made a significant wish with that sacrifice."

"Exactly what they wished for is unclear to us retainers, but it seems to have helped the Bei Yuan family grow rapidly over the past year, overtaking the Gifune family as the top tax-paying family in Luming County."

"You don't want to end up in a cage, so think about getting chosen by the eldest of the Bei Yuan family tomorrow."

As they spoke, a group of adults wearing long tunics entered. They carried a cage covered in black cloth and casually tossed it in front of Cang Tai and the others. "Some of your pets died without treatment. Some are still alive. Pick them out yourself."

Cang Tai rushed to the cages, sifting through them until he finally found his dying kitten in a cage that had been thrown into a corner.

Instead of receiving treatment, the little black cat had grown weaker, lying limp in Cang Tai's arms, blood covering its lower body. It was unclear whether it had pooped blood or been bitten by another animal in the cage.

"[Cang Tai]!" Cang Tai's face turned pale as he stared at the blood on the kitten's body. Tears immediately filled his eyes. "How could this happen?"

The other children's pets weren't in much better shape—most were struggling to breathe.

For a moment, the backyard was filled with the sound of children crying.

The squires standing by the cages looked uneasy. One who had been speaking to Cang Tai earlier poked his head out and, with a mixture of

emotions, told them, "It's going to rain today. Don't take the cubs out of the cages. They'll freeze to death."

"If you're on good terms with the Lord of the Sacrifice, go and beg them to take you in."

The children seemed to find hope in this suggestion.

"Yes, he and I agreed that we would be paired together. I'd be his squire first, and he would take care of me as a sacrifice. If he fell from sacrifice, I would become his sacrifice in return. That way, we'd both be chosen!"

"Me too! I'm going to find her now!"

The children ran toward the front yard, clutching their pets as though they had found a lifeline.

The squire watching them had a complicated look in his eyes. He glanced at the squire behind him, as though wanting to say something.

The squire behind him, whose back was turned, suddenly let out a nervous laugh. "I told him to do that in the first place."

"I said I couldn't last and didn't want to suffer. He said he'd endure for me and become a sacrifice so that I would be sheltered. What happened?"

The man, holding a lifeless, already cold dog, laughed hoarsely and brokenly. "My dog froze to death outside. Didn't he open the door for me?"

The children, already running ahead, did not hear this and continued knocking eagerly at the doors of the offerings.

The offerings inside pulled open the doors. Most were dressed in comfortable yukata, holding wooden tubs that had clearly just come from the hot springs. They radiated warmth, and the floor was scattered with unfinished pots of hot soup and fried lobster—an opulent scene.

The pets inside were dressed in delicate, warm outfits, lounging on plush white blankets, stretching, and sleeping soundly.

In contrast, the squire standing outside was disheveled, his clothes

torn and reeking of rotten food. Muddy water, like petroleum, dripped from the edges of his hair after the light rain. In his arms, he clutched a small, shivering, filthy animal, its body stained with blood.

When the door opened, the expressions of both the offerings and the attendants froze for a moment.

—In just a few hours, it felt like they were from entirely different worlds.

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

The heat wafted lazily from the room, brushing over the faces of the stunned attendants and causing them to disperse. They blinked in a daze, their eyes gradually falling upon the small creature licking itself lazily inside the room.

"May we...?" The squire couldn't help but step closer to the warm room. "Go in?"

The offering instinctively stepped in front of them, gathering her yukata. She glanced at the squire's dirty, dripping shoes and her expression shifted to one of resistance and embarrassment. "What's the matter? Can't you just say it outside?"

The squires looked at the offering in disbelief, their breath fading as they held the little creatures in their arms.

Outside the door, Cang Tai shivered, clutching the unmoving black cat in his arms. He watched as the attendants were ushered away, one by one.

... Bai Liu. The infamous Bai Liu, rumored to be able to kill small animals at will. Would he really take him in?

Nervously, Cang Tai swallowed, closing his eyes as he prepared to clap his hands together.

The paper door slid open on its own, revealing Bai Liu, draped in a loose white bathrobe. Water dripped from the ends of his hair, the collar slightly open to reveal pale skin with a coin pendant dangling from it.

Bai Liu's cold, clean brow was thick with the steam rising from his body. His voice was flat, as though he had been expecting Cang Tai at his door. "You've been standing here for almost ten minutes. What's the matter?"

In Bai Liu's arms, the silver-blue-eyed, white-haired Little Bai cat, its bell untied, nestled curiously, tilting its head to look at Cang Tai. The little cat mewled, extending a paw to play with the black cat in Cang Tai's arms.

Bai Liu didn't stop the gesture; he let his pet interact with Cang Tai.

For some reason, Cang Tai suddenly felt a surge of emotion. He knelt before Bai Liu, tears streaming down his face. "Please, save [Cang Tai]."

Bai Liu lowered his gaze. "What do you bring to the table if I don't do something worthless?"

Cang Tai clutched the corner of Bai Liu's robe, his eyes red with desperation. "If you save [Cang Tai] now, I'll be your most loyal servant. I'll never betray you."

Bai Liu was silent for a moment before raising his eyes, his pupils dark. "Deal's up."

Thirty minutes later, a dazed and freshly cleaned Cang Tai sat on Bai Liu's tatami, next to the similarly cleaned black cat. Its fluffy tail was held high, visible for all to see.

It was hardly a surprise.

Bai Liu's gaze shifted from the little black cat's tail back to Little Bai, who sat beside him in a dignified, elegant manner.

Little Bai leaned against Bai Liu, tilting its head and meowing softly. It nuzzled him, then curled up by his leg to sleep, behaving perfectly.

This quiet routine made Bai Liu think of Xie Ta.

The other little black cat, after eating and drinking its fill, dashed around Bai Liu like a playful dog. It jumped into Bai Liu's arms, pushing Little Bai aside, then licked his nose and wiggled its behind as it chased Bai Liu's robe.

In short, it resembled a certain lizard.

A black cat and a white cat, both strikingly similar in appearance and habits.

Bai Liu had never believed in coincidences in games. If he was right, this was the twisted sense of humor of some sadistic game designer.

He lowered his eyes to look at the two cats sleeping peacefully on his lap, one on the left, one on the right.

Cang Tai, embarrassed by his black cat's hyperactivity and wanting to return it, looked up—then froze.

He saw Bai Liu, who was rumored to kill small animals, calmly stroking the heads of the two kittens with the back of his hand. Instead of moving them, Bai Liu looked up and spoke softly, "It's late. Go to sleep."

With a chuckle, Cang Tai lay down on the extra tatami that Bai Liu had provided. The two tiny cats curled up beside Bai Liu's pillow, like little guardians.

Bai Liu, under the watchful eyes of his two 'guardians,' soon closed his eyes and drifted to sleep.

Cang Tai had expected a restless night, but before long, he found himself fighting against his eyelids, yawning before he finally fell into a deep slumber.

Day 2

Cang Tai had slept soundly, and by the time he woke up, Bai Liu was already dressed.

Bai Liu wore a black tunic with long white lining, featuring a crane-and-cloud motif on the collar, while Cang Tai was dressed in a more understated grey valet tunic.

Once they were dressed and stepped out of the room, Cang Tai noticed several squires standing in the central piazza. Their red eyes and sleepless expressions were the result of a restless night in the rain. They held small animals, their heads drooping and their fur tangled, while their bodies were stiff from the cold. They stared vacantly across the room.

The offerings began trickling out of their rooms one by one. Upon seeing the attendants, they quickly avoided their gaze and moved on, walking briskly as they gathered in small groups, whispering among themselves.

"They chose the squire themselves, so the squire should do what the squire does."

"Why should I share a room with them? I've just enough space for myself, and it's not like they don't have a place of their own."

"Yeah, and who knows what diseases their dogs and cats might have.

What if they infect my cat? It looks sick."

"Why should I suffer for them? I need my own space."

"Why not go back to your place and stand outside my door all night?"

Cang Tai, who overheard these complaints, paused. He felt the shift in how everyone viewed him and the others. It reminded him of the food chain theory Bai Liu had discussed with him the day before on the boat.

[People who enter the food chain of desire lose their ability to empathize.]

[In their eyes, there are only predators who are inferior to them and predators who are superior to them.]

He glanced at Bai Liu standing beside him. Bai Liu's expression remained calm, as though he had anticipated this shift.

After breakfast, all the offerings and attendants gathered outside the boathouse. It was a sunny day, with the heat radiating down. The attendants held black umbrellas over the offerings, their faces mostly neutral.

Gosho, the man leading the group, appeared less than pleased.

"Today, we're taking you to the Bei Yuan family. They were the top tax-paying family in Luming County last year. You'll go there first, and they'll choose from among you."

"After noon, you'll head to the Gifune family, my family, the top tax-paying family the year before last."

"You'll be visiting eight families today, and if you're lucky enough to be chosen by any of them, you could even take on their surname and become part of their clan. If that happens, you'll be moved out of the boathouse and enjoy better living conditions."

Lord Gosho grimaced, pulling the corners of his mouth into a stiff smile. "Now, let's go to Bei Yuan's house."

As soon as Gosho's words left his mouth, Bai Liu heard a clear system beep in his ears.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has unlocked the side quest - Obtain the shrine key in the hands of Bei Yuan's family head.]

[The body of the old evil god is imprisoned behind the shrine on the hill, where He slumbers, day after day, listening to the suffering of the multitudes. Only the most anguished souls can make Him open His eyes and gaze upon the sacrifices who are mad with pain.]

[Ask player Bai Liu to steal the shrine key from the head of the Bei Yuan family and make the Old Evil God open His eyes for you.]

Bai Liu lowered his eyelashes.

Holding an umbrella over Bai Liu, Cang Tai glanced at him. In the sunlight, Bai Liu's complexion appeared almost translucent, and Cang Tai felt a momentary daze. This was the first time he had seen Bai Liu so closely in such strong light.

"From what you said to me yesterday, combined with the reaction of the Gosho today, it seems like the Bei Yuan and Gifune families have a rivalry. Is that right?" Bai Liu asked, his voice soft, almost a whisper as he turned his face slightly toward Cang Tai.

Cang Tai froze for a moment before stammering, "Sh-should be."

"If I want to be chosen by the Bei Yuan family today," Bai Liu mused, "what should I do?"

After a pause, Cang Tai scratched his head nervously and leaned closer to Bai Liu, whispering, "You shouldn't worry about whether Bei Yuan will choose you. The extended family always picks the most attractive offerings, and you're by far the best-looking of the group. They'll definitely choose you."

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

Bei Yuan's home was perched atop a hill, and the group ascended a long trail, or rather a series of steps, before they could catch a glimpse of the magnificent building hidden deep in the dense jungle.

The house's enormous eaves loomed over the forest, and as one looked up, a slightly smaller but more dignified wooden building with soaring eaves became visible behind Bei Yuan's house. Its floor, made of mahogany, held birdhouses, standing higher up in the landscape.

"Closer to us is the residence of the Bei Yuan family," Gosho remarked, lifting his gaze to the flying eaves behind the torii. He gathered the hem of his garment and bowed respectfully. "Higher up is the residence of the evil god, the Luming Shrine."

The offerings and attendants bowed in unison, mimicking the movements of the imperial boat.

The path ahead, a well-worn rocky trail, led to the gate of Bei Yuan's house. Two stone lanterns stood on either side of the gate. Bai Liu glanced at them briefly and noticed they appeared very new—seemingly only a year old. Their heads were intricately carved into the shape of a simple Shiba Inu, its tongue playfully sticking out.

The imperial boat knocked on the door of Bei Yuan's house.

The door creaked open slowly, revealing an elderly servant with white hair. He peered out, first glancing at the knocker, then at the offerings behind him. With a slight bow, he withdrew his gaze and bent down to open the door wider. "Lord Gosho, the master has been waiting for you."

Gosho grunted in acknowledgment, entering without sparing a glance.

Bai Liu followed the imperial boat inside, where he was greeted by an elegant and extravagant Japanese garden. Jagged rocks flanked the left and right sides. Clear water bubbled over them, creating a lively and interesting display. The water, seemingly drawn from the mountains, should have been frozen at this time of year, but the Bei Yuan family had cleverly installed stone ovens to heat the pipes, allowing the water to flow hot and steamy over the rocks and grass despite the cold weather.

Bai Liu took a moment to study the stone ovens, estimating there were

nearly a hundred of them, cleverly integrated into the courtyard for both practical use and aesthetic purposes.

Unable to resist, Cang Tai leaned over and whispered in Bai Liu's ear, "So many retainers and animals nearly froze to death in the rain last night. If even a third of these stone ovens had been distributed down there, they would have been able to survive..."

The old servant, who had been observing, turned his head and shot Cang Tai a condescending look before speaking.

"What you should be thinking about, as newcomers, is how to work your way up to be chosen by the lord of the Bei Yuan family to enjoy the beautiful courtyard these stone ovens create. Don’t waste your pity on the self-serving, caged inferior animals who don’t even deserve to see these stone ovens."

"The stone ovens are for the viewing of the sacrificial adults—those who endure pain and sacrifice for the evil gods to bring value to Luming County—not for the squires to warm themselves."

"In Luming County, these squires, who aren't suffering enough to live in cages, are nothing more than animals who cannot produce value and shouldn't consume any resources to live."

Cang Tai flinched under the servant’s gaze, lowering his head and replying softly, "Yes... I understand," and said no more.

The servant turned his gaze away indifferently and bent forward, quickly leading the procession down a series of solid wooden cloisters.

From the courtyard, one could view the serene landscape: the bubbling spring, birds flitting among the flowers, bamboo gently knocking against a stone jar, and petals falling into the courtyard’s lake, creating a scene of pleasant, refreshing elegance.

The offerings and attendants continued to express their admiration for the beauty and delicacy of the courtyard. It was clear from their eyes that they longed for this place.

The last to walk was Cang Tai, his head bowed, clutching his umbrella. A feeling of quiet discontent and gloom weighed on him.

Bai Liu also wished to be chosen by the Bei Yuan family... Was he the same as these offerings?

Would he... also agree with the old servant?

"If you have something to ask, just say it," Bai Liu spoke calmly, not looking at him. "You've been staring at me for ten minutes now."

"I'm sorry!" Cang Tai apologized in a panic. He slowly raised his head and asked in a soft voice, "Bai Six, do you think the old servant was right just now?"

"That a stone oven is more for ornamental purposes for the sacrifices than for warming the attendants?"

Bai Liu responded, "The rightness or wrongness of someone's words depends on their perspective."

"From the viewpoint of these people who are now sacrifices, from the viewpoint of the servants of the Bei Yuan family, and from the viewpoint of those with a vested interest in exploiting others at the top of the food chain, they naturally feel their actions are justified."

"A stone oven doesn't benefit the squires by keeping them warm, but when placed here for display, it's a daily benefit that they can see and enjoy."

Cang Tai gathered his courage. "What about from Bai Six's point of view? Do you think they're right too?"

Bai Liu turned his head slightly, his gaze serene as it landed on Cang Tai. The intensity of his stare made Cang Tai hold his breath, gripping the umbrella so tightly his palm turned white.

"No," Bai Liu replied in a soft, measured tone. "I don't think they're right."

A long breath escaped Cang Tai, his eyes widening. "But Bai Six is now also a sacrifice, with a vested interest. Why not think they are right?"

Bai Liu studied him for a moment, his eyes dark and shifting. The fine wind tousled the strands of hair hanging over his forehead. "At the top of the food chain, these people have constructed a system with an old evil god who is meant to exploit everyone."

"But because he chose not to exploit them, he's now being tortured and exploited by everyone."

"That old evil god... he's my lover."

Cang Tai froze, completely stunned.

Bai Liu shifted his gaze to the old servant ahead, his voice devoid of emotion. "I came here to deal with those exploiting him and to dismantle the system built on his suffering."

"And when that's done, I'll tell him," Bai Liu added with a pause, "No matter what happens, he wasn't wrong to make the choice in the first place."

Cang Tai's eyes burned, and though he had a thousand questions, he simply nodded with a heavy "Hmm," his voice tinged with emotion. "Neither the evil god nor you are wrong."

"Enough with the chatter!" The man leading the procession, Gosho, turned back, impatience clear in his expression. "Hurry up! We're going to the parlour to choose the offerings!"

"Yes!" Cang Tai hurriedly grabbed Bai Liu's arm, pulling him into a quick pace. "We're coming!"

The Bei Yuan family's parlour was vast, its open space almost resembling the main hall of a dojo. The floor was covered with soft silken cloth, and a few servants sat on their knees behind a low table. A man with a traditional goldfish-ben hairstyle—shaved at the back of his head—sat there. His strong body gave him the appearance of a man in his forties or fifties, but the wrinkles on his face made him seem much older, like someone in his sixties. His expression was tense and grim.

He glanced down at the offerings book in front of him, flipping through it casually before raising his gaze to sweep over the offerings kneeling before him. His eyes paused on Bai Liu, who had entered last.

"There's a kid named Bai Six, right?" he asked in a deep voice. "Look up and let me see you."

Bai Liu slowly raised his head, meeting the man's gaze directly.

The head of the Bei Yuan family nodded with apparent satisfaction. "Good-looking, strong-willed. Can be conditioned over time."

"Take the boy," he ordered, "and keep his squire with him."

The head of the family then rose, casting a glance over Bai Liu and the others. "Since you are now the Lord of the Bei Yuan family's offerings,

you will stay here from now on."

"I'll send someone to the boathouse to bring your pets and luggage. Someone will show you around, explain where you can and can't go, and tell you what you need to do to enjoy everything the Bei Yuan family has to offer."

He nodded to the old servant who had led them in. "You show them the way."

The old servant nodded respectfully, then turned to Bai Liu and the others. "Come, follow me."

"First, congratulations to all of you," the servant said with a smile, though it didn't reach his eyes. "From now on, you will live in the mansion of the family that brings joy and prosperity."

The servant's steps were quick and measured, like a snake weaving through the shaded wooden cloisters. The ground was littered with broken red maple leaves that had just fallen, their sound a soft rustle underfoot. The leaves drifted into the nearby water pavilion, outside the house.

The air was thick and warm, clinging to their skin despite the cold weather—a strange, unsettling atmosphere.

"A beautiful yet eerie place," Bai Liu thought to himself.

"In the Bei Yuan family, the sacrificial lords are the supreme beings. The family has grown to what it is today because of the dedication of generations of sacrificial lords. Without their suffering, the beauty of the Bei Yuan family grounds would not exist."

"So, the first thing anyone who enters the Bei Yuan family must do is pay homage to these sacrificial adults, who have endured supreme suffering for the family's development."

The old servant stopped in front of a well-constructed room and bowed before pushing the door open.

Cang Tai drew a sharp breath as he saw what was inside.

The room contained a large wooden shelf designed in the style of a shrine, with flying eaves and tails. Dozens of shrines were arranged on the shelf, each containing black-and-white photographs of people who appeared no older than teenagers—or even younger.

The old servant stepped aside, his hands clasped. "These are the sacrificial candidates purchased by the Bei Yuan family. They didn’t survive until the end and committed suicide out of pain. They are enshrined here."

"If you don't survive and take your own life, you’ll be offered up here too."

"Now, ask the four lords to come in and pay their respects."

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

The other chosen sacrifice, who had been eager to be selected, stood dumbfounded at the sight before him.

The old servant indifferently restrained the two unresponsive children, bowing to the offerings in the shrine. "Pay your respects to the predecessors who broke the jade for the Bei Yuan family."

The two children emerged from the shrine in a daze, their shoulders trembling.

It didn't quite match the privileged life they had imagined.

The old servant, seemingly unaware of the shift in the children's expressions, bowed slightly and continued walking briskly with small, quick steps. "The residence of the chosen sacrifices is in Bei Yuan, at the highest part of the house."

"That place is the closest to the shrine—the largest shrine in Luming, which you'll see every morning when you wake up. It's where you will be sacrificed."

"The shrine holds the beautiful body of the evil lord. We cannot disturb it often, and it is only open to the public during the hottest and coldest times of the year—winter and summer—when the prefecture holds a grand festival in honor of the evil god."

"Funya and the sacrifices in the great houses go to the shrine to worship the evil lord. But the evil lord resides in the shrine, and only the tears of a sacrifice in enough pain can wake him up."

"Don't go up to the mountain on ordinary days. Lord Evil is sleeping and dislikes being disturbed. The shrine doors are always locked, and there is no need for daily prayers."

Bai Liu's eyes twitched. "The shrine is locked, so who holds the key? Is it with Lord Bei Yuan?"

The old servant stumbled in his steps and glanced at Bai Liu. "Yes."

"The key to the shrine is passed to the highest taxpayer each year. The Gifune family held it last year; this year, it belongs to the Bei Yuan family."

The old servant led Bai Liu and the others to an isolated, high loft. He bent down slightly, raising his hand in respect. "This is the residence of the lords of sacrifice."

"I understand that the offerings are new to the Bei Yuan family and are curious about this place, but it is late. I advise you not to wander."

The old servant raised his head slightly, revealing his cloudy, aged eyes. "The Bei Yuan house is dangerous after dark. If any of the sacrificial lords meet their end at the hands of spirits, their bodies will not even enter the shrine of Bei Yuan."

Bai Liu noticed Cang Tai and the other children had turned pale with fear and immediately shouted in response, "Yes!"

The old servant's eyes flicked to Bai Liu. "Where is Lord Bai Six?"

Bai Liu lowered his eyes slowly, speaking in a submissive tone. "I will offer myself properly to the evil gods here."

Slightly satisfied, the old servant withdrew his gaze, bent down, and closed the door with a bow. "We will bring your Lordships' belongings from the boathouse shortly. Please rest well."

Within ten minutes of Bai Liu and his family settling into the loft, the hesitant and quiet maid arrived with Bai Liu's luggage.

Cang Tai's eyes brightened at the sight of the little black cat in its cage. He tried to hug it, but the cat wriggled free, gave a high-pitched meow, and darted towards Bai Liu, who sat by the attic window.

Bai Liu stroked the two cats gathered at his feet with the back of his hand, his gaze drifting from the open window through the fading darkness of night to the Luming shrine deep in the jungle.

Cang Tai approached and whispered, "Is Lord Bai Six’s lover the evil god who resides in that shrine?"

Bai Liu’s eyes moved away from the window, and he looked down at the well-behaved Little Bai cat in his arms. "It’s not living," he said softly. "It’s trapped in that shrine."

"So, I’m going to bring him out."

"...Just now, you asked for the key to the shrine." Cang Tai swallowed nervously. "Bai Six, are you planning to steal the key after dark?"

Bai Liu hummed, a flat sound of acknowledgment.

Cang Tai tensed. "But the old servant said that Bei Yuan's house is haunted at night, and you don't even know where the key is! It's too risky!"

"There's always a way around it." Bai Liu raised his eyes to look at Cang Tai. "As long as you're willing to help me, Cang Tai."

Cang Tai blinked, dumbfounded. "How am I supposed to help you?"

Bai Liu replied coolly, "Find out about Bei Yuan Xiaokui."

After nightfall, the courtyard of Bei Yuan's house lay in darkness. The grass and trees cast eerie shadows on the veranda, and the stone fireplace by the rocky rockery glowed faintly, its fire flickering ghostly in the still air. The atmosphere was thick with hot, sticky humidity.

Cang Tai hurried down the corridor, not daring to glance at his surroundings. His mind raced, repeating the instructions Bai Liu had given him:

— Beiyuan Xiaokui, one of the Bei Yuan family's offerings, and her brother were both bought by the family during the first year of the evil god festival.

And last year, Beiyuan Xiaokui's brother had been sacrificed.

This brother was intentionally raised by the Bei Yuan family, enduring over a year—almost two—of suffering. His sacrifice, made to fulfill a wish, had propelled the Bei Yuan family to the top of Luming County, underscoring the extreme torment he had endured during those two years.

Not to mention the immense value to the Bei Yuan family of Xiaokui, who bore three years of pain. She was undoubtedly one of the family's most important offerings, which is why it was no surprise she was recaptured after escaping.

Bai Liu lifted his gaze and fixed Cang Tai with a steady stare. "The key to the shrine should be with Beiyuan Xiaokui or her brother."

Cang Tai blinked, confusion spreading across his face. "Wait, isn't the key to the shrine a highly valuable item? Why would the Bei Yuan family keep it on the body of a sacrifice?"

"Because they are the ones closest to the gods," Bai Liu replied calmly. "This family deludes itself into thinking they can get closer to the gods. They built their mansion to gaze at the dwelling of the gods, they constructed the attic we're in to overlook the shrine. Their obsession with the evil gods is extreme. So, it's likely that the key, which holds the power of the gods, is kept with the sacrifices—the ones closest to the gods."

Cang Tai hesitated, still uncertain. "But even if it's placed on the sacrifice, how can you be so sure it's Xiaokui and her brother? The Bei Yuan family has more than a few sacrifices..."

"Yes, they have many," Bai Liu's voice remained calm, "but these two siblings are the ones who have contributed the most to the family and are the most memorable."

"They were the first pair of squires and sacrifices in the Bei Yuan family."

"They were the first to enter the shrine on behalf of the Bei Yuan family."

Cang Tai shivered at Bai Liu's judgment.

He walked through the warm night air, the flowers blooming and the water flowing in the courtyard to his right. He took a deep breath, the rich, warm fragrance filling his lungs. Yet, to him, it seemed more like the stench of resentment, the bitter cold hidden beneath the surface warmth, born from the sacrifices' agony.

Bai Liu had said that Beiyuan Xiaokui, the most precious and valuable offering, had endured three years of pain and must have lived in the highest, closest attic of the Bei Yuan family.

After circling the area a few times under various pretenses, Cang Tai finally spotted a particularly tall loft opposite their own.

This attic had only one room, like a lighthouse with empty wooden shelves below it. The entrance was guarded by two servants, and a long flight of steps led up from the attic door.

Cang Tai sneaked through the grass, eyeing the guards, then turned to examine the lavishly constructed loft, its windows and doors closed, surrounded by piles of flowers.

Beiyuan Xiaokui lived here.

“It’s almost like a place where a princess would live,” Cang Tai whispered, a hint of trance in his voice. “But it’s just a sacrifice…”

With that, Cang Tai crouched in the grass, waiting patiently.

As night fell, the servants guarding the entrance left for their quarters, retreating to a side room to keep watch over Xiaokui.

Sure enough, the two servants climbed into the attic and went to sleep in separate rooms, one on each side.

Cang Tai breathed a sigh of relief. He darted through the grass, grabbed the ladder's base, and began climbing, one step at a time. He carefully gripped the sill and knocked gently.

“Xiaokui,” Cang Tai whispered softly, “It’s me, Cang Tai. Are you there?”

After a long silence, long enough for Cang Tai to think Xiaokui wouldn’t open the window, it creaked open. Xiaokui, clad in a close-fitting shirt, her face pale and weary, appeared at the window. Her voice was indifferent. "What are you doing here? Is this another trick from the Bei Yuan family to lure me into escaping, only to catch me again and make me suffer more?"

Before Cang Tai could respond, Xiaokui started to close the window again. In a panic, he scrambled through the gap, rolling into her room, shaking his head as he explained, “No, I was chosen by the Bei Yuan family as a squire.”

“I’m here because Lord Bai Six wants the key to the shrine.”

Cang Tai looked at her eagerly, folding his arms. “He said you would help me. Do you have the key?”

Xiaokui raised an eyebrow. "Bai Six? Why did he send you for the key?"

Cang Tai scratched his head, thinking before choosing to tell the truth. “He said the evil god at the shrine is his lover, and he plans to elope with him.”

Although Bai Liu hadn’t said it quite like that, that was essentially the message Cang Tai took away.

Xiaokui’s expression changed. She froze for a moment, then clapped

her hands and laughed, as though hearing something ridiculous. Tears streamed down her face as she laughed. “Take the evil god and elope? Hahahaha!”

Cang Tai froze, terrified. He knelt and quickly covered her mouth. “Stop laughing! If the maids hear you, we’re in trouble!”

“It’s fine,” Xiaokui said lazily, lying back on the floor, her gaze unfocused as she stared at the ceiling. “I often laugh like this at night, in a psychotic way. They won’t care.”

“They just need to make sure I’m alive and in pain. That’s all.”

Cang Tai looked at her, bewildered. “What’s so funny?”

Xiaokui wiped tears from her eyes and, still a little dazed, answered, “Bai Six made up a ridiculous story, and you actually believed it.”

“There’s no way he and the evil god are lovers, let alone that they would elope.”

Cang Tai wasn’t convinced. “But when Lord Bai Six talks about evil gods, I think he’s serious!”

Xiaokui whispered softly, “My brother was very serious too. He once said he would take me away from this place.”

Cang Tai paused, then hesitantly asked, “Were you and your brother... sacrifices and squires too?”

Xiaokui closed her eyes. “Yeah.”

"I am the sacrifice, and he is the squire."

"My brother, who is three years younger than me, is so oblivious to these things that he can't grasp the meaning behind many of them. He doesn't know pain the way I do. Even when he's tortured, beaten, and covered in blood by the Bei Yuan family, he cries when he sees me, hugs me, calls me his sister, and showers me with affection."

"He only understands pain, not suffering."

Tears slid from the corners of Xiaokui's tightly shut eyes, her voice hoarse. "But when I saw him like that, I was scared, and it hurt constantly."

"Even when we were tortured in the same ways, my pain was far

greater than his. It felt as though the things he couldn't understand were being transferred to me—so that I became the sacrifice."

"I thought it would go on like that, and when the day came for me to be sacrificed, he would be cast out of the Bei Yuan family and probably return to the boathouse to live in a cage. Even then, I thought it would be better than staying in the Bei Yuan family as the sacrifice."

"Because he's always been raised in this environment, I knew that even if he was caged, he could live a happy, carefree life, without knowing suffering. This world, this cruelty, was all he knew since he was a child. He didn't understand anything else."

"He thought this was the way the world was supposed to be—that this is how cruel the world should be."

"But one day…" Xiaokui's hollow eyes widened, "The Bei Yuan family sent a teacher to my brother and me."

"They began to teach us about the real world."

"Every day, we saw how much happier others were than us. Millions of people—who from birth had loving parents, good friends, who studied normally, grew up loved, married, had children, and continued to live joyfully. The teachers told us that this was normal, that this was the life everyone should live. We were deviants, they said. We were living an abnormal, lowly existence—one that had to be tortured to survive."

"Then the Bei Yuan family began to teach us all of this, while torturing us more and more."

"One day they told us that mothers and fathers love their children. The next day, they invited our parents to watch us being tortured, giving them vast amounts of money."

"One day they told us we could play with our favorite animals. The next morning, I woke up to find the sunny doll hanging outside my window had changed. It wasn't a doll anymore. It was my puppy."

"The sun was so strong, and my little dog hung by the eaves, his tongue hanging out. The collar around his neck had the little flowers I had sewn for him. Flies buzzed around him."

"My brother and I broke down in tears as we buried the puppy's

body." Xiaokui's eyes glazed over, tears spilling down her face. "That was when my brother finally understood."

"The world isn't that cruel. It's just cruel to us."

"He told me, 'Sister, I must take you away from this place.'"

"He started to torture himself more and more. He wanted to be more miserable than me; he wanted to become the sacrifice. He'd come to me, crazy with pain, crying, saying, 'Sister, if I sacrifice myself, we can live a normal life.'"

"We will be happy, he said. The Lord of Evil will see our suffering. If I sacrifice my pain to Him, then we can escape. We'll run away, and we can go to all those places we saw in books and on TV. We can have puppies without them being hung, without mom and dad watching us suffer every day, forced into dog bowls, whipped, and fed dog food."

"'Sister, someone must love us. All this suffering is just to lead us to a better life, a hopeful future.'"

Xiaokui took a deep, shaky breath. "I knew the teachers were teaching us this to give us hope."

"Hope is what makes the pain of torture bearable. With hope, we won't kill ourselves. We endure for the hope that things will get better, until the day of sacrifice comes."

"My brother really became a sacrifice, and I became his squire."

"On the day he was sent to the shrine for the sacrifice, I confirmed with the Bei Yuan family over and over: All it took was one painful sacrifice for my brother to receive a large sum of money, and they would no longer restrict his movements. He could leave Luming County whenever he wanted."

"I watched him walk into the shrine, and then I heard the sound of the shrine doors loosening. People around me were ecstatic, claiming that the Evil Lord had opened His eyes and stepped down from the shrine. I was excited too."

"But then my brother came out of the shrine, head down, hands trembling."

Xiaokui turned to Cang Tai, her tear-streaked face twisted into a half-smile, her voice hoarse.

"He looked up at me, his eyes blank. His hands were cold, like a corpse, and his speech was incoherent. His mouth dripped with saliva, but I could understand what he was trying to say. Years of knowing him, the things we shared, let me piece it together."

"He said, 'Sister, it was a trick. A lie.'"

"If the sacrifice's suffering doesn't move the Evil Lord, He won't open His eyes and grant the wish. The sacrifice won't leave."

"If the Evil Lord does open His eyes, the pain will drive the sacrifice mad, and we would die just from looking into His silver-blue eyes."

"We can't escape."

Xiaokui's laughter was wild, almost manic, as she broke into tears. "And then, after he came back, my brother hung himself outside my roof."

"Like a sunny doll."

She wriggled up from the ground, pushing herself up with trembling arms, her messy hair falling around her bloodless face. Her laughter was nervous, strained. "You tell me…" She looked at Cang Tai with hollow eyes, "How did Bai Six fall in love with Him? How did he become lovers with Him?"

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

"Your brother is dead?!" Cang Tai's mind spun in disbelief. He staggered back two steps, eyes wide. "But Bai Six, my lord, said he was going to find your brother!"

Xiaokui turned her head slightly, lying on the ground, and let out an eerie, mindless laugh. Her entire body shook as she stifled the laughter, which seemed almost desperate. "Looking for my brother? Then he'll have to go to whatever shrine is filled with sacrificial tablets to find him."

"But right now, Bai Six can't see my brother through the shrine—only the remains of..."

Cang Tai's eyes widened in horror. "The spirits of the discontented?!"

"It's not my brother's spirit," Xiaokui smiled darkly, "He's not buried in the shrine. The Bei Yuan family doesn't allow sacrificial corpses inside their shrines."

Cang Tai blinked, stunned. "But isn't the shrine supposed to house the sacrifice? Why wouldn't the body be allowed?"

"How could they place a body in a sacrificial shrine?" Xiaokui rolled her eyes, giving Cang Tai a look of disdain. "Of course, they need something much worse than a mere body."

Xiaokui covered her mouth with a miserable blush, stifling a giggle. "Guess what they put in there?"

Outside the shrine, Bai Liu stood motionless.

As nightfall descended, the shrine grew quiet. A strange, pungent smell of blood seeped from the doorway, and through the paper-covered windows, a dark, writhing shape could be seen moving inside. Above the door, a thick, hand-rolled knotted rope hung at regular intervals, adorned with imperial rice paper—legend has it, this paper can seal away evil spirits.

And when the rope breaks, the demon is released.

Bai Liu raised his hand, breaking the rope, and calmly stepped into the

night, entering the shrine.

A translucent wave of water rippled around him, expanding and dissipating, as the knotted rope snapped. Blood stained the imperial paper, and Bai Liu's temperature dropped several degrees. The shrine lit up, though no lights had been switched on.

The light wasn't that of a shrine lamp. Instead, it was a faint, flickering orange—a treacherous glow that resembled the reflection of a huge beast's eyes in the dark, radiating malice.

A gust of wind blew from the closed shrine, coming and going as if the shrine were breathing. It stirred the hem of Bai Liu's coat, carrying with it a strong, fishy scent, like the mouth of a vicious dog.

Bai Liu walked on, unfazed by the smell, his expression shallow. He approached the large wooden cabinet inside the shrine, offering a slight bow with folded hands, then raised his head, lifted the hem of his coat, and stepped onto the shrine.

The wind, like breath, paused momentarily, as if confused. Then it surged louder, howling like a dog baring its teeth at an intruder—snarling, warning, and growling in fury. A massive yellow eye appeared on the back of the wooden cabinet, staring maliciously at Bai Liu.

Unperturbed by the strange sights, Bai Liu climbed to the first level of the wooden cabinet and looked up, seeing the shrine placed at its highest point.

Inside the shrine, there was a black-and-white photograph of a young boy, no older than twelve or thirteen, with a babyish face, grinning in the picture.

—This was the only posthumous photograph of a smiling offering in the entire Bei Yuan family shrine.

Below the photograph was a tablet with the inscription [Bei Yuan Jiro].

Bai Liu reached up, without hesitation, and grabbed the black altar beneath the shrine. His fingers brushed the wet, blood-smeared carcass of an animal, which he then removed.

It was a tiny black Shiba Inu, its neck snapped unnaturally, soaked in some kind of embalming fluid.

The dog's limbs hung limply, its body dripping fluids onto the floor. Its once-bright yellow eyes were now a clouded, yellowish haze.

As Bai Liu lifted the corpse, the huge yellow eye behind him narrowed to a vertical slit. The iris flickered, and the light in the shrine dimmed. Something leapt out from behind the wooden cabinet, snarling at Bai Liu with sharp teeth.

In the pitch-blackness, a massive, beastly roar reverberated through the shrine.

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Bai Liu for activating the first page of the Monster Book of "Evil God Ritual - Boathouse."]

Loft

Cang Tai scratched his head in anxiety. "Bai Six, is already in the shrine now. Xiaokui, please, tell me—what's really inside the shrine?"

"If there's no sacrificial corpse there, then why did that old servant say there are terrible spirits there and we shouldn't go out at night?"

Xiaokui curled her lips wryly. "Of course, there are spirits in the shrine. It's true the bodies of the sacrifices aren't there, but the bodies of pets with the same names as the sacrifices are."

"The evil spirits formed by animals are much more terrifying than those of humans."

Cang Tai, kneeling, was dumbfounded. "A pet's corpse?! How could it be the corpse of a pet?!"

Xiaokui raised an eyebrow. "A pet's corpse, of course."

"The Bei Yuan family tortures sacrifices every day. Why should they fear the spirits formed by the sacrifices? Even if a person turns into a ghost, it's the ghost that fears the person, right?"

Xiaokui's expression remained indifferent. "But animals are different."

"They don't remember as well as humans. Once they become spirits of grievance, they won't remember who tormented them in life. They'll only remember who their master was. The evil spirits they form will relentlessly attack humans near the shrine, trying to protect their master."

Cang Tai sat paralyzed, lost in thought. "Why is the shrine full of dead pets?"

Xiaokui replied, "Because the bodies of the sacrifices are not allowed in the shrine."

Confused, Cang Tai asked, "Why?"

Xiaokui laughed bitterly, choking on her laughter until tears flowed. "Because the shrine does not accept those who died in vain."

"The sacrifices here either couldn't endure the pain and killed themselves before the evil sacrifice, or they endured the pain and successfully became part of the evil sacrifice, but killed themselves because they saw the evil god's eyes and went mad."

"Anyone who commits suicide is unclean and cannot enter the shrine to receive offerings."

Her expression turned fierce as she pounded the floor, cursing viciously. "But these bastards from the Bei Yuan family, who obviously take pleasure in the suffering of the sacrifices, pretend to glorify their pain by erecting a plaque to honor their 'contribution' to the family. As if their suffering wasn't suffering, as if it was a voluntary sacrifice!"

"Even the standing shrines for sacrifices—most of these sacrifices died tragically by suicide. They don't follow the rules of shrine holiness!"

"That's when the family came up with a solution." Xiaokui sat up, propping herself up on the floor. Her gaze was cold and emotionless as she stared at Cang Tai. "They decided to replace the sacrifices with substitutes to be put in the shrine and receive worship."

Taking a shaky breath, Xiaokui continued, "I was going to bury my brother's body by the sea, but the Bei Yuan family said they would let my brother enter a shrine where he could be worshipped and appreciated forever. They promised that after committing suicide, my brother's vengeful spirit could become a Buddha instead of being trapped as an earthbound spirit in their family."

"As much as I hate them, I want my brother to escape here—even if he has to be a ghost, I just want him to leave."

"So I agreed and let them take my brother's remains."

Xiaokui's lips twisted into a smile, but it was hollow. "My brother had

a Shiba Inu with the same name as me. Mine died, but his is still alive."

"After my brother died, that Shiba Inu stayed under the same roof where my brother hung. It didn't eat or drink for over three days until I force-fed it to keep it alive."

"Then, it seemed to realize my brother was gone. It would eat when I gave it food, but mostly it stayed by the eaves, staring."

Xiaokui's eyes welled with tears. "It was a very docile dog. It never hurt anyone, even when beaten. But after my brother's death, when the Bei Yuan family tortured me, it would rush at them, showing its teeth, trying to protect me. It wouldn't back down, even after being beaten several times. It was stubborn—just like my brother was when he was alive."

"It would always follow me around, but when they were about to take my brother's body to the shrine, I couldn't find it anywhere."

"I searched everywhere. I shouted its name—'Jiro! Jiro! Where are you? Come out, Jiro!'"

"I searched from dawn till dusk, shouting until it was dark, but still no sign of it."

Xiaokui leaned closer to Cang Tai, her smile twisted and grotesque, tears streaking down her face. "And then I finally found it."

"They told me to go to the shrine to worship my brother, and as I walked there, worried about Jiro, I entered the shrine and saw [Jiro]."

"Jiro had been strangled, his neck broken and sealed up!"

Xiaokui's sobs were heart-wrenching. "They chose an animal — a pet — when there were so many other alternatives!"

"They just want us, the living, to keep suffering. To become sacrifices in the next round!"

Her voice cracked as she continued, tears flowing freely. "After that, I heard rumors about spirits of resentment."

"I know that it's Jiro's ghost, transformed into a vengeful spirit, guarding my brother's shrine day and night. Anyone who dares to look at him, anyone but me, will be chased and dragged into the

shrine, torn apart."

Xiaokui suddenly burst into a frantic laugh, her face streaked with tears, her eyes distant. "If Bai Six had gone to the shrine, he would have been eaten by [Jiro] before even meeting the evil god!"

"What!? I need to warn Lord Bai Six about this!" Cang Tai panicked, scrambling to climb out the window.

But as soon as he stood, Xiaokui lunged and grabbed him by the ankle, pulling him back to the ground.

With a wild, tear-streaked grin, she looked up at him, her expression maddened. "[Jiro] hasn't been fed in a long time."

"Instead of letting your Lord Bai Six become a painful sacrifice to the Bei Yuan family's cause, why not let him feed [Jiro] well?"

Bai Liu sat casually on the floor of the shrine, his left hand gently stroking a large black Shiba Inu beside him.

The Shiba Inu had golden pupils and exuded an unsettling aura of resentment. Its white neck bones were clearly visible, yet it continued to nudge its head against Bai Liu's hand, sticking its tongue out and offering its bony neck for more attention.

When the Shiba Inu suddenly flopped onto Bai Liu's coat, it seemed to catch a strange scent and immediately bared its teeth. But as Bai Liu reached over, it sniffed his hand twice in confusion before lying back down and exposing its belly.

The process repeated itself, over and over.

The Shiba Inu was unfamiliar with the scent on Bai Liu's body, but the scent on his hands was unmistakable—it was the scent of Xiaokui, its owner's sister.

Bai Liu glanced down at what he was holding—a roll of soft, fine hair that he had taken from the outer curtain of the window, which had been thrown down by the pale lady who had climbed up.

It was Xiaokui's hair, one of the weaknesses of this [Black Dog Grudge] monster.

From the two Shiba Inu-shaped stone lanterns in front of Bei Yuan's

house, where the previous year's offering had been Xiaokui's brother, to the photo of the highest offering at the shrine, which resembled Xiaokui, the old servant had mentioned that the shrine did not accept people who had died in vain. Yet, the offering here was Xiaokui's brother. All this information combined gave Bai Liu enough to deduce the location of the key.

Bai Liu slowly slipped two fingers through the Shiba Inu's teeth, gently sliding them down its throat to remove an antique key wrapped in plastic.

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Bai Liu for completing the side quest - Stealing the key to Bei Yuan's shrine.]

[Two tips:]

[1. Player Bai Liu can now use the Shrine Key to open the Shrine and meet the evil gods, but doing so carries a greater risk of losing your spirit level. Please choose your path carefully.

2. Every morning at five o'clock, the master of the Bei Yuan family will come to the shrine to pay his respects and check the key inside the black dog's corpse. Be sure to return the key before then.]

Bai Liu placed the hair on the tip of the black dog's nose, then turned and walked out of the shrine, alone in the night. His thin, almost transparent white coat barely disturbed the air as he moved toward the shrine above Bei Yuan's house.

Cang Tai, struggling on the windowsill, suddenly saw a dim light on the road leading to the shrine.

She jerked Cang Tai away, staring in shock at the light that was approaching. "Bai Six actually got the key...?"

"Doesn't he want to die? He's heading straight for the shrine with the key," Xiaokui muttered. "Isn't he afraid the evil gods will drive him mad?"

"Or maybe he's already crazy because of the evil god," Xiaokui added absently, watching the light draw closer to the shrine.

"Maybe they shouldn't really be lovers," she said quietly.

Cang Tai, arguing softly, replied, "I told you, Lord Evil is Lord Bai Six's lover."

Xiaokui paused for a moment, then spoke with sudden calm, "So what if they're lovers? Even if he opens the shrine, he won't see the evil gods."

Cang Tai asked incredulously, "Why not?!"

Xiaokui sneered, her gaze cold. "This evil god only opens his eyes when someone suffers enough. The rest of the time, he's a corpse—sealed in a massive shrine. No one can wake him up."

"The Bei Yuan family tried various methods to force the evil god awake once they had the key," Xiaokui continued. "But all they accomplished was alienating those who came near, turning them into monsters, driving them to suicide, or being killed."

She fixed her gaze on the shimmering light at the top of the hill, her tone as cold as her stare. "That is a cruel and evil god."

"It's dangerous to get involved with someone like that," she muttered. "Thinking he can love someone... that's just wishful thinking."

Cang Tai's face flushed with anger. She swung her fist, shouting, "No! Lord Bai Six said they are lovers! A pair!"

Xiaokui glanced at Cang Tai before turning her attention back to the light at the hilltop, her expression lost in thought, as though in a trance, or perhaps asking a question.

"Can an evil god who feeds on human suffering truly understand love... and how to love someone?"

Bai Liu tilted his head, gazing at the closed door before him. With a flicker of light, he slid the key into the lock and turned it.

"Squeak!"

The door creaked open, dust and dead leaves falling as Bai Liu stepped inside, holding a flickering gas lamp. He passed through door after door, ward after ward, until he reached a shrine hut with flying eaves.

In front of the hut was a money box. Through the top compartment, Bai Liu could see scattered coins—offering tokens people used to make wishes to the evil gods.

Bai Liu lowered his gaze to the coin hanging over his heart—his game manager.

It turned out that the coin, the human God Xiang wish-granting parasite, was the reason the system manager appeared as it did when the players entered the evil god's game.

—Because this coin was the medium through which people made their wishes to the evil one.

Bai Liu raised his head as he circled the ringing bell, stepped over the cipher, and pushed open the last wooden door to finally enter the shrine.

The interior was spacious, with tatami mats spread across the floor. Directly opposite were two wooden doors, set a distance apart and closed in the center, likely leading into a larger shrine, depending on the style.

If there were no surprises, Xie Ta would be inside.

Bai Liu paused in front of the shrine and reached out to open the door. However, the moment his hand touched the door’s handle, it felt as though time had frozen. His hand hung motionless in mid-air for several moments.

Bai Liu rarely hesitated, as there were few things in this world that could make him do so.

But pushing open this wooden door—at this moment—was one of those things.

He lowered his eyes to his hand, still paused in front of the door.

The Xie Ta of this game world would be the same as the Xie Ta from the other worlds before they met. In other words, the Xie Ta of old.

No matter how much Bai Liu had pried, Xie Ta had never revealed anything about his past. Now, this mystery was finally unfolding in front of him.

What would the former Xie Ta—who had been killed by [him]—be like when they met again?

Would he kill him? Would he hate him? Or would he simply pretend he didn’t exist, as he had with [Bai Six] in this world line?

It was reminiscent of how Xie Ta had treated the other children at the orphanage.

He ignored everyone—children, investors, everything around him—existing in the world like a statue, never acknowledging any human being.

It was from Xie Ta that Bai Liu first understood that there seemed to be no room for humans in God's eyes—not out of arrogance, but simply because…

He was incapable of generating affection.

Bai Liu still didn't understand why, of all the humans, of all the children, of all the [Bai Six], Xie Ta would choose to look at him.

He had asked Xie Ta, who had paused thoughtfully before responding, "The problem isn't with me. It's with you, Bai Six."

At the time, Bai Liu had found it amusing. "How could the problem be mine?"

Xie Ta had looked at him seriously, "Yes."

"Because the way you look at me, no matter what time of day it is, I'm bound to turn back."

"Something like a look doesn't convince me." Bai Liu had propped his chin up and smiled lazily. "How do you tell the difference between the way I look at you and the way others do? Can you even tell when someone who looks exactly like me is looking at you?"

"I can." Xie Ta had gazed at him with his silvery-blue eyes. "Because you are different."

"No matter how many [Bai Sixes] there are, you're the only one who looks at me differently."

"The moment you looked at me with those eyes, I was given your soul, and I developed feelings."

"It's because of you that I have a soul."

Bai Liu pushed open the shrine door, and a blinding light flooded out from within.

Beyond the shrine, there was a backyard. In the soft moonlight, a man sat on the veranda. His silver-blue curls fell to his waist, shimmering faintly.

He wore a wide kimono, looking no older than eighteen or nineteen, his long body draped in graceful folds. Golden chains trailed behind him, jangling lightly as he moved. He appeared to be engrossed in a book.

In the center of the backyard was a large goldfish pond, the bright orange and red fish swimming gracefully, their flower-like tails stirring the water into shimmering ripples. The light reflected off the water and the pages of the book, illuminating the quiet side of the man's face. His long lashes fluttered like snowflakes, catching the moonlight.

Bai Liu stopped behind him, close enough to almost glimpse the book he was reading.

The night breeze rustled the trees, and their wide, gauzy tunics fluttered in the wind, merging together like leaves caught in a breeze.

The man put down his book and turned back to the table. His eyes, familiar and silvery-blue, met Bai Liu's gaze through the gauzy fabric.

The breeze swirled between them, and Xie Ta looked at Bai Liu with a calm expression. He raised the book, now broken and reassembled, in his hand.

"I haven't seen you before. Is this your first time at the shrine?" he asked, his voice light.

"Want to read it together?"

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

The moonlight shines on the surface of the pond where goldfish swim, creating a fractured, shimmering light.

The silhouettes of two people reflect on the glistening water as they sit close together, reading a book. A soft night breeze stirs their quiet conversations, and in the stillness, the only sounds are the gentle flow of water and the distant chirping of birds.

"How did this book get torn up?"

"A child from the orphanage I was at tore it up and threw it in the pond. But I really liked it, so I picked it up and glued it back together."

"Why did he tear up your book?"

"I don't know. Maybe he doesn't like me or my books. After all, no one likes a monster that won't die."

Xie Ta says this in a light, casual tone, as if it's nothing significant.

Bai Liu's voice pauses for a moment. "How did you end up here?"

Xie Ta lowers his eyelashes. "The kid who tore up my book cut me up and pushed me into the water. I drifted with the current for a long, long time, slowly piecing myself back together. By the time I regained consciousness, I was in this shrine."

"Have you ever thought about..." Bai Liu turns his head, looking at the side of Xie Ta's face. "Leaving here?"

Xie Ta turns to meet his gaze. "I can't leave."

He opens his arms slightly, and in the reflection of the moonlight, Bai Liu catches a glimpse of the millions of silver threads wrapped around Xie Ta's body. The strings stretch through the air from all directions in the shrine, tying around his wrists, ankles, limbs, and torso, constricting him tightly.

"This is the puppet string the gods have tied to me," Xie Ta says, his voice flat. "Because I haven't met God's expectations, I am here to be refined until I become a competent evil god."

Bai Liu looks at him. "A qualified evil god?"

Xie Ta turns his head, his eyes calmly watching the goldfish swimming in the pond. "A vessel for all desires, strengthened by the pain of human sacrifice, capable of turning the world upside down into an evil game."

"I couldn’t do it, so I was banished."

Bai Liu’s eyes darken. "Banished from what?"

Xie Ta falls silent for a moment. "I don’t remember."

"All I remember is being covered with a white cloth, unable to move. A man would visit me every day, asking if I wanted to become an evil god."

"Each time I answered no, he would carve and trim my face and body with instruments through the cloth, then leave, returning the next day to ask me again. Eventually, he sighed and told me, 'You will never have a soul in my hands. You need to go through the experience.' And so, I was banished."

Bai Liu asks, "Why didn’t you want to become an evil god?"

Xie Ta pauses. "Because I don’t understand it."

"Every sacrifice that comes to the shrine to see me—those who awaken me from my slumber—carry the desire for extreme pain."

"They approach me, push aside my slumbering shrine, and look up at me with obscured eyes. They kneel before me, praying with tears, or curse and force me to fulfill their desires."

"But I don't have the power to grant wishes. Only true evil gods do."

"If the pain of these sacrifices meets God's standards, God will be satisfied and grant their wishes. But in doing so, God transfers their pain, desires, and memories to me, making me feel the agony they have endured."

"God always says that pain makes the soul worthy, that I need pain to carve it up."

Looking down at the carefree goldfish swimming in the pond, Xie Ta extends his fingers and taps the surface of the water. The ripples spread out, and the goldfish scatter as he continues.

"But no matter how much human suffering and desire I take in, I’m

like an inferior funnel—unable to hold or use it to become an evil god."

"I don't understand human desire or pain, and the one who carved me said I have the most evil and powerful body in the world, yet I'm a failed vessel—unable to contain any evil."

"He said it was because I had no soul, and that pain means nothing to a soulless monster."

"I don't understand why people desire and suffer, nor why, despite it all, they continue to pray to the evil gods who torment them to fulfill their wishes."

"Why not just give up?"

Xie Ta turns to look at Bai Liu, gently placing his hand on the back of Bai Liu's hand, gazing at him earnestly. "Bai Liu, you came to me and awakened me. Can you tell me what desire you have that must be fulfilled, no matter the pain?"

"Can you tell me why you won't give up on this desire?"

Bai Liu avoids Xie Ta's gaze, lowering his eyes and pulling his hand back. His fingers curl slightly, and he mutters softly.

Xie Ta leans forward, his curiosity shining through as he stares into Bai Liu's eyes. "Why won't you give up on this desire, no matter how painful it is?"

Bai Liu pauses, his tone shallow. "Probably because the pain of losing this person is more intense than the pain of never having them."

Xie Ta falls silent.

Slowly, he straightens up, pulling his hand away from Bai Liu's and distancing himself. He furrows his brow as he looks at the reflection of his trembling bare feet in the water, the chains rattling around his limbs.

Xie Ta asks softly, almost rhetorically, "Bai Liu's desire... is it a person?"

"It's rare, isn't it? To feel such pain for only one person that it wakes you up."

Xie Ta lowers his eyes. "Can you describe the pain you feel for this

person? What kind of pain would make you come to pray to the evil god?"

Bai Liu, too, lowers his gaze, staring at Xie Ta's reflection on the water. Turning slightly sideways, he speaks calmly. "Probably painful enough to become an evil god."

Xie Ta's eyes widen, and he turns to look at Bai Liu's face. But Bai Liu stands up, says indifferently, "It's getting late. I have to go." He turns to leave.

"Please wait!" Xie Ta reaches out, trying to grab Bai Liu as he turns away.

But the moment his hand stretches out, countless threads surge, wrapping tightly around his wrist and halting just as his fingertips brush the fluttering hem of Bai Liu's shirt.

Xie Ta's fingers stretch white with the effort, but he still gently and firmly grips Bai Liu's shirt, tugging it as he tilts his head back to look at him. His tone is light. "Will you come back tomorrow?"

Bai Liu pauses but doesn't look back. "Do you want me to come?"

Xie Ta's long eyelashes tremble. "Yes."

Bai Liu's tone is flat. "I'll be here tomorrow night, then."

As Bai Liu pushes open the shrine door and disappears from view, Xie Ta, still restrained by the puppet strings, feels a wave of sleepiness. Slowly, he collapses onto the wooden floor, his books scattered around him.

This was the first time he'd seen a sacrifice wake him up simply by walking into the shrine.

The sacrifice, Bai Liu, looked into his eyes—calmly, despite the intense desire and pain within him. He didn't lose himself to it; he simply stared back, unmoved, as the terrible evil god.

—That look was full of emotions Xie Ta didn't understand.

He would love to see it again.

Xie Ta leaned against the old wooden board, staring in the direction Bai Liu had gone. He slowly closed his eyes.

Bai Liu descended the hill with his nightlight, returned to the shrine, and put away the key. He then went back to the attic where he lived. When he opened the door, a startled Cang Tai lit up upon seeing him, slapping his chest in relief. "You're back at last! It's almost dawn!"

Cang Tai then worriedly told Bai Liu what Xiaokui had said to him, and Bai Liu nodded, much as he had expected.

"Then won't we be tortured during the day too?" Cang Tai said, already anxious as he thought about the scenarios Xiaokui had described.

"You're a squire. Don't worry too much," Bai Liu said, unzipping his tunic and placing it next to his pillow. With his eyes closed, he prepared to sleep. "They'll mainly focus on torturing the sacrifice."

There were many words on his lips, but in the end, none came out—just a long, quiet sigh.

It was clear he would be tormented by the twisted Bei Yuan family members, but he still fell asleep quickly and easily.

He, as a squire, hadn't even slept the night before.

Lord Bai Liu, as a sacrifice, had a good heart...

"Oh, yeah. I'm going to break into the shrine tomorrow night and steal the key." Bai Liu suddenly spoke, eyes still closed. "The black dog spirits at the shrine recognize their owners. I need something that smells like Xiaokui. Did you steal Xiaokui's clothes and bring them back?"

Cang Tai slapped his forehead in realization. "I almost forgot! I brought them back!"

Then, as Cang Tai processed it, he gasped in shock. "What! You're going to steal the shrine key tomorrow night?!"

"Mm." Bai Liu snorted lazily, rolling over to sleep. "He's stuck there and can't leave. That'll have to do for now."

Bai Liu fell asleep quickly, leaving a nervous Cang Tai anxiously biting his hand, lost in thought.

Second Night

The bandages were being applied to Bai Liu's shoulders, but blood seeped through as soon as they were wrapped. How could they lynch you like this right out of the gate?!

Bai Liu appeared unfazed as he donned his coat after securing the straps and stood up. "I'm leaving."

Although he had managed to use Liu Jiayi's panel to heal the wound earlier, in this situation, quickly healing it wouldn't be ideal for a sacrifice.

Cang Tai knelt anxiously at Bai Liu's feet. "Bai Six, sir, you returned last night and barely slept. Then, during the day, you were... taken by Bei Yuan's family. Are you still going tonight?"

"Yes," Bai Liu replied succinctly.

One Hour Later

Xiaokui, bored and lying by the window, was topless. Her back, much like Bai Liu's, was covered in fresh knife cuts, still raw and exposed to the air, untreated.

She stared out the window, one hand propping her chin, lost in thought. Suddenly, something caught her eye, and her gaze froze as she noticed a small, dark figure on the road leading up to the shrine at the top of the hill.

Again? Xiaokui's face twisted in shock as she frowned. Does this guy have a death wish? He was just tortured during the day, and now he's going back out there at night?

Bai Liu pushed open the door of the shrine, following the same path as yesterday. He stepped inside, pushing open the shrine's door.

The moonlight was clear, and Xie Ta was still sitting in the same position, looking back at him. Bai Liu stepped onto the old wooden planks of the veranda, and a wave of dizziness hit him.

The blood loss from his wounds, the chase with the black dog, and the rush to reach the shrine had left him slightly lightheaded. He steadied himself against the pillar at the entrance, trying to regain his balance.

Xie Ta instantly sensed something was wrong. He frowned and

stepped forward, reaching out to support Bai Liu, who was swaying on the edge of collapse.

A small, delicate dress with cherry blossoms embroidered on the chest slowly slipped out of Bai Liu's sleeve and floated to the ground.

Xie Ta and Bai Liu’s gazes met at the same time.

This was the dress Bai Liu had used to deceive the black dog's spirits, which Cang Tai had hastily stolen from Xiaokui’s attic.

It was a woman's undergarment.

Xie Ta slowly withdrew his hand and tucked it back into his sleeve, his eyes fixed on the dress. "...Is this the clothing of the person, whom you can’t restrain your desires?"

"You’re carrying it with you?"

Bai Liu didn’t respond.

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

"It's not her," Bai Liu said plainly. "This is Beiyuan Xiaokui, another sacrifice's clothing."

"She and I never interacted at Bei Yuan's. These clothes just ended up with me for some random reason."

"Beiyuan Xiaokui?" Xie Ta echoed.

Bai Liu's sharp gaze lifted. "You know her?"

Xie Ta shook his head slightly, his eyes meeting Bai Liu's evenly. "I haven't seen Beiyuan Xiaokui in this world line yet," he said. "But I have met her before."

"She was brought to me by another child."

"Who?" Bai Liu asked.

Xie Ta was silent for a few seconds before answering. "In every world line, God creates a derivative of Himself—one that grows up in that world. And when this derivative reaches around fourteen years old, he finds his way to me at the orphanage."

"Though derivatives are creatures of God, they inherit His innate hunger for greed and power. They plunder, they destroy, they are ruthless and dominant in every world line."

"Like me, each derivative is a candidate to inherit the role of the evil god. But we both share the same fatal flaw that keeps us from becoming one."

Xie Ta's voice softened as he looked at Bai Liu. "Neither of us has a soul."

"To correct this, God devised two different methods for us to gain souls in each world line."

"He first exposes us to a large number of humans, waiting to see if we develop emotions toward one of them. That person becomes our [anchor]."

"Once we have an [anchor], we go from being soulless creatures of God to potential successors of the evil god—with a soul."

Xie Ta lowered his eyes. "After that, the evil gods create elaborate games, forcing us to destroy—"

Bai Liu lifted his gaze. "—Destroy your [anchors], and in the agony of losing them, make your souls 'complete.' That's the goal, isn't it?"

"Yes." Xie Ta turned his head slightly, watching Bai Liu. "God calls it the 'shaping influence'—the destruction and reconstruction of the soul through loss."

Bai Liu averted his eyes, his tone light and mocking. "Sounds like the kind of experiment an evil god would come up with just to pass the time."

Xie Ta didn't refute him. Instead, he sat casually by the cloister, his knees bent as he gazed up at the moon. His expression was unreadable. "But the experiment never worked on me."

"No matter how many people the evil gods threw into my path, I never found my [anchor]."

Bai Liu's voice was quiet but firm. "Not only that. You became an [anchor] yourself—for one of God's derivatives, didn't you?"

Xie Ta hesitated, then nodded. "Yes."

"Because we were created as competing products, even when He lost his memories at the start of a new world line, his curiosity about me was stronger than for anyone else."

"He would watch me. The books I read, the places I went, how I reacted when touched, the food I ate, my expression when I was punished. Even—"

Bai Liu's voice remained eerily flat. "Even the pinholes in your body. The eyes you deliberately covered. He stood at your bedside while you slept, leaning down to count the flutter of your eyelids, the rhythm of your heartbeat. He memorized the exact temperature of your skin."

Xie Ta's fingers curled slightly where they rested beside Bai Liu. His gaze dropped to the pond below, where goldfish swam lazily beneath his chained feet.

Bai Liu turned his head, watching him. "After observing you for so long, He realized you were different from the greedy, lust-filled people around him. He fixated on you. Developed some… unusual desire to

be near you. That’s why you became His [anchor], isn't it?"

Xie Ta’s long hair swayed in the wind as he responded lightly, almost cryptically. "That’s true. But not quite how you put it."

He met Bai Liu’s eyes, his silver-blue gaze shimmering in the moonlight. "Derivatives don’t 'feel' the way you’re suggesting. That kind of desire doesn’t apply to them."

"To be an [anchor] doesn’t require positive emotions. Extreme negative emotions can shape a soul just the same."

"Every derivative in every world line only feels one thing toward me."

Xie Ta’s voice was soft, almost gentle. "Killing intent."

"His hunger for wealth makes him view me as an obstacle. I am the [anchor] that tethers his desires, and the moment He kills me—discards me—He is free."

"The [anchor] sinks, and He sails forward, filled with His own desires. He enters the game that God has already laid out for Him, walks the path set in stone, and ascends to the top—becoming the king of the world line."

Bai Liu tilted his head slightly. "Then God should be satisfied. He found His perfect heir, didn't He?"

Xie Ta shook his head. "God is not satisfied."

"The last derivative who stood before Him possessed a soul—but it was empty. A vessel filled with nothing but desire. There wasn’t a shred of pain inside it."

"And a soul without pain is worthless to Him."

Xie Ta's voice was quiet, but final. "So He keeps trying. Keeps opening new world lines. Keeps experimenting—with His derivatives, with me, and with every human trapped in this world."

Xie Ta spoke in a calm, measured tone. "Of all God's experiments, I am the only creation that has failed to find its [anchor]."

"God exiled me to countless places, made me meet countless people, hoping I would find it."

"But I still cannot understand human desires or feelings."

"So God sent me further, so that I might comprehend the depths of human longing and sin." Xie Ta lowered his lashes slightly. "He cast me beneath the sea, into the heart of the earth, to a universe 13.7 billion light-years away—and then transformed my body into a seat."

"Under His hand, I became a monster, a creature of inherent evil."

"The gods say that when human desire touches me, it breeds boundless suffering and hell. That because I am a god who receives humanity's faith, I must also bear responsibility for the tragedies born of my own evil."

"Anyone who comes near me will have their deepest, most depraved desires drawn from their subconscious. When those desires grow strong enough, or when enough people surround me—once the sum of their desires surpasses a threshold set by some cruel god—my body will transform, fragmenting into instruments that fulfill their longing."

"When these [tools] seep into human society, they heretically warp people into creatures like me."

"In response, humanity formed an organization to combat these [tools] and the monsters they create."

Xie Ta lifted his gaze. "Within this organization, they call these [tools] —and those who are altered by them—heretics."

"I am the sum of all heretics, the being they most wish to destroy."

"In every worldline, on every path God has laid before me, regardless of who they are—good or evil, powerful or weak—whenever people look upon me, they are left with only two thoughts: to dismantle me or to annihilate me."

"When they meet my eyes, they experience only one extreme emotion —"

"—fear."

Xie Ta's eyes remained half-lidded, the moonlight washing over his face. His long, silver-blue hair shimmered, glowing faintly, casting him in an ethereal pallor. Beneath the light, he looked as flawless as a jade carving, so still that, save for the subtle movement of his lips, one might not even realize the god whispering before them was alive.

"God sees humanity as a mirror."

"When a person stands before a mirror and directs an emotion toward it, the mirror reflects that emotion back. If one harbors hatred, the reflection returns that same hatred.

"The first emotion God wanted me to possess was fear. So He made all who stood before me afraid, hoping I would reflect their terror and, in doing so, develop a soul powerful enough to become an evil god—a being feared by all."

"But no matter how many people cowered before me, I could never understand what they were feeling. I could not mirror their emotions, nor could I create them within myself. And so, I was never able to form a soul of my own."

"God calls me a broken mirror, incapable of reflecting what stands before it."

Xie Ta turned his head, his gaze falling upon Bai Liu. The wind stirred his hair and the leaves, shifting like dark clouds across Bai Liu's vision, as light as the tone of Xie Ta's voice.

"But Bai Liu is different."

"When Bai Liu looks at me, I feel something unfamiliar."

Xie Ta braced a hand against the wall of the corridor, leaning in. His silver-blue eyes dilated as he approached, catching the moonlight and water's reflection—bright yet unfathomable, like an ambiguous haze. And yet, his gaze remained as clear as a still pond, untouched by understanding.

"This feeling makes me want to watch you all the time, to sit beside you and read, to visit the places you frequent, to know how you react when others touch you, to know what kind of food you've eaten—"

"—to undress you and examine the wounds you try to hide, to stand by your bedside after you've fallen asleep, to lean down and count the minute flutter of your eyelashes, the steady rhythm of your heartbeat, to touch you differently than I ever have—"

"—to feel warmth."

Xie Ta reached out, fingers brushing against Bai Liu's face as if he were touching the surface of a pond, as gentle and careful as one would be with a goldfish. His eyes lowered, his voice quiet, yet weighted with sincerity.

"Bai Liu, can you tell me—what is this feeling? The one that refracts from you to me whenever you look at me—the one that makes me feel... strange?"

Bai Liu's heart skipped a beat.

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

Bai Liu turned his head slightly, his gaze dropping to avoid Xie Ta's eyes. He stood up quickly, his tone steady.

"It's morning. I'm going back."

Xie Ta tilted his head, his silver-blue eyes reflecting both the dim moon above and Bai Liu standing at the edge of the veranda. His voice was soft.

"So... are you coming back tomorrow?"

Bai Liu remained silent. He didn't ask, Do you want me to come? like he had the night before. But Xie Ta, as if reading the unspoken question, answered naturally,

"I want you to come tomorrow."

The light in his eyes flickered, catching the pale glow of the clouds at dawn.

"I want you to come every day."

"So I can see you every day."

Bai Liu's breath hitched for a moment. His fingers curled at his side. When he spoke again, his voice was flat, distant—like that of a stranger.

"Why do you need to see me every day?"

"I'm just an ordinary sacrifice."

"An evil god like you has no reason to waste so much curiosity and attention on someone as insignificant as me."

Xie Ta studied him intently.

"That is… if you were just an ordinary sacrifice."

"Then why did you steal the key and come to see me the night before?"

"We were already going to meet at the Evil God Festival in a few months, weren't we?"

Bai Liu stiffened.

Xie Ta suddenly smiled. His long lashes trembled as he glanced at Bai Liu's right hand, which was curled slightly behind his back. Then, lifting his own left hand, he slipped his fingers between Bai Liu's, slowly interlocking them.

"You were the one who woke me up with pain to come and see me," he murmured. "And now you're asking me—an evil god who knows nothing—why I want to see you day after day."

"I'm just a flawed, imperfect mirror."

Xie Ta lifted his gaze, his silver-blue eyes meeting Bai Liu's.

"So naturally, the reason I want to see Bai Liu… is the same reason Bai Liu wants to see me."

"Can I wait for you tomorrow night?"

Bai Liu's lips pressed into a thin line. His grip on Xie Ta's cold fingers tightened for a fleeting second—before he let go. Without another word, he turned and strode toward the exit of the God Xiang Society, leaving behind only a single, emotionless sentence.

"I won't be here tomorrow night, so you don't have to wait."

Xie Ta's hand was left empty as he slowly leaned back against the veranda.

The wind stirred the trees in the courtyard, sending leaves drifting down, rippling the pond's surface.

Behind him, Bai Liu heard the faint rattle of chains. He recognized the sound—the chains around Xie Ta's feet, dragging across the ground, then tensing as if being pulled taut.

Xie Ta was following him.

Bai Liu didn't turn around. He simply stopped in his tracks. The lingering cold of Xie Ta's fingertips still pressed against his skin. Closing his eyes, he exhaled slowly before asking,

"What did you want to say to me?"

A pause. Then, in a whisper,

"I don’t understand."

Xie Ta’s voice was quiet, uncertain.

"I could sense that you wanted to come see me."

"But… why didn’t you?"

Another pause.

"Are you angry?"

"I'm not angry," Bai Liu said after a few seconds of silence. "But I’m not particularly pleased, either."

"It’s true—I’ll do anything to see someone if I want to see them." His voice was calm, measured. "But if that person only sees me because I want to see them… it feels like I’m giving something without receiving anything equal in return."

"Because that’s not a fair deal."

Bai Liu lowered his eyes.

"You’re only reflecting my feelings for you."

Xie Ta’s voice softened. "Then… what is an equal deal?"

Bai Liu finally turned. His expression was unreadable as he gazed into Xie Ta’s clear, emotionless eyes.

"I need you to want to see me."

"If one day, the Lord of Evil himself desires to see me, then naturally, I will come to see you."

With that, Bai Liu picked up the lantern by the door. He bowed slightly, his tone polite and detached.

"Good morning, Lord Evil. I have a lesson in sacrifice to attend."

"I’ll be leaving now."

Xiaokui, propped up by the attic window and stifling a yawn, raised an eyebrow as she watched Bai Liu approach with a lantern in hand.

"You're early today."

Bai Liu stepped into the attic where he lived, gingerly set the lantern down, undressed, and lay down on the tatami.

Despite his careful movements, Cang Tai stirred beside him. Blinking groggily, he turned his head and immediately stiffened. Bai Liu was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling with dark, unreadable eyes. His expression was so empty that it sent a chill down Cang Tai's spine. Rubbing his arms, he hesitantly asked,

"...Lord Bai Six? Are you in a bad mood?"

Bai Liu murmured, "Sort of."

Cang Tai, still groggy but now intrigued, scooted closer. "Why? Didn't you just meet the Evil God-sama?"

Yesterday, Bai Liu had come back from his meeting in an uncharacteristically good mood. But tonight…

"Because I hate it when people like me just because I like them," Bai Liu said flatly. "That kind of affection is cheap. It's not even as solid as a transaction—it's the same as how people give affection to a dog."

Cang Tai reeled. "What do you mean, 'the same as a dog'?! Dogs are adorable! I love dogs!"

Bai Liu gave him a sideways glance. "Then why do you like dogs?"

Cang Tai blinked, caught off guard. "Because they're cute, obviously!"

Bai Liu turned his gaze back to the ceiling. "No. People like animals because they assume the animals will love them back. That's why they choose ones they can discard if they don't—like dogs, cats, rabbits."

"Because these animals have no real power to resist humans. Their only two options are to be domesticated or abandoned."

Cang Tai's pupils trembled. He opened his mouth to argue, but no words came out.

Because… wasn't that true?

What would he do if he had a dog that didn't love him? If the dog bit him every day, bared its teeth, hurt him and his family over and over?

Cang Tai faltered. The honest answer sat like a stone in his throat. He'd give the dog away. Maybe worse.

“That’s why humans choose ‘safe’ pets to love,” Bai Liu continued softly. “It’s all about minimizing risk while maximizing return.”

“That’s not all it is!” Cang Tai protested, scrambling for a counterpoint. “I genuinely love dogs for their personalities too!”

Bai Liu glanced at him. “If you had to choose between two pets—one a dog with a snake’s temperament, the other a highly venomous lizard with a dog’s personality—which would you pick?”

Cang Tai hesitated. “...The dog.”

Bai Liu didn’t pause. “And if you had the option to pick neither?”

Cang Tai instantly snapped, “Then I’d pick neither!”

Bai Liu let out a slow exhale, resting his scarred arm over his eyes. His voice was so calm it was almost unsettling.

“But I picked the lizard with the poison.”

Cang Tai was stunned. “?! Why? If you could choose neither, why —?!”

“Because I didn’t want to choose either,” Bai Liu murmured, “but I still fell in love with that lizard. And when you love something, you want to keep it.”

Cang Tai took a shaky step back, swallowing hard. "Lord Bai Six… you fell in love with… a lizard?"

Bai Liu didn’t acknowledge the shock in Cang Tai’s voice. He just continued.

"But this lizard doesn’t know he's human. So he has no way of giving me the same… human affection.”

Cang Tai’s breath caught in his throat.

"I'm probably the only human in the world who would keep such a lizard—one that could poison everyone just by looking at them."

Bai Liu's voice grew quieter. “He only knows that I'm the one person who will reach out, touch him, stay with him forever. So he comes close to me, holds me, treats me well… the same way a person would feel fondness for a dog that licks their hand.”

He took a slow breath.

“Even gods must feel this way toward those who are weaker than them.”

His breathing became uneven, his hand clenching into a fist over his eyes. His voice wavered.

"But he still doesn’t understand what it means to me."

His chest rose and fell erratically. Then, silence.

Cang Tai thought Bai Liu had finally fallen asleep when, after a long, long pause, he heard a hoarse whisper.

“This is the most unfair deal I’ve ever made.”

A bitter chuckle.

“I can’t believe I ended up loving a god the way someone loves a dog.”

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

Third Night
Xiaokui, growing more and more bored, lay sprawled on the windowsill. When she saw Bai Liu approaching the shrine with a lantern, she sighed, resting her chin on her palm.

"There you go again."

But then, something unusual happened. She straightened up, surprised—Bai Liu had stopped at the shrine's entrance. He stood there, lantern in hand, without pushing open the door.

An hour passed.

Two hours passed.

Bai Liu remained motionless in the long, dark night, his dim lantern flickering like a lone firefly. He stood like a stone lantern guarding the shrine, silent and unyielding.

Then, the shrine door creaked open just a sliver. A pair of long, pale hands curled around the frame, straining against the unseen force keeping them inside. The evil god's hands.

He wanted to step out.

But Xiaokui recalled her brother's words—the evil god was bound in chains, unable to leave the shrine.

Bai Liu could have stepped inside and met him, yet he never crossed the threshold. He remained outside, forcing the god—stirred by his presence—to struggle, reaching toward him from within.

"What is this?" Xiaokui frowned. "He went through all that trouble to steal the key, even while seriously injured… just to stand outside all night?"

Yet Bai Liu did just that.

When Xiaokui woke at dawn, she saw him still standing there, lantern in hand, before finally turning to leave. He descended the mountain without so much as a backward glance.

The hands grasping the shrine door slowly withdrew.

Xiaokui furrowed her brow. "What the hell is this man thinking?"

The Fourth Night. The Fifth Night. A Month.
No matter how severe the torment during the day, no matter the weather—rain, snow, or storm—Bai Liu climbed the mountain every night.

Every night, he stood outside the shrine until dawn.

Even Xiaokui, who had initially watched out of idle curiosity, could see the toll it was taking. He grew thinner, paler, hollow-eyed. And yet, his expression never changed. As if the exhaustion, the sleepless nights, the quiet vigil—none of it mattered.

It was as if he had never spent those endless hours standing there, waiting.

The Summer Festival Draws Near
The first sacrifice took his own life.

The Bei Yuan family master came to inspect the remaining offerings and praised the trainers for their work. A new lesson was added to their education: love.

The snow melted, replaced by ceaseless rain. Buds bloomed among the shrine's trees.

Xiaokui, watching the days blur together, realized—summer was coming.

Then, another sacrifice—the one who had arrived with Bai Liu—took his own life as well.

He had been drowning in suffering, while Bai Liu remained eerily calm. Bai Liu's impassivity had drawn little attention before, but now, beside the other's obvious agony, it became apparent. Unsettling.

And so, the Bei Yuan family's focus shifted toward the more responsive sacrifice.

When the second man attempted suicide again, the family head waved a hand, smiling. "Good. He's nearly ready. No more training for today —give him whatever he asks for. Keep him alive long enough to reach his peak."

Bai Liu bowed his head and stepped away.

No one stopped him as he left.

The summer storms arrived, bringing heavy evening rains.

Bai Liu climbed the mountain as always, a paper umbrella shielding his lantern from the downpour.

Now that he was no longer closely watched, he moved more freely.

Xiaokui lay on the windowsill, chin propped on her hands, watching the dim light flicker through the misty night. Watching Bai Liu ascend the path had become one of the few amusements in her dull life of servitude.

She still didn't understand—what did Bai Liu want?

As the rain thickened, his lantern wavered in the distance, an insect-like glow drifting toward the shrine. Through the veil of rain, he emerged—wavering, wandering—before stopping once more at the shrine's entrance.

Xiaokui's breath caught.

The door creaked open. And from within, a pale hand reached out once more.

Over the past few days, the evil god within the shrine has been pushing farther and farther outward. What began as a mere sliver of an opening has grown—first a small gap, then enough to push the door halfway open. At one point, Xiaokui even thought the god inside would finally step out.

What Xiaokui cannot see is the hand pushing open the door—pale and long, yet scarred. Wounds from silk threads and chains mar the skin, blood dripping down the outer robe, joining the rhythm of the rain as it falls into the pond.

"There you are, Bai Liu."

Xie Ta stands by the door he has forced halfway open, his voice soft, his gaze downcast. "I heard your footsteps. I felt your pain. So I woke up and waited for you."

He hesitates, then asks, "Aren't you coming in to see me today either?"

Outside the shrine, the only answer is the relentless downpour. Bai Liu does not speak. He never does. Night after night, he comes. And night

after night, Xie Ta speaks to him as if Bai Liu might, one day, respond.

Xie Ta is used to the silence. He tilts his head slightly, watching the wind chimes tremble beneath the eaves, listening to the rain grow heavier. The silk threads binding his wrists and ankles dig deep into his flesh, fresh blood seeping through the thickly scarred fabric of his robe. Drops slide from his fingertips, mixing with the rain pooling on the ground.

Outside, Bai Liu stands beneath an umbrella, the water dripping from its edges as steadily as the night itself. Blood and rain fall to the earth together, vanishing into the mud.

"...You've been coming for days now," Xie Ta murmurs, his voice barely carrying over the rain. "I've been waking up earlier and earlier. And you—" He closes his eyes briefly. "You seem to be in more and more pain."

He lifts his gaze toward the heavy wooden door, knowing Bai Liu stands just beyond it. Every night, Bai Liu remains there, unmoving, until dawn. Then he leaves—only to return again the next night.

Will Bai Liu get sick in this rain...?

The thought unsettles Xie Ta. His fingers curl against his chest in quiet confusion.

He is the one who is bleeding. His body is the one in pain. And yet, the thought of Bai Liu falling ill—that is what tightens around his heart.

A strange kind of pain.

Xie Ta doesn't understand it. He cannot see Bai Liu's expression through the door, cannot sense his emotions as he can with others. And yet, somehow, he knows them.

Every night, his heart races as Bai Liu approaches. Every night, it slows when he wakes and realizes Bai Liu has not stepped inside. And every night, when Bai Liu leaves, Xie Ta listens to the fading footsteps —his own heartbeat following that rhythm, fast, then slow, until sleep takes him again.

Now, the thought of Bai Liu leaving again makes his chest tighten. But the thought of Bai Liu coming back makes it loosen.

"It's raining too hard tonight," Xie Ta says to the door. "Maybe you should go back earlier."

Silence.

Then—Xie Ta hears the shift of the umbrella. The quiet sound of footsteps retreating down the hill.

So strange.

Xie Ta stares at the door, his fingers clenching against his heart.

He was the one who told Bai Liu to leave. But now that Bai Liu is truly walking away, he feels as though the time they spent together—just standing on either side of the door—has ended too soon.

Again, he is left with a hollow, inexplicable loss.

Why?

Alone, he should be unable to reflect anyone's emotions. But then, where do these two conflicting feelings come from?

Still, just as every night before, Xie Ta calls out as Bai Liu departs:

"Will you come back tomorrow?"

For a moment, amidst the downpour, Bai Liu's breathing hitches.

Xie Ta hears the pause in Bai Liu's steps. A single step forward. The faint brush of fingers against wood.

His heartbeat spikes.

Xie Ta leans toward the door, heedless of the silk threads cutting into his bones, of the blood soaking into his robes. He shouldn't meet Bai Liu in such a state, but he can't bring himself to care.

He smooths his appearance briefly, then fixes his gaze on the wooden door, breath caught, light flickering in his eyes.

Will Bai Liu open the door?

Will he finally speak?

For a moment, Bai Liu's hand lingers against the wood. Xie Ta straightens unconsciously, anticipation curling through his chest.

Then—Bai Liu's hand falls away. He hesitates, turns, and walks away.

Just like every other night.

Xie Ta's shoulders slowly slump. His empty gaze remains locked on the door, the dim glow in his eyes fading.

As Bai Liu's footsteps disappear, Xie Ta can barely hear the sound of his own heartbeat.

It is as if it, too, has left with Bai Liu tonight.

He sinks to the ground, the heavy silk threads carving deep into his skin. His vision dims as he closes his eyes, whispering to himself:

"Whether you come back or not—"

"I will always wait for you."

Xiaokui rests by the window, expecting another rainy night of watching Bai Liu stand outside the shrine, just as he has for days. She yawns, drowsy with routine.

But then, just before dawn, Bai Liu suddenly steps forward.

Xiaokui sits up, watching as he moves closer to the shrine's wooden door, lamp in hand.

He raises his hand, pressing it lightly against the damp wood.

Xiaokui leans in, eyes narrowing. "Is he… going in today?"

She watches as Bai Liu's fingers shift.

"No…" she murmurs. "He's writing something?"

Inside, Xie Ta's voice is lost beneath the rain.

"Will you come back tomorrow?"

"It doesn't matter if you don't answer me. Whether you come or not, I'll still be waiting."

Outside, Bai Liu stands motionless, umbrella in hand, rain streaming down in sheets. Then, without a word, he turns.

The lamp in his grasp casts a dim glow over the wooden door.

Droplets bead across its surface, refracting the light.

Bai Liu lowers his gaze, pressing his palm against the wood. Then, carefully, he lifts a finger and begins to write.

Stroke by stroke.

He lingers for a moment, staring at the words. Then, without another glance, he turns and descends the hill.

The rain intensifies.

Through the mist, Bai Liu’s lantern fades into the distance, swallowed by the downpour.

Slowly, the sky begins to brighten.

As the first light of dawn washes over the shrine, it illuminates the words Bai Liu has left behind—etched into the rain-damp wood.

[I'll come tomorrow.]

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

The following day, the sky was clear.

Deep within Bei Yuan House, sunny dolls hung from the eaves, their painted smiles swaying gently in the warm breeze. Sunlight filtered through, casting shifting patterns on the wooden floor.

Inside, Xiaokui knelt on the tatami, her gaze drifting lazily from the golden light outside to Bai Liu, who sat directly in front of her, his back perfectly straight.

—Is this guy made of steel? After a night of torrential rain, he's already back in full regalia, ready for a refresher course on sacrifice… just three hours later.

At the front of the room, a middle-aged man with sloping beards and a dull, somber expression walked slowly, reading from a book. A subtle, eerie smile tugged at his lips.

"The beautiful lesson we will teach you today, my lords of sacrifice, is a brand-new course called 'Love'… or 'Love.'"

His voice was soft, measured.

"It is that time of year when the offering adults enter their flowering season, a time when one should be full of fantasies about love. Would anyone like to share with the teacher—what is the best love story you have ever imagined?"

Silence.

Bai Liu kept his head bowed. Xiaokui stared absently out the window. Another offering laughed madly, his eyes hollow.

The teacher, unfazed, simply nodded and turned to Cang Tai, who was seated respectfully behind Bai Liu. "Cang Tai, would you like to tell us what you think is the perfect love story? Perhaps the first one that comes to mind?"

The sudden attention drained the color from Cang Tai's face. Cold sweat beaded at his temples. He swallowed and replied in a barely audible voice, "…I'm not sure."

The teacher lowered his gaze. "Not sure at all?"

Cang Tai flinched under the scrutiny. He swallowed again, voice even quieter. "…There are fairy tales. Like the one with the princess and the prince, right?"

The teacher leaned in slightly, his expression unreadable. "Very well. What kind of fairy tale exactly?"

Cang Tai's fingers curled into his sleeves. He stole a glance at Bai Liu's unreadable profile before stammering, "The prince… the prince would risk great danger every night, sneaking past evil monsters just to reach his princess, who was trapped in… a god—no, no, a very high place. He would stay with her all night, trying to find a way to free her."

Xiaokui, who had been gazing out the window, flicked her eyes toward Cang Tai and Bai Liu, intrigued.

—Isn't that exactly what Bai Liu does every night?

The teacher nodded, as if something had clicked. "Ah, so it's Rapunzel."

Cang Tai frowned. "What's Rapunzel?"

"It's the fairy tale you just described." The teacher straightened up and waved a hand. A servant stepped forward, placing fairy tale books on Xiaokui and Bai Liu's desks.

The cover depicted a girl with long golden curls cascading from a high tower. Her face was obscured, but her hair spilled past the narrow attic window, where below, a man clung to the strands, looking up at the unseen girl.

The teacher's voice was smooth as he began reading aloud:

"Long, long ago, there was a girl whose hair held great magical power. From the moment she was born, the magic in her hair attracted passing witches. One such witch stole the girl away and took her deep into a dark forest filled with monsters. She locked her in a towering structure, forbidding her from ever stepping outside, using the magic in her hair to sustain her own power."

"The girl grew up day by day in that tower."

"She knew nothing of the world beyond. Isolated, untouched by reality, she believed the world to be nothing more than the narrow, dim attic she lived in."

Cang Tai listened with rapt attention, eyes wide. He shuffled forward on his knees, breath hitching. "And then what?! Did the white—did the prince appear?!"

The teacher gave a slow nod.

"One day, a passing prince caught sight of her. Enchanted by the long-haired girl's beauty, he began standing watch outside the tower night and day. He called up to her—"

"Beautiful maiden, let down your long hair so that I may climb up to meet you."

"The girl, who had never seen such a handsome man, let down her hair. The prince climbed up."

"They met in secret every night, hidden from the witch's eyes. But in the end, the witch discovered them. Furious, she separated them, banishing the girl to an even farther, lonelier place."

Cang Tai gasped. "But what about the prince?! Didn't he defeat the witch?!"

The teacher smiled faintly.

"In the end, the prince did defeat the witch. He reclaimed the long-haired girl… and they lived happily ever after in the castle."

Cang Tai exhaled in relief. "That's a good ending."

The teacher clasped his hands and surveyed the room, that ever-present false smile curling his lips.

"What do you think of this story, my lords of sacrifice?"

His gaze landed on Xiaokui.

"For example, Lady Xiaokui, if you were Rapunzel, what would you do?"

Xiaokui propped her chin up with a hand and answered easily, "I'd probably lure the stupid prince with my beauty. Then, once he climbed up, I'd stab him with a pair of scissors, steal his clothes, and disguise myself as him to escape the attic."

Cang Tai looked horrified. "That's not a love story! That's a horror story! And wouldn't killing the prince be a crime?!"

Xiaokui glanced at his alarmed expression and chuckled under her breath. "Maybe."

"But even if it's a crime, it's still better than spending the rest of your life trapped in an attic, growing hair for a witch, don't you think?"

Cang Tai fell silent, lips pressing together.

The teacher, unsurprised by her response, turned next to Bai Liu.

"And what about Lord Bai Liu? If you were the prince, what would you do?"

Cang Tai, who had just ducked his head, lifted it again in anticipation.

—Bai Liu is just like the prince in the story. He's bound to give the same answer, right?

Bai Liu was quiet for a moment. Then, slowly, he lifted his gaze.

"If I were in this story…" He spoke evenly. "Chances are, I wouldn't be the prince."

Cang Tai stiffened.

The teacher raised an eyebrow. "Then what would Lord Bai Liu be?"

Bai Liu's expression remained calm.

"I'd be one of the monsters lurking in the dark forest, watching the tower from below, coveting what's inside, waiting for the day when the one above finally falls."

Aoi Tai: QAQ

—Why is it turning into a horror story again?!

The teacher rubbed his chin, intrigued. "A monster-and-princess romance? So something like Quasimodo and Esmeralda, then?"

He studied Bai Liu carefully.

"So does that mean Lord Bai Liu, as the monster, would still climb the tower to rescue the beautiful princess and elope with her? Would the princess fear you at first, only to later recognize the love hidden beneath your monstrous exterior? Would she finally accept you and stay by your side?"

Cang Tai: QAQ!!!

—As expected of Lord Bai Liu… Even this version of the love story is… strangely moving?!

"No." Bai Liu's pupils darkened as he looked at Mr. Xiang. "If he loved me only because I loved him, odds are I'd kill him."

Cang Tai froze mid-step, moved by the tears clinging to Bai Liu's cheeks.

The teacher started as well. "Why?"

"If I fell in love with him and took him away from the tower because of that love—" Bai Liu's expression remained emotionless, his tone as calm as if he were explaining a mathematical theorem. "—but he only loves me in return because I love him, then for him to keep loving me, I must keep feeding him my love, as if I were buying his affection. That is not an equal transaction."

He paused.

"And if I can no longer stop myself from making this transaction—"

Bai Liu lifted his gaze. There was no light in his eyes, only a depth so vast it seemed to stretch to the bottom of the sea and the dome of the sky.

"—then to stop myself from losing more in this deal, I'll make sure he can only ever love me this way when—"

"I kill him."

The room fell into stunned silence.

Even the teacher, who had maintained a hypocritical smile, faltered. He placed his hands on Bai Liu's desk and asked, still smiling, but with an edge of unease, "Surely it's not that extreme, Lord Bai Six? Maybe the princess fell in love with you simply because you saved her from the high tower?"

"Isn't it natural for a princess to fall in love with the man who rescues her?"

Bai Liu's voice was quiet, his tone sparse. "Is that so?"

The teacher nodded confidently. "That's how love works."

Bai Liu lifted his gaze. "Then she simply loves [the person who saved her]. It doesn't matter who that person is—even if they aren't a person at all. Even if they're a monster like me, she will love them just the same."

His lips curled into a lazy smile.

"Tell me, how is that any different from a dog wagging its tail at its master?"

The teacher hesitated.

"A dog will love whoever feeds it, regardless of whether its owner is a rich man, a worker, or a stray." Bai Liu leaned back slightly, tilting his head. "All dogs wag their tails for their masters."

His gaze bore into the teacher, unblinking. "This kind of 'love' isn't about the person themselves. It's just a reflex, a conditioned response. It depends on nothing more than who happens to be there first—who climbs the tower before anyone else. A fleeting, inevitable trick of the mind."

The teacher inhaled deeply, composing himself. "That may be true, but you're speaking in extremes. The kind of relationship you want doesn't exist. If a princess falling in love with her rescuer isn't good enough, if an elopement isn't good enough—then tell me, Lord Bai Six, under what circumstances do you want a princess to fall in love with you?"

Bai Liu tilted his head slightly.

"I want him to love me right there in [the tower]."

His voice was eerily steady. "I want him to know that I am a monster, standing below the tower with a sword, waiting to kill him. And even then, I want him to cut the threads that bind him and jump—"

The teacher stared, his breath catching. Bai Liu's eyes were so dark they seemed to swallow all the light around them. Empty, yet suffused with something too intense, too deep, too layered to name. Paired with his flat, dispassionate voice, it created a chilling dissonance.

"—I want him to fall, knowing full well what I am. I want him to descend from godhood to humanity—for me."

Bai Liu turned his face slightly.

The teacher jolted back to his senses, shaking his head violently as if dispelling a spell. He took a panicked step away, clenched his fist, and coughed to steady himself.

Forcing a smile, he murmured, "Lord Bai Six, you ask too much of your princess."

"I'm not in love with any Rapunzel." Bai Liu's tone was flat.

The teacher blinked. "If not Rapunzel, then who lives in the high tower of your dark forest?"

Bai Liu turned his gaze to the window. Through the dense woods, he could faintly see the shrine perched atop the hill. He was silent for a moment.

Then, softly, he said, "A lizard with poisonous eyes."

The teacher was taken aback. "A lizard?! Why a lizard?"

Bai Liu lowered his gaze. "I don't know."

A pause.

Then, with an absent tilt of his head and a lazy curl of his lips, he smiled.

"But whatever form he takes, he is something I love."

His voice was almost a whisper.

"And when the people come to his tower—to touch his hair, to claim his power—"

His fingers idly propped up his chin as his gaze darkened, the smile lingering.

"—I will kill them all before he ever chooses to fall for anyone but me."

"He will always have only one choice—me."

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

The teacher stood still for a moment, visibly shaken, before regaining his composure. "That concludes today's lesson."

His gaze swept over the gathered sacrifices, his expression settling back into its usual calm. "In the coming days, you have something important to prepare for beyond your studies."

"The Summer Festival is approaching, and before you're sent to the shrine, the sacrificial lords will visit the boathouse for a pain test."

He smiled, his tone reassuring. "But you needn't worry too much about the results."

"I doubt any of you will reach the necessary threshold—except for Lady Xiaokui, of course. After all, it's only the Summer Festival. You won't be fully ripe until at least the Winter Festival."

He gestured dismissively. "The sacrificial lords may now leave."

Then, turning to Xiaokui, his smile took on a more deliberate edge. "But Lsdy Xiaokui will stay a little longer."

"With the level of pain you're already experiencing, you'll be more than ready for the offering table this Summer Festival."

"But to ensure that your suffering reaches its full potential, we'll conduct some... special training over the next few days. After all, the greater your suffering, the more value you bring to the Bei Yuan family."

The teacher stepped closer, a condescending smirk curling at his lips as he looked down at Xiaokui.

"You're sixteen now, aren't you? Old enough to fall in love."

"And since you already understand what makes a good love—"

His smile widened.

"—it's time you experience its pain as well."

"Tomorrow, we'll gather a group of [princes], and you, Lady Xiaokui, will choose the one you wish to fall in love with as your [prince]."

"They’re all very fine [princes], you know."

"Handsome, yet dying of cold. Squires handpicked from the boathouse by the Bei Yuan family."

"The Bei Yuan family saved them from their cages and told them it was because of your kindness. Naturally, they admire you."

"They love you already, just like those Shiba Inu dogs you once adored. If you reach out your hand, you can have their love and loyalty just as easily."

The teacher leaned down, his breath warm against Xiaokui’s ear. His voice softened, almost playful.

"Of course, you don’t have to choose one of these [princes]."

"But if you don’t..." His smile deepened. "We’ll dispose of them. Just like we disposed of the stray cats and dogs you didn’t want on the ship."

"I do hope our [princess] won’t be so cruel."

Xiaokui, who had just begun to rise, stopped. Inch by inch, the light faded from her eyes. She lowered her head, her voice barely a whisper, as if speaking from the bottom of a well.

"Yes, teacher."

"I will choose a [prince]."

That evening.

Xiaokui slumped vacantly against the windowsill, her long hair slipping down her shoulders.

A teru teru bōzu hung under the eaves of the attic—where her brother and dog had once played—swaying gently in the night breeze. High above, in the attic’s window, where even the moonlight did not reach, the darkness loomed like a towering coffin.

A faint glimmer of light flickered in the distant mountains.

Xiaokui’s gaze shifted. For a moment, the frozen stillness of her face thawed as she let out a soft grunt.

“There you go again.”

Bai Liu walked along the mountain path, lantern in hand, climbing steadily toward the peak.

Xiaokui shifted slightly, propping herself up on her hands as she watched him in a daze. A whisper slipped from her lips.

“...He’s still coming?”

Her fingers clenched.

“Is love really so... magical?”

At the entrance of the shrine, Bai Liu came to a stop. A voice soon drifted from inside, clear and composed yet tinged with something almost eager.

“...I’ve been waiting for you. I thought you wouldn’t come tonight.”

A pause. Then, as if correcting himself—

“So, you were just late.”

A soft inquiry followed.

“Did something happen?” Xie Ta’s voice was gentle, inquisitive. “Was the offering lesson delayed? Or did today’s lesson injure you, slowing your climb up the mountain?”

Bai Liu remained silent.

Xie Ta’s breath hitched. His heartbeat quickened. He stepped toward the door, glancing down at his hands—thread-thin cuts blooming red where the silk bindings had bitten into his skin.

“Tonight, Bai Liu still won’t come inside,” Xie Ta murmured, “nor will he say a word to me.”

His fingers tightened around the wooden frame. The silk threads around his wrists and ankles constricted, sinking into pale skin. More blood welled up, tracing a cruel contrast to the casual tone of his voice.

“The threads... are growing.”

He tilted his head slightly, eyes dark with quiet contemplation.

“The gods told me that these threads are spun from the pain of sacrifices—their suffering turned into chains that bind me. The more agony they endure, the more threads I receive, weaving deeper into my body.”

A faint chuckle.

“But that’s what’s strange.”

His fingers ghosted over the gossamer bindings.

“I haven’t received any sacrifices lately. No offerings of pain. And yet... the threads keep multiplying.”

He lifted his gaze to the door.

“So whose pain... is this?”

The translucent threads shimmered in the dim light, forming a web around him. Slowly, they tightened—biting into his skin, slicing his cheek. Blood dripped from his jaw.

“Is it Bai Liu’s pain?”

His voice wavered, almost questioning.

“But Bai Liu hasn’t been here. He hasn’t offered his pain to me.”

More threads materialized out of thin air, coiling around his limbs, tightening, suffocating.

“If it’s not Bai Liu’s pain, then whose is it?”

Xie Ta furrowed his brows, pressing a hand to his chest.

“Why... do these threads only appear when you’re near?”

Why did they wound him so deeply—why did these injuries ache more than any before?

Outside, Bai Liu still said nothing.

A soft drizzle began to fall, the rain tapping lightly against the wooden beams.

Through the mist and rain, Xie Ta heard Bai Liu’s footsteps retreating. His body moved instinctively—he took a step forward.

And in that instant—

A reaction.

Countless silk threads lashed out from every direction, binding him in place. They coiled around his limbs, his torso—twisting, tightening, suffocating—until he was trapped in a translucent cocoon, only his eyes left visible.

Blood trickled from the fresh cuts, staining the shrine floor.

Xie Ta looked down at his bound hands, then back at the door.

The gods had said these threads would only manifest when he received a sacrifice's pain.

But Bai Liu had never offered his pain to him.

So then... why?

The sound of Bai Liu's footsteps faded into the distance.

Xie Ta remained standing in place, dazed, staring at the closed wooden door.

This time, Bai Liu had left. And he hadn't slept through it.

For the first time, he remained awake. The threads did not fade. The shrine was empty—save for him.

Slowly, Xie Ta lowered his lashes, his expression unreadable.

—These threads keep me awake. Keep me wounded.

And they are spun from my own pain.

On that penultimate rainy night before the summer festival, the moment the sacrifice departed—

For the first time, the desireless god felt [pain].

The overwhelming, suffocating weight of it—so dense, so unrelenting—it kept him sleepless. It held him captive, unmoving, bound to this place, to this door, to the fleeting presence of the one who left.

And so, night after night, he remained.

Waiting.

Enduring.

Offering his own pain—as if it were a sacrifice.

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

The Next Day

Bai Liu's group was escorted to the boathouse for testing, but Xiaokui was left behind at Bei Yuan’s house.

Bai Liu was still being received by the imperial boat at the boathouse.

The man had grown gloomy and aged in the months since their last meeting. His head was shrunken, his face wrinkled like old leather, and he stared at Bai Liu with eyes that resembled those of a deep-sea fish—murky and predatory.

The offering beside Bai Liu stood neatly, dressed in fine clothes. However, the attendants were a different story.

Aside from those chosen by the clan, like Cang Tai, the squires left behind in the boathouse were disheveled, thin, and reeked of fowl. Their eyes were vacant, heads bowed as they shuffled after the offerings like walking corpses.

"Come here," Gosho beckoned grimly. "I hope your suffering will satisfy us before it satisfies the gods."

Bai Liu followed the imperial boat with his gaze lowered. After a few turns, they entered a spacious and gloomy Japanese-style room.

At the center of the room were two hollowed-out tiles in the floor, revealing a formation of mountain stones beneath. A small yet intricate balance sat atop the stones, with a red wooden tray placed on a stone platform. The tray held a dozen gilt, translucent silk threads.

Bai Liu’s eyes flicked over the threads. They were of a similar size and material to the ones that had been tied to Xie Ta’s body.

All the offerings and attendants stood in rows in front of the stone formation, their heads lowered.

“These are the instruments used to test your pain from the past six months: the Hoowolf Scales and the Threads of Pain,” Gosho said, standing with his hands behind his back beside the scales. He tilted his chin slightly, eyeing everyone. “These threads are condensed from the pain of previous sacrificial masters. With the blessing of the Supreme God of Dreams, we have carefully stripped these threads from the

bodies of the evil gods in the shrine to test your [pain] levels."

"You will place your right hand on one side of the scales, and we will place the thread of pain on the other side," he continued. "The Hoowolf Scales can detect the pain in your hearts. If the pain in your heart outweighs the thread, the scales will tilt to your side. If the pain is lighter than the thread, they will tilt to the other side."

"Based on our previous experience, a sacrifice whose pain weighs as much as a silk thread is a qualified offering."

The imperial boat cast a sidelong glance at all the offerings. "There is no order to the testing. Who will go first?"

Unease rippled across the offerings' faces. After a moment of hesitation, one of them took a deep breath, raised his hand, and shakily said, "I... I'll go."

Gosho waved his hand, and a servant bowed beside him. He moved the scales into position under the mountain rock, carefully holding a sterling silver tweezer in one hand and a painful silk thread in the other. He placed the thread on the left side of the scales.

The balance immediately tipped, the left plate hitting the base with a loud crunch.

Cang Tai, watching from the side, whispered in Bai Liu's ear, "This silk thread looks so heavy."

The offering looked at the thread, momentarily relieved to think that it would be easy to outweigh the scales with his pain. He raised his right hand and placed it on the right plate of the scales.

The scales didn't move.

The offering's face went white.

He pressed harder, his face turning red with effort, but no matter how much force he used, the scales stayed level as if nothing had been placed on the right side at all.

The imperial boat frowned in anger. "Not a single grunt of pain, you punk!"

He kicked the offering, sending him tumbling to the ground with a loud thud. Without sparing a glance, the imperial boat turned to the

servants. “Where is the squire who served him? Tell his attendant to come and inspect!”

The servant knelt and bowed. “Yes, Lord Gosho.”

Moments later, the squire of the offering was brought forward. The man appeared nearly broken, too weary to react to a human voice. He was held by a servant who placed his hand on the right plate of the scales.

When his hand made contact, the scales shifted slightly, tilting just two frames to the right.

The imperial boat’s expression softened. “Nice. Two frames—two-fifths of a silk thread in pain.”

He looked over at the squire with dull eyes, nodding in satisfaction. “From this day forward, you are the Lord of the Offerings.”

“And the sacrifice you serve becomes your attendant.”

The blood drained from the face of the sacrifice who had been kicked aside. He threw himself at Gosho’s legs, breaking down in tears and begging, “Lord Gosho, please let me try again! Please!”

The imperial boat remained unfazed. “Take him to the cage and lock him up with his pets.”

The maid bowed her head. “Yes.”

Two servants dragged the crying offering away.

Not long after, the servants returned. One of them kneeled and reported to Gosho, “Shortly after we placed him in the cage, he suddenly went mad, cried out, and strangled his kitten. He then kowtowed, begging us to test him again. Lord Gosho, should we test him again?”

The imperial boat shook his head, indifferent. “Let him suffer a while longer.”

“The next sacrifice.”

The offerings were stunned by the brutal start to the tests. One by one, those who were tested looked paler than the last. The ones who barely passed stumbled down, disoriented. Cang Tai overheard some of the offerings muttering to themselves, trying to figure out what they had

to do to make their pain seem greater.

Dozens of sacrifices were tested, but none of them managed to tilt the scales more than three frames when their hands were placed on them.

The imperial boat's expression darkened, and the harshness in his gaze towards the sacrifice was palpable. "Not a single sacrifice able to reach even the slightest level of pain. It seems we've been too generous with you all."

The offerings trembled in fear, none daring to lift their eyes to meet the imperial boat's gaze.

The situation took a sharp turn when the deranged sacrifice from the Bei Yuan family stepped forward.

As soon as the man placed his hand on the scales, guided by his attendant, the scale arm snapped around, hitting the last cell on the right with a sharp click.

Gosho's eyes twitched as he regarded the offering. "Whose sacrifice is this?"

The maid bowed respectfully. "It is from the Bei Yuan family."

Gosho's expression clouded, a sneer forming on his lips. "The Bei Yuan family has always excelled at torturing sacrifices."

He turned to the servant and said grimly, "Release the silk thread again. I want to see just how much pain the Bei Yuan family has managed to cultivate in the last six months."

The servant stepped forward and, with tweezers, added another filament to the left side of the balance.

The needle wavered slightly, two frames to the left, but still fell short of the center.

"Is it really heavier than two..." Gosho's face darkened with frustration. "Add more!"

The maid added another thread.

The needle on the scale shifted further to the second compartment on the right. The servant looked up at Gosho, his surprise evident. "My lord, this offering has two and a half roots of pain, which is more than enough for the offering table at the summer festival."

Gosho muttered an approving "oh" and turned to survey the other offerings. "Where is the other Bei Yuan family sacrifice?"

The maid removed the two silk threads and pointed towards Bai Liu, who stood at the back. "It seems it's him."

Gosho raised his chin. "You, come forward."

Cang Tai swallowed nervously as he watched Bai Liu calmly rise. With deliberate precision, Bai Liu extended his pale fingers and placed them on the right side of the scale.

The balance, with only a single thread on the left, spun immediately. The hand on the scale didn't stop when it hit the last frame; it continued, striking the bottom with a sharp crunch.

The scales, which had resisted all the offerings' efforts, now trembled under Bai Liu's light touch, the wire and frame visibly shaking.

Gosho turned sharply to observe Bai Liu, his eyes narrowing. He spoke in a low voice, "Add the threads."

The servant complied quickly, adding threads one by one to the left side of the balance.

One... two... ten sticks.

By the time the eleventh was added and the needle still pressed against the bottom right, everyone in the room had fallen silent.

The offerings stared at Bai Liu, sitting serenely at the right end of the scale, while the maids' hands trembled as they continued adding the threads. Gosho's gaze never wavered from Bai Liu, his eyes filled with a mixture of disbelief and growing intrigue. Cang Tai watched in stunned awe as the pile of silk threads grew on the left side of the balance.

"Seventeen," the servant said, eyes wide with disbelief. "Lord Gosho... we've run out of silk threads."

Without taking his eyes off Bai Liu, Gosho waved his hand dismissively. "Go to the Gifune family's warehouse."

His expression turned calculating. "There's plenty more there. Bring it all."

The servant bowed deeply. "Yes, Lord Gosho."

Ten minutes later, servants hurried into the room, each carrying several heavy-looking boxes, which they lined up in neat rows.

Inside these wooden boxes were bundles of silk thread. Though few in number, collectively they added up to a significant amount.

Gosho gestured again. "Add them all."

The servants unloaded the silk threads, piling them high on the left side of the scale. When the final bar from the last box was placed, the scales groaned under the weight, and the cross-frame creaked as if it were on the verge of breaking. Finally, Gosho raised his hand.

"Stop."

The maids wiped the sweat from their foreheads with trembling hands, their eyes flickering nervously between the scales, still pressed firmly against the bottom right, and Bai Liu's calm face. A look of fear began to creep into their expressions.

These were nearly all the threads taken from the body of the evil god.

When a person's level of suffering matches that of a god and they don't lose their sanity...

This man must be capable of truly dreadful things.

A twisted excitement flickered in Gosho's eyes as he stepped forward, lifting Bai Liu's face with his fan. He examined him as if he were a rare treasure, asking in a hoarse voice, "What is your name?"

Bai Liu met his gaze without a flicker of emotion. "Bei Yuan Bai Liu."

Gosho sneered contemptuously at the name. "Bei Yuan... not a name to be proud of."

He leaned closer, his eyes burning with greed as they locked onto Bai Liu's pupils.

"You are a sacrifice of immense pain. Perhaps you'd be better off named Gifune."

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

After testing all the offerings and attendants, Bai Liu was left alone by the imperial boat.

Cang Tai looked anxiously at Bai Liu's back, stealing a fearful glance at the imperial boat standing next to him before retreating on his knees.

As Gosho circled Bai Liu, he tapped his fan thoughtfully against his lower lip. His eyes lingered on Bai Liu before he suddenly smiled. "If you're willing to cooperate by changing your surname and coming to our family as a sacrifice, I can guarantee you the highest honor in our house after completing just one successful sacrifice for us."

Bai Liu looked up at Gosho, his expression impassive. "Can a sacrifice like me still have the right to change my name?"

"Normally, no," Gosho replied, unfolding his fan to cover the lower half of his face. His eyes narrowed slightly, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "Normally, it's impossible for a sacrifice chosen by a major family to change its surname and be passed on to another family."

"But if the sacrifice escapes and is then captured by another family, it's a different matter." Gosho's tone turned cold. "An offering during an [exodus] can be unstable, after all."

Bai Liu maintained a shallow, level gaze. "I don't seem to understand what Lord Gosho is suggesting."

Gosho's grin turned wry as he leaned forward, settling across from Bai Liu. "As I'm sure you've noticed, Bai Liu, it's difficult to mass-produce offerings that meet the standards of divine suffering."

"Of the dozens, even hundreds of sacrifices we acquire each year at great cost, less than one layer of sacrifice can produce even a single thread of pain after six months. After a year, maybe a quarter or fifth of the sacrifices may be successfully sacrificed."

"No matter how tempting the bait used to catch these uninitiated sacrifices, no matter how twisted the methods used to inspire them to torture themselves, these sacrifices will become desperate and numb after a year. When they realize they must live their entire lives for something as abstract as pain, they start to wither."

Gosho's expression darkened. "A numb sacrifice can't produce quality pain, and so those who can't be sacrificed after a year are discarded—they usually end up committing suicide."

"We learned over time that both the attendants and sacrifices could endure more torment, producing more pain, when their hearts were filled with hope."

"So, we experimented, trying various approaches. Eventually, we discovered the key to rekindling these numb sacrifices: we let them go."

"We planted our people among the servants, hinting that they could escape. After creating various mishaps, we let the sacrifices believe they had managed to slip away. But we don't capture them immediately—this doesn't produce enough bitterness or provide the best time for these sacrifices to fully realize the depth of their situation."

Gosho's smile widened into something darker, his eyes gleaming with twisted satisfaction. "We usually let them stay out for six months before we catch them again."

"During this time, we surround them with well-meaning people—people who will offer kindness, however small. It could be something as simple as a generous restaurant owner who gives them a free meal, or a stranger who offers them an umbrella in the rain. Sometimes it's a kind-hearted person who helps them find a job or offers to take them in temporarily, letting them reintegrate into society and live a 'normal' life—father, mother, friend, lover roles."

Gosho chuckled lazily. "It's hard for these tortured sacrifices to resist such kindness. It's like a dog beaten with poison—though wary, it still can't resist the temptation of the meat thrown at it."

"When these desperate exiles, having briefly tasted normal happiness, begin to adjust to their new lives, slowly believing the world might be kind to them, they start to hope again..." Gosho's voice dropped, a sick grin spreading across his face. "That's when we shatter their false happiness."

"The moment their happiness is destroyed, and they're dragged back to hell, the pain they experience is unlike anything before."

Bai Liu's eyes flickered. "Beiyuan Xiaokui was deliberately let out by you?"

Gosho nodded, a smug expression on his face. "Smart man."

"With your level of pain and intelligence, there's no need for such cheap tricks to cause you pain," he added, then flicked his fan as he turned his attention back to the scales, his gaze heavy and contemplative.

"Usually, we recycle the offerings used in the evil festival six months ago, and introduce new offerings for the next festival. This is why sacrifices typically have a maturation period of a year. We let them become utterly desperate, reignite their hope, and then sacrifice them so that the pain isn't just seasonal, but a full six-month cycle of suffering."

"This ensures the sacrifices we use are mature and properly conditioned. We differentiate between old and new offerings to avoid confusion when they're recaptured."

Bai Liu glanced at Gosho. "What about Beiyuan Xiaokui?"

Gosho's expression darkened immediately. "Beiyuan Xiaokui was an exception. She was taken back early."

"She still had four months left to mature, but the Bei Yuan family insisted on taking her back. They'd already collected last year's tax and didn't want their sacrifice under the influence of our [exodus program]. They claimed she already had nearly three years' worth of pain built up and didn't need further conditioning by us, the Gifune family."

Gosho slammed his hand on the table, his anger barely contained. "This arrogant attitude is a complete disrespect for the Gifune family's method of sacrifice, and a violation of the entire [Exodus Project]!"

His chest heaved with rage. "The original [Exodus Plan] was to release the sacrifices once they had all been captured and returned, so that these sacrifices, in utter despair, would try to escape again."

"The eight families would have priority in hunting these desperately fleeing sacrifices, a sort of divine mega-hunt before the summer festival arrives."

"The moment these escaped sacrifices are caught, their pain will be at its peak. That is the best time to appreciate their suffering, and whoever catches the sacrifice can immediately drag them to the shrine for the sacrifice."

"It would have been a perfect plan, but the Bei Yuan family became disgruntled and refused to comply."

Gosho's face turned cold. "The hunt was originally supposed to be random, but the Bei Yuan family suspects something fishy about the fact that the Gifune family has caught the most painful sacrifice two years in a row, made the most valuable wish, and then remained the number one family in taxation the following year, all thanks to that wish."

"Last year, they used this as an excuse to force a reform of the sacrifice cultivation program. They pushed for an early distribution of sacrifices, so each family could cultivate their own offerings."

Gosho sneered. "This proposal was actually supported by seven of the eight great families."

"But under this new cultivation system, everyone received sacrifices that were far less painful than those cultivated through our [Exodus Program]. So last year's Summer Festival had very few sacrifices that could be used to make a wish. The ones that were returned were mostly useless, all but discarded."

"Except for the Bei Yuan family." Gosho's expression twisted. "The sacrifices they cultivated themselves offered the deepest pain, and they were able to make the most valuable wish of last year, becoming the number one family in taxes this year."

"So this year, the six families have returned to align with the Gifune family, opting to use the [Exodus Program] to breed their own offerings, but the Bei Yuan family is still stubbornly sticking to their own breeding program."

Gosho looked at Bai Liu with a twisted smile. "- And they've managed to produce an even more painful sacrifice than last year."

"I'm not curious about what the Bei Yuan family can do to make you all suffer like this, but I can tell you one thing for certain: the Gifune family can offer something even greater than what the Bei Yuan family will give you."

"The summer festival [Exodus Program], which the Bei Yuan family is participating in this year, is why your new batch of offerings will be sent to live in a new place for six months before being captured and returned."

"The specifics of the program for each sacrifice in the [Exodus Program] are the responsibility of our house, the Gifune."

Gosho leaned forward, his eyes fixed on Bai Liu. "If you wish, I can swap you with a common sacrifice, sending them to your rightful place of exile to be tortured. You, on the other hand, can wait until after this year's Summer Festival. The Gifune family will give you whatever you want, and we'll send you far from Luming County to start a new life—exactly where you want to be."

Bai Liu lifted his gaze. "Anything I want?"

"Yes, anything." Gosho's tone became bolder, more arrogant. "Luming County is under the rule of the Gifune family. Anything within Luming County, you can take if you wish."

Bai Liu stared coolly at the imperial boat. "So, what do I need to do?"

"Sacrifice once." Gosho's gaze never wavered. "On the day of the Summer Festival, you will be released as the new sacrifice, and the old sacrifices that were released and captured six months ago will be released again, with all eight families returning to hunt them."

"I will mix you in with the old sacrifices. You just need to ensure that you are hunted by the Gifune family, then go to the shrine and make your sacrifice."

Bai Liu was silent for a moment, then a small smile tugged at the corner of his lips. He looked at Gosho, whose puzzled expression matched his confusion, and spoke softly, "I agree to the deal with you."

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

Meanwhile, at the Bei Yuan family.

Xiaokui removed her magnificent garments with a numb expression. The servant beside her, head bowed, softly advised, "Lady Xiaokui, you've chosen your [prince's lord]."

"You know what will happen to your [prince-sama] if you run away before the summer festival, don't you?"

Xiaokui gazed out the window at the sunny doll hanging from the eaves, then lowered her eyes.

The maid folded her arms, bowed, and stepped back. Xiaokui stood frozen in the middle of the room for a long time, then turned to the window and stared, motionless, at the shrine.

It was now nighttime, but the Bai Six had not yet returned. Word was that they had been detained at the boathouse by the Imperial Boat. The head of the Bei Yuan family was on a rampage, and the entire family was preparing to negotiate with the Imperial Boat over the detention of the offerings.

Her nightly ritual of watching Bai Six head to the shrine was interrupted.

After staring at the shrine for a long time, Xiaokui yawned tiredly. Feeling bored, she was about to look away and go to bed when she noticed the door of the shrine was slightly ajar.

Xiaokui’s eyes narrowed suspiciously at the gap, and then she glanced around to ensure she didn’t see Bai Liu. Her heart skipped a beat.

Had she not been watching every day, she would have never noticed the faint opening in the door.

This evil god, who resided in the shrine—could it be awakening now, in the absence of painful sacrifices?

Xiaokui quickly opened the window, glancing around to confirm the only person in the attic was the sleeping servant. She swiftly climbed down the side of the building with practiced ease.

The Bei Yuan family would be gone for at least an hour, likely heading

to the Gifune family. During that time, the Bei Yuan estate would be relatively empty. Xiaokui calmly calculated that if she returned before their return, she would be safe from detection.

Although she had been caught once before, she had managed to escape the Bei Yuan family successfully. She was comfortable with the idea of visiting the shrine without leaving the estate's gates.

Swinging herself down from the loft, Xiaokui took a steady leap to the ground, then sprinted toward the shrine.

Unbeknownst to her, the servant she thought was sleeping had silently opened the window and was watching her escape.

The servant, holding a corded phone, approached the receiver and spoke softly into it, "Bei Yuan Xiaokui is approaching the shrine, following the same path Bai Six has taken for the past few months."

"House Master, the summer festival is only two days away. Since we've confirmed that Bei Yuan Bai Six has the qualifications to awaken the evil gods, should we delegate the escape route to the two sacrifices tonight after testing whether Bei Yuan Xiaokui can also awaken the evil gods?"

"Yes, delegate it," came the hoarse voice of the Bei Yuan family head, "We can't allow the Gifune family to claim the number one spot."

"We've been working with these two sacrifices for over half a year now. It's time they pay the price called [pain]—the gift of the Bei Yuan family."

"Understood," the servant replied quickly, glancing at the [Offering Parenting Plan] form hanging on the wall. He respectfully continued, "Allow me to confirm the details."

"Our parenting plan for Bei Yuan Xiaokui involves [educating for cognitive bias] as well as [Exodus twice]."

"Last year, we had to let Bei Yuan Xiaokui go on the run during the [Exodus Program] guided by the Gifune family, spending two months drifting outside. During that time, the Gifune family tried to reach out to her. But since we didn't want her under their control, we secured the tax first and brought her back this year."

"After recalling her, we nurtured her [educational cognitive bias], torturing her while teaching her that the outside world is wonderful,

inspiring her desire to escape again."

"Tonight, we'll arrange an escape route for Xiaokui and place a [good person] from the Bei Yuan family along the route to help her, capturing her heart once and for all."

"At the Winter Festival in six months, we will have this [good person] betray her, sending her back to the Bei Yuan family tied up by her own hands. Then, she'll be the perfect painful sacrifice."

The Bei Yuan family head laughed hoarsely, "A wish made with her will be quite perfect."

The servant hesitated for a moment before continuing to read the [Sacrificial Parenting Plan].

"The sacrifice, Bei Yuan Bai Six, who stole the shrine key on the first day he arrived at the Bei Yuan family and awakened the evil god, was a mature sacrifice from the start."

"During these past four months, Bai Six went to the shrine daily to worship. We initially thought he was a devout cultist, so we planned his formation under [blasphemy], which involved making the evil gods fall and collapse in his heart of faith."

"For example, torturing him in the shrine, forcing him to pray to the evil god for help, but the god never came, which deepened his suffering."

"But soon, we realized Bai Six wasn't a devout cultist," the servant said, confused. "Through six months of observation, we found that rather than being a believer in the evil god, Bai Six was...?"

The Bei Yuan family head finished the sentence quietly, "He was tempering the evil gods, forcing them to suffer for him and believe in him."

The servant nodded, "Yes, so we don't have a particularly effective breeding plan for Bai Six. We're just taking it step by step, putting him into the [escape program], and seeing what happens in six months."

"Tch." The Bei Yuan family head narrowed his eyes. "It's just a shame we don't have a tool to measure pain like the Gifune family. Otherwise, we wouldn't have to wait six months for results."

"The two key props for cultivating the sacrifice—the balance and the

house of boats—are in the hands of the Gifune family. We can't openly open the shrine at a non-sacrificial node, so we can only observe from outside the shrine to see if the sacrifice can awaken the evil god."

The servant sighed, "Even so, we've lost many people in the course of these observations due to the evil god's alienating influence on those who see him."

"However," the Bei Yuan family head chuckled dryly, "judging by the way the Gifune family snatched Bai Six tonight, Bai Six should indeed be quite the painful sacrifice."

The servant hesitated, "Then, my lord, should we still delegate the escape route to Bai Six, given how much he's already suffering?"

"Let him go," the Bei Yuan family head replied. "We can't compete with the Gifune family, so if we don't let them take him, we'll just lose him anyway."

"Understood," the servant nodded obediently. "I'll immediately arrange to meet the escapees."

Hilltop, Shrine

Xiaokui hurried up the hill, her gas lamp in hand, her gaze fixed in a trance on the massive shrine perched at the summit. The hot night breeze brushed past her face.

Is this what it's like for a Bai Six to walk around here every night... on a night like this?

By the time she reached the towering shrine door, Xiaokui regretted her impulsive decision, a rare feeling for her.

Stalls had been set up on both sides of the shrine, knotted ropes hung from posts, and lanterns were strung up one after another. The area around the shrine had been meticulously cleaned.

The summer festival was only two days away. The shrine was about to open to the public, and preparations were well underway. This meant the area was guarded and bustling with activity. Xiaokui was taking a significant risk by coming here now.

But it was late, and she hadn't spotted the caretaker...

Xiaokui took a deep breath and stepped up onto the last rung of the ladder.

A soft voice drifted out from behind the door, "Who is it?"

Is that the voice of the evil god?

Xiaokui froze at the sound. Her heart raced, but at the same time, an inexplicable surge of hatred rose within her.

The one who dwells here is the evil god who killed my brother.

"You're waiting for Bai Six, aren't you?" Xiaokui asked, her voice calm.

There was a long pause inside. Then, the sound of chains scraping reached her ears, followed by a strong, metallic scent of blood that wafted out of the door. The voice inside grew softer, distant, yet sincere, as it responded, "Yes, I've been waiting for him all day."

"Normally, he'd have been here by now, but... for some reason, he hasn't come today."

"Do you know what happened to Bai Liu?" the voice asked, pleading.

Xiaokui gripped the handle of the gas lamp tighter, inhaling slowly before exhaling. Then, with an inexplicable smile, she spoke, "You don't have to wait."

"Bai Liu won't be coming to see you again."

The voice inside fell silent for a moment before asking, its tone growing flatter, "Why?"

Xiaokui's smile deepened as she responded, "Do you know what the latest lesson in our offerings is?" She chuckled darkly. "It's 'Love.'"

"We told the love story of Rapunzel yesterday, and today, we let the offerings choose their favorite [prince] from the handsome young men around them to experience the wonders of love."

"Bai Liu has also chosen his [prince], you know."

The voice inside the shrine went completely silent.

Xiaokui waited, a thrill of vengeance bubbling up inside her, but at the same time, she felt a strange sense of suffocation.

It was as if the only light she saw in the dark, twisted forest of this cursed place—her home, Luming County—was the dying glow of Bai Liu's gas lamp, flickering before her eyes.

Cang Tai's sparkling eyes flashed before her, his voice serious as he spoke:

"[Lord Bai Liu and the evil god must be true love, as beautiful as in fairy tales.]"

Xiaokui gritted her teeth. "What, are you giving up?"

As her words fell, the shrine door creaked open, revealing a pale, slender hand. In the faint moonlight, the evil god—bloodstained and disheveled—struggled to push open the half-doors, dragging himself toward the entrance with the effort of his trembling fingers.

His delicate face was stained with blood, his body pulled toward the shrine by countless silk threads. She gasped as he spoke, his voice weak, "Has the selection ended for Bai Liu [Lord Prince]?"

"Can I ask Bai Liu to return to the original prince, and perhaps choose me as well?"

Xie Ta's closed eyelashes fluttered slightly, and his face flushed with a faint red hue. "I'm not young, but I'm still quite handsome."

Beiyuan Xiaokui stood frozen, struck speechless by the sight of Xie Ta. Just as she opened her mouth to speak, her head jerked to the side, startled by the rustling in the grass.

"Who's there?"

A figure slowly emerged from the shadows.

Beiyuan Xiaokui froze again.

It was a woman with a tall, graceful figure who looked eerily similar to Xiaokui. Her body was bruised and battered, showing signs of having endured severe hardships before arriving here.

Xiaokui whispered in disbelief, "… Sister."

It was the eldest of Xiaokui's four siblings.

After Xiaokui and her brother Jiro were sold, her older sister had severed ties with the family and was forced out of Luming County to

marry in a small seaside town far from here.

"I didn’t agree with our parents selling you and Jiro, but I couldn’t do anything about it. I was kicked out of Luming County and banned from returning." Xiaokui’s sister grasped her hand without speaking and urgently said, "I came here, especially during the summer festival, when the guards are lax in Luming County."

She half-crouched, gripping Xiaokui’s shoulders, and looked at her with pleading eyes. "Run away with me, and leave this hell behind!"

Xiaokui stared blankly at her sister’s outstretched hand, uncertainty flickering in her eyes.

Slowly, she lifted her hand and placed it gently in her sister’s palm.

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

Beiyuan Xiaokui replied in a daze, “Sister Apricot, I’ll go with you.”

Tears of joy welled up in Apricot’s eyes as she grasped Xiaokui’s hand tightly. But her gaze flickered warily toward the half-open door of the sinister shrine. “Who were you talking to?”

Xiaokui turned around. Xie Ta, who had been standing there just moments ago, was gone.

“Shh—!” Sister Apricot pressed her index finger to her lips, glancing around quickly. “Someone’s coming. Move.”

Xiaokui turned back, still dazed. The shrine’s doors swayed gently in the night breeze, revealing the god hanging from the center of the shrine, suspended by countless silk threads.

Moonlight poured in, illuminating the god’s unnaturally long neck, bloodied by the threads that hoisted him aloft. His silvery-blue eyes, glistening like a deep pond, locked onto Xiaokui just as she turned back.

Xie Ta only watched her leave, his gaze filled with moonlight.

The moment she met his eyes, Xiaokui’s mind buzzed. Everything around her slowed, as though caught in an eerie, dreamlike motion. Strange noises crept into her ears.

[System prompt: NPC spirit value detected at zero.]

[..... NPC is undergoing alienation ..... NPC alienation aborted .....]

[System Alert: Incarnation (Tawil) generation (pain) detected. Walking out of the shrine will trigger a special node ..... Copy entering reset .....]

The game designers had concealed data from World Line 657 (Player [Bai six]) within this node of Evil God Festival – Funhouse. If the body of the evil god Tawil experienced distress and voluntarily stepped out of the shrine, it would trigger a special game mode at the moment of departure.

[The Egg Game path is unfolding .....]

[The copy of "Evil God Festival – Boathouse" from World Line 657 is about to overlap with "Evil God Festival – Boathouse" from World Line 658. Prepare for your encounter across world lines.]

[Detecting total number of players across both world lines ……]

[World Line 658: Player Spades, Player Bai Liu.]

(Player Spades exists in the timeline five years later and has no active game progress.)

(Player Bai Liu has triggered the "Wicked Spirits" storyline, entering the timeline from five years ago. He is currently halfway through the game.)

[World Line 657: Player [Bai six].]

(Player [Bai six] has triggered the "Evil Spirit" storyline, entering the timeline five years prior. The game is 97% complete, and he is in the process of sacrificing the Evil Spirit. Completion is imminent.)

[Total number of players in the overlapping copy of "Evil Ritual – Boathouse": Three.]

[Calculating time flow and space curvature between instances …… Adjusting replica progress …… Adjusting NPC memory …… Adjustment complete. Replica time, space, and World Line 658 progress now match. NPC memory aligned with World Line 657 game progress.]

[NPC memory reset initiated.]

[Loading memories from "Evil God Ritual – Funhouse" into NPC data from World Thread 657 ……]

Beiyuan Xiaokui's vision blurred. She felt herself being pulled backward at an unnatural speed, memories flooding into her mind—so vivid, so real, yet completely fabricated. She had never lived these moments, yet they had been forcibly implanted in her consciousness.

Everything seemed the same at first. She had escaped, only to be captured and returned two months later. On the boat back, she met [Bai six].

But from that point forward, nothing followed the expected path.

She remembered Cang Tai's voice trembling as he confronted this [Bai

six], asking if he had killed small animals—and people—back at the orphanage.

And she remembered [Bai six] smiling softly as he admitted it.

[Yeah.] His voice was pleasant, almost lighthearted. [What, am I not allowed to kill?]

[No one even remembers these things when they're gone. So why shouldn't I kill them?]

[It's not like anyone loses anything. I'm just clearing out the worthless parts.]

[That goes for you all too. No one would remember or care if you were killed, either. You're even lower and more meaningless than the things I've cleared out before.]

Among the muffled cries of fear, Xiaokui—huddled on the bed below—clearly heard [Bai six] say lazily:

[Because you're just NPCs in a game I'm playing.]

By the time they arrived at the boathouse, [Bai six] had, unsurprisingly, been chosen as a sacrifice. He coerced Cang Tai into becoming his squire and was eventually selected by the Beiyuan family to become [Beiyuan Bai six].

On the first night at the Beiyuan estate, [Bai six] stole the key and went to the shrine—just as she had once done. And just like before, Xiaokui saw him from the attic.

But [Bai six] never awakened the evil god.

One night. Two nights. Over and over.

[Bai six] went to the back of the shrine every single night. And every night, the evil god remained silent.

During the day, this [Bai six] lounged in class, but his self-inflicted torment was so brutal, so methodical, that even the Beiyuan tutors—who reveled in cruelty—were left shaken. These people, who had inflicted all manner of torture upon others, sometimes fled the room with pale faces, clutching their stomachs as if about to retch.

As if, rather than a helpless sacrifice, the chamber held a monster that truly terrified them.

Xiaokui vividly recalled the hushed whispers among the tutors. [Bai six] was a complete lunatic.

At night, that same lunatic climbed the shrine again and again, staying there until morning, only to return looking slightly paler each time, as though he had encountered something unbearably repulsive.

Xiaokui, watching from afar, never understood his actions. And she dared not ask.

Not until the summer festival came. Not until the trial—the agonizing test that every sacrifice had to face—began.

And then, at last, she understood why [Bai six] had never awakened the evil god.

She understood why he had driven himself to madness.

During the trial, as Cang Tai watched, [Bai six] placed his hand on the right-hand plate of the scales.

The needle didn't even move.

It was as if there was no pain in his heart at all.

"How is that possible?" Xiaokui asked Cang Tai afterward.

Cang Tai was just as stunned. He thought he must have been mistaken. With the way [Bai six] tormented himself, it should have been impossible.

But there was no mistake.

[Bai six] had failed the test. He was demoted to a mere squire.

Yet he didn't seem to care.

Night after night, lantern in hand, he still climbed the shrine.

Xiaokui gradually realized what this man was trying to do—

[Bai Six] was deliberately torturing himself, trying to invoke pain to awaken the evil gods.

But then what?

Why was he doing this?

Xiaokui was curious, but she had to accept that she might never get an answer.

She was too terrified of [Bai Six] to ask.

His cruelty and indifference had reached a level that would even make the Bei Yuan family tremble. Despite his demotion to squire, no one dared to treat him as such. Not out of respect—no, no one respected [Bai Six]—but out of fear. His lazy, smiling face as he tormented himself cast a shadow over everyone's hearts.

Even more outrageous was how, after only a month as a squire, he had caught the attention of the Bei Yuan family's master—not for obedience, but for his skill in inflicting pain. He was promoted from a mere squire to a teacher.

Xiaokui, as a key offering, worked with [Bai Six] one-on-one twice a week.

In the dim, silent peace room, they sat together.

Xiaokui knelt on a cushion, her hands trembling in her lap. No matter how hard she tried to suppress her fear, she couldn’t stop them from shaking. She didn't dare lift her head to look at the boy sitting across from her.

But she could feel his lazy, half-lidded gaze drifting over her, tracing her with unsettling patience.

Xiaokui had feared the adults who captured her, feared the teachers at the Bei Yuan house—but this was different.

Fearing someone her own age, even more than those adults, was a new experience entirely.

How could a boy—sixteen, maybe seventeen—who could still be called a child, terrify her so much that she could barely breathe?

"You must be wondering why I go to the shrine every night."

[Bai Six's] voice broke the silence. He was sitting cross-legged, propping his chin against his palm, his posture casual, a light smile on his face.

"I know you've been watching me."

Xiaokui's heart nearly leaped out of her chest. She was about to deny

it when [Bai Six] lazily cut her off.

"I can tell you why."

"Because I have a wish I want God Xiang to grant."

Xiaokui hesitated, then clenched her teeth and forced herself to ask, "Bai Six… Teacher… what is your wish?"

[Bai Six] lifted his gaze.

"They didn't like me at the orphanage." His voice was light, almost distant. "They threw a lot of dirt on me—framed me for abusing small animals, for doing all sorts of terrible things. And then, in the end, they accused me of murder."

Xiaokui was startled. Instinctively, she looked up.

"Were… were those all false accusations?! Then why did you admit to it on the boat?"

"Because denying it wouldn't have changed anything, would it?" [Bai Six] lowered his eyelashes, his face shadowed. "You all believed the rumors anyway. Might as well wear them."

"It's not like anyone would care about a monster like me—someone who can't even feel pain."

"Someone who can't even serve as a proper sacrifice."

Xiaokui clutched the fabric of her shirt, staring blankly for a moment.

[Sister, I know pain—but not suffering.]

[Sister, is it my fault that I can't feel pain? Why does everyone hate me?]

[Can't I take my sister's place as the sacrifice?]

…Jiro.

Her brother.

Her poor brother had been just like this.

If he were still alive, he would be around [Bai Six's] age, wouldn't he?

Beneath [Bai Six's] long lashes, his dark eyes showed no hint of despondency. There was only an indifferent sort of amusement, a detached curiosity. Yet, his voice remained soft as he said:

"That's all for today's lesson, Xiaokui-sama. Go get some rest."

"Don't wait for me at the shrine tonight. I know I can't feel pain. I've given up on fulfilling my own wishes."

He stood up to leave.

Xiaokui clenched her teeth.

And just as [Bai Six] reached the door, his fingers brushing the paper frame, she called out hoarsely—

"Bai Six, please wait!"

He paused. The corners of his mouth curled up slightly, but he didn't turn around. His voice remained subdued.

"Is there something else, Lord Xiaokui?"

Xiaokui's throat tightened. Still, she tilted her head and forced the words out, voice trembling.

"Can you tell me… what exactly your wish is?"

"My brother… he was like you. At first, he couldn't feel pain either."

Her vision blurred.

"All his wishes were for me. So I wonder… what kind of wish would someone like him make, if it was for himself?"

For the first time, [Bai Six] stopped completely.

Slowly, he turned back to her.

His gaze landed on the tear tracks clinging to the corners of her eyes, and he smiled—not mockingly, not cruelly, but with something unreadable.

"Do you really want to know?"

"You swear you won't tell anyone?"

Xiaokui nodded fiercely. "I swear!"

[Bai Six] crouched down.

He reached out his right hand, extended his pinky, and looked up at her with a surprisingly childish expression.

"Then… pinky promise."

"Hook your pinky with mine, and we'll be bound for a hundred years."

Xiaokui froze.

Her breath caught.

…Jiro used to say that, too.

Pulling pinkies, making promises—he used to do the same thing.

Swallowing back a sob, she took a deep breath and extended her hand, linking her pinky with his. She gently curled their fingers together twice, just like she used to with her brother.

"I promise," she whispered. "I won't tell anyone."

[Bai Six's] lips curled slightly. His voice was light, almost teasing.

"A liar swallows a thousand needles, Sister Xiaokui."

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

Xiaokui and Bai Six hooked their pinkies and shook them. She raised a hand to wipe the tears from the corners of her eyes before asking softly,

"...And Bai Six, what is your wish?"

Bai Six propped one hand on the tabletop, lowering his gaze. He tapped his knuckles against the wood, the rhythm steady and unhurried.

"I want to sacrifice the evil god."

Xiaokui's breath caught. "Sacrifice the evil god?!"

"Yeah." Bai Six's lips quirked into a lazy smirk. "It's because of Him that you're all suffering, isn't it? Wouldn't everything end if He were sacrificed?"

Something about his words felt wrong, but Xiaokui couldn't pinpoint what. She frowned.

"...Why is that your wish?"

Bai Six tilted his head slightly, his loose kimono slipping off his shoulder, revealing patches of dark, scaly skin. He winked.

"Because I hate evil gods, of course."

Xiaokui hesitated. "Hate evil gods…?"

Most of the sacrifices hated the evil god, but something told her Bai Six's hatred ran deeper—different from the others'.

"That's right." Bai Six's eyes half-lidded, his voice carrying an almost bored amusement. "When I was at the orphanage, no one liked me. The teachers found me unsettling. The other children rejected me. No matter what I did, I was always left on the outside."

"But there was someone else like that. His name was Xie Ta."

Xiaokui found herself listening more closely.

"I was curious about him. He liked the same books as me, played the same horror games. Even the same teachers and children hated him. I

thought he was interesting. I wanted to understand what he was thinking."

Xiaokui couldn't help but smile. "You wanted to be friends with him."

Bai Six paused as if considering it. "Logically, that would be the expected conclusion."

"...But he rejected me."

Xiaokui blinked. "Why?"

Bai Six shrugged. "I don't know. No matter how many times I invited him to play, he ignored me. Even when I stood directly in front of him, he just walked past me—cold, indifferent."

He let out a soft exhale, his smirk returning.

"So, naturally, I started to hate him."

Xiaokui frowned. "That's not right. Even if he wanted to say no, he should've at least said it properly."

Bai Six leaned his cheek against his palm, his tone growing more subdued.

"Then, one day, he disappeared. Some said he died."

Xiaokui's stomach clenched. "Died?!"

"Mm." Bai Six sighed, almost regretful. "And because I was the one who had openly shown hostility toward him, and because I returned late that night, they accused me of killing him."

Something about Bai Six's tone unsettled her. Xiaokui suddenly recalled the way he had laughed on the boat, the ease with which he had confessed to killing Xie Ta and dismembering his body.

…That wasn't the attitude of someone who had been falsely accused.

But before she could dwell on it, Bai Six continued, his voice calm, unhurried.

"As more children started hating me, wanting me gone, the teachers took it upon themselves to punish me. They drowned me repeatedly in the baptismal pool, forced confessions from me—methods not too different from the ones used here in the Bei Yuan family."

He gave a light chuckle, as if telling a mildly interesting anecdote.

“The only thing I could do was escape to the church where Xie Ta had disappeared. I prayed there, day after day, because there was no one else to help me. I thought maybe God would save me.”

Xiaokui swallowed, her throat dry.

“But that act of prayer… the others twisted it into something else. My teachers and the other orphans said that I was a murderer—returning to the scene of my crime to relive the thrill of it.”

His voice lowered.

“All because I smiled when I prayed.”

Bai Six lifted his gaze then, locking eyes with Xiaokui. There was something terrifyingly vast in those dark eyes, as if they could swallow all the light in the room.

Xiaokui froze.

She couldn’t move.

Bai Six leaned forward, resting his head lightly against her shoulder, his breath warm against her skin as he whispered,

“Do you think the same way?”

“Was it my fault that I didn’t know how to show suffering? That I thought prayers should be offered to God Xiang with devotion, not misery?”

Xiaokui’s heart twisted painfully.

Jiro…

Isn’t this just like her Jiro?

Overcome, she reached out, stroking Bai Six’s hair as she loudly denied, “It’s not your fault!”

“It’s the fault of the people who tortured you!”

Against her shoulder, Bai Six’s lips curled ever so slightly. His voice was quiet, almost childlike.

"...Is that so?"

Xiaokui took a deep breath. "Yes!"

Bai Six exhaled softly, his tone slipping into a near whisper.

"I don't know how long I prayed to God Xiang… but one night, I had a dream."

"In it, I was no longer a child from the orphanage. I was a resident of Luming County, feeling the call of the evil god."

"The evil god brought me into a game with many others. He said that if I won, I could gain many things."

"Money. Power. Tools."

"Then I woke up on a boat."

"The evil god told me the game was called TheEvil God Festival – Boathouse, and the only way to win was to sacrifice the evil god in the shrine."

Bai Six lifted his head slightly, looking at Xiaokui.

"That first night, when I stepped into the shrine, Sister Xiaokui…"

"Guess what I found?"

Xiaokui shook her head, her thoughts a tangled mess.

Bai Six smiled.

"I found the evil god's body sleeping in the shrine."

"The very one I was accused of killing."

His smirk widened, and his next words sent ice down Xiaokui's spine.

"Xie Ta."

Xiaokui's pupils contracted.

She walked out of the room where Bai Six had been giving her lessons, her mind almost blank. As she stepped through the doorway, Xiaokui hesitated, glancing back uncertainly. Bai Six stood there, effortlessly accepting the next offering, his posture relaxed, his expression

unreadable.

"Lady Xiaokui," he said with a light smile, arms crossed as he leaned against the doorframe. "Don't forget our pact."

As the days passed, she found herself growing closer to Bai Six. During lessons, he would teach her how to avoid torture, slipping her quiet reminders when no one was watching. Sometimes, he would distract her with games of horror and backgammon. Other times, they would do nothing at all—just lying on the tatami mats, staring at the ceiling, speaking of things that meant nothing and everything at once.

"If only I had met you earlier, Lady Xiaokui," Bai Six murmured one day, sprawled across the floor. "If only someone had been there to play with me back then... maybe I wouldn't be here now."

His voice dropped, softer than a breath.

"If only... I had a sister, too."

Someone who would never abandon him. Someone who would miss him when he was gone.

"Because having people who long for your presence, even in death... that makes it all worth it."

Xiaokui found herself saying, without thinking, "Bai Six is valuable, too."

"Is that so?" Bai Six let out a quiet laugh, unamused. "Valuable to whom?"

The more time she spent with him, the more he reminded her of a child.

—Particularly like Jiro.

Slowly, she let her guard down.

One day, Bai Six looked at her and asked, suddenly, "Beiyuan Xiaokui, do you want to leave this place?"

Xiaokui froze. The answer should have been obvious, but she found herself hesitating.

"...Yes," she finally admitted.

"I have a way for you to escape," Bai Six said, his voice quick and even, without a trace of emotion. "Soon, there will be a major conflict between the Gifune family and the Beiyuan family. In the chaos, the guards around the boathouse will be at their weakest."

"If you want to run, that's your chance."

Xiaokui bit her lower lip, as if on the verge of saying something—but in the end, no words came.

"If you want the other sacrifices to escape too, spread the word," Bai Six continued indifferently. "But once you leave, don’t come back."

Xiaokui's head snapped up. "What about you?"

Bai Six smiled, casual as ever. "My goal is here. I’m not leaving."

She opened her mouth to argue, but he cut her off before she could.

"I’ve already contacted your sister. She’ll be waiting for you and take you straight to the county where she lives now."

"Run. Get out of here. Stay alive. Forget everything that happened in this place and start over."

Bai Six’s gaze softened, something unreadable flickering in his dark eyes.

"Including me, Sister Xiaokui."

Panic flared in her chest. She stepped forward, reaching for him. "Then come with us!"

Bai Six turned away. His voice was quiet, but firm. "Lady Xiaokui, today’s lesson is over. Go back."

"Don’t come back."

Xiaokui clenched her teeth, struggling to find the right words, but Bai Six's footsteps stilled.

"If I get the chance," he murmured, "I’ll come see you in six months."

On the night of the conflict, the Gifune family set fire to the Beiyuan estate. Half of Luming County burned in the blaze.

"—Bai Six!"

"Where are you?!"

Xiaokui searched desperately through the flames, but she never found him.

She was dragged from the inferno by Cang Tai, her body weak, her mind spinning. When she reached the path leading to the shrine, she saw Apricot waiting there.

The moment she laid eyes on Xiaokui, Apricot threw her arms around her, sobbing.

"Finally… finally, I found you!"

Xiaokui turned back with a blank expression, her gaze drawn to the shrine atop the hill. Amidst the raging inferno, a lone figure in a white kimono stood untouched by the flames. He smiled faintly, lifting a hand in a slow wave, as if congratulating her on her escape.

—It was Bai Six.

Her vision blurred with tears, and she murmured unconsciously,

“…Thank you.”

“Thank you, Bai Six.”

She had finally escaped this hell. With her sister by her side, she left for a place where spring blossoms bloomed.

At first, she lived in fear, dreading that men from Luming County would come for her. But as the days passed and no one came, she began to let herself believe in safety. She settled into a normal, peaceful life, welcomed with warmth by Apricot and her kind husband.

Good news seemed to follow. Before long, Apricot announced that she was pregnant.

Her husband sighed, exasperated yet indulgent. “Look at the dates—you were already pregnant when you went to save Xiaokui. I told you to let me go instead, but you wouldn’t listen.”

Apricot cradled her belly, her eyes soft as they rested on Xiaokui. “Even if I had known, I still would have gone myself.”

“She is as much my sister as my own children will be.”

“When Bai Six contacted me, he said Xiaokui had suffered greatly and might not trust strangers. He insisted that I be the one to come.”

Apricot exhaled, shaking her head. “That Bai Six… He really is a good person, isn’t he? Willing to help our Xiaokui.”

Xiaokui blinked in surprise at the mention of Bai Six name. She hesitated, then reached out to gently touch Apricot’s stomach. Her voice felt distant, as if she were speaking of something from another lifetime. “I wonder if he’s left Luming County yet.”

Apricot flicked her forehead playfully. “Don’t worry, Bai Six is smart. I’m sure he’s long gone from that wretched place.”

“Didn’t he say he’d come see you in six months? There’s still a month left—who knows? Maybe when you open the door, you’ll find him standing there.”

Xiaokui inhaled deeply, then let out a quiet hum of agreement.

But when the six months were up, it didn’t happen as she imagined.

On a gloomy afternoon, rain poured relentlessly from the sky. Apricot and her husband were out for a maternity check-up when Xiaokui heard a knock at the door. She opened it—

And there stood Bai Six, pale and drenched, rainwater dripping from his hair.

Xiaokui froze in shock. “Bai Six… teacher?”

Without a word, Bai Six seized her wrist and pulled her into the rain.

“Come with me,” he said, his voice eerily calm. “I have something to show you.”

Xiaokui stumbled after him, struggling to break free. Fear crept up her spine. After all this time, after finally building a peaceful life, what horror was about to befall her now?

“What’s wrong, Bai Six?” she asked, her voice unsteady.

“Did you come to see me?”

“I did.” Bai Six strode forward through the downpour, his expression unreadable. “But I also came with bad news.”

“We’ve all been deceived.”

Xiaokui frowned. “…What do you mean?”

“You won’t believe me if I just tell you,” Bai Six said evenly. “So I’ll show you.”

“Besides you, seventy-three other sacrifices escaped that fire. Four of them ended up in a county near here.”

“One of them is Cang Tai. You remember him, don’t you?”

Xiaokui’s unease deepened. “I do.”

Cang Tai had fled with her that night. He had been taken in by a kind couple, and under their care, he had flourished. They encouraged him to study hard, to aim for university. He was preparing for exams, full of hope for the future.

Just like the others.

The other escapees who had come to this county were doing well, too. They met up from time to time, talking about their days in Luming County like old war stories, distant and surreal.

“…Isn’t that a good thing?” Xiaokui asked hesitantly.

Bai Six’s voice was cold. “Don’t you think it’s strange?”

“Why is it that every single one of you is thriving?”

“Because the world outside is beautiful,” Xiaokui said automatically—words ingrained in her by the Bei Yuan family’s teachers.

Outside Luming County, the world was a paradise. That was what they had always been taught. So long as they escaped, happiness awaited them.

Bai Six let out a humorless laugh. “No.”

His soaked hair clung to his face as he turned to her. “From the teachings to the fire, to your so-called escape—it was all a lie. A long, carefully orchestrated deception.”

A chill ran down Xiaokui’s spine. “What… do you mean?”

Bai Six didn’t answer. “See for yourself.”

They traveled by foot, then by carriage, taking two rides until they reached the outskirts of a town.

Their first stop: the home of Cang Tai.

The house was tucked away in a quiet area. They had to walk some distance before reaching it.

As they neared, Xiaokui heard muffled sobbing—then a sharp, pleading cry.

“No… Mom, Dad, you’re lying, right?” Cang Tai’s voice was raw, desperate. “It—it can’t be true, can it?!”

Bai Six didn’t spare her a glance as he pulled her toward the side of the house. “There’s a window here. Look inside.”

Through the warm glow of lamplight, Xiaokui saw Cang Tai kneeling on the floor, clutching a torn A+ report card, tears streaming down his face.

“I got in! I passed the entrance exam!” His voice cracked. “Please, please, don’t send me back!”

Sitting across from him were the couple who had taken him in. The same couple who had fed him, encouraged him, given him a home.

They weren’t looking at him.

Instead, their eyes were fixed on two men in black standing before them.

Xiaokui’s breath caught in her throat.

—She knew those men.

They were servants of the Bei Yuan family.

One of them pulled out a thick stack of bills and handed it to the couple. “Thank you for your efforts these past six months.”

The couple accepted the money with beaming smiles. “No trouble at all, no trouble at all! We were happy to do it.”

The servant’s gaze swept over Cang Tai, who knelt on the floor, trembling. “To ensure Lord Cang Tai suffers a little more, we ask that you personally escort him back to the shrine. Watch as he is

sacrificed.”

The husband nodded eagerly. “Of course, of course. We agreed to this six months ago. We’ll do exactly as we were told.”

Xiaokui felt like she was going to be sick.

The wife, still smiling, turned to the servants and handed them cigarettes. “Next time you have another child for us to raise, do let us know. It’s been such an easy way to make money.”

The servants took the cigarettes without a word, indifferent.

And Cang Tai—

Cang Tai had stopped crying.

His eyes were empty.

Completely void of light.

Outside the window, the rain poured relentlessly.

"I'm sure you can see it now," Bai Six said, his voice indifferent. "This was all by design—a carefully orchestrated escape meant to make the sacrifice even more agonizing." He glanced at Xiaokui, unreadable. "Even I was just a pawn, used to deliver a message to you."

"No, that's not true." Xiaokui shook her head, dazed. "It was my sister who came to pick me up, not some stranger."

She clung to the thought as if saying it aloud would make it real. "She was always the kindest to me. She fought with my parents when they tried to sell me. She wouldn't—she couldn't do this to me. We're real sisters..."

"Is that so?" Bai Six asked, his voice eerily calm. "And yet, it was your real parents who sold you, wasn't it?"

Xiaokui flinched.

"Your sister was already pregnant when she came to get you," Bai Six continued. "She wasn't well-off, and she came for you at the exact moment she needed money the most." His words were clinical, methodical. "For years, she never came. Then, suddenly, two months into her pregnancy, she did."

His dark eyes held no light as he asked, "Are you sure she won't sell you?"

Xiaokui turned away, staring blankly at the watch on her wrist. She muttered as if in a trance, "My sister will be back from her maternity checkup soon... I still need to go home and cook. If I don't, she'll come back from the rain with nothing to eat, and she'll be starving... The baby too..."

She stumbled forward, taking a few steps before collapsing to the ground. Her palms scraped against the gravel, blood pooling from the cuts, but she barely noticed. She pushed herself up, staggered forward again, and fell once more, whispering feverishly:

"That won't do... That won't do..."

The rain drenched her, running down her face—she wasn't sure if it was rain or tears.

Bai Six approached her slowly. As she knelt there, trembling, he held out a hand.

"There are three more sacrifices," he said.

His voice was void of warmth. "Do you want to see them?"

Xiaokui lifted her head, her eyes unfocused.

"...Alright."

"Yota, please, don't leave me behind! I'll do anything!"

Sonoko clung to her boyfriend's leg, sobbing hoarsely. "I love you. Please, don't send me back!"

Her voice cracked with desperation. "I can earn money—more than they'll ever give you! Just don't do this!"

A short distance away, a boy stared at his older brother in disbelief. His voice wavered as he forced out a shaky smile.

"Kawano... brother?"

He glanced at the Bei Yuan family's servant handing money to Kawano, then back at him, his voice almost hopeful.

"Is... is it a customer, Kawano-go?"

The older brother turned to him with the same easy-going smile he always wore.

"Yeah, of course, it’s a big order." He fanned himself with the stack of bills. "And only you could’ve done this one."

The boy's smile froze.

The realization sank in, slow and suffocating.

"You—"

Before he could finish, Kawano rolled up his sleeve and backhanded him across the face. The slap sent the boy sprawling, teeth and blood flying from his mouth.

He stopped struggling after that. The last light in his eyes flickered and died.

Kawano counted his money, then pointed at the boy lying on the floor.

"Be good now. I raised you for six months for this payout. If it weren’t for the money, who’d waste their time feeding a freeloader like you?"

Xiaokui stood motionless in the rain. Bai Six stood beside her, a black umbrella shielding him from the downpour.

She didn’t know how long she stood there. Long enough for the boy to be dragged away like a discarded doll, for the rain to wash away the blood on the ground.

Her vision blurred.

That boy had been sacrificed—just like that.

Bai Six's voice cut through the storm.

"I can send you somewhere Bei Yuan’s family will never find you," he said. "But your sister and her family already know about you. If you want to truly escape, to make sure they never come after you—"

His expression didn’t change as he placed a black dagger into Xiaokui's trembling hands.

"Then there's only one way."

His voice was steady, emotionless.

"Either you let them use your love for them to keep you trapped in a never-ending nightmare, offering yourself up again and again as a sacrifice..."

"Or—" He met her eyes.

"You sever the ties completely and choose freedom."

Xiaokui didn't remember how she got home.

Didn't remember how she showered, changed, cooked.

She sat at the dinner table, back straight, posture perfect, waiting.

The only difference from before was the black dagger resting silently on her chair.

Ding dong—
The doorbell rang twice before the door finally opened.

Apricot sighed with mild exasperation. "Xiaokui, really. Not answering the door again?"

"You have a key," her husband pointed out with a chuckle. "You could've let yourself in. You're just being lazy again."

Apricot shot back defensively, "I was carrying a ton of shopping bags! I didn't have a free hand, okay? It's not laziness!"

Her husband nodded with amusement. "Mostly, you're just too excited about buying baby stuff before the baby is even born."

Apricot sat down excitedly across from Xiaokui, beaming. "The baby's healthy! Just another month or two to go!"

Xiaokui stared at her blankly, her eyes unfocused. "Is that so?"

Apricot frowned, finally noticing something was off. "Xiaokui, what's wrong?"

Xiaokui lowered her gaze. "Just... a little tired."

"Then let me tell you something that'll wake you right up!" Apricot looped her arm around Xiaokui's, her enthusiasm returning. "Guess who I ran into on the way here?"

"Bai Six!"

"He saw me and gave me a big red envelope—said it was a tradition from his homeland, a blessing for a new baby." Apricot scratched her cheek, looking a little shy. "I felt awkward accepting it, but he said it was for you too. Told me to ask if you wanted it."

Her husband pulled a thick wad of cash from his briefcase. "Here it is."

The moment Xiaokui saw the money, she froze.

The wrapping paper.
The thick texture.
The familiar markings.

They were exactly like the bills the Bei Yuan family's servants had used when paying for the others.

A lie.

Xiaokui lowered her head, her voice barely a whisper. "That's impossible… Bai Six was with me all afternoon."

Her breath hitched.

"This money—this is the same as theirs."

Tears welled in her eyes as she lifted her face, her voice breaking.

"It was them, wasn't it?! They paid you!!"

Her grip tightened around the knife hidden behind her back.

"Liars! You're all liars!"

"You're no different from my wretched parents—both of you got happiness at the cost of my suffering!"

"You don't deserve to be parents at all!"

Apricot gasped, instinctively shielding her belly. Her husband paled, rushing forward to stand between them.

A cold flash of steel.

A scream.

For a moment, it was impossible to tell whether the cries came from the attacker or the victims.

Bai Six leaned leisurely against the doorframe, arms crossed, glancing at his watch. He waited patiently, listening to the agonized sounds within. When the screaming finally subsided, he pushed the door open and stepped inside, unhurried.

The room was drenched in blood.

Apricot's husband lay motionless on the floor. Xiaokui knelt beside him, her hands trembling, the knife slick with crimson. Her eyes were vacant.

Across from her, Apricot was barely clinging to life, cradling her stomach.

She reached out weakly, fingers brushing Xiaokui's face.

A bloodstained handprint.

Through tear-filled eyes, Apricot whispered, "My... poor Xiaokui."

"Sister... doesn't blame you."

"Sister knows... you were tricked."

Bai Six stepped lightly over the husband's body, humming a tune as he approached Xiaokui.

Apricot's voice was fading, but she forced out her last words.

"If... if I truly am just a sacrifice..." Her lips quivered. "Then let my wish be..."

Blood seeped from her ashen lips.

"Let someone save my sister."

"Let Xiaokui escape this nightmare."

"Let her live... happily ever after..."

Her body slumped.

Her arms, once wrapped protectively around her stomach, fell limply to the floor.

The pool of blood grew wider.

Bai Six gazed down at Xiaokui as if inspecting merchandise. Then, he knelt before her and smiled.

"Sister Xiaokui, you're finally perfect."

"You're the most exquisite sacrifice in this entire copy."

Xiaokui barely reacted. She lifted her head slightly, her pupils shrinking.

Bai Six chuckled.

"Yes, that's right."

"It was all set up for you."

"I can't generate pain myself, so I needed a first-class sacrifice—someone whose agony was pure enough to awaken the Evil God and make a wish worthy of sacrifice."

"The other sacrifices? Those were all real. The Bei Yuan family really did orchestrate them as part of their so-called 'Exodus Plan.' I didn't lie to you about that, Xiaokui."

Xiaokui's fingers slowly unfurled.

The knife slipped from her grip, landing with a soft squelch in the blood pooling beneath Apricot's body.

Bai Six's smile widened.

"But Apricot was the exception."

"She wasn't paid by anyone."

"She was truly a good sister."

"So, Xiaokui... you were the exception too."

"You are both a victim of hell and a sacrifice of happiness."

He leaned closer, his voice dripping with delight.

"Tell me, Sister Xiaokui—how does it feel?"

"To seize happiness with your own hands... only to destroy it?"

Xiaokui couldn't remember how Bai Six took her back to Luming County, nor how he dragged her to the shrine.

But she remembered how, just before she lost consciousness, he wrenched her wrist and broke it.

She remembered the sensation of her hair being gripped, her body hauled like a discarded object and dumped beneath the shrine.

For years, the shrine doors had never opened for Bai Six.

But the moment Xiaokui stepped inside—

They opened.

A pair of bloodless, bare feet descended before her.

Threads—countless, translucent threads—floated outward, tangled in the air like puppeteer's strings.

Long silver-blue hair cascaded around the figure, glowing with an eerie luminescence.

Xiaokui gazed up in a daze, tears slipping down her cheeks.

This... is the Evil God?

Bai Six's voice rang cheerfully in her ears.

"I offer a sacrifice to the Supreme Evil God, Beiyuan Xiaokui."

"And my wish is—" Bai Six's smile deepened. "To sacrifice this Evil God's vessel, Xie Ta, and clear the game."

The figure before her began to change.

Their body glowed, their limbs stiffening, warping into the form of a wooden effigy.

But those silver-blue eyes—holy and inhuman—remained unchanged.

They stared at her.

Waited for her.

A true sacrifice, born of her own pain.

Waited for her to wish.

Xiaokui’s vision blurred with fresh tears.

Her voice trembled.

"I wish..."

Apricot’s dying words echoed in her mind.

Let someone save my sister.

Let her escape this nightmare.

She clutched her chest, sobbing uncontrollably. Then, she threw her head back and screamed—

"God, please!"

"Let the one who can save us appear!"

"Let us escape this nightmare!!!"

[System prompt: NPC (Beiyuan Xiaokui) world line memory fusion complete.]

[Fusion Copy Unlocked.]

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

The moon shone down on the earth.

In the dark forest, the "princess" who had fled from the high loft staggered down the hill, her mind spinning.

As the memories returned in full force, Xiaokui collapsed to the ground, her body convulsing as she vomited uncontrollably. Her fingers dug into the dirt, her tears mixing with the burning acid she expelled.

Bai Six...

Bai Six!

The cowardly, self-doubting sacrifice had been nothing more than a prop in his hands. Her pain—real and searing—was just another game piece he moved to pass the trial.

"Xiaokui!"

Apricot fell to her knees, cradling Xiaokui's trembling body, tears streaming down her face. She, too, had remembered. Her sobs were soft but broken. "My poor sister..."

A sharp scoff cut through the night air.

From the darkness of the forest, a figure emerged, the shifting moonlight gradually illuminating his features. The young man smiled.

"What a performance, Sister Xiaokui."

Xiaokui stiffened.

Bai Six took a slow step forward, his eyes glinting with amusement as he reached out, tilting her chin up with a finger. Her face was frozen in a blank, immobile expression.

"To think you almost sacrificed the evil god," he murmured, chuckling softly. "I never expected..."

He trailed off before leaning in slightly, his voice filled with cruel delight.

"There are actually other players who can lure the evil god out of the

shrine and trigger this special game path."

He let out a quiet laugh.

"It's hilarious, really."

Bai Six half-closed his eyes, his voice light. "Tell me—do you think your suffering alone is enough to lure the evil god out now?"

Xiaokui shuddered violently.

"If it isn't..." Bai Six tilted his head. "What will you do?"

She barely registered Apricot moving beside her.

Then, a blur—Apricot had grabbed a large stone, her expression twisted with desperation as she raised it high.

"You're insane! Stay away from Xiaokui!"

Bai Six smirked, his fingers slipping into the folds of his sleeve. A glimmer of black.

A bone whip.

"Sister, no!" Xiaokui's scream tore through the night.

Apricot swung—

In a blink, Bai Six flicked his wrist.

The bloodstained black bone whip shot out, wrapping around Apricot's neck with chilling precision. With a single tug, he dragged her toward him, her feet scraping helplessly against the ground.

She choked, fingers clawing at the whip strangling her, her face quickly turning blue.

Bai Six tilted his head as if remembering something. "Oh, right." He feigned surprise. "Apricot-san... you're pregnant, aren't you?"

His voice was light, almost friendly. "How long does it take for a pregnant woman to suffocate before the baby in her belly dies from lack of oxygen?"

A pause. Then, he mused, "I think... about three minutes?"

The whip tightened.

Apricot convulsed, her limbs thrashing violently against the dirt. Her fingers, once desperately pulling at the whip, were slipping.

Her lips parted—her voice was hoarse, barely a whisper.

"Xiaokui..."

Apricot's gaze, blurred and dimming, held hers.

"Don't let my death make you suffer."

Her voice cracked.

"Pain... that's what he wants."

Xiaokui's vision swam.

Apricot's hand fell limply to the ground—

A snap tore through the air.

From behind Bai Six, a white bone whip sliced through the darkness.

Reacting instantly, Bai Six released Apricot and spun, both hands swiftly intercepting the incoming strike.

Black and white whips clashed in midair, ringing with a sharp, vibrating hum.

The force sent a gust through the clearing.

Xiaokui barely had time to react before she threw herself forward, catching Apricot as she collapsed.

She pressed trembling fingers to her sister's face—warm. Breath.

Alive.

Tears spilled down Xiaokui's face. "You're alive... you're alive!"

Bai Six's expression shifted. He turned, eyes narrowing toward the direction of the attack.

A figure stepped into the moonlight.

He wore a broad white hari-kari coat, the fabric flowing with each

measured step. A long red ribbon was tied around his hair, trailing in the wind as he moved.

The ribbon passed the corner of his eye.

Bai Six let out a slow whistle, a smirk curling his lips.

"Now that's a nice outfit."

The man's expression was unreadable. "This is ceremonial attire for the sacrifice." His voice was calm, detached. "But I don't recall ever agreeing to let the Bei Yuan family sacrifice me."

Bai Six's smile faltered slightly.

Bai Liu's eyes met his.

"It's not for Bei Yuan," he said quietly.

"It's for the Gifune family."

Silence.

Then—

A startled gasp.

Apricot, still clutching Xiaokui for support, turned her head, eyes wide as she stared at the distant mountainside.

A glow.

A massive, roaring fire.

Her voice trembled. "What's going on?!"

Beneath the shrine, where the Bei Yuan family estate lay, flames devoured the compound.

The mansion—once imposing and untouchable—was engulfed in a raging inferno.

From even this distance, the desperate cries and frantic shouts of the Bei Yuan servants echoed up the hillside.

"The altar and shrine are burning!"

"The master's collection—get water! Save the books and paintings!"

"The sacrifice's loft collapsed!"

"Shut off the warm water to the rockery! Redirect the garden springs to fight the fire!"

Xiaokui's breath hitched.

She had dreamed of this.

Dreamed of seeing the ugly, rotting Bei Yuan estate burn to the ground.

But now that it was happening, right before her eyes... it felt surreal.

Like a divine miracle.

Her gaze snapped to Bai Liu.

"You..." Her voice shook. "Did you set the fire?!"

But before Bai Liu could respond, Xiaokui nervously and self-consciously denied it, her voice shaky:
"How could Bei Yuan's house, so heavily guarded, suddenly burst into flames like that?"

"It would take at least 30 or 40 ignition points for a fire of this scale to ignite. Even if it were set, the Bei Yuan family invested a lot in drawing mountain spring water. They'll have the fire under control soon..."

"The fire will be put out soon enough."

But as soon as she said this, the light in Xiaokui's eyes seemed to fade.

She recalled a fire at the Bei Yuan house in her memory, realizing it was part of a sacrifice ritual designed to facilitate a reasonable exodus.

The fire wouldn't even burn.

As expected, the intense flames at the Bei Yuan house were soon under control, with the fire in the southeast corner quickly extinguished. Many servants were cursing furiously.

"Catch the arsonist!"

"Must have been one of the sacrifices!"

"Bring them back and torture them!"

But before anyone could leave, the fire reignited.

In the southeast corner, a servant screamed desperately, "Help, the fire's back!"

"How did it reignite?"

"Didn't we already divert the mountain spring water?"

Xiaokui stood frozen, confused.

"Interesting," Bai Six said, leaning in as if watching a spectacle. His black whip curled in his hand as he glanced at Bai Liu, amusement in his voice. "Did you tamper with Bei Yuan's spring water supply?"

Bai Liu shot him a glance but didn't reply.

"Lord Bai Six!" A distant voice shouted from the hilltop, filled with excitement. A figure waved frantically in the dark. It was Cang Tai. "I secretly took the key from Bei Yuan's house and gave it to the Gifune family, just as you ordered!"

"They said they were celebrating the summer festival and had plenty of sake carried up through the shrine!"

"Sake, mountain spring water, the supply system..." Xiaokui mumbled, snapping to attention. "When the Gifune family got the key to the shrine, they could have cut off the spring at the mountain top and replaced the water with sake."

"To create the illusion of warm water for the garden, the Bei Yuan family always kept the fireplace burning in June, so the spirits would ignite as soon as they entered the furnace!"

"Bei Yuan’s home has at least a hundred stoves—that’s over a hundred fires..."

Xiaokui's eyes gleamed as she looked down at the flames below, then her lips curled into a smile. She clutched her stomach and laughed until tears streamed down her face.

"The brutes who let so many squires freeze to death in winter!"

"Deserve to die!"

The Bei Yuan family panicked as the fire raged, but the Gifune family had already blocked the mountain, declaring, "Summer Festival—no one is allowed near the shrine."

The once-powerful family couldn't escape the flames. They had no choice but to walk toward the shrine, fear evident on their faces. It was as if they feared the [evil god] more than the fire itself.

The mountain fires blended with the darkness, the moon shining behind the shrine. In the distance, members of the Gifune family could be seen unloading bottles from the top of the hill, then heading down.

At the waterfront, a lively scene unfolded. Ritual dancers filled the stands, while at the boathouse, the attendants and offerings, who had been locked away, burst from their cages and fled, as if they had received some kind of signal. They scattered into the darkness, like animals escaping captivity.

From high on the bleachers, a figure lowered his telescope with satisfaction. He turned to the servant beside him.

"The new offerings have been released. Inform the [anchor men] to take their positions and prepare to receive the new batch."

"Remember, give them the happiest six months of their lives."

The servant bowed and held up the box containing the binoculars. "Yes, Lord Gosho."

Gosho smiled as he put the binoculars away. Looking toward the Bei Yuan house burning in the distance, he said with a smirk, "Tonight is the eve of the summer festival. Everyone has enjoyed six months of happiness. Now, it's time to have some real fun."

"The new offerings are out. Let’s release the old ones for hunting and games."

The Royal Boat floated beneath the stands, where the guests from Luming County cheered and laughed. Gifune raised his hand, signaling the start of the festivities.

"The Evil God Night Celebration Festival begins."

Hilltop.

"So this is the night," Bai Six remarked, as if finally satisfied with the unfolding scene. He stepped forward, his smile thin and impassive.

"The Bei Yuan house is burning, the Gifune family attacked, the new sacrifices fled, and the old ones are being hunted."

"If it’s this night... it’s happening now..."

Bai Six grinned as he looked intently at Bai Liu, counting down softly. "5, 4, 3, 2, 1..."

The air crackled as a massive beam of light shot up from behind Bai Liu, exploding into the dark sky. Thousands of sparks rained down like fireworks.

The sound of explosions filled the air, mixing with the bright moonlight and glittering fireworks, casting light and shadows on the shrine below, illuminating it in vibrant colors.

-- It was like the grand stage of a game.

Bai Six's smile grew as he hid his whip behind him. "The game has finally begun."

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

On the vast expanse of sand by the sea, countless sacrifices ran for their lives, their bodies pushed to the brink. Blood streamed from their seven orifices, their airways felt as though they were burning, and their bodies screamed in pain, yet they never stopped running.

The sacrifices glanced up at the beautiful moon and the fireworks lighting the sky, their faces marked with a trance-like, relieved smile despite the blood dripping from their mouths.

If they could just get out of here, they would be completely free.

Beyond this nightmare, a better world awaited them, one free from pain!

In the distance, the maid from the Gifune family, standing atop the fire station, watched the fleeing sacrifices with indifference. She picked up the phone. “Lord Gosho, the sacrifices have escaped from Luming County. Should we release their [anchors] now?”

“Hold off for now,” Gosho’s voice crackled from the other end. “Make sure they don’t get close to the old sacrifices. The seven family lords are hunting them, and I don’t want them ruining the fun.”

The maid glanced back up the hill when she heard the mention of the seven great families.

From a distance, she saw only a faint glow at the shrine. Rather than notifying the fire brigade, she smiled slightly. “After tonight, the Bei Yuan family will be completely removed from the Eight Families, correct?”

Gosho’s smile was audible. “I will make sure the Bei Yuan house is reduced to ashes.”

“Lord Gosho... won’t you attend the hunt for the old sacrifices tonight?” The servant hesitated slightly, uncertain.

“No need.” Mikoto’s lips curled into a smile. “I already have the most valuable sacrifice.”

“Tonight, I will offer him to the evil gods.”

With that, a massive firework shot up from the back of the lookout, exploding at the highest point of the hill. The colorful light burst into the night sky, revealing the men of the Gifune family, weapons drawn, carefully descending from the top of the hill toward the shrine. Meanwhile, the Bei Yuan family, cornered at the base, scrambled up the hill in fear.

“It’s time to enter the shrine.” The leader of the Gifune family turned to those behind him, barking orders. “Keep your skins tight and your eyes covered.”

“If anyone accidentally catches a glimpse of that corpse and turns into a monster, don’t say I didn’t warn you!”

“Yes!”

The man from the Gifune family swiftly pulled a thick black cloth from his pocket and tied it around his eyes as he entered the shrine’s grounds.

Taking a deep breath, the leader continued, “Lord Gosho said the sacrifice Bai six has already been taken outside the shrine. Our task is simple: grab Bai six, bring him in, and sacrifice him. Once that’s done, tonight’s mission will be complete.”

“We must be quick. By the time the next Funakya night wraps up with the sacrifice, the other lords will be bringing in old sacrifices they’ve hunted. We need to finish Bai six’s sacrifice before then!”

At the base of the hill, the servants were hurrying along.

“Hurry!” they urged. “Ladies and lords of the Bei Yuan house, tear off your clothes and cover your eyes!”

“We’re almost at the shrine!”

“Please, do not open your eyes! If you see the evil gods in the shrine, you’ll either become a sacrifice and go mad, or transform into a monster and be hunted!”

The men on the hill moved cautiously, their feet testing the ground, while those at the bottom stumbled along, their eyes tightly shut, faces full of fear and panic.

At the shrine, Bai six stood with his hands behind his back, slowly approaching Bai Liu. He raised an eyebrow, his lips curling into a smile. “What an interesting scene.”

“Everyone stumbles forward, eyes closed, toward the evil gods they worship daily, yet fear so much for their own desires.”

As Bai Liu spoke, Bai six’s whip lashed out from behind his back toward him. Bai Liu raised a hand to block, his dagger materializing in his palm. The blade pierced the loop of the bone whip, twisting around and pulling it from Bai six’s grasp.

Bai six stepped back, the whip disappearing from his hand. As he raised his hand again, the whip reappeared, and he swung it toward Bai Liu, twisting it as the bone spurs unfurled with a sharp hiss.

Bai Liu remained calm, transforming his dagger into a monkey’s claw, gripping the long, spiked bone whip with his bare hand, and yanking it toward him.

In the process, the bone whip disappeared once more from Bai six’s hand. He quickly dodged back, narrowly avoiding Bai Liu’s claws aimed at his neck. As he spun around, the whip reappeared at his waist, and he lashed it toward Bai Liu’s face.

Bai Liu sidestepped, the claws of his monkey's hand leaving four deep scratches on Bai six’s shoulder.

Bai six winced, clutching his wounded shoulder, then looked up at Bai Liu with a grin. “Should I really say, not bad for someone who can make an evil god suffer enough to walk out of the temple?”

“You’re much better than I expected.”

Bai Liu regarded the injured Bai six, his dark eyes unblinking. “Is this your first time playing a game copy?”

“Rolling out so soon?” Bai six smirked. “The Evil God Festival – Boathouse was indeed my first copy, but I’m curious. I shouldn’t look like a new player, so how did you figure that out?”

Bai Liu merely stared at Bai six without answering directly, his gaze falling to the bone whip in Bai six’s hand. “If this is your first copy, then you wouldn’t have been rewarded with props for failing the game.”

“Where did you get this bone whip?”

“How about a trade?” Bai six smiled, eyeing Bai Liu. “You answer my question, and I’ll answer yours.”

"You have no skills, so this must be your first game," Bai Liu replied calmly, his tone dry. "Now, it's my turn. Where did you get the bone whip?"

Bai Six smirked, lifting the black bone whip in his hand and giving it a shake. "Isn’t that the only way to get props in the game?" he said. "The first one is a bonus, but the second drops from killing monsters."

The smile on his face widened. "In my version of the Evil God Festival, I got the key to enter the shrine map and found the evil god NPC." He paused, eyes glinting. "But I didn’t suffer when facing Him, so I couldn’t awaken the evil god." He shrugged. "Still, since the Evil NPC’s face reminded me of a very annoying person I met in reality, I decided to take out my frustrations on Him. He wasn’t waking up, and I couldn’t push the game progress forward, so I decided to relive what I did to that person in real life. That’s when this bone whip fell out of His body."

Bai Liu’s expression shifted, a quiet understanding dawning in his eyes. Slowly, he lifted his gaze and fixed it on Bai Six, his voice steady but chilling. "You cut him open and took his spine out, didn’t you?"

"You could say that," Bai Six replied with a nonchalant shrug. "I was going to take some other things he dropped, but they were too fragmented to be useful, so I left them. He grew back, or refreshed, the next night, so it took me several days to dissect him properly and get the most intact piece." He raised the bone whip again, his grin widening. "How’s that? Looks good, doesn’t it?"

Meanwhile, Xiaokui, standing off to the side, glanced down at the bottom of the hill with a solemn expression. Turning to Bai Liu, she spoke urgently, "Bai Six! The men from Bei Yuan’s family are coming up!"

Cang Tai scrambled down from the top of the hill, his eyes wide with shock. "Bai Six, my lord! The Gifune family’s men are coming out of the shrine too!"

When Cang Tai reached Bai Liu, he blinked in astonishment, looking back and forth between Bai Liu and Bai Six. "Huh? How can there be two Bai Six?"

Xiaokui raised an eyebrow. "Is this guy's memory not fully integrated?"

Bai Liu gave Cang Tai a cold stare, his voice icy. "Cang Tai, take Beiyuan Xiaokui and her sister down the side path—the one I told you about, the one I sometimes use to get to the shrine."

Cang Tai snapped to attention. "Yes!"

Bai Liu's gaze shifted slightly, his eyes flicking to Xiaokui. "At the boathouse, the old and new sacrifices are fleeing," he said. "Beiyuan Xiaokui, your sister was contacted by someone from Bei Yuan's family to lure you out. You should be able to judge for yourself whether she really wanted to save you, right?"

Xiaokui took a deep breath, clutching her sister's hand. "Mm!"

"Your sister and you are safe," Bai Liu continued, his voice calm. "You'll encounter many other sacrifices during the [exodus]. If you want to help, use your sister as an interface and guide them along a different path of escape." His eyes hardened. "That way, they won't run into the [anchors] set up by the Gosho family."

He raised his gaze to Xiaokui, his words carrying a note of finality. "But the world isn't as nice as Bei Yuan's family has taught you." His tone turned colder. "In addition to the [anchors], there are many others who will try to deceive you, feeding off your pain." He paused for emphasis. "It's a cruel world."

Xiaokui's voice trembled. "I know."

Bai Liu nodded calmly, his eyes turning back to Bai Six, who was slowly backing away toward the shrine. He raised his whip nonchalantly, his expression unreadable. "Good to know."

"Now, learn to live for those who don't feed on your pain but those who will make you weep and suffer—for you," Bai Liu continued, his voice carrying a dark edge. "They're the kind of idiots you read about in textbooks—the ones who can give you a good life."

Xiaokui watched Bai Liu's retreating back, a mixture of confusion and awe on her face, hearing his final words as he chased after Bai Six.

"Take Cang Tai with you to escape," Bai Liu called over his shoulder.

Xiaokui's tears fell unexpectedly, and she choked back a sob, her voice shaky as she replied, unsure which question she was answering. "I

will."

"I will, Bai Six teacher!"

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

The moment the men of the Gifune family cautiously stepped into the shrine, their eyes blindfolded with black cloths, Bai Six stepped back and pushed open the shrine door.

The heavy red wooden door creaked loudly as it swung open, alerting the leader of the Gifune family. He immediately drew his sword and shouted, "Who's there?"

"Sacrifice Bai Six." Bai Six turned back with a smile, raising an eyebrow slightly. "The Gifune family's sacrifice you wanted is here. Won't you come and get it?"

The Gifune family leader paused, his sword swinging harshly toward the sound of Bai Six's footsteps. "Go! Get him into the shrine!"

"Yes!" The other Gifune family members shouted, pulling out their swords despite the blindfolds and jogging toward the direction of Bai Six's footsteps.

Just as the group of samurai neared Bai Six, the shrine door opened again.

A lighthearted Bai Liu pushed his way through.

"Who is it now?!" The leader of the Gifune family spun around, his sword quickly clamping onto Bai Liu's neck as he stepped through the door. "Who are you, and what are you doing here at this late hour?"

Bai Liu shot a quick glance at Bai Six and instantly understood what had happened.

Bai Six flashed a smile at Bai Liu before waving and disappearing behind the shrine.

Bai Liu withdrew his gaze and blocked the man's sword at his neck with his hand. "Didn't you ask me to come?"

"That voice—are you Bai Six?!" The leader of the Gifune family asked in surprise, his sword twirling as he looked in the direction Bai Liu and Bai Six had gone. "You're Bai Six, but then who was that man?"

"I'd like to know too." Bai Liu didn't pause as he walked swiftly inward, cracking the whip in his hand. He flicked his wrist calmly. "So

move out of the way. I'm going in."

The blindfolded man, sensing the long whip in Bai Liu's hand, grew tense. "If you are Bai Six, there's only one thing you're here to do—be sacrificed."

"What are you doing with that weapon?!" he shouted, swinging his sword toward Bai Liu's neck in an attempt to force him back. At the same time, his left hand reached down to grab the long whip.

Without hesitation, Bai Liu snapped the whip with his right hand, striking the Gifune family leader across the face with a resounding crack. The man was sent flying backward, and Bai Liu deftly jumped over his fallen body, heading straight for the shrine.

Realizing something was wrong, the man from the Gifune family quickly turned and tried to grab Bai Liu's ankle as he moved past. But with a swift flick of his wrist, Bai Liu dodged the attempt.

"There's something wrong with him!" the man shouted as he hit the ground.

The silvery light of the swords reflected off Bai Liu's cold eyes, causing him to frown as he raised his right hand, lifting the white bone whip with its bloodied end. He swung it down with great force and speed.

When the bone whip reached its highest point, it looked like the inverted tail of a scorpion, poised to hook the silver moon in the sky.

With a sharp "swoosh," the bone whip came down.

"Whoosh—bang bang bang—!!!"

Sporadic flashes of light erupted from the moon, and as if scattered by the raised whip, they exploded into thousands of bits of smoke and flames, which cascaded downward in a flurry.

"Don't panic, everyone!!!" A servant of the Bei Yuan family shouted, waving his hands to calm the frightened, blindfolded members. His voice was hoarse but loud as he explained, "It's just fireworks! Not weapons!"

"Everyone, follow my voice and come along! The shrine is fully equipped to avoid fire, and there's a pond that draws spring water from the mountains. We'll be safe inside!"

The wooden door of the shrine creaked open again.

The smell of blood was so pungent that the Bei Yuan servants' noses twitched, their cold sweat dripping down their sideburns, darkened by the smoke of the fire and staining the white veils they used to cover their eyes.

The hand of the Bei Yuan servant who had pushed the door open trembled slightly as he reached for the handle to pull it down and see what had happened inside the blood-soaked shrine. But as his fingers brushed against the gauze, he stopped.

If he removed the gauze and saw the evil god’s corpse, he would be dead.

As the Bei Yuan servant stood frozen, unsure whether to move forward or retreat, a heartbreaking cry of fear echoed from the men behind him: "Why aren’t the people ahead inside yet? The fire’s spreading!"

Before the servant at the front could react, the men behind him pushed forward, panicked and rough.

The Bei Yuan maid at the end of the line fumbled for the door valve, finally feeling it on one side. She slammed it down hard, barely avoiding the tongue of flame licking at her.

The pair of ornate lapis lanterns at the shrine entrance were instantly reduced to ash as the fire surged upward.

The servant who had managed to close the door inside fell to his knees, his hands on the ground, a look of relief and ecstasy on his face. "We did it! There are pools in the shrine! We’ll be safe here!"

"The soil here is damp..." At this, the servant scooped up a handful of earth with both hands. He paused, slowly straightening up, and brought the wet dirt close to his nose to sniff.

A salty, rusty taste filled his nostrils.

His face drained of color, and with horror, he tossed the dirt aside, screaming as he recoiled, "It’s blood! It’s all blood!"

Soon, his back was pressed against the leg of another man, blindfolded and trembling. The man turned and grabbed the servant's leg. "There’s something wrong with this shrine... Should we leave?"

A drop of blood landed on the man's gauze, freezing him in place for a moment. Slowly, he lifted his head, as if realizing something.

Peering through the loose top edge of his blindfold, his face drained of the last trace of color. He let go of the servant's leg, staring vacantly, his mouth agape.

The man—no, the corpse—he was leaning against was dressed in the black samurai uniform of the Gifune clan. A short knife had been thrust through his nose, and his wide eyes stared blankly as his body slumped against the shrine gate bell. In his hand, he still gripped the large rattle used for shrine wishes.

The ground was littered with the bodies of black-samurai warriors from the Gifune clan, their necks snapped cleanly by a whip. Heads were scattered across the ground, eyes still open in death. Some had thrown their short swords, others had not, and some swords lay broken, only half left in the palms of the headless bodies.

A servant from the Bei Yuan family shakily nudged one of the corpses, which slowly fell face-down, its grip on the bell tight as if trying to alert the others. As the body fell, the bell rang out.

The bell's toll, combined with the servant's hysterical, sobbing scream, echoed through the burning shrine: "Someone's slaughtering the shrine!!!"

The moon above the shrine seemed to reflect in the blood that stained the ground, while the fireworks surged and exploded with a faster pace. From a distance, the sound of cheers and celebration from the crowd on the beach could be heard, as if the summer festival fireworks display was reaching its grand finale.

"Shoo—shoo—bang!"

The fireworks transitioned from vibrant colors to a blinding red, and a flare burst among them, just as vivid, hidden within the red explosions without drawing attention.

The Gifune family servant, stationed at the fire lookout, scanned the flare with his binoculars. His face paled as he quickly dialed Gosho: "Lord Gosho, the warriors surrounding the shrine have sent a call for assistance."

"A call for assistance?" Gosho, standing on the towering bleachers, narrowed his eyes. "Are you sure it's a request for help and not a

signal that the mission is complete?"

The servant lifted his binoculars again, confirming the signal before replying, "It's still sending. It's definitely a flare for assistance."

"This group of trash," Gosho muttered, glancing at the six clansmen under the stage, busy collecting arrows from the old sacrifices. His face darkened. "The Evil God Festival for hunting old sacrifices is almost over. The major clans have finished their hunting and are preparing the sacrifices. They've just completed the simple task of clearing the Bei Yuan clan remnants and sacrificing Bai Six. And they still haven't finished? They need assistance?"

"And...?" the servant asked hesitantly. "Would you like to offer assistance, Lord Gosho?"

Gosho gritted his teeth. "Of course, I'll provide it! Otherwise, everything I've set up will be lost!"

The servant nodded quickly. "Yes! I'll inform the remaining Gifune samurai on the hill to enter the shrine immediately!"

He pulled a purple-red flare from his pouch and ignited it, sending it into the sky.

"Shoo-!!!"

As the fuchsia smoke and fire erupted, the Gifune warriors stationed on the hilltop saw the signal and exchanged wary glances in the darkness. Quickly, they raised the black cloths around their necks to shield their eyes and moved swiftly toward the God Xiang community.

"That's..." Beiyuan Xiaokui, halfway through her run and pulled by her sister, suddenly heard the peculiar sound of a firework explosion. She looked up sharply and froze as the fuchsia flare shot upward from the fire station. Her pupils contracted. "A flare from the Gifune family's siege!"

Her memories, now fused, seemed to ignite the moment she saw the flare's piercing colors.

"Sending out this flare is like issuing a mandatory kill order from the Gifune family. All their samurai will be mobilized, and they won't stop until they finish their mission."

"They want to kill Bai Six and completely wipe out the Bei Yuan

family..."

As Xiaokui spoke to herself, she caught sight of a few rising sky lanterns. Their glow reflected in her pupils, sending a shiver down her spine.

--That's the lamp Bai Six carries every night when he goes to see the evil gods and walks the mountain.

But the lamp, which Bai Six had tossed aside while rushing to save his sister, was now reduced to a skeleton by the fire, drifting upward toward the deep black sky.

It seemed as if the gods themselves were taking it—like a soul being claimed.

Cang Tai, shaking Xiaokui's hand off, ran toward the fire, coughing as the smoke engulfed him.

Xiaokui grabbed his shoulders, shock in her voice. "That's the shrine and the Bei Yuan house burning! What are you doing?!"

"Didn't you say the Gifune family was going to kill Lord Bai Six?!" Cang Tai coughed, tears streaming down his face. "I have to save Lord Bai Six!"

"And Bai Six... and the kittens!"

"I left them in the attic of the Bei Yuan house! If this keeps up, they'll burn to death!"

Xiaokui gritted her teeth. "Are you crazy?! Do you realize what it means to have all the samurai of the Gifune family mobilized?!"

"It would be easier to kill you than to cut a turnip!" she shouted.

Cang Tai shook his head, sobbing. "I don't know. All I know is that Lord Bai Six and the kittens made it possible for me to live here, without being used as a sacrifice or suffering. They've helped me so much and taught me so much."

"I never thought the world could be beautiful because of the Bei Yuan family's teachings, but I believe Lord Bai Six's love for the evil gods is beautiful."

Cang Tai cried out, "I don't want to see Lord Bai Six dead!"

"They were supposed to have a happy ending! Isn't that what they write in fairy tales?!"

"Fairy tales are..." Xiaokui's teeth clenched, her eyes closing as she tried to shatter Cang Tai's fantasy. "It's all..."

--Lies.

The burned lamp fluttered down near her and slowly extinguished, like the light in her eyes in another world.

[Love is all a lie.]

Bai Six smiled, kneeling before the shrine, her hollow eyes fixed on the flames as she said, [In this world, there is no love.]

[Because no one who believes in love truly exists.]

[Only pain is eternal.]

Xiaokui's eyes snapped open. She stared at the burning mountain, her eyes now reflecting the fire's light. Taking a deep breath, she said, "You go to Bei Yuan's house and rescue the two kittens. I'll go up the mountain and search for Bai Six along the back roads."

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

Xiaokui, halted by her sister's panicked shouts, turned and ran back down the path she had just come up, not daring to look back.

The sound of weapons clashing under the unquenchable fire, along with the sharp crackling of burning wood, echoed through the hills.

Xiaokui covered her mouth and nose, her gaze lifting toward the shrine perched at the top of the hill, now enveloped in heat and ash.

Inside the shrine, Bai Liu dragged the bloodstained whip with his right hand, his left hand coldly pushing the door open with two fingers.

The heavy wooden door creaked slowly open.

Bai Six, gripping the whip in his right hand, smiled as he drove the sharp bone spikes of the whip into Tawil's neck, forcing him to lean back. The black bone spikes pierced Tawil's pale, thin skin, and blood trickled down his body, staining his white tunic.

Tawil's silver-blue eyes were half-closed in weakness as he looked up at Bai Liu, his voice hoarse from the pressure of the whip against his throat. "You're here at last," he rasped. "I thought you wouldn't come today."

Bai Liu's gaze remained on Xie Ta's neck, where bone spikes were piercing the flesh and bleeding out. His voice was calm, but his grip on the whip tightened, his fingertips turning white. "Why did you think I wouldn't come?"

"You spoke to me," Tawil half-smiled, his silver-blue eyes gleaming faintly. "I thought you'd left with your Prince Charming."

His voice softened with earnestness, as if expecting something. "Are you here now to choose me as your Prince Charming?"

Bai Six's playful eyes flicked between Bai Liu and Xie Ta, finally resting on the bloodied side of Xie Ta's body. His gaze lingered there, his smile widening.

"You trained him," Bai Six continued, his tone amused. "You went out of your way to create a monster, someone who would fall in love with you."

Bai Six’s eyes sparkled with a mixture of admiration and mockery. "What a completely new way of solving the problem."

He grinned, as though sharing a playful tip about the game. "I'm curious, Bai Liu—how did you do it?"

"How did you manage to make such an evil creation, one that remembers all the memories of the worldline, with no humanity or human feelings, fall in love with you?"

"Even God hasn't managed that."

Bai Six's amusement grew as he examined Bai Liu across the room. "How did you pull it off?"

Bai Liu didn't answer. With a swift motion, he swung the bone whip toward Bai Six without hesitation. But before it could land, his left hand shot out, placing itself between Bai Six’s whip and Xie Ta’s neck, bending back to protect Xie Ta. In one fluid motion, he ripped the black bone whip from Bai Six's grip.

Bai Six sidestepped, his smile still present, though his eyes were devoid of emotion. He tightened his right hand, wrapping the whip back around Xie Ta’s neck, and turned his wrist. The bone spikes flared outward, sinking deeper into Xie Ta's flesh.

The white tunic around Xie Ta’s neck was soaked with blood, the bone spur lodged deep in his throat, preventing him from making a sound.

"It’s not advisable to pull on these bone whips," Bai Six warned, glancing sideways at Bai Liu. "It’ll tear the head right off."

A rare, dangerous aggression flickered in Bai Liu’s dark eyes as he glared at Bai Six. His right hand loosened its grip on the whip, and in the next instant, the bone whip morphed into a sharp, short blade. He struck swiftly, aiming to sever Bai Six's head from his neck, but Bai Six narrowly avoided it.

A strand of black hair from Bai Six’s temple was sliced off, drifting lazily to the ground, while a few drops of blood splattered on the falling strands.

Bai Six slowly turned his head back, lifting his eyes with a grin as he licked the blood dripping down his face. His excitement grew. "That’s what makes it fun, big brother."

"Show me more. I'm curious to see what interesting skills you have left."

Before he could speak further, Bai Liu didn't hesitate. He yanked the black bone whip tighter around Xie Ta's neck, using his body's force to widen the gap. With a swift roll, he kicked Bai Six hard in the spine.

Bai Liu's shoulder absorbed the blow, and blood seeped from the corner of his mouth as he smiled through the pain. Instead of defending himself, he yanked on the bone whip around Xie Ta's neck, sending both Xie Ta and the whip flying.

Bai Liu's right foot landed on Bai Six's shoulder, and he pushed back, narrowly dodging another strike from the whip that came crashing down into his blind spot.

A large hole was cut into the wooden floor beneath them, with the black bone whip's spikes embedded deeply in the ground. The floorboards around it were turned over, revealing a pond below.

Goldfish swam aimlessly in the pond, their scales reflecting the flickering light from the fireworks in the black sky, giving the illusion that they were swimming in a festival of summer fireworks.

Bai Liu knelt on one knee near the hole, his back straight. His waist was only centimeters from a bone spike that had been thrust upright behind him. He gripped the black bone whip in one hand and looked coldly across the hole at Bai Six.

Bai Six eyed the black leather gloves that appeared on Bai Liu's hands. "A short blade, gloves... So, a shifting skill weapon?"

He grinned. "Or—could it be that I'm using your skill weapon now, Bai Liu?"

Before Bai Six could finish his question, Bai Liu threw the knife from his hand. Bai Six dodged it fluidly, but the blade grazed his neck, spinning into a bottle of poison.

The poison splashed as it hit the water, and the pond instantly turned black, bubbling as thick, toxic mist rose into the air. Bai Liu felt his health bar drop, but he didn't care. Instead, he summoned the white bone whip with his right hand and gripped it tightly. Without pause, he swung it toward Bai Six.

The white bone whip flew through the hole Bai Six had made, sending

a large wooden slat flying through the air.

"Flutter!"

The sound of water splashing reached Bai Liu's ears as he heard Bai Six fall into the poisoned pond behind him.

After completing his usual barrage of strikes, Bai Liu stood up and sidestepped toward the spot where Xie Ta had just been thrown. He kept his eyes on the pond below, scanning it from the corner of his vision. The whip in his hand transformed into a gun, and he fired rapidly at each bubbling spot in the water.

"Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang-!!!"

Bai Liu stood in front of Xie Ta, facing the pond with an indifferent expression. Though the water had settled, the gun in his hand remained aimed at it, poised and alert.

The plank beneath him creaked, and Bai Liu’s focus sharpened. He fired six quick shots at the plank beneath his feet before smoothly reloading, shifting his aim to where the water had shifted beneath it. He pulled the trigger again, releasing six more precise shots.

Silver cartridges clinked as they hit the ground.

The barrage continued until the first system beep echoed in Bai Liu’s ears.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has hit player Bai Six with his skill weapon (Rose Revolver).]

Blood spread across the dark water, and Bai Liu’s eyes locked onto the spot where it rippled out. His gaze was cold, filled with aggression—like a scaly dragonfish enraged by its prey, ready to strike again, leaving no chance for the prey to escape.

Bai Liu raised his left hand, calm and intent, aiming at the bloodstained water.

"Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang-!!!"

Six clean shots rang out, and Bai Liu reloaded again, smoothly adjusting his aim as the blood shifted. His shoulder moved slightly to absorb the recoil, then he pulled the trigger again.

"Bang! Bang! Bang-!!! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG--!!!"

Another system beep sounded.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has hit player Bai Six with his skill weapon (Rose Revolver). Player Bai Six's life is decreasing...]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu... (repeated)]

Bai Liu continued his relentless assault, emptying magazine after magazine, ensuring that no part of Bai Six had the chance to resurface. Cartridges littered the ground beneath him. Finally, the system prompt changed.

[System Alert: Player Bai Six has zero life and is out of the game.]

[Congratulations to player Bai Liu for killing player Bai Six!]

Bai Liu's dark eyes lingered on the still waters of the pond for a moment. The gun in his hand morphed back into a whip.

He raised his hand, snapping the whip into the water, stirring it from side to side. The whip made contact with a heavy body, and with a flick of his wrist, he looped the whip around Bai Six's waist. He pulled the corpse out of the water and flung it onto the plank.

Bai Six's body, lifeless and ashen, was dropped onto the wood with a dull thud, shaking slightly as it settled.

Bai Liu approached the body, eyes cold, observing it with the same indifference as one might examine a stone.

Bai Six was bloodless, his skin showing signs of severe poisoning—patches of it were corroded, ravaged by toxins.

Bai Liu nudged the body with his foot, flipping it over onto its side so that it lay face down, spine exposed. His eyes narrowed, watching the spine with intense focus.

Then, with a calm, practiced motion, Bai Liu cracked his whip, opening the body's clothes to reveal the skin beneath. He reached into his belt and produced a bottle of poison, preparing to pour it into the hollow at the center of the back.

But just as he was about to do so, Bai Liu felt a tug at his sleeve.

"You're at...?" Xie Ta's voice, strained and weak, came from the ground. He had been bound by a silk thread and could only crawl. His neck was covered in bloody puncture wounds from bone spikes that

continued to bleed. Despite his injuries, Xie Ta gazed up at Bai Liu with a calm, almost detached expression.

Bai Liu glanced down, lowering his gaze. "I was going to corrode his skin with poison and extract his spine."

Xie Ta was silent for a long moment, his eyes distant. He coughed softly, then asked in a muted voice, "Why?"

"Xie Ta." Bai Liu crouched down, his right hand gripping Xie Ta's jaw and lifting his chin. He stared into Xie Ta's eyes with a cold, steady expression. "Do you really not know why I'm doing this?"

"You remember the memories of other world lines. That means you're the Xie Ta from those lines. You've had your spine drawn out by this [Bai Six] at my feet—by countless versions of me in other world lines."

Bai Liu's gaze deepened as he locked eyes with Xie Ta. "Why didn't you speak up while I was torturing you?"

"Why didn't you tell me I was forcing you to develop feelings for someone who looks exactly like the bastard who manipulated and hurt you?"

"Why didn't you tell me you knew you were trapped in a game and that I, as a player, was here to use you for my own gain?"

Xie Ta's breathing stilled slightly, and his eyes darkened in confusion. He didn't seem to fully understand Bai Liu's words. "Is any of this important?"

"This world is just a game for me," Bai Liu replied flatly.

Xie Ta's silvery-blue eyes reflected Bai Liu's face completely. "That's what's real to me."

"You are real to me," Xie Ta added, his voice earnest.

Bai Liu paused, his fingers tightening around the bottle of poison.

Xie Ta, his face bloodied and his white robe torn, slowly sat up. He was covered in blood but still knelt devoutly, looking up at Bai Liu with a serious expression.

"It doesn't matter if it's a game to you," Xie Ta said, his tone unwavering. "It doesn't matter if it's just for a pass."

"Now, can I be your Prince Charming?"

Bai Liu remained still for a moment before shifting his position, kneeling in front of Xie Ta. He met Xie Ta's gaze, and in that moment, he saw the subtle tension in Xie Ta's eyes, a silent anticipation. Both their heartbeats quickened.

Thump-thump-thump.

The two men's heartbeats began to sync, thumping in unison.

"I don't want a Prince Charming who will die," Bai Liu said softly, his eyes downcast. "Will you die?"

Xie Ta's reaction was swift, panic flickering in his eyes. "I won't die! I'm a monster!"

Bai Liu raised his eyes slowly. "Then we make a deal."

"You give me your soul, your life, and your love," he said.

"I'll give you my wish, my faith, and my love."

Xie Ta nodded. "Good."

He asked earnestly, "Is there anything else I need to do for the deal?"

"I need money as a medium," Bai Liu said, his voice light but firm. "Close your eyes."

Xie Ta obeyed, closing his eyes without hesitation.

Bai Liu looked down at Xie Ta's bloodied face. His gaze softened, then drifted down to the coin hanging over Xie Ta's chest.

—The coin, a symbol of Bai Liu entering the game's task manager.

It also symbolized the foolish, lust-driven players who made deals with evil gods.

Bai Liu remained silent for a long moment, then took the coin into his mouth, pressing it under his tongue. It tasted cold, metallic—like rust, like the blood from Xie Ta's body.

"Are you done?" Xie Ta's voice came softly, his eyes still closed.

Before Bai Liu could respond, he leaned forward, raising his right

hand to gently close Xie Ta’s eyes.

Their lips met.

"What was that?" Xie Ta asked, his voice muffled as he tasted the foreign object in his mouth. "Is it a coin? It makes my heart beat so fast."

"No," Bai Liu’s voice was soft. "It was a kiss."

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

“Huh.”

A low, mature male laugh echoed from behind Bai Liu.

The moment Bai Liu heard it, his pupils contracted. Instinctively, he kicked Xie Ta away from him and then swiftly pivoted, placing one foot across his body. His muscles tensed as he raised his shoulder and flicked his wrist. The spurs of his whip flared out, and with all his strength, he hurled the whip toward the source of the sound.

The whip struck the ground with a violent thud, its bone spikes digging into the floor. But the force of the strike didn’t dissipate. It tore through the boards, crashing into the pond with a loud splash.

“Phew—bang, bang, bang!”

Water shot into the air, falling in a cascading curtain through which brilliant fireworks exploded in the night sky.

Twisted and beautiful.

A pale, bony hand, clad in a black glove, emerged from the water’s curtain. It gripped Bai Liu's whip with relentless strength, pulling the weapon towards its owner.

The man behind the curtain stepped forward, emerging like an actor taking the stage. His face was bloodied, his body riddled with the gunshots Bai Liu had just fired. Yet, there was no sign of panic or evasion, only calm confidence as he walked steadily toward Bai Liu.

With a smile in his eyes, he gazed at Bai Liu, whose chest rose and fell with heavy breaths. He spoke with admiration.

“Wow, quick reflexes.”

“You almost killed me just now.”

[System Alert: Player Bai Six sacrifices the shrine offering (Tawil) and the suffering of Player Bai Liu before exiting the game and makes a wish -]

[--- Invite the evil gods to come to earth and destroy them.]

Bai Six tugged at the glove on his right wrist with his left hand.

Behind him, huge fireworks bloomed continuously, casting a demonic splash of light against the side of his face, making his smile appear even more dangerous.

“I forgot to mention,” he said with a smirk, “while you acquired your identity as an evil god believer in the third game, the Bai Six of other timelines didn’t hesitate to choose me as their evil god the moment they entered their first game, The Evil God Festival—Funhouse. The moment they stepped into the shrine, they learned of my existence.”

Bai Six’s smile widened as he hooked his index finger around the brown thread hanging in front of his chest. Instead of a coin like Bai Liu’s, a shiny, inverted cross pendant swung from the cord.

“And I can come to earth by inhabiting the bodies of these believers.”

“Just like you did with Yuan Guang, right?” Bai Liu replied coolly, taking a step back without breaking eye contact. “Another one of your special tricks?”

Bai Six shrugged, his smile unreadable. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“What game do you want to play next?” Bai Liu asked, eyeing him with a piercing gaze.

Bai Six grinned, his lips curling slightly. “The game has already begun.”

With a violent crash, the door behind Bai Liu flew open. A group of blindfolded, armored Gifune warriors, armed with shuriken, charged in. They shouted, raising their swords as they hissed, “- Kill!”

From the open doorway, Bai Liu saw the bodies of Bei Yuan clan members scattered across the ground, slain by the warriors of the House of Gifune. Blood stained the shrine courtyard, with pools still visible on the ground.

Bai Six, unfazed, extended his left hand flat and spread his fingers wide. Transparent threads flew from the inner layer of his glove, snaking around his wrist.

“Let’s see how much you’ve grown recently, my heir.”

[System Alert: Evil God Bai Six uses skill (Puppet Silk).]

The sharp tips of the rapidly flying threads embedded like needles into the necks and joints of the oncoming Gifune warriors. They let out stifled grunts of pain as they clutched at their necks in confusion.

Before they could react, Bai Six twisted his wrist downward and slowly closed his left hand into a fist. His fingers danced across the puppet silk, flicking the threads outward. The warriors' movements were immediately controlled by the threads, and they began attacking under Bai Six's manipulation.

The warriors raised their shuriken high, aiming to strike at Xie Ta, who had been kicked into a safe corner by Bai Liu and bound in place by heavy silk threads.

Bai Liu jerked back, whipping out his weapon and deflecting the short knives slashing toward Xie Ta. The silver blades gleamed, reflecting the light of the surrounding fireworks, their brilliance making the walls of the room shimmer like fish scales. Bai Liu quickly averted his gaze, avoiding the blinding flashes.

Suddenly, a long black bone whip flew through the air, wrapping around the handle of one of the short blades, then swinging toward Bai Liu's neck, hidden amidst the flashing blades.

His eyes cold, Bai Liu raised his hand, turning his whip into a sword. He held it diagonally across his neck in a backhanded grip. The two blades collided with a deafening clatter of metal.

Bai Liu pressed the knife outward, backhanding the incoming blade away. It bounced back along the same path, and Bai Liu casually deflected it with a flick of his whip.

Bai Six smiled, his eyes locked onto Bai Liu. "Just a reminder," he said, "I'm the one you should be wary of. Those minions? Not worth your full attention."

In the blink of an eye, Bai Six's coat swirled as he vanished like a gust of wind.

Bai Liu sidestepped, raising his hand almost instinctively. He spun his blade, making a defensive gesture through the air in front of him.

"Boom—!!!"

Without warning, Bai Six reappeared directly in front of Bai Liu, his own short knife held in a backhanded position. He tried to overpower

Bai Liu, pushing him backward.

[System Alert: Player Bai Six uses Player Liu Huai's personal skill (Flashing Strike).]

Bai Six laughed, using his elbow to push Bai Liu's knife inward, shifting their positions so that Bai Liu was now pinned beneath him. Slowly, he brought his blade closer to the pulsating blood vessels at the side of Bai Liu's neck.

His smile deepened. "Not bad. You can predict my moves, just not as smoothly as I can. You're growing quickly. I'm looking forward to the day you manage to kill me."

As Bai Six's knife hovered near his neck, Bai Liu made his move. Without hesitation, Bai Six withdrew his hand, gripping the knife tightly, and slashed upward, aiming for Bai Liu's neck.

But there was no blood-spurting sound. The slash came up short.

Bai Six's expression remained impassive as he barely paused, grabbing the hilt of his shuriken and reversing it across the back of Bai Liu's neck.

"Pop—!!!"

The two blades collided again.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu uses Player Muke's personal skill (Flashing Strike).]

Bai Liu appeared mid-air behind Bai Six, dropping down slowly. Using the momentum of his body and his position behind Bai Six, he squeezed the man's wrist, bringing his own blade down toward the back of Bai Six's neck.

Quickly, Bai Six turned the horizontally positioned hilt outwards, deflecting the downward slash with ease.

Bai Liu didn't retreat. His gaze was fixed on the reverse cross pendant hanging at the back of Bai Six's neck. His blade shifted, becoming a monkey's claw, aimed at the brown silk thread that held the pendant.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu uses Player Mu Sicheng's personal skill (Thief Monkey Claw).]

Bai Six instantly detected Bai Liu's intention. He was now facing away

from Bai Liu, and his response was too slow to match Bai Liu's. The strength difference was immense, making it unlikely that Bai Liu could kill him in this position. But this was the perfect opportunity for theft.

Bai Six smirked.

Clever. Bai Liu had quickly identified the key prop in the game they were playing.

The short blade at the back of Bai Six's neck shifted, no longer extending protectively. It pressed tightly against his skin and rose upward, slicing through the hair that had been holding his long locks in place.

As the hairline was cut, long black hair tumbled down Bai Six's shoulders, blocking Bai Liu's view of the pendant.

At the same time, Bai Six's gloved fingers twisted, and a sharp-edged playing card appeared between his index and middle fingers. The card sliced through the long strands of hair at the back of his neck, heading straight for Bai Liu's face.

Bai Liu snapped back, narrowly avoiding the card. But his monkey's claws continued their path, striking toward the back of Bai Six's neck.

The claws, once aimed at the pendant, now hit Bai Six's shoulders instead.

The card flew past Bai Liu's eyes, embedding itself in the wooden board behind him. The face of the card trembled, its red peach heart spinning as it displayed shifting images of various people.

Bai Liu's breath caught as he eyed Bai Six, whose turned expression mirrored a familiar, unsettling warmth.

[System Alert: The Evil God Bai Six uses the personal skill (Heart for Heart) of Player Queen Hearts.]

The peach heart continued spinning, eventually framing a picture of Xie Ta reading in the orphanage library, surrounded by shelves of books.

Bai Six turned, his long black hair shifting into silver-blue curls as it cascaded down his shoulders. He looked at Bai Liu with a gentle smile, his silver-blue eyes gleaming. "How unexpected. My heir seems so deeply in love with a creation I have long since discarded."

And then, Bai Six transformed completely—his appearance now mirroring Xie Ta's.

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

The warriors who had been struck down by Bai Liu collapsed to the floor, writhing and wailing in pain as they kneeled in twisted positions.

They scrambled across the crumbling wooden floor like spiders, quickly crawling toward Xie Ta, who was cornered.

Xie Ta's eyes and nose were obscured by dense threads, almost like cloth, and his arms and legs were bound to the ground. He could only move slightly, his bloodstained white kimono spread out around him. His head turned just enough to where Bai Liu stood, and at the edge of his field of vision was the coin Bai Liu had given him earlier—now whipped away by Bai Liu.

His fingers trembled slightly as he gripped the board beneath him, bracing against the taut wire, as though trying to rise. His hand brushed the ground in search of the coin he had dropped.

A warrior twisted in an unnatural, agonizing manner as he raised his short sword, slashing at Xie Ta's slender fingers that reached out to touch the ground. "Die, monster!" he hissed.

The long, white whip lashed out with such force that the spike at its end passed directly in front of the warrior's chest.

The warrior released the whip in shock, blood spurting from his body as he slowly collapsed.

Bai Liu gasped for breath, blood spilling from his lips as a short knife was thrust completely into his right shoulder. Bai Six, the one holding it, smirked as he gripped the handle and yanked it upward.

Blood sprayed out.

"It's so touching," Bai Six commented, his smile cold. "When you and Xie Ta were both attacked by me at the same time, unable to defend each other, you didn't hesitate to choose to save him."

Bai Liu quickly jerked his shoulder back, stepping away. He pressed his hand to the still-bleeding wound, his face pale and expressionless. He gazed at Bai Six, calm and unfazed. "Isn't that exactly the choice you wanted me to make?"

Bai Six nodded thoughtfully, still smiling. "True. But I also wanted you to experience something. A feeling... or perhaps, pain."

His silver-blue eyes shimmered as he smiled wider. "What does it feel like to be hurt and tormented by the one you love, Bai Liu?"

Bai Liu exhaled sharply.

"That was what Xie Ta suffered before," Bai Six continued, his smile widening. "Now, you've tasted it too. How does it feel?"

Bai Liu slowly released his grip on his shoulder, his expression calm as he began to laugh softly. "It's not your place to give me the pain I gave him."

"And you think you're worthy?" Bai Six teased, curling his fingers around the silk threads on his left hand. "It seems I can't inflict pain on you as I do with the others I've created in this world line."

"You are the only one among all my humanoid creations whose suffering is beyond my control."

Bai Six leaned forward, a curious glint in his eyes. "I'm really, really curious—what would it take for me, a god, to make you suffer for my amusement?"

As the threads vibrated, a warrior jerked to life, kicking the coin Xie Ta had been reaching for.

The coin flew and clattered into the corner with a sharp thud, before rolling into the water.

Bai Liu's gaze followed the coin as a black bone whip stabbed toward him from behind. He sidestepped and caught the whip with his left hand, which had transformed into a monkey's paw, while his right hand held the white bone whip and flung it out.

The bone whip lashed across the floor, sweeping all the warriors into a pool of black poison.

Bai Liu's monkey paw disappeared the moment he released the whip, and a vial of poison appeared in his hand. He popped the cap with his thumb and tossed it into the pond.

Screams and shrieks filled the air as the warriors, their metal shells melting, tried to escape the corrosive pool. Each time they reached

out, Bai Liu whipped them back, sending them plunging back into the pool to continue their screams.

When the screaming stopped, Bai Six raised his hand, retracting the puppet silk.

The threads burrowed through his gloves as Bai Liu smirked. "You've cleared the field, now it's my turn."

His eyes shifted toward Xie Ta in the corner.

As Bai Liu approached Xie Ta, Bai Six's bone whip lashed down toward his face. Bai Liu jumped back twice to avoid it, raising an eyebrow as he glanced at Bai Six.

Bai Liu's expression and tone were cold. He looked at Bai Six flatly, twirling the bone whip in his hand as the spines clicked out.

"Who says I'm done clearing the field?" he said, his voice steady. "Isn't there still a big piece of trash to clean up?"

"Maximum trash... are you talking about me?" Bai Six asked with a tilt of his head, watching Bai Liu with interest. "Are you angry? I've been watching you for twenty-four years, and it's rare to see you so outwardly emotional."

Ignoring Bai Six's words, Bai Liu threw another whip at him.

Bai Six flipped his palms upward, and a wall of water patterns appeared before him. The whip hit it, bouncing back as if it had struck latex.

[System Alert: Evil God Bai Six uses Godly Skill - (Audience View)]

[This skill can trap an opponent in the viewer's perspective, where they can only watch and cannot attack the world behind the wall. The field on one side of the wall is the (viewer field) and the other side is the (small TV field), a Genesis skill.]

Bai Liu's eyes snapped to Xie Ta, who was trapped behind the watery wall with Bai Six. His pupils constricted to pinpricks.

Bai Six clapped his hands, smiling. "Okay, our only audience, focus on me and stop looking at the NPC."

"Our interactive TV game is about to begin."

"Before we start, let me introduce the background of the game."

With that, Bai Six snapped his fingers, and the silk thread binding Xie Ta lifted him off the ground.

The silk thread gently lowered Xie Ta into a chair that had mysteriously appeared in front of the watery wall. Xie Ta's head drooped as though he had fallen asleep, his gaze fixed on Bai Liu on the opposite side of the wall.

With a slow wave of his hand to the left, Bai Six summoned a crimson velvet curtain that hung gracefully over the battered wooden pillars flanking the shrine. The floor's cracked planks slowly repaired themselves, restoring their pristine condition, gleaming like the well-maintained stage planks Bai Liu had seen earlier during the festival.

"Pop!"

Bai six clapped his hands together, and the crimson velvet curtain descended smoothly, concealing Xie Ta behind it. In the middle of the curtain, a wooden sign swung lightly, painted in red lacquer with yellow writing that read:

-- [The Festival of the Evil Gods - The Boathouse - Act I Scene].

Bai six glanced at Bai Liu across the watery wall, a soft smile playing on his lips. "I hope you don't mind that I’m handling the voice work for the background of the game," he said.

"Pop!"

Another light clap from Bai six.

As the curtain rose, Xie Ta vanished as though by magic, replaced by an unfinished wax figure sitting where he had been. The wax figure slumped against the chair, like a human statue in an art class, a delicate white cloth draped over it, fluttering in the night breeze—ready to slip away with the wind.

Bai six placed his left hand behind his waist, his right hand raised in front of him. He made a slight bow in a gentleman’s salute before raising his eyes, a smile tugging at his lips.

"At the beginning of this tale, allow me to introduce myself," he said smoothly. "By status, I am the arch-villain of this game, an evil god who will strike down all players indiscriminately."

"In human terms, I am called the God of All-Seeing. Through the medium, I see everything happening."

Bai six straightened up casually, still wearing his trademark smile as he looked across the watery wall at Bai Liu.

"Humanity calls me the All-Knowing God, describing me as having dominion over time and space. I am the door to all the time and space in the universe."

"The past is me; the present is me; the future is me. All space and time converge and cease in me. I am an unimaginable entity, one so overwhelming that texts within human culture say even a mere glimpse of me—through dreams or fantasies—can drive a person mad."

Bai six lowered his gaze and tapped his index finger lightly in the air. In an instant, darkness spread from his fingertips, consuming the scene around him, leaving only the stage planks beneath his feet.

The once sacred shrine was swallowed by an impenetrable black void, and the shattered planks beneath Bai Liu's feet vanished, leaving him to seemingly fall into an endless void or deep ocean. Weightlessness and suffocation slowly crept in.

"Huh."

Behind the watery wall, Bai Liu chuckled, reaching out with his black leather-gloved hand to pull a puppet silk from the air, wrapping it around his wrist as he descended.

Bai Liu glanced upward, his wrist tethered by the thread, and saw Bai six peering down at him from behind the watery wall, his expression one of pity—or was it indifference? Bai six murmured:

"Behold, mortal, so weak and vulnerable in the vastness of the universe."

Bai six released the puppet silk, sending Bai Liu into another free fall, though this time he was caught by a stool from the audience, gently floating back towards the opposite side of the watery wall. There, he once again faced Bai six, now surrounded by a bizarre universe—one so dark that it was impossible to discern anything.

"It's too dark, isn't it?" Bai Liu heard Bai six's voice, low and contemplative. "My apologies. I neglected to give our audience enough

light."

A soft wave of Bai Liu’s hand summoned colorful, dense orbs of light, which burst from his body, emitting warmth and energy. As the spheres flowed, they stirred the air, causing Bai Liu's hair to flutter slightly.

Bai Liu observed Bai six's emotionless, dark eyes reflecting the glowing spheres, as if the brightest parts of the universe had been captured in those eyes. Through them, the unknown expanse of the universe seemed to unfold before mortal eyes.

The luminous orbs swirled around, gathering together in a cosmic dance. They formed streams of starbursts and ribbons of light that illuminated the endless darkness surrounding them.

The scene was surreal—magnificent, as though Bai six's simple words had illuminated the very universe.

"Humans often describe my appearance through glowing spheres," Bai six whispered, his voice soft as the spheres of light hovered around him. He held up a shimmering white orb in his right hand and extended it toward Bai Liu through the watery wall.

The warm glow from the orb bathed Bai Liu's face.

Bai six chuckled lightly. "Do you know what this sphere is?"

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "What is it?"

"It is time, space, the future—it is the door," Bai six said calmly. "It represents the myriad of world lines I have created."

"And this one, right next to you, is world line 658—where you are."

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

The sphere was casually released by Bai Six, floating into Bai Liu's face. It shifted from white to translucent in an instant, its surface refracting colors like a bubble caught in sunlight.

The bubble drifted off into the depths of the universe, merging seamlessly with the other spheres until it became indistinguishable from the band of light surrounding them.

"I was born from these," Bai Six said, lounging lazily in one of the spectator chairs behind the watery wall. He propped his chin up, eyes lifting to smile at Bai Liu. "Of course, so were you."

"I've existed for so long, I no longer remember how I became an evil god. I've been a god for as long as I can recall."

Bai Six removed his gloves, spreading his palms toward Bai Liu. Seven or eight weak, twitching spheres struggled to emerge from his hands. He lowered his gaze, gently cradling the spheres as they fought to escape.

With a soft "ki," Bai Six squeezed the sphere, causing it to explode into countless points of light that vanished into his hands.

He looked up, smiling. "In that moment, ten world lines where you existed were destroyed in my hand."

"Interesting, isn’t it?"

"I don't think it's funny," Bai Liu replied, his tone calm.

"Hmm," Bai Six mused, thoughtfully rubbing his chin. After a moment, he smirked. "Well, then, it's not funny."

"I don't think it's interesting either. It's boring," Bai Liu stated flatly.

Calmly, Bai Liu asked, "Aren’t you going to tell me about the game's backstory? What about the rest of your villainous setup?"

"What’s your purpose, for instance?"

"You didn’t seem interested in me," Bai Six leaned back in his chair, casually folding his legs. His long hair fell lazily over his shoulders, and he tilted his head slightly, resting his forehead on his right hand.

He smirked. "My goal, of course, is to escape this endless and tedious existence."

Bai Six looked down at his right hand. "Whether I wish it or not, the world lines continue to spill out from my palm, as if I'm creating them with my own hands."

"But that's not quite true."

"I am merely a door," he continued. "These pre-existing world lines must pass through me—the door of time and space—to come into being. If they don't, they remain on the other side of the door, stagnant and useless."

Bai Six raised his eyes, a subtle smile curling at his lips.

"On the other side of the gate lies the inorganic abyss—the darkness and the unspeakable evil that has no end. The creatures from the world lines that end up there will remain trapped, lost to madness, ultimately leading to their own destruction."

"At first, I found it entertaining to watch them destroy themselves on the other side of the door. But after witnessing it countless times, the spectacle grew tiresome."

"So, I began to place the world lines on this side of the door."

Bai Six raised his index finger, pointing at the watery wall. The ripples spread outward, and from the tip of his finger, spheres began spilling out, dimly visible beyond the wall. He whispered softly.

"This side of the gate holds the objective logic of the universe—the truths of the stars and the workings of all things. The world lines gain light here; they can survive and flourish."

"Here, in this realm, the world lines evolve into a rich variety of creatures, so different from those on the other side. Dogs, cats, roses, primroses—just to name a few."

"I've enjoyed watching these different species evolve, and I find them endlessly fascinating."

Bai Six rested his jaw lazily on his hand, eyes locking onto Bai Liu. A soft laugh escaped him. "But of all the species, the one I find most intriguing is the human."

"Other creatures merely require visible, tangible things to survive—sunlight, air, water, food, shelter. But humans," Bai Six's voice dropped, "they need something unseen."

"Even with plenty of sunlight, air, water, food, and shelter, it doesn't take long before a human, abandoned and alone in a world line, succumbs to despair. Eventually, they will turn to self-destruction in their agony."

Bai Six smiled. "Besides material needs, humans require kindness and love to survive."

"This is so curious. It's the first time I've encountered a species with such a fantastical need. I'm fascinated by what drives this need in you, and under what circumstances it could be abandoned."

"So I've conducted numerous experiments on humans across various world lines to uncover the core of this need." Bai Six's eyes glinted as he smiled. "And I discovered the essential truth: you have souls."

"I try to create souls."

"But even if I fabricated an identical shell to imitate a human from the worldline, infused it with the same memories, and threw it into an identical worldline I created, this creation still wouldn't produce a soul."

"No matter how many factors I unified, this creation of mine would never produce a soul. It seems that a soul must be formed autonomously by humans, in a social environment where I do not interfere, and where it naturally comes into being."

"In all the time I've existed, I've never encountered something I couldn't create or possess, but now, something has finally appeared."

Bai six curled the corners of his mouth into a smile. "And it's just too much fun."

"What I cannot create or own is the most valuable thing." He leaned back, the amusement evident in his eyes.

"I've observed many worldlines and discovered a pattern in the birth of a human soul. It occurs when a human experiences two particularly strong emotions. These emotions hold the potential to give rise to a soul."

"These emotions, as human society calls them, are [love] and [pain]."

"To test this theory, I descended into each worldline as an evil god, demanding that they sacrifice either [love] or [pain] to me. In return, I would grant them some material object they desired."

Bai Liu's smile deepened. "But soon, I discovered something even more interesting."

"Soul, love, and pain—three things I cannot create and which I find most valuable—these humans would actually sell their love, pain, and soul to me in exchange for something external that I offered at my whim."

"Eventually, they reached a point where they could no longer produce [love] to offer me. But, in their desperation to continue receiving my material rewards, they chose to torture their own kind, sacrificing the suffering of their people to me in exchange for my favor."

"It's clear that kindness and love are necessary for their survival, yet they abandon all of it for an external object. They fanatically pursue me as their evil god."

Bai six smiled as he glanced at Bai Liu. "It's funny, don't you think? How creatures like humans tend to destroy themselves?"

Bai Liu's gaze was cold. "This kind of 'fun' won't satisfy you for long, will it?"

"Indeed," Bai six sighed, as if regretting something. He spread his hands and shrugged his shoulders. "Soon, these humans began killing each other, abusing their kind at my command. Their hearts became so filled with evil and darkness that they could no longer produce the pure emotions and souls I sought. They became just as lustful and monstrous as the very creatures they feared."

"The side of the Gate that was once bright began to lose its truth, logic, and light, becoming dim under the chaos of humanity's struggles."

Bai six smiled darkly. "It became as dark as the other side of the door."

"On the other side of the door, however, because all the worldlines crossed through me to get here, the worldlines there dwindled. The other side has grown brighter instead."

Bai Liu spoke with quiet precision. "Isn't it because you, the evil god, didn't intervene to maintain the balance? That's why the other side returned to its normal state?"

"You can say that if you like." Bai six smiled, his expression nonchalant. "Anyway, in the end, the universes on either side of the Gate have swapped. I had grown bored of playing with humans, and the whole universe was starting to feel tedious. I needed an heir to take my place as the Gatekeeper."

"I think the previous evil god may have had a hand in this, so I was chosen to be the successor."

"But to become the Gatekeeper, to succeed as the evil god, there is one crucial condition that must be met." Bai six's smile widened. "The successor must bear the difference between the universes on both sides of the Gate without causing them to collapse. He must have the ability to contain the desires and evils of the entire universe. And most importantly, he must be more valuable than I am."

"So, I want my heir to be a human with a soul."

"There is value in this request," Bai Liu observed, his gaze sharp. "Isn't it your request?"

Bai six curled his lips into a smirk. "Yes."

"If someone less valuable than me sits in my place, he will be devoured by the awakened me one day." Bai six crossed his arms, leaning against the chair. "Because this universe is so boring, I want my heir to kill me." He seemed almost wistful, as if the thought itself amused him.

"I searched for a long time but could never find an heir who met my criteria." He paused. "Eventually, I grew so bored that I decided to create one myself." Bai six stood up, casually walking towards the wax figure sitting in the chair behind him, his voice taking on a tone of excitement.

"I stripped most of my divine power from my body and poured it into this creation. I sculpted him into my ideal form, giving him a perfect body and bestowing upon him the highest qualities that humanity has praised throughout the ages."

Bai six extended his right hand, gently touching the wax figure's features, his gaze soft as he looked down at it.

"I gave him all the best things I learned from human society, trying to make him my most perfect and valuable creation."

The blurred face of the wax figure slowly began to melt, reshaping into delicate features. The wax dripped down the back of his head, silver-blue hair falling loosely. The hands, once waxen, solidified into white, firm forms that dropped unconsciously to the side of the chair. The figure's chest began to rise and fall, as if breathing—like an idol in slumber.

Bai six rested his hands lightly on the back of the chair, looking at Bai Liu with a smile.

"I call him the embodiment of my good will, and I name him Tawil."

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

"I gave this creation, called Tawil, all the qualities I thought might grant it a soul. I made it a god and cast it into all the worldlines that passed through the gate, hoping that some human in those worldlines would make it feel love and, thus, grant it a soul."

Bai Six slowly raised his eyes and sighed, as if in regret.

"But no matter how many worldlines it passed through, it remained like a cold statue—a broken mirror—sitting on its throne, looking down indifferently at the humans who bowed before it. It gave them external objects, step by step, yet could not feel human emotions in any way."

"I realized that such a method was not feasible and called it back from all the worldlines."

"I inquired of it," Bai Six lowered his eyes, lifting Tawil's jaw gently. He spoke softly to the still slumbering figure, "Why do you refuse to become an evil god?"

"Why not feel love and pain, and become a keeper of souls?"

Bai Six's gloved hand caressed Tawil's closed eyes, his tone growing softer, "I received an interesting answer."

"It looked at me with those pure black eyes and said it thought humans were fine as they were—without the presence of gods or gates."

"In Tawil's eyes, it was good that they simply warmed each other in this universe, where love and pain are intertwined."

"He didn’t understand why God must exist, why God must guard the door, why God must give these things to humanity, or why God must keep the door. Instead of improving the worldline, these things seemed only to make them more miserable."

Bai Six looked up at Bai Liu and smiled. "I told it that it was not God who wanted to exist, but that God already existed—not you, but someone else."

"It couldn't understand and asked me if there was no worldline where God existed."

"I told it, no."

"To be honest, Tawil has been a bit of a disappointment to me," Bai Six said, stepping back slowly. He flicked his hand, and silk threads wrapped around Tawil's body, lifting him up like a puppet on strings. "No matter how much I told it these truths, no matter how much I taught it to become an evil god, it couldn't understand or do so."

"It has a foolishly naive perception of humanity."

"I gave it so much divine power, and yet it foolishly expended itself bit by bit, fulfilling the wishes of mankind."

Bai Six gazed at Tawil, suspended by the silk threads, a look of pity on his face. "I had hoped that Tawil's gratuitous giving and gifting would make the humans love him, but no—he was always met with more greedy demands."

"No matter how much Tawil, as a god, gives to mankind, what he receives in return is always only desire—endless desire."

"I became bored, and after the last bit of patience I had for this creature of my own creation ran out, I chose to banish him."

"Since humans can't teach you to love, I'll let humans teach you to suffer."

Bai Six lowered his eyes as he loosened the silk thread holding Tawil, and the creation fell into an endless universe of darkness.

With one hand, the silk thread shot out, suspending Tawil once more.

Bai Six smiled, glancing at Bai Liu across the watery wall. "Don't be so nervous. I'm not really going to let him go."

"He's the only leverage I have to speak to you face-to-face. I wouldn't dare discard him, or I'd never find another way to get you to sit down and pay attention to my words."

Bai Six’s attitude toward Tawil was that of a doll, playing with him and Bai Liu at will.

Bai Liu, gripping the handle of his chair, looked at Bai Six. "So, what did you do to him?"

"I put a part of [the door] in Tawil's eyes." The silk thread in Bai Six's hand opened, and Tawil's eyes slowly began to open.

Tawil floated in the universe, his eyes half-open—silver-blue orbs that seemed to reflect the entire universe behind them. Stars and rivers of light danced in his gaze, but there was no emotion, no soul—just a reflection of the world, like well-crafted glass, complete yet empty, reflecting everything but never truly engaging with it, unlike Xie Ta's open, flat gaze.

There was no emotion in Tawil's eyes, and no soul.

"When humans look into Tawil's eyes," Bai Six continued, "they see the abyssal universes on the other side of the door, where countless mad worldlines struggle. Desire is reflected from the other side, plunging them into the same madness as on that side of the door."

Bai Six turned to Bai Liu and explained briefly, "Soon, they will develop the ultimate hatred for the gatekeeper, who both grants their wishes and shackles their desires."

"So they will hurt the bearer of this door, the one who owns these eyes, until their desires are satisfied."

Bai Six's lips curled into a smile. "Until the monsters from the Abyss, through their mutilation of Tawil, manage to create a gap in the door and come through—becoming heretics in the eyes of these humans."

"Those monsters were not caused by Xie Ta," Bai Liu asked calmly, as if rhetorically. "It was the desires of these people that destroyed the door over Xie Ta's eyes, allowing the monsters on the other side to pass through and reach this side. Yet you made Xie Ta believe it was his fault, convincing him that those around him would also think it was his fault, increasing their hatred and causing him even more suffering. Didn't you?"

"Bingo," Bai six chuckled. "That's right."

Bai six shrugged with a regretful sigh. "Honestly, I feel like I've made a mistake, letting things get this tragic." He paused. "I originally wanted to give Tawil a soul out of love, so I sculpted him into a non-aggressive god. But my ultimate goal was for him to kill me. But a Tawil with that character could never bring himself to attack me, even if I tortured him to destruction."

"So I changed my strategy," Bai six continued with a laugh. "I erased his memory and told him you were the original evil god and gatekeeper, and that I was just a greedy human who had stolen your godhood." He mimicked an earnest tone. "You want to preserve the

order of the universe and the integrity of the Gate? Then come and kill the greediest, most desperate being who wants to destroy you—me." He shrugged. "Then I banished Tawil to the next 658 worldlines, and at the same time, I sent my derivatives into them. I whispered in their ears, in their dreams: 'By killing Tawil once and for all, you will obtain the most valuable thing in the world.'"

"I know what kind of god I am," Bai six said, his eyes flashing silver-blue for a moment as he looked directly at Bai Liu. "So I know exactly what my creatures will do. They can't resist such temptation." He looked down for a moment, almost lost in thought. "Because they, like me, are a collection of the two greatest desires from either side of the door."

"I had expected Tawil to rebel against me to protect the door and preserve truth and order. But he never did." Bai six shook his head. "He was like countless gods before him—allowing me and others to slaughter, abuse, and mutilate him. It was in that moment I realized that Tawil was not compassionate towards humans, nor was he trying to fulfill human desires." He smiled darkly. "It was pure naïveté and indifference. He never saw humans or me with any positive regard. Even when I stood behind him in 657 worldlines as the enemy who killed him to take the throne of God, he would only look coldly at the book in front of him, never turning back." Bai six chuckled. "Because he found books more interesting than humans." He paused, then continued with a slightly amused tone, "Later, even when I tortured him more, banishing him further into the game, he still had no emotions for me—no love, no hate, no resentment. Because he had no desire for me, or for any human, at all."

"It's interesting, to say the least," Bai six mused, letting out a soft laugh. "At this point, Tawil is surprisingly less human and arrogant than I am, for one of my creations."

"But just when I was about to give up on him, two incredible things happened in the 658th worldline." Bai six's grin deepened as he looked across the watery wall at Bai Liu. "The first thing was that my derivatives slipped out of my control." He leaned forward slightly, eyes glinting with intrigue. "I couldn't reach him through his dreams anymore, couldn't entice or influence him like before. This derivative grew up like a perfectly normal human child, isolated in this worldline." He chuckled softly. "It was fascinating to watch him. Despite the extreme rejection by his kind, he survived in a hostile environment." He shook his head in disbelief. "Humans—especially juveniles—are prone to suicide when they're rejected by their kind.

But this one survived, without any love or acceptance from anyone." His voice dropped slightly, his tone growing darker. "And not only did he survive, but he found Tawil, a creation incapable of emotions, and in his mind, he thought Tawil was the only other of his kind."

Bai six leaned back, eyes glinting with satisfaction. "This misconception gave the derivative affection for his destined enemy, who didn't even acknowledge him. Day and night, he wandered around, thinking he was watching Tawil, hiding his food from him because he didn't want him to starve, and secretly stashing books for Tawil, who never showed any response." He smiled almost wistfully. "It was amazing, really."

Bai six's smile widened as he added, "Then an even more amazing thing happened." He paused for dramatic effect. "This derivative, despite Tawil's total lack of emotional response, generated a soul based on his own feelings, driven by his own misperceptions. This is the first time I've ever seen a human create a soul without being loved." He chuckled softly, clearly pleased by this outcome. "A soul born from nothing but misperception and isolation."

The last trace of expression faded from Bai Liu's face as he listened. He said nothing.

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

"I’m very curious about that." Bai Six tilted her head slightly, smiling. "What’s it like to fall in love with a creation that doesn’t respond, to deceive yourself into love?"

"Do you suffer when you watch Tawil reading alone in the church, when he looks back at you?" she continued. "You do mind that, don't you?"

"Nobody likes a kind that makes them miserable—you just don’t have a choice," Bai Six went on. "After all, since you were born, you’ve never received spontaneous love from other humans. Everything you've ever traded for has been conditional. So, can you tell if people care for you because of who you are, or because of what you give them?"

"Xie Ta was like this. Lu Yizhan was like this. Your later teammates—Muke, Mu Sicheng, Liu Jiayi, Tang Erda—each and every one of them."

"You have to meet their expectations and give them what they want in order to draw them near."

"So, did you really win their affection, or did you simply buy their presence?"

"If one day, you can no longer offer what they want, will they abandon you? Leave you forever?"

Bai Six curled her lips into a smile. "- Like the once-dead Xie Ta."

Bai Liu’s breath slowed as he hung his head, his hair falling over his face, his expression unreadable. His body shrank, and his clothes transformed from a kimono to the wide uniform of an orphanage. He became thin, frail, and took on the appearance of the fourteen-year-old Bai Liu.

A frail Bai Liu sat motionless in an audience chair opposite the watery wall, drops of water falling from the ends of his hair into the universe.

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu has been attacked by the evil god Bai Six. His spirit value has dropped and is about to fall below 60. Hallucinations are imminent...]

Bai Six smiled, watching Bai Liu—or little Bai Liu, aged fourteen—across the watery wall.

"You're essentially the same as Tawil at the beginning," Bai Six mused. "You gathered people to yourself by pre-giving to them, but I've proven in countless experiments that such pre-giving doesn't bring love. It only brings desire."

"Are you sure that what you're receiving from others now is truly affection, or is it just desire disguised as affection?"

Bai Six lowered her eyes, as if pitying him. "You, like Tawil, are a lonely god."

"It doesn't have a soul, so it doesn't feel the loneliness or misery when it doesn't receive love—but you do."

"Your soul will only produce pain endlessly, because of your lack of love."

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu's spirit level continues to drop and will soon fall below 40!]

Water gradually seeped from Bai Liu's clothes, as if he had fallen into a non-existent pool. His hair and clothes began to levitate in the universe, his hands floated in front of him, and a door-like black hole appeared beneath him, spinning with a faint silvery-blue glow inside.

Bai Six gazed at Bai Liu with her silvery-blue eyes, smiling, and continued.

"The pain born from a person's soul binds them, trapping them in place, unable to move forward. It's like a silk thread, manipulating them, until they become a puppet of their own pain."

A transparent thread of silk flew from the depths of the universe and wrapped around Bai Liu's wrist, lifting his frail arm like a puppet on a string.

"Tawil is a true monster. You, however, are a monster with a soul. You were never the same kind from the start."

Bai Six whispered softly.

"And you are surrounded by humans—good and bad—who have been loved, and who have loved in return. They've gained souls because of

the pain others have caused, and they have human beings who truly hold them."

"They don't come from the same place as you. Even if they wander to you now, they won't end up in the same place as you. They all have their own place to return to, and people who will welcome them back."

"You're just a god who took them in for a brief moment."

Bai Six looked across the watery wall at fourteen-year-old Bai Liu. "When they leave, you'll still be alone."

"No one will stop for you."

"No one ever expected you to be born. No one ever expected you to grow. No one ever expected you to become a good person. And you, a derivative of an evil god, struggled to control your desires, to satisfy their conditions, and turn yourself into an ordinary good person. In doing so, you tried to make yourself one of their kind and earn their fleeting affection."

"- It's like the fourteen-year-old you turned yourself into a monster in order to be a match for the monster-like Tawil."

"After all these years, all this effort, you still haven't found your kind, Bai Liu."

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu's spirit level continues to drop and will soon fall below 20!]

Two silk threads flew out, wrapping around Bai Liu's left wrist and neck. Slowly, he raised his head as the threads tugged him upward.

"In this world, I am the only one who has been watching you, who has been expecting you, since the very beginning of your existence," Bai Six said.

Bai Six removed his right glove, looked down, and gently cupped the side of Bai Liu's face with his hand. His voice was soft, almost tender.

"I understand what you're thinking, what you have to do. I will present the most fascinating game in the world to you," he continued. "The birth of your soul surprised me. It made me abandon that old creation. Your growth, your self-restraint, made me realize that I was witnessing something invaluable."

"You opened my eyes to the possibility of a human being, with a soul, becoming a god—guarding the gate in endless pain and loneliness."

Bai Liu's warm palm grazed the side of his face, his thumb brushing beneath Bai Liu's eyes. His face held a compassionate smile.

"I know that if it were you—even surrounded by abysses, darkness, hatred, lust, and all manner of negative emotions—you would still manage to hold onto your sanity. You would keep your soul in some kind of love, one that comes from nowhere, to maintain your human form and guard the door for eternity in the vast, infinite universe."

"Just like guarding those you thought were your kind, even though they weren't."

"Of all the world lines you can perceive, the one who truly understands your thoughts, the one who expects you to live forever, the closest thing to your kind of existence, is actually me—the one you hate."

Bai Six crouched in front of Bai Liu, his silvery-blue eyes shifting to a deep blue as he gazed at the fourteen-year-old sitting in the chair. He gently stroked Bai Liu's soft hair, like a wise, affectionate elder.

"Out of 658 world lines, you are the one I have harbored the most malice for. So many people hate you. Yet, all I can do is watch you struggle against the malice others have given you."

"I'm sorry," Bai Six whispered.

Suddenly, he leaned forward and embraced little Bai Liu, burying his face in Bai Liu's thin shoulders. He held the fragile shoulder blades tightly, his voice sincere.

"I'm sorry."

"In all 658 world lines, you exceeded my expectations. Yes, I caused harm, and hurt many people—but only you. It was never my intention to toy with you in this game."

"You are not just a game NPC, nor are you a creature born of my creation."

"You are just like me—without a kind, but with a soul."

Bai Six gently patted the motionless little Bai Liu on the back, as

though soothing a child.

"I've been thinking for a long time—back when I saw you dive into the church, throwing yourself into Xie Ta's arms, soaked in blood and water—"

"What if, at that moment, instead of twisting yourself into Xie Ta's embrace, someone had come along and offered you a hug?"

"What if I had come to you, as one of your kind, and embraced you?"

"But I can't touch you. I want to, though." Bai Six's tone softened, becoming lighter. "He's already human, with a soul. He loves others. And one day, he'll wait for the one who comes to offer him an embrace."

"So, I watch quietly by your side, waiting with you, waiting for that person to appear."

"In these ten years, you've had people fighting alongside you, people who believed in you, people who stopped you from going astray, people responsible for you, surrounding you with many, many people —"

"But still, no one has come to offer you a hug."

"You've become an omnipotent god, a monster without evil in the eyes of others—but no one sees you as human."

"Only I know," Bai Six whispered. "Only I know that you're a human, with a soul, a good soul that has always loved others."

"You're waiting for a hug."

"I thought humans were like mirrors, reflecting emotions. I thought you, who gave love, would have waited for your own hug long ago. But, to my surprise, you took in so many people, and in the end, it was me who gave you that hug."

Bai Liu's eyes were wide open, emotionless, as he stared behind the watery wall at the cold statue of Tawil. The eyes of the statue reflected the fourteen-year-old Bai Liu, huddled in the chair, held by Bai Six's shoulders.

Bai Liu opened his mouth, whispering [Xie Ta] softly, as if speaking into a muzzle.

Tawil’s silver-blue eyes met his, but he didn’t respond.

Then, a single tear slowly fell from Bai Liu’s eye, as if in response. Bai Six's voice came, soft and resigned.

"Be my heir, my child."

"This is where you will end up."

[System Warning: Player Bai Liu’s spirit value will soon reach zero! Warning! WARNING!!!]

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

"Xie Ta."

An indistinct voice floated through the air. Spades, standing in the boat, instantly turned around, his lips pressed tight as he scanned the crowd, searching for Bai Liu among them.

The bustling crowd, dressed in costumes and chatting animatedly as they headed toward the festival, did not include Bai Liu.

Yet, that had definitely been Bai Liu's voice.

Spades pushed against the crowd, his eyes darting between the people, while he casually tapped his system panel, dropping an item to check if there were any other players nearby.

[System Alert: No other player's movement track detected nearby.]

[System Warning: You are currently in the middle of a league, player Spades. You have not moved within the map for three hours. A yellow card warning will be issued for negative play. Please engage actively by exploring the map, contacting NPCs, and completing the main quest as soon as possible!]

Immediately after, the main quest panel appeared in front of Spades, its bold red text practically jumping up to his eyelashes, almost as if it feared he wouldn't see it.

Spades clicked his tongue in annoyance, flicking his fingers and dismissing the system panel with a glance, uninterested.

[System Alert: Player Spades' status is set as (Servant) to this year's greatest sacrifice of the evil gods.]

[Main Quest: Find the largest sacrifice and offer it to the other side to make a wish to the evil god.]

The sacrifice you're seeking is the one who has been tortured the longest since the festival's inception, having accumulated the most pain.

Reluctantly, Spades skimmed through the main quest again, forced to read it by the system, and then quickly retrieved his panel, resuming his search for Bai Liu in the crowd.

A few young girls in summer kimonos whispered as they passed Spades.

"I heard that this year, the Gifune family is going to sacrifice that one?"

"No way, right? How could they sacrifice him after all these years of hiding him away?"

"I heard the Gifune family was instructed in their dreams that this one won't be needed for the Evil God Festival anymore, and that the Evil God-sama will choose a new successor."

Spades, a violent player who never bothered gathering information, walked past the gossiping NPCs without a second glance, not paying attention to their words.

A moment later, a group of men in bathing suits walked by, laughing among themselves.

"Last year, my family caught a sacrifice at the Funeral Palace Night Festival, made a successful wish at the Sea Shrine, and had a pretty good year. This year we caught another one, so it looks like next year should be just as good."

"No matter how well they do, they'll never compare to the Gifune family," one man said, rubbing his chin with a sigh. "Ever since the fire five years ago, when the Bei Yuan family was burned to the ground and their biggest sacrifice fell into the hands of the Gifune family, I knew Luming County would be ruled by the Gifune family for the next twenty years."

"Eh, didn't they say the Gifune family is sacrificing their biggest offering this year?" another man chimed in, poking his head up curiously. "Is that true? Isn't it said that this sacrifice is particularly evil? Wasn't that the reason the Bei Yuan family was destroyed?"

"After the fire, people died, went mad, leaving only a few demented survivors to guard those inferior sacrifices that couldn't be used initially."

"Hush," the first man said, his tone serious as he looked around, lowering his voice. "If you don't want to be punished, stop talking about that incident from five or six years ago."

"Five years ago, half the village could've been wiped out as offerings.

A large number of people committed suicide by jumping into the sea, and everyone was terrified of the shrine," he warned, his voice tense. "Why do you think the shrine was moved to the sea? People were too afraid to stay on the same land as it anymore."

The men fell silent, casting their gazes downward as they passed Spades, walking in quiet unease.

But Spades, still uninterested, didn't pay them any mind, continuing to search the crowd.

The system, almost apologetic, popped up a reminder.

[Please pay attention to the key quest information provided by nearby NPCs! You've missed two important quest messages!]

Spades paused and muttered, "Why should I care what they say?"

The system responded: [Some key game information will be provided through NPC conversations. Please be aware of the information around you.]

"Is that so?" Spades replied, his face expressionless. "I thought the game designer wanted me to follow the path they laid out for me, which is why they keep sending me these messages?"

"I don't like playing games that way."

Spades drew his whip, his black eyes reflecting the large, gilded ships docked in the harbor. His tone was cold: "Playing this game like this... what's the difference between me and these scripted NPCs?"

"It's not even my game, it's his game."

The system panel popped up briefly before vanishing from Spades' face. He gripped the whip with an emotionless expression and walked straight toward the large ship docked in the harbor.

He made his way to the harbor—the very spot where he had heard Bai Liu's voice earlier. With a sweeping glance, he surveyed the area.

On the side of the harbor stood a massive wooden platform with raised corners and a gable structure, complete with a wooden stage for ritual dances. Thick, knotted ropes hung from the wooden frame, adorned with white paper at regular intervals to ward off evil spirits.

Under the high platform, a wooden sign painted in red read: [The

place where the dance of the divine priest is performed].

Across from the high platform, a large gilded ship was docked. It wasn't just a ship, but a stage for a theatrical performance shaped like one.

The stage had three tiers, each lined with numerous light bulbs on the sides and overhead, glowing brightly like daylight even at night. The center stage was bathed in light.

Crimson velvet curtains hung from loops on either side, with a polished wooden floor in the middle. Two actors dressed in hari-kari costumes sat on wooden stools facing each other, separated by a piece of watery glass. A male actor in a shimmering quicksand-colored coat stood beside them.

A small sign in front of the stage read: "The Evil Gods Festival Play - Act 1."

The audience's chairs were neatly arranged in front of the stage, though not all of them were filled. New people continually arrived from the distance, taking their seats.

A newcomer turned to an older audience member and asked, "What's the play about?"

The veteran leaned in and whispered, "This play is a traditional part of our annual Luming County festival. It tells the story of the emergence, development, and changes of the festival. We're only in the first act."

Curious, the newcomer asked, "What's this first act about?"

The old audience member pointed at the actors on stage. "This act introduces the process of the evil gods choosing their heirs to come to Earth and preside over the festival. The two sitting on either side of the watery wall are the heirs chosen by the evil gods, and the one beside them in the bright-colored sarong is our evil god lord."

Suddenly, the two actors sitting on stools leapt to their feet and began exchanging insults, sparring across the watery wall:

"I am the one most favored by the Lord of Evil! I am the most exceptional heir!"

"I am the one who is the logical successor to the evil god!"

The old audience member chuckled and shook his head. "The Lord of Evil created all living things and chose his heirs from among them. In the end, two heirs met the requirements—"

The "evil god" on stage nodded with his hands behind his back, watching the two heirs compete for the top spot. "You are both excellent, but there can be only one successor to me."

"I will erase all your memories and cast you into every world line I've created. You will each be given a new identity: [sacrifice] and [squire]."

"The [sacrifice] will be aided by me during their training, while the [squire] will be hindered by me in countless ways." The evil god paced around the two heirs. "But this status is not fixed. At any moment, the one who suffers more will become the [sacrifice], and the one who suffers less will become the [squire]."

"At the end of all the world line adventures, the [sacrifice] will become the next evil god, after sacrificing pain and soul to me."

"And the [squire] will lose everything: friends, loved ones, lovers, and their soul."

The older audience members nodded in agreement. "Yes, that's right. That's where the Luming County [sacrifice] [squire] system comes from."

The heir sitting across from the watery wall suddenly spoke softly, "Xie Ta."

—It was Bai Liu's voice!

Spades, still searching for the stage, snapped his gaze upward. Without hesitation, he jumped, gripping the edge of the stage.

As he leaped, the curtain fell behind him, plunging the stage into darkness. The sounds of the audience outside faded, and the footsteps of the three actors on stage overlapped, gradually converging into a single figure moving toward Spades.

The stage lights, previously blindingly bright, suddenly shimmered around him like swirling stars, reflecting in Spades' emotionless eyes as the approaching figure came into focus.

Bai Six curled his lips into a smile. "Long time no see, Spades."

Spades stared at him in silence.

Bai Six's gaze dropped to the black bone whip in Spades' hand, and his smile deepened. "The whip I gave you... is it working?"

[System Alert: Player Spades triggers a plot point and enters "The Festival of the Evil Gods - Act II Play."]

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

"It seems you don't want to discuss the whip with me." Noticing Spades' retreat, Bai Six smoothly changed the subject, offering a smile. "Would you like to talk about Bai Liu instead?"

Spades' steps faltered, and he turned to face Bai Six.

"Perhaps we could sit down and talk?" Bai Six gestured with a smile. As he did, a stool slid from the shadows of the stage, stopping right in front of Spades' knee. Bai Six made a polite invitation with a nod.

Spades stared at him for a moment before slowly sitting down.

"The last time you saw me was when you won the championship, wasn't it?" Bai Six spoke casually, walking behind Spades, his hands resting on the back of the chair. "You told your whole team not to make a wish on me, to leave it with me."

"An interesting approach," Bai Six added with a slight smile.

He leaned down, looking at Spades with an amused expression. "But this is the second time we've met. Do you remember the first time?"

Spades was silent for a moment before responding, "Siren Small Town."

"Yes, I was the first person you met after you emerged from Siren, and I gave you my bone whip." Bai Six's eyes softened with a touch of compassion as his hand brushed the top of Spades' head. "Do you know why?"

Spades remained silent.

Bai Six smiled again, his voice soft. "Because you were the vessel of creation I once held most dear."

"Do you know what you were born for?" Bai Six's tone shifted slightly as he leaned closer to Spades, raising his hand. A wall of water materialized in front of Spades, rippling and expanding into a circle, revealing an entirely new scene.

Behind the watery barrier, a scene unfolded. A fourteen-year-old Bai Liu sat alone in a solitary confinement cell at the Home, curled up in the dark. He shivered, either from the cold or something more, his

eyelids fluttering and his body curled tightly as if he were a frightened animal. His lips moved faintly, whispering something in his sleep.

"[Xie Ta]."

The name escaped his lips in a soft murmur.

Spades' eyes flickered as Bai Six explained quietly, "This is fourteen-year-old Bai Liu."

The image on the watery wall shifted, showing a bandaged figure, followed by a tall, thin, ghostly doll that clumsily raised its arms, shaking them in an odd, humorous gesture.

"Are you sure you won't consider playing with dolls when you grow up?" A youthful, teasing voice echoed, and the scene changed to reveal a smiling, fourteen-year-old Bai Liu. His gaze was focused on Xie Ta, a playful grin on his face. "I think you have a real talent for it."

The doll, seemingly unaware of Bai Liu's mockery, responded earnestly, "Really?"

"And how much money can you make playing with dolls? Will it be enough to support us both?"

Bai Liu paused, his expression turning indifferent as he glanced away. "I don't need you to feed me, and you can't afford it."

"Just mind your own business."

Though Bai Liu seemed to dismiss the suggestion, Spades noticed the faintest smile at the corner of his mouth as he turned away.

Spades had never seen Bai Liu smile so easily before. It left him speechless, his gaze fixed on the watery wall, the light reflecting off his eyes.

The watery wall flickered like a giant television screen, replaying the memories from the orphanage.

They met, they read together, they were punished together, chased together, hated together.

--Together in the darkness, resting peacefully in each other's arms.

But then Xie Ta died.

So Bai Liu read alone. He was punished alone, chased alone, beaten alone, hated alone.

--A man curled in the dark, lost in uneasy slumber.

And as all this unfolded, Xie Ta—whom Bai Liu thought was dead—was not. Spades saw Xie Ta's translucent spirit hovering in the watery wall, desperately circling Bai Liu and pleading with him.

"Go away, don't stay here."

"Don't feed me, you'll die if you eat too little!"

Bai Liu couldn't see or hear Xie Ta's desperate pleas. He continued walking, numb, following the same path he had when Xie Ta was still alive.

Bai Liu grew thinner, his lips turning pale, then white and blue. His body shrank, growing visibly frail.

Spades' brow furrowed deeply.

On one occasion, when Bai Liu had collapsed from the cold and lay unnoticed by the pond all night, Xie Ta's spirit descended, wrapping his ethereal form around Bai Liu's unconscious body, just as they had done when they fell asleep together.

Xie Ta closed his eyes, speaking quietly, "God."

"If you exist now and are watching this, I ask you to appear."

"I wish to make a wish to you."

The wind swirled around Xie Ta, lifting his soul as an old, carved door flickered into view. Beyond it lay endless spheres of silvery-blue light, and from within, a hand emerged, grasping the door handle and pushing it outward.

The spheres shattered into points of light, and Bai Six stepped through the fragments, standing before Xie Ta. He looked down at the kneeling spirit with a compassionate smile. "Tawil, what is it that you wish from me?"

Xie Ta knelt before Bai Liu's unconscious body, tilting his head slightly before speaking in a soft voice.

"God," he began, "I want to give this man all the happiness that any

ordinary person in this world can have."

"I want him to have companionship in his loneliest times, for his suffering to disappear, and everything he has lost to be restored."

"I want him to always have someone to play his favorite horror games with."

Xie Ta lifted his head, his silver-blue eyes shimmering faintly. "I believe that he and the one he loves will never be separated."

"They will meet in a human way, be together in a human way, and eventually, end beautifully in a human death."

Bai Six smirked. "What a greedy creation. These wishes are far more than one. What would you offer in exchange?"

Xie Ta fell silent for a long while before responding in a soft tone. "I would give my soul for that."

"I have a soul now, and I will become the next evil god, as you wish, guarding the gate forever."

He lifted his gaze toward the swirling silvery-blue spheres behind Bai Six. "I will never leave this door as long as I know there is a world where he can live happily ever after."

"Never leaving the abyss, full of desire and pain."

"Are you sure?" Bai Six smiled. "No matter how many times you see him happy with someone else in the future, there will be no turning back for you."

Xie Ta grasped Bai Liu's cold hand, unwavering. "I'm sure."

"Then it's a deal." Bai Six extended his hand, and in an instant, the shimmering, glowing silver-blue swirls behind the door surged forward, curling around Bai Six's outstretched right index finger like waves. They nodded at Xie Ta's brow.

A silver-blue vortex shot into Xie Ta's forehead, sending his entire body reeling backward, his eyes glazing over.

Bai Six's ethereal, smiling voice echoed in Xie Ta's ears.

"I grant you the ability to change the world line. You may bring those you believe can alter Bai Liu's fate into this place, allowing him to

have friends and loved ones in any way you choose."

"But Bai Liu is still too young to understand love. When the time comes, I will bring him the one he loves, just as you wished."

"But," Bai Six added with a slight smile, "now you have a soul, yet it doesn't bring you pain."

"In order for you to successfully become an evil god in this world line, Tawil, I will need to give you other painful experiences." His gaze drifted to the small, frowning form of Bai Liu behind Xie Ta, and his smile deepened. "If you can't provide me with the pain I require, I may choose another, more miserable child to be my heir."

"If you don't want that, try harder to become more miserable."

A silvery-blue whirlwind passed by, and Bai Liu stirred, coughing as he woke. He looked around at the empty pond, glancing at his right hand in confusion.

For a moment, it felt as though Xie Ta was still alive, holding his hand so tightly, unwilling to let go.

Spades, gazing at the watery wall, seemed to sense something. His face, once vivid, now reflected emotional resistance as he turned his head away. "I don't want to look."

The watery wall followed his gaze, shifting to face him no matter how hard Spades resisted, getting closer.

Spades closed his eyes, gripping his whip tightly.

Bai Six chuckled softly and snapped his fingers. "If you don't want to see, I can explain what happens next."

"Because Tawil made a wish at the cost of his soul, Bai Liu gained a friend and a loved one of his own. He became one of the ordinary people, living a simple life."

"In contrast, Tawil was exiled by me, to be slaughtered and tortured by the other players in the game."

"But even then, he did not suffer, not truly. His suffering only came because of Bai Liu. So I had Bai Liu enter the game, a year before he met Tawil, in order to grant Tawil's wish—that they would meet and fall in love in a human way."

Spades interrupted, his voice cold. "I can't hear you."

Bai Six smiled impassively and continued, "I separated Tawil's spirit from his body in Siren Small Town, trapping the spirit in the game for seven days of reincarnation, while his body was released to live normally with Bai Liu."

"His body is you, Spades."

"You were born from Tawil and Bai Liu's obsessive love, but in truth, I created you for one reason only."

Bai Six laughed. "And that's what makes Bai Liu and Tawil miserable."

"Your very existence means the demise of the soul Bai Liu truly loved —Tawil."

"The first time you met Bai Liu, you ripped Tawil's remaining heart from his body and crushed it. The second time you met him, you forced him to accept the evil god's heirship I gave him, because that was the only way to save Xie Ta."

Spades' eyes snapped open, and with a sudden motion, he lashed his black whip across the room. Bai Six dodged, and a multitude of watery wall screens surrounded Spades, all showing scenes of him hurting Bai Liu.

Bai Liu lay pale in his hospital bed as Du Sanying wept beside him. "How did his heart get cut open?" he cried, turning to the doctor.

Bai Liu, his eyes filled with a watery sheen, whispered softly, "I miss you so much, Xie Ta," just before he was swallowed by the pond at "The Edge of the Dense Forest."

Bai Six's voice echoed from behind the myriad watery screens with a smile.

"Your very existence means constant harm to Bai Liu, constant pain for him."

"You've done your duty well, but what surprises me even more—"

Bai Six laughed softly, suddenly breaking through the walls of water. He pinned Spades to a chair, his eyes gleaming as he looked down at the figure prepared to fight back.

"You've managed to produce your own soul under Bai Liu's loving

gaze."

"Though that love isn't for you—it's merely for Tawil, through you."

As Spades raised his hand to swing the whip, an excruciating, burning pain erupted from his back, forcing him to drop his weapon.

The wound felt all too familiar—an agony that had tormented him before. Yet this time, the pain was different.

It wasn’t a sharp, stabbing pain like being sliced by a blade. This pain seemed to burn from deep within, causing his heart to sour, his limbs to slow, and his eyes to blur with water.

It wasn’t unbearable, but it made him feel... helpless. As if no matter what he did, he couldn’t win.

But what exactly was it that he couldn’t win? It wasn’t the game...

Spades, confused, barely noticed a transparent thread flying toward him. It wrapped itself around his right wrist.

Bai Six chuckled. "You now possess a soul, and with it, pain. In a way, you qualify to be my heir."

"But tell me—who do you think Bai Liu will choose as his lover? And who will he abandon, to become the lone heir to the evil god?"

Spades finally looked up, a drop of water unconsciously falling from his eye. It landed in the watery screen, where the past of Bai Liu and Xie Ta was projected.

Oh, so this was it.

The thing he had just realized he couldn’t win.

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

The tears melted on Xie Ta's face within the watery wall, expanding in layers until they formed a bright, mirror-like surface on one side. In it, Spades reflected Tawil, who was also shedding a tear.

This mirrored hydrographic wall separated Spades from Tawil, much like the glass on a stage where two actors gaze at each other. However, this was a one-way mirror: Spades could not see Tawil behind the glass, but Tawil could see Spades.

On one side of the mirrored wall, Bai Six stood to the left of Spades, while on the other side, he stood to the right of Tawil. Bai Six spoke, his smile evident in his voice.

"What is it like to see your own vessel in tears, Tawil?"

Bai Six's smile softened as he whispered in Tawil's ear, "Haven't you already accepted all of this? So why are your tears falling now?"

"What are you suffering for, my child?"

"You are in pain, and your vessel will meet Bai Liu."

Suddenly, Tawil's left hand expanded into a wall of water, revealing Bai Liu reaching for Spades' hand as he stepped into the game pool.

Bai Six whispered, "Read the same."

To Tawil's right, another watery wall opened, displaying two men in the Dense Woodland Frontier, reading a mechanical manual.

"Closer."

In this watery wall, Spades wrapped his arms and legs around the struggling Bai Liu, hiding under the bed, their breaths intertwined.

"Kisses."

Another watery wall appeared. Spades looked down at Bai Liu, whose eyes were closed, and slowly leaned down to kiss him.

Tawil's fingers curled around the handle of the chair, his breathing quickening as he closed his eyes.

"I don't want to see it." He turned away, refusing to watch.

"Why don't you want to see it, my boy?" Bai Six bent down, looking over Tawil's shoulder at the image in the watery wall in front of him. "Are you jealous?"

"Jealous of that vessel you are as a human being, about to have the Bai Liu you dreamed of. Jealous that this vessel is like you were at the beginning—transformed from a lonely, cold creation into a monster with a soul because you were loved by Bai Liu."

"Jealous that Spades will see, embrace, and kiss the happy Bai Liu that you sacrificed your soul to wish for?"

"Yes." Tawil remained quiet for a long time before slowly opening his eyes to gaze at the image in the watery wall. "I was jealous of him... of my vessel."

"I suffer from jealousy and the inability to have."

Countless transparent threads fell onto Tawil's body like snow from the depths of the stars, enveloping him in a cocoon called [Pain]. His face became obscured, and only his voice, light and calm, could be heard emerging from the threads.

"But I know it wasn’t his fault. He didn’t choose what he was born for; it was all just a game of yours."

"The relationship between me, Bai Liu, and Spades is one of God, sacrifice, and servant."

"One of the three of us must be a god, one a sacrifice who suffers because of the gods, and one a squire who guards the sacrifice."

The threads continued to fall around Tawil, their sound growing fainter with each passing moment.

"No matter who becomes the god, who is the sacrifice, or who is the servant, everyone suffers."

"So you made a wish to prevent Bai Liu from becoming a god, choosing instead to make the most painful wish for yourself." Bai Six raised an amused eyebrow. "Did you intentionally allow Spades to be born?"

Tawil was silent for a long time before he finally spoke.

"Yes."

His gaze passed through the densely woven silk threads, settling on Bai Liu's image on the watery wall screen. Spades, with a cool expression, pushed forward, his pupils glimmering with dappled light, and his tone soft.

"I can't think of a second way to make Bai Liu happy while making myself miserable at the same time."

"What a great sacrifice," Bai Six remarked with a smile. "This plan you and Lu Yizhan worked on would have been flawless. As you intended, you would have become my heir, an evil god, guarding the door from the heretics on the other side to restore the world line to normal."

"Bai Liu's memory would have been sealed by Lu Yizhan. He would have grown up under his care, becoming an ordinary person in this mundane world. Then, he would have met your stripped vessel, Spades, in a light-hearted love story."

"Lu Yizhan won the game, others won world peace, and Bai Liu won family, friends, and lovers."

"Only you, my poor boy," Bai Six continued, placing his hand on Tawil's silken shoulder as if in pity. "You've lost everything you had, a lonely, miserable soul watching a world where everyone else is happy from the door."

"It's amazing this is the best ending you could conjure."

"But here's what you didn't anticipate." Bai Six raised his hand in front of the watery wall facing Tawil, snapping his fingers as he smiled. "There was someone who didn't follow the trajectory you and Lu Yizhan predicted."

The image on the watery wall paused, then rewound rapidly, the scenes blending into a fragmented patchwork, finally stopping at the image of young Bai Liu, fourteen years old, lying languidly by a pond.

At that moment, Lu Yizhan had just used his skill to forcibly erase all memories of Xie Ta from young Bai Liu.

Lu Yizhan asked Bai Liu if he wanted to change his name and escape, but the young Bai Liu, who should have forgotten everything, turned toward the pond and spoke in a hoarse voice.

"I don't accept too many name changes."

"Why?" Lu Yizhan asked.

Bai Liu, his eyes listless and distant, responded, "...I don't know. I always had the feeling that maybe someone... would come to me under my original name."

"I don't want him to be unable to find me."

Tawil's pupils, hidden in the threads, snapped shut.

"Surprised, aren't you?" Bai Six smiled. "I'm surprised too. I thought Bai Liu had completely forgotten you. The memory-wiping skill I gave to Lu Yizhan is a god-level, world-line skill, which means even a god can't fully erase Bai Liu's memories of you."

"He doesn't know who you are, doesn't remember your connection, but he instinctively does everything he can to keep you."

The scene on the watery wall shifted to Lu Yizhan escaping the orphanage with young Bai Liu.

Just as they were about to leave, Bai Liu suddenly turned back, running inside: "Wait, I need to get something."

"What is it?" Lu Yizhan asked desperately. "They're coming after us!"

Bai Liu didn't pause. "Something very important."

Lu Yizhan was stunned when Bai Liu returned, panting, holding something in his arms—bloodstained bandages and a storybook, torn and glued back together.

The image in the watery wall shifted again, showing a slightly older Bai Liu, around 17 or 18, in a school uniform, standing on the street, staring at a doll waving at him from outside a shopping mall with a big sale.

Bai Liu approached the doll, meeting its eyes. "Hello."

The doll froze, then removed its hood to reveal a confused man inside. "You... hello? What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to ask," Bai Liu said calmly, "How much does it cost to do this for about a month?"

The man in the doll suit scratched his head helplessly. "Look at the dress. You're still a high school student, right? It's not even a holiday.

You might as well study hard before worrying about making money."

"It's tiring doing this. Look at me—hanging around here all day for just sixty bucks, all covered in sweat."

"I'm not afraid of being tired." Bai Liu nodded, "Sixty a day? Thanks."

As he turned to leave, the man in the doll suit called out, somewhat irritated, "Hey! Are you in some kind of trouble? Do you have any adults to take care of you?"

Bai Liu's back stopped, but he didn't turn around. His voice remained calm. "I don't know."

"But I feel as though I have someone else to feed."

The man didn't hear the first part clearly, only the second half, and he bitterly advised again, "Then don't bother with the doll suit. It's not much money."

"I don't want it. He does." Bai Liu's tone was cold. "But he's not very good at it, so I'll do it instead."

"How much money can I make playing a doll? Will it support us both?"

"[I don't need you to feed me, and you can't afford it. Just mind your own business.]"

Bai Six curled the corners of his mouth.

"Bai Liu clearly doesn't remember you, but since you disappeared, he's never stopped searching for you in this world line where your existence has been erased."

"Although he never found you, he never doubted your existence."

Bai Six reached out, brushing the watery wall. The image shifted once again, and he spoke with a low, amused smile.

"Even when he questioned his own sanity, he never doubted you."

In the watery wall, an image of Bai Liu appeared—now an adult, likely in his twenties. He sat in a poorly equipped community counseling room, staring levelly at the psychiatrist across from him. He calmly described his condition.

"...I always feel like I met someone who was very important to me when I was about fourteen, someone around this tall, supposedly good-looking—though I can't really remember. They had silvery-blue eyes that seemed to drive people crazy. But I've checked countless times and never found any information about this person."

The psychiatrist, flipping through Bai Liu's case notes, paused.

"Mr. Bai Liu, some children who experience extreme loneliness in their youth tend to imagine a friend of their own—sometimes these friends take on surreal qualities, like fairy tale monsters."

"But these fantasies usually don't last into adulthood, do they?" Bai Liu asked, his tone cool. "I might be a psychopath, but there's no way this person is just a figment of my imagination."

"Because...?" The psychiatrist prompted.

Bai Liu suddenly fell silent.

The psychologist looked up, waiting for an answer. "Because of what?"

Bai Liu lifted his gaze. "Because I can tell he's not some imaginary friend, or some monster."

"He's someone very important to me."

Bai Six smiled and whispered into the silk-covered ear of Tawil.

"Bai Liu is still in love with you."

"He loves the soul you abandoned and sacrificed."

A tear slowly fell from Tawil's eye, and the watery wall before him cracked like shattered mirrors. Countless threads from his body flew outward, cascading like falling snow in the playback.

"Don't," Tawil whispered through his tears, reaching out for the silk threads that slipped away from him. "Don't say that."

"Don't let me know he's still in love with me."

Tawil's voice was hoarse as he stared at Bai Liu through the fractured image in the watery wall, tears streaming down his face.

"Because if I know... I'll never be able to stop suffering. And then, it will be his turn to suffer."

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

The mirrored water wall reflected Tawil and Spades on either side.

The countless threads of Tawil and Spades soared upward, pulled straight out, and were carried deep into the universe, spreading endlessly, flowing through a distant door.

Behind the door sat a young Bai Liu, aged fourteen, in a chair, with Bai Six embracing him. A silk thread ran directly from beneath Bai Liu's chair, tying around his wrists and ankles.

Bai Liu was wrapped in thick silk threads, and Bai Six gently stroked the strands falling across his shoulders, smiling softly as he spoke.

"The suffering of the sacrifice and the attendant is ultimately offered to God. The more they struggle, the more suffering God receives."

"Only God, then, is the most painful of all creatures."

"Do you agree?" Bai Six's hand passed through the silk threads, brushing them away from Bai Liu's face. He cupped Bai Liu's cheek and said softly, "You wear such a sad expression, but it's perfect."

"There's no better heir than you."

Bai Six gazed down into Bai Liu's pitch-black eyes, which reflected no light, and a smile curled on his lips. "If you were a god, who would you choose as your beloved sacrifice?"

"Is it necessary to choose?" Bai Liu suddenly spoke, his eyes lifting to meet Bai Six's through the silk threads. "The sacrifice before me, the soul that offered me love... hasn't there only ever been one?"

[System warning: Player Bai Liu's spirit level is at zero, and the berserk panel has been activated!]

Bai Liu's right hand grasped the silk thread, pulling it toward him. Bai Six, also tangled in the threads, was dragged a step toward Bai Liu. Together, they both stepped into the void.

"You surely can't be fooled," Bai Six said with a smile as they descended. "You're far too perceptive about the love and pain you receive."

"You are the most perfect mirror I've ever seen."

Bai Six's hand reached out to touch Bai Liu's dark eyes through the overflowing silk threads. He whispered dreamily, "I can see clearly in your eyes what I have."

"What I have..."

Bai Liu's hair floated upward, strands of it and transparent threads brushing past the corners of his eyes. His gaze remained calm as he looked directly at Bai Six, yet his eyes reflected only the universe—nothing more, except for a door with a silvery-blue glow.

"It's just a door without a key."

Bai Six laughed and snapped his fingers. The door appeared beneath them, opening, and he and Bai Liu fell into it, entangled in the silk threads.

"Bai Liu, where did you say the key to this door is?"

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has triggered a plot point to enter "The Evil God Festival - Act 3."]

Flames raged, and screams echoed from within the shrine, now engulfed in fire.

Inside the Shrine.

Bai Liu was instantly transported back to a timeline from five years ago. He locked eyes with Bai Six, his eyes glowing an eerie silvery-blue, before snapping a sharp whip toward Bai Six's face.

The whip tore through the air, smashing directly into the pond beneath the shrine, cracking the bottom and causing water to spill into the cracks, revealing the barren pool floor.

At the center of the pool lay Tawil, blindfolded with silk, soaked through, and huddled at the bottom. He choked weakly, clutching the coin Bai Liu had given him.

Without hesitation, Bai Liu leaped into the pool and dashed toward Tawil.

A black bone whip fell in front of Bai Liu, spinning a bone spike outward. Bai Liu skillfully leaped backward to dodge and blocked the strike with his own whip.

The whips intertwined as Bai Liu and Bai Six moved in perfect synchronization, pulling the handles in opposite directions.

Bai Liu looked up at Bai Six, who smirked back. "Although I'm using a weak shell now, and you've forced yourself to explode to your limits, it's not going to be that easy for you to defeat me."

As soon as the words left his mouth, Bai Liu released the whips and shifted his right hand into a monkey's paw, his gaze sharp and unwavering.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu uses Player Mu Sicheng's Burst Skill (Thief Stalking) - Super Full Speed Stamina Slot Empty Status.]

In an instant, Bai Liu appeared in front of Bai Six, his long fingers flipping, and his sharp monkey claws slashing at Bai Six's neck.

Bai Six raised an eyebrow and swiftly crouched down, letting the pendant fall back onto his neck, while swinging his whip backhandedly to ensnare Bai Liu's wrist. Bone spikes shot outward, attempting to shake him off.

Bai Liu twisted his wrist and pressed forward, his monkey paw aimed directly at Bai Six's throat.

"Nice response," Bai Six said, leaning back and stepping away. He smirked, pointing to the reverse cross pendant at his chest. "When did you realize that this body is using this pendant and not the supposed wish to summon me?"

Bai Liu's eyes remained cold and focused. Without a word, he raised his hand and attacked Bai Six's left hand, targeting the reverse cross pendant.

"Ah, it seems you won't speak," Bai Six said thoughtfully, a smile playing on his lips. "Then I'll have to guess."

"You figured out that the wishing level here doesn't even reach divine status, and you once used the reverse cross to summon Tawil in reality, didn't you?"

"But unfortunately..." Bai Six's gaze scattered as he raised his hand, intercepting Bai Liu's strike. He smiled, "This pendant no longer serves its purpose, because Spades has completely destroyed Tawil."

Bai Liu's chest rose and fell with a slight shudder, his wrist, now held

by Bai Six, bloodied from the bone spikes that had pierced it, the blood dripping steadily down.

Bai Six laughed. "With your current strength, you're not lucky enough to take the Reverse Cross from me."

"But alas, it seems your luck is... running out."

"Die, Bai Six!" A harsh female voice shouted from behind him, and a short knife pierced through his chest.

The force of the stab pushed Bai Liu slightly forward, just enough for his outstretched monkey paw to snag the Reverse Cross pendant, which hung before his heart.

Bai Liu yanked the pendant free, but the grin on Bai Six's face only deepened as he backhanded a whip at Beiyuan Xiaokui, who had thrust her sword into his body with all her might. The whip turned into a poker, gleaming coldly as it slashed toward Bai Liu's right wrist, where he clutched the pendant.

Bai Liu's hand dropped with a crash, blood pouring from the wound.

Xiaokui, struck by the whip, was thrown against a pillar. She collapsed to her knees, coughing up a mouthful of blood.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu switches to the system panel of player Liu Jiayi and uses his personal skill (Antidote) on himself.]

Bai Liu tossed an antidote bottle into the air, interrupting the flow of blood, and grabbed at the Reverse Cross pendant slipping from Bai Six’s grasp. The antidote splashed across Bai Liu’s severed hand, and within seconds, his hand regrew, just in time for a whip to smash the bottle.

The force jolted Bai Liu’s hand away from the pendant, but despite the brief disconnection, he reacted quickly. With near-invisible speed, he used his fingers to hook the Reverse Cross back.

As he grasped it, Bai Six paused, a low smile curling his lips. He raised his right hand, opening it slowly.

A coin-shaped pendant fell from his fingers, swinging like a pendulum.

At the bottom of the pool, Tawil, bruised and scarred, coughed as he opened his hand—not holding coins, but the Reverse Cross pendant,

now in his possession.

[System Warning: Player Bai Six's token prop (Reverse Cross Pendant) for summoning the Evil God has disappeared. The Evil God will soon leave the game copy.]

"That's funny," Bai Six muttered, his body paling with each passing second, like a corpse, yet he continued to smile at Bai Liu with amusement. "That's funny."

"In that moment, you seized the opportunity to work with the others and trade the Reverse Cross pendant from me."

"You really placed your hopes on such a risky gamble, helping the other side to help you."

Bai Six glanced over at the limp Xiaokui, still slumped against the pillar. "Just like in the last match."

He smiled, eyes flicking to the bloodied Bai Liu. "I wonder, when did you start believing in this 'good things come in return' nonsense?"

"Are you really going to beat me with your 'good will triumph' mentality?"

A chuckle escaped Bai Six's lips. "A friendly reminder: the last person who thought like you never beat me."

Bai Liu, battered and leaning against the pillar, looked up slowly, his voice hoarse yet firm. "I don't believe in good karma either."

"In my experience, the bad guys often fare better than the good ones."

"You've made me even more curious," Bai Six mused, tilting his head. "Why did you choose to play this game?"

"You clearly don't think that helping others will get you anywhere, but you did it anyway."

Bai Liu's eyes narrowed as he responded coolly. "Because I beat you once before."

"I'm not being nice."

"I simply repeated my last victory over you when I had no other choice."

Bai Six paused, realization dawning on him. "Ah, I see. You helped Yuan Guang defeat me by mistake last time. You hoped it would work again this time, didn't you?"

"That's interesting."

Bai Six gazed at Bai Liu with a soft smile. "You've only gotten negative feedback from me—'good actions lead to bad outcomes,' 'helping others only brings misfortune.'"

"But just once, you helped someone, and now you're starting to see positive feedback."

"Bai Liu," he said with a knowing smile, "you're making me wonder if I might be a good person at heart."

"I'm really looking forward to our next encounter."

[System Alert: Evil God leaves player Bai Six's body.]

Bai Liu collapsed to his knees as Bai Six's body shut its eyes and crumpled to the ground.

He took a shaky breath, his face pale and bloodless, and steadied himself before slowly rising to his feet.

Bai Liu used the antidote to heal himself and staggered toward Tawil in the pool.

Pausing beside him, he bent down and lifted Tawil horizontally. Tawil, blindfolded by silk thread, weakly wrapped his arms around Bai Liu's shoulders, his voice soft and confused. "Bai Liu?"

"You hold on tight." Bai Liu took a deep breath, adjusting his grip. With his other arm, he hoisted the unconscious Xiaokui onto his back. His face remained calm as he spoke, "What Bai Six left us isn't over."

"The Gifune family's waiting outside. I'll get you both out of here before you say anything."

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

The shrine doors burst open as Bai Liu kicked them down, sending a rush of endless flames surging toward him. Ash and heat collided in the air, enveloping him.

He lifted his gaze. His dark eyes reflected the burning orange glow of the fires, the blackened mountains, and the dazzling fireworks exploding across the sky.

From afar, he heard the crowd at the foot of the hill cheering, their voices rising in unison as they began the countdown.

"As the Festival of Evil begins and the fireworks reach their grand finale, let's count down to the happiest time of the year!"

"Ten!"

Brilliant bursts of fireworks erupted one after another, like glittering bouquets unfurling in the night sky—an offering to the gods, heralding the start of a beautiful story.

Bai Liu moved forward, head bowed, carrying Tawil—bruised and broken—in his arms, while Beiyuan Xiaokui, bloodied and barely conscious, hung from his back. His steps were slow, his body weighed down, as if the burden he carried was far too much.

From the shrine, countless threads still bound Tawil, wrapping tightly around his limbs, around Bai Liu's arms, their cruel name: [Pain]. They coiled like vines, constricting, strangling them both. Their mingled blood dripped onto the scorched earth below.

"Nine!"

Bai Liu stumbled, his breath turning ragged, his entire body leaning forward as he fought to walk—away from the shrine, down the hill.

But the threads tethering him and Tawil refused to let them go.

"Bai Liu." Tawil's voice was soft. His face, torn by the silk threads, was eerily calm—he showed no sign of pain. Instead, he reached out, his fingers gently tracing the wounds on Bai Liu's body, as if committing them to memory. His gaze never wavered, intent, like he wanted to remember Bai Liu for eternity.

"Put me down."

"You won’t make it out with me."

"Your hands are shaking."

"Eight!"

"I don’t care." Bai Liu’s eyes locked onto Tawil’s. "You gave yourself to me. That means I have the right to take you with me."

Tawil exhaled softly. Standing on Bai Liu’s shoulders, he hesitated for a moment before leaning down and wrapping his arms around him.

He whispered, "But I love you."

Bai Liu’s pupils contracted.

"Seven!"

Tawil’s eyes fluttered shut. "I finally understand now."

"The feeling you had when you came to see me—it was love, wasn’t it?"

"Six!"

"I wanted to see you. I wanted to escape the shrine and see the person you chose as your prince charming. I wanted to ask why you never stepped inside to see me."

Tawil buried his face against Bai Liu’s shoulder, holding him so tightly that Bai Liu, for once, felt breathless. His voice came out hoarse, barely above a whisper.

"I wanted you to come see me every day, to talk to me, to look me in the eye and tell me your thoughts."

"I wanted you to take me away. I wanted to go with you."

A silk thread tightened.

"I wanted you to be with me forever."

Two silk threads tightened.

"Five!"

Bai Liu's arms instinctively tightened around him. "…You're leaving me again, aren't you?"

"God spoke to me once," Tawil murmured, his voice feather-light, "He told me that I would be his heir when I learned to generate pain worthy of sacrifice."

"He said that only love can make a god suffer."

The threads constraining Tawil suddenly pulled taut.

"Four!"

"The more love a person receives, the more painful their sacrifice to the gods becomes." Tawil, bound in silk threads, lifted his eyes to Bai Liu and smiled—soft, almost joyful. "That pain is what gives gods control over mortals."

"I am already a puppet of the gods."

"The prison that holds me—" Tawil's voice was quiet, but steady, "—was built by my own love and suffering. I cannot leave it."

"Three!"

"Two!"

"ONE!!!"

"The Festival of Evil has officially begun!!!"

Heavy figures surged up the path behind Bai Liu, each clutching a lifeless, sacrificial offering. These were men from the eight great families, those who had come in advance to make their tributes—and now, their voices rose in furious chants.

"What's going on?! Why is the shrine burning?!"

"Where's the body?! The one in the shrine—it's gone!"

"Was it the Bei Yuan family who allowed this, or did one of the defected offerings steal it?!"

Behind them, fireworks burst in the sky, brilliant explosions of color.

"I love you." Tawil closed his eyes and let himself fall, pressing his cold lips against Bai Liu's unresponsive ones as he whispered, "My soul

will only exist for you."

"But you cannot stay here."

"Because here, there is only pain."

[System Prompt: Congratulations to player Bai Liu for obtaining one of the main quest objectives (Evil God Spirit). He is about to depart to the timeline five years later. Please prepare for player Bai Liu.]

Threads of light stretched from Tawil's body, pulling him backward. His eyes remained shut as he embraced Bai Liu one last time, fingers threading through the long hair at the nape of Bai Liu's neck. His lips moved soundlessly, as if trying to speak.

Bai Liu barely had time to register the armed men rushing toward him—knives, guns, clubs raised in rage—before another firework exploded overhead, casting a kaleidoscope of color across his vision. He shut his eyes for just a moment.

And in that moment, Tawil's voice reached his ear in a final whisper.

"Farewell, Rapunzel who came to rescue me."

Bai Liu's eyes snapped open.

He was lying on his side on the cold floor, as if he had collapsed from exhaustion. The shrine's dim training hall stretched around him, shrouded in darkness, save for the pale glow of moonlight filtering through a distant window. His gaze landed on the wall opposite him—on a picture of the Sea Wave Shrine.

The same image that had first led him into this nightmare.

Everything—the fire, the frenzied crowd, Beiyuan Xiaokui bleeding, the corpse of the evil god who had kissed him so tenderly—had vanished like an illusion, a dream unraveled at dawn.

For a long moment, Bai Liu sat in silence. Then, without hesitation, he rose, draped his coat over his shoulders, and strode toward the door.

Two servants knelt just beyond the threshold. Their garments bore the embroidered insignia of the Gifune family.

As soon as Bai Liu stepped forward, they raised their hands, barring his path. Their heads remained bowed.

"Master Bai Liu, you cannot leave."

"Lord Gosho has decreed that unless you complete the sacred dance for tomorrow's ritual, you must not step beyond this shrine."

Bai Liu's gaze flickered between them and the shrine behind him—so different now from the one he remembered. His voice was cool, edged with suspicion.

"Is this the Luming Shrine?"

The maid hesitated, then nodded. "Yes. You've been practicing your dance here in the worship hall. Don't you remember?"

Bai Liu's expression remained impassive. "If this is the shrine," he asked, voice quiet yet sharp, "then where is the evil god who lived here five years ago?"

The servants stiffened. As though he had uttered something unspeakable, they paled, heads lowering further. Pressing their hands together in desperate prayer, they whispered rapidly:

"Evil God, do not blame us, do not blame us… We did not mean to move you from the Luming Shrine to the Sea Shrine after the great fire."

"It was just that… after the catastrophe you unleashed five years ago, half the people in Luming County went mad. They took their own lives in their sleep, driven to despair by the horror you brought upon them."

"Evil God, please, do not blame us…"

Bai Liu's face betrayed nothing. Slowly, his gaze shifted—past the kneeling servants, past the shrine walls—to the distant sea, where the shape of a shrine rocked upon the waves.

A floating temple.

Thunder rumbled overhead. Then, without warning, rain came pouring down.

A girl stumbled into the boathouse, shivering violently, her thin undergarments soaked through. Her lips were bloodless, her skin pallid and bruised. But despite the relentless downpour, she didn't shut the door behind her. She simply knelt, letting the wind and rain

lash against her face, as if welcoming the suffering.

By the entrance, a weathered wooden plaque swung back and forth in the storm. The inscription was nearly worn away, but the name could still be discerned—

[Beiyuan Xiaokui]

"Xiaokui, what the hell are you doing?"

A male voice, sharp with alarm, cut through the rain. A drenched Beiyuan Cangtai rushed inside, closing the door and setting down his overturned paper umbrella. He turned to Xiaokui, his expression hard with reprimand.

"Why didn't you close the door? In this weather?!"

Xiaokui barely blinked. Her voice was detached, hollow.

"Maybe I haven't suffered enough from the training room."

Cangtai flinched. His gaze flickered to his own hands—knuckles raw and bloodied. Clenching them into fists, he said nothing.

Xiaokui's dull eyes sharpened, catching the movement. "You went to the suffering room too?"

"...Yeah." Cangtai forced a wry smile. "Ever since they found out we helped set the shrine on fire five years ago, the Bei Yuan family fell from grace. We don't even have a proper mansion anymore. But even though they can't train us like they used to, they never stopped torturing us."

"Of course not." A sharp grin flickered across Xiaokui's face—both triumphant and bitter. "What happened five years ago scared them shitless."

Cangtai chuckled under his breath, nostalgic. "Yeah. That night, the shrine was burning, Bai Liu was trying to save the evil god, and we ran back to help him."

"I was the one who ran back to help him!" Xiaokui shot back. But her bravado faded quickly. "Not that I was much help. I got knocked out almost immediately."

She exhaled shakily. "But I remember… Bai Liu carried me down the mountain. He was trying to save the evil god, but the shrine's silk

threads pulled him back. He couldn't leave."

"And then the eight families arrived with their sacrifices."

Xiaokui laughed suddenly—wild, unhinged, her arms trembling with mirth. "And then the imperial boat dragged Bai Liu into the shrine to sacrifice him."

"But the evil god—"

Her voice dropped into a whisper, thick with something almost like awe.

"He refused."

"He refused to open his eyes. Refused to sacrifice Bai Liu. He shut his eyes tight and said, 'I will not allow you to do this to him.'"

"And that night—" Xiaokui's grin stretched wide, sharp as a blade. "The evil god threw a tantrum."

Cangtai's breath hitched.

Xiaokui's laughter was feverish. "He unleashed his power, burying half of Luming County with him—all for the sake of Bai Liu."

"He entered their dreams, looked straight into their souls."

"And those beasts—those lustful, disgusting creatures—couldn't withstand it. They went insane. Killed themselves in their sleep, unable to bear the weight of the evil god's gaze."

Her voice softened, distant.

"It was the first time I ever saw an evil god kill someone."

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

Cang Tai smiled faintly, but the smile soon faded. His gaze lingered in awe on the picture of the Wave Shrine hanging on the wall. In a hushed voice, he murmured, "But after that, the people of Luming County began to fear this 'evil body.'"

"They were terrified to place the body of the Evil God—the very entity that had suffered so much for their own selfish wish—back in the shrine on the hill after the fire. It was too close. It frightened them. And yet, they refused to abandon the annual Evil God Festival. So they built a massive shrine in the shape of a ship and moved the entire body of the Evil God, along with the original Luming Shrine, far out to sea, away from Luming County."

Xiaokui let out a sharp, sarcastic laugh. "The same people who once longed to be closer to God now want to be as far away as possible, even if it kills them."

"Yes." Cang Tai lowered his head, staring at his bloodstained knuckles. "Later, to prevent the sacrifices from uniting and rebelling during training, they were separated into individual chambers. That's when the Bitter Chamber was built."

"Every year, during the Evil God Festival, the chosen sacrifice would travel by small boat, escorted by servants from the eight families and the villagers who had once made a wish, to the Sea Shrine—where they would be offered up."

"We board the ship every year," Xiaokui said with an indifferent shrug. "But we always come back because the sacrifice fails. Bai Six, too."

Cang Tai hesitated before whispering in defense, "But our failed sacrifices aren't quite the same as Lord Bai Six's, are they?"

"We couldn't awaken the Evil God because we didn't suffer enough. But Lord Bai Six… he suffered more than any of us."

Cang Tai fell silent for a moment before continuing, his voice barely above a whisper. "I heard from the other retainers that the Gifune family insisted on sacrificing Lord Bai Six year after year. He was the most agonized sacrifice they had ever made. Even when the Gifune servants dragged him by the hair, forcing him against the Evil God's altar, the god stirred… but never opened his eyes."

Xiaokui turned away, her voice muffled. "Because if he opened his eyes, Bai Six might be sacrificed."

She let out a bitter chuckle, almost to herself. "Those two… they're such a yin and yang."

"When Bai Six stood guard outside the shrine door every night, he never spoke a word. And now, it's the Evil God's turn—trapped in the Sea Shrine, only able to see Bai Six once a year, yet unable to open his eyes and look at his only beloved."

"What kind of twisted fairy tale is this…"

Cang Tai, too, fell silent. "The Gifune family claims they placed the Evil God in the Sea Shrine, yet every year, when we go to offer the sacrifice, we see nothing. The shrine is empty."

"They say the only way to meet the Lord of Evil is by awakening him with one's own pain."

Cang Tai frowned, worry flickering across his face. "But you and I have searched the Sea Shrine countless times, even in secret. We've never found him. I wonder where the Gifune family has hidden him."

Xiaokui clenched his fists, hatred flashing in his eyes. "Those bastards. Five years ago, when the Evil God slaughtered, they were about to take their own lives under the influence of his corpse. But then, a true Evil God appeared in their dreams and interrupted them—let them live. And now those mangy dogs are still alive today."

Cang Tai looked out at the storm outside the window. "I wonder if I'll make it through this year's Summer Festival."

The Summer Festival Grounds, Under Heavy Rain
Umbrellas bobbed like scattered petals as festival-goers hurried for cover. Vendors scrambled to pack up their wares, muttering curses at the unexpected downpour. Rain drummed against the makeshift shelters set up along the shore.

"This has never happened before," someone grumbled. "It never rains during the Summer Festival…"

"Even the fireworks display has been delayed."

"The divine service rehearsal is tonight too, right? Are they still dancing in all this rain?"

On a raised platform overlooking the chaos, the head of the Gifune family stood rigidly, his hands clasped behind his back. His face was grim, his expression unchanged from five years ago—eyes filled with shadows. A servant, bowing respectfully at his side, murmured cautiously:

"Lord Gosho, the rain is heavy. Would it be appropriate to postpone or cancel some of the rituals?"

The imperial ship's master narrowed his eyes. "The fireworks display is postponed. Everything else proceeds as scheduled."

The servant hesitated. "But Lord Gosho, the tradition dictates that the eight great family offerings leave for the Sea Shrine by boat tonight. With the wind and waves like this, should that not be reconsidered?"

Gosho let out a thin smile, his jowls shifting. "Ask them. If they wish to cancel, they may. If not, they may sail their own boats. But whether they go or not, the Gifune family will not cancel tonight."

"Prepare the sacrifice, Bai Six, and his squire. Tonight, we sail for the Sea Shrine."

The servant flinched, eyes widening. "Bai Six… again?"

Gosho shot him a sidelong glance. "You have a problem with that?"

"I-I wouldn't dare!" The servant quickly lowered his head. After a long pause, he cautiously asked, "But… Lord Gosho, we've privately sacrificed Bai Six nearly two dozen times without success."

"Isn't that why you chose him as the heir to the Evil God? Why you made him perform the Dance of the Evil God?"

Gosho's expression twisted into something unreadable. "Yes."

"That's exactly why I insist on sacrificing him. He is a sacrifice so agonized that even the Evil God refuses to open his eyes."

The servant looked up, confusion flickering in his gaze. "But… if the Evil God won't open his eyes, then the sacrifice will fail again. What's the point of bringing him to the shrine?"

Gosho's cloudy eyes drifted toward the breaking waves, a chilling

smile spreading across his face. "Last night, I had a dream."

"The real Evil God spoke to me. He told me that tonight, I would finally be able to offer up the most tormented sacrifice in the world… and usher in the birth of a new god."

The Boats on the Waves
Two small boats rocked violently on the churning sea, swallowed by the darkness of the storm. They drifted so far apart that, on this rain-drenched night, one could not see the other.

On each vessel, a boatman stood, shrouded in a straw raincoat and a wide-brimmed hat.

"Lord Bai Six," a servant of the imperial ship's family murmured, bowing deeply. Rain slicked his translucent cloak as he gestured toward the small boat. "Please, step aboard."

Bai Liu, dressed in full ceremonial attire, held a delicate paper umbrella in his left hand. His white robe, crimson hakama, and semi-transparent golden-feathered shawl clung to him, soaked through by the storm. The long strands of his hair trailed over his shoulders, wet against his pale skin. A faint red tint marked his lips, subtly smudged, standing out vividly in the dim rain.

He slowly raised his umbrella, dark eyes peering through the curtain of falling water at the boatman who beckoned him forward. It was as if he already knew where this journey would end.

The servant averted his gaze, unsettled.

No wonder Lord Gosho said… this man is the Evil God's…

Bai Liu's voice was calm, cutting through the rain. "Wasn't I dressed like this to dance for the gods? Where are you taking me?"

The servant swallowed. "Lord Bai Six, due to the heavy rains, the divine festival dance will no longer be performed on the shore. This year, it will be held at the Sea Shrine."

He bowed lower. "Please… step aboard."

Bai Liu exhaled softly, then stepped onto the boat.

As the vessel swayed and the boatman pushed off into the storm, Bai

Liu flicked his fingers.

A system panel materialized before him.

[System Alert: Congratulations, Player Bai Liu, for unlocking the final scene of "Evil God Festival – Boathouse" and triggering the final node of the story.]

Meanwhile, on another ship.

Spades stared at the Gifune family's maid standing before him. His expression remained unreadable as he stated flatly, "I want to go to the Sea Shrine."

The maid, eyes darting to the whip in his hand, shrank back in fear, her voice trembling. "B-But... you're not Lord Bai Liu's squire! Please wait a moment!"

"If you want to go to the Sea Shrine, you can wait for the other squire's boat tomorrow—"

"No waiting." The moment Spades finished speaking, he stepped into the boat, flicked his whip, and sent the shrieking boatman flying onto the shore. Then, he turned back and said, just as indifferently, "They can wait. I'm in a hurry."

With that, Spades raised his whip and cracked it against the water. The sheer force of the strike sent ripples across the sea, and as if propelled by an unseen force, his boat shot forward like an arrow toward the shrine.

The maid and the boatman, left speechless on the shore: "....."

Meanwhile, at the ornamental pool.

Mu Sicheng glared at the big screen, his face darkening like a storm cloud. He shook his leg restlessly, his voice sharp with irritation. "What kind of shit broadcast is this? I've been watching this dumbass the whole time—where the hell is Bai Liu?! Why aren't they showing him?"

"It's already halfway through the game, and all I've seen is Bai Liu practicing some damn dance routine! And when they finally cut back

to him, he's still practicing!"

"I don't buy it!" Mu Sicheng smacked his thigh in frustration. "There's no way Bai Liu would waste time dancing in a competition!"

"Is the system rigged or something? Why is there so little footage of Bai Liu? Are they deliberately cutting him out?"

"Stop swearing. There are kids here." Tang Erda said this, though his own frown deepened as he stared at the screen. His scowl only grew as he watched Spades leap onto the boat. "But... there is something off about this broadcast. Bai Liu only appeared briefly at the start and in a short cutscene midway. The rest of the time, it's been Spades. This isn't how league broadcasts usually work."

Muke shifted uncomfortably. "Could it be that Bai Liu's footage isn't being released?"

"What do you mean?" Mu Sicheng turned to him.

Liu Jiayi, arms crossed, stared at the screen, her voice flat. "Like the Five Buildings incident."

Tang Erda snapped his head toward her. "You're saying—"

Before he could finish, Wang Shun's voice rang out in an excited tone, cutting him off. "Switch to Bai Liu's feed!"

Every head turned toward the big screen.

On the rain-drenched night, Bai Liu stepped off a boat onto the Sea Shrine's stone steps, his heavy hakama lifted in one hand. An umbrella, now uselessly soaked, hung from his other hand as water dripped from his hair and clothes.

In the corner of the screen, Mu Sicheng caught sight of Spades at nearly the same moment—leaping from his boat onto the shrine's wooden platform.

The shrine, shaped like a boat itself, rocked slightly from Spades' landing. Both men, arriving from opposite sides, looked up simultaneously—locking eyes.

Mu Sicheng let out an exasperated yell, balling his fist and punching Tang Erda's leg. "What kind of shitty system is this?! I wait forever for a proper broadcast, and when they finally cut to Bai Liu, they make it

a damn dramatic entrance scene!"

Tang Erda: "....."

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

Wang Shun's voice trembled as he broke into a cold sweat, eyes locked on the big screen. "Is this a straight fight? Bai Liu doesn't have a death exemption, and his panel stats can't compete with Spades!"

"Bai Liu, can you avoid Spades for now?"

Muke shook his head grimly. "He can't. The Sea Shrine map is too small to hide in, and neither Bai Liu nor Spades is the type to avoid the main quest. This is the final stage of the game, and both of their objectives are to sacrifice each other."

"They'll definitely clash head-on."

Wang Shun felt the cold sweat trailing down his back, his voice hoarse with fear. "Doesn't that mean… one of them has to die for the game to end?"

"Shit!" Mu Sicheng shook his leg so violently that his knee bounced up and down, his nerves stretched to the limit—though his mouth remained as brash as ever. "That has to be Spades, not Bai Liu!"

"Bai Liu is steady," Tang Erda agreed calmly. "Let's see how this plays out."

"Wait." Liu Jiayi narrowed her eyes, staring at Spades' main quest panel. "No… Spades' objective isn't to sacrifice Bai Liu. It's to sacrifice [the most painful offering]."

Muke frowned. "But Spades is the squire of the most painful offering. His mission is to sacrifice that offering. We just saw the selection process on the big screen—Bai Liu was the most painful sacrifice in the Luming County boathouse."

"Yes," Liu Jiayi's voice grew cold. "Bai Liu was the most painful sacrifice in the boathouse—but not necessarily [the most painful offering]."

Muke was stunned. "What do you mean?"

"Haven't you noticed the wording?" Liu Jiayi's tone was icy. "There's no qualifier for [the most painful offering]."

"Qualifier?" Bai Yi, watching the game from the assassin's bench,

tapped Liao Ke on the shoulder, confused. "What does that mean, Brother Liao?"

Liao Ke's expression mirrored Liu Jiayi's. "Spades' main quest doesn't specify where the most painful offering comes from. There's no restriction."

"If there's no qualifier," he continued, his voice steady but grim, "then the system will default to—"

"The most painful offering in the entire world at this moment."

In the audience, Hearts leaned against his seat, resting his chin lazily in his palm as he gazed at the big screen. "Not just the one from Luming County."

Phoebe leaned over the railing, blinking curiously as he turned to Hearts. "Wasn't Spades' sacrifice supposed to be Bai Liu?"

"Not necessarily," Georgia, seated beside them, straightened his posture. His voice was precise and articulate as he analyzed the situation. "Right now, the most logical sacrifice for Spades would be Bai Liu—but that doesn't mean it has to be Bai Liu."

"If Spades is meant to find his sacrifice," he continued, "then his best method would be to do so as the squire of the most painful offering himself."

"If it's not Bai Liu…" Armand stared at the screen, his voice trailing off. "Then who does Spades serve?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Across from Armand, Daniel sat in the audience, legs swinging excitedly over the railing divider. He spun a bloodstained clown mask around his right index finger, his apple-green eyes fixated on the top right corner of the screen. A grin stretched across his face. "We're at the final stage. If Spades doesn't find his sacrifice soon, it'll be Bai Liu's win~"

Cen Buming, who had remained silent until now, lifted his gaze to the big screen. "The most painful offering can't be Bai Liu."

"He doesn't feel pain."

Daniel turned his head, grinning, and flicked the clown mask straight at Cen Buming's face. "Then who do you think it is, President?"

Cen Buming calmly removed the mask from his face, his expression unreadable. His eyes darkened, and his lips curled into a slow smile.

"I think it's—"

"Xie Ta."

Daniel leaned in with interest. "Who's Xie Ta?"

Cen Buming paled slightly as he placed the mask back over Daniel's face. He stared through it into the green eyes behind the mask and murmured, "It's normal that you don't recognize him."

"His existence was erased from this world line."

"All you need to know is that he is Bai Liu's [anchor]."

Before the weight of his words could settle, the commentator's hysterical voice shattered the tension.

"BAI LIU MAKES THE FIRST MOVE!"

"He just threw his whip straight at Spades' face!"

In-game, waterfront boathouse.
Cang Tai stood by the door, staring at the heavy downpour outside, his worry deepening. "Why is the rain getting heavier and heavier?"

"What, do you have a problem with that now?" Xiaokui, lying on the floor, rolled her eyes. "Would you rather the Evil Festival go ahead as planned?"

"No." Cang Tai clutched the fabric over his chest, his expression tightening. "But if the festival is canceled, Bai Six wouldn't have to perform the dance tonight. He should have already returned to the boathouse by now—resting."

His voice dropped. "But it's almost midnight, and he still hasn't come back from the shrine..."

"You mean..." Cang Tai's heart pounded as he paled. "Lord Bai Six... wasn't taken by the imperial ship to be sacrificed alone, was he?"

Xiaokui jolted upright. She and Cang Tai locked eyes before quickly dismissing the thought. "Impossible! You're Bai Six's squire—he

couldn’t have been taken to the ritual without you."

"And if Bai Six, the most precious sacrifice in the boathouse, had really been taken, Gosho would’ve followed him to the sea shrine himself to make a wish. But he was just here at the boathouse..."

Xiaokui abruptly pushed the door open. Her pupils dilated as she looked toward the patio at the boathouse’s center.

Just moments ago, Gosho had been standing there under an umbrella, inspecting the remaining offerings. But now, he was gone—only his footprints remained in the middle of the rain-soaked stone.

A servant of the Gifune family hurried down the corridor, and Xiaokui seized him by the collar. "Where is Lord Gosho?" she demanded.

The servant blinked at her in surprise. "Lord Gosho finished inspecting the offerings and went to the port."

The port. The place where boats depart for the shrine at sea.

Gosho was really going to sacrifice Bai Six.

Xiaokui’s face went white.

At the harbor, Gosho stepped into a small boat with the help of a few attendants. He shook off the water from his robes and sat down while a servant held an umbrella over him. Two boatmen gripped their oars, propelling the vessel toward the sea shrine—its silhouette barely shifting on the storm-lashed waves.

The rain poured relentlessly. As the wind howled, the boat rocked violently, but Gosho paid it no mind. He batted away the servant’s umbrella, rain drenching his face as he stared at the shrine in the distance. A dark, twisted smile curled his lips.

Finally. The day the gods had foretold.

He had waited ten years for this moment—to offer up the most painful sacrifice of all. To make this noble offering suffer the most on this night.

"Lord Gosho," the servant shouted over the downpour, wiping rain from his face. "For five years now, every time we've tried to sacrifice Bai Six, the evil god couldn’t be appeased because his eyes wouldn’t

open. What makes you so sure tonight will be different?"

"Did the gods send you a sign?"

For a long moment, Gosho remained silent, gazing out at the turbulent sea. Then, suddenly, he let out a chilling laugh.

"Who said I was sacrificing Bai Six?"

The servant froze. "Didn't you say tonight's offering would be the one who suffers the most?"

"And who told you that the most painful sacrifice in this world is Bai Six?" Gosho's voice was low and feverish. His fists clenched. "Yes, Bai Six is in agony—that's why he was chosen as the heir of the evil god. He is meant to become the next one."

"But the sacrifice I'm offering tonight is someone even more tormented than Bai Six."

"The corpse of the evil god—trapped in this shrine, only allowed to see his beloved once a year, unable to open his eyes or utter a single word to Bai Six—that is the most agonizing existence of all."

Gosho's grin stretched grotesquely. "And tonight, the sacrifice is ready. The gods have sent the one who must oversee it to the shrine."

"Tonight, will be the night of ultimate suffering."

"The corpse of an evil god?!" The servant's hands trembled, nearly dropping the umbrella. "Are you saying... the one we've been worshipping all this time is what you intend to sacrifice?"

"After tonight, he will no longer be a god." Gosho wiped rain from his face, his smile sharp and cruel. "Or rather, he ceased being a god the moment I hid him away five years ago. Now, he is nothing more than an offering—one I will finally see destroyed."

"Hid him away...?" The servant's breath hitched. "But I've never seen the evil god's body in the shrine. And those who failed to complete past sacrifices always said they couldn't find him in the sea shrine... It was you, wasn't it? You hid him, Mikoto-sama!"

Gosho's smile deepened as he turned to the servant.

"Of course no one could find his body in the shrine."

He leaned in, his voice a whisper against the storm.

"Because I never hid him there in the first place."

A thunderclap split the sky, and in the blinding flash that followed, a bone whip lashed through the sea shrine like a lightning strike, shattering wood and sending bells crashing in all directions.

Bai Liu's chest rose and fell twice as he swept his gaze over the empty shrine.

—Tawil isn't here.

The shrine wasn't large. He had practically torn through every inch of it, leaving only one possibility—Gosho had hidden Tawil away.

Behind him, the black bone whip came down hard. Bai Liu twisted sideways to dodge, but the strike swept close—too close. He was forced to face it head-on.

Spades advanced, his pure black eyes locked onto Bai Liu, his tone devoid of emotion.

"This is a match between you and me."

"Who has your attention? Are you trying to lose to me?"

The whip in Spades' hand coiled and twisted with unnatural speed, snapping around Bai Liu's shoulder before he yanked it downward with merciless force.

Bai Liu's arms tore free. Blood gushed out.

A roar erupted from the crowd watching through the big screen as the host shrieked with excitement, "Spades has disarmed Bai Liu!"

Mu Sicheng shot up from his chair, gritting his teeth as he stared at Bai Liu bleeding out on the screen. He couldn't even swear.

"Sit down!"

Tang Erda shoved him back into his seat, his own head bowed, fists clenched so tightly they turned white. He refused to look at the screen, his voice low.

"Trust Bai Liu."

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu uses Player Liu Jiayi's panel to activate the Antidote skill.]

Bai Liu bit down on the antidote bottle, tilting his head to drink in nothing but air. Instantly, his severed arms regenerated. Without missing a beat, he twisted his grip—the whip in his hand shifting into a short knife.

His left hand grabbed Spades' shirt. His right hand slashed for Spades' throat.

Spades dodged.

In the split second that Spades turned his head, Bai Liu changed tactics. His knife shifted back into a whip, coiling around Spades' neck as he used the momentum to wrench him off balance.

Spades reacted with inhuman speed, shoving his hands between the whip's coils and prying them apart with raw strength. But the moment he widened the ring, Bai Liu flicked the handle—bone spurs flaring out and sinking deep into Spades' shoulder.

Without hesitation, Bai Liu pulled the whip taut.

Deep gashes tore across Spades' shoulder. Blood spattered toward Bai Liu's face, only to be washed away by the relentless rain.

The host shrieked, shaking the rafters of the viewing pool. "Bai Liu fights back! He's struck Spades with the whip!"

"I'm not here to sacrifice you."

Spades was immobilized, his arms pinned against Bai Liu's. His chest heaved, but his voice remained eerily calm as he met Bai Liu's gaze.

"You are not the sacrifice in my mission."

Bai Liu's grip on the whip tightened. A strand of hair slipped over his face, rain and blood smearing together along his lips. He lifted his gaze, voice quiet.

"I know."

"So I'm going to win you."

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

"Bai Liu flips Spades overboard!!!"

The presenter practically danced with excitement. "Spades fights back! He's caught Bai Liu by the ankle with his whip—dragging him down with him! Now both players are in the sea!"

"Unbelievable!"

"Shit, shit!" Mu Sicheng's hands were ice-cold, his teeth chattering as he clenched them. "How long is this fucking fight going to last?!"

Wang Shun couldn't bring himself to look at the big screen. Instead, he took a few deep breaths, forcing his focus onto the system panel to distract himself.

"Bai Liu's popularity is still rising—he's now ranked 48, closing in on the top 50."

He tapped on the panel, exhaling slowly. "The odds on Bai Liu and Spades winning are down to 4:1... and our betting pool has grown to..."

Wang Shun's voice faltered. He swallowed hard before finishing in a hushed tone.

"Fifty times what it was at the start of the game."

The numbers were staggering, but no one looked relieved.

—Because this wasn't strategy. This was Bai Liu throwing away his immunity, gambling his life for attention.

Liao Ke's gaze stayed fixed on the screen, where the sea was an endless stretch of dark blue, almost black.

Beside him, Bai Jiamu clenched his fist on his knee before exhaling. "Uncle Liao," he asked, "do you think Spades can beat Bai Liu?"

"It's hard to say." Liao Ke let out a bitter chuckle, shaking his head. "The Reverse God might be able to see a path to victory, but I can't."

He hesitated.

"If I had to guess..."

A pause.

"Fifty-fifty."

"Fifty-fifty?! That can’t be right!" Bai Yi’s voice rose sharply. "The betting odds are 4:1! That means Spades wins eighty percent of the time!"

Frustration mounting, he turned to the dark screen and stomped his foot. "Where is he?! Can you turn up the brightness? I can’t see a damn thing!"

"Bai Yi."

Bai Jiamu suddenly raised a hand, pressing it firmly onto Bai Yi’s shoulder. His grip was steady—reassuring, yet unyielding.

Bai Yi turned to face him, and what he saw in Bai Jiamu’s expression made his breath hitch. A look of desperate determination.

"If Spades loses," Bai Jiamu said quietly, "we have to win the double."

Bai Yi reacted instantly. "Spades won’t lose!"

"Spades can lose."

Bai Jiamu took a deep breath, squeezing Bai Yi’s shoulder tighter. His voice was firm—too firm for his age.

"The gamblers out there might think he can’t lose. And if he does, they’ll go crazy. They’ll curse him, abuse him." His grip tightened. "But we’re his teammates. We’re supposed to give him the right—the freedom—to lose."

"If we can’t even accept him losing... then no one in the world will."

Bai Yi’s shoulders sagged. His expression went blank, and his eyes glistened. Tears welled up, spilling over as he mumbled, "...But he didn’t have a get-out-of-jail-free card. If he loses, he dies."

Silence.

For a long moment, no one spoke.

Then Bai Yi inhaled sharply and forced out a laugh—too quick, too brittle. "I’m just joking!" His voice cracked as he grinned. "Spades will just—concede and quit, right? So it’s fine!"

No one answered him.

The smile on Bai Yi's face slowly faded.

Spades might be able to lose in a game. He might even be able to run away.

—If this were just a game.

But Spades was a player who had never clicked the quit button.

Not even when he was drowning in the mud last time.

Spades was a monster who never admitted defeat.

It was as if the [Quit] button had disappeared from his system panel the moment the league began.

After a long, long silence, Liao Ke finally spoke, his head bowed.

"Spades was born into a world that never accepted him. Let's not let him leave it as someone no one accepts as a teammate either."

"That's too much."

Bai Yi stared blankly at the rippling water on the big screen, tears slipping down his face as he slowly opened his mouth.

"So we should just accept Spades' death, then?"

A pause. His voice was barely above a whisper.

"…He hasn't even been to reality once."

The screen flickered—what had been unreadable darkness turned to light, and the image of two men locked in battle beneath the waves reappeared.

As the picture became clearer, the audience gasped. Many stood up, craning their necks to get a better look at the screen.

The presenter nearly leapt out of his seat. "Here it comes! Here it comes! The moment of truth!"

In the dark, churning waters, black and white whips of bone intertwined, darting beneath the turbulent surface like the skeletal remains of a stripped fish.

Bai Liu's ankle was ensnared by Spades' bone whip, dragging him deeper into the sea.

"Spades' bone whip is pulling Bai Liu down!" The host gripped the microphone, his voice electric with excitement. "As we all know, Spades' Bone Whip is one of the highest-intensity, highest-judgment skill weapons in the game! The Slayer Sequence spends millions of points every year maintaining this weapon. Once it wraps around you, there's basically no escape!"

Bai Liu's red hairband came loose, and his long hair fanned out in the water. Bubbles escaped his lips as his expression remained eerily calm. In a backhanded motion, he swung his whip like a blade, slashing at the bone whip around his ankle.

"Is Bai Liu seriously trying to cut through Spades' bone whip with a dagger?" The presenter sucked in a breath. "That's a cheap gamble. It's basically impossible."

But Bai Liu didn't hesitate. His short knife sliced cleanly through the water.

A thick ribbon of blood unfurled from his foot. The bone whip, severed, sank into the abyss.

The presenter gawked. "…Did contestant Bai Liu just cut off his own ankle?!"

"He actually broke free of Spades' Bone Whip!"

Bai Liu swiftly downed an antidote. His severed foot twisted outward, grotesquely regenerating. His face was ghostly pale as he shot toward the surface, gasping for breath as the rain lashed down against him.

He shut his eyes, inhaled deeply. His long hair trailed behind him, dark as ink against the waves.

A second later, something erupted from below.

The black whip lashed past Bai Liu's face, sending a massive wave crashing behind him. A thin, finger-wide gash split the right side of his face, and his shirt was torn from his shoulder.

Blood trickled down his cold, pale skin, merging with the water.

Floating on the surface, Spades held his whip, his expression

unreadable. Wet strands of hair clung to his forehead, partially obscuring his eyes.

He raised his hand. The whip snapped in both directions, parting the water as it lunged straight for Bai Liu.

It sliced past Bai Liu's left side, severing strands of his hair. Bai Liu inhaled sharply and dived.

Spades followed in an instant, legs pressed together, his streamlined form cutting through the water like a hunting black-skinned tiger shark. His speed was so intense that the water distorted around him.

"Wow! He's keeping up!" The host hammered his desk, nearly breathless. "Incredible! Every opponent who's fought Spades says his aquatic combat ability gives him a total attack advantage underwater —and now we see why!"

"Bai Liu doesn't stand a chance!"

"What a load of bullshit!" Mu Sicheng rolled up his sleeves, ready to climb over the railing and throttle the host. "What kind of commentary is this?!"

Tang Erda yanked him back. "You can't hit him from here."

On the big screen, Spades' hand was just inches from Bai Liu's waist.

At the last moment, Bai Liu twisted his body sharply, spinning out of reach. Their eyes met as Spades hovered just above him.

Without hesitation, Spades flung his whip, wrapping it around Bai Liu's waist.

But Bai Liu twisted like a fish, slipping free just as the whip tightened.

"He dodged it!!!" The presenter clenched his fist in excitement. "What a move!"

Mu Sicheng punched the air. "Hell yeah!"

Muke exhaled a long breath.

Liu Jiayi pressed her fists to her jaw, her eyes locked on the screen. "Judging by Bai Liu's current speed, he's using Mu Sicheng's movement panel—probably in full burst mode."

A beat of silence.

"But it only lasts five minutes."

Muke froze.

Liu Jiayi lifted her gaze back to the screen. "If Bai Liu doesn't finish this within five minutes, he'll be completely vulnerable."

Ripples and bubbles churned across the screen.

Deeper and deeper they dove. The color of the water darkened, the surface chaos fading into eerie stillness.

Bai Liu pressed forward, his gaze locked ahead. Behind him, Spades followed without wavering, his eyes never once leaving Bai Liu—as if, in the vast expanse of the ocean, Bai Liu was the only thing that mattered.

A warm white light pulsed from the depths.

Bai Liu veered sideways, swimming toward it.

He stopped directly above it, letting himself sink like a drifting leaf. His face was blank, his dark eyes reflecting the glow that seemed to breathe at the bottom of the sea.

At the center of the light, a man floated, bound in countless silken threads.

Tawil.

His head hung low as if in deep sleep, his silver-blue curls fanning through the water. His white clothing, stained with blood, rippled with the currents.

A reverse cross pendant—exchanged with Bai Liu long ago—rested over his heart, emanating a soft glow that blurred his face, the silk threads distorting his expression beneath the deep blue.

Following the threads upward, they led to the Sea Shrine, floating unmoving on the surface, untouched by the storm.

The moment their eyes fell on Tawil, both Bai Liu and Spades' system panels flashed simultaneously.

[System Alert: Congratulations, Player Spades, on discovering the

ultimate sacrifice—Tawil. Please complete the sacrifice before the Night of the Evil Sacrifice ends.]

[System Alert: Congratulations, Player Bai Liu, on gathering the spirit and flesh of the Evil God in one place. Please complete the sacrifice before the Night of the Evil Sacrifice ends.]

Evil God Festival – Boathouse

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The moment the prompt appeared, Spades' whip lashed out without hesitation, its sharp tip aimed straight at Tawil's heart as he drifted in the water.

Bai Liu spun around, his gaze sharp, and stepped between them, raising his own whip to block Spades' attack.

The two whips collided, the force of impact sending Bai Liu backward. He crashed into Tawil behind him, tiny bubbles escaping from between his clenched teeth, his long, dark hair billowing through the water.

The impact propelled Tawil as well, his silver hair tangling with Bai Liu's. Though otherwise motionless, Tawil slowly lifted his head, the silk blindfold over his silver-blue eyes concealing his expression.

Even so, he reached out, wrapping his arms around Bai Liu.

The reverse cross pendant at Tawil's lips suddenly flared with brilliant light. In the radiance, a barrier of shimmering air formed around Bai Liu, allowing him to breathe underwater.

"Bai Liu?" Tawil whispered against his ear. "Is that you?"

Bai Liu's voice was barely audible. "It's me."

"I've come for you."

Tawil chuckled softly. "You're always a mess when you come to see me."

Before Bai Liu could respond, Spades' whip struck again. Bai Liu reacted instinctively, but Tawil pulled him behind him, stepping forward in his place. With a pale expression, Tawil raised his right hand, fingers splayed.

Ripples of light spread through the water like an unseen current, stirring the hair of the two men facing each other across the barrier—identical faces locked in a silent standoff, both eerily calm.

"No concession?" Tawil asked softly, blindfolded yet unwavering.

Spades' expression was unreadable. "No."

His whip lifted and struck down with enough force to tear through space and time, crashing against the watery wall. Though his attack was meant for Tawil, Spades' gaze was locked firmly on Bai Liu, who stood behind him.

"I refuse to accept this," Spades said, his words sharp and deliberate. "I will win Bai Liu."

"I'll sacrifice you—and become his most worthy monument."

A crack splintered through the water barrier.

Tawil's brow remained smooth, his voice steady. "Do you even know whose relic you are?"

Through the fractured veil of water, Spades met Tawil's unreadable gaze. And in the instant Tawil's wall shattered, Bai Liu moved. Without hesitation, he pulled Tawil behind him, his whip twisting into a short blade that slashed toward Spades.

The blade grazed Spades' cheek, leaving a thin line of red that bled into the sea.

For the first time, Spades hesitated.

He could have dodged. But in that instant, as Bai Liu's eyes bore into him, something wrenched inside him—a sudden, phantom pain at the old bullet wound in his back, locking his body in place.

Bai Liu's gaze, dark and unreadable, held nothing in it for him.

As the blade struck, the silk thread binding Tawil's right wrist unraveled. At the same time, a new thread coiled itself around Spades' wrist.

"The pain between us is shared," Tawil murmured, his voice a muted echo in the water, resonating only in Spades' ears. "The more joy I feel from Bai Liu's love for me, the more pain you will feel."

"And the more joy Bai Liu gives you, the more pain I will bear in turn."

"One of us must be sacrificed—an [anchor] for Bai Liu, an offering to

the gods."

Bai Liu pressed forward. Spades stepped back.

With every move Bai Liu made, Tawil's threads unraveled—while Spades' bindings grew tighter.

The more the silk threads wove around him, the heavier Spades became, the more sluggish his movements, until at last he was wrapped nearly entirely in a cocoon, bound beneath the sea shrine—transformed into the new anchor.

The other end of the filaments extended to the great ship-like shrine above, the weight of its burdens and [pains] sinking into Spades' body.

Through the suffocating silk, Spades lifted his head with effort, staring at Tawil, who now stood free, holding Bai Liu close. Tawil's lips curled into a faint smile.

Looking down on him like a god, Tawil's voice was gentle. "Now do you understand?"

"You'll never win against me."

"...I don't get it." Spades, trapped in [pain], hissed through his teeth. "But I will defeat you."

He met Tawil's silver-blue eyes, his vision blurring as the crushing weight pulled him downward.

It was so heavy.

He had never carried anything so heavy before. Even in the games, he refused to bring extra props—too cumbersome, too restrictive.

So this is what [pain] feels like.

Spades had never known it, not truly. He had never understood human joy or sorrow, never grasped the meaning of victory's tears, of grief's cries, of the quiet elation of understanding.

Even at the heart of triumph, pain, and desire, he had always been separate from them—a creature reaching out toward something forever unfamiliar.

But he had one memory.

A single moment burned into him.

The moment he was born in the drowning town of Siren, when a man stood before him—his long ponytail catching the light, his white shirt stark against the sea.

A man who had smiled at him, his features blurred by the sun, and reached out.

Handing him a black bone whip.

"This is a relic of your predecessor, which I return to you in its original form."

Spades looked up at the strange man. At that time, the man's mouth was still unable to speak, and only untuned syllables escaped.

The man smiled and crouched down, gazing at Spades, who lay on the ground. "The only reason I allowed you to be born—"

"—is that you will make people suffer with your triumphs and presence."

"The heart of pain is all black." The man chuckled softly and placed the black bone whip beside his head. "Let's call you Spades."

So, that was what the man wanted him to do.

So, that was what [the pain] was.

Spades slowly lowered his eyelids, his body sinking downward. He opened his mouth, and countless bubbles rushed across his face.

... Bai Liu, is it this hard when you're in pain?

"Spades."

"Wake up."

"Do not indulge in the illusion of suffering."

The wall of water in front of Spades shattered, and he snapped back to reality. Tawil was no longer holding Bai Liu and smiling. Instead, Tawil stood behind the wall of water, staring at Spades with no trace of sorrow or joy in his silver-blue eyes.

Tawil's gaze was calm as he observed Spades.

"Your desire for Bai Liu is so strong that you were affected by the [door] on my eyes."

"You've never had a drop in mental value before, have you?"

[System warning: Player Spades' mental value has dropped by 20!]

Instead of answering Tawil, Spades raised his hand, his face devoid of emotion, and slammed it against the watery wall. His voice hissed with determination. "I want to win!!!"

Bai Liu, from behind the wall, turned his whip into a knife and thrust it forward, just as Spades had hallucinated. Without hesitation, the blade headed straight for Spades' face.

Threads immediately dangled from Spades' right hand. His whip and Bai Liu's shuriken slammed into the watery wall, exploding in a massive wave of light and wind. Neither man flinched but instead pressed forward, their weapons locked, their faces contorted in fierce determination.

"Lose it for me!!!"

"I want to win!!!"

On the big screen, the presenter slowly lowered his microphone, his mouth hanging open. He was too stunned to offer any commentary.

The crowd was silent, almost unable to comprehend that this was the largest audience for a game since mid-season.

Mu Sicheng stared at Bai Liu on the screen, his mind reeling in disbelief.

"This vocal person... is that Bai Liu?"

Bai Yi was completely dumbfounded.

He had never seen Spades fight so desperately, chasing victory with such reckless abandon.

The two men, who appeared cold and self-controlled on the surface, were now caught in a chaotic battle. They fought without restraint, punches, kicks, bites, and knee strikes all blending together in a wild display of aggression, as if they were children fighting over a toy, trying to outdo one another.

As they struggled, threads emanated from their bodies, connecting them to the shrine, binding them like puppets manipulated by the gods. Yet, this savage clash, in spite of the threads, seemed like two puppets struggling to break free from their strings.

The two men pulled back after exchanging another blow.

Bai Liu's body was surrounded by an air film, his chest heaving with exertion. His face was marred with cuts, running from the left edge of his eyebrow to the right corner of his lip, some deep enough to bleed. Silk threads were attached to his shoulders, neck, and back.

He wiped the blood from his mouth and fixed his gaze on Spades across the room.

Spades, breathing heavily, held his bone whip in a backhand grip. His face remained expressionless, though bruises from Bai Liu's assault were evident, and silk threads connected his right hand and left wrist.

Tawil floated between the two men.

They looked at each other and, in perfect synchrony, turned and raised their bone whips, charging toward Tawil in the middle.

"I'll sacrifice him!!!" Spades chuckled dully, raising his whip high and slashing it across Bai Liu’s shoulder. His eyes burned with unwavering resolve. "Get out of the way!!!"

Bai Liu’s shoulder was shattered by Spades' whip, and the weapon fell to the sea floor. In a fit of rage, Bai Liu bit down on Spades' wrist, his teeth sinking into the skin as he hissed through clenched teeth. "I forbid it!!!"

Spades gritted his teeth, relinquishing the whip as he raised his fist and aimed for Bai Liu’s right eye.

The two men twisted, falling downward.

Spades bared his teeth and sank them deep into Bai Liu’s shoulder.

Bai Liu’s body trembled with the pain, and Spades felt a deep, searing ache in his own back, as though his very brain might explode from the intensity.

For some reason, his eyes burned in the cold water.

So many games won, driven by Bai Liu's verdict on his fate from the

very beginning. It subconsciously pushed him to seek victory, to choose an ending that was painful for everyone.

But this time—this time, it was different.

It was his pain, his desire to win!!!

With a fierce expression, Spades bit down harder, deforming Bai Liu's shoulder and drawing blood. Bai Liu grunted, the sound of his shoulder blade cracking echoing in the water.

Without allowing Bai Liu a moment to recover, Spades slammed his right hand into Bai Liu’s stomach, sending him spiraling toward the depths of the sea.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has used Player Muke's personal skill (Flashing Strike).]

Bai Liu, now missing one hand, sprang into action. He stepped in front of Tawil, his long, blood-soaked hair trailing behind him as he shot Spades a menacing glare.

Time and time again, over and over, he had lost to this man in this twisted game.

—And lost everything that mattered.

[Will you always play games with me later?]

[Hmm.]

Xie Ta’s earnest reply still echoed in Bai Liu’s mind.

Liar. A lie. Not true.

Wouldn't it have been different if he'd beaten you, at least once, by now?

—Could it be that I will be the one to become the evil god?

Without hesitation, Bai Liu raised his hand and drove the knife deep into Spades' chest, twisting the blade as he pulled it out.

A spray of blood erupted from the wound, and a transparent thread instantly wrapped around Bai Liu’s left hand where the knife had been.

The two men staggered back, bruised and battered, but didn't wait for a moment's respite before charging at each other again, fighting like wild animals, their whips raised.

The rain had finally stopped falling.

On a small boat, Gosho could not hide the joy that spread across his face as he noticed the shrine had calmed. "Let's go see. Maybe the sacrifice has been made, and we can make a wish."

"Aye." The boatman bowed and began rowing.

As the boat neared the shrine, the imperial boat rocked steadily, and then, without warning, a great explosion of fireworks burst into the night sky, as beautiful as starry flowers.

The servant next to Gosho whispered, "Lord Gosho, the fireworks display should have started now that the rain has stopped."

"Perfect timing." Gosho smiled smugly and made his way toward the disordered shrine. "A lively backdrop is perfect for wish-making."

But as they took only a couple of steps, the shrine suddenly shook violently, as though something beneath was tugging at it.

The maid screamed in terror, and Gosho gripped a stone lantern for balance. "What's happening?! The evil god in my dream clearly told me it would be safe to make a wish..."

Before he could finish, the entire boat-shaped shrine flipped over!

The imperial boat plummeted into the sea!

Gosho, panic-stricken, flailed in the water, bubbles escaping his mouth as he tried to stay afloat.

Below the surface, Bai Liu and Spades fought almost beyond recognition, their bodies covered in blood and threads, as they struggled for control over Tawil, who was once again sealed by the threads and asleep.

The overturned shrine crashed onto Tawil, and Gosho frantically paddled to avoid getting caught in their fight, knowing that a brush with the two men would mean certain death.

But before he could escape, Bai Liu's bone whip lashed out, wrapping around Gosho's ankle and yanking him toward Spades, preventing him from stalling the fight.

Spades did the same.

The imperial boat was tossed around like a ragdoll by the two men, and soon, Gosho was suffocating. His face turned purple as he struggled to breathe, entangled in the silk threads. Tawil was pulled downward by the force of his thrashing, and the now-sunken shrine continued its descent.

Bai Liu reached for Tawil, but was suddenly stopped by Spades, who missed Tawil and instead grabbed the silk threads wrapped around him.

Spades pinned Bai Liu down, blocking his movements and snatching the threads from Bai Liu's grasp.

Bai Liu took a sharp breath, as though he had been waiting for Spades to get close.

Before Spades could react, Bai Liu jerked back and kissed him, his eyes closed.

Spades' pupils widened in shock.

At the same moment, Bai Liu yanked Tawil upward, restraining Spades in a brutal way as he pushed Tawil’s body into Spades’ from behind.

Spades’ pupils dilated instantly as Bai Liu kissed him, and his heart raced as something cold was pushed into his mouth.

It was a coin.

[System Alert: Player Spades' soul fusion initiated.]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu used the Soul Trade skill to trade with Spades' soul. The soul is now returned to its rightful place, and the trade coin is located on Spades. The trade is effective.]

[Player Bai Liu now officially owns Spades' soul and has access to his system panel.]

[Player Bai Liu uses Spades' soul note to access Spades' system panel and prepares to hit the game exit button.]

[System Warning: Is player Bai Liu sure to hit the game exit button for player Spades? Player Spades is in the middle of a match, and the default exit is a forfeit.]

[Player Bai Liu identified.]

[System Alert: Player Spades has exited the game. Game over.]

As fireworks exploded above, Gosho's body, bound by silk threads, sank into the sea. His twisted face grimaced in pain as he became the sacrifice for the night.

From the boathouse, Xiaokui watched the disappearing shrine, her eyes filling with tears as she heard a calm, familiar voice in her ears.

It sounded like Tawil's voice—the evil god's voice—and like Bai Liu's voice.

[God grants your wish.]

[Someone is coming to your rescue.]

Xiaokui clutched the paper door of the boathouse, staring at the dazzling fireworks, tears streaming down her face.

Had this game of sacrifice, this torment, finally come to an end?

The moment the screen went dark, both the wandering circus and the killer sequences leapt to their feet, rushing toward the exits.

After the life-or-death struggle they'd just endured, both Bai Liu and Spades were surely in bad shape and needed assistance.

Bai Liu staggered out, his second step faltering before he collapsed. Spades didn't even make it to the exit before he fell to the ground.

Tang Erda and Mu Sicheng quickly caught Bai Liu.

He gasped and coughed, his face pale, his hair dripping seawater, the strong scent of blood filling the air.

Liao Ke and Bai Yi were about to reach for Spades when Liao Ke noticed something and pulled Bai Yi back, shouting, "Wait! Don't go near Spades!"

Spades, who had fallen to the ground, coughed and slowly pushed himself up onto his elbows. He lifted his head, his silvery-blue eyes

cold and distant.

A loud alarm blared across the ornamental pool.

[System Warning: Please move away from the source of contamination and use mental bleach to maintain your mental values!]

[Top-tainted NPC exodus detected in game!!!]

Spades' face, drenched with water and broken hair, revealed his silvery-blue eyes, filled with an eerie, otherworldly calm.

Chapter End Notes

> Gosho drowned. Not in some heroic struggle, but because the world finally stopped tolerating him. Funny how life always finds a way to balance things out.
>
> Not one soul mourned him. His death was the only good thing he ever did: made the world a little less disgusting.
>
> To Gosho — may the fishes find his company as unbearable as we did.

The Challenge

The entire pool was shrouded in a dense cloud of white mist, and all that could be heard was the constant choking and coughing of the audience.

“What’s going on? What NPC exodus?”

“I’m still waiting for the results! Well, now I can’t see a thing.”

Before Bai Yi could react, he saw Spades collapse to the ground not far from him. He reached out to help, but Liao Ke stopped him.

“No!!!” Liao Ke pulled Bai Yi behind him, quickly accessing his system’s prop panel. He turned away from the battered and bruised Spades, who was struggling to rise, his voice low and serious. “Spades is in grave danger.”

“If you don’t want to leave the game, go crazy and kill yourselves. Now behave yourselves!”

“Don’t look into his eyes.”

Liao Ke dragged Bai Jiamu and Bai Yi backward, moving quickly until they reached the edge of the inner perimeter of the viewing pool, where they could just barely make out the faint silhouette of Spades through the mist.

The figure was trying hard to stand, but it seemed too injured to do so on its own. He took a few unsteady steps before collapsing again, only to struggle and try to rise once more.

Climb up, fall down. Climb up, fall down.

Spades seemed to be searching for someone, moving in a nearly crawling manner. He resembled a lizard newly transformed into human form, uncoordinated and awkward, struggling to move on all fours.

Bai Yi’s heart clenched as he watched. “Are we just going to leave him like this?”

Liao Ke’s expression was grim. “We can’t afford to get involved right now.”

“We’re his teammates! We can’t just leave him!” Bai Yi’s eyes filled with tears, his voice trembling. “He’s hurt like this because of our game!”

“He doesn’t know anything,” Liao Ke said, his tone cold. “We forced him onto the field, taught him the rules, told him to win these games, and banned him from reality.”

“We’ve taught him all these rules meant to benefit us humans in the real world, but we’ve never treated him with the same kindness we show to people in reality. He lives like a monster even when we’re around.”

“Everyone fears him.”

Bai Yi’s voice became almost a whisper, his eyes brimming with tears. “If even we, his teammates, won’t help him now... then he truly has nothing left.”

Liao Ke clenched his fists and lowered his head. He opened his mouth to speak, then paused. “You’re not allowed to help.”

“I’ll go.” He looked up, determination in his eyes.

Bai Yi panicked. “I didn’t mean to force you! I’ll go! I’ll go myself!”

“None of you need to go.” From the mist, a slender figure emerged, slightly hunched over, coughing harshly. With clenched fists and a warm smile despite the bloodstained uniform draped over his shoulders, the man spoke softly. “Someone will go.”

Liao Ke exhaled deeply, a small, genuine smile finally breaking through his serious demeanor. “You’re finally here.”

Bai Yi and Bai Jiamu stared in stunned silence at the man who had appeared from the mist.

Bai Jiamu’s shoulders relaxed, but Bai Yi couldn’t hold back the tears. He rushed over and hugged the man like a lifeline. “Captain!”

“We lost the singles!!!”

Lu Yizhan caught the wailing Bai Yi with a raised eyebrow. “Really? Looks like I missed a great game.”

“I’m the one who’s late.”

Meanwhile, in the white mist, Spades continued to stumble alone. His clothes were soaked, blood dripping from the ends of his hair and the corners of his coat. His face was expressionless, ears ringing with the system's endless warnings.

[Please do not approach player Spades! He is now in a dangerous monster book state!]

[Please stay away from player Spades!]

[Please do not approach player Spades!]

Oh, keep them away from me.

Only now did Spades' mind process the system's messages that were still echoing in his ears.

He collapsed again, his knees buckling as he tried to rise. With a determined calm, he considered his next move.

There's no need for these warning messages, he thought. They're superfluous.

These people, these players... they won't come near me, even with the warning.

They're afraid of me.

It's just like being afraid of a monster in a game.

Spades tried to move again. His knees buckled, and he fell hard to the ground.

Blood and seawater dripped from the tips of his hanging hair, and pools of blood misted away from his knees as he knelt, Spades thought somewhat dazedly.

Yeah, I was supposed to be a monster in the game.

No one should have ever come near me in the first place. My role is to kill those who approach, to make them feel fear, pain, to let them drown in their own desires.

The only purpose of my birth and existence is this.

[Not so.]

Suddenly, Spades recalled what Lu Yizhan had said when the strange prophet leaned over the balcony fence of the killer sequence, smiling at him. He had reached out, gently patted his head, and said:

[Not so. We Spades do not exist to cause pain and fear to others. No life in this world was created for that purpose.]

[You must have been born because someone loves you.]

[And your presence will surely bring them immeasurable happiness.]

And who is this person? Spades asked.

Lu Yizhan had smiled and answered: [That person is the one who brings you into reality and turns you into a human being.]

Does this person really exist?

Spades looked at the blood beneath his knees, at the blood-stained hands, at the empty, silent white mist around him, and wondered deeply:

So many humans... Why should this one love such a monstrous creature as me?

"Bai Liu, what are you doing there?" Mu Sicheng's urgent voice cut through the tension. "Shit! That's Spades over there! The system won't let you pass! It's dangerous, don’t you hear?"

"Bai Liu, you're badly injured, don't do something reckless!" Tang Erda warned, his tone serious.

"Don't go over there," Muke said softly, "Spades has his teammates to handle this. Rest first, okay?"

"Bai Liu." The final voice was Liu Jiayi's, who had been silent for a long while before speaking, "Go if you want to."

"I know you've made your choice."

Throughout it all, Bai Liu didn’t respond. He was silent, his determination clear as he pushed past the people blocking his path, stepping into the white mist with unsteady steps, moving toward Spades.

Spades slowly looked up, and before him appeared a similarly broken figure—thin, alone, and struggling to maintain his balance. Like him,

this figure swayed a few steps toward him.

No matter how many obstacles stood in the way, neither of them took a step back.

The piercing warning grew louder:

[Please do not approach player Spades!]

Why should this man love me, a monster to be feared, when there are so many humans? Spades had asked Lu Yizhan, bewildered.

[He's so strange.]

Lu Yizhan had smiled: [I thought he was strange too.]

[But when you meet him, you'll like him a lot.]

At the time, Spades had been confident: [I wouldn't like him.]

Lu Yizhan laughed and asked: [Why?]

Spades had replied bluntly: [Because I don't like it.]

Bai Liu reached Spades, who was still kneeling, pale and breathing heavily, his blood trailing from his wrist and ankle wounds.

Bai Liu looked down at Spades, who gazed back up at him. A drop of blood mixed with seawater fell from Spades' eyelids.

Bai Liu extended his hand to Spades, holding a game coin in his palm. His voice was light as he spoke: "I win."

In that moment, Spades couldn't hold back his tears.

He didn't understand why he was crying, just as he didn't understand many things about humans. He didn't realize that in this moment, he was experiencing all the human emotions he'd always wondered about—like, hate, love, jealousy, pursuit, pain, and resignation—emotions he had never fully grasped before.

"I lost." Spades' voice trembled as he clenched his fists. "I'm an unqualified memento."

Bai Liu paused, then tucked the coin away. Kneeling in front of Spades, he unwrapped a roll of bandages and carefully began wrapping Spades' silvery-blue eyes. Their breaths came close together

as Bai Liu worked with meticulous attention.

"No," Bai Liu whispered softly in his ear, the warmth of a smile in his voice. "You passed."

[System Alert: Player Spades' danger level has been neutralized. The danger alert has been lifted.]

The spray of psycho-bleach ceased.

As the white mist began to clear, Bai Yi rushed forward, excitement in his voice: "Spades! The captain's back!"

The circus crew gathered around to assist Bai Liu.

Spades was placed on a stretcher, his eyes still wrapped, and Liao Ke held his hands, guilt evident in his expression. "Is everything alright? I'll take you to the killer's office and get your wounds checked."

"I'm sore," Spades mumbled dully. "It's heavy again."

Spades had never cried out in pain during the game, and when Bai Yi heard it, his heart skipped a beat. But then Spades spoke again, confused: "Heavy... what's heavy?"

"I feel like my body..." Spades said slowly, "it's so heavy."

"It's normal," Lu Yizhan replied, stepping forward with a smile as he touched Spades' forehead. "Because soul and love—they are heavy things."

"Eh..." Bai Yi noticed a paper-like object clutched in Spades' left hand and tried to tug at it, curiosity getting the best of him. "Spades, what's in your hand?"

Spades gripped it tightly. "Mine!"

"No robbery, no robbery!" Bai Yi immediately backed off with a raised hand in surrender, laughing nervously. "I just thought it might be something bad you brought out of the game."

"No," Spades said simply. "Bai Liu gave it to me."

Bai Yi hesitated, then asked carefully, "You're blindfolded now... do you want me to help you see what Bai Liu gave you?"

Spades lay still on the stretcher for a long time before slowly releasing

the small, crumpled note from his grasp.

Bai Yi froze when he saw what was written on it.

It was a simple note with only a string of twelve digits.

—It was a coordinate from reality.

Access to Bai Liu's rental house.

The Challenge

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The white mist cleared, and everything in the audience pool came into full view again.

A mechanical voice echoed through the arena, announcing:
[System Alert: Player Spades voluntarily exited the game...]
[System Alert: Player Bai Liu wins the single-player tournament and earns 1 point.]
[Game over for "Evil Ritual - Boathouse." Congratulations to the Wandering Circus for winning the single-player tournament.]

A pin could have dropped in the audience as an eerie silence settled.

The host, sitting on the rocking arm of his chair, took a deep breath, staring at the astonished faces in the crowd. With trembling hands, he shouted, "Bai Liu won the match! He shattered Spades' undefeated streak! He's the first player ever to defeat Spades in a single-player tournament!"

Wang Shun, sitting on a wooden bench, stared at the system panel in disbelief. For a moment, he thought he'd misread the numbers. The pool was expanding at a staggering four hundred times the rate it had at the start of the tournament, and the Circus members' popularity was skyrocketing, reflected in the stats panel's top right corner.

Liu Jiayi's ranking surged twice, stopping at 52nd place.
Tang Erda's ranking climbed to 67th.
Mu Sicheng shot up into the top 50, landing at 48th.
Muke advanced to 77th.

Wang Shun stared at Muke's final ranking three times before collapsing onto the bench. His hands braced the edge to keep him from sliding off as he exhaled a long, hollow breath. "Bai Liu's final placing—sixth. Top 10 in popularity. He's a star player now," Wang Shun muttered in awe.

In a single game, the entire team had earned a free pass to the next round, their star status secured exactly as Bai Liu had predicted.

This was... simply unbelievable.

"Bai Liu!!!"
The front-row spectators, who had been silent until they saw the match results, suddenly erupted in cheers. They jumped to their feet, their faces flushed with excitement, their necks strained from shouting, all chanting the name of the match's winner.
"Bai Liu!!!"
"Bai Liu!!!"

The energy spread to the back rows, and soon, the entire pool was filled with the unified roar of the crowd. Even Daniel stood on the fence, arms raised, smiling and chanting Bai Liu's name alongside everyone else. The host, still rocking in his chair, couldn't help but join in.

"It's a miracle!" the host shouted, his voice hoarse. "A new myth has been born! A rookie breaks Spades' undefeated streak in a singles match!"

"Let's give our heartiest applause, points, and cheers to this brave newcomer!"

The crowd erupted in applause, throwing clothing into the pool, shouting Bai Liu's name, and igniting electronic fireworks—an unexpected spectacle.

Normally, players would respond to such interactions by collecting some of the clothes thrown in and signing them before tossing them back—a tradition for star players after a great game.

Wang Shun stepped forward, leaning close to Bai Liu's ear to explain the custom. Bai Liu nodded in understanding, giving a subtle glance to the audience.

Tang Erda noticed the underwear, bras, and socks being thrown in and, in a serious manner, covered Liu Jiayi's eyes.

Liu Jiayi, who couldn't see. "..."

Wang Shun, both embarrassed and excited, added, "Some celebrity players even strip down and sign autographs, throwing their clothes back to the crowd. It really ramps up the points rush."

Liu Jiayi, her eyes still covered, replied calmly, "Hearts did that last time. She took off her heels and stockings, signed them, and threw them back. The points surged two or three times faster than before."

Tang Erda, realizing the situation, silently uncovered Liu Jiayi's eyes.

Mu Sicheng let out an exasperated breath. "Isn't that just selling your body?"

Bai Liu, thoughtfully resting his index finger on his chin, responded, "Well, it's rare that my body is worth this much."

Mu Sicheng froze. "....."

Shit, I forgot... this guy will do anything for money!

The three large men beside him all flinched, their eyes subtly and critically scanning Bai Liu, who was drenched in a wet white shirt, dripping suit pants, and regular black leather shoes with white socks.

Tang Erda paused for a moment, then spoke calmly, "Don't force it. The point rush is moving fast now."

"There's nothing on you to take off," Liu Jiayi pointed out bluntly. "They want clothes that fit snugly. You can only take them off if you do it inside…"

Muke calmly covered Liu Jiayi's mouth. "Personally, I think a normal interaction is fine."

"Usually, it takes three pieces off," Wang Shun muttered, clenching his fist and coughing. He glanced at Bai Liu in front of him, uncomfortable and unsure where to direct his gaze. "...Better forget it, President."

"Well, three?" Bai Liu paused, then smiled, heading toward the audience. "Three should be fine."

With that, he raised his hand and pulled it back, shaking out the ringlets in his hair. His long, wet locks cascaded over his shoulders. Bai Liu looked up, smiled, and tossed the ringlets toward the audience.

"Ohhhhhhh!!!" The crowd erupted, rushing toward the stage. "Bai Liu, I love you! Throw it this way!!!"

Bai Liu lowered his eyes, pulled on his shirt tie with one hand, then bit the cap off the marker Wang Shun had handed him. He signed his name on the tie, rolled it into a bundle, and tossed it lightly toward the front row.

“Ah! Mine! Mine! I got it!” The audience went wild, nearly contorted with excitement.

Mu Sicheng watched, stunned.

This man is too skilled at undressing! Does he have no shame?

Bai Liu reached into his collar with two fingers, pulled out a bandage, and tossed it into the crowd. Then, he turned around nonchalantly, ignoring the chaotic crowd behind him, and returned to his position like a gamer who had completed his mission.

“All right,” Bai Liu glanced at Wang Shun. “Now the whole crew gets a free pass, right?”

Wang Shun, still dazed, nodded blankly. “You’re sixth, President.”

“Sixth place?!” Mu Sicheng gasped, pointing at Bai Liu. “This guy is already in sixth place? Is he on a rocket?”

“Not far off from it,” Wang Shun sighed. “You’re all in the top 100 for popularity too. Besides that, the popularity of the top players has shifted after this game.”

“Spades has seen a significant drop in popularity, falling from first to second,” he continued.

“So, does that mean the original number two is now number one?” Muke asked, frowning. “I remember the original number two in popularity was…”

Wang Shun smiled bitterly and stepped aside, glancing at the man in the killer sequence. The man was smirking, his gaze fixed on them helplessly. “Yes, the current number one in popularity is the Inquisitor of the Reverse Gods, the top tactician in the game.”

“The focus is on the next regatta,” Wang Shun added.

After a brief moment of excitement, the crowd calmed down at the host’s hysterical shout. “Both tacticians, please come forward to shake hands, warm up for the next double-header, and announce the names of the players for the next game!”

Bai Liu, surrounded by a group of players bandaging him, raised his hand to stop their movements and stood up with an unruffled expression.

The Reverse God removed his jacket, looking toward Bai Liu and stepping aside.

The two men met at the center of the big screen.

The Reverse God extended his hand first, a smile on his face as he sincerely asked, “How are you hurt?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing.” Bai Liu’s tone swept over the Reverse God’s right shoulder. “If you can’t hold out, just admit defeat.”

“I don’t mind.” The Reverse God scratched his head, laughing lightly. “Is that trash-talking me?”

“No,” Bai Liu responded flatly, reaching out to take the Reverse God’s hand. “It’s just a genuine suggestion.”

“Spades is off the court and won’t be playing for a while,” Bai Liu continued. “Add to that, you’re a tactician in bad shape. That’s four gaps for me.”

Bai Liu lifted his eyes, his gaze sharp. “You don’t have much of an advantage in the group game. If anything, you’re at a disadvantage.”

The Reverse God’s smile narrowed slightly, and he sighed. “Yes, you’re right.”

“Bai Liu, you’re a real distraction,” he added.

“So, you’re giving up?” Bai Liu met the Reverse God’s eyes, his expression steady.

The Reverse God stared at Bai Liu, his gaze deep. He exhaled slowly. “I think you already know the answer.”

With that, he slowly raised his hand.

The host noticed the Reverse God’s movement and nodded at the spatial barrier between the two tacticians. “May I ask the player, Reverse God, do you have anything to say to the public?”

“Yes,” the Reverse God smiled sheepishly, lifting his face. “It’s like this, host: no more double-match players on the Slayer Sequence side. We forfeit the double match.”

“Straight into the team match.”

Chapter End Notes

The ringlets are tightly curled or spiral-shaped strands of hair.

Qiao Mu Private High School

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After the announcement that the Killer Sequence had forfeited the doubles match, the room erupted.

Doubles was their dominant event in the Killer Sequence, yet they had chosen to forfeit another match at a critical moment—right after losing the singles, when they needed crowd support the most.

It was an entirely unexpected decision.

This meant the Killer Sequence had now lost two games in a row to the Wandering Circus, a newcomer guild.

Whispers spread through the audience. Sitting on a wooden bench, ready to play, Mu Sicheng furrowed his brows in confusion. "Wait, I don't have to play in doubles?"

Bai Liu adjusted his collar, straightened the bandages on his wrist, and mumbled, almost plaintively, "Straight to the tournament."

"President." Wang Shun hesitated as he glanced at Bai Liu's composed expression. "I know Spades, the ace player of the Killer Sequence, isn't participating, and their core tactician, Reverse God, is seriously injured, so our odds of winning look better…"

"But personally," he paused before finally voicing his thoughts, "I still think they have a higher chance of winning than we do."

Bai Liu's sharp gaze swept toward him. "Do you have new data?"

Wang Shun scratched his face with a wry smile. "Not exactly new, but I've been analyzing the major star teams, especially their team performance, and I know their win-loss ratio."

"They're missing Spades, and at first glance, that seems like a major loss. But it's not."

Wang Shun tapped into the system panel. "Spades has always been a lone wolf in team matches. He never played well with the rest of the team, as you all know. He trains alone most of the time."

"The one actually practicing with the other four in Killer Sequence is someone else—a reserve player named [Zhou Gong]."

A photo popped up on the panel: a fresh-faced boy with a few pimples on his forehead, looking younger than expected.

"He doesn't seem like much. Why's he called [Duke of Zhou]?" Mu Sicheng couldn't help but scoff.

"It's skill-related," Wang Shun replied, then looked at Bai Liu with a complicated expression. "From what I've heard, in the early stages of the playoffs, Spades struggled to sync with the team. Reverse God was already making preparations to replace him with [Zhou Gong] for direct team matches."

"Because he actually fits with the team."

"In the end, Spades managed to keep up, so they didn't make the switch," Wang Shun took a deep breath. "But that says a lot."

"It means that, from Reverse God's perspective, as a tactician, [Duke of Zhou] is actually more useful than Spades in a team game."

Bai Liu glanced at the photo. "So he's the one replacing Spades in the tournament. Anything else on him?"

"Not much. He's rarely played official matches, so there's little data." Wang Shun shook his head. "The only thing I do know is that he has an unusual relationship with Liao Ke, another Killer Sequence player."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "Unusual?"

"They seem to share the same skill type," Wang Shun explained. "[Duke of Zhou] calls Liao Ke his teacher."

"So Reverse God is fielding two control players?" Liu Jiayi frowned. "Is he planning a long-range, offensive-defensive strategy?"

"That's right."

Tang Erda, suddenly remembering something, turned to Bai Liu with a serious expression and whispered, "Did you get Spades' soul in that scene just now? Can you use his panel?"

"Not quite," Bai Liu opened his system panel, his gaze lowering to the soul note data. "I can't use his panel until he fully remembers who he is."

The last entry in his soul note displayed an image of Tawil lying in a white baptismal font, eyes closed, hands resting over his chest, clutching the coin Bai Liu had given him.

Killer Sequence's side.

Reverse God patted the pimple-faced boy on the shoulder, looking completely at ease. "Zhou Gong, I'm leaving the next game to you—Bai Liu."

Zhou Gong took a deep breath and lifted his head, eyes brimming with determination. "Don't worry, Captain! Leave it to me!"

"I've been preparing for this match against Bai Liu for a long, long time under my teacher's guidance!"

Liao Ke, standing beside him, nodded, his gaze complicated as he looked at Reverse God. "We've been preparing for ten years."

"We won't lose, Captain."

The host raised his hand, voice filled with passion. "Both teams, please enter the arena!"

Reverse God shrugged on his uniform jacket with one hand, his eyes calm and resolute. "Let's go—to face my greatest opponent."

Bai Liu stood as well, tightening his gloves. His expression was unreadable, his tone steady.

"Let's go—to face my best friend."

"This is a life-or-death match. The loser's league career ends here!" The host raised his left hand high before bringing it down with force.

"Will this year's biggest dark horse, the Wandering Circus, continue their meteoric rise? Or will the legendary duo of the Killer Sequence defend their championship glory?"

"Will both tacticians please step forward and shake hands!"

Bai Liu and the Reverse God ascended the steps, closing the distance between them with steady, unhurried strides. Their expressions remained composed—calm, almost indifferent—as if this wasn't a crucial final match but just another game, one of countless others they

had played over the years.

The Reverse God glanced at Bai Liu, a faint smile curling his lips as he extended his hand. "Still here, playing with you," he remarked lightly.

Bai Liu's gaze flickered downward, settling on the offered hand. He let out a quiet hum before clasping it, speaking abruptly, "It's been almost ten years of playing these absurd games together, hasn't it?"

The Reverse God hesitated for a moment, then returned the hum with a knowing smile. "Almost ten years."

Their hands remained interlocked, yet the tension that should have defined this moment—the sharp, electric anticipation of battle—was absent. There was no wary stiffness, no instinct to tighten their grips or test the strength of the other.

—Because they knew each other too well.

—Because, deep down, there was an unshakable conviction that neither would truly harm the other.

In the end, it was just another game.

"You're the prophet." Bai Liu raised his eyes, his voice calm. "Have you ever seen how our game ends?"

A long silence stretched between them. The Reverse God finally looked down at their joined hands and answered softly, "No."

"Why not?" Bai Liu asked.

"Because I was afraid." The Reverse God exhaled, rubbing the back of his neck with a wry smile. "I'm a coward, Bai Liu. When I fear a future… I don't look at it."

Bai Liu remained unfazed. "What exactly are you afraid of? That I'll win? That I won't die like you hoped?"

"Don't make me sound so heartless." The Reverse God met Bai Liu's gaze, his smile gentle but his eyes glistening as if on the verge of tears. "I've watched you grow for ten years. I know, deep down, that to you… I'm your best friend."

"But you're my last friend."

Bai Liu's breath hitched.

The Reverse God stepped forward, placing a firm hand on Bai Liu's shoulder as he pulled him into a brief, one-armed embrace. With his eyes shut, he whispered in Bai Liu's ear:

"I fear both endings."

"I fear you losing. And I fear me losing."

"The game—officially begins!" the host announced, his voice cutting through the air.

"Both teams, log in now!"

Their hands loosened and slipped apart. Without hesitation, they turned away from each other, walking in opposite directions—neither looking back, their gazes locked ahead, toward their own battle groups.

—Toward their own futures.

[……Loading game……]

[System Alert: Players have entered the game—Qiao Mu Private High School.]

[(Killer Sequence) vs (Wandering Circus), five-player team competition—officially begins.]

Chapter End Notes

> Zhou Gong (Duke of Zhou) is a historical and mythological figure from ancient China, known for his wisdom and contributions to governance during the early Zhou Dynasty. He is often associated with dreams and interpretations of dreams in Chinese culture.

Qiao Mu Private High School

[Player Bai Liu logging into the game copy: Qiao Mu Private High School.]

Qiao Mu Private High School is a prestigious institution known for its high graduation rate. Equipped with state-of-the-art facilities, it boasts a student and faculty population exceeding 10,000 across its middle and high school divisions.

But in recent times, the school has been plagued by a series of disturbing incidents. It started with a senior girl drowning in the man-made lake less than a meter from the back hill. Then, senior students began committing suicide one after another in their homes. Whispers of hauntings spread rapidly among the students.

You are a senior at Qiao Mu Private High School. After a week-long break, you return to campus—where seventeen students have already taken their own lives—to continue preparing for the upcoming exams.

[Player Bai Liu's academic records analyzed. Player Bai Liu is classified as a "poor student" in this game copy and has been assigned to a regular class.]

[Class Assignment: Upper Thirty-seventh]
[Main Task: Achieve the top rank in this year's entrance examination.]
[Time remaining: 50 days until the exam.]

Bai Liu slowly opened his eyes. For a brief moment, everything around him was frozen in time before the scene came rushing back to life in a chaotic symphony of sounds.

A day student tossed a blackboard eraser. A boy laughed with the student beside him. A girl in the front row wore earbuds, lost in her own world. From the corridor, the class representative waved a stack of papers, shouting:

"Who hasn't picked up their second-year English test yet? Mr. Xu's marking them later! Come get them from the podium yourself!"

Outside, basketballs pounded against the pavement. A whistle blew. The trees cast shifting shadows against the windows, and across the schoolyard, a large red banner stretched across the opposite building:

[50 days until exams. Pre-exam assembly today.]

[Current time: 14:00]

Bai Liu withdrew his gaze, turning just in time to see the English class representative approaching. Without a word, she slapped a test paper onto his desk.

She raised an eyebrow, crossed her arms, and scolded, "Bai Liu, didn't I tell everyone to pick up their English papers? Yours has been sitting on the podium all day, and you never came to get it. What's your excuse?"

The English class rep was a striking girl with shoulder-length hair, a small braid behind her right ear, and a butterfly hair clip. She was quite tall, standing at around 5'7" or 5'8".

Bai Liu met her gaze, his expression unreadable. As he looked at her, memories of his high school years slowly resurfaced.

Her name was Hou Tong—a classmate, the English class representative, and a member of Fang Dian's volleyball team. She had been placed in a regular class due to her lackluster grades, but her wealthy family had paid for her enrollment at Qiao Mu Private High School.

Bai Liu had a hazy recollection of most of his classmates. But he remembered Hou Tong clearly because…

Hou Tong, under Bai Liu's unwavering gaze, clenched the edges of his test paper. Her lips pressed together, her face gradually turning red, but she still held her ground.

"Last time, you left your English test on the podium, and Mr. Xu made you clean the toilets for a month! If you do this again, do you want to clean them for two months?!"

Ah. That was why he remembered her.

This young lady had a crush on him.

Or, to be more precise—she had a crush on his face.

Bai Liu accepted the test paper from Hou Tong, lowering his gaze slightly as he said in a quiet, almost lazy voice, "Thanks."

"No need to thank me. It's my job as class rep." Hou Tong feigned indifference, ruffling her hair as she turned away. "Don't let this

happen again. Delivering your papers is a pain in the ass."

Bai Liu glanced down at the test in his hands.

His score on the English II paper: 83/150.

Not a disaster, but… utterly hopeless.

There were no distinct strengths or weaknesses—just an even spread of mistakes across the entire paper.

His gaze shifted to the name scrawled on the upper margin. The handwriting was slightly messy, still carrying a hint of youthful inexperience.

[Bai Liu]

Yes. That was his handwriting at seventeen or eighteen.

And Qiao Mu Private High School… was indeed where he had studied at that age.

Back then, Qiao Mu Private High School collaborated with both the education department and the orphanage. As part of a government mandate, elite private schools like Qiao Mu were required to allocate a certain number of spots each year to orphanage students.

But while Qiao Mu did accept orphanage students, they were all placed in the lowest-ranking general classes. Compared to other orphanage students who managed to enter public high schools, those assigned to Qiao Mu were considered unlucky.

Public high schools required entrance exams. Bai Liu, having transferred to a public orphanage at fourteen, had taken the exam a year later—and failed. His only option had been an allocated spot at a private high school.

Among the private high schools, Qiao Mu was considered the worst placement.

At first glance, a near-aristocratic institution like Qiao Mu seemed like a good opportunity. But for orphanage students, it was a nightmare.

Most teachers and students here looked down on orphans.

Bai Liu was the third orphanage student to attend Qiao Mu on an allocated spot. The first had dropped out due to a mental breakdown.

The second had disappeared after skipping school one day.

Lu Yizhan was the fourth.

Originally, Lu Yizhan had ranked first in the entrance exam and secured a place in a public high school. But when he learned that Bai Liu had been assigned to Qiao Mu, he gave up his spot without hesitation to follow him.

The orphanage only had one allocated spot at Qiao Mu, so Lu Yizhan had to get in on his own.

Not only did he succeed, but he ranked second among all Qiao Mu's selective students—just behind Fang Dian. Both of them had been awarded full scholarships and were placed in Class I, the prestigious Special Merit Class.

After spending time at Qiao Mu, Bai Liu finally understood why the previous orphanage students had ended up the way they did.

There are three types of students at Qiao Mu High School.

The first type consists of the wealthy—some extremely rich, others simply well-off—but with unremarkable academic performance. These students often carry a sense of entitlement and look down on those from less privileged backgrounds, particularly those from the orphanage. They take pleasure in mocking them for being orphans and, at times, resort to petty bullying—throwing their textbooks out before class, barricading the bathroom stalls to keep them out, and other similar antics. However, their bullying is usually childish and superficial, easy enough to ignore.

The second type includes students with outstanding grades but modest family backgrounds. They attend Qiao Mu on substantial scholarships —students like Fang Dian and Lu Yizhan. They generally avoid conflict but also show little sympathy for the children from the orphanage. Their admiration is reserved for high-achieving students, and they tend to look down on those who enter through social welfare programs, like Bai Liu. Even when they witness bullying, they turn a blind eye and walk past without intervening.

The third type comprises students who neither excel academically nor come from affluent families. Unable to secure a spot at a prestigious public or private high school, their families scrape together the tuition fees for Qiao Mu. Many of them, being only children, quickly fall into the orbit of the wealthier students, becoming their lackeys and joining

in on the bullying of those lower on the social hierarchy.

This third group poses the most trouble for Bai Liu. They despise the fact that he, a welfare student, gets to attend Qiao Mu without paying or achieving top grades.

Take Bao Kangle, for example.

Bai Liu's gaze shifted to the second row, where a male student sat glaring at him with open hostility.

The boy had buck teeth and metal wire braces. His hair was cut in an unflattering watermelon style, his bangs thick and heavy. He was short, his legs slightly bowed when he sat, and his face was marred by inflamed, pus-filled acne.

Bao Kangle.

A third-rate student who had targeted Bai Liu for all three years of high school.

Most of Bai Liu's troubles with the third group were manageable, something he could deflect with minimal effort. But Bao Kangle was different. While he technically fit the profile of a typical third-type student, his circumstances set him apart. Unlike the others, he hadn't gotten into Qiao Mu by paying his way in.

The classroom door swung open, cutting through the tension. A woman strode in, red-painted nails tapping against a lesson plan in her hand. She wore seven-centimeter heels, her hips swaying as she moved.

She was petite, no taller than 5'5", dressed in black stockings and a fitted pencil skirt. Her hair was the same unflattering watermelon cut, her bangs heavy, her slightly bucked teeth peeking through as she surveyed the classroom. Her expression twisted in visible distaste the moment her gaze landed on Bai Liu.

She tapped her lesson plan against the podium. "Class."

A crisp voice rang out. "Stand up!"

"Good afternoon, Mr. Xu," the students chorused.

Bai Liu rose naturally with the others, bowing along in unison before glancing up at the teacher.

Xu Wei.

His English teacher.

His homeroom teacher.

And a faculty member at Qiao Mu High School.

She was also Bao Kangle's mother.

Bao Kangle had entered Qiao Mu through a special staff-affiliated admission pathway. Like Bai Liu, he hadn't needed to pay tuition. But unlike Bai Liu, he resented that fact.

And, in a way, Bai Liu could understand why.

He lowered his gaze as Hou Tong cast a quick glance back at him, a small smirk curling her lips. It was a fleeting gesture, but both Xu Wei and Bao Kangle caught it at the same time.

Bao Kangle liked Hou Tong. Or rather, Xu Wei had instructed Bao Kangle to like Hou Tong.

She had gotten him into Qiao Mu and placed him in her own class for a reason—to position him close to Hou Tong, a "white swan" from a prestigious background. With Xu Wei as his wingman, Bao Kangle, an unremarkable "toad," was supposed to seize the opportunity to climb the social ladder.

But Bai Liu—an orphan with no family connections, no outstanding academic achievements, no wealth—had unknowingly disrupted those plans.

All because Hou Tong liked looking at him.

Hou Tong's voice rang out, cheerful. "Good afternoon, teacher!"

"Good afternoon, everyone," Xu Wei replied with a nod. "Sit down."

The students moved to obey—

"Wait," Xu Wei said, flipping through the attendance roll. Her tone was indifferent. "Bai Liu, remain standing."

Bai Liu didn't react as the others paused.

"You scored an 83 on your English exam this time," Xu Wei continued,

her voice sharp. "Half of your completion blanks were wrong. I don't know how you manage to listen in class and still do so poorly."

She sighed, shaking her head. "I know you were born into unfortunate circumstances, that you don’t have parents to guide you. But that should be all the more reason for you to work harder."

A faint glimmer of satisfaction flickered in her eyes as she looked down at him.

"Bai Liu, you are different from the other students in this class. They have parents, they have futures. You sit here by the grace of social welfare. I hope you can carry yourself accordingly and consider where you’re headed in life."

Her lips curled slightly. "You'll stand for the remainder of this lesson."

The classroom erupted into laughter. Someone snickered, "Be grateful for charity, Bai Liu."

Hou Tong’s head snapped up, her expression one of disbelief.

Bai Liu had only scored 83. He wasn’t even the lowest in the class.

So why was he the only one being singled out?

Qiao Mu Private High School

“The pep rally is at 2 PM. We’ll start half an hour early, go over the paper for twenty minutes, and then take a ten-minute break before the meeting.”

Xu Wei looked up and, as if she didn’t even see Bai Liu standing there, spoke kindly to the other students. “It’s almost May. It’s hot, and we’ll be standing for two or three hours. Drink some water before you head down, and be careful not to get heatstroke.”

“Alright, everyone, turn over your papers.”

The air buzzed with cicadas under the sweltering summer sun. Bai Liu sat in the third-to-last seat by the window in the back row. To his left, the glass framed the world outside, where the heat shimmered in waves.

Dressed in a crisp white student shirt and black trousers, Bai Liu leaned lazily against the curtain, his head tilted slightly as he flipped through his English paper with one hand. The sheer white gauze behind him blurred into a mist-like backdrop.

The collar of his shirt fluttered in the warm breeze, half-covering his pale lower lip. His damp hair clung slightly to his forehead, tousled by the wind, while the broad green leaves outside cast shifting patterns of light onto his lashes, creating a faint shimmer.

Sensing someone watching him, Bai Liu lifted his eyelids. His gaze met Hou Tong’s—she had turned to sneak a glance at him from behind the cover of her paper.

Her face flushed instantly. She whipped her head back around, clutching her chest, took two deep breaths, and pounded her fist on the desk.

Damn, he’s handsome! I’m going to get him!

Xu Wei’s expression darkened as she took in their small exchange. With a dull thud, she slammed the lesson plan onto the podium. “Bai Liu, come to my office for a moment.”

Without waiting for a response, she turned sharply on her heels and strode out.

As Bai Liu gathered his things, a few boys passed by, snickering.

“Another orphan training session?”

“Better work harder for yourself, Bai Liu, so you don’t have to rely on teachers hanging you out to dry~ Don’t let down society and the state that raised you~”

“Fuck off!” Hou Tong slammed her hand on the desk and stood up, eyes blazing as she glared at them. “You’re the ones spouting bullshit! Say one more word, and I’ll slap the shit out of you with a volleyball!”

Hou Tong was tall, beautiful, and a star player on the volleyball team. Coming from a well-off family, she had plenty of admirers.

But she was also terrifying. Not only was she vicious when provoked, but no high school boy her age could stand a chance against her in a fight. Years of training had given her absurd strength—she could probably snap someone in half with a single move.

One unlucky boy once found himself on the receiving end of her wrath. He walked away with a grade 2 concussion.

Since then, no one dared to make crude jokes around Hou Tong.

Seeing her genuinely angry, the boys muttered under their breaths and backed off.

It was an open secret that Hou Tong liked Bai Liu. That was precisely why the boys in the class resented him so much.

Bai Liu turned to her and said politely, “Thank you.”

“N-No problem.” Hou Tong, who had just resolved to flirt with Bai Liu minutes earlier, suddenly found herself scratching at her ears in embarrassment. Now that Bai Liu was earnestly thanking her, she blushed, looked away, and shuffled back two steps. “Go see Mrs. Xu already.”

Then, as if trying to escape, she blurted out, “I-I’ll go get you water and ice cream!”

Before Bai Liu could respond, she bolted.

Bai Liu simply pushed the door open and stepped out, indifferent to the whispers that followed him.

Bao Kangle trailed after him, walking just behind. He shot Bai Liu a hateful glance, purposefully brushing past his shoulder as he sneered. “Going to leech off Hou Tong for free snacks again?”

His lips curled in disdain. “Seriously, Bai Liu, you’ve been drinking her water and taking her ice cream for free this whole time, but I’ve never seen you treat her back, huh?”

Bai Liu lowered his gaze slightly, his voice soft and unhurried. “But… Hou Tong insists on treating me every time. If I refuse, wouldn’t that break her heart?”

Bao Kangle’s face turned red with fury. Bai Liu’s deliberately innocent act—like a sly green tea manipulator—made his blood boil. He cursed under his breath, spun around, and stormed toward the teacher’s office at the end of the hall.

Bai Liu, on the other hand, strolled at his own pace. As he walked, he turned his head slightly to gaze out into the corridor, taking in the familiar sights of his old high school.

Qiao Mu High School is a secluded institution built on a private mountain. It has two large teaching buildings, two dormitory buildings, and separate facilities for exceptional students—a specialized teaching building and a dedicated dormitory.

At the base of the hill stand the General Building and the Laboratory Building. These two structures are similar in size and height, facing each other. From Bai Liu’s seat in the General Building, he has a direct view of the Laboratory Building.

However, the Laboratory Building is clearly superior—better constructed, with more qualified teachers and fewer students per class. Unlike the crowded conditions in the General Building, the Laboratory Building’s classrooms are spacious, clean, and bright. The students there appear well-mannered and composed, in stark contrast to the chaotic atmosphere of the General Building.

Admission to the Laboratory Building is reserved for students with strong academic records, influential backgrounds, or specialized skills. Most of them are guaranteed to secure spots in top universities, whether through the college entrance exam, artistic or athletic achievements, or studying abroad. Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian were among these students during their first and second years of high school.

By the time they reached senior year… Bai Liu's gaze shifted to the far end of the hill, where two other buildings stood.

These buildings, though smaller than those at the base, had been renovated so luxuriously that they barely resembled school facilities. Instead, they looked like high-end apartments, complete with manicured gardens and artificial lakes. These were Qiao Mu High School's pride—the Exceptional Academic Building and the Exceptional Hostel.

It was said that each classroom in the Exceptional Academic Building was twice the size of regular classrooms, equipped with fully digital teaching tools, and provided each student with a personal tablet. There were only ten students per class, each guided by three to four senior instructors.

The dormitory was equally extravagant. Each student had a private room with an en-suite bathroom, measuring 20 to 30 square meters—two to three times the size of ordinary dorms. No more than ten students lived on each floor, attended to by two wardens and a personal cook. Rumor had it that students could order meals at any time, even in the middle of the night.

Bai Liu knew this was no rumor.

On their first day, Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian ordered an entire feast, smuggling the food down the mountain under their clothes for Bai Liu. After calculating the cost, Fang Dian nearly broke down.

"Fuck, this meal cost over a thousand," she cursed, tears welling in her eyes as she stuffed food into her mouth. "Can I resell it?"

"Nope," Lu Yizhan sighed, patting her back as she choked on a bite. "We should just be grateful we even got to bring it down."

Qiao Mu High School was strict with ordinary students. Those from general classes, like Bai Liu, were not even allowed near the Laboratory or Exceptional buildings.

When Bai Liu tried to approach Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian in the Laboratory Building, he was coldly stopped by teachers and security guards.

"Don't you know regular students aren't allowed here? Poor students like you will only distract them."

“Friends? What friends? Students in the Experimental Class don’t mix with poor kids. If you want to be here, stop making excuses and study harder—get into the top 400 in the next exam.”

Yet, the school turned a blind eye to students with special privileges. Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian, ranked first and second in their year, could openly sneak food to Bai Liu without consequence.

After all, how much could three students really eat?

As long as Fang Dian and Lu Yizhan maintained their top rankings, Qiao Mu High School’s reputation would continue to soar. More parents, eager to see their children excel, would send them here.

Bai Liu withdrew his gaze from the hilltop and walked into the teacher’s office around the corner.

Unlike the Laboratory Building, where each teacher had a private office, the General Building housed a collective workspace—one large office where all the teachers on the floor worked together. Gossip spread fast in such an environment.

Standing before the door, Bai Liu lifted his eyes.

“Report.”

“Come in.” Xu Wei didn’t even glance at him, blowing on her rose tea. “Stand in front of me.”

Bai Liu stepped forward, stopping a meter away from her. “Did the teacher need something?”

Xu Wei finally sighed, setting down her cup. She lifted her puffy eyes, sneered, and dropped a few test papers at his feet.

“These are your results from the second round of mock exams,” she said. “Pick them up and see for yourself.”

Bai Liu bent down slowly, gathering the papers.

Math: 72.
Language: 78.
Science: 158.
English: 83.

Total—

“—391 points.”

Xu Wei’s hand slammed against her desk with a loud bang.

“With scores like these, can you even call yourself a student of Qiao Mu High School?”

A snicker came from the side.

Bao Kangle, who had come to get water, muttered under his breath, “He only got in because his parents died. Pretty sure even he’s too embarrassed to say he’s from Qiao Mu.”

Xu Wei shot him a look. “Watch your mouth. Get your water and leave.”

Bao Kangle smirked, glancing at Bai Liu’s test papers before heading for the door. As he walked out, Bai Liu overheard his cheeky voice in the hallway.

“Hey, guess how many points Bai Liu got this time?”

“Didn’t you bet he’d break 400? Missed it by nine points, huh? Hahaha!”

Xu Wei’s cold gaze returned to Bai Liu.

“You’ve dragged down our class average again,” she said flatly. “Do you know how many quality points that costs us?”

She exhaled, pressing her fingertips against her temple. “I don’t expect you to be a top student. But at least act like you value your place here. Do you have any idea how much others had to pay to get in?”

Setting her teacup down, she took a deep breath.

“I won’t compare you to students from normal families—it wouldn’t be fair to you as an orphan. But look at Lu Yizhan.”

She leaned forward, voice sharp.

“He grew up in the same place as you. Do you know his second mock exam score?”

“687.”

“Your score isn’t even half of his.”

She scoffed. “And yet, he still comes from the Laboratory Building to find you in class. Why don’t you learn from him?”

Shaking her head, she muttered, “Honestly, I don’t understand why he even bothers with you. Don’t you feel ashamed standing next to him?”

Bai Liu stared down at the papers in his hands. He blinked, slow and deliberate.

"I don't even ask much of you." Xu Wei scolded until her throat was dry, then took another sip of water from her cup. "I didn't care what you did in your freshman and sophomore years, but it's your senior year now. If you're willing to show up to class, shouldn't you at least take it seriously?"

She glared at Bai Liu, then threw a sketchbook onto the desk, pinning it down with a sharp tap of her red-painted fingernail. "Look at what you're doing in my class!"

The name Bai Liu was scribbled across the cover, alongside a few unfinished equations, the last letters trailing off in distorted strokes.

Bai Liu picked up the sketchbook, his fingers tracing the familiar texture of its cover. Flipping it open at random, he took in the crude sketches scrawled across the pages—then it clicked.

So it’s this book.

He used to skip class often in his early high school years. By the second semester of his sophomore year, Lu Yizhan had found various ways to drag him back, but Bai Liu never really paid attention in class. Most of the time, he drifted off or absentmindedly doodled in his notebook.

This was the very same book he used to sketch in—confiscated by Xu Wei at some point. No wonder he never found it after graduation.

Xu Wei snatched it from his hands before he could turn another page, slamming it back down. She flipped through it angrily, thrusting it toward his face.

"What is this nonsense you've been drawing?!"

Bai Liu lifted his gaze, his expression unreadable, and looked at the sketches.

The drawings, made with blue and red ballpoint pens, were crude but clear enough to decipher.

The first half of the book was filled with depictions of a grotesque female demon with bulging eyes and red-painted nails, being slain in various ways. Occasionally, a grinning toad with a watermelon-shaped

head appeared beside her, as if watching the scene unfold.

But then, the drawings shifted.

A faceless, spindly figure in a school uniform began to appear. The little figure sat alone on the edge of a flower bed, staring down at two ice cream sticks in its hands. There was something desolate about it.

On the next page, a black, tangled mass of lines—roughly the size of a small dog—materialized in front of the figure.

The inky scribbles were vague, as if the artist hadn't fully grasped the shape of the shadow before him, only able to depict it in blurred outlines.

The creature crouched by the little figure's legs. A speech bubble was scrawled beside it:

[Can I have one of those ice creams you're holding?]

The small figure replied with a curt [No give.]

The creature pressed on: [Then can I trade with you?]

The figure hesitated. [Trade for what?]

[For my newly born soul.]

Bai Liu stared at the sketchbook, reaching out to take it.

He didn't remember ever drawing this.

Xu Wei yanked it away before he could touch it. She opened her mouth, ready to scold him further—then hesitated.

Bai Liu was watching her.

His gaze was flat, unwavering.

A shiver ran down her spine. Her voice faltered. "...Why are you looking at me like that?"

She had never seen that expression on him before. For a brief moment, the room felt colder.

Clearing her throat, she straightened her posture, forcing a firm tone. "The teacher is only scolding you for your own good," she said, though

her movements were smaller now, more careful. She gestured toward the book. "Just look at what you've drawn. It's a mess. If you had real artistic talent, I could at least help you apply for art and physical education programs—but this?"

She tapped a fingernail against the page. "Red-nailed demons? That ridiculous toad? It's all too grotesque. They're from those horror games you like to play, aren't they?"

Bai Liu glanced at her red nails. The corner of his lips curled slightly.

"Sort of."

Xu Wei exhaled sharply and flipped to another page. "And these little figures—this one is supposed to be you, isn't it? And what's that… that scribbled mass talking to you?"

She sighed, adopting a feigned look of concern. "You know, with everything happening lately, people are paying close attention to the mental health of senior students. I was worried about you, so I showed your sketches to the school psychologist."

She folded her arms. "They said these kinds of drawings indicate self-imposed isolation. If taken too far, they suggest deeper psychological issues—like lingering childhood fantasies of imaginary friends that haven’t disappeared."

Bai Liu remained silent, his head bowed, fingers gripping the edge of the book.

When Xu Wei saw Bai Liu’s reaction, she couldn’t help but feel smug. She slowly puffed up her chest, her expression turning hypocritical and arrogant.

"Of course," she said, her tone laced with condescension. "It’s not that the teacher doesn’t understand why you have these issues. After all, you grew up in that kind of environment, and with that kind of personality… you didn’t have any friends in the orphanage, did you?"

Bai Liu remained silent.

Xu Wei’s smile widened.

"Senior year at Qiao Mu is very demanding, and stress can easily worsen psychological problems. As you’ve seen, several students have already had difficulties this year. The teachers don’t want you to be

one of them."

She paused, as if considering something, before suggesting lightly, "How about this? I can help you apply for a withdrawal first. Once you're feeling better, you can transfer to another class."

As long as Bai Liu was forced out, her class rankings wouldn't be affected. And more importantly, Hou Tong would stop pestering him.

Seeing that Bai Liu still wouldn't respond, Xu Wei frowned and was about to press further when another teacher approached her desk and tapped lightly.

"Mrs. Xu, we're heading down for the assembly."

"Got it." Xu Wei stood, sweeping one last glance at Bai Liu. "Think it over."

She added, almost as an afterthought, "I'm doing this for your own good."

Outside, the loudspeaker crackled to life.

[All students, please assemble in the playground! All students, please assemble in the playground!]

Students bustled into the hallway, dragging their stools along with them, complaining about having to sit through a pep rally in the 2 PM heat. Almost everyone clutched a frozen bottle of mineral water, their pockets stuffed with sorbet and ice-cream snacks.

Qiao Mu High School wasn't short on resources—no one here would sit through a pep rally without a cold drink or something to eat.

No one except Bai Liu.

He couldn't afford to buy them.

But that didn't mean he couldn't eat them.

"Mrs. Xu kept you for the whole break again," Hou Tong grumbled as she walked up, fishing something from her pocket. She held out a popsicle. "At least let you get a sip of water?"

Bai Liu closed his half-open sketchbook, his gaze flicking to the popsicle in her hand. He thanked her, polite and distant.

"Thanks, but no thanks."

Hou Tong froze, then quickly realized what he was thinking. Before he could turn away, she grabbed his sleeve and hurriedly explained, "I didn't buy it for you!"

"Fang Dian did! She told me to bring it to you!"

Bai Liu paused, turning to look at her.

"I swear, I didn't buy it!" Hou Tong waved the popsicle for emphasis. "Look, it's the cheapest kind—only fifty cents! I wouldn't buy this for you."

She wasn't lying.

Her small pocket was filled with expensive ice-cream bars—seven, eight, even ten dollars apiece. And among them sat a single, cheap, double-stick popsicle that seemed completely out of place.

But it was the kind Bai Liu had eaten the most throughout high school.

During the summer, Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian would pool their money to buy them for him.

"...Thanks." Bai Liu took it, his expression softening slightly. He wasn't as detached this time, his gaze serious. "Please thank her for me."

Hou Tong sighed in relief when he accepted it. But as she looked down at her bag of overpriced ice-cream bars, none of which seemed as valuable as that fifty-cent popsicle, she felt a sharp pang in her chest.

She stomped her foot, her eyes reddening.

Why is Fang Dian any different from me?

Why won't you ever take anything from me?

Bai Liu walked away, casually tearing open the wrapper. Cheap popsicles like these always came with two stick-shaped halves fused together.

Before Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian got together, Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan used to share them—one half for each. It was a good deal.

But after Lu Yizhan started dating Fang Dian, things changed. There were only two popsicles to split between them. Three people made it awkward.

So Bai Liu, the unnecessary third wheel, had quietly removed himself from their little world. While they shared their popsicles, he would leave for the office to get a drink of water instead.

At eighteen, Bai Liu had thought about it rationally:

It was finally time for Lu Yizhan to have his own circle.

He had always wondered why Lu Yizhan kept him around for the past four years. But that question faded once Fang Dian appeared.

Probably because there was nothing better to focus on at the time.

He must have just been bored.

But soon, Bai Liu found himself facing a far greater confusion.

He had assumed Fang Dian's presence would finally set Lu Yizhan on the right path—get into a good university, graduate, land a decent job, get married, have kids, make plenty of new friends. Eventually, his life would drift far away from Bai Liu's.

Their relationship should have ended at half of a fifty-cent popsicle.

Because Lu Yizhan shouldn't have to keep eating these cheap things, splitting them with someone like him.

They were never in the same world to begin with.

It was Lu Yizhan who had been forcing himself.

Forcing himself to be kind. To lower himself.

Wasn't he?

But… that wasn't what happened.

Instead of taking away Bai Liu's half of the popsicle, Fang Dian's arrival had done the opposite.

It had doubled it.

This woman would laughingly buy the same fifty-cent popsicles and

break one in half—giving the extra piece to Bai Liu.

She'd ruffle his hair, grin, and say, "What are you hiding from? I like you too."

Since then, Bai Liu's confusion had only grown.

Because now, instead of one half, he had two.

"Bai Liu!"

A bright, lively voice called out from the crowd.

A girl with a high ponytail, dressed in a school uniform and skirt, waved at him with an easy grin. Sunlight poured over her, making her seem almost dazzling, her warmth cutting through the suffocating air.

"Bai Liu! Over here!"

"Come sit next to me!"

"What are you hiding from?"

Fang Dian closed the distance between them in a few quick steps, grabbing Bai Liu's face and giving it a vigorous rub. When she finally let go, she studied him for a moment, tilting her head as if contemplating something. "Weird… I feel like you've grown up in just a few hours."

Even inside the game, Bai Liu felt his back tense under Fang Dian's thoughtful gaze.

It always seemed like she knew nothing—but at the same time, like she knew everything. Bai Liu had lost count of how many times he'd felt that way since he was a child.

If Spades was a purely instinct-driven wild animal, then Fang Dian was one that also knew how to think for itself—twice as terrifying. Bai Liu had almost never been able to fool her.

Fang Dian's uncanny ability to deduce why Bai Liu was messing around—and exactly what he was thinking—once made him unexpectedly sympathetic toward Lu Yizhan.

…Spending time with someone like this. Bai Liu sighed inwardly. Lu Yizhan, it's lucky you're a good person.

He averted his eyes and changed the subject smoothly. "Come on, how much could I have grown in just a few hours?"

"Hmm…" Fang Dian rubbed her chin, scrutinizing Bai Liu for a long moment before nodding. "You feel like you're twenty-three or twenty-four now. So mature."

Bai Liu, who was, in fact, twenty-four: "…"

"Ah, I'm probably overthinking it!" Fang Dian laughed and threw an arm around Bai Liu's shoulders. "Come on, let's go watch Mr. Lu speak at the pledging ceremony!"

"Lu Yizhan? On stage?" Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "Aren't you in first place? Why is he speaking?"

Fang Dian waved dismissively. "Ah, it's a shame. A student got hit

during a football game a while ago, and his family made a huge fuss with my dad. I got dismissed because of it."

Something stirred in Bai Liu's memory. "That student's name?"

"Bao Kangle." Fang Dian thought for a second before turning back to Bai Liu. "I think he was your English teacher's student? I hit a ball between his legs, and he landed on his ass, scared half to death. His face went completely pale. His mom wanted to storm into our classroom and cause a scene, but since I was in the elite class, a regular English teacher like her couldn't even get in. So, they just pulled me from the pep rally speech, and that was that."

She shrugged, unconcerned. "The way Bao Kangle was screaming, I thought I actually broke something."

Bai Liu: "…"

Well, now he knew where Hou Tong got the habit of breaking bones so casually.

Bai Liu glanced at Fang Dian and hesitated. He wanted to ask, Do you know about Bao Kangle and me? But before he could, Fang Dian caught the change in his expression and frowned.

"What?" She looked puzzled. "Isn't it normal for me to hit people during a game? You and Lu Yizhan got hit too, didn't you?"

That was it.

Fang Dian always made it seem like she wasn't doing anything special—but somehow, she knew everything about you. And because you could never trace her intentions, it all just felt like coincidences or accidents.

You couldn't even owe her a favor. You couldn't even say thank you.

Fang Dian was simply too good at this.

Bai Liu inhaled deeply, his expression momentarily unreadable.

It wasn't unusual for Fang Dian to hit someone with a ball. She hadn't said anything outrageous. But it was true—he and Lu Yizhan had both been hit.

Lu Yizhan had always lingered around the volleyball courts, pretending to look for someone. When Bai Liu had asked him why,

he'd practically panicked, waving his hands frantically and insisting that he was just passing by.

But if Lu Yizhan wouldn't go, Bai Liu would. He was far too curious about what had drawn the usually mild-mannered Lu Yizhan here.

And the answer had been obvious the moment Bai Liu stepped onto the court.

Fang Dian shone. She practically sparkled.

"Steady, don't panic!"

She wore sports shorts and a cropped top, her toned body gleaming with a thin layer of sweat. Her sharp features were lively, and her entire being radiated the exhilaration of someone utterly immersed in the game. Her ponytail bounced with every light-footed movement, her focused gaze locked onto the blue-and-yellow volleyball soaring over the net.

"I've got it!"

"Pick it up! Second pass!"

Fang Dian took two quick steps back and leapt, her flexible waist arching mid-air as her eyes tracked the ball's trajectory. She swung down as if wielding a heavy sword.

"I'LL DO IT—!"

BANG!

The ball struck just inside the white line. The whistle blew. Another point scored.

Fang Dian raised her hand with a dazzling smile. "Good shot! Keep up the good work, everyone!"

"Yes, Captain!"

Meanwhile, Lu Yizhan—who had been looking for Bai Liu—spotted him standing courtside, staring at Fang Dian. His heart nearly stopped.

He sprinted over, panic written all over his face. "Bai Liu! What are you doing!?"

At that exact moment, Fang Dian sent a serve flying over the net—

right onto Lu Yizhan's head.

"OW!" Lu Yizhan yelped, clutching his head.

Fang Dian blinked, then stuck out her tongue.

A teammate called out from behind her. "Captain, you hit someone again!"

"It's fine, it's fine!" She jogged toward them, waving a hand dismissively. "I'll go apologize and see how bad it is."

As Fang Dian approached, Lu Yizhan rubbed his head, blinking dazedly at her. For a moment, they just stared at each other through the wire mesh fence.

The wind blew lightly through their hair and clothes, isolating them from the rest of the world.

Standing between them, separated by the wire mesh, Bai Liu: "…"

…Suddenly, I feel like I'm intruding.

Lu Yizhan turned bright red, fumbling for words. "H-hello, Fang… student?"

His grip tightened around the volleyball. "Is this… your ball?"

As he spoke, he wiped it awkwardly on his uniform and tried to step forward—only to trip over himself.

Still flustered, he glanced up at Fang Dian through the fence. "Um, how… how do I give it back to you with this in the way?"

Bai Liu is beside himself with expressionless thoughts. …You could just walk inside and hand it to her.

Lu Yizhan, aren't you usually a clear thinker? Why are you acting so out of it right now?

Fang Dian leaned against the wire mesh, her whole body still radiating the post-exercise heat. With her hands resting on the mesh, she squinted at Lu Yizhan's face. "Your name is Lu Yizhan, isn't it?"

Lu Yizhan quickly straightened up, holding the ball and shouting reflexively, "Yes, Captain!"

After a moment, he looked confused and asked, "Do you know me?"

Fang Dian couldn't suppress a snort of laughter. "You and I were in the same exam batch. You came second, I came first. My picture's been hanging on the honor roll wall for a semester, so it's not unusual that I know you, right?"

"Oh, right," Lu Yizhan scratched his head in embarrassment, his face turning redder. "I should have known about that picture..."

"It's not very flattering," Fang Dian added generously. "But you're much more handsome in person than in the photo."

Lu Yizhan blushed even harder, looking like he might combust. He forcibly pulled Bai Liu over and seriously introduced him to Fang Dian. "This is Bai Liu, my good friend."

"I know," Fang Dian smiled with an arched eyebrow. "I've seen you two eating together in the cafeteria."

Lu Yizhan gulped nervously, his words stumbling as he asked, "Do you think Bai Liu is a good person?"

Fang Dian turned her head, appearing seriously impressed by Lu Yizhan's earnest question. She stroked her chin thoughtfully through the wire mesh and then scrutinized Bai Liu.

Bai Liu, standing awkwardly by the mesh, thought, ...This feels like a single mother on a blind date, asking if her date can accept raising her child alone.

"I think..." Fang Dian paused, then looked at Lu Yizhan, her expression playful. "I believe in your choice. Yes, I think he's a good person too."

Lu Yizhan, visibly relieved, sat down with a dazed look, tears welling up in his eyes. He murmured, "Thank you for agreeing with my choice, Captain."

From behind, the team urged, "Captain, you're almost done! Stop flirting with cute guys and finish your training!"

Fang Dian waved an OK gesture without looking back. "Give me five more minutes, I'll be right there."

Lu Yizhan scrambled to his feet, wiped his eyes, took a deep breath, and tossed the ball over the mesh. He then tugged at Bai Liu's collar,

attempting to leave. "Thanks, Captain Fang... We'll just go now."

"It's taking you a while," Fang Dian called out.

"Wait!" She caught the ball as Lu Yizhan tried to leave. Her voice dropped to a whisper, "Can you do me a favor before you go?"

Lu Yizhan, already walking quickly toward the exit, froze, then turned halfway, as if too afraid to face her. His voice tightened. "I have to go first. If it's not urgent, Fang... maybe find someone else to help."

"Is that so?" Fang Dian's tone remained calm. "I'll find someone else then. I was playing too hard earlier, and I accidentally unbuttoned one of my underwear buttons in the back. Can you block me, Lu Yizhan, so I can button it back up?"

"Now, Lu Yizhan, since you won't help, I'll just find someone else."

Lu Yizhan: "!!!"

"No way!!!" Lu Yizhan spun around, rushing to Fang Dian's side. When he saw her holding the ball with a mischievous smile, he lost all energy. His face turned bright red, and he muttered, "I... I'll block for you, you can button it."

Bai Liu, who was dragged along by Lu Yizhan, could only stare, numb. Why am I even involved in this right now?

He should be under the net, not in the middle of this situation.

Fang Dian worked quickly, finishing up before Lu Yizhan could run away again. She lowered her voice, whispering, "Lu Yizhan, can I ask you for one more favor?"

"Come closer. I'm too embarrassed to say it out loud."

Lu Yizhan, afraid to run this time, stayed put, thinking that, like earlier, it must be something girls weren't supposed to say aloud. He leaned in, putting his ear near the mesh. "What is it?"

With a smile on her face, Fang Dian leaned in and whispered in his ear, "I want to hit on you."

"Can I get your personal contact info, handsome?"

Lu Yizhan's face turned an even brighter shade of red. His mouth dropped open in shock. "Eh?!"

Bai Liu, standing to the side, turned his eyes away, unimpressed.

So dumb.

Qiao Mu Private High School

Fang Dian is a woman who claims she often hits people by accident, but it's amazing how her balls always seem to fly with such precision. They generally land on only two types of people: those she likes, and those she hates.

At one point, Bai Liu wondered if Fang Dian did it on purpose. But after being forced to watch the game several times, he had to admit—reluctantly—that she hadn't done it intentionally.

He couldn't quite figure it out.

Fang Dian, this perplexingly magical person, was always up to something Bai Liu just couldn't understand.

Take this moment, for instance.

"Are these the ice-cream sticks you've been secretly saving?" Fang Dian, who was about half a head taller than Bai Liu in high school, naturally pinned him down with a laugh, then pulled a bundle of sticks from the pocket of her skirt. "I found them under my bed. You're really good at hiding things."

Bai Liu took the ice-cream sticks from Fang Dian's hands, his expression unnervingly blank for a moment.

Back in high school, many ice-cream manufacturers ran a campaign called "one more," similar to the "one more bottle" promotions for drinks today. If the wooden stick from an ice-cream had "one more" written on it, you could exchange it for another ice-cream at the kiosk.

Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian were always lucky—most of the ice creams they bought had the "one more" stick, and they would leave that stick with Bai Liu.

Rather than eating them, Bai Liu would save the sticks and tie them into bundles, hiding them in a place he felt was safe—like the compartment under Fang Dian's bed.

Lu Yizhan sometimes hid things there too, like money for Fang Dian's birthday present, and Bai Liu would follow his lead.

Now, both suspects—Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan—had been caught red-handed by Detective Fang Dian herself.

"Lu Yizhan actually hid a hundred dollars under my bed," Fang Dian mused. "Was he saving up for a present for me?"

"..." Bai Liu remained stoic. "You don't need to ask me if you've figured it out."

"I'm more curious about why you're suddenly rummaging under your bed," Bai Liu added. "It's heavy and dirty, don't you ever clean it?"

Fang Dian laughed, scratching the back of her head. "I had a feeling you guys would be hiding something there, so I lifted the bedpan and flipped it over. But I didn't expect to find this. Haha."

Bai Liu's eyes narrowed, and he thought: Lu Yizhan, do you really want to spend your life with this horrible woman?

"But I didn't expect you to save these sticks, I thought you'd already eaten them." Fang Dian brought the bundle of sticks up to Bai Liu with a mischievous glint. "Why did you save them?"

Bai Liu's gaze shifted. "I'm saving them to sell for money."

"Lies," Fang Dian dismissed instantly. After thinking for a moment, she shook her head. "How much could this sell for? If you were really going to make money, you'd do something bigger."

Then, an idea seemed to hit her, and she stared at the neatly tied bundle of ice-cream sticks in her hand with sudden realization. "These ice-cream sticks can be redeemed cumulatively! You want to save up for them and treat Lu Yizhan and me to two expensive popsicles, do you?"

Bai Liu, who had been caught dead to rights, didn't answer.

There was no point in arguing in front of Fang Dian, so Bai Liu calmly admitted, "You can't redeem those expensive popsicles. You can redeem only the popsicle that costs $2.50 each at most."

"Holy crap, that's awesome!" Fang Dian rubbed her hands together eagerly. "Two and a half dollars? That's a lovely treat!"

"I haven't had a 'lovely multi' in a while!" she added.

Bai Liu paused. "But you bought it for me."

"Really?" Fang Dian looked up, confused. "Is that how it is? I don't remember."

Bai Liu sighed.

Again.

Fang Dian was so skilled at this trickery that it was impossible to tell whether she meant it or not. You could never gauge what she gave you in return as part of some trade.

The $2.50 treat was something Fang Dian had bought for him the last time she received a scholarship.

Bai Liu had been punished by Xu Wei that day for sweeping the toilets. While he was stuck in the toilets, his classmates Bao Kangle and the other boys cornered him.

He calmly picked up his desk, which had been kicked around more times than he could count, wiped it clean of the "orphan" and "bitch" graffiti, and arranged his soaked textbooks to dry on the windowsill. Then, he walked slowly through the dark school building, his mind preoccupied with thoughts of what Xu Wei might say when she found him the next day.

"Why did you break another set of desks?" Xu Wei would scold. "Do you know how many desks and benches you've broken? Do you know how many desks and benches you've broken? You've been scribbling on your own desk, don't you know that's forbidden by school rules?"

At that moment, Bai Liu couldn't tell her that no one should ever have to scrawl the word "orphan" over and over again, nor should anyone smash desks repeatedly as though in a group fight.

That sort of thing was generally done by hyperactive, low-value teens.

If Bai Liu had said this to Xu Wei, the matter would not have been resolved so easily.

She would have raised her voice, asking: "You mean you're being bullied?"

Her eyebrows would be laced with sarcasm and a sneer. "What kind of families and backgrounds do the students in our class have? I'm sure you know perfectly well. You don't have any real connection to them. If you didn't do something to provoke them, would they really bully you for no reason?"

"Why don't they bully you instead of someone else? Have you looked

at yourself?"

"Is it because you have too many reasons inside yourself to find them?"

Then, a half hour of arguing, name-calling, and finger-pointing would follow, until Bai Liu eventually bowed his head and admitted fault. Xu Wei would then take a long, satisfied breath and dismiss him, saying, "Go to class. Next time, look for your own reasons first."

So, Bai Liu simply admitted it: "I broke it. I'm a bad student. The orphanage will cover the cost of the damage. I don't have to pay for it."

That left Xu Wei with nothing to say but, "Watch out next time. Get out of here."

That evening, as Bai Liu reflected on everything, he unbuttoned his school uniform to let the wind dry his clothes. When he reached the bottom of the school building, he spotted Fang Dian and Lu Yizhan waiting for him.

Bai Liu paused mid-step.

They were holding up a cute multi-flavored cone, with a pair of cheap-looking birthday candles shaped like the number 18.

The candlelight illuminated their faces, which, though tired, still shone with smiles. The soft glow of the candle was warm and bright against the darkness of the building behind Bai Liu.

Fang Dian's face peeked out from behind the cone, her smile lighting up the hallway as if the entire space had been momentarily illuminated.

"Bai Liu, we've escaped down the mountain to find you!" she declared.

Lu Yizhan quickly removed his school jacket and draped it over Bai Liu's thin shoulders, his frustration and worry hidden beneath a mask of concern. "I've told you so many times—when you get into trouble like this, you should come to me. I've spoken to the security guard on the hill. He'll let you out if you come..."

"Not necessarily," Fang Dian interrupted, nudging Lu Yizhan aside and stepping forward. She met Bai Liu's eyes, her expression serious. "I know it's hard to get up the mountain, but if you need us, Lu Yizhan

and I can skip class and come down to help you with these problems."

"Do you need us?" she asked.

Bai Liu met her gaze and was quiet for a long moment. "I don't need you to," he replied softly.

Lu Yizhan, exasperated, cut in quickly, "This is exactly what I'm talking about! Why do you always try to act tough like this?"

Fang Dian, as if not hearing Lu Yizhan at all, nodded at Bai Liu. "Then wait until you do need us," she said gently.

Lu Yizhan turned sharply toward Fang Dian. "Wait until he needs us? If this keeps up, Bai Liu's going to end up completely—"

"Change what?" Fang Dian interrupted, looking at Lu Yizhan with a clear, open gaze. "I really don't think this will change anything about Bai Liu. It's not much of a situation—it's just a bunch of idiots messing around."

"I don't think something this small is going to change Bai Liu. Besides, Bai Liu will talk to us if he needs to. It's not like he's handling this alone."

"We'll always be on his side, Lu Yizhan."

Lu Yizhan fell silent, his anger subsiding. Slowly, he dropped his hand from Bai Liu's shoulder and looked down. "I see. I was thinking too much."

"You've known Bai Liu for so long, and you worry about him," Fang Dian continued, crossing her arms with a mock sigh, though a smile lingered in her eyes. She reached out and playfully nudged Lu Yizhan's head. "But you can't treat him like a kid forever. He'll grow up too."

"He'll go from being a good little kid to being a great adult."

"Isn't that an interesting change?"

Fang Dian lifted her arm and pushed the ice cream cone in front of Bai Liu.

The candle atop the ice cream was more than halfway melted, its flickering light casting a shaky glow on Bai Liu's emotionless face. His damp hair hung loosely, droplets of water dripping down as his dark

eyes reflected Fang Dian and Lu Yizhan standing before him.

"Happy 18th birthday, and happy bar mitzvah, Bai Liu," Fang Dian said cheerfully. "Blow out your candle, make a wish, and then have a bite of your birthday ice cream!"

Bai Liu closed his eyes, then slowly blew out the candle and tore it away before taking a bite of the ice cream, which was already starting to melt.

Fang Dian leaned in next to him, her eyes wide with curiosity. "What does it taste like?"

"Strawberries," Bai Liu replied, pausing. "Didn't you buy it? Didn't you see the wrapper?"

Fang Dian pressed further, "Just one question: What did you wish for? Was it for me and Mr. Lu or not?"

Bai Liu was quiet for a long while. He opened his mouth as if to say something but then simply took another bite of the melting ice cream. "Nothing was promised," he said softly.

"If wishing on some so-called god could make things work, there'd be no need for you or me to take the entrance exams," he added.

Fang Dian sighed, resting her cheek against her hand. "You're so realistic, Bai Liu. Wishing is just an excuse. I don't believe you didn't make a wish."

Bai Liu remained silent, another droplet falling from the end of his hair. He lowered his eyes to the ice cream, now nearly deformed in his hand, and whispered quietly.

"I made a wish... that next year, you'll buy me ice cream that isn't strawberry."

"It's so hard to eat," he added, a slight smile playing on his lips.

Qiao Mu Private High School

It had been more than six months since Bai Liu first tasted the overpriced $2.50 ice cream of his life on his eighteenth birthday.

Since then, Bai Liu had started saving the popsicle sticks Fang Dian and Lu Yizhan bought for him after each treat.

But the sticks weren't safe to leave lying around at school or the orphanage, so Bai Liu hid them in the only place he felt secure—Fang Dian's home.

Now, thinking back, he seemed to remember saving up to...

Bai Liu's gaze shifted to Fang Dian's hands. She followed his line of sight, unfolding one of the popsicle sticks. Her eyes narrowed with a sudden realization. "There are five of them."

"That's not right." Fang Dian rubbed her chin, brow furrowing as she narrowed her eyes at Bai Liu. "If I remember correctly, given how often we've bought you popsicles, you should have seven."

"I don't think you'd be the type to eat two of them yourself halfway through saving them."

She twirled the stick in her hand, then raised an eyebrow. "So, where are the other two?"

Bai Liu: ...

The same woman who had once claimed she couldn't remember buying him a popsicle now had an oddly precise memory of the exact number of sticks.

Bai Liu decided to go with the flow, learning from past experiences. "I don't remember either."

"I don't believe you." Fang Dian wasn't about to let it go. Grinning mischievously, she elbowed Bai Liu's shoulder playfully. "Two missing in one go? Why does this feel like..."

"Who did you treat to a popsicle?"

Without turning his head, Bai Liu slung an arm around Fang Dian's shoulders as they walked toward the playground. "Why would

someone as stingy as me treat anyone?"

"You're not stingy; you're just vindictive and pragmatic," Fang Dian replied with a shrug. "Why would you buy a popsicle for someone who hasn't done the same for you?"

Bai Liu: ...

Fang Dian didn't stop there. Leaning in, her enthusiasm grew. "So now I'm really curious. I haven't heard of anyone other than Hou Tong sharing snacks with you recently, and you haven't taken anything from her. That can only mean one thing!"

Bai Liu glanced sideways at her. "What does that mean?"

"You offered to buy someone a popsicle!" Fang Dian's eyes lit up as she grabbed Bai Liu by the neck, shaking him gleefully. "Who is it? Hou Tong from your class? Wei Shuang from our class? Or Du Yishan, the second-string volleyball player? Who got your 'first kill' out of everyone chasing you?"

"You little iron tree finally blossomed secretly behind my back after being chased by so many people, didn't you?"

Bai Liu, shaken out of his usual composure, replied with a cool, slightly uneven tone. "I'm curious about two things."

Fang Dian stopped shaking him and tilted her head. "What two things?"

"First, how do you connect me buying someone a popsicle with being in a relationship?" Bai Liu's voice remained calm, though his eyes carried a tinge of disbelief.

"And second, why are so many girls from your circle chasing after me?"

"Why would someone like you spend money on someone else if you didn't have feelings for them?" Fang Dian replied bluntly. "I haven't seen you spend money on anyone except me and Lu Yizhan."

"Besides, you didn't even give me two!" She waved the stick in her hand playfully. "Lu Yizhan and I haven't had one yet, but you've invited someone else. Ungrateful, much?"

Bai Liu's expression twitched subtly.

“As for the second question...” Fang Dian scratched her head, looking a bit embarrassed for once. She glanced away before sticking her tongue out. “Isn’t it nice to have so many rich and beautiful women chasing you?”

Bai Liu dismissed the idea without hesitation. “No.”

Most of the girls who pursued him were from Fang Dian’s neighborhood or the volleyball team she played for. They were, as she claimed, rich and beautiful, excelling either in sports, academics, or both. Someone like Hou Tong fit that description perfectly.

Even by Bai Liu’s utilitarian standards, they were objectively “valuable” individuals.

But there was one point Bai Liu couldn’t ignore—Fang Dian’s volleyball teammates were all athletic types.

Which meant...they were exceptionally tall.

Hou Tong: 179.
Wei Shuang: 178.
Du Yishan: 182.

Bai Liu, in high school, stood at a modest 172.5.

Add a little heel height to the girls, and Bai Liu found himself at an uncomfortably perfect height difference for romantic clichés like kissing.

Fang Dian wrinkled her nose and retorted, "What’s so bad about that? If I had so many beautiful people chasing after me, I’m sure I..."

Bai Liu interrupted flatly, "Then Lu Yizhan would cry and hang himself at your doorstep."

Fang Dian paused mid-sentence, "..."

Fair point.

"Eh, I just talk about you casually with them," Fang Dian said, scratching her head in rare embarrassment. "You know me. I like to make sure everyone knows what I’m up to, and you’re interesting, so I might’ve mentioned you a few times while playing."

Bai Liu’s smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. "Like discussing who gets my 'first kill' during games? Auctioning me off to potential suitors and

hosting bidding parties?"

Fang Dian’s eyes widened in horror as she took two steps back. "How did you know?!"

Bai Liu's brow twitched.

He had only found out after graduating, during a drunken confession at a party at Fang Dian’s house. She had openly admitted to holding mock bidding sessions during volleyball practice, where her teammates speculated on his "first love" and who would get to date him. The highest bid had reportedly reached a million dollars for a year of his time.

At the tender age of eighteen, Bai Liu had unknowingly been auctioned off to the highest bidder.

"A lot of people want to date you," Fang Dian had said, laughing as she slurred her words. "Hou Tong said she’d pay a million dollars a year just to spend time with you!"

"If Mr. Lu weren’t around, I’d consider it," Bai Liu had replied sarcastically.

Now, Bai Liu shook his head at Fang Dian’s antics. "You’ve likely added fuel to their fantasies."

"What?! No!" Fang Dian exclaimed, running to catch up with him. She turned to walk backward in front of Bai Liu, grinning as always. "I think it’s just your beauty and charm doing all the heavy lifting."

"After all, you’re actually quite inviting."

"If I were as rich as Hou Tong, I’d pay a million a year to be your friend too," Fang Dian added with a mischievous wink.

Bai Liu gave her a cold, unimpressed look.

Without breaking stride, he extended a hand toward her. “Then we’ve known each other for two years. At a million per year, you owe me two million."

Fang Dian blinked, then placed the five popsicle sticks into Bai Liu’s hand with a mockingly serious expression. "Here’s $2.50 worth of collateral. I’ll put the remaining $1,999,997.50 on credit and pay it later."

With that, she waved and darted off, her ponytail swaying as she called over her shoulder, "Mr. Lu is about to speak on stage! I'll bring him to you later!"

Bai Liu watched her leave, then glanced at the five popsicle sticks in his palm. Slowly, his hand curled into a fist around them.

"Bai Liu!"

A tall high school student with monkey-themed headphones called out as he navigated through the bustling crowd, holding up a bench for support. "Finally found you!"

Mu Sicheng approached, brushing dust off his school uniform before casually slinging an arm over Bai Liu's shoulder. "Wow, Bai Liu. You're still so young… and so small."

Bai Liu looked up, his gaze unamused.

Mu Sicheng immediately stopped teasing. Clearing his throat, he leaned closer and began to report. "I'm identified as a student in Senior Class 4 in the lab building."

Bai Liu's gaze shifted to Mu Sicheng's system panel.

[Based on the analysis of player Mu Sicheng's high school results, player Mu Sicheng in this copy is identified as an honors student and assigned to the experimental class.]

[Classification Class: Senior 4]

Mu Sicheng clicked his tongue. "The system pulled my high school scores—over six hundred points. Looks like it's simulating our academic performances pretty accurately. What do you think about Liu Jiayi?"

"She's never been to high school. She'll get stuck in a bad class, right?"

"You're the bad student," a voice cut in, icy and sharp.

Mu Sicheng turned, startled, to see an eighteen-year-old girl with short hair standing nearby, arms crossed. Liu Jiayi regarded him with mild disdain.

"This system doesn't just simulate the high schools we attended. It predicts where we would end up based on our trajectories," she

explained coolly.

Liu Jiayi stepped up next to Bai Liu and turned her system panel toward him.

[Player Liu Jiayi has no high school results. Simulating her likely outcomes based on available data... Simulation complete.]

[Player Liu Jiayi is classified as an exceptional student and assigned to the Premium Class. (Note: The Premium Class is located at the top of the hill.)]

[Classification Class: Senior Class]

Mu Sicheng gaped. “Why is she an exceptional student? She’s eight years old! Shouldn’t she be in a remedial class?”

Ignoring him, Liu Jiayi continued, “I used my privileges as a top student to gather some information about our group.”

“Tang Erda is in the PE class for art and physical education students, Senior Class 12, in the laboratory building. Muke is in my class, one of the top 100 scorers."

Liu Jiayi paused, glancing at Bai Liu. "So far, our team’s distribution seems decent. We have representatives across different classes. Two exceptional students and no bad students yet."

Bai Liu, the team’s only underachiever: “…”

Bai Liu's expression remained calm as he steered the conversation. "We can argue about who's the best or the worst student later. But let's focus on the real issue first. The main quest requires us to rank first in the exams, but there's a glaring loophole in the mission parameters: no time limit is specified."

Mu Sicheng blinked, tilting his head in confusion. "No time limit? What's that supposed to mean?"

Suddenly, Muke's even voice interrupted. "Exactly what he said." He adjusted his gold-rimmed glasses and continued seriously, "The quest doesn't specify when we need to achieve this first-place ranking."

Mu Sicheng flinched, nearly tripping over his own feet. "Damn it, when did you sneak in?!"

"I came with Jiayi," Muke replied smoothly, his tone lightening. "We're both 'special needs' students."

Mu Sicheng froze, defensive. "Hey, special needs students are awesome, okay?!"

Shaking off the awkwardness, Mu Sicheng opened his system panel and pointed to the countdown. "It says fifty days until the entrance exam, so doesn't that mean we have fifty days to complete the quest?"

Muke shook his head politely. "That's just the countdown to the exam date. The system doesn't explicitly state that it's the deadline for the quest."

"Then how else could it work?" Mu Sicheng frowned, his voice rising in irritation. "It can't be less than fifty days—what, seven days or something ridiculous?!"

[System Alert: Congratulations, player Mu Sicheng, for unlocking hidden information about the main quest: [Quest Duration].]

[The main quest has been updated: Achieve first place in the university entrance examination within seven days.]

Mu Sicheng stared blankly at the system panel before slapping it in frustration. "SEVEN DAYS?! I haven't even finished the third mock exam—how the hell am I supposed to top the whole school in seven

days?!"

Liu Jiayi shot him a flat look. "Oh, because you were totally going to be first in fifty days, right?"

Ignoring Mu Sicheng's indignant sputtering, Liu Jiayi turned to Bai Liu with a grim expression. "This isn't our only problem. The real nightmare is the entrance exam itself."

Her voice dropped. "The system marked me as a 'special merit' student, but I don't have any high school-level knowledge. I can't even begin to function in the Gao Kao session."

Bai Liu's sharp gaze shifted to Mu Sicheng. "What about you? If you took the exam now, could you even crack 600 points?"

Mu Sicheng flinched, scratching his neck awkwardly. "Uh… maybe three, four hundred? Tops? I've sort of forgotten everything."

Bai Liu turned to Muke.

Muke adjusted his glasses again, his expression apologetic. "I studied abroad for high school. I didn't take the exams here, so my score wouldn't be very high either."

"Great," Liu Jiayi muttered, rubbing her temples. "Bai Liu, what about you? You said you scored over a hundred points lower than Mu Sicheng last time. You have a better memory—maybe you haven't forgotten everything?"

Bai Liu's response was calm and immediate. "Still over a hundred points lower than Mu Sicheng."

Silence fell over the group as Bai Liu glanced around, his expression unreadable. "Let's not despair just yet. The game has a solution. There's still a way forward."

Mu Sicheng leaned in eagerly. "Wait, really? You have a plan?"

Bai Liu tapped his chin thoughtfully before asking a question that made everyone groan. "Do you think Captain Tang could be the top scorer in his province?"

Their collective hope plummeted.

"High achiever?" Tang Erda asked, baffled, as the group cornered him to explain the situation. After a moment, he answered seriously, "I

didn’t even take the entrance exam."

Mu Sicheng exploded. "HOW DID YOU NOT TAKE THE ENTRANCE EXAM?!"

Tang Erda rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "I trained with the Heretic Authority. We had promotion exams, not regular ones."

"And maybe," Mu Sicheng tried one last desperate attempt, "you’re just naturally brilliant at high school subjects?"

Tang Erda shifted uncomfortably, coughing into his fist. "Uh… I scored 507 on this copy’s mock test. That’s not great, right?"

Bai Liu grasped Tang Erda’s hands dramatically. "Captain Tang, you are now the hope of our entire team."

Tang Erda: "…"

It wasn’t until Muke quietly compiled their scores and explained Bai Liu’s reasoning that Tang Erda finally grasped the gravity of the situation. He glanced around at the group, his expression one of bemused disbelief. "I never thought I’d be considered the ‘top achiever’ of any team."

His humor quickly faded as his gaze dropped to the system panel, where the looming [seven days] deadline cast an ominous shadow. "But honestly, the time limit is the real issue here. It’s April 25th in this scenario, meaning we’re still 43 days out from the actual exams. How are we supposed to take an exam that hasn’t even happened yet?"

His voice dropped lower. "It’s impossible."

Bai Liu’s expression remained calm and calculating. "There’s no such thing as an unsolvable game," he said evenly. "The key to completing this mission is hidden somewhere in the copy. We just need to find it."

Tang Erda hesitated but nodded, his jaw tightening in determination.

The pep rally felt suffocating.

The headmaster, a sharp-faced man in his forties, strode onto the stage in a pristine suit. His presence immediately commanded attention, though not in the way a respected leader might. Instead, he radiated

an air of arrogance and disdain, his eyes sweeping over the gathered students like a predator sizing up its prey.

"Good afternoon, Qiao Mu High School," he began, his voice clipped and patronizing.

He raised the microphone, amplifying his voice further. "Originally, this pep rally was scheduled for thirty days before the exams. But as I'm sure you all know, certain events forced us to adapt."

His tone turned sharp, venom lacing his words. "Someone decided to contact the education department about... rumors concerning this school. And thanks to their interference, we lost an entire week of valuable study time."

The students remained silent, their heads bowed like prisoners awaiting judgment.

"You're probably wondering why I've brought you here early." The headmaster tapped the microphone twice, producing an ear-piercing screech. His lips curled into a sneer. "It's simple. I want to warn the misguided seniors among you to stop your nonsense and focus on your studies!"

The tension in the air was palpable as his gaze slithered across the crowd, like a snake sizing up its next victim.

"I've told the teachers repeatedly to avoid discussing those... unfortunate incidents," he continued, his voice icy, eyes narrowing. "But some of you thought it would be amusing to stir up trouble, didn't you? Reporting the school and causing chaos?"

A boy in the crowd trembled, his classmates whispering and pointing at him.

The headmaster's smirk widened. "Well? Do you have anything to say for yourself? Stand up and own your actions!"

The boy burst into tears, shaking his head frantically. "It wasn't me! I didn't report anything!"

His protests were ignored as the headmaster gestured for him to be escorted away.

"Take this as a lesson," the headmaster said coldly, addressing the remaining students. "You wasted a week of precious time. Every senior

who fails to meet their potential this year will have you to blame. You will be the reason for their failure."

The crowd fell into a suffocating silence, each student shrinking under the weight of his words.

Satisfied, the headmaster nodded. "Good. Now, let's hear from one of our top performers. Please welcome Lu Yizhan, who scored 687 on the most recent exams. He'll share his insights and lead the pledge."

Polite applause followed as Lu Yizhan ascended the stage. His steps were steady, his posture confident. Unlike the headmaster's predatory demeanor, Lu Yizhan exuded calm authority.

Lu Yizhan took the microphone with a curt nod, pointedly ignoring the headmaster.

He began his speech with practiced ease. His voice was clear and firm, yet carried a weight that silenced even the faintest whisper in the crowd.

"I have two statements to make regarding the report and the tragic deaths of seventeen students," he began, his expression unreadable.

The audience tensed, the headmaster's smirk faltering ever so slightly.

"First," Lu Yizhan continued, his tone unwavering, "the person who submitted that report to the education department was me."

A collective gasp rippled through the crowd.

"Second," he said, his voice sharp as steel, "those seventeen students were not losers. They were victims."

Qiao Mu Private High School

Chapter Notes

> For those who don't know :
> Essentially, GCSEs are exams designed to assess the knowledge, skills, and understanding students have gained across a variety of subjects during secondary school. For international students, GCSEs serve as an equivalent to high school diplomas or certificates in other education systems.

The whole school was in an uproar.

"That's not...?" Mu Sicheng glanced at the young, somewhat familiar face in the stands, frowning as he nodded. "Who is that again? Have I seen him before?"

Tang Erda also frowned.

"Lu Yizhan? Isn't that Bai Liu's best friend? Why is he here as an NPC in the game?" he thought, trying to make sense of the situation.

-- Is it the same situation as with the Rose Factory?

Muke and Liu Jiayi paused when they saw the face and both turned toward Bai Liu, wordlessly waiting for his reaction.

Bai Liu remained calm, offering no explanation.

The headmaster, furious, attempted to climb up and pull Lu Yizhan down from the stage. "What are you talking about, Lu Yizhan?! Get down from there!"

But Lu Yizhan skillfully dodged the approaching headmaster, running around the stands with the microphone in his hand, reading his commentary at breakneck speed.

"These seventeen students were all students who improved to the top 100 in one of their senior exams, went up and then came back down the hill..." Lu Yizhan's voice echoed through the stands.

Mu Sicheng furrowed his brow. "What does it mean to 'go up the mountain and then come back down'?"

As Lu Yizhan continued reading from his script, Bai Liu's calm

explanation from below gradually aligned with his words.

“The students in that area of the hill at Qiao Mu High School are ranked based on their exam results. The top 100 students in each exam get to go up.”

Bai Liu continued, his tone even and measured, "The fact that they went up and then came back down means these seventeen students were not originally in the top 100, but they managed to climb into it through chance in one of the exams—weekly or monthly. However, in a subsequent exam, they fell out of the top 100 and came back down.”

Liu Jiayi, sharp as ever, caught on immediately. She turned to Bai Liu. “You know this school so well, Bai Liu. This wouldn’t be your high school, would it?”

The other four men turned their heads in surprise, eyes fixed on Bai Liu. His face was expressionless as he observed Lu Yizhan, who was still evading the headmaster's frantic attempts to catch him in the stands.

Meanwhile, the headmaster, like a thunderstorm, was chasing Lu Yizhan through the stands. Lu Yizhan continued to dodge with ease, his voice growing louder and clearer as he read from the script.

“Although the police have confirmed the seventeen students did commit suicide, there’s no reason for a series of deaths to occur in such a specific place,” Lu Yizhan’s voice rang out.

“Everyone has the instinct to survive. When seventeen people from the same environment cross the line of instinct and choose death, there must be a compelling reason behind it—a reason that forces them to escape from an environment that makes survival impossible, even at the cost of death.”

Offstage, Liu Jiayi stepped closer to Bai Liu, meeting his gaze directly. "Did this copy land in your high school? What happened back then?"

Bai Liu was silent for a moment before he lifted his eyes. "There weren’t seventeen deaths."

"No one died in my high school, and this copy failed to land."

"Failed to land?!" Tang Erda stared at Bai Liu in shock. "How can a copy fail to land without strong external intervention?"

He recalled the failed landings at the Rose Factory and Ice Age, where the Heresy Bureau had mobilized almost all its resources, resulting in deaths and injuries.

Tang Erda had checked the files on Qiao Mu High School, and it wasn't listed. This meant the Heresy Bureau hadn't intervened, and yet the copy had failed to land on its own without any casualties.

How is that possible?!

Bai Liu lowered his gaze. "A man prevented this copy from landing."

"A man stopped the landing of a copy?!" Tang Erda repeated, almost disbelieving. "And there were no casualties?"

"Mm," Bai Liu replied, lifting his eyes and turning toward the stands. "He wouldn't let innocent people die under his watch."

"He's a rotten person."

Meanwhile, in the stands, Lu Yizhan and the exhausted headmaster were at opposite ends. A crowd gathered around the headmaster's side, trying to catch Lu Yizhan, but he was so agile that even after twenty minutes of running, no one had managed to lay a finger on him.

The students, already riled up, had begun laughing and running around in the same carefree manner as Lu Yizhan.

On stage, Lu Yizhan, with a composed smile, held up the microphone as he calmly negotiated with the group of teachers. "When a school allows seventeen students to choose to end their lives, there must be something deeply wrong with that school."

"These are students who went up the mountain, only to come back down before committing suicide… Have you ever considered, headmasters and teachers, that the problem might not lie with these seventeen students, but with the mountain itself?"

"The mountain?" Muke caught on quickly, sensing the underlying message in Lu Yizhan's words. "Is there some kind of clue hidden on that mountain?"

"You could say that," Bai Liu replied indifferently.

"What's on the mountain?" Liu Jiayi asked, her gaze fixed on Bai Liu.

“Have you figured out how to clear this copy?”

“I have a rough idea of how to clear this copy in seven days,” Bai Liu responded flatly. “Back in my high school, there was a very strange campus legend.”

“A campus legend?” Mu Sicheng asked, intrigued.

Meanwhile, the headmaster in the stands gasped in disbelief, his voice cold and biting. “What could these seventeen students possibly have to do with something on the hill, when they committed suicide on their own?”

Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan turned their heads in unison, both gazing toward the dark mountain looming behind the campus. Their eyes focused on the peak as their voices gradually merged.

“Gaucho Lake on the Hill.”

The headmaster’s expression shifted, as if something had been exposed. He scolded them sharply. “What nonsense! That lake is just an artificial lake for the entrance exam, a ridiculous rumor spread by students! Lu Yizhan, stop spreading these lies!”

Mu Sicheng, still curious, pressed on. “Gaucho Lake? What is that?”

“A man-made lake at Qiao Mu Private High School, situated up on the hill,” Bai Liu explained calmly. “I’ve never been there myself, but those who have say it’s a very beautiful lake, right in the middle of the hill. It’s especially stunning when the moon reflects off it.”

“The reason it's called the ‘lake for the entrance exam’ is because it’s said that every senior who takes the exam must walk around the edge of the lake alone, three times on a moonless night. You must do it on both the front and back sides of the lake, without getting a drop of water on your feet. When you look into the middle of the lake, you’ll see the yellow moon disappear, transforming into a set of yellow tables and chairs.”

“And in the center of that table is a set of papers,” Bai Liu added, his tone steady. “Those are the GCSE exam papers for that year.”

“The so-called Gaucho Lake can predict the exam papers for that year.”

“At that point, you must jump into the lake, dive to the bottom, and

complete the GCSE papers. The marks you get will be your actual marks for that year. If you don't jump in, the tables and chairs will turn back into the moon and vanish under the water."

Mu Sicheng was taken aback. "Isn't that cheating?"

"You could say that," Bai Liu responded nonchalantly. "But supposedly, that's why Qiao Mu Private High School had such a high promotion rate. It's also why so many wealthy and powerful families sent their children here, up the mountain."

"It's all because of the legend of Gaucho Lake."

"In terms of this legend," Muke frowned. "Isn't it troubling that the results of the Gaucho Lake exams are the entrance exam results? Why would so many students go down there?"

Bai Liu replied in a flat tone, "Because they only believe part of the legend."

Mu Sicheng asked rhetorically, "What do you mean by believing only part of the legend?"

"They thought they might actually see the GCSE papers," Bai Liu explained, "but they didn't believe that the marks from the papers done at the bottom of the lake were the real GCSE marks."

Mu Sicheng puzzled, "Why?"

Bai Liu glanced at him before speaking indifferently, "If you took the GCSE paper once underwater and then did the same paper again in the real exam room, knowing the questions and having time to revise and find the originals, would you feel your performance in the first exam would match the second?"

"Of course not," Mu Sicheng responded without hesitation. "If I did the same paper again, I'd get a higher mark because I'd already know the questions."

"Exactly," Bai Liu said, looking away. "That's how the students around me felt, so they all tried, but no one ever really saw much. In the end, the Gaucho Lake legend remained just a legend."

He paused, then added, "But it's also said that some people have actually seen the GCSE papers in the lake."

"There was a girl who fell into the lake in my second semester of senior year," Bai Liu continued. "She said she saw the GCSE papers, but she drowned before she could do them."

"After that, the GCSE lake was filled in."

All four men were shocked. "Filled in? Why?!"

Bai Liu explained calmly, "A student reported that Qiao Mu Private High School was leaking entrance exam questions and provided

evidence."

He paused, then added, "The evidence was a complete set of GCSE papers from that year—six sets, all the questions, said to be the ‘A’ papers."

"A whole set of GCSE papers?!" Mu Sicheng was stunned.

Bai Liu’s gaze shifted to Lu Yizhan in the stands. "The GCSE questions weren’t finished, but the ones given by this student overlapped with most of the questions that would be included in the real exam. As a result, someone came to inspect Qiao Mu Private High School. Afterward, they filled in the Gaucho Lake, fixed up the school, and even changed the GCSE questions for that year. After that, no more students had trouble on the hill."

"The girl who fell in the lake?" Liu Jiayi asked, suddenly aware of the keyword. She tilted her head and looked at Bai Liu. "The system’s background says a girl fell into the lake and died, which led to a series of events. But in your reality, this girl didn’t die, right?"

Bai Liu paused and shook his head. "No."

"She was rescued from the bottom of the lake by a student, carried down the hill overnight, and taken to the hospital, where she was resuscitated. She later sat for the entrance exams and did well."

Bai Liu then looked up at the student in the stands who was excitedly delivering his speech, trying to avoid the headmaster, security guards, and teachers chasing after him.

--The student who rescued the girl from the bottom of Gaucho Lake was Lu Yizhan, who was on the mountain at the time.

From the bleachers, Lu Yizhan delivered an impassioned speech while dodging the headmaster’s pursuit. "I joined forces with four other students who, like me, had concerns about the school system, to speak out about the problems at Qiao Mu Private High School."

"I hope the headmaster deals with this issue fairly and does not vilify students who were not involved."

The headmaster, out of breath and furious, demanded, "Which students were involved?"

"Senior 2, Special Achievement student Bai Jiamu, myself and Liao

Ke," Lu Yizhan listed, "Experimental Class 3, Class 11 students Zhou Gong and Bai Yi."

Lu Yizhan flashed a bright, warm smile. "Five students in total."

The headmaster's furious expression slowly softened as he stopped his chase and stood still, gazing thoughtfully at Lu Yizhan. The teacher next to him whispered in his ear, "Three special merit students and two special merit reserves, all of whom could go to prestigious schools. Lu Yizhan is still a top reserve."

"Principal, perhaps we should handle this lightly and let it go?" the teacher suggested quietly.

Both the headmaster and Bai Liu narrowed their eyes at the same time.

"The killer combination of three exceptional students and two front-row students in the lab class," Bai Liu said calmly, analyzing the situation. "We don't have any advantage. Plus, Lu Yizhan is an excellent student with a great memory. If he takes the college entrance exams now, he'd probably score over six hundred and seventy easily."

Mu Sicheng, still a bit disoriented, asked, "What killer combination? Isn't Lu Yizhan your friend and an NPC at this school?"

Tang Erda, reacting slowly, turned sharply to look at Bai Liu, stunned into silence.

Bai Liu had just implied that the student speaking earlier wasn't the Lu Yizhan they thought was an NPC but a player who had logged into the game—one of their biggest opponents. And the player who had logged in as [Lu Yizhan], Bai Liu's only friend, was now a formidable adversary in this game:

—First Tactician, Judge Against God.

Muke and Liu Jiayi quickly grasped Bai Liu's implication. Liu Jiayi nodded and asked seriously, "Can I ask how many points Lu Yizhan scored on the college entrance exam?"

"718 points," Bai Liu replied coldly. "First place was Fang Dian, with 732 points."

Before Mu Sicheng could fully process who Lu Yizhan was, he was

dumbfounded by the score. "What did you say?!"

"No way we can catch up to those scores, no matter how hard we try." Muke took a deep breath. "We'll lose to them unless we find another way to beat them."

"We can't win through the normal route." Bai Liu's expression turned cold. "Now we have to take the unorthodox path."

"What unorthodox path?" Tang Erda asked, his expression hardening.

Bai Liu glanced at Lu Yizhan on stage, his tone flat. "There are two ways to win in a game like this. The first is to progress step-by-step through the main quest, the typical way of playing a competitive game."

"The second is..." Bai Liu's voice hardened, "...to kill your opponent outright."

Tang Erda snapped his head up. "You're going to kill them?!"

The headmaster on stage finally spoke grimly, "I can let the five of you go this time."

"But from now on, anything that happens on this mountain, you better pretend you didn't see it. Don't say a word about it."

Lu Yizhan laughed. "That's no good, Principal."

"I have eyes to see and a mouth to speak. So let me pretend I didn't see or hear anything—pretend these seventeen dead children don't exist, pretend that you didn't force those kids into the lake to do the exams, or leak the GCSE questions to the offspring of the powerful..."

Lu Yizhan's smile faded, and his expression turned lighter. He drew a massive sword from behind him, one so large it spanned his entire height. Lifting his chin slightly, he looked at the headmaster with an impassive gaze, then curled his lips into a smile.

"An ordinary person like me, who would run away from the scene, also occasionally has some bloodlust and wants to stand up for himself."

With that, he swung the heavy sword downward, the blow landing with a force that made the headmaster stumble backward in terror, trying to escape.

Just then, a snow-white bone whip struck the back of the headmaster, its force enough to make him nearly vomit blood. But before the whip could cause further harm, Lu Yizhan blocked it with his sword.

Lu Yizhan glanced helplessly at Bai Liu, who had jumped onto the stage. "Don't be so radical. Just scare the NPCs. If you kill him and turn him into a monster, we'll be in trouble later."

Bai Liu gave him a flat look, his expression indifferent. "You guessed I would attack you here?"

"I put the bait out so obviously, several of your squad members reported it to you," Lu Yizhan grinned, raising his heavy sword. "If you could resist biting the bait, then it wouldn't be you."

"After all, you don't have many other options, and no one in your team seems good at GCSEs."

Lu Yizhan's smile was gentle as he teased, "Bai Liu, do you regret not studying harder in high school?"

Bai Liu swung his whip again, his tone cold. "Who's to blame for that? Who told you not to mention there was such a game in the future? Otherwise, I would have studied hard to beat you."

"..." Lu Yizhan stood firm, holding his sword as he cried and laughed at the whip. "You didn't study, and now you're blaming me?!"

Bai Liu didn't answer. Instead, he swung his whip again, more forcefully this time.

Lu Yizhan took two steps back to block the strike.

The whip hit the bullet hole in the center of Lu Yizhan's sword—a hole caused by a bullet Bai Liu had fired previously. The hole was surrounded by tiny cracks, the sword barely repaired after it was sent to General Hua for urgent mending.

The sword had been shattered once before, when Lu Yizhan had tried to stop Bai Liu and Spades, blocking their bone whips.

This sword had been with Lu Yizhan for 658 world lines, and he cherished it. But now, seeing Bai Liu's whip strike the fragile spot without mercy, Lu Yizhan winced in pain as if he himself had been hit. He cried out, "Be gentle!"

"I only have this one sword! If you break it, I'll be useless!"

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow, looking at him indifferently. "You won't have a weapon to use? Isn't that a good thing?"

Lu Yizhan: "..."

What a cruel son of a bitch!!!

Fang Dian is right—Bai Liu really is an ungrateful son!

Qiao Mu Private High School

Seeing Bai Liu point to the most vulnerable bullet hole in the heavy sword, Lu Yizhan felt a sharp pang in his heart. He quickly switched his grip on the sword, withdrawing it and transitioning into a tai chi stance. With a swift motion, he lightly thrust the sword, sending Bai Liu onto the stage.

From the stands, Lu Yizhan called out, his tone helpless, "I don't want to fight you anymore. You'll break my weapons."

"I'll find someone else to fight you." Lu Yizhan added, and with those words, he vanished from the stands, replaced by a serious-looking Zhou Gong in a bright yellow school uniform and glasses—the new challenger, the third-generation hunter, Zhou Gong.

Zhou Gong raised his hand in a polite bow, then glanced up at Bai Liu below the stands, offering a slight nod. His voice was sincere and solemn: "Hello, Bai Liu. I am the third-generation hunter chosen by the captain, and a disciple of Mr. Liao. You can call me Zhou Gong."

"My goal in this match is to render you incapable of attacking anyone in front of me or moving." Zhou Gong added, his tone firm.

Bai Liu narrowed his eyes, then leaped up, grabbing the bleachers with one hand, while striking out with his whip. Zhou Gong quickly reacted, retreating and assuming a martial arts stance. With a swift "ahhh" sound, he threw something... a stethoscope.

"Please, Mr. Bai, enlighten me." Zhou Gong held the stethoscope in his right elbow, brow furrowed in seriousness, while his left hand extended flat toward Bai Liu.

Bai Liu: "....."

The situation quickly spiraled out of control as students either gathered on the sidelines to cheer or, for reasons unknown, rolled up their sleeves to join the fray.

Meanwhile, a few teachers and security guards struggled to manage the chaos. Several classes were already in hysterics, calling the police, while the headmaster hid behind a curtain in the stands, trembling.

Lu Yizhan jumped down from the bleachers and hurried to meet Liao Ke, who had come to meet him. Liao Ke couldn't help but glance back

at Zhou Gong and Bai Liu, who were still locked in battle, and asked, "Shall we handle this together?"

"Hmm." Lu Yizhan replied, his expression unreadable, "Bai Liu won't beat Zhou Gong. Let's go deal with the rest of the Wandering Circus crew."

"I thought you were opposed to selecting Zhou Gong as a third-generation hunter." Liao Ke remarked, scanning Lu Yizhan as they ran. "You wouldn't be so quick to pit him against Bai Liu."

Lu Yizhan exhaled deeply, closing his eyes without responding.

The Hunter card in Werewolf Kill, a powerful card that helps the Prophet lead the civilians to victory, has two main functions: protecting the Prophet and eliminating those the Hunter deems werewolves, essentially causing them to self-destruct for the benefit of others.

It could be said that every generation of hunters is designed to eliminate the werewolves, with each generation possessing unique skills tailored for this purpose. However, the skills of the hunters have always been created with the primary goal of eliminating Bai Liu.

The first-generation hunter, Cen Buming, with his skill [Punishment], traps anyone he deems guilty—especially Bai Liu, the person he sees as the most sinful in the world. Once Bai Liu is trapped, escape is impossible.

The second-generation hunter, Tang Erda, known as the [Rose Hunter], uses the [Rose Revolver], and his key skill is [Suicide Bullet]. This skill involves a deadly gamble: whoever is unlucky dies first, ensuring Bai Liu's guaranteed demise due to his luck value of 0.

Then there's the third-generation hunter, Zhou Gong. His skills—[Hypnosis] and [Dream Interpretation]—are unique. This generation isn't about eliminating Bai Liu but monitoring him instead.

Lu Yizhan let out a slow, heavy breath.

At first, he hadn't planned to choose a third-generation hunter. It all began ten years ago, the moment he laid down the knife that killed Bai Liu.

Ten years ago.

Liao Ke stared incredulously at the young, fourteen-year-old Lu Yizhan, still syncing with the world line. He asked in disbelief, "Captain, what did you just say?"

"You want to spare Bai Liu?!"

Lu Yizhan seemed just as stunned by the words himself, feeling guilty yet resolute. He repeated his decision, "I don't think we should kill him."

Liao Ke took a deep breath. "Captain, I haven't been with you since the first world line, but I've served as your vice-captain in countless others. Do you know what you're doing?"

"That's the final world line!"

Lu Yizhan bowed his head, silent for a long moment. When he finally spoke, his voice was hoarse, "But Bai Liu hasn't done anything yet."

"He's not a bad person. We can't kill him."

Seeing Lu Yizhan like this, Liao Ke slumped in his chair, staring at the ceiling, lost in thought. "Captain, I don't understand..." he muttered.

"Even if there's a one in a thousand chance that Bai Liu isn't a bad guy, how can you choose him over so many others?"

"With so many dead already, does it really matter whether he's good or not?" Liao Ke's voice cracked with emotion, and tears welled in his eyes as he faced Lu Yizhan, who remained silent.

"Isn't it more important that these people, who have been good their entire lives, finally have a chance to survive in this world line?"

"Do you even remember who you are and what your role is?" Liao Ke stood up, gripping Lu Yizhan's shoulder with force. "Who told me that it's the Prophet's duty to protect civilians?"

"He's a civilian, too." Lu Yizhan replied steadily, looking up at Liao Ke, his voice calm and firm.

Liao Ke nearly shouted in frustration, "He's not!!!"

"He is." Lu Yizhan's gaze didn't waver as he gently removed Liao Ke's hand from his shoulder. "He hasn't committed any crime. He hasn't done anything wrong, so he is a civilian."

"I know you want to kill him," Lu Yizhan continued, his tone matter-of-fact. "But if you want to kill him, kill me first. Otherwise, I won't let you touch him."

Liao Ke staggered back, as if struck by a punch to the face. His chest heaved with heavy breaths, his emotions bubbling to the surface, but he remained silent.

"I'm sorry." Lu Yizhan whispered, shaking Liao Ke's hand firmly. "I'm not a very good captain."

Liao Ke slowly lowered his hand, a complex expression on his face, and sighed deeply. "It's not your place to say you're incompetent, Captain Lu."

"You're just too competent, but if you were a little selfish, you'd have killed Bai Liu."

"So, what's your plan now?" Liao Ke finally relented, his face etched with exhaustion. "If you're going to let him live, what happens next?"

Lu Yizhan scratched his head awkwardly. "I haven't really thought it through yet."

"But we can't just leave him be. I'll keep an eye on him, make sure his desires remain steady, and prevent him from joining the game."

Liao Ke locked eyes with Lu Yizhan, his tone serious. "How long do you plan to watch him?"

Lu Yizhan paused before answering, "We'll watch as long as we can."

"So your next move for Bai Liu is 'supervision'?" Liao Ke asked, raising his hands in resignation. "But you and I both know that once he enters the game, he'll become a serious threat in just a few rounds."

"You can't just do nothing, Captain." Liao Ke's voice grew insistent. "This is the most basic precaution."

Lu Yizhan remained silent for a long moment before finally looking up and saying, "You train a student with psychological suggestion techniques."

"When the time comes, I'll introduce him to Bai Liu."

Although Lu Yizhan had opened the door and Liao Ke had quickly trained his students, their efforts never came to fruition.

Bai Liu's desires wavered significantly after failing his exams at the age of fifteen.

Liao Ke suggested, "It's time for Little Zhou and Bai Liu to make contact."

Lu Yizhan stood on the windowsill, gazing down at Bai Liu in the orphanage, his fists slowly clenching. "Wait a little longer," he said softly.

"He's not going to enter the game over something so trivial."

Bai Liu was forced to drop out of school at eighteen by Bao Kangle. He failed his entrance exams, and his desires fluctuated drastically.

Liao Ke insisted, "No more delays, Captain Lu!"

Lu Yizhan sat by a flower bed on the campus, staring at the ice-cream stick Bai Liu had saved for him, his voice strained. "Wait a little longer."

"He'll make it through this and won't enter the game."

At twenty-two, Bai Liu faced an accident involving Fang Dian, and his desires shifted once more, dangerously close to pushing him into the game.

"We have to make contact now," Liao Ke said, standing at the corner of the stairs outside Fang Dian's hospital room. He turned to Lu Yizhan, "If we delay any longer, Bai Liu's psychological defenses will only grow stronger, and Little Zhou's hypnosis points won't be buried deep."

Lu Yizhan leaned against the wall, chain-smoking, his voice muffled by the smoke. "Wait a little longer."

"I've folded his memories; he'll forget this part and won't enter the game."

Liao Ke shook his head in frustration, his voice heavy. "This is your last memory fold. Why waste it like this?"

"You and I both know that Bai Liu is eventually going to enter the game. Bai Six won't let him live a normal life in reality."

"It's not a waste." Lu Yizhan exhaled slowly. "Every day Bai Liu stays out of the game is another day he can live a normal life. It's not a

waste."

When Bai Liu was twenty-four, he was laid off.

Despite that, his desires remained stable. Lu Yizhan invited him to dinner, and he found himself a new job, as if the strange events of the past had no bearing on his current life—he moved forward in a normal, ordinary way.

Lu Yizhan sat on the sofa, scrolling through his phone, reading the news:

"Today, in a seaside town, there have been a series of disappearances among innocent tourists. It's suspected that the local townspeople may be involved in robberies..."

"A town renowned for having unearthed the most complete mermaid skeleton ever found..."

Suddenly, Lu Yizhan's phone rang. It was Liao Ke, his voice gravely serious. "You saw it, didn’t you?"

"Bai Six has devolved copies in reality—it's the Little Town of Siren, where Bai Liu’s [anchor] is located."

"He’s about to enter the game. We can't delay any longer, Captain Lu."

Lu Yizhan stayed silent for a long time, staring at the papers Bai Liu had left behind on the coffee table: high school notes, coupons for a hot pot restaurant they’d gone to recently, and two ice-cream sticks in a pencil holder, each with the phrase "one more time" written on them.

He blinked slowly, feeling as though his self-made illusion was shattering.

"Alright," Lu Yizhan said, his voice soft. "Let the third generation of hunters make contact with him. I've buried all my points in the game."

Hearing Lu Yizhan's decision, Liao Ke let out a long, relieved sigh, though his tone remained dark. "But I don’t know if it’s too late. Bai Liu is already twenty-four. Little Zhou may not be able to plant the hypnosis points deep enough into Bai Liu’s subconscious mind."

"I’ll have Little Zhou try as a free community trainee psychiatrist first," Lu Yizhan said. "I’ll recommend him—just tell them he’s providing

unemployment counseling."

That evening, Lu Yizhan went to see Liao Ke and Zhou Gong in the community psychologist's consultation room.

Liao Ke and Zhou Gong exchanged complicated glances as Lu Yizhan entered.

Lu Yizhan seemed to grasp something. "So, is Bai Liu the kind of person who's too guarded for the hypnosis point to work?"

"Not at all," Zhou Gong replied lazily, scratching his head. "The hypnosis went smoothly. Both Mr. Liao and I were surprised at how easily the points were buried in his subconscious."

Lu Yizhan frowned. "Bai Liu trusts you? He's never met you before."

Zhou Gong looked at him for a moment before speaking, pursing his lips. "Bai Liu said you recommended me."

"So he just trusted you?" Lu Yizhan asked, confused.

Zhou Gong nodded. "He thought he had a psychological problem, so he believed that your recommendation to see me was genuine. From start to finish, there was no resistance to the hypnosis points or my consultation."

Lu Yizhan shifted, leaning against the door, a small laugh rising in his throat, though he swallowed it back. His eyes welled with emotion.

"So many people in high school said he had mental problems, and he never believed it... but when it comes to me, he believed it without a second thought."

Lu Yizhan looked up, his expression softening. He smiled faintly, glancing at the silent Liao Ke and Zhou Gong. A tear slipped down his cheek.

"Bai Liu is so gullible."

Liao Ke recalled that moment with a sigh, his voice tinged with sorrow. "Yeah, no one expected it to be so easy to implant hypnosis points in Bai Liu."

He had mixed feelings about it, and so did Lu Yizhan, who had raised Bai Liu as his own.

It was hard to say whether implanting the hypnosis points in Bai Liu had been easier or harder than expected.

Lu Yizhan didn't respond to Liao Ke's words. Instead, he looked away slightly and shifted the topic. "Let's stick to the plan."

Liao Ke returned to the matter at hand, his expression serious. "We'll have Bai Jiamu and Bai Yi hold off Tang Erda and Mu Sicheng, while we handle Muke and Liu Jiayi. That way, Bai Liu and his group won't have any special students left."

"Without the special merit students, they won't be able to make it up the hill to get close to GCSE Lake, and our next move should be quick."

"Agreed," Lu Yizhan said, exhaling slowly. He looked up, his resolve firm. "Let's move."

Muke eyed Lu Yizhan warily as the man blocked his path. With a smirk, Lu Yizhan approached Muke, hefting a massive heavy sword. "I didn't expect you to do so well with your studies abroad."

"I'm flattered," Muke said impassively, stepping back and casually flipping a brightly colored shuriken into his hand. "Your high school grades are as good as Bai Liu said they were."

"Is that so?" Lu Yizhan chuckled, scratching the back of his head. "Bai Liu still talks about my high school grades, huh?"

Muke met Lu Yizhan's gaze steadily. "There's no one else he can talk to but you."

The smile on Lu Yizhan's face faded slightly. He raised his heavy sword slowly above his shoulder. "That's my mistake."

"I didn't let him make more friends in high school."

"But," Lu Yizhan's smile returned, gentle but still carrying a hint of sadness as he looked down at Muke, "the high school crowd didn't deserve him."

"I know there are plenty of good friends waiting for him in the future who will never turn their backs on him."

"That's my cheating as a prophet. There's no point in making him settle for a brief moment of conformity when there are good people waiting for him ahead."

Lu Yizhan's smile grew as a breeze brushed past him, tousling his hair and fluttering the edges of his school uniform. "I'm sure, if Bai Liu had to choose, he wouldn't pick those guys from high school."

"He must have waited six years, until the moment you appeared, to finally make a real friend."

Muke, now cornered by Lu Yizhan, clenched his jaw and bit his lip. His gaze turned cold as he drew his knife and lunged for Lu Yizhan's face. In the blink of an eye, he vanished, reappearing behind Lu Yizhan. With a leap from the wall, Muke aimed his knife at the back of Lu Yizhan's neck.

"It's my choice, and Bai Liu's, to be friends with me! It's none of your business!"

[System Alert: Player Muke uses skill (Flash Strike).]

Without turning around, Lu Yizhan swiftly raised his blade sideways, intercepting Muke's knife. The sudden force caused Muke's body to jerk, his gaze going slack as he trembled.

The knife fell to the ground, disintegrating into countless points of light.

Liao Ke appeared behind Muke, holding up a hypnotic clock that swung back and forth. The stethoscope around his neck was now attached to Muke's heart. Muke collapsed, unable to move.

[System Alert: Player Liao Ke uses skill (Asking for Medical Advice) on Player Muke.]

[System Alert: Player Liao Ke uses personal skill (Hypnotic Point Recovery) on Player Muke.]

[(Hypnotic Point Recovery) can hypnotize a player, commanding them to act based on the hypnotic message. The skill requires physical contact to bury the hypnotic message in reality, which then affects the player in-game once the point is embedded in their subconscious.]

[Information about (hypnosis points) buried in Player Muke's body has been detected. Retrieving data... Retrieval complete.]

[A total of two hypnosis points have been found, along with a memory replay confirming the hypnosis immersion process.]

Muke's mind was in turmoil. His heart, connected to a stethoscope, fluctuated violently with each beat, and a sharp pain throbbed in his head, as if two needles were buried deep inside, piercing outward.

His mind began to involuntarily replay fragments of past memories, as if a videotape of his life's experiences was rewinding rapidly in his head.

"Click."

The tape suddenly stopped rewinding and began to play forward. Muke's head shot up in pain as he stared at the scene unfolding before him.

-- It was Bai Liu, leaving his post.

Bai Liu, in the midst of packing up his belongings, threw his computer aside. At this moment, they had argued, and Muke had always believed their conflict was what had drawn him into the game, as though his exposure to Bai Liu as a player was the catalyst.

But no, Bai Liu wasn't even in the game yet.

As the scene played on, Muke's pupils dilated, and his expression went blank.

-- Lu Yizhan appeared.

Lu Yizhan stood at Bai Liu's vacant seat, collecting the belongings Bai Liu had left behind. Liao Ke was also there, helping to gather Bai Liu's things.

Muke watched the scene, seeing himself approach the two men arrogantly, demanding to know what they were doing there.

Lu Yizhan looked up and smiled at Muke. "We're here to invite you to

play a horror game, Mr. Mu. A game called 'Siren Town.'"

The Muke on the screen frowned. "No, I'm not interested in a horror game developed by Bai Liu. Get out of here."

"You'll play," Lu Yizhan said, his smile unwavering, as though he had already seen Muke's future, as if he knew everything that was about to unfold. "You'll regret doing such an outrageous thing to Bai Liu back then."

Muke waved his hand dismissively. "Security, get rid of them."

The screen froze.

Muke slowly raised his head and looked at Lu Yizhan, whose face remained expressionless. "It was you. You engineered my hypnosis point to get me into the game. You dropped me into Siren Town, made sure I met Bai Liu, who entered the game at the same time, and erased all memories of our contact."

"-- You made me one of Bai Liu's players. A friend. One of the people around him."

Muke's voice trembled with disbelief. "You... you controlled every step of Bai Liu's path once you were in the game, just like Bai Liu did?"

"You could say that," Lu Yizhan replied calmly. "You were indeed placed around Bai Liu by me."

"You are one of my divine cards."

Six months ago, at the Shrine.

Bai Six sat in front of Lu Yizhan, his body half-turned into a stone statue. With a smile, Lu Yizhan rested his jaw on his hand. "Our game is about to begin again."

"With your efforts in this world line, we're starting the werewolf game later than usual," he continued.

"The copy I've chosen this time is Siren Small Town," Bai Six said, flipping over a face-down card depicting a beautiful silver-blue fish tail, its edges corroded into white bone. He smiled at Lu Yizhan across from him. "Traditionally, the first copy I would have prepared for Bai Six in each world line would be The Evil God Ritual – Boathouse."

"In this copy, I will have Bai Six kill his anchor once and for all and follow the path I've designed for the heir of the evil god."

"But," Bai Six's smile faltered, "in a desperate attempt to prevent this copy of the Evil Ritual from entering reality, the Tawil of this world line swam as far as he could. Instead of drifting toward Luming County as I intended, his body washed up in a distant seaside county, becoming The Little Town of Siren."

"But none of it matters," Bai Six said, looking up with a smile. "This world line between Bai Liu and Tawil isn't the same either."

"Perhaps it would have been more powerful for Bai Liu to see Tawil—or Xie Ta's body—in reality than to kill him?" Bai Six mused. "I'm looking forward to the moment when Bai Liu sees the eyes of Xie Ta's corpse, filled with lust, and enters the game filled with both lust and hate, ready for a killing spree."

Lu Yizhan, his face covered with stone spots, slowly raised his head. "I won't let Bai Liu see Xie Ta's body again in reality."

"So what are you going to do about it?" Bai Six chuckled softly. "There's nothing you can do to stop me from making them meet in reality."

"There is a way," Lu Yizhan's voice was so soft it seemed as if only he could hear it. "As long as I... as long as I..."

His voice began to tremble uncontrollably. "As long as I get Bai Liu into the game before you let him see Xie Ta, that's all that matters."

Bai Six went silent for a rare moment before narrowing his eyes and smiling, applauding lightly. "Wow, what a surprise."

"Our prophet did everything he could to keep Bai Liu—the good boy he raised—from entering the game, only to end up sending him into it himself."

Lu Yizhan closed his eyes.

He had personally instructed Zhou Gong to plant hypnotic triggers in Bai Liu's consciousness, allowing him to enter the game under Zhou Gong's subtle guidance.

He had stopped this moment for ten years, never imagining that he would end up creating it with his own hands.

Soon, Bai Liu entered the game, and the werewolf game between him and Bai Six entered its second round.

"This opening makes me curious to see how you'll play Werewolf Kill in this world line," Bai Six said, propping his head lazily on his hand, sweeping the deck in front of Lu Yizhan. A smirk deepened on his face. "Originally, the only god cards in your hand were Prophet and Hunter."

"But you previously housed Mu Sicheng in worldline 0045 and Liu Jiayi in worldline 0068, implanting hypnosis points in Muke's subconscious and essentially semi-housing him."

"Now, you have in your hand a god card with a hunter, a seer, a thief, a sorceress, and a yet-to-be-formed assassin."

"This is the most chips and cards you've ever played against me."

Bai Six sat up slightly, amusement twinkling in his eyes. "It took you so much work, so many sacrifices in so many worlds, to assemble such a complete deck of Werewolf God cards from those derivatives, Lu Yizhan."

"What are you going to do with this deck?"

Lu Yizhan didn't hesitate. "I want to devolve this sacred medal to Bai Liu."

Bai Six crossed his arms and propped his jaw on his hand, intrigued. "Taking a god card from another worldline's werewolf and delegating it to a werewolf in this worldline? That's funny."

"And how are you going to delegate it?"

Lu Yizhan slowly raised his eyes and, with a steady hand, pushed a card toward the center of the stone table. "Devolve by winning against you."

"This time, I'm devolving Muke in Siren Small Town, and he'll be the most consistent backup in Bai Liu's team."

Muke falls into the endless depths of Siren Town. In a panic, he pleads for help on a small TV screen:

"Whoever it is, come and help me!"

Bai Liu, passing by the small TV with his bone whip, is pulled by an

invisible force. He turns back, his expression light, gazing at Muke who is dying and begging for help, tears streaming down his face.

"Please," Muke sobs, tapping the screen. "Help me."

Finally, Muke, from Qiao Mu Private High School, looks up with vacant eyes. His gaze locks onto Lu Yizhan, tears unconsciously flowing down his face. His smile is strange as he speaks, almost as if talking to himself.

"Bai Liu told me earlier that he always felt someone in his life was manipulating him, pulling him down the most dangerous path to seek an end where everyone is safe in the midst of danger."

"He didn’t want that."

"When Bai Six appeared, we all thought the one controlling everything and forcing him onto that path was Bai Six."

Lu Yizhan slowly raised his heavy sword at Muke, who was kneeling on the ground.

"I didn’t expect that," Muke burst out laughing through his tears. "So there’s you, Lu Yizhan."

The heavy sword falls.

[System Alert: Player Muke has zero life and is out of the game.]

Qiao Mu Private High School

Liu Jiayi, amidst the bustling crowd, heard the system announce that Muke had been eliminated. She jerked her head back as students rushed past her in a flurry of activity.

Thoughts raced through her mind at lightning speed, and she quickly reached a conclusion:

— Muke has been sniped, and she's next in the killer sequence!

She was the only exceptional student left in the circus!

Quickly, Liu Jiayi turned and headed toward the location where she knew Mu Sicheng and Tang Erda were. As a witch, she was in control, not much of a fighter, and far too dangerous to be left alone. But she'd never been so far behind in the game for this long.

Bai Liu wouldn't leave her stranded for long—he would come to her aid soon. But this time...

Liu Jiayi took a deep breath and glanced at her phone. Her lip quivered as she saw the row of missed calls from Bai Liu. She couldn't reach him, and in this critical moment, she had no choice but to turn to other forces for support to ensure her own safety. She was the healer—the lifeline of the entire team. She was the one who could never fail, especially not against a strong team like the Killer Sequence.

If anything went wrong with her, the entire team's survival would be jeopardized. Liu Jiayi knew this well and had always protected herself. But unfortunately, her opponents knew this, too.

"Hello, Jiayi." Lu Yizhan dropped down from a tree, a smile on his face as he drew his heavy sword, the tip trailing a deep scratch on the ground. "It's been a while. You've changed so much."

"So have you." Liu Jiayi stepped back, wary, narrowing her eyes. "You've changed more than me, Lu Yizhan."

"Or maybe it isn't a big change after all," she added with a cold voice, "but the true nature you've been hiding for so long is finally out in the open, right?"

Lu Yizhan scratched his face with some embarrassment and let out a

helpless sigh. "Maybe that's how it looks to you guys."

"Not to us," Liu Jiayi shot back. "It's to Bai Liu."

"We've only met you a few times, and we don't care about your face. But Bai Liu cares."

Lu Yizhan's face paused slightly, and he looked up at her with a bemused expression and a faint smile. "True."

"Not many people would care about what face I have," he added, "but Bai Liu is indeed one of them."

Before Liu Jiayi could respond, a stethoscope flew from behind her ear. With a sharp sidestep, she dodged the attack.

A massive cloud of purple poison spiraled up, engulfing the entire area.

[System Alert: Player Liu Jiayi uses Personal Burst Skill (Poison Fountain).]

Liu Jiayi quickly retreated, sprinting through the dense, poisonous fog. She raised her sleeve to cover her mouth and nose as she headed toward the stands.

Bai Liu had planned for her and Muke, the weaker UEs, to retreat to the classroom and stay out of the fight, while he, Tang Erda, and Mu Sicheng—three of the more aggressive players—would target Liao Ke, Lu Yizhan, and Bai Jiamu, using the underclassmen to fight the upperclassmen.

She had already informed Tang Erda and Mu Sicheng that they were coming to join her, and that they had orders from Bai Liu to eliminate Bai Jiamu's team. But the fact that Liu Jiayi hadn't rejoined them meant only one thing:

— These two men were haunted by Bai Jiamu.

And on top of that, Bai Liu was missing...

Liu Jiayi pursed her lips. In such a chaotic situation, the loss of their tactician was disastrous. Without him, their side lacked leadership and couldn't react quickly to the evolving crisis.

As much as she disliked being the healer and tactician at this point, it was the best course of action. She had to bring Bai Liu back to the

contact center!

"Are you trying to get to Bai Liu?" A sturdy figure, trailing a heavy sword, loomed through the thick poisonous fog. His voice was clear and calm, yet carried an unfamiliar sense of oppression. "That won't do."

"It was a difficult task, controlling your tactician," the figure continued, his tone almost detached. "I sacrificed three of my team members just to control him for this long. But now, with that sacrifice behind me—"

"—Bai Liu will move, at least after I kill you."

Slowly, the figure raised his sword with one hand, holding it flat against his arm. Purple smoke slashed down the sides of the blade as it cut through the air.

Liu Jiayi quickly turned and retreated. She knew she was no match for Lu Yizhan's strength, and fighting back wasn't an option. However, she soon found her way blocked.

The stethoscope that had emerged from the smoke twisted into a ring, blocking her path. Gritting her teeth, Liu Jiayi watched Liao Ke emerge from the mist. She jerked her head back to see the figure approaching with the heavy sword.

The figure drew closer, a thick purple mist swirling around him. His head was bowed, his expression unreadable. His left hand was clenched, and his right hand held the heavy sword flat, blood oozing from his shoulder.

—That's the unhealed wound from the gunshot that stopped Bai Liu in the last game.

"Lu Yizhan," Liu Jiayi managed, struggling to maintain her composure. "What do you think will happen if you kill me and take down Bai Liu?"

"Did you have to go this far with Bai Liu, with us?"

"You've changed, Jiayi," Lu Yizhan's figure seemed lighter now, his eyes filled with emotions Liu Jiayi couldn't quite read. But those eyes were deep. "But this isn't a game for good kids."

"Get out of here."

Without effort, the heavy sword swung toward her.

Liu Jiayi's pupils shrank. A figure suddenly penetrated the fog with blinding speed. The figure raised a pair of monkey paws, blocking Liu Jiayi's face. She heard a hiss of pain as the sword's blade scraped against the sharp claws.

The poisonous mist was blown away by the force of the clash, and everything was briefly illuminated by a flash of fire.

Mu Sicheng's chest heaved as he held onto the blade of the heavy sword with a desperate grip. Blood oozed from his hands as he struggled against the weight of the sword, sliding backwards, leaving deep imprints in the ground. Despite the pain, he flashed a gangly smile and raised an eyebrow. "Looks like I'm just in time?"

[System Alert: Player Bai Jiamu has zero life, exit the game.]

Mu Sicheng was covered in cuts from Bai Jiamu's razor blade, his clothes torn. Yet he couldn't hide the smug grin on his face as he looked at Lu Yizhan.

"Sorry for clearing out your players while you were about to take us down."

Liu Jiayi winced and held her forehead. "Muke's been taken out by them."

"Shit!" Mu Sicheng exclaimed in shock, "When did that happen?!"

A silver bullet struck the stethoscope blocking Liu Jiayi's path, causing it to crumple with a crunch before being snatched up by Liao Ke, who was lurking nearby.

Tang Erda, similarly covered in razor wounds, leaned against a wall, changing magazines. "Didn't you hear the system beep when you were fighting Bai Jiamu?"

Lu Yizhan looked over at Tang Erda and Mu Sicheng, both standing in Liu Jiayi's way, watching him with hostility. He sighed, shaking his head. "Bai Jiamu is really a bad boy, isn't he? He was taken out so quickly? Wasn't he supposed to stall for at least ten minutes?"

Lu Yizhan smiled faintly, flipping the heavy sword in his hand, his expression suddenly fierce. "Well, there's no way out now."

Taking a deep breath, he tightened his grip on the sword, his gaze hardening. "I'll finish this with a pair of three."

"You're too arrogant…" Mu Sicheng started, but before he could finish, Lu Yizhan vanished from his spot and reappeared right in front of him.

Lu Yizhan swung the sword from the bottom to the top, its blade already at Mu Sicheng's throat. Mu Sicheng had no time to react, his eyes wide with astonishment. The sword was so close he could feel the air shift as it cut through the space.

For a moment, Mu Sicheng froze, unable to resist at all, his body trembling. He could only back up, the heavy sword looming dangerously above him.

The cold, dangerous look in Lu Yizhan's eyes shattered the image of the gentle tactician that Mu Sicheng had always known. This man, holding a sword to his throat, was no longer the friendly, easy-going one who cared about every player's life.

No. This look—it was the look of a god who had already passed judgment on countless players and heretics. A god who had killed them without hesitation, whose eyes held the cold certainty of someone who had already carried out countless executions.

This was a look that only someone who had already slain so many could possess.

With a swing of his sword, blood sprayed.

"Mu Sicheng, look out!" Liu Jiayi shouted, grabbing his hair just in time to yank his head back from the sword's swing. But it was too late —Mu Sicheng's right hand had been severed.

Leaning against the wall, Mu Sicheng's pupils were dilated as he covered the gushing wound on his hand. He shakily looked up at Lu Yizhan, now drenched in blood—Muke's, Liu Jiayi's, his own, and the blood from the wound on his shoulder.

That sword could have decapitated him with a single blow.

"Who the hell… are you?" Mu Sicheng asked, his voice shaky.

Lu Yizhan looked up with an innocent smile, scratching his head. "Why are you asking this now, in the middle of a fight?" He gave a

sheepish grin, as if he was just some confused high school student.

But his uniform was stained with blood—Muke's, Liu Jiayi's, Mu Sicheng's, and his own.

"Let's see… I have more identities outside of the game. Some call me the Prophet, others the Judge against the Gods, the Reverse God, some call me the Captain," Lu Yizhan said seriously, rubbing his jaw. He smiled and added, "But personally, I prefer to be called Lu Yizhan. Mr. Lu works too."

He then drew the heavy sword from the ground with one hand, the wind ruffling his bloodstained hair. "But in this game, I should only have one identity."

With a gentle smile, he added, "And that's what you're up against."

Qiao Mu Private High School

Lu Yizhan looked across at Liu Jiayi, Mu Sicheng, and Tang Erda, took a deep breath, and raised his heavy sword again.

Three months ago, at the Shrine.

Bai Six looked at Lu Yizhan with amusement. "Are you sure you want to devolve the Witch card? It's one of the few high-level God cards, and a healing card at that. I suggest you think carefully before making a decision."

He smirked. "Besides, didn't Fang Dian want to adopt the Witch card? Are you really going to hand it over to Bai Liu instead?"

Lu Yizhan lowered his head. "…I'm sure."

Bai Six folded his hands under his chin, watching Lu Yizhan with a smile laced with amusement. "The Witch card is a clever one, and in this game, our Werewolf is just as clever. Giving the Witch card directly to the Werewolf… well, he won't necessarily devour it. Instead, he'll likely use it to his advantage, turning it against the Werewolf. Have you thought about what you're doing?"

Lu Yizhan stared at the Werewolf and Witch cards leaning together on the table. He opened his mouth, hesitated for a moment, then exhaled slowly. "I've thought about it."

No wonder.

He hadn't thought about it either. Not fully. He had come this far, yet with each step, it became harder to tell if his choices were right or wrong.

Later, at home.

"Wow, that smells amazing! Lu Yizhan, what are you making?"

As soon as Fang Dian hung up her bag after work, the rich aroma from the kitchen hit her. Eyes lighting up, she hopped excitedly and rushed inside, wrapping her arms around Lu Yizhan's waist from behind. She peeked over his shoulder, her voice brimming with curiosity. "What are you cooking?"

Lu Yizhan, standing in his small kitchen, wore an apron while holding a spatula. He focused on the pan of sizzling oil, flipping the meat with practiced ease. After a moment of silence, he spoke.

"…Wife, do you think Bai Liu would make a good older brother?"

Fang Dian never questioned why Lu Yizhan asked strange things out of nowhere. She simply considered the thought seriously, resting her chin on his shoulder.

"It's hard to imagine that little brat having a sister."

Then, as if picturing something, she suddenly burst into laughter. "I bet he'd bully his sister to the point where she'd get sold off and still help him count the money."

Lu Yizhan licked his lips, his voice dry. "…So, that means he wouldn't be a good brother?"

"No, it fits." Fang Dian smiled, arching her eyebrows. "But he'd be the kind of bad brother who would also protect his sister. The kind who'd brush her hair, take care of everything behind the scenes, and make sure no one but himself could bully her."

Lu Yizhan closed his eyes.

The following day, at the hospital.

"It must be tough for you to take on this case over, Mr. Lu."

The policeman guarding Liu Jiayi rubbed his shoulders, sighing. "How can an orphanage treat children like this? Feeding them mushrooms without testing for toxicity—what were they thinking?"

Lu Yizhan glanced over the officer's shoulder into the hospital room. Liu Jiayi lay in bed, her face pale, with Liu Huai sitting beside her. His voice was barely above a whisper.

"Yeah."

The policeman turned to look at him. "By the way, Mr. Lu, why did you suddenly decide to take on this case?"

Lu Yizhan lowered his eyes. "…No reason. I just happened to have time to take care of it."

The officer clapped him on the shoulder, half-joking. "You really can't stay idle, can you? A hero saving the world, as always."

Hot Pot Restaurant

Lu Yizhan sat across from Bai Liu, his expression unusually serious. Bai Liu had just logged out of the game, still adjusting to reality, when Lu Yizhan spoke.

"I came across a case recently. Can you help me?"

Bai Liu had just broken apart his disposable chopsticks. He lifted his eyes, glancing at Lu Yizhan.

"Sure."

Then he smiled.

"This hot pot is on you."

Inside the Game

Lu Yizhan's heavy sword slashed downward, piercing Liu Jiayi's chest.

Blood spilled from the corner of her lips as she stared at him in disbelief. Yet, she didn't hesitate. As soon as her skill cooldown reset, she flung the first vial of antidote to Mu Sicheng, her voice hoarse.

"Take it, Monkey!"

There was no point in using the antidote on herself. Lu Yizhan was targeting her—if she wasted it on herself, she'd still lose. Better to help a teammate instead.

But he had prepared for this. Every move she made, every retreat she attempted, he countered as if he had fought her hundreds of times before. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't break through his strategy.

In the end, she could only admit defeat.

Liu Jiayi, bloodied and fading, slowly closed her eyes. Her small body slid off the heavy sword and crumpled to the ground.

[System Alert: Player Liu Jiayi's health has dropped to zero. She is out of the game.]

The moment Liu Jiayi vanished, Mu Sicheng clutched the antidote she had thrown him. Tang Erda's stance shifted instantly—from protecting Liu Jiayi and Mu Sicheng to launching an all-out attack on Lu Yizhan.

With Liu Jiayi gone and Mu Sicheng's skills on cooldown, Tang Erda struggled to hold the line alone. He shot a quick glance at the phone in his breast pocket, clenching his teeth.

If Bai Liu were here…

If that guy was with him, one versus three wouldn't even be a problem. Hell, even one versus two would be easy.

But the issue wasn't the numbers.

The issue was that their opponent was Lu Yizhan.

He knew them—knew them too well. He could read their every move and exploit the smallest gaps in their defense. He had already slipped past Tang Erda's guard multiple times.

Frustration burned in Tang Erda's chest as he coldly reloaded his gun, flipping it in his hand before pulling the trigger.

[System Warning: Lu Yizhan's life expectancy has dropped to 28!]

Lu Yizhan looked up at Tang Erda, who was reloading.

For a brief moment, his gaze softened.

The rookie who used to complain about running laps as punishment…

Now, that same trainee had grown into a soldier—one strong enough to stand against him.

This was the second-generation hunter he had chosen. The one he had personally trained and shaped with his own hands.

And yet…

Tang Erda had never even met him before. His fate had been decided by Bai Six and himself, long before they ever stood face to face.

Is this what it means to play God?

What an awful power.

Two and a Half Months Ago, at the Shrine.

"You only have one God-ranked card left."

Bai Six tilted his head, a smirk playing on his lips as he eyed Lu Yizhan—half-petrified, stone creeping up to his waist.

"Are you really going to delegate the powerful Hunter card to Bai Liu?"

Lu Yizhan's voice was hoarse but unwavering.

"Yes."

Bai Six chuckled. "This is a God card even more dangerous and extreme than the Witch card. A Hunter on the verge of madness. You're handing it to Bai Liu just like that? Aren't you afraid the Hunter will take out the Werewolf in a single blow?"

Lu Yizhan slowly lifted his head. His eyes were resolute.

"I won't let anything happen to Bai Liu."

Same day, Heretics Authority.

"Captain Tang." Su Yang stepped forward, a dossier in hand, his expression serious. "A regional police officer contacted us regarding the mushrooms used in the mass poisoning at the orphanage. He suspected they weren't normal. After our investigation, we confirmed it—they weren't."

Tang Erda took the folder. "A sample of the mushrooms?"

He tore open the file bag. Alongside the mushroom sample vial, a surveillance tape tumbled out.

Tang Erda frowned, picking it up. "What's this?"

Su Yang glanced at it. "Hospital surveillance footage of the five surviving children from the poisoning case. Somehow, it was slipped into the folder and sent to us along with the samples."

Tang Erda shoved the tape into the player. The moment the screen flickered to life, his pupils contracted.

The image showed Bai Liu walking in.

"Who sent this?!" Tang Erda snapped, whipping around to face Su Yang. "Who is this person?!"

Su Yang, startled by Tang Erda's reaction, quickly answered, "We checked—his name is Bai Liu. The officer who sent the tape over is called Lu Yizhan."

He hesitated before adding, "I hear they're… pretty close friends."

[System Warning: Player Tang Erda's life points have dropped to 17—imminent danger of zero!]
[System Warning: Player Lu Yizhan's life points have dropped to 15—imminent danger of zero!]

Fire erupted as steel clashed with gunfire. Tang Erda gritted his teeth, staring down Lu Yizhan, who was closing in on him with his heavy sword.

—What the hell? This was the Heretics Authority's melee combat style. Since when did Lu Yizhan fight like this?!

He had never seen Reverse God—or even Lu Yizhan himself—engage in close combat like this.

Lu Yizhan's blade pressed against Tang Erda's shoulder. His eyes, reflected in the cracked steel, were sharp and unyielding—the gaze of a true judge, a man who had cut down countless heretics and sinners.

Tang Erda let out a choked, breathless laugh. "Where did you learn to fight like this?"

Lu Yizhan's right shoulder was drenched in blood. He coughed, red staining the corners of his lips. His grip tightened. His voice was soft but unwavering.

"I created this method. Specifically to deal with heretics."

Tang Erda's pupils shrank. "You're the first detachment captain who committed suicide ten years ago?!"

Lu Yizhan exhaled, pale-faced, then suddenly smiled, his eyes curving with an eerie gentleness.

"Such a heavy title," he murmured. "I'd rather you just call me senior."

With that, his heavy sword flipped and slashed across Tang Erda's throat.

[System Alert: Player Tang Erda has reached zero life points and is out of the game.]

Mu Sicheng's severed right hand regrew as the antidote Liu Jiayi had thrown at him took effect. But his skills were still on cooldown, and he was trapped—tightly bound by a stethoscope that had burst to life. He grimaced, thrashing against his restraints.

"Let me go!" he yelled.

Liao Ke, watching over him, sighed. "I can't hypnotize him—he's too early in the game. He doesn't have the points I need to plant suggestions. This is the best I can do."

Lu Yizhan turned, dragging his heavy sword behind him. His gaze landed on Mu Sicheng, his expression unreadable.

"Too reckless," he murmured. "Far too reckless."

Mu Sicheng had been an anomaly in his God deck. Before he could even decide how to delegate him, the fool had run straight to Bai Liu and logged in with him. Lu Yizhan had nearly gone into cardiac arrest watching it happen.

And sure enough, in just half a day, Mu Sicheng had already made a mess of things.

At least, the outcome hadn't been disastrous.

Lu Yizhan crouched down, staring at the bound Mu Sicheng, who glared at him with furious defiance. He exhaled a long, weary sigh.

—This guy.

No matter the world line, Mu Sicheng was always the first to die at Bai Liu's hands.

Yet in every timeline, without fail, he was also the first to approach Bai Liu.

Especially in this world line.

Lu Yizhan had deliberately kept them apart, ensuring Mu Sicheng stayed away from Bai Liu, planning to delegate the Thief in a later instance.

And yet, the moment Mu Sicheng caught a glimpse of Bai Liu on the small TV, he had been drawn in—irresistibly, instinctively, almost as if fate itself demanded it.

Mu Sicheng had first approached Bai Liu intending to steal from him.

Instead, Bai Liu had stolen his soul.

But it wasn't just Mu Sicheng.

The Witch, whom Lu Yizhan had believed would poison the Werewolf.

The Hunter, who was supposed to shoot him.

All of them—every single one—had ended up as cards in Bai Liu's hand.

Even himself.

Bai Liu…

Lu Yizhan clenched his heavy sword, lowering his gaze.

—What is it about this werewolf I've watched grow up?

How does he make everyone—every enemy, every adversary—abandon their defenses and willingly offer him their faith, their trust, their very souls?

Lu Yizhan still didn't know the answer.

But instead of finding it—

He closed his eyes.

Bracing himself on his heavy sword, he took a deep breath—

And raised it.

Mu Sicheng panted heavily, his eyes fixed on the heavy sword poised to decapitate him. The muscles in his face were so tense they

trembled.

"…Damn," he muttered, "you've already killed three in a row—couldn't you at least push me around a little first?"

Villains always liked to push before they pushed! Bai Liu liked to push! Lu Yizhan, on the other hand, didn't even give you a chance—he just went ahead and wiped out the entire field without a word!

"There's no time for that." Lu Yizhan raised his heavy sword high, grinning. "If I dragged this out any longer, I'd be the one getting wiped out instead."

The heavy sword fell.

Mu Sicheng clenched his teeth, squeezing his eyes shut. The cold system beep rang in his ears just as a flash of silver cut across his vision.

BANG!

A violent clash echoed as weapons met in front of him.

In the Spectator Pool

Muke, Liu Jiayi, and Tang Erda, already eliminated by Lu Yizhan's heavy sword, sat on the bench with grim expressions. Their heads were bowed, hands clasped in front of them, and not one of them dared to look at the big screen.

Beside them, Wang Shun tried to keep watching, but the moment he saw Lu Yizhan dragging his sword toward Mu Sicheng, his heart pounded wildly. He quickly averted his gaze, his face twisting into the same bitter grimace as the others.

…Shit. He was so nervous he felt like he was going to dry heave. Someone say something.

"I'm half responsible for this," Tang Erda suddenly said, exhaling deeply. "I should've realized from the start that Bai Jiamu's plan was to sacrifice himself to stall Mu Sicheng and me. I should have abandoned the struggle and gone back to support Bai Liu."

"No, it's my fault," Muke countered, his lips tightening. "I let my emotions get the best of me. When I sensed Lu Yizhan's intent, I

should've retreated and regrouped with Bai Liu instead of engaging him head-on."

"Will you two shut up?" Liu Jiayi snapped irritably. "I, the witch who got wiped out in the opening scene, haven't even started taking responsibility. You two don't need to fight over who's to blame."

Wang Shun swallowed hard, struggling to keep his nausea at bay.

For God's sake, could they not say things like that?!

…Jesus Christ, why did it sound like they were holding a post-match review when they were still losing the game?!

And then—

Wang Shun glanced at the big screen again. The moment he saw Lu Yizhan raising his heavy sword for the final strike, his face fell. He groaned and buried his head in his hands.

No! Are they really going to lose their first team match like this?!

Their opponent had only lost one player, while their side had already lost three—and was about to lose a fourth.

The audience wasn't taking it well either.

Wang Shun's system panel kept flashing—every indicator for the Wandering Circus was plummeting. Especially Bai Liu, who had barely clawed his way up to sixth place in popularity—he'd just dropped over twenty spots due to this pitiful performance.

Wang Shun could hardly bear to watch anymore.

But even if he didn't look, the host kept riling the crowd up.

"Oh my god, oh my god!" the commentator exclaimed. "The Reverse God Inquisitor—normally a calm and strategic player who avoids direct kills—is now leading the attack and clearing out players one after another!"

"He's eliminated three opponents single-handedly and is about to take out a fourth! Could he be about to wipe out the entire enemy team by himself?!"

"I never imagined the Reverse God would take on a main attacker role, let alone execute it so flawlessly! Up until now, he's been known

for playing control and roaming positions, adjusting his tactics dynamically to the team's needs. But now, he's proving he can even be the main attacker—he truly is a master tactician!"

As Lu Yizhan's heavy sword descended on the big screen, Wang Shun curled into a ball, squeezing his eyes shut as he braced for the system alert signaling Mu Sicheng's elimination.

[System Alert: Player Bai Yi has zero life. Exiting game.]

[System Alert: Player Zhou Gong has zero life. Exiting game.]

Wang Shun's eyes flew open. He turned toward the player logout display—only to realize he wasn't looking at Mu Sicheng's elimination.

Instead, two members of the Killer Sequence had just been cleared.

Zhou Gong and Bai Yi lay sprawled on the ground, battered and bloodied. The rest of their teammates rushed to their aid, their bodies covered in deep whip marks.

The audience and commentators were dumbfounded.

"W-What just happened?!" the host stammered. "Two members of the Killer Sequence were eliminated back to back?!"

"Who took them out?!"

"There's another player besides the Reverse God clearing the field… Is someone else about to single-handedly wipe out the entire opposing team?!"

The answer was obvious.

All eyes turned to the big screen.

Wang Shun's brain nearly short-circuited.

"Wait, I'm dizzy. I get that Bai Yi got eliminated with an immunity card, but Zhou Gong didn't even have one!" His voice was filled with disbelief. "How the hell did Bai Liu drop his HP to zero and still safely knock him out?!"

Muke's eyes gleamed with an unspeakable intensity as he stared at the screen.

"Because he's Bai Liu."

In-Game

Mu Sicheng's eyes snapped open as the system alert rang out.

Above him, Bai Liu leapt from the first floor of a nearby school building. He landed lightly on Lu Yizhan's right shoulder, pressing down on his back while simultaneously winding his whip around Lu Yizhan's heavy sword and yanking it upward. The blade was wrenched from its downward arc, its hilt dragging away from Mu Sicheng's vulnerable throat.

Bai Liu's eyes were sharp and calculating, his half-loose hair whipping in the wind. A fresh slash ran along the side of his face, and his white shirt—now missing most of its buttons—hung loosely from his frame. His black leather-gloved hands gripped the whip with practiced ease, one holding the hilt while the other pulled taut.

The redirected blade pressed against Lu Yizhan's own neck, forcing him to lean back just in time to avoid a fatal cut. A deep wound opened along his brow, blood spilling down to stain half his face red.

"Captain Lu!!!" Liao Ke's pupils contracted in shock.

"Bai Liu!" Mu Sicheng's voice was filled with elation.

Liao Ke lunged forward, attempting to separate Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan.

Bai Liu smoothly flipped backward, landing effortlessly on the ground. He tossed a small bottle toward the kneeling Mu Sicheng.

"Drink it. Recover."

Then, without another word, he turned and lashed his whip forward once more, diving straight back into the fray.

Mu Sicheng caught the bottle—and then flinched. A cold shiver ran down his spine.

It was an antidote.

…Wait.

They had only been in this game copy for an hour. Even if Bai Liu and

Liu Jiayi had used their system panels efficiently, the antidote's cooldown could have only reset twice at most.

Yet Bai Liu—without using an antidote himself or any attack-type system panels—had just eliminated two members of the Killer Sequence alone, using only his whip.

Mu Sicheng choked back a laugh, his hands shaking as he downed the bitter liquid.

"…Fuck," he muttered, wiping his mouth. "Thank god Bai Liu is my teammate."

Because otherwise, they'd all be doomed.

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng has recovered to 87 life points.]

Bai Liu nodded forward and flung his whip straight at Lu Yizhan—only to be caught mid-motion by a stethoscope thrown by Liao Ke. Without hesitation, Bai Liu let go of the whip, transforming it into a short blade. In the same breath, he flipped a switch on his system panel and vanished.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has used Player Mu Ke's system panel to activate the personal skill (Flashing Strike).]

In the next instant, Bai Liu reappeared behind Liao Ke. The man's pupils shrank to pinpricks, his breath catching as he felt the cold steel of Bai Liu's blade against his neck. Bai Liu's expression held no trace of warmth—only the detached efficiency of a killer. The knife slashed inward without mercy.

Blood gushed from Liao Ke's neck. He choked, coughing violently as his hands instinctively shot up to staunch the bleeding. His mind blurred, teetering on the edge of comprehension.

Trapped.

This guy... Bai Liu...

Lu Yizhan had never been the real target. He had.

Bai Liu never intended to engage in a drawn-out fight against Lu Yizhan, who had a deep health pool and an unknown skill base. Wasting time and resources against him would be inefficient. Instead, Bai Liu had chosen to systematically eliminate the players surrounding

Lu Yizhan—cutting off his support and forcing him into isolation. A tactician like Lu Yizhan, who thrived in team-based strategies, would be powerless without his teammates.

Liao Ke felt a chill even as the blood drained from his body.

This guy... he was analyzing Lu Yizhan's weaknesses before making a move.

Cold. Calculated. Completely unfazed by the losses of his own teammates, as long as his objectives were met. Bai Liu was clearing the backline with ruthless precision.

Lu Yizhan was a weaker player than Bai Liu.

Unlike Lu Yizhan, Bai Liu had Soul Notes in his possession. Even with his teammates falling, he could still utilize their system panels and skills. Rather than engaging in a straightforward exchange—trading three players for three—Bai Liu had opted for a complete tactical sweep, eliminating the Double Captain Fang members first before leveraging his free-flowing solo playstyle against Lu Yizhan's now-crippled team.

These two had been playing the game for nearly a decade.

Lu Yizhan might know Bai Liu well.

But Bai Liu knew Lu Yizhan just as well.

Expressionless, Bai Liu pressed Liao Ke forward, controlling his movement. The short knife in his hand plunged downward, slicing through Liao Ke's body until the tip reached his heart.

Liao Ke let out a strangled grunt. His breath hitched. His body slowly slumped. The stethoscope around Bai Liu's wrist loosened as Liao Ke's fingers lost strength. His head fell against Bai Liu's shoulder, motionless.

[System Alert: Player Liao Ke has reached zero life. Exiting game.]

Bai Liu barely reacted as Liao Ke's blood seeped into his shirt.

Holding Liao Ke's limp body almost tenderly, he lifted his gaze. His face—already stained with the blood of Bai Yi and Zhou Gong—was an eerie contrast to the calmness in his eyes as he looked past Liao Ke...

...straight at Lu Yizhan.

Lu Yizhan, weakly propped up against his heavy sword, met his gaze without surprise. Blood drenched half his face, yet he smiled. As if he had expected this all along.

"It's really you," Lu Yizhan murmured. "You never make a losing deal."

"I took three of your players. You took four of mine."

In the Spectator Pool

Wang Shun watched in stunned silence as Liao Ke's name blinked out of the leaderboard. The blood still dripping from his severed throat on the big screen made it feel far too real.

Wang Shun swallowed hard. "Three... three for four..." he stammered.

Just a minute ago, he'd thought Bai Liu's team was doomed—a five-for-one trade at best.

Now?

Their tactician had turned the tide, eliminating three opponents in a single, calculated sweep.

For a moment, the arena was eerily still. Then—

The crowd erupted.

A deafening roar of cheers, screams, and fists pounding against seats filled the stadium.

Countless voices, hoarse with adrenaline and awe, chanted the same name.

"BAI LIU!!!"

Qiao Mu Private High School

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"The Reverse God is running low on life now—Bai Liu is about to ride the wave!" The host raised his microphone, voice bursting with excitement. "Is he about to pull off a miracle and wipe out the top-ranked team all at once?!"

Then, his tone shifted—almost sympathetic, yet carrying an unmistakable note of amusement. "But unfortunately, that's impossible."

The host's smile deepened as he continued, "Bai Liu himself should be the next one eliminated from the competition."

"The Inquisitor of the Gods is currently at fifteen life points, and Bai Liu—staff, rewind the footage and bring up Bai Liu's life bar in the bottom right corner of the big screen—"

The moment it appeared, the host let the silence stretch before delivering the punchline.

"—everyone, take a good look. He only has three."

The once-deafening cheers for Bai Liu faltered, fading into uneasy murmurs as realization settled in. Spectators sank back into their seats, stunned.

One viewer sneered. "That's it? I thought it was impressive, but in the end, it's just a three-for-four trade that turned into a four-for-four draw."

"Leaving a roaming player on the field at the end… and still losing?"

Another rolled their eyes. "This guy has been pulling these flashy, pointless tactics since he was a rookie. How is he still playing in the playoffs? I've been sick of him from the start. Why the hell is he still around? How is he not dead yet?"

"I don't want to see this kind of player in the finals. It's boring—it makes me not want to bet."

At the front row, Daniel leaned against the railing, lazily twirling his

sniper rifle between his fingers. His ears twitched at the comments, his narrowed eyes gleaming with irritation. Without hesitation, he reached for his gun.

Before he could fully draw it, a hand clamped down on the back of his neck.

"This is a playoff game," Cen Buming said coolly, effortlessly restraining him. "Unless you want to get written up for misconduct, control yourself."

Daniel clicked his tongue in annoyance, but the rifle spun back into place. "Tsk. So I can't even shoot a spectator in the playoffs?"

"Oh, you can." Cen Buming didn't bat an eye. "You'll just get a demerit, lose your standing, and never see your godfather on the field again. You'll be stuck watching him through a TV screen for the rest of your life."

Daniel's fingers froze mid-spin. He exhaled sharply, then slumped back, resting his chin on his hand as he stared at Bai Liu's image on the big screen. His apple-green eyes glowed with a strange, feverish light, his lips curving into a fascinated smile.

"President," he mused, "what do you think my Godfather would say about me now?"

Cen Buming's gaze flicked to the tie Daniel wore—just a little too small for him—then to the damp curls clinging to his fingers, and finally to the bandages wrapped around his sniper rifle.

All three had been acquired after Daniel had held three spectators at gunpoint for daring to grab Bai Liu's personal belongings, all while smiling and exchanging what could only be described as "friendly" words.

Daniel asked again, voice tinged with anticipation—almost childlike. "What kind of godson do you think my godfather sees me as?"

Expressionless, Cen Buming withdrew his hand from Daniel's neck. He wiped his palm clean with a tissue, as if it had been tainted.

—A deranged one.

Meanwhile, the host resumed his analysis.

"It looks like Bai Liu has the upper hand… but with only three life points left, that's misleading."

"The Reverse God is notorious for his defensive abilities and survival skills. In this scenario, if he makes a move, Bai Liu will be eliminated first—meaning both teams will be left with only one player each. A four-for-four trade."

"But!" The host's voice sharpened, drawing the audience back in. "The Wandering Circus will be left without a tactician!"

"A match without a tactician is practically over before it starts. Even if Mu Sicheng—the only one left on the field—has 87 life points, nearly seven or eight times that of the Reverse God, it won't matter."

"The Reverse God is not just a strong player—he's an elite tactician and an exceptional game decoder. Personally, I don't believe Mu Sicheng will be able to take him down, even if he's barely hanging on."

The host raised a hand and gestured toward the large screen, where Lu Yizhan's player stats were magnified for all to see.

"Because we all know the Reverse God's intelligence stat—"

With an air of exaggerated reverence, he grinned and pointed at the screen.

"—The highest in the game. A solid 96."

Liu Jiayi scoffed from the sidelines, unimpressed. "That idiot must have bet on the Reverse God. He's obviously leading the audience into placing bets on him too."

Her expression darkened as she glanced at the big screen, where Bai Liu stood facing Lu Yizhan. "But… he's not wrong. Taking Lu Yizhan out quickly is going to be difficult."

She hesitated, eyes narrowing at the life counter next to Bai Liu's system panel.

"And..."

Her lips pressed together.

"If Lu Yizhan decides to kill Bai Liu, there's nothing we can do to stop him. My cooldown isn't over yet—I already used my antidote on Mu

Sicheng. Bai Liu has no way to restore his life points."

Wang Shun's hands were ice-cold with nerves. "How is he down to three? He doesn't even look injured! Why didn't he just use the antidote on himself?!"

If Bai Liu gets killed, like the host predicted—then what? What's the point of having just Mu Sicheng left on the field?!

Could he even beat the Reverse God alone?!

"Because Bai Liu is gambling."

Mu Ke's voice was tense as he stared at the screen.

"If he hadn't given the antidote to Mu Sicheng, Mu Sicheng would've been taken out instantly by Liao Ke. Bai Liu needed at least two of our players on the field.

"So he bet those three life points on saving Mu Sicheng."

"Bai Liu's only chance of winning," Tang Erda murmured, exhaling slowly, "depends on Lu Yizhan."

His gaze locked onto the screen.

"Lu Yizhan can't see Bai Liu's panel. He doesn't know Bai Liu only has three life points left."

Tang Erda clenched his right hand into a fist.

"It all depends on whether Lu Yizhan realizes the truth—"

"That Bai Liu in front of him can be eliminated with a single hit."

"If he figures it out..."

The air grew heavy.

The next move would decide everything.

A psychological battle between Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan had just begun.

But these two have been friends for ten years. They know each other too well—how could Bai Liu possibly fool Lu Yizhan?

"They're moving!" The host's voice cracked with excitement. "Bai Liu

doesn't care that he only has three life points—he's walking straight toward the Reverse God!"

"Let's see how the Inquisitors against God will respond!"

Wang Shun felt another wave of nausea rise in his throat. He looked away from the screen, his heart pounding wildly. A bitter smile tugged at his lips—he was seriously going to need a motion sickness bag for the next Bai Liu game.

Even with only three life points left, Bai Liu was still taking the initiative against the top-ranked tactician in the entire game.

It was obviously just a bluff, a desperate play—an empty city strategy made to look like a real attack.

...No wonder Charles, the infamous gambler, had taken a liking to him.

Bai Liu had always been the kind of player who placed wild, reckless bets—and yet remained eerily calm even when the odds were stacked against him.

"The Judge against the Gods has moved! He's raising his heavy sword!!!" The host practically roared, his face flushed with anticipation. "Will this be the moment that decides the match?!"

He was midway through his shout, eyes bulging with emotion, about to declare—[The Reverse God has killed Bai Liu with one strike!]—

And then, an explosion erupted on the big screen.

The entire arena fell silent.

A girl appeared out of nowhere.

With a single sweeping motion, she cleared the entire area. She flung her empty pockets to the side, eyes blazing, and without a hint of hesitation, took two quick steps back before launching forward—

—and kicked the Reverse God straight in the waist.

The impact was brutal.

Caught completely off guard, the Reverse God let out a strangled cry, a sharp crack sounding from his ribs as he was sent tumbling across the grass, his heavy sword slipping from his grasp. Gritting his teeth,

he stretched out a hand, bracing himself to rise.

The host choked on his words like a strangled goose. A dry, stunned sound escaped his throat: "What the hell—who is this NPC?!"

On the Big Screen.

Bai Liu, battered and bruised, watched impassively as Fang Dian grabbed Lu Yizhan by the collar and yanked him up like a misbehaving child before turning to walk away.

"Still trying to run? Stay put." Fang Dian crossed her arms, eyes sweeping over the two men with a sharp, no-nonsense glare. "Hands behind your head."

Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan hesitated for only a fraction of a second before instinctively crouching down, heads bowed, hands laced behind their heads.

—Exactly the posture of two criminals caught red-handed.

Mu Sicheng stood frozen in disbelief. He stared at Fang Dian like she was some kind of divine entity—the Buddha who had finally subdued the havoc-wreaking Monkey King.

Fang Dian, sensing another presence, glanced at Mu Sicheng. Her sharp eyes narrowed as she assessed him from head to toe, a thoughtful expression crossing her face.

The weight of that look alone was enough to make Mu Sicheng's survival instincts kick in.

Without thinking, he immediately crouched down in the same position as Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan.

A few beats of silence.

Mu Sicheng, belatedly realizing what he'd just done: "....."

Fang Dian didn't even blink at his reaction. Instead, her lips curled into a grin, flashing her teeth as she waved dismissively behind her. "If you're just passing by, keep moving, class is in session. I'll handle the clean-up."

Mu Sicheng swallowed hard, a chill running down his spine as he

glanced at the two "criminals" crouched in front of Fang Dian—Lu Yizhan and Bai Liu, both tacticians of the highest caliber.

...She was using words like clean up for them?

What a terrifying woman.

Fang Dian squatted down as well, extending a single finger to poke Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan on the forehead. She sneered.

"Well, well. You both really know how to use me, huh?"

She turned to Lu Yizhan first, eyes narrowing. "You. Lu Yizhan.

"You've never been nervous in your entire life—not even when giving speeches in front of thousands of people. And suddenly, today, you're ‘nervous’ and conveniently ask me to run across town to buy you some obscure, dirt-cheap energy drink that just happens to be unavailable on campus?

"So you could get me out of the way while you and Bai Liu duked it out?"

Her voice trailed off ominously.

Lu Yizhan flinched. His shoulders hunched, his head dipping lower as he muttered a sincere, guilty, "...Sorry."

Bai Liu, utterly unfazed, fanned the flames with a casual remark: "Wow. Lu Yizhan actually dared to order you around. How bold."

Fang Dian shot him an unimpressed look. "And you have the nerve to talk."

Her gaze sharpened as she jabbed a finger at Bai Liu’s forehead. "After getting your ass handed to you by Lu Yizhan, you deliberately brought me back here as backup, didn’t you?

"Every time you lose to him, you come crying to me, asking me to beat him up so he’ll think twice before doing it again.

"You're eighteen. Can you please learn how to lose gracefully?"

Bai Liu’s gaze drifted off to the side. "It’s only fair. If someone keeps making my life difficult, shouldn’t I be allowed to return the favor?"

Fang Dian sighed, pressing a finger to Bai Liu’s furrowed brow before

shaking her head.

Her lips quirked up into a bright, exasperated smile.

"Bai Liu. When are you ever going to grow up?"

Chapter End Notes

Youhou!!!! Fang Dian

Qiao Mu Private High School

"Tell me, you two." Fang Dian couldn't help but laugh, resting her chin in her hand as she taunted Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan, who were crouched in a row before her. "What was so serious that you couldn't just talk it out? You had to fight, huh?"

"Two grown men, one swinging a broom, the other flailing a mop, brawling in front of the entire school—don't you have any shame? What is this, kindergarten?"

Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan, heads bowed, responded in unison with a silent thump.

In the game, NPCs perceive players' actions through a special filter—one that rationalizes their behavior in ways that make sense within the copy's world.

For instance, if a player suddenly attacked another, an NPC might see it as a minor scuffle rather than a violent fight to the death. If a player died, the system would seamlessly erase their presence, treating them as if they'd simply transferred out of school.

So, by now, Liu Jiayi, Tang Erda, Bai Jiamu, and Bai Yi—having all been "killed" from the copy—were likely perceived by the NPCs as temporary transfer students who had already moved on.

Every experienced player understood these mechanics, but...

Bai Liu’s gaze flickered down to the whip in his hand. Then to the heavy sword Lu Yizhan was hiding behind his back, his ears burning red with embarrassment. His expression froze for a split second.

...So the system had rationalized his whip as a mop and Lu Yizhan’s sword as a broom?

Did that mean that, to all the student NPCs, Bai Liu had dramatically flung a mop into the stands to challenge Lu Yizhan—who had then brandished a broom and joined him on stage, shouting dramatic one-liners?

...This was humiliating.

Without a word, Lu Yizhan calmly let go of his sword. Bai Liu smoothly put away his whip. Then, as if nothing had happened, they

both turned to look at Fang Dian.

Lu Yizhan—his right cheek smeared with blood—laughed heartily and threw an arm around Bai Liu's shoulder. "Haha, it's nothing serious! We just got a little worked up after losing a game."

Bai Liu, bruised and bloodied, his shirt slightly torn and stained red, nodded without a trace of guilt. "Just some friendly competition. Totally normal. Nothing to worry about."

From the sidelines, Mu Sicheng, still crouched in horror, screamed internally.

LOOK AT YOURSELVES! WHO WOULD BELIEVE THAT?!

A "friendly match" wouldn't have nearly sliced my neck open as collateral damage!

Fang Dian nodded, clapping her hands as she stood up. "Well, it's good you two made up." She smiled, dusting off her hands. "I'll go grab your stuff—got some popsicles along with the drinks."

Mu Sicheng watched in stunned silence as she left, his mind spiraling.

She actually believed them?!

His eye twitched. This had to be the NPC filter at work.

As soon as Fang Dian turned her head, Lu Yizhan, who had been crouching on the ground, immediately averted his gaze to the floor and raised the heavy sword he had just put down.

Bai Liu, holding his bone whip in one hand, slid it down against the blade of the heavy sword, while his knee swiftly met Lu Yizhan's left kick.

Both moved with remarkable speed, as though they shared some unspoken understanding. Almost as soon as Fang Dian stood up and turned her head, they struck in near-perfect silence, the clash of the heavy sword and bone whip sparking brilliantly.

Fang Dian walked over to the plastic bag she had tossed aside, then turned back, saying, "They're a bit melted. Are you still eating?"

Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan instantly withdrew their weapons, both returning to their previous positions, casually hooking shoulders and looking at Fang Dian with friendly expressions.

Lu Yizhan smiled at Fang Dian and gave Bai Liu a hearty pat on the shoulder. "Of course, I'll eat what you bought!"

Mu Sicheng, watching the exchange, was left almost dumbfounded. He had seen Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan appear friendly and calm, but secretly, they had exchanged several blows and were ready to kill each other.

Is this what they call hypocrisy and acting by top tacticians?

Fang Dian, unaware of Mu Sicheng's internal turmoil, grinned and said, "I only bought two popsicles, but they come in pairs, so we can share them among the four of us." She handed one to Lu Yizhan. "Since you and Bai Liu have made up, do you mind sharing this one?"

"You're both long-time friends," she continued, glancing at Lu Yizhan with a soft smile. "Don't let a game win or loss get in the way. Bai Liu was raised by you, and you're like a brother to him."

Lu Yizhan hesitated for a moment, slowly shifting his gaze to the popsicle Fang Dian handed him.

It was a cheap, 50-cent popsicle, wrapped in paper and dripping as it melted. The taste was sugary and reminiscent of the cheapest popsicles from their high school days.

The smell was familiar to both Lu Yizhan and Bai Liu—the unmistakable scent of the simplest popsicle from the local kiosk.

Fang Dian handed it to him with an unspoken tenderness in her eyes, reflecting Lu Yizhan's bewilderment.

"And don't be so afraid of losing to Bai Liu," she added. "It's just a game between friends. If you lose, you lose nothing."

"When has Bai Liu actually won something from you?" she asked with a lighthearted tone.

Lu Yizhan paused for a moment, taking the popsicle and tearing open the wrapping to reveal two sticky, white popsicles, both melting and dripping with water.

The popsicles were frozen together in the middle but could easily be broken apart, looking like two brothers—hence the name "brother popsicles."

With a soft "chomp," Lu Yizhan broke the popsicle in half and handed

the other piece to Bai Liu, who accepted it after a brief pause.

The two men, bruised and bloodied in their school uniforms, sat side by side in the chaos of the playground, each holding a popsicle stick in their left hand, silently biting into their treats.

None of them spoke, the only sound being the quiet crunch of the popsicles.

Lu Yizhan's eyes squinted as a soft summer breeze tousled their hair, lifting the dust and blood from their faces.

In this world, despite the looming threat of the evil god he was about to confront, and the constant worry over the eccentric little brat beside him, Lu Yizhan felt at peace. Surrounded by his ordinary girlfriend, Fang Dian, and his ordinary best friend, Bai Liu, he lived a simple life, free of complications, and would die a simple, happy death.

It was as if all the burdens, all the games that had torn him apart, had never existed.

Lu Yizhan closed his eyes, the weight of his thoughts heavy on him.

Fang Dian, sitting between them with a popsicle in hand, leaned back and looked up at the sky. She held Bai Liu in one arm and Lu Yizhan in the other, chewing slowly as she slurred, "I just gave one to Mu Sicheng. So, what are you two still squatting here talking about?"

Bai Liu turned his head slightly, chewing on his popsicle stick, and asked, "Talking about the game. Do you think there's a way to win the game 100% of the time?"

Fang Dian waved her hand dismissively. "Not in that way."

"But you win every time," Bai Liu said calmly. "Lu Yizhan and I have never beaten you."

Fang Dian shrugged with a cheeky grin. "Because I cheat."

"I play all the games with you guys, but I've buried a lot of hidden points, things only I know about. It's like playing with a secret pass—how can you beat me?"

Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan were both stunned.

"You cheat?!" Lu Yizhan exclaimed, his voice filled with disbelief. "It's

just a little game between us. Do you really have to cheat?"

Fang Dian spread her hands, smirking. "See, I'm just taking advantage of that mentality. It's second nature for me to cheat, which is why you can never win."

Bai Liu paused, deep in thought.

He had wondered many times why Fang Dian always beat him, but never considered that it might be because she was actually cheating.

"I never expected that," Bai Liu admitted.

Fang Dian took another bite of her popsicle, chewing lazily. "Cheating is the easiest way to win a game. It's better to make the rules of the game than to follow them. You all are smart, but there's one thing about me that beats you every time."

She shifted the topic. "So, what do you think is the best way to cheat in the world of gaming?"

Bai Liu looked at her directly. "What is it?"

Fang Dian rolled her eyes playfully, her smile mischievous. "You find someone who can't stand to see you lose, then use their trust in you to exploit their emotional weakness, and win."

"That's why I always win against you. It's just too easy to cheat and win based on your trust in me."

Bai Liu went silent, and Lu Yizhan kept his head down, contemplative.

"But then," Fang Dian continued, gazing up at the clear blue sky, her voice softening, "in my opinion, winning or losing a game between friends doesn't change the relationship."

"At worst, it might test the strength of your bond, but it won't break it."

She paused, as if a sudden thought occurred to her. "Oh, right. I almost forgot. I came to deliver a message from the headmaster."

Her expression froze for a moment, then she looked at them with a serious expression. "You've been punished with confinement and toilet cleaning for allegedly fighting in public."

Qiao Mu Private High School

"Grrrrr! It's not fair!" Mu Sicheng complained sullenly as he mopped the floor. "Why should the poor students get punished for fighting and clean the toilets, while the exceptional ones only have to be locked up on the hill?"

"You're an experimental student, and you'll only be confined for two more days." Bai Liu's tone was light as he wrung out his handkerchief. He was so used to these situations that he didn't think it mattered. He lifted his eyes to glance at Mu Sicheng, who had been cleaning toilets for what seemed like forever, cursing under his breath. "You don't have to clean toilets with me."

Mu Sicheng stopped mopping, propping the mop handle on the floor. He looked at Bai Liu with a questioning expression. "[Bai Liu, are you sick?] "I'm going to be comfortably confined, and I'm just going to leave you here to clean the entire school's toilets by myself?"

Bai Liu met his gaze and wisely swallowed the "ahem" that was about to escape his lips.

"You're my boss!" Mu Sicheng said incredulously. "How can you just let the boss get punished alone?"

"Whatever the punishment is, I'm definitely with you!"

Bai Liu was quiet for a moment, looking away. "As you wish."

He left Mu Sicheng, who was swearing while cleaning, to continue scrubbing the entire toilet with a quick and efficient rhythm. It was clear he had cleaned these filthy toilets a thousand times before.

Mu Sicheng, who was struggling to clean the toilets with none of the skill Bai Liu had, looked up in awe. "You're so good at cleaning toilets."

Bai Liu put the mop in the bucket, picked it up, and walked out of the toilet with a faint smile. "The class teacher probably thinks I enjoy cleaning toilets."

Mu Sicheng paused, dumbfounded for a moment. Then he quickly realized what Bai Liu meant, and his anger flared up. "Damn, this teacher is sick, isn't she? Is she trying to screw you over?"

"I can't say it was intentional." Bai Liu responded evenly. "It's just that I keep breaking the rules, and she has a good reason to punish me."

"Breaking the rules?" Mu Sicheng was puzzled. "What could you possibly do, you're just a high school student?"

"The things I've done should be catching up with me soon." Bai Liu stopped at the door of the toilet, his eyes catching sight of a girl's school uniform skirt peeking out from the corner. She looked slightly flustered, as if she had been caught in a rare moment of hesitation.

Bai Liu turned to Mu Sicheng, abruptly asking, "When you were in high school, did you ever get chased by a girl?"

Mu Sicheng grinned confidently. "Of course, I've been chased! I'm so handsome!"

"So how did you turn them down?" Bai Liu sidled up to Mu Sicheng with a mischievous smile.

Mu Sicheng rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I never really turned them down... they didn't seem to like me directly. It felt more like they just admired the idea of a handsome guy."

Bai Liu's expression went blank. "...Really?"

He was tempted to ask, If these girls never said anything, what made you so sure they liked you?

"Why are you asking this all of a sudden?" Mu Sicheng asked curiously. His expression shifted to something narrower, suspicion creeping in. "You didn't get chased by a girl in high school, did you?"

"Almost," Bai Liu admitted calmly. He spoke gently, his voice smooth. "She offered me a million a year to be her boyfriend until she got bored of me."

"What?!" Mu Sicheng exclaimed in horror. "That's basically a contract!"

"Who is this girl?! The nerve of her!"

Bai Liu slowly looked up, his gaze drifting toward the toilet door.

There, standing in the doorway where she had been hiding, was a girl. She had clearly overheard Bai Liu's words of rejection.

"I don’t understand." Hou Tong’s voice was soft and nasally, and her eyes were slightly red, as if she had been crying. She clenched the side of her skirt nervously. "Why don’t you like me?"

Bai Liu’s voice remained calm. "I don’t understand why you like me."

"I’m a poor student, an orphan from the orphanage. I’ve been punished countless times. Everyone in my class avoids me, and when I first started hanging out with you, it was for your money. I come from a completely different world than you. I’m not the type of person you usually like."

Bai Liu walked up, washed his hands, and took a tissue from his pocket, offering it to Hou Tong, who was now quietly crying. His tone remained light.

"Your feelings are so inexplicable. Can you tell me what exactly it is about me that you like?"

"Because you’re just delightful!" Hou Tong cried, taking the tissue from Bai Liu. She looked away, her face flushed with embarrassment, as if she didn’t want him to see her humiliation. "You’re the first boy I’ve liked this much since high school. I don’t even know how you can be so obnoxious about it."

She paused, wiping her tears, and continued.

"That's not how Fang Dian described you."

"She said you play games and cheat when you lose, that you do things carefully, you remember those who are kind to you, and that although you seem cold, you're actually a very affectionate person who remembers the good in others."

"You and Fang Dian must be close friends, that's why you're fooled by her sweet talk," Bai Liu replied calmly. "I'm not at all like she says I am."

"Who's friends with that Fang Dian woman?" Hou Tong snapped, her frustration evident as she stamped her feet. She turned around, tears in her eyes, and looked at Bai Liu. "She's the woman I hate the most!"

"She's so good at everything. Since I met her, I can't beat her in studies, volleyball, or looks!" Hou Tong wailed. "And if I can't even beat her in having a boyfriend, then what’s left?"

"She's better than me at everything and keeps flaunting it..."

Hou Tong covered her face in despair, squatting down and hugging her knees as she cried, "I've never felt this humiliated in my life."

Bai Liu: "..."

The real reason for his perpetual "peachiness" in high school suddenly became clear.

A dumbfounded Mu Sicheng: "..."

"You..." Bai Liu asked with deliberate calm, turning to Hou Tong, "Why would you think that if I were your boyfriend, I'd be better than Fang Dian's boyfriend?"

Hou Tong looked up at him, her tear-streaked face softening slightly. "Because Fang Dian always said her boyfriend, Lu Yizhan, was the best man in the world. I thought if I found someone better than him, I'd win."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "So, you think I'm a better man than Lu Yizhan?"

"No," Hou Tong huffed, recalling Fang Dian's words. "Fang Dian said her boyfriend was the best man in the world, and I couldn't beat anyone else. So, the only way to beat her was..."

"By finding the worst man in the world to be my boyfriend!" she said, shaking her fist in determination. "Fang Dian said you were the one with the potential to be the strongest bad guy and beat Lu Yizhan, so I had to chase you!"

Bai Liu: "..."

Fang Dian, this woman, is as good at manipulating women as she is at manipulating men.

Mu Sicheng, utterly bewildered, let out a confused "huh?"

Bai Liu's gaze softened as he bent slightly to meet Hou Tong's eyes. He spoke with quiet intensity, "Are you really ready to fall for the 'worst man in the world'?"

"I'm a bad man," he continued, "and if you insist on getting involved with me, there's a good chance I'll take everything from you—body and heart."

Hou Tong looked at Bai Liu, his wounds, the faint red marks beneath his eyes, his bloodied lips, his dark eyes, and the subtle, almost intoxicating aura he emitted. For a moment, her mind went blank, and she stammered.

"F-Fang Dian said that if I could maintain my composure while being with you, I'd never fall for another bad man again..." she whispered, her face flushed. "So being with you before anyone else is... the best deal I could ever get."

Bai Liu leaned closer, a soft, almost flirtatious laugh in his voice. "The best deal, you say?"

"Yeah..." Hou Tong barely managed to get the words out, her face turning red as she avoided his gaze. "I was going to offer you a million a year, so you'd talk to me until I was eighty. That's only sixty-two years, so for $62 million, I'd get the boy I like... and a lesson."

Bai Liu's eyes flickered, raising an eyebrow. "Did Fang Dian tell you all this?"

"Yeah..." Hou Tong mumbled, still blushing. "She said I could easily be tricked by men, but if I learned from you, I'd never be fooled again. You're the most advanced bad man, and if I learn your ways, I'd never fall for someone less clever than you. I could protect myself and my family's business."

Bai Liu gave her a nonchalant glance before speaking softly, as if coaxing her: "What else did Fang Dian tell you about me? Please, Hou Tong, tell me everything."

With a dreamy look in her eyes, Hou Tong replied, "She also said you liked horror games. I've bought a lot, but haven't finished any of them yet." She whispered, "She said if I wanted to win you over, money would help, but I don't think I'll use that anymore."

"Thank you, Hou Tong." Bai Liu straightened, his expression polite but detached. "I need to go clean the other toilets now. We'll talk later."

As Bai Liu turned to leave, Hou Tong, still lost in thought, called after him, "What about that million-dollar deal? Is it still on?"

Bai Liu paused, glancing back. "Now that I'm worth a million, I don't think I can accept it."

"Then name your price!" Hou Tong insisted, undeterred. "I can offer

more!"

"Name my price..." Bai Liu half-turned, smiling faintly as he tilted his head. "How much you offer depends on how much the other guy is willing to pay to compete for me."

"If the price is the same, I would’ve chosen to sell myself to him!"

"Sold to who?" Hou Tong stomped her feet in frustration. "Who else from the volleyball team made you an offer behind my back?"

Qiao Mu Private High School

Mu Sicheng looked at Hou Tong, who was stamping her feet in frustration, tears welling up in her eyes. With the gaze of a warrior, he raised two fingers in a salute before stepping around her to chase after Bai Liu, who had already gone ahead.

"Bai Liu, don’t go alone—wait for me!"

It was 9:30 p.m. The students had finished their evening study sessions, and the building they had cleaned was now empty. Bai Liu walked down the dimly lit corridor, his gaze drifting outside. The dormitory buildings in the distance were sparsely illuminated, suggesting that not many students lived there.

"Wow, this school is packed, but the dorms aren’t even full?" Mu Sicheng followed Bai Liu’s gaze, curiosity piqued.

Bai Liu withdrew his gaze. "They’re not."

Most students at Qiao Mu Private High School preferred not to live in the dorms. Either they attended as day students, picked up by their parents every evening, or their families rented or bought houses nearby.

For many of these students, their entire household seemed to revolve around them, with their families bending over backward to provide the best conditions. The idea of them having to live in a dormitory was considered a disgrace.

The ones who did stay in the dorms were typically from more modest backgrounds—students who prioritized their academics above all else. Bai Liu’s dormmates were no exception.

They didn’t openly antagonize him like others at school did, but their dislike was apparent in a quieter, more passive-aggressive manner.

Whenever Bai Liu touched anything in their shared space, it would mysteriously disappear or get scrubbed down.

For example, if his towel so much as brushed against another person's, that student would wordlessly throw their own towel away, sometimes even doing it in front of him, before coldly stating:

"It’s dirty. I need to buy a new one."

As if discarding a towel made them somehow superior to him.

Bai Liu didn't mind. He saw through their behavior immediately. The more powerful students at school hated him loudly and openly. His dormmates—top students from average backgrounds—wanted to align themselves with that hatred to feel superior. But they were also afraid of the consequences if something serious happened to him.

So they settled for this—petty, posturing hostility.

It was a weak, vain display. But Bai Liu knew exactly how to handle it.

He would accidentally brush against their most expensive clothes and electronics and say, "Oops, I got your computer dirty. I'll throw it away for you so you can buy a new one."

At that, their carefully curated arrogance would crack.

Panic-stricken, they'd rush to stop him, scrambling for excuses.

"It's fine even if it's dirty!"
"I'll clean it myself!"
"You barely even touched it—it's not dirty!"

Bai Liu would feign innocence, "Oh, but I touched it again just now. And again. Now it's definitely dirty. I really should throw it away."

Watching their expressions shift between desperation and barely concealed rage was endlessly amusing.

That was how things were—until something happened later that year. After that, Bai Liu never stayed in the dorms again.

"Eh, now that Reverse God is on the mountain, we can't get up there because of our identity settings," Mu Sicheng muttered, a rare note of frustration in his voice. "But Gaucho Lake is up there too. If he plays it smart and there's moonlight tonight, he could jump into the lake and clear the game just like that."

"Is there any way for us to get up there?"

"There is." Bai Liu's gaze flickered slightly. "And that way will be coming to us soon."

Mu Sicheng blinked. "Huh? What do you mean?"

Bai Liu paused before answering. "Someone will be coming for me soon. They'll go out of their way to force me up the mountain."

Mu Sicheng's eyes widened. "Who?!" He suddenly straightened, then elbowed Bai Liu in the ribs with a knowing smirk. "Ohh, is it that girl from earlier?"

"No." Bai Liu denied it flatly.

Mu Sicheng frowned, but after a moment, his face lit up with sudden realization. "Wait—then it's Fang Dian!"

"No." Bai Liu shook his head again.

Mu Sicheng hesitated, then grinned slyly. "It's definitely Fang Dian, isn't it?"

Before Bai Liu could respond, Mu Sicheng spotted something ahead and let out an excited yell. He grabbed Bai Liu's arm and shook it frantically.

"There she is! Look! She's coming for you!"

At the far end of the corridor, in the shadows near the stairwell, a girl with a long ponytail stood leaning against the wall. As if she had heard her name, she stepped forward into the moonlight with a cheeky grin.

She raised a hand in greeting, her voice casual and playful:

"I snuck down the mountain to find you, Bai Liu!"

Fang Dian walked up to Bai Liu, greeted Mu Sicheng, then circled around him, nodding in approval. She lifted her chin and said, "You're looking pretty good—better than Mr. Lu, who's still locked up on the hill."

That was obvious, Mu Sicheng thought. Bai Liu had already used multiple antidotes from a couple of CD resets, restoring his health to near full. Of course, he was in better shape than Lu Yizhan, who had been beaten up by Bai Liu.

"It's good that you're okay." Fang Dian clapped her hands together. "I'll head back now."

"Eh, wait!" Mu Sicheng called after her. He hesitated for a moment, then asked, "Sister Dian, can you sneak Bai Liu and me up the

mountain?"

Fang Dian didn’t even bother asking Bai Liu what he intended to do. She immediately started thinking, then answered seriously, "I don’t think so. The security on the mountain is really tight. Mr. Lu has tried bribing people countless times just to get in and see us, but it never worked. Only students and teachers assigned to the mountain can go up. And it's almost ten o’clock—once the big iron gate closes, only teachers have the key. The security guards don’t even have one, so there's no way for us students to open it."

Mu Sicheng let out a disappointed groan.

"It’s late, the moon is high—why do you want to go up there?" Fang Dian smirked. "You’re not thinking about testing the waters in Gaucho Lake, are you?"

Mu Sicheng shuddered, a chill running down his spine. "No, no way!"

Why did she have to guess right on the first try?!

"Then there’s nothing else to discuss. The gate's about to close." Fang Dian turned to leave again. "I’m heading back."

"Wait a minute." Bai Liu’s voice stopped her. He smiled faintly. "Let’s talk about Hou Tong’s 62 million, shall we?"

Fang Dian visibly stiffened before abruptly picking up her pace, striding away with a snort. "Have fun scrubbing toilets!"

Bai Liu watched her retreat with an expression of mild amusement. His voice, however, remained steady and indifferent. "Fang—Dian—"

Fang Dian’s footsteps faltered. She exhaled heavily, turned back with a look of resignation, and muttered under her breath, "...I can’t believe Hou Tong actually bought into that nonsense. I was just joking."

"Joking?" Bai Liu’s tone remained flat. "You planned out my entire life for the next eighty years with that 62 million."

Fang Dian sighed again. She leaned against the railing, resting her chin on her hand, and looked at Bai Liu. "Well, didn’t you agree to it?"

She studied him for a moment before continuing with a knowing smile. "You always say you love money, that you’d do anything for it —but when a girl genuinely offers you both her heart and her fortune,

you won't take it."

"You don't actually care about the 62 million," Fang Dian chattered. "I think you just don't want to be the bad guy. You can tell that Hou Tong is sincere, and you don't want to trample on her feelings to get the money."

Bai Liu rejected her assumption without hesitation. "That's not the reason."

"Then what is?" Fang Dian challenged, her gaze locking onto him. "What other reason could there be for an eighteen-year-old you to refuse 62 million dollars being handed to him on a silver platter?"

Bai Liu paused. Something about her question felt... off.

...She had a point. Why had he refused Hou Tong back then?

Now, he had a reason—he had something worth more to him than 62 million.

A lizard.

A lizard that could make him turn down that amount of money.

But why had he refused at eighteen?

At that time, there shouldn't have been a single reason for him to reject such an offer.

Fang Dian studied his silent expression and narrowed her eyes, her voice taking on a teasing edge. "There's something really strange about those two missing ice-cream sticks..."

She leaned in slightly, her grin widening. "Bai Liu, did someone come along who made you give up the 62 million?"

Her eyes gleamed as she closed the distance between them. "Who do you like, Bai Liu?"

10:30 PM.

Fang Dian didn't get the answer she wanted from Bai Liu, and by then, she had no choice but to rush back up the mountain before the gates closed at ten.

After hurriedly scrubbing a few toilets, Mu Sicheng and Bai Liu

stopped cleaning. They waited until they were sure the NPC guards patrolling the school building had left, then made their way back to Bai Liu's classroom instead of the dormitory.

In the empty room, Mu Sicheng yawned and slumped over the desk behind Bai Liu, exhaustion weighing on him. His eyelids drooped as he muttered, "Bai Liu, why are we in the classroom instead of going back to the dorm?"

"Waiting for an opportunity to get up the mountain," Bai Liu replied calmly, flipping open the sketchbook he had taken back from Xu Wei that morning.

He used to sketch and record whatever interesting things happened each day. In a way, these pages were fragments of his memory.

The puppy line in the drawings, the missing ice-cream sticks, his rejection of Hou Tong—these were all inconsistencies, gaps in his recollections.

Maybe the answer lay in this sketchbook.

The classroom was dark, the only illumination coming from the pale moonlight spilling through the windows. Mu Sicheng soon drifted into sleep, sprawled across the desk. Meanwhile, Bai Liu carefully turned the pages, searching.

He flipped to the first appearance of the puppy line and then continued forward.

From the moment those lines first showed up, they were always there—clinging to Bai Liu's feet during class, resting on his pillow at night, curling into his hair when he cleaned the toilets.

He couldn't drive them away, couldn't hit them, couldn't get rid of them.

They were like a shadow, a presence that only he could see.

In the sketches, a tiny figure asked the tangled ball of puppy strings: [Why are you following me?]

Each time, the puppy-like bundle of strings gave the same response: [I don't want you to be alone.]

[My wish is for Bai Liu to never be lonely or sad. So whenever you

are, I'll be here.]

[What are you?] the little figure in the sketchbook asked.

The bundle of strings tilted its head and replied: [I am a qualified souvenir.]

Qiao Mu Private High School

"And what would it take for you to get away from me?" The little man in the manuscript asked indifferently, lifting the ball of tangled puppy string out of the way.

"You like me a little," the lifted puppy ball of string replied. "And I'll stay away from you."

A string of ellipses hovered next to the villain in the draft, followed by a simple question: "Why should I like you?"

In the moonlight, the puppy in the manuscript suddenly moved, as if animated, its silvery-blue eyes gazing upward. "Because the future you likes me a lot."

The moment Bai Liu, seated on the desk, met those silver-blue eyes, everything around him fractured into shifting lines, distorting instantly. He could hear it—the sharp snap of something unfolding in his mind, like a long-forgotten memory being unsealed. And then, all at once, they came flooding back.

The floor beneath him wavered, vanishing and reappearing. The moon outside the window melted into the sun. The blackboard in front of him flickered from black to yellow. Behind him, where Mu Sicheng had been dozing, the scene shifted—now, he was surrounded by murmuring, fidgeting classmates. The air grew swelteringly hot.

Bai Liu turned his head slowly, taking in the classroom, his gaze settling on the top right corner of the blackboard—

[300 days until the entrance exams.]

He was back. His first semester of senior year. The beginning of it all.

A strange sensation crept over Bai Liu. It was as if he were stepping into his own memories from the inside, reliving them as they solidified around him. But in turn, his more recent memories faded—everything that had happened after he turned eighteen gradually becoming a blank slate.

His gaze, usually calm and sharp, grew colder, more detached, mirroring the way an eighteen-year-old Bai Liu would have truly seen the world.

The classroom buzzed with whispered conversation.

"Do you think any of those top-ranked students who just went up the hill will go to Gaucho Lake?"

"They're all academic elites. Why would they care about a place like that?"

"Not necessarily," someone argued. "What if they go to help someone else with the test questions?"

A voice, slightly louder than the rest, cut through the chatter. "What if one of these top-ranked students has a friend who needs their help?"

The speaker shot a pointed glance at Bai Liu, sitting at the front row. The boy next to him caught on and snickered, covering his mouth before waving a dismissive hand.

"Forget it. Some people couldn’t solve the original questions even if they had them in the exam room."

Another student muttered under his breath, irritation and jealousy lacing his words. "I don’t get why Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian follow him around like ghosts. And he's all smug about it too. Does he really deserve that?"

"Now that they’ve gone up the mountain, let’s see how long he can keep up that act when there’s no one left to fawn over him."

Bai Liu remained impassive.

Qiao Mu Private High School thrived on the worship of academic excellence. Naturally, students like Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian, who excelled in everything, were at the top of the social hierarchy. Both top scholars and influential students vied for their friendship.

But while Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian were friendly on the surface, they kept most people at arm’s length.

Every time they came to Bai Liu’s class to see him, they were swarmed by eager students hoping to strike up a conversation. Yet, without fail, they would smile, politely decline, and speak only with Bai Liu.

This, of course, frustrated those who had repeatedly failed to win their attention—such as the student sitting diagonally behind Bai Liu.

He wasn't particularly gifted academically. He was at Qiao Mu more

for networking than for studying, always eager to ingratiate himself with influential peers. He had been trying to get close to Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian for ages—without success.

"I think Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian are only with him out of pity. They're not even from the same world—"

"Bai Liu—!!!"

A cheerful voice interrupted the murmuring.

Fang Dian appeared at the classroom door, grinning as she leaned in, winking at Bai Liu, who sat by the window. "Mr. Lu and I snuck down from the hill to find you. Come on out!"

The student who had just been whispering froze, choking on his words. His expression twisted in disbelief, as if reality had just betrayed him.

Bai Liu, meanwhile, gathered his things with practiced ease, walking past the stunned student without a glance. He approached Fang Dian with the same cold detachment.

"Let's go."

"Mr. Lu is waiting downstairs," Fang Dian said as she led the way. "I checked your schedule and saw that you have PE next. I figured you could skip it, so I came down now."

"Why?" Bai Liu asked flatly.

Fang Dian slung an arm over his shoulder, grinning. "Because Mr. Lu and I went up the mountain, and I didn’t want you getting bored down here alone, so I came to play with you."

"That’s not the real reason, is it?" Bai Liu said, unimpressed.

Fang Dian rubbed her chin. "Well, that’s my reason. But Mr. Lu... yeah, he seems to have something else on his mind."

It was a bright day. Blue skies. Green grass. The campus thrummed with the energy of students running, laughing, and enjoying their youth. The scene should have been carefree.

"Lu Yizhan!" Fang Dian called, waving.

Lu Yizhan turned his head slowly.

Deep dark circles hung under his eyes. His lips were chapped. He clutched a pile of books, his entire presence exuding exhaustion. He looked one breath away from collapsing into the dirt.

Expression vacant, voice hoarse, he let out a dazed: "...Huh?"

Bai Liu's gaze flicked over him. "How long has he been like this?"

Fang Dian shrugged. "Who knows? At least a week."

Lu Yizhan dropped onto the edge of a flower bed, sighing as Bai Liu approached. He didn't waste words. "Bai Liu, I saw your first mock exam results."

"278."

There was something fragile in Lu Yizhan's tired eyes—a glimmer of hope. "Did you mess up your answer sheet?"

Bai Liu crushed that hope in an instant. "No. I just don't know how to do it."

Lu Yizhan dragged a hand down his face, exhaling sharply. "...I see." Then, with sudden determination, he pulled out a stack of books, rifling through them.

"Here. These are my senior year notes, along with Fang Dian's from her exams."

"This one covers the simple questions that make up 80% of the test—you should be able to score decently just by reviewing these."

"This one's for medium-difficulty questions. Not a priority, but if you have time, go over the most frequently tested types."

"This is a summary of biology answer templates. Word choice matters a lot in marking, so make sure to phrase things properly, or you'll lose small points."

"Chemistry—focus on inorganic salts. Skip the complicated organic ones if you're short on time."

"For math, just nail the first conic equation. That's two easy points."

As he spoke, Lu Yizhan kept pulling out book after book, each one neatly annotated with exam strategies—some even freshly written, his watermarker ink still new.

"Is this what you've been doing all night?" Bai Liu asked softly, glancing at the thick stack of notes.

Lu Yizhan let out a tired sigh. "I didn't stay up late just for you, so don't take it to heart."

He hesitated before continuing, frustration lacing his voice. "It's mostly because I found out you scored a 278." His eyes were shadowed with exhaustion and a hint of bitterness. "I couldn't sleep. I felt terrible, so I got up and wrote down all the exam points for you."

Bai Liu: "....."

This really isn't necessary.

Lu Yizhan looked at Bai Liu with a mix of despair and fondness, letting out another weary sigh. "You're smart. You've always picked things up quickly since we were kids. You can clear the hardest horror games on your first try—so why can't you do well in school?"

"I don't think the problem is that Bai Liu can't do it." Fang Dian pressed an elbow into Lu Yizhan's shoulder, thoughtful. "I feel like he just doesn't want to learn."

Lu Yizhan pressed on. "Bai Liu, why don't you want to learn?"

Bai Liu flipped through the notes, his expression unreadable. "I never saw the need to study in high school."

Lu Yizhan was stunned. "How can there be no need? If you get good grades, you can choose the university and major you like, go to a good school, get a stable job, and live a normal, happy life."

"I don't have a favorite university or major." Bai Liu rested his chin in his hand. "Nor do I have any aspirations for the 'normal, happy life' you're talking about."

Lu Yizhan fell silent for a moment before asking, "Then what do you like?"

Bai Liu's answer was crisp. "Money."

Lu Yizhan took a deep breath, trying to reason with him. "If you study hard, you can get into a top university, specialize in something profitable, and become rich faster than most people."

"But that's the problem." Bai Liu glanced up absently. "Sure, it's a

normal and legal way to make money, but it's far too inefficient for me."

He tilted his head slightly. "I'm better at something less socially acceptable—something that makes me thousands of times more money than that slow, drawn-out path."

Lu Yizhan's heart skipped a beat. His voice snapped, sharp and uncharacteristically angry. "That's enough."

For once, his usually gentle face twisted with frustration as he stood up. "You know damn well that those 'other ways' come at the cost of injury and even death for countless people. And you'd still choose that path?"

Bai Liu paused for a moment before averting his gaze. "That's none of my business."

Lu Yizhan's chest rose and fell sharply. The anger in his eyes dimmed into something much sadder. His voice was quiet. "……You just had to go against me, didn't you?"

Bai Liu opened his mouth, as if to say something. But in the end, he said nothing.

A silence settled between them.

After a long moment, Lu Yizhan wordlessly pulled out a plastic bag and handed it to Bai Liu. "Here. A popsicle. Eat it and go back to class."

His voice was steady again, but distant. "If you don't want the notes, I'll take them back to the dorm."

Then, without another word, he gathered up the papers he had spent all week working on and left without looking back.

Fang Dian watched as Bai Liu stared after him, not moving. She sighed, then reached out and tapped Bai Liu's forehead with a finger.

"You. Just admit you don't want to study."

She shook her head. "He's really worried about you."

Bai Liu lowered his gaze. "Lu Yizhan wouldn't have given up on me studying, not until we reached this point." His voice was quiet. "But I'm just not cut out for it. I don't like studying."

Fang Dian studied him for a moment. "Was that really the reason just now?" she asked. "Do you actually believe those ‘other paths’ are better than studying?"

Bai Liu didn’t answer immediately. A long silence stretched between them.

Then, finally, he murmured, "No."

"What's that about?" Fang Dian tore open a popsicle wrapper and handed it to Bai Liu. "Here, have half."

Bai Liu took it, biting into the ice as his gaze dropped. "Studying is boring." His voice was quiet but firm. "I don’t know what I want out of life, or what I’m even studying for. Forcing myself to do something I’m bad at just isn’t worth it."

"The kind of life Lu Yizhan talked about..." Bai Liu took another bite, the ice sliding down his throat, spreading a shallow coldness inside him. His voice carried the same chill. "I don’t hate it."

"But I don’t like it either."

Fang Dian asked softly, "Then what kind of life do you like?"

Bai Liu's lips rested against the popsicle stick. He paused for a long time—long enough for his lips to redden from the cold—before he finally murmured, "I don’t know."

"Then think about it some more." Fang Dian ruffled his hair, her tone as lighthearted as ever, without a trace of worry. "You’re only seventeen. You’ve got plenty of time to figure out what you want. Take it slow."

Bai Liu glanced at her. "Is it okay if I only get 278? Is it okay if I fail the college entrance exam?"

"Hmm, well..." Fang Dian propped her chin in her hands, biting at the end of her empty popsicle stick. "Maybe it's not my place as the top student to say this, but honestly? I don’t think scoring 278 is that big of a deal."

Bai Liu studied her. "Aren't you afraid that if I don’t go to university, don’t get a good job, I’ll end up going astray? Become some kind of social outcast?"

"There are so many kids in the world. Not every single one of them needs to score above 278 to be considered a good person." Fang Dian turned her head slightly, giving him a sly wink. "It's not like the kid who finishes last on the test is doomed to delinquency."

She stretched her arms and smiled at the students running across the playground. "If that were true, we could just arrest the last-place student every year and—poof! No more crime in the world."

Her voice held laughter, but her eyes were clear.

"Failing an exam doesn't mean you can't live. Even the kid who comes in last still has the right to choose what kind of life they want."

Then, suddenly, she slapped Bai Liu on the back, making him stumble. "But!" She grinned brightly. "If you haven't figured out what you want yet, you should still study hard."

Bai Liu steadied himself, raising an eyebrow. "And why is that?"

Fang Dian's voice turned serious. "Because one day, when you do find something you want—something you really, really want—you won't miss your chance just because you weren't prepared for it."

She glanced at her watch and let out a small gasp. "Whoa, it's already this late? Next class is math! I have to get back."

She started jogging back uphill but turned back briefly. "You've really upset Mr. Lu. I don't think he'll be coming down the mountain to see you anytime soon." Tossing her finished popsicle stick at Bai Liu, she waved as she ran off. "I'm prepping for a physics competition, so be a good boy and sit with your thoughts for a bit. Talk to us if you need anything!"

And with that, she was gone, leaving Bai Liu alone by the flowerbed, staring down at the two sticks in his hand.

One from Lu Yizhan.
One from Fang Dian.

Both had the words "one more" printed on them.

Bai Liu was just about to get up and leave when he noticed something.

A book.

Lu Yizhan must have left it behind in his rush.

He hesitated before picking it up and flipping it open.

It was small, filled with page after page of chemical equations. To make things easier for Bai Liu, Lu Yizhan had written concise notes beside each one—equations Bai Liu had missed before—each written in neat, careful handwriting.

Bai Liu turned to the last page and stopped.

A scholar's prayer charm was tucked inside.

It was the kind of red paper talisman the stationery shop gave away for free with a ten-yuan purchase—a cheap superstition meant for nothing but psychological comfort.

Bai Liu unfolded it.

Inside, written in Lu Yizhan's steady, powerful handwriting, was a single wish:

"I hope Bai Liu studies hard, scores at least 400, and gets to do what he likes."

Bai Liu squeezed the talisman in his hand. Slowly, he blinked. Then, just as slowly, his fingers curled around the paper.

The playground was bustling—four classes were having P.E. at the same time. The students played basketball, volleyball, table tennis, chasing each other, laughing, talking. The noise carried easily to the flowerbeds where Bai Liu sat.

He should've been part of that scene.

But whether he was in the crowd or outside of it, Bai Liu always stood apart.

And he probably would for a long time.

He slipped the notebook into his pocket and turned away from the playground. Lu Yizhan had put the rest of the notes back in his dorm —Bai Liu figured he might as well go get them.

But just as he was about to leave, something tugged at his pant leg.

Bai Liu stopped.

He looked down.

His expression stilled.

At the base of the flowerbed, something sat—something small, fluffy, and about the size of a puppy. It looked like a tangled mess of black thread, as if someone had taken a 2B pencil and scribbled random loops in midair.

A tiny, thread-like limb reached out, grabbing the hem of Bai Liu's coat.

Its face—if it had one—tilted up to look at him.

Then it made a peculiar sound, like an animal whose vocal cords hadn't fully formed.

"That popsicle you're holding—can I have one?"

Bai Liu stared at the dark mass of lines, caught in eerie silence.

Qiao Mu Private High School

Fifteen minutes later, in the boys' dormitory.
As Bai Liu walked down the dormitory corridor, the other students cast him disgusted glances before quickly looking away, distancing themselves from him. He was used to these reactions and normally ignored them, but today, his gaze subtly drifted toward their ankles.

A strange, thread-like creature—a tangle of dark, stringy lines in the shape of a puppy—was attempting to swipe at their feet with its frayed limbs.

Yet, no one else seemed to notice. The students passed by as if the creature didn’t exist.

After fifteen minutes, Bai Liu was certain: he was the only one who could see and touch the thing clinging to him. But he still wasn’t sure what it was.

He shut the door to his dormitory, peeled the squirming ball of threads off his knee, and examined it with calm scrutiny.

"Where did you come from?" Bai Liu questioned. "Why are you here, and what do you want?"

"I'm from the future," the tangle of threads answered, voice slightly muffled as Bai Liu held it in place. "I came to keep you company."

"Keep me company?" Bai Liu raised an eyebrow. "You've never been here before. Why now?"

The creature's dark eyes blinked. "Because I like you."

"I didn’t want to miss any point in your life, so I came here—to be with you."

"I don’t need company," Bai Liu said coolly, shaking the thing off. "Go back."

The mass of thread trembled slightly, then pushed against Bai Liu’s hand, resisting. Its voice sharpened.

"You’re lying."

"I exist because of your love. If you truly didn’t need me, I wouldn’t be

here at all—I would have disappeared."

"But if you need me, if you like me, if you love me... I will grow. I will take shape."

A pair of dark, unfathomable eyes stared up at him.

"I will become human—because of your love."

Bai Liu remained unmoved. "I'm used to being alone. Whatever you are, go back where you came from."

The tangle of threads didn't respond, but it did grow slightly—its silent defiance written in the way it held Bai Liu's gaze.

[You're lying.]

[Because I can tell—you don't like being alone.]

Bai Liu's breathing slowed. His thoughts wavered between Can I get rid of this thing? and Am I just hallucinating?

He chose to ignore it.

"I've probably just been playing too many horror games."

"Maybe I imagined a monster I'd actually want to kill."

"Suit yourself," Bai Liu muttered, turning his attention back to the notebooks Lu Yizhan had left under his bed.

As he knelt down to retrieve them, the thread-creature clambered onto his back, wrapping two wiry limbs around his shoulders in a loose embrace—like a person hugging their lover from behind.

Bai Liu paused but didn't react.

The creature pressed its head to Bai Liu's shoulder. "What are these?"

Bai Liu ignored it.

It started again.

"What are these?"
"And what's this?"
"Is that Lu Yizhan's name?"
"Your name is Bai Liu. Why do you have his things?"

"Are you stealing them?"

It was relentless. A persistent, babbling presence, determined to wear him down.

Bai Liu exhaled slowly, rubbing his temple as a dull ache set in. "They're teaching materials. Lu Yizhan made them for me."

"Oh." The creature quieted for a second. Then, "What are teaching materials?"

Bai Liu shot it a cold glance. "Aren't you from the future? Didn't you go to high school? Don't you know what teaching materials are?"

The tangled threads shrank slightly, its dark eyes narrowing in confusion.

"Should I have gone to high school?"

"You shouldn't just go to high school," Bai Liu said flatly. "You should also get at least four hundred points and a bachelor's degree."

"...What's a bachelor's degree?" The creature looked even more lost. "I've only ever been with you. Why would I need a degree?"

"I don't want to go to high school or university. I just want to be with you."

Something in its posture shifted. It slowly turned to look at the notebooks, and a dark gleam flickered in its black eyes.

Then, in one swift motion, it raised a wiry hand and whipped the pile of teaching materials.

"You can't go to high school," it hissed. "You can't get a degree. You can only be with me—"

"Enough." Bai Liu interrupted, pinching the bridge of his nose as a sharp pang struck his head. He inhaled deeply, then exhaled in slow, measured control.

"...What is your relationship with the future me?"

The thread-creature was silent for a moment, as if considering.

Then, it answered, dead serious—

"You let me bathe with you."

Bai Liu: "..."

He stared at the tangled mass in his arms.

What kind of disgusting relationship was this?

Bai Liu returned to the classroom with his teaching aid, the ball of tangled puppy lines now slightly larger, draped over his head like an oddly shaped hat. Its dark eyes darted around, surveying the surroundings like a cautious animal.

Just as he was about to step inside, a sharp voice stopped him in his tracks.

"Bai Liu, stop right there."

Xu Wei stood at the podium, lesson plan in hand, a thin smile on her face. "Skipping my class again, huh?"

A quick glance at the tired, uninterested students scattered across the room told Bai Liu everything he needed to know. Xu Wei had hijacked their free period to lecture about the upcoming paper, and since Bai Liu hadn't been present to sit through it, he was being singled out.

"You sure are arrogant for someone who scored 278 points," Xu Wei sneered. "Just because you were shoved into this school and can't be expelled, you think you can do whatever you want?" She gave a cold laugh. "Since you don't want to listen to my class, don't. Go stand outside."

Bai Liu, unfazed, turned around and walked out as instructed. He dropped his school bag at his feet, pulled out the English notes Lu Yizhan had made for him, and started reading.

From inside the classroom, occasional bursts of laughter and snide remarks drifted out.

"If you can only manage a 45 in English, how do you expect to have a future? The world is international. You'll be dealing with elite professionals from across the globe, and you won't even be able to introduce yourself properly. 'I am Bai Liu, fine, and you?' That's about as far as you'll get."

More laughter erupted from the students.

The tip of Bai Liu's pen hovered over his notes for a fraction of a second before he continued writing, his expression unreadable.

Above him, the puppy lines shifted, its tangled form tilting forward. Dark eyes peered down at him.

"I am Spades, fine," it echoed clumsily in broken English. "And you?"

Bai Liu ignored it.

"I am Spades, fine. And you?" the puppy repeated.

"...And you?"

"...And youuuuuuuuu—!"

"I am Bai Liu, fine," Bai Liu finally replied, voice flat. "Now shut up."

Satisfied, the puppy lines went silent for a moment—only to quickly refocus on the notes in Bai Liu's hands.

"What's this?" it asked.

"English."

The tangled mass of lines seemed to process that. "Oh," it said, as if coming to a grand realization. "That's what that monster woman was talking about learning just now."

The corner of Bai Liu's lips quirked up slightly—so quickly that it might have been imagined—before his expression flattened again.

"Why do you need to learn English?" Spades asked, full of curiosity. "Does it help you play the game better?"

Everything Spades had ever learned had been for the sole purpose of improving in the league. In his mind, education had only one use: winning.

Lu Yizhan had once tried to teach him literacy, math, even a little biology, but Spades had quickly realized none of it was useful for gaming and skipped out on lessons entirely.

Bai Liu paused before answering. "...No. Learning English won't help you play the game better."

Spades, confused, pressed on. "Then why learn it?"

"In a broad sense, it removes barriers to communication and expands the range of people you can manipulate in the future," Bai Liu explained casually. "Mastering English allows you to exploit native speakers more efficiently. In a narrower sense, it's about gaining an advantage in short-term competition—ensuring you get ahead of others and accumulate more resources for yourself."

Spades thought for a moment before replying, very seriously, "I don't really get it."

Bai Liu exhaled slightly. "Put simply, it lets you talk to foreigners."

Spades blinked. "Is talking to foreigners supposed to be impressive?"

"The group behind me seems to think so," Bai Liu said blandly. "They get a sense of superiority from speaking fluently with people they consider of higher status."

Spades nodded, as if coming to an important conclusion. "Then you're better than all of them."

Bai Liu gave him a dry look.

"You can communicate with me—an alien—without any barriers," Spades continued matter-of-factly.

Bai Liu: "....."

How the hell did he end up stuck with this mass of indistinct human-animal monstrosity, tangled up in wild wires, who only played games, never went to school, and had such a fundamentally bizarre way of thinking?

By the end of the school day, Bai Liu returned to the dormitory—with a slightly larger lump of tangled string still clinging to his head.

The dorm was empty. Bai Liu, accustomed to the solitude, set his bag down and made his way into the bathroom. Just as he was about to unzip his pants, he hesitated.

Slowly, he turned his head.

The puppy lines, now perched on his shoulder, was staring straight at his right hand as he reached for his zipper.

Bai Liu: "....."

Two seconds later, the puppy was unceremoniously tossed out of the bathroom.

A minute later, Bai Liu emerged, drying his hands. His gaze landed on the puppy now curled up on his pillow, looking as if it intended to sleep beside him.

Bai Liu paused mid-motion.

Three seconds later, the puppy was ripped from the pillow and thrown to the floor.

Looking confused, it asked, "Why can't I sleep in the bed?"

"Because I don't like sharing my bed." Bai Liu sat on the edge, not sparing Spades a glance. "Not with people. Not with pets."

"I want to sleep in the bed."

"Too bad."

Spades stretched out a wire-thin limb, defiantly tapping the edge of the mattress. His dark eyes locked onto Bai Liu's. "I want to sleep next to you."

Bai Liu gave him a slow, nonchalant side glance. "You can try."

Spades: "....."

A long silence.

He could tell—instinctively—that there was something dangerous in Bai Liu's gaze.

Maybe sleeping on the floor wasn't so bad after all.

Spades curled up into a ball at Bai Liu's feet, his voice slightly sullen. "I can sleep with you. Why can't I sleep in the bed?"

Bai Liu remained calm. "…You can't sleep with me now, either."

"Oh." Spades thought for a moment, then asked seriously, "Then can I sleep with you for forty-five minutes? After one class?"

Bai Liu: "You can't…"

Earlier, Bai Liu had explained to Spades that a lesson lasted forty-five

minutes, after which the teacher and subject would change.

In Spades' mind, this translated to: The rules of this copy change every forty-five minutes.

Which meant that whatever was prohibited now could be allowed later.

"Then in ninety minutes, I can—" Spades began again, pressing his point.

"You can't," Bai Liu interrupted coldly. "You can only sleep on the floor."

Spades let out a soft oh, climbed off Bai Liu's foot, and crawled a little farther away—about thirty centimeters—before turning his back to him without another word.

A classic sulking posture.

Fifteen seconds passed.

Then, still facing away, Spades slowly extended one wire-thin jio toward Bai Liu's foot, wiggling it slightly—his way of asking for a handshake.

Bai Liu had spent enough time with this guy to recognize what was happening. This was Spades' way of making up after a silent tantrum.

Just like a dog—one handshake, and whatever grievance he'd been sulking over would be forgotten.

Bai Liu: "……"

Having a dog was so much trouble.

Expressionless, Bai Liu still reached out and shook the wire-thin jio.

Satisfied, Spades immediately turned back around and settled himself against Bai Liu's feet. "There are four beds in here. Are three other people sharing them with you?"

"Hm." Bai Liu responded absentmindedly.

"And where are they?"

"Out for a late dinner. They haven't come back yet," Bai Liu replied

flatly. Anticipating Spades' next question—So why didn't you go eat?—he preemptively added, "I didn't go because I don't have money for food."

Qiao Mu Private High School had excellent meals—but they were also expensive. The orphanage provided a standard meal plan for the students they sponsored: three dishes, one soup, two meats, and one vegetable—enough to cover three full meals.

But not late-night snacks.

Qiao Mu had a dedicated late-night snack bar that opened after 9:30 PM, offering everything from fried chicken and cola to elaborate multi-course meals. Of course, it was expensive—twenty dollars a bowl at minimum.

Students ranked in the top 400 of the school received a $50 nightly snack allowance, but it could only be used for their own purchases.

In their first and second years, Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian had tried using their allowances to buy snacks for Bai Liu.

Eventually, Bai Liu had stopped eating late-night snacks altogether.

But that didn't mean he wasn't hungry.

At seventeen or eighteen, they were all still growing. Even a full three meals weren't enough to stave off hunger by eleven or midnight. Most of the top students in Bai Liu's dorm would rush to the snack counter as soon as evening study ended, not returning until close to 10:30 PM.

Squeak—

The dormitory door swung open.

The three other students entered, chatting and laughing, but the moment they saw Bai Liu sitting at his desk, head down, reading his notes, their smiles disappeared.

Their faces turned cold, as if they'd just walked into something unpleasant.

All three carried food containers from the snack bar. One of them moved to place his food on the table, only to be stopped by another, who gave him a meaningful look before mouthing:

"Be careful—it might get stolen."

The first student hesitated, then glanced at Bai Liu. His expression darkened with disgust before he silently stowed his food in the cupboard, locking it away.

Then, as if making a point, he deliberately walked past Bai Liu and muttered, "Excuse me, I'm going to wash my dishes."

Without so much as a glance, Bai Liu shifted his foot to the side, giving way as if making room for a stray cat or dog.

The man looked at Bai Liu as if he didn't care about him at all, but his heart burned with anger. Raising his voice, he accused, "My bowl was moved today, and you were the only one in the dormitory without a bowl. Did you move it?"

Bai Liu glanced up. "I moved it."

The man, who had been planning to frame Bai Liu, froze in place. He hadn't expected Bai Liu to just admit it.

"I touched that bowl," Bai Liu continued, flipping through his book as if nothing had happened. "I thought it was dirty. You should throw it away."

That bowl had cost him over 3,000! It was the bowl he brought out during late-night snacks to show off! The other two dormmates thought he was rich because of it!

His face turned red with anger, but when he saw the other two looking at the bowl as if it truly was filthy, he hesitated. He wanted to save face, but he also felt bitter about losing it. Finally, he forced himself to say, "It's true that if you touched it, it must be dirty… but maybe I misremembered. It doesn't seem like it moved."

"I did touch it," Bai Liu said, looking up with innocent sincerity. "That bowl looked so expensive—I just couldn't resist touching it, inside and out. Sorry. It must be too dirty now. You should throw it away."

The man's face darkened. His teeth clenched. "Yeah… it must be dirty. I'll throw it away now!"

Bai Liu hummed nonchalantly. "That bowl is so expensive and beautiful. I really couldn't resist touching it a lot. You should smash it before you throw it away, or I might be tempted to touch it again."

Shit!

The man cursed inwardly. Now, he couldn't even retrieve it, wash it, and take it home!

With gritted teeth and teary eyes, he smashed the bowl while the other two dormmates watched in silence. Then, he wiped his face, stuffed the shattered pieces into a trash bag, and muttered, "Something dirty shouldn't be kept anyway. I'll go throw it out."

…

Later that night, crouched by the garbage heap, the man hesitated. He dug through the trash, trying to retrieve the pieces, but the dim light, the stench, and the sharp ceramic shards cutting his fingers made him curse in frustration.

"Shit! Bai Liu!"

It was as if he was the one being bullied.

When he returned to the dorm, he washed his hands furiously, climbed into bed, and pulled his curtain shut. Moments later, muffled sobs came from behind the fabric, as if he was crying under the covers.

The other two dormmates exchanged awkward glances before silently taking their own showers. No one dared to provoke Bai Liu anymore.

Bai Liu, meanwhile, occupied the entire dormitory desk, lazily organizing his notes. The other three didn't even dare to look at him.

—The scene looked as if Bai Liu was the one bullying them.

All three had drawn their bed curtains closed, isolating themselves from Bai Liu.

Qiao Mu's private high school forbade students from keeping their lights on at night, but the dorm supervisor often turned a blind eye to honor students. As long as they didn't stay up past 1 or 2 AM, no one would interfere.

Bai Liu took advantage of this. His dorm housed three honor students, meaning he could read Lu Yizhan's notes with the light on without being disturbed.

One by one, the others fell asleep, leaving Bai Liu alone.

He stared intently at Lu Yizhan's physics notes.

The problem on the page involved a complex magnetic field scenario —two overlapping fields, a positively charged particle, an emission machine, acceleration, deflection, and final impact on a plate. The question asked for the initial acceleration of the particle, factoring in gravity.

A full A4 page detailed Lu Yizhan's solution, diagrams, and key concepts.

Bai Liu had spent two hours on this problem tonight and still didn't understand it. He set the notes down, exhaled, and murmured, "...Studying really is the least cost-effective thing you can do."

On his shoulder, Spades stirred. He had been bombarding Bai Liu with questions, which Bai Liu had ignored.

"What's this?"
"Why did they say the bowl was dirty after you touched it?"
"What are you drawing?"
"Why is this dot spinning three times in a pile of dots?"

Now that the others were asleep, Bai Liu finally answered.

"It's physics."
"They're trying to feel superior to me, so they say anything I touch is dirty."
"I'm drawing a magnetic field analysis."
"I don't know."

Spades pondered this, uninterested in physics. Instead, he latched onto a more pressing question.

"But you're not dirty," he said. "You're cleaner than they are. So why do they think you're dirty?"

"It's not that they actually think I'm dirty," Bai Liu explained, his voice steady. "It's just a way to keep their distance. They don't want to touch me or have me touch their things."

"I see."

Then, suddenly—

Bai Liu's pupils contracted.

The small black mass on his head grew. In mere moments, it expanded

into the size of a full-grown man. A pair of arms circled his waist from behind, clasping together. A chin rested on his shoulder.

A voice, low and indifferent, asked, “You don’t?”

“You obviously love to sleep with me in your arms.”

—

Bai Liu lay in bed, his back to the wall, eyes staring blankly ahead. Behind him, the figure of a man curled around him, arms wrapped tightly around his waist, legs entwined with his. Slow, steady breaths rose and fell against his shoulder.

...He had no idea how things had ended up like this.

One moment, Spades had been a tiny bundle of thread. The next, he had turned into a man, slinked into Bai Liu’s bed with stubborn persistence, and refused to leave.

“Get down.” Bai Liu pushed against him, his breath uneven. His usual calm was gone, replaced by the raw discomfort of having his personal space invaded. “You can’t sleep in my bed.”

“You can’t cuddle with me like this.”

Spades’ voice was heavy with sleep. “You don’t like it?”

Without waiting for an answer, he effortlessly flipped Bai Liu onto his side, pressing Bai Liu’s head to his chest. His large hands wrapped around Bai Liu’s back, holding him still. A warm palm patted Bai Liu’s shoulder in a slow, steady rhythm.

“You like to sleep like this, don’t you?”

“Go to sleep.”

Bai Liu lay there, limbs trapped, his mind blank. He glanced toward the three beds with their thickly drawn curtains, deliberately isolating him.

[So unlucky to be in the same dorm as the orphanage kid.]
[...Ugh, can't transfer, guess I'll put up with it.]
[I heard kids from orphanages steal, and they eat animal feed.]
[Gross, isn’t that dirty?]
[I really don’t want to share a dorm with him. Anyone willing to swap?]

[Who would?]
[Not me.]
[Not me either.]
[Fuck, no choice. Let's draw lots. Whoever gets unlucky, sucks to be them.]

Bai Liu blinked slowly.

All the parts of his body they had called dirty—his hands, his arms, his shoulders—were held tightly by Spades.

His fingers curled slightly.

Very, very slowly, he hugged Spades back.

He closed his eyes.

...Having a dog had some benefits, aside from the hassle.

Maybe his decision to pick this one wasn't so bad after all.

Hou Tong had noticed that Bai Liu had changed a lot recently.

Before, Bai Liu would often twirl his pencil absentmindedly in class, his gaze scattered and unfocused. When he was punished and made to stand outside, he would lean against the wall, half-asleep, exuding an air of indifference—like nothing truly mattered to him.

It was as if he had no favorite things, no favorite people, no aspirations—just drifting through life without care.

But recently, that sense of apathy had disappeared.

Hou Tong was almost startled to realize that Bai Liu had started studying.

He was no longer lost in thought during class but instead sat with a calm expression, flipping through pages of textbooks and notes. Occasionally, he would borrow her English papers to correct mistakes, and every now and then, he would twirl his pen before gazing out the window—with a faint, almost imperceptible smile at the corners of his eyes.

That smile lit up his entire face.

He had started taking things seriously. Xu Wei, despite himself, noticed Bai Liu's grades climbing with every mock exam—278, then

the low 300s, then the mid-300s, and soon nearing 400, approaching the undergraduate admission line.

In the dormitory, Bai Liu's roommates were surprised to find that he had begun staying up late to study.

At first, they scoffed, making cynical remarks about his newfound diligence. But Bai Liu ignored them entirely, and soon, a strange sense of urgency took hold of them. His steady routine and rapid improvement made them uneasy.

Whenever they saw Bai Liu studying late, they felt compelled to outdo him. If Bai Liu stayed up until midnight, they stayed up until 12:15. If he stayed up until 12:15, they pushed to 12:30.

Before long, their grades started slipping.

One by one, they cracked under the pressure and abandoned their late-night study sessions. Yet Bai Liu remained steadfast, staying up until 1 a.m. with unwavering focus, his scores continuing to rise.

Even when they had given up, just the sound of Bai Liu turning pages from behind his curtain kept them awake at night. The thought of a former underachiever studying so relentlessly made them too anxious to sleep.

The first to break was a roommate whose grades plummeted past the 400th percentile. Chronic stress and insomnia took their toll, and he was eventually forced to drop out.

The remaining two grew increasingly alarmed. Their own insomnia worsened as their scores steadily declined—five consecutive weekly tests, two monthly exams, and a mock exam. When their parents finally arrived at the dormitory with grim expressions to collect their things, they stood there, heads lowered, sneaking uneasy glances at Bai Liu.

"I—I haven't been sleeping well because my roommate stays up late studying," one of them tried to explain, shifting uncomfortably. "That's why my grades dropped…"

His parents, unimpressed, scoffed.

"Everyone else stays up late to study and improves. You stay up late and get worse?!" they snapped. "It's your senior year! We didn't spend all that money for you to slack off and make excuses!"

“If you want to transfer to a day school, fine,” another parent said coldly. “But if your grades keep slipping, we’ll have a serious problem.”

With that, both students fell silent and followed their parents out, casting one last, complicated glance at Bai Liu. They looked as if they wanted to say something, but in the end, no words came.

After that, Bai Liu’s dormitory was empty.

His life, however, continued as usual—completely unfazed by the chaos his presence had caused.

Meanwhile, Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian sat by the flower bed, upright and tense, staring at Bai Liu.

“…You called us here to show us your monthly exam results, didn’t you?” Lu Yizhan asked, his voice tight.

Bai Liu hummed in confirmation. “The scores aren’t out yet, but the test papers are. I figured I’d let you take a look.”

Lu Yizhan sucked in a sharp breath. His palms were already sweaty. Taking a moment to compose himself, he clenched his fists, exhaled twice, and finally spoke:

“…Alright. Let’s see it.”

Bai Liu handed over his paper. Lu Yizhan hesitated, squinting as he shielded the score column with his hand, as if delaying the inevitable.

As he and Fang Dian flipped through the exam, their expressions shifted. By the time they reached the end, Lu Yizhan’s eyes were red. He lowered his head and wiped at them with his palm.

“…Damn,” Fang Dian muttered, rubbing the back of Lu Yizhan’s head. Her own eyes shimmered with barely restrained tears. “351 points. Bai Liu, you—”

Bai Liu pursed his lips and looked away. “...It’ll do.”

Fang Dian couldn’t hold back her laughter. She ruffled Bai Liu’s hair roughly. “You idiot, this is amazing!”

Lu Yizhan, however, was already examining the paper with a serious expression. “Wait—there are still a lot of mistakes. We need to go over them and analyze—”

“Oh, come on!” Fang Dian cut him off impatiently. “We’re not analyzing anything right now!” She grabbed Bai Liu excitedly. “We’re going out for a celebratory meal!”

Qiao Mu Private High School

It had been a year since Bai Liu last had an eight-dollar bowl of beef noodles for a midnight snack.

There were three of them now, but only one bowl sat on the table—placed in front of Bai Liu. He hesitated, not yet picking up his chopsticks.
“Don’t you two want to eat?” he asked.

“We usually eat well. The dorm building upstairs gives us food at night,” Fang Dian sighed with some regret. “It’s just that today’s Sunday, and the kitchen’s closed. Otherwise, we’d have stolen something to feed you.”

“Keep your voice down,” Lu Yizhan laughed helplessly. “If someone hears you, Bai Liu won’t even get this midnight snack.”

“Okay, okay.” Fang Dian made an “OK” gesture, unbothered. She eagerly shoved the chopsticks into Bai Liu’s hand. “Eat up! If you don’t, the noodles will get soggy!”

She and Lu Yizhan looked at him expectantly, genuinely happy for him.

Since Bai Liu had been gone, the two of them hadn’t stepped foot in the cafeteria—not even once. Despite still receiving a daily midnight snack allowance of fifty dollars, they never went back.

It had been a year.

When Bai Liu asked why, Fang Dian only smiled and rubbed his head.

“It doesn’t feel right to eat with one person missing. So we just don’t go.”

Bai Liu sat silently for a long moment before finally picking up his chopsticks and slowly beginning to eat.

What did it mean to have “one person missing”?

At the time, he hadn’t asked. But now, he felt like he finally understood what Fang Dian meant.

After eating, Lu Yizhan rambled about all sorts of things until Fang

Dian eventually nudged him.

“Mr. Lu, it’s almost ten. We’ve gotta head back up.”

“I know.” Lu Yizhan looked at Bai Liu with a complicated expression. In the end, he simply smiled with relief and patted Bai Liu on the shoulder. “Don’t stress too much. Scoring 351 is already impressive.”

“I can tell you’re trying—you’re really a good kid.”

“You talk too much!” Fang Dian interrupted, dragging Lu Yizhan away as she pulled Bai Liu aside. Her eyes sparkled, as if she saw right through him. “So… did you find what you’re looking for in life?”

Bai Liu paused. “I think I have an idea.”

“Already? That’s fast,” Fang Dian said, stroking her chin, her tone teasing. “With how messed up your brain is, I thought you wouldn’t figure it out until senior year was over.”

Then she asked, almost slyly, “Did you… meet someone you want to spend time with?”

Bai Liu didn’t answer.

“Fine, don’t tell me.” Fang Dian waved it off. She pulled her heavy book bag around and started taking out notes and study aids. “Last time, Mr. Lu rushed those notes for you, and your basics are still pretty shaky. I got worried you wouldn’t be able to keep up, so I—the top student in our grade—personally sorted out all of senior year’s material and exam questions for you.”

“Read it carefully and I guarantee at least 400 points on the test!”

She dumped the hefty notebooks into his arms with a grin, the dark circles under her eyes clearly visible. “This is the weight of knowledge. Take it seriously!”

Bai Liu held the notes and was quiet for a while. “Did you stay up late doing this?”

“It didn’t take long,” Fang Dian said lightly. “I had free time anyway.”

Free time?

Bai Liu knew that she and Lu Yizhan were constantly preparing for competitions and the entrance exam. They didn’t have time to spare.

But Fang Dian made time anyway.

He hesitated, then accepted the well-worn stack of notebooks and study aids. “I owe you one.”

“That doesn’t count.” Fang Dian flicked his forehead and raised an eyebrow. “A favor’s something you owe when you ask for help. You didn’t ask—I did it because I wanted to. So it’s not a favor.”

Bai Liu lowered his head, staring at Fang Dian’s scuffed schoolbag—so full it looked like it couldn’t be held in two hands.

“I don’t get it,” he said quietly.

“Get what?”

“You and Lu Yizhan—you could spend all this effort on someone from the top of the hill,” Bai Liu said. “You could make friends with someone up there. They’d give you more in return—money, connections, a smoother future.”

“Why waste all that effort on me?”

“That’s easy.” Fang Dian didn’t hesitate. “Because we don’t want to be friends with them.”

“It’s not about liking them. We like you, and we want to be friends with you.”

“But you’re brilliant and valuable,” Bai Liu said, looking her in the eye. “You’ve worked so hard to be the top students—first and second in the school—and now you’re throwing all that away for me. It’s not worth it.”

Fang Dian’s amber eyes crinkled, and she gave him a gentle smile.

“Remember what I told you, Bai Liu?”

“I said, we study hard so that we can choose the life we want to live.”

“We didn’t work hard to gain more ‘value.’ We worked hard so we could choose the kind of life we want.”

“And choosing to be your friend—that is the life we want. Neither of us feels like we’re wasting anything.”

Moonlight fell across Fang Dian’s face. Her smile was bright and soft.

“It’s almost ten. Time to go!”

She turned and dragged Lu Yizhan uphill, her voice still ringing with laughter:
“See you next time, Bai Liu!”

Bai Liu watched her ponytail bounce as she ran off. Then, a dark mass of threadlike shadow appeared beside him, attaching itself to his body.

“Why’d you disappear earlier?” Bai Liu asked, his tone even.

Spades lay sprawled across Bai Liu’s back, resting his chin on Bai Liu’s head. His voice was low and a little sulky.

“I can only show up when you’re alone.”

“When I'm alone?” Bai Liu echoed. “But you’ve appeared before—like in the dorms or classrooms.”

“It’s not about how many people are around,” Spades said. “It’s about when you feel alone. When you feel that way, I can exist. But when you don’t, I can’t.”

“In the classroom, in the dorms—you still felt alone, so I could show up. But just now, when you were eating beef noodles with them… you didn’t feel alone. So I couldn’t exist.”

Bai Liu paused. “You and Lu Yizhan can’t coexist?”

“You could say that.” Spades buried his face in the crook of Bai Liu’s neck, voice muffled. “I’m the monster that exists to keep you from being alone.”

“When there are people who make you feel not alone… there’s no reason for me to exist.”

“You’re that kind of monster?” Bai Liu asked, reaching up to grasp Spades’ hand on his shoulder. His voice was calm. “Then you’ll probably be around for a long time. I like being alone.”

In his other hand, Bai Liu held the thick packet of notebooks Fang Dian had given him.

Then, slowly, he let it go.

The big exam was coming.

And right after that… the parents' meeting.

Lu Yizhan and Bai Liu, both students from unusual family backgrounds, don't have parents who attend parent-teacher conferences.

Neither does Fang Dian.

Bai Liu has never been one to pry into other people's family matters and has never asked why Fang Dian's parents never show up. But human nature has a way of tugging at our curiosity—especially when it comes to those who are talented and stand apart. It's as if understanding someone better might bring you closer to their world.

Bai Liu first heard about Fang Dian through the gossip of his dormmates.

In junior high, Fang Dian was top of her grade. Her parents were known to be kind and loving, and her family was well-off. For the first fifteen years of her life, Fang Dian's path was described as smooth, happy, and full of promise.

But as if fate couldn't bear to let her happiness last, everything changed when she turned fifteen.

Her mother fell seriously ill. Her father spent everything they had trying to save her, but it wasn't enough. Desperate to raise more money, he was deliberately drawn into gambling by someone who saw an opportunity.

In one night, he lost everything—and worse, racked up enormous gambling debts.

It should've been the start of a tragic spiral for Fang Dian. But it wasn't.

Instead, she took control. She dragged her father away from the gambling table, tied back her shoulder-length hair, and walked up to the table herself—empty-handed but determined.

And in one night, she won it all back. Then she stopped.

Her father, in a hysterical breakdown, grabbed her shoulders and shouted, "Keep gambling! You're so good at it! Win back your mother's medical fees!"

“If you’re so capable, then why don’t you do it yourself?”

Then, seeing Fang Dian shake her head resolutely, he collapsed to his knees. Tears in his eyes, he looked up at her and pleaded, “Please... for Daddy?”

“I cheated to win,” Fang Dian replied quietly. “I can’t gamble again.”

“In gambling, it’s not just money you put on the line—you put yourself in, too.”

“And I don’t want to see you destroyed by anything else besides Mom’s illness.”

Her father couldn’t understand her. He left the money to Fang Dian and vanished, leaving her to handle the wreckage alone.

And she did.

She topped the city in her secondary school entrance exams, earning offers from several prestigious schools, including public ones with great academic atmospheres. Originally, she had planned to attend a public school near her home, but in the end, she chose Qiao Mu—the school that offered the highest scholarship. The bonus barely covered her mother’s treatment costs.

Still, her mother’s condition worsened quickly. She passed away within six months.

Fang Dian arranged the funeral herself. The costs were covered by prize money from competitions, Qiao Mu’s annual special merit allowance, the little money left from her mother’s treatment—and a large sum that appeared in her bank account after her mother’s death, presumably sent by her vanished father.

With that money, Fang Dian bought back the old house her family had sold to pay medical bills. She finally had a home outside of school again.

—It became the place where Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan stayed most often when they weren’t on campus.

It was... a very small home.

It was odd—none of the top-ranking students at Qiao Mu ever had parents at parent-teacher conferences. But Qiao Mu treated its

exceptionally gifted students with unusual generosity: the school allowed Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian to conduct their own parent-teacher conferences.

The logic was that students like them didn't need parental supervision. They could manage their own lives. They were their own parents.

Bai Liu, on the other hand, didn't receive this privilege. When conferences were held, his seat was always empty.

Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian would've liked to attend in his place, but Qiao Mu held all parent-teacher meetings simultaneously across classes, so Lu Yizhan would always be at his own meeting when Bai Liu's was happening.

It's worth mentioning that, for some reason, Lu Yizhan had an odd obsession with attending parent-teacher conferences on Bai Liu's behalf. He even tried to skip his own more than once—only to be caught by his homeroom teacher.

"Why are you so determined to do this for me?" Bai Liu asked him once.

Lu Yizhan gave him a mischievous look. "You don't get it. Everyone around me used to dream of being your father, you know?"

Who in the Heretics Bureau didn't call Bai Liu by six different nicknames and secretly try to be his dad back then…

Bai Liu, slowly: "?"

And so, once again, at this parent-teacher conference, Bai Liu's seat sat empty.

The classroom buzzed with chatter. Parents dressed to impress—dripping in the latest fashion, wearing their most expensive watches, ruby rings, necklaces, and leather handbags. Every now and then, someone's pigeon-blood ruby ring would graze another's freshly styled hair. "Oh, sorry," one would say, as their bespoke mechanical watch clinked against someone's calfskin bag. "My apologies."

It was like a parade of hens and roosters, strutting and fluffing their feathers for show.

The students had long since been forgotten as the parents exchanged fake smiles and pleasantries in loud, hypocritical voices. The whole

scene resembled less a school's parent-teacher conference and more a flashy social mixer at a hotel:

"Hey, what did you drive here today? I came in my BMW and couldn't find a parking spot—Qiao Mu really needs to expand. It's impossible to find space during these parent meetings."

"Did your family snag another unit in the Sunnyside development?"

"I heard there's a promotion coming up—might be a position opening soon."

"Lan's cream is 10% off for Double Eleven, just over four grand! Want to split it with me?"

In short, while it was technically a parent-teacher meeting, it had little to do with the students themselves.

Bai Liu had never attended a single one of these meetings. Not that he needed to. After all, there were only ever two topics discussed:
One, parents scrambling over each other.
Two, students scrambling over each other.

While the adults cloaked their competition in civility, the jabs exchanged by the 17- and 18-year-olds were far more direct.

"My mum just bought me the latest drop," the boy sitting beside Bai Liu said smugly, swinging his legs to show off his sneakers. "Told her to bring them today so I could try them on."

"Damn, those cost over three grand, right?"

The boy wiggled his fingers dramatically. "Nuh-uh."

"No way! Is that a baller's signature on them?"

"Holy shit, that's a limited release from two years ago. How'd you get it?"

The boy shrugged with a casual smile, waving his foot closer to Bai Liu's face. "Money. Paid a premium, plus shipping—cost me nearly six grand."

"Six thousand?! What a steal. I want a pair too!"

"I'll ask my mum to look into it. My sister-in-law's overseas, she might be able to find them."

Bao Kangle, who'd been listening with a dark, jealous look, stared at the sneakers like they were treasure.

Bai Liu, having heard variations of this conversation countless times, turned away. He leaned against one of the windows in the corridor outside the classroom, staring inside.

Through the window, his seat was clearly empty—surrounded front and back by affluent parents. As if simply attending wasn't enough, they had casually dumped their designer handbags onto Bai Liu's desk.

It was as if his family's absence had always been expected. A void.

The boys, still buzzing about the shoes, noticed Bai Liu's silence. Their expressions soured, and they exchanged looks before moving closer.

The ringleader nudged Bai Liu's shoulder. "Hey."

Bai Liu turned to him with a cold look. "Yes?"

"Oooh, look at that glare," the boy teased, leaning in with a grin. "What were you staring at?"

He exaggerated a glance over Bai Liu's shoulder into the classroom. "Looking for your parents?"

"Oh right, you don't have any!" he added with mock sympathy, throwing his hands up. "Tell you what, I'm in a good mood today, got my new sneakers and all."

"How about you call me 'Dad' and I'll head in and sit through the conference for you?"

The others stifled their laughter, while Bao Kangle's previously gloomy face lit up. He looked at Bai Liu like he was lesser—like as long as Bai Liu was around, he wouldn't be the lowest on the totem pole.

"Not like I'm bullying you or anything," the boy continued, patting Bai Liu's shoulder with mock gentleness. "It's just that you're poor. And parentless."

"My folks have been amazing to me, so I figured—why not give back? Help someone from an orphanage, do my part for society, y'know?"

"Look," he said, grabbing Bai Liu's shoulders and turning him forcefully toward the classroom window. "My parents are sitting right

in front of your seat, their bags are on your desk. You're literally basking in their good luck. Aren't I being generous? Call me dad?"

Bai Liu was about to reply when his voice caught in his throat.

Through the glass, a dark, human-sized mass of writhing black lines sat silently in his otherwise empty seat.

It looked around curiously, then casually brushed aside the two handbags that had been dumped there.

Inside the classroom, a man and woman turned, startled by the noise of bags hitting the floor.

"Who knocked our bags down?" the woman asked, frowning.

"Wasn't this spot reserved for bags?"

Someone nearby spoke up, "That's Bai Liu's seat. He doesn't have any parents coming today, so it's been empty."

The man and woman waved dismissively, clearly annoyed.

"The one you're talking about—Bai Liu—I know him. From the orphanage. Dirty and cheap. I heard he steals food from his classmates' lockers, which our kids absolutely hate."

"I didn't even know our son was sitting in front of him before. After the meeting, I'll talk to Mr. Xu about moving him. How can he focus on studying if he's staring at someone like that all day? It's bound to affect his mood."

With that, the two parents picked up their handbag and, without even dusting it off, placed it arrogantly and unceremoniously on Bai Liu's desk—as if it was theirs to begin with.

At that moment, the black, humanoid shadow slowly raised its head. Bai Liu—still being held down outside the window by a group of rowdy boys—stiffened. Through the glass, he saw the dark silhouette shift. The moment those two called him "dirty" and "cheap," the line twisted and morphed into the faint figure of a man.

The man had flawless, almost surreal features. He sat rigidly, as though determined to force his tall, long-limbed body into Bai Liu's tiny seat. His expression was utterly blank. He looked no older than eighteen or nineteen and had striking silver-blue eyes.

So this is what… the little ball of black lines—Spades—really looks like?

Apparently, his eyesight hadn't failed him yet.

Spades lifted his head with disinterest. His pale eyes locked on the couple about to place their bag on the desk.

The man and woman froze. They stared into the space above the desk, their faces stunned—as if they were witnessing a silver-blue door slowly opening in the air.

A second later, their faces contorted.

By the window, the boy continued mocking arrogantly. "Why don't you fight back? Look how impressed my parents are with me."

Then came a sudden scream from inside the classroom:

"Mr. Wang?! Mrs. Wang?! What are you doing?!"

The boy, still gripping Bai Liu's collar, turned to the window in confusion.

Inside, his parents looked like wild dogs. Their eyes rolled up, tongues lolling, and they were sprawled across Bai Liu's desk—licking it frantically as though tasting something unbelievably sweet. A strange, euphoric smile twisted their faces.

"Smells so good... hehehe… smells so good..."

It wasn't just a loss of dignity—it left the entire classroom stunned.

The surrounding students screamed, trying to pull the couple off the desk. But the two snapped their teeth threateningly, biting anyone who got too close.

After biting two frantic parents who tried to intervene, the boy finally panicked. He shoved open the window and shouted:

"Mom?! Dad?! What are you doing?!"

His parents slowly turned their heads toward him. Their gaze sent a chill down his spine, and he instinctively stepped back.

But before he could run, they leapt from the desk like beasts, diving out the window and pinning him to the ground.

The boy's head slammed into the pavement, his mind buzzing. He gagged, disoriented. But his parents didn't stop—they leaned over him, baring their teeth, sniffing him eagerly.

The boy thrashed and screamed, terrified. "Help me! Somebody help me!"

No one moved—except for Bai Liu, who watched coldly as the boy clawed at his pant leg for help.

"You want me to save you?" Bai Liu asked calmly.

The boy nodded frantically, snot streaming down his face.

"Call me Dad," Bai Liu said flatly.

The boy froze, blinking. He was just about to curse when his parents grinned again—those same horrific smiles—and the terror cracked him open.

"D-Daddy! Daddy, please! Save my dad!!"

It was as if that one word—Daddy—triggered something.

His parents abruptly crouched, their expressions going vacant and obedient. They bent down and began licking the boy's sneakers reverently, pressing their tongues flat against the dirty soles.

They were actually licking their own son's shoes.

"Hey, hey, Father-in-charge," the man murmured, his voice sycophantic and hollow. His empty eyes stared up at his dazed son. "I licked your shoes good, didn't I? I even gave you 1.6 million before… That job that just opened up—do you think it's mine now?"

The woman was licking too—delicate and precise, her shoulders swaying with pleasure. "Honey, honey, Daddy-husband~ Look how hard I'm working~ Can I get a little more for next month's allowance?"

"I want a two-hundred-thousand-dollar emerald bracelet~"

"Buy it for me, and I'll always call you Daddy~"

The boy stared, shell-shocked. Even he—spoiled and clueless—understood what this was.

The rest of the class looked on in stunned horror.

Halfway through their licking, the parents suddenly jerked back. The lustful haze on their faces faded as they groaned, gripping their temples as if waking from a nightmare. Dazed, they looked around—and then at their son.

They lowered their eyes and stared at the sneakers they had just been worshipping. A moment ago, their son had bragged about the fresh signature on those shoes—signed by his idol.

Now, thanks to their tongues, it was just a smudged blur.

Their mouths burned with the lingering taste of ink, tongues stained dark.

Soon after, the school security—called in by frantic parents—arrived. They helped the couple up and escorted them out, faces pale and twisted with shame.

As they passed the crowd, the father suddenly snapped. He grabbed his son's hair and slapped him twice.

"You little bastard! Look what you've done to us!"

"We spent so much money raising you, giving you the best! And you score this low on a test?! You're making me and your mom sick!"

The boy tried to defend himself, still reeling from the scene, but two more slaps cut him off. His cheeks puffed with red welts.

"Just wait until we get home," the man growled. "I'm not done with you yet."

The boy was slapped hard, over and over, and no one stopped him. His father all but dragged him away, his mouth slack and drooling from the beating, and the man didn't even pause—like he was venting some deep grievance through his son.

The students who had followed the boy earlier avoided his pleading gaze. Heads down, they quietly backed away, pretending not to see.

Bai Liu turned his eyes to the window. Spades was sitting inside, and their gazes met through the glass. Bai Liu raised his chin slightly—a silent gesture for him to come out and explain.

The sudden outbreak of violent parents… this had to be his doing.

Spades leaned back, propping his head in his hands, deliberately ignoring Bai Liu's summons. Instead, he demurely remained seated in Bai Liu's chair, mimicking the other parents who were earnestly reviewing their children's exam papers. His expression said clearly: I'm in the middle of a parent-teacher conference. Do not disturb me.

Bai Liu: "……"

Can you even read the paper from there...?

Yet, somehow, the parent meeting for Class 37 continued without incident after that brief, tense disruption.

Xu Wei stepped up to the podium and summarized the exam results—highlighting the top and bottom ten students. As each student was named, their parents stood to receive comments. Those with top-performing children basked in pride; those at the bottom shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

Bai Liu usually ranked near the bottom. But this time, miraculously, he'd managed to escape that category. He wasn't part of the students being criticized. He was... somewhere else.

"And now," Xu Wei continued, glancing down at her list, "let's go over students who made significant progress this time. These students have shown great improvement recently, and I encourage all parents to learn from each other. It's the final year—please pay more attention to your children."

She called names one by one, and the corresponding parents stood to modest applause—some awkwardly proud, some stiff, as if the praise was directed at them and not their kids.

"Hou Tong—improved by one hundred and twenty points," Xu Wei read aloud, looking at the man with approval. "Your child has shown consistent improvement."

"How could she not?" Hou Tong's father, an affable-looking man, laughed sheepishly. "She was rock bottom before. Anywhere from there is an improvement."

The class chuckled warmly.

"You may sit," Xu Wei said, scanning the list again. Her expression darkened. "The last student to show progress is a... special case. I won't mention his name—his parent didn't come."

Hou Tong's father raised a hand. "Teacher, even if their parent didn't show up, isn't it still worth saying? The kid still made progress, didn't he?"

Xu Wei hesitated, flustered. "Well, yes, but... this meeting was arranged on short notice, so maybe—"

"Go ahead, Mr. Xu," Hou Tong's father interrupted with a wave. He muttered under his breath, "Some teacher you are... no wonder Xiaotong doesn't like—"

Xu Wei forced a smile and cleared her throat. "The last student who made progress is Bai Liu."

Her eyes flicked toward Bai Liu by the window, her tone bordering on mockery. "Parent Hou Tong is right—all students should be treated equally. So let's stick to protocol. Even though Bai Liu's parent isn't here, they should still stand up to accept the praise."

"Let's give a round of applause to Bai Liu's parent."

All eyes turned to the empty chair.

Then, slowly, Spades stood.

He straightened his back, gave a reserved nod—an imitation of every parent who had come before—and accepted the applause as if he truly were Bai Liu's guardian.

Bai Liu's lips quirked into the faintest of smiles.

After the meeting, students were dismissed for a half-day and allowed to return home with their parents.

Bai Liu was the last to leave the classroom—not because he had no one to return to, but because his situation was reversed. His 'parent' was waiting on him.

Spades' transformation was visibly weakening. He lay still, clinging to Bai Liu's back, light as mist and fading by the second.

"You're not supposed to touch people," Bai Liu said flatly as he walked. "So what was all that about? Sweeping handbags, driving people mad—you seemed pretty powerful back there."

“I wasn’t supposed to,” Spades murmured, voice barely audible. “I’m not allowed to interfere with your school life. Those are the rules.”

Bai Liu paused. “And just now?”

Spades hesitated. “I was too angry. I broke the rules.”

“They can’t talk about you like that.”

“There’s a price for breaking rules, isn’t there?” Bai Liu asked calmly. “That’s why you’re too weak to walk and need me to carry you now?”

Spades gave a muffled mm, tucking his head against Bai Liu’s back like a scolded child.

The silence between them stretched.

The sun was setting, casting a golden light that slanted low and long, dragging Bai Liu’s shadow along the ground behind him.

“Next time,” Bai Liu said, eyes fixed on the shifting shadows at his feet, “don’t do something that stupid. It’d be pathetic if you broke yourself trying to protect me.”

Spades, clinging to his back, cast no shadow of his own. Only Bai Liu’s feet touched the ground. But somehow, it felt like the two of them were walking together.

Spades weighed nothing. Bai Liu carried nothing.

And yet—he leaned forward slightly under the burden. As if he were really carrying someone. A stray string monster who’d shown up just for him… just to attend a parent-teacher conference.

“Do you understand?” Bai Liu asked again, tone sharper. “Don’t do that next time.”

Spades was silent for a long time. Then, softly, “I can’t help it.”

“Why not?”

“Because I like you. A lot.” Spades tightened his grip, pressing closer. “I like you so much.”

“I like you, Bai Liu.”

“Bai Liu, I like you.”

“I really, really like you.”

Bai Liu was quiet for a long time.

“…I know,” he finally replied.

“Oh.” Spades paused, then softly added, “I like you, Bai Liu.”

“…Got it.”

“I like—”

“I said I got it.”

The sunlight stretched Bai Liu’s shadow behind him. It passed through the corridor window and cast its glow onto the back blackboard of Classroom 37.

At the center of the board was the honor roll for students who had improved. Neatly written names filled the space: second to last was [Hou Tong].

The final name, written crookedly in uneven strokes, was [Bai Liu].

Xu Wei hadn’t intended to include it. She assumed no one—certainly not in the school, maybe not even in the world—would care about Bai Liu’s small improvement in one exam. What did it matter if his name was missing?

After all, Bai Liu had no parents.

But there was a monster who cared. Who remembered. Who existed.

Quietly, clumsily, it had carried Bai Liu on its back. Then, draining its strength, it had picked up a piece of chalk with trembling hands and added that final name—stroke by painstaking stroke—at the bottom of the list.

Because, to the monster, Bai Liu was something worth celebrating.

—Just like the moment it stood up for him at the parents' meeting.

Qiao Mu Private High School

After the parents' meeting, Bai Liu was left alone—or rather, with only one other person—to live quietly, day by day.

As exam season approached, Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian visited less frequently. Yet, Bai Liu didn't fall into the same kind of isolation he had once known.

Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that after the parents' meeting, the student who had previously caused trouble was withdrawn from the school, and the rest of the class had become noticeably more well-behaved.

In any case, Bai Liu's life settled into a peaceful and steady rhythm, unfolding in quiet, orderly steps.

Over time, Hou Tong, who had been secretly watching Bai Liu, noticed that he was changing again. But unlike the earlier changes in his academic performance or daily habits, this felt different. Perhaps it was the particular sensitivity girls have when it comes to boys they like.

She had the sudden realization—Bai Liu might be in love.

Like now, for instance—
It was a drowsy spring afternoon during study hall. The curtains swayed softly in the breeze, and sunlight poured through the windows. Bai Liu sat by the window in a white shirt, collar slightly open, chin resting on his hand, eyes lowered in lazy concentration as he drew in his sketchbook with a perfectly sharpened pencil.

The curtain drifted again and again, brushing past the ends of his hair like a quiet, fluttering backdrop.

Hou Tong leaned over her desk, hiding behind a stack of books as she stole glances at him.

And then, she saw it—the faint upturn at the corners of Bai Liu's lips.

He was smiling.

Not the polite, distant smile he wore when thanking her. Not the forced, performative smile he used in conversations with classmates. Not the kind of smile that felt like a mask.

This smile was different.

It was the kind of smile she herself made when she daydreamed about Bai Liu, when she unconsciously wrote his name in the corner of her notebook, when she imagined their future together.

It was the smile of someone in love.

But who exactly did Bai Liu like?

After nearly a month of secret observation, Hou Tong had come to a frustrating conclusion: Bai Liu didn't really interact much with anyone. He barely spoke to other students or teachers, and whenever he did, his attention was fleeting and impersonal.

There were no obvious clues.

And yet, her instincts told her—he was in love. She could feel it.

Her eyes flicked to the sketchbook he was working on. But after a few glances, she forced herself to look away, pushing a textbook in front of her face to block the view, frustration weighing heavy in her chest.

She thought about that soft smile again and took a deep breath, burying her flushed face in the crook of her arm, pretending to nap.

There were girls prettier than her at school, but they weren't as good at volleyball. Those better at volleyball weren't as wealthy. And those wealthier than her didn't like Bai Liu the way she did.

So then... how had she lost?

Was there really someone out there who was prettier, richer, better at sports and more in love with Bai Liu than she was?

A bittersweet mix of jealousy and disbelief swirled inside her, and she clenched her fists, silently vowing: I'm going to find the girl who managed to beat me.

Thus began Hou Tong's more intense—ahem, more detailed—observation of Bai Liu.

And soon enough, she began noticing strange things.

For instance, when Bai Liu ate, he would place a bowl of soup across from him, as if someone else were sitting there. It looked like a coincidence—until you looked closer.

When he studied, his body tilted slightly to one side, as if a tall person were beside him, leaning over his shoulder.

He always took the most secluded path back to the dorm, his fingers loosely interlaced behind his back—as if secretly holding hands with someone walking beside him.

The more Hou Tong watched, the more she realized something was off. Some of Bai Liu's gestures and reactions were just too strange.

Like now.

Xu Wei, who had always disliked Bai Liu, found an excuse to send him out into the hallway during class.

It was the second period of the afternoon, and the fifteen-minute relaxation break had just started—five minutes for eye exercises, followed by ten minutes of calming music.

Hou Tong's seat was by the window on the opposite side of the corridor. She pressed gently on her temples and scratched around her eyes under the guise of rest—but really, she was peeking through the narrow slit of her fingers, watching Bai Liu through the glass.

He stood just beyond the corridor, back to her, reviewing his notes while being punished.

The windows were so clean they gleamed. She could see him clearly.

Bai Liu stood with his back resting against the glass, head bowed. His developing shoulders pressed lightly against the white fabric of his spring shirt. The sides of the shirt were stretched slightly over his back, making his frame look thin, straight, and delicate. There was a faint dampness where sweat had gathered, and from this distance, she could almost smell the gentle scent of detergent.

His hair had slipped behind his ears, swaying in the breeze. Long eyelashes cast soft shadows across his cheeks. His lips were parted slightly as he read silently from his notebook.

Hou Tong froze for a second.

The whole scene—sunlight, reflections, the delicate lines of his figure—looked like something straight out of a film.

Bai Liu was reading so intently...

As if sensing her gaze, Bai Liu lifted his head slightly and glanced at her—just for a moment—through the glass.

The eyes were pale—almost colorless. The dark pupils caught in the pale orange light of the afternoon, lazy and focused.

Despite the absence of emotion in that gaze, Hou Tong's heart pounded uncontrollably. She almost fumbled as she snatched a book, flipping it open and clutching it tightly in front of her face to shield her eyes from Bai Liu's. She pretended to read.

Bai Liu's gaze flicked briefly from Hou Tong's upside-down book before returning to the notebook in his hands.

Hou Tong's wide eyes peeked out from behind the pages, quietly watching him as he read intently. But the more she watched, the more aggravated she felt.

The Bai Liu from before... would have smiled after a stare-down. Even though she knew the smile was calculated, a deliberate way to reel her in—he still smiled. But now, Bai Liu wouldn't even spare her that.

He's clearly distancing himself.

That person hadn't even shown up yet, and Bai Liu was already practicing everything about being in a relationship for her—even distancing himself from Hou Tong.

There was only one explanation that made sense to her: Bai Liu was doing things alone... that only people in a relationship would do together.

There was only one truth!

Bai Liu was practicing how to fall in love with someone he liked.

How much more like a boyfriend training arc could this get…

So serious, so earnest... so cute. But the worst part? He was already doing it for someone else.

Hou Tong slumped onto the desk in despair. But when she remembered that Bai Liu had been "practicing" like this for over six months—and this mysterious love interest still hadn't shown up—she couldn't help her growing frustration. She slammed her fist down on the table.

“Damn it! Half a year and that clueless woman still hasn’t shown up to date Bai Liu?!”

“If she doesn’t want him, I do! I want to date! I’ll pay to date!”

At the end of the five-minute eye exercise broadcast, the loudspeakers transitioned into a cheerful pop song. A light, bouncy melody played overhead:

“I just want to hold your hand and never let go—”

Hou Tong glanced toward the window where Bai Liu stood—and froze.

His outstretched right hand had curled slightly, as if being held by someone unseen. A larger handbag seemed to rest against it, fingers clasping his.

“You, lean on my shoulder—”

His right shoulder dipped subtly, as though someone had gently rested against it.

“You, asleep on my chest—”

Bai Liu leaned against the window, his neck tilted slightly to the side, as if someone lay asleep against him. And then it happened again—that faint smile Hou Tong had caught earlier returned. His lashes fluttered as he looked down… at something resting against his chest.

He gently pushed the invisible presence away, lips parting as he softly spoke.

Through the glass, Hou Tong couldn’t hear, but she could see his lips move. She mimicked them, mouthing each syllable in sync:

“What are you doing... acting out the lyrics?”

The song reached its peak: “A life like this—I love you, you love me—”

At that line, Bai Liu’s expression seemed to freeze. He turned his head abruptly, breathing uneven.

—Like a high school boy caught off guard by a sudden confession from his crush.

The next song began, an English track with an unmistakable opener: [KISS].

Hou Tong watched as Bai Liu took a deep breath, his gaze lowering calmly to his notebook. He murmured something—not rote memorization, but more like an explanation, as if translating the lyrics to himself.

“Kiss means… kiss?” Hou Tong mimicked his soft accent in confusion. “A kiss is very intimate and only happens between lovers and couples?”

...What’s this? English vocab?

But... Bai Liu doesn’t even know what ‘kiss’ means?

In the next moment, Hou Tong saw Bai Liu’s head tip back slightly, his shoulders jolted against the window. It was like something had slammed into him. His shirt gathered tightly around his waist, gripped by invisible hands. His body was locked in an embrace. His neck tilted back.

Hou Tong couldn’t see his face anymore, only the slight tremble of his back pressed against the glass. The faint outline of his shoulder blades strained against his shirt, his skin flushed red from his neck to behind his ears. Slowly, the notes slipped from his hands, fingers unclenching.

The spring breeze drifted gently through the 3pm air. Only one “bad student” had been punished to stand in the empty corridor. Camellias bloomed in riotous red on the hilltop. The lighthearted, ambiguous music danced through the halls of the school.

And in Hou Tong’s wide eyes was reflected that very student—the one she liked—eighteen years old, standing there with flushed cheeks and trembling hands.

She saw him, in the final chorus of [KISS], release his notebook completely.

Close his eyes.

And hug his invisible lover back—tightly, without hesitation.

Qiao Mu Private High School

Time was steadily ticking down—less than a hundred days remained before the entrance exams.

Hou Tong still hadn't found the girl Bai Liu liked, but with the exams looming, she was too distracted to keep an eye on him the way she used to.

Even Xu Wei barely had time to give Bai Liu a hard time anymore.

Qiao Mu Private High School held weekly exams, monthly assessments, and biweekly round-robin tests. On top of that, she had to deal with her son Bao Kangle's unpredictable grades.

Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian had been given extra lessons too. Every time they snuck down to find Bai Liu, they looked completely exhausted—Fang Dian often dozing off on Lu Yizhan's back, her eyelids drooping with sleep.

Eventually, Bai Liu told them to stop coming down so often, reassuring them that everything would be settled after senior year.

Lu Yizhan agreed, albeit reluctantly.

While everyone else was swamped with the chaos of senior year, Bai Liu remained a maverick—moving at his own pace, out of step with the urgency that gripped the others.

Evening Study, 9 PM, Class XVII.

In the final three months of senior year, most of the students in Bai Liu's class leave for home after school, with parents arriving at 9 PM to pick them up.

The classrooms are filled with disheveled, tired students packing up their materials, papers, and stationery boxes, heading toward the school exit where their parents wait anxiously.

"How was your day?"

Or, "How did you do on your test?"

Outside the classroom, a bustle of students and parents can be heard,

but none of this concerns Bai Liu.

Bai Liu sits alone in the corner of the gradually emptying classroom, casually twirling his pencil as he rests his chin on his hand, working through a conic curve problem in mathematics.

He had already calculated the final result for this question three times in an hour—each time arriving at the same answer: one-half.

After going through the problem again without realizing where he went wrong, Bai Liu grew frustrated. He narrowed his eyes, scanning the problem once more, determined to solve it. Finally, his gaze stopped on the period at the end of the last sentence in the problem.

The final word and the period were unpleasantly crossed out.

Math, so annoying.

Time crawled by, the night growing later. The classroom on the first floor was slowly emptying, and Bai Liu, in the bottom right corner by the window, was still working through the conic curve problem for the fourth time.

In late spring, the subtle chirping of mosquitoes could be heard through the window. Suddenly, the empty chair in front of Bai Liu moved on its own, dragging itself closer until it was pressed against his desk.

If a student had passed by the window at that moment, they would have screamed in terror—this was straight out of a school horror movie!

Spades casually crossed his long legs and sat backward in the chair in front of Bai Liu, resting his head on the back of the chair and wrapping his arms around it. He tilted his head, studying Bai Liu. "Why are you still working on this problem? You were quick with the last one."

He looked a bit uncomfortable in the small chair, his long frame forcing him to sit awkwardly, feet restless against the floor, causing the chair and his body to sway.

Bai Liu’s chair also swayed slightly. He glanced up at Spades, his voice cold. "Stop shaking your chair. You’re making my desk move."

"Oh." Spades pulled his legs back and adjusted his chair so that it was

squarely facing Bai Liu. He tucked his legs under the desk, pressing them against Bai Liu's calves.

The cramped space under the desk only added to the tension.

Bai Liu's pen made a mark on the paper as Spades' leg lifted the desk. His eyelids fluttered, but Spades continued, clueless. "Why are you still stuck on this question?"

The last problem had been the easiest geometry question—of course he solved it quickly.

But Bai Liu didn't explain it that way. He didn't look at Spades, instead focusing on the question as he answered casually, "Because this question won't let me get it right."

"What's stopping you from getting it right?" Spades frowned, "Just kill the problem."

Bai Liu paused, a faint smile curving the corners of his mouth before it flattened out again. "Can't kill it. This question..."

His words trailed off.

Spades propped himself up on the desk and leaned forward suddenly, one of his legs slipping under the desk to reach for Bai Liu's leg. As Bai Liu tried to move his chair back, Spades stepped on it, holding him in place.

Spades' left hand opened, palm up, and gently took hold of Bai Liu's right hand, which had been turning his pencil. He held it firmly at the spot where Bai Liu had made the mistake on his fourth attempt.

Spades held him so tightly that Bai Liu could barely move. A strange chill ran through him—Spades' skin against the back of his hand and his knee pressing against Bai Liu's thigh felt like an icy embrace.

It suddenly hit Bai Liu: the monster that had been with him all along, the one who had followed him through every stage of his life, had quietly invaded his space. By claiming the affection that had once been his alone, it had grown into a behemoth, controlling his every move.

He realized that, in the grip of this monster, he didn't even have the strength to reach for his pen.

Bai Liu lowered his eyes, watching Spades' hand cover his completely, feeling the smooth, firm muscles of Spades' arm.

It was astounding how quickly Spades had changed—what had once been the small figure of a child now pressed against him, his knees near Bai Liu's thighs.

"Why can't you solve this question?" Spades' voice was unusually soft, his tone sincere as he wrapped his hand around Bai Liu's pencil and said, "If you don't like it, I'll get rid of it for you."

Spades' head rested lightly against Bai Liu's, and he leaned in just a little closer, his breath hitching as their shadows intertwined on the paper.

The proximity made Bai Liu's breath catch. He quickly turned his gaze away, lowering his eyes.

It was hard to believe that this man—who looked so confident and imposing now—had once been a disorganized mess of puppy-like energy just six months ago. He was more handsome than any NPC Bai Liu had encountered in the game.

And he was so much more than that now, in every sense.

Bai Liu's right hand, still holding the pen, clenched tightly, his fingers turning white. His voice remained cold: "How exactly do you plan to help me solve this problem?"

Spades lifted his gaze, studying Bai Liu intently before his eyes dropped to his lips, a strong, purposeful look in his eyes.

"You reward me now, and I'll solve it for you."

Bai Liu instinctively pursed his lips before quickly rejecting, "No reward."

"I said, not in the classroom," Spades insisted.

"But you also said it's not allowed in the dorm room," Bai Liu countered. Spades gripped his wrist and pressed it down, leaning his head against Bai Liu's shoulder, his voice muffled as he spoke, "So where else is it allowed?"

"You haven't rewarded me in 84 minutes."

—Which was almost exactly one and a half periods of evening study

time.

When Bai Liu was doing his laundry in the dormitory one and a half nights before self-study, Spades asked to hold his hand, wanting to take credit for it and asking for a reward. Bai Liu didn't want to give him one—he had no idea who had started this perverse trend of "rewards."

Just hugging him and doing the laundry already required an extra five minutes of kissing. Was this how future Bai Liu always made such unprofitable deals with this guy?

But for some reason, it ended up being a reward anyway, with another kiss added on the way out.

Bai Liu had forbidden Spades from following him to his evening study sessions, as Spades was truly detrimental to his academic performance.

Yet, it felt as though Bai Liu, when the door was closing, couldn’t help but glance back at Spades behind the door.

Through the small gap, Bai Liu saw Spades lying face down across his bed, his head buried deep in Bai Liu's quilt, wearing his freshly changed school uniform. A strong sense of abandonment radiated from the monster, like a dark cloud thundered above him, a storm swirling in his mind.

Then, without knowing why, Bai Liu felt something shift within him. He called out softly through the closing door, "Spades, are you coming with me?"

Spades looked up, his face expressionless but his silvery-blue eyes locking with Bai Liu’s. "I want it," he said.

Later, Bai Liu couldn’t recall exactly what happened, but he remembered that Spades had grabbed his wrist, pulled him into the dormitory, pinned him against the half-open door, and very much taken it upon himself to claim his reward.

Bai Liu drank two glasses of cold water before leaving the house to cool down the redness of his lips.

The more time Bai Liu spent with this creature, the more obsessed he became, which made him wary of the possibility that Spades had some sort of special ability—like making him blank out for a brief

moment, leaving him unconscious.

For example, right now.

Bai Liu was about to say, "No more rewards tonight, and you can't go to bed," but then he tilted his head and locked eyes with Spades, who was leaning on his shoulder.

Spades lowered his eyes, a small beam of light catching his long eyelashes. His cold demeanor softened with a quiet warmth in the orange glow of the light. His silvery-blue eyes stared intently at Bai Liu, his voice suddenly softer.

"I like you, Bai Liu."

There was no emotion in his words, but they carried such tenderness that Bai Liu felt a trembling in his chest.

So, Bai Liu put down his pen, and the words that left his lips were calm. "I'm bored with the questions. Let's go for a stroll on the playground."

"There's a reward for you there too."

A year ago, Bai Liu would never have imagined being alone on the playground after 9:30 p.m. It was a place where the couples at Qiao Mu High School often snuck off to, hiding their love.

Back in his second year, Bai Liu had only come to the playground for one reason: to help Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian, a couple, escape the watchful eyes of the teachers.

Because every now and then, the head teacher would appear, torch in hand, roaming the playground, scanning the couples with a sharp gaze. His eyes were ruthless, always on the lookout to break up any adolescent love, like a lone wolf stalking its prey.

When the head teacher found Bai Liu, the emotionless "lightbulb," he was a perfect shield.

Bai Liu knew the playground well, and he was familiar with many places where couples could be alone, like the table tennis table by the stadium.

He knew how the adolescent boys, filled with hormones, couldn't resist kissing their girlfriends in these secluded spots, even going as far

as putting their hands inside their school uniforms.

Bai Liu had often seen their panicked faces as they rushed to flee when the head teacher appeared, torchlight catching their terrified expressions, their hysteria so stark that the scene seemed absurd.

Some of the boys even abandoned their girlfriends to run away alone.

At those times, Bai Liu observed the farce with detachment, as though it was happening in another world, to another species.

He didn't understand why the boys were so restless or why the girls sobbed so heartbreakingly. He didn't understand why they scrambled to be together, engaging in such a meaningless act of sexuality when the head teacher's voice rang out.

A year ago, to Bai Liu, love seemed like a foolish pursuit, while desire was the true motivator.

But it seemed a waste of desire to be unable to control it rationally, to do things that could have no real consequence.

Bai Liu never imagined he would become part of this ridiculous couple, just as he never thought he'd lose control of his own desires.

Spades lowered Bai Liu onto the table tennis table, his lips trailing down from the corner of Bai Liu's mouth to his jaw, placing quick, tender kisses. His hands were already lifting the hem of Bai Liu's school uniform. The moment he reached beneath it and pressed his cold fingers against Bai Liu's skin, a shiver ran down Bai Liu's spine. His body trembled like a shrimp curling up from the cold, his delicate fingers clutching Spades' shirt with a vice-like grip.

Bai Liu's breathing became shallow and rapid, as though he was drowning. He slowly lifted his head from Spades' shoulder.

Under the dim streetlight falling on the table tennis table, Bai Liu's eyes were damp, his dark gaze hazy with confusion. His mind felt on the verge of shattering when he heard the distant voice of the head teacher.

Bai Liu didn't understand why the couples didn't separate, even as they heard the voice.

But in that moment…

He slowly closed his eyes, holding onto Spades, feeling his body dissolve into a warm haze as Spades kissed the corners of his eyes, whispered sweetly in his ear, and gazed at him with those silvery-blue eyes.

"I like you."

Maybe I'm actually psychotic, Bai Liu thought, or maybe I'm just crazy.

Bai Liu opened his eyes and looked at the approaching torchlight, his mind in a daze.

In that moment, he wondered: if the head teacher discovered that Spades had left without him, would he cry like the girls who had been abandoned?

Can he cry?

He didn't know.

Bai Liu clung to Spades' back as he closed his eyes and allowed himself to sink deeper.

... If we're meant to be together in the future, we shouldn't be apart.

Qiao Mu Private High School

The head teacher eventually missed Bai Liu, who was hiding in the corner, and Spades, who was crouched beside the wall behind the ping pong table. Both stood still, hands in the air, their breaths uneven as they waited for the head teacher to leave.

"When we get back," Bai Liu said, lowering his eyes. The soft glow still haloed his face, but his voice was cool. "Don't interrupt my studies."

Spades tightened his grip on Bai Liu's hand and let out a small ooh before asking, "So… can we come back here tomorrow?"

Bai Liu didn't respond. He simply squeezed Spades' hand back, slowly.

Amid the bustle of the school day, time passed quickly. Strange incidents occurred now and then, but they were soon uncovered.

For instance, a girl jumped into the lake on the hill, believing the legend of the high school lake. She was saved by Lu Yizhan, who happened to be passing by. Not long after, Qiao Mu Private High School was reported for omitting questions on their exams.

The entire school was thrown into chaos. A covert purge began, and disorder rippled through Qiao Mu like a fever.

Bai Liu, a student from the orphanage, came under special attention. An inspector pulled him aside for a conversation—not formal or rehearsed, but more like a casual chat.

"How are things going here?"

"Have you thought about your future?"

"Your grades have been improving lately."

The inspector handed Bai Liu a business card with a rare gentleness. "I've looked into your class. And into you."

"There's not much advice I can give you, but I want you to know—you're not alone."

He patted Bai Liu on the shoulder, his tone serious. "Many people are willing to help you shoulder the burden. I am. So is the orphanage. So are the friends around you. You don't have to fight injustice alone."

He said this with enough clarity to make his meaning understood, but not so plainly as to expose what he knew. Then, with a wave of his hand, he turned to leave.

Only later did Bai Liu learn the reason he'd been singled out. The anonymous student who reported the exam question omission had mentioned him—along with the many injustices plaguing the school.

Even Xu Wei, a minor player in the school's hierarchy, was dragged into the mess. She was investigated for her senior teacher title and suspended from extracurricular institutions. Her once-comfortable monthly income of over $30,000 plummeted to just $4,000—and it kept falling. Xu Wei came to class every day looking paler and more haunted.

One day, she collapsed in the middle of class.

Coincidentally, that was the same day she was found guilty of accepting nearly $200,000 in gifts from parents. She was ordered to repay the full amount.

Gifts that had already been sold were converted into cash to cover the debt.

The classroom descended into chaos. Bao Kangle clung to Xu Wei, who had collapsed at the lectern like a dead woman, sobbing, "Mom! Mom! What's wrong, Mom?!"

Looking at Xu Wei's face—white as death—the students who had once used money and power to bend the rules were visibly shaken.

…What happened to Xu Wei today could easily happen to them tomorrow.

Students and parents were being investigated too. The inspection team treated Qiao Mu High like their own home, visiting teachers and students one by one, as if they wouldn't stop until they unearthed the full truth.

And instead of dwindling, their numbers only grew.

By the window, Bai Liu watched yet another group of investigators arrive. This group wore octopus-shaped badges on their shoulders. The previous team greeted them with deference.

In this situation, Bai Liu—an orphanage student—was now under

protection. No one at school dared speak to him or treat him with disrespect.

When Xu Wei was discharged from the hospital, the first thing she did at school was call Bai Liu into her office to apologize.

“Bai Liu,” she said. Her voice was weak. She wasn’t fully recovered, her pale face propped up by her thin body leaning against the desk. The stern tone she used to lecture him was gone. “The investigation team leaders spoke to me. Was it you who brought this to their attention?”

Bai Liu glanced at her indifferently. “Is that what you called me here for?”

The implication was clear: if this was all she wanted to talk about, he’d be leaving.

Xu Wei looked up at his expression—completely devoid of regard—and nearly ground her teeth in frustration. She trembled, on the verge of cursing him out.

But then she remembered the investigators, the strange rumors she’d heard about Gaucho Lake, and a chill ran down her spine. She stopped.

“...No,” she said quietly. “I just wanted to say I’m sorry.”

“Before, when I scolded you—it wasn’t intentional. I was just worried. I didn’t expect that what I said would degrade your character, would be taken as an insult. If my words hurt you, then I’m sincerely sorry.”

“Mm.” Bai Liu gave a noncommittal nod.

Xu Wei’s eyes lit up. She slowly pushed a document toward him and bit her lip. “Bai Liu, if you understand… please sign this letter of understanding. I need to show it to the investigation leaders.”

Bai Liu glanced at the letter, then picked up the pen.

Xu Wei’s eyes widened.

He signed with three titles: [Orphan of the Orphanage], [Social Scum], [Mental Patient]. Then he looked up at her with an unreadable expression. “Signed, teacher.”

“That’s not even your name!” Xu Wei’s face twisted, her voice rising

into hysteria.

Bai Liu blinked at her calmly. “So you do know that’s not my name?”

“Then why did you always call me that?”

Xu Wei froze, her expression vacant, absurd. Her hands slipped from the desk as she slumped forward.

Yes… those were her own words—thrown back at her, just as they had once been thrown at him.

Bai Liu set down his pen as if it were weightless, turning to leave.

"If you really want to apologize, show some sincerity, teacher." He paused. "At least bring your fellow Bao Kangle students with you when you do."

The small flower bed near the playground.

Fang Dian listened as Bai Liu recounted Xu Wei’s apology, then gave him a thumbs up. "Cool!"

Bai Liu turned his gaze to Lu Yizhan. "What happened at Gaucho Lake? I heard it was you who saved that student?"

Lu Yizhan scratched his head and let out a long sigh. "I just happened to be there. I don’t know why that girl suddenly jumped in, but I was fast enough to pull her out."

Bai Liu’s eyes narrowed. "And why were you at Gaucho Lake in the middle of the night?"

Lu Yizhan hesitated. "Because I was investigating what’s going on with the lake."

"What exactly is going on at Gaucho Lake?" Bai Liu asked.

Lu Yizhan rested his hands on his knees, slowly clenching them. "I’ve been digging into the origin of the rumors and figured out the exact conditions for the lake to 'open.'"

"The specific conditions for Gaucho Lake to open?" Bai Liu’s gaze sharpened. "What are they?"

Lu Yizhan took a deep breath. "You've probably heard the version going around at the base of the mountain—that if the moon is reflected just right in the middle of the lake, you can see the future exam papers. But there's another version."

He lowered his voice. "A version whispered among some of the teachers."

"—that the student who opens Gaucho Lake must be one destined to fail the exam."

Lu Yizhan's eyes darkened. "It means the lake only opens for a student who will lose their future GCSE results."

Fang Dian tilted her head, curious. "Let's say the rumor is true. It still doesn't make much sense, does it? If a student sees the test paper in advance, learns the questions, and then does them again in the exam hall, they should do better, right?"

"It's not like that." Lu Yizhan's tone turned uncharacteristically grim. His lips pressed into a line. "Once you've seen the questions in the lake and you couldn't solve them—
you'll never be able to solve them again."

Hospital, Ward 301.

A girl with damp hair lay pale on the bed—the same girl Lu Yizhan had saved the night before. Despite nearly drowning, her face wasn't the least bit disheveled. Instead, it was lit with excitement. Her eyes flicked anxiously toward the phone on the bedside table.

Her heart pounded as she slowly reached out and picked it up.

Screen on. Unlock. Open browser. Begin typing.

The ward was empty except for her—an upper-year student now trembling with manic energy as she searched. Her chest heaved with emotion, her eyes locked on the tiny, glowing screen.

[What are cyanobacteria?]

[Is "step by step" the correct idiom?]

She had seen them—actually seen the GCSE questions underwater. She'd remembered them. She got so many of them right in her head!

The more she searched, the faster she breathed. A flush rose in her pale cheeks, her lips trembling.

There was one big chemistry question—organic compounds. She never got it right. But she'd remembered the stem. She'd tried to hold on to it, to bring it back and search for it—

But now, as she tried to write it out, her mind blanked.

She couldn't remember the question.

How?!

She clutched at the memory, frantic, but the question spun uselessly in her head—fifteen points, slipping away behind some invisible barrier.

She pressed her lips together.

Maybe she'd just forgotten. Maybe it would come back. She opened her mistake log, the one for big organic questions she had carefully studied for months.

But when she looked—nothing made sense.

The stems of the questions blurred and twisted. Lines of text morphed into strange, twitching rows of alien characters. Each word twisted into a tiny, grinning worm with a human face, leering at her from inside the screen.

"Ah!" She shrieked, flinging the phone away.

"Miaomiao, what's wrong?" Her father burst through the door. He saw the phone lying on the quilt and reached to pick it up.
"Don't worry about the questions right now. Just rest, okay?"

But Miaomiao, wide-eyed and trembling, grabbed the phone back. She scrolled through her mistake log, now with horror in her gaze.

That big organic chemistry question—unsolved at the bottom of the lake—was gone from her memory.

The genetics question in biology—also gone.

The physics question on punch timer speed...

She slowly lowered the phone.

Her face was blank, distant.

A friend had once joked with her about the lake legend:

—“The score you get on the exam in the lake is your real GCSE score.”

She had laughed.

“How can it be the same score if you take the exam twice?” she’d argued.

Now, she understood.

Because the questions you can’t answer the first time—

—are erased from your world.

No matter how hard you try after that,

you’ll never get them right again.

Qiao Mu Private High School

"Miaomiao, are you okay?" Her father asked with concern as he gently picked up his bleary-eyed daughter. He set the phone aside and continued, "You were unconscious for a long time after you drowned. You only regained full consciousness about a week ago. Try not to get too emotional—Dad gets really worried about you."

"By the way, your class teacher and the headmaster came to visit you."

Miaomiao looked up, dazed. "Who?"

Her father repeated patiently, "The headmaster and your class teacher, Mr. Ren."

The headmaster gave a stiff smile to Miaomiao's father before turning to look at Miaomiao in her hospital bed. His eyes gleamed like he was staring at a slab of cooked meat.

Unnerved, Miaomiao's father instinctively shifted to block his daughter's view from that unsettling gaze. Fortunately, the headmaster quickly looked away, and Mr. Ren—Miaomiao's class teacher—stepped forward.

"Mr. Wang, Miaomiao has missed quite a few revision classes recently. I'd like to discuss how we can help her catch up."

He glanced at Miaomiao, then lowered his voice. "Would it be alright if we spoke outside? I'm worried the conversation might stress her out."

After a moment of hesitation, Miaomiao's father nodded. "Alright, let's talk outside."

The ward door remained open. Inside, Wang Miao lay on one of the beds, separated by a drawn blue curtain. From outside, she couldn't be seen. The headmaster lingered by the doorway, staring at Miaomiao with a dark, calculating expression. Miaomiao stared back, confused, unable to reconcile this aged, sagging man with the proud headmaster she'd once seen during the 100-day countdown ceremony.

"You've seen the GCSE papers, haven't you?" the headmaster suddenly asked.

Wang Miao's heart skipped. She jolted upright instinctively. "How…

how do you know?"

"How many questions do you still remember?" he pressed, stepping closer. His expression grew darker, and he leaned on the hospital bed's railing. "You're a decent student. If you focus, can you recall the questions worth four or five hundred points?"

Terrified, Wang Miao shrank away, shaking her head repeatedly, unable to respond.

The headmaster let out a long breath, then lowered his hands and stared at her coldly. "Well, since things have come to this, let me be direct."

"As I'm sure you've realized after going to Gaucho Lake—those rumors are all true."

"There's something special at the bottom of the lake. It allows certain students—those doomed to fail—to see their actual future exam papers."

Wang Miao finally found her voice, trembling. "How do you know that?"

"Because I'm a player." The headmaster raised his heavy eyelids. "What's in that lake is a prop I redeemed from the game and planted there myself."

To Wang Miao, his words blurred into nonsense. She blinked at him, dazed. "What… what did you just say?"

The headmaster exchanged glances with the two teachers beside him, speaking in a low voice. "She's not a player. Where's Lu Yizhan—the one who saved her?"

One teacher replied seriously, "I checked. Lu Yizhan is in our class. He's not a player. He just happened to be there and jumped in to save someone. His behavior doesn't fit a player profile."

"Lu Yizhan even circled Gaucho Lake without showing any desire to enter it. Definitely not a player."

"So who solved all the questions, escaped the prop, and then reported us?" the headmaster's face flushed with suppressed fury. "Who tipped off the Heresy Authority and got our prop confiscated?"

"Have we screened everyone we've interacted with in the game?"

A teacher nodded. "Yes. All our identities in the game are disguised. No one's been exposed. It's unlikely someone tracked us from the game into reality just to target us."

"Then our original guess stands." The headmaster dropped heavily into a chair and gave a bitter laugh. "Some little brat from our school entered the game, survived, discovered the truth about heretics and props, and then decided to play the hero."

"Exactly," the teacher agreed. "Otherwise, how could anyone have completed that fake GCSE paper at the bottom of the lake, memorized all the questions, and then submitted them straight to both the investigation team and the Heresy Authority?"

"Only a player could've pulled that off."

Wang Miao watched the two teachers talk, but her ears rang and their words faded into static.

One teacher gave her a dismissive glance, like she was nothing more than an insect. "And Wang Miao? Just an ordinary student."

"Handle her like we've done in past years," the headmaster ordered with a wave, standing up. "You talk to her. I need to return to the school."

The sagging flesh of his cheeks trembled with suppressed anger. "I've already ordered a list of students who might be players. I'll verify them one by one when I get back."

"If I find the little brat who ruined everything..."

He didn't finish the sentence. On his way out, he exchanged a friendly smile with Miaomiao's father, as if he were simply a concerned educator, not someone who had just issued silent threats in a hospital ward.

Inside, the teacher sat down across from Wang Miao, adopting a formal tone.

"Student Wang Miao, you've already entered the GCSE lake and completed questions while the prop was active. That means the score you achieved there will be your real score during the actual exam. You understand what that means, right? It's not a very good result."

"You now have two choices. First: take the GCSE as is and accept whatever score you already got—it'll be the same no matter how many times you retake it."

Wang Miao shook and forced herself to speak. "I... I can repeat the year!"

The teacher gave her a pitying look. "Repeat? Do you think you'll still be able to answer the questions?"

"Didn't you hear me? That score is locked in. It's a rule-based prop. No matter what you do, your result won't change."

"So what's the second option?" Wang Miao's voice was hollow. She didn't fully grasp the conversation, only clung to the structure.

The teacher smiled.

"Tell us the questions you remember. We'll share them with students who need them, and in return, you'll receive a generous commission."

"What do you say, Wang Miao?"

Wang Miao sat frozen, her mind blank, the world spinning around her. She couldn't utter a single word.

Meanwhile, at Xu Wei's home—

"Students who've been acting strangely in class recently?"

Xu Wei was on the phone in the living room, nodding nervously as she spoke with quiet urgency. "Yes, yes, that's right, Headmaster. Bai Liu has been particularly strange. I received a book from him—it showed him with some sort of... strange creature, always with him."

"It started around senior year. He suddenly changed—he'd talk to himself, say things I didn't understand. His grades improved drastically. He used to do poorly, but then it was like something helped him, and everything turned around overnight."

"Is there something Bai Liu wants in particular?" she echoed the question from the other end of the call.

"Yes!" Xu Wei's tone lifted as she stood. "He's obsessed with money. He caused quite a stir with that charity orphanage thing before—all

just for money. And he's obsessed with horror games. Always playing those when he has nothing better to do."

"He's especially drawn to horror games."

At that moment, in the headmaster's office—

Listening to Xu Wei's report, the headmaster narrowed his eyes. He circled Bai Liu's name in red ink on the student list in front of him, then hung up the phone.

"These seventeen students are our key suspects," the headmaster said, swiveling in his chair and tossing the list onto his desk. He eyed the four teachers standing before him, all with heads bowed. "Find a way to get them to jump into Gaucho Lake—watch how they react to props. We'll identify the real player that way."

"Especially this one—Bai Liu." His finger pressed firmly on the name at the top of the list. "I'm fairly sure he's a player. Probably has props from inside the game."

"Maybe not now, but definitely in the future. Keep an eye on him—we might be able to pull him into our ranks."

One of the teachers hesitated before speaking. "But this student is also under investigation by the Heresy Administration. He's from the orphanage, which puts him in a delicate position. It's risky for us to make any direct moves."

"And the team assigned this time is said to be the second squad of the Heretic Authority. Their leader is... notoriously harsh on players. We can't risk being exposed as players ourselves."

The teacher visibly shivered, voice softening. "...Principal, perhaps it's better if we don't act directly. We could have an ordinary person try something with Bai Liu instead?"

The headmaster paused, then nodded slowly.

"Principal, we're low on points," the teacher continued cautiously. "We already spent a lot just to buy that altered college entrance exam paper. It's taken us years to recoup those points. If we act now, we'll need props again... and we don't have the points to redeem them."

The headmaster let out a long breath, face darkening. "Understood. I'll spend some money. I'll have Xu Wei test him."

At 2 a.m., Xu Wei was stirred from sleep by her phone. Her eyes shot open at the voice on the other end.

“What? Two and a half million?”

The headmaster’s voice was calm, almost coaxing. “I don’t know if you’ll agree, Ms. Xu Wei. But if you can lure Bai Liu to jump into Gaucho Lake, I’ll give you two and a half million dollars.”

“No one will know. Just you and me. I promise nothing will happen to you.”

“Jump into Gaucho Lake?!” Xu Wei’s voice rose, but she quickly lowered it, trembling. “That means... Bai Liu could drown? Will I be held responsible?”

“Why should it matter to you if he drowns?” the headmaster snapped. “It’s the most stressful point of the college entrance exams—he’d have a million reasons to jump. No one will question it. You’ll be safe.”

“Fine. Let me... think it over.”

Xu Wei hung up, dazed. She slowly sank to the floor, staring blankly at her new home.

She had bought the place with a loan after landing her job at Qiao Mu High School. At $41,000 per square foot, the apartment was in a famously wealthy district. And yet, the monthly mortgage was $20,000—for thirty years. Now, under investigation, she couldn’t even make payments anymore. Rumors were spreading. Because Bai Liu refused to sign a letter of understanding, the investigation team was reportedly considering revoking her teaching license over so-called “ethical issues.”

If she couldn’t come up with the money, she’d lose everything.

Her eyes drifted through the glass balcony door to the coffee table. A porcelain cup held down the letter of understanding—the one Bai Liu had refused to sign, the one that still listed him as [orphan from the orphanage].

She would only be coaxing him to jump. If anything happened, she might face moral condemnation, at worst. But she’d walk away with two million dollars.

Xu Wei drew a deep breath, steeling herself to stand—

—when she saw the shadow in front of the coffee table.

Bao Kangle's eyes were bloodshot, his face twisted with manic excitement. "Mom, I heard everything. There's two million on the line."

"I'll help you push Bai Liu into the lake!"

Qiao Mu Private High School

Undercurrents swelled beneath the calm surface of everyday life, yet people walked across the rippling waves as if the ground were still solid beneath their feet.

Under mounting pressure from all sides, Qiao Mu Private High School announced an early exam break—one week off, no homework—giving students a chance to mentally adjust before finals.

The moment the notice was issued, students erupted into cheers, regardless of whether they had been involved in the recent commotion. Some even began tearing up their papers in celebration.

Snow-white sheets fluttered from the upper floors of the school building like confetti, and amid the jubilant cries of "liberation!", Bai Liu turned away from the window. His gaze returned to the unfinished math problem on his desk, and he calmly wrote the word “solve.”

While the rest of the class scrambled to pack up, Bai Liu remained still, indifferent, absorbed in his work as if the commotion had nothing to do with him.

One by one, the students trickled out. The once-lively classroom fell quiet. Outside, the sky dimmed. When Bai Liu finally looked up again, the room was empty.

He had spent half an hour on that probability question—and this time, he got it right.

His accuracy had been improving. His scores in major exams now consistently topped 400.

“Bai Liu!” Fang Dian called out, appearing in the doorway with a shoulder bag slung across her body, dressed in her sports uniform.

“You coming back or what?”

—By "back," she meant the little house. Back with Fang Dian.

Bai Liu glanced around. “Where’s Lu Yizhan? He’s not with you?”

“Something came up at the orphanage, so he went back to handle it.” Fang Dian walked in casually and sat across from Bai Liu. She studied his face for a moment before her eyes narrowed. “What’s wrong?

Don't tell me you're thinking of staying here instead of coming back with me?"

Bai Liu hesitated. "I was planning to stay and study."

Of course, that wasn't the truth. His gaze drifted to a shadow lingering in the corner of the room—a familiar figure: Spades. But the moment Fang Dian entered, the figure vanished. Bai Liu pressed his lips together.

...Lately, there had been too many people hovering around him. Teachers from the orphanage checking in, classmates like Hou Tong watching him during lessons, Fang Dian and Lu Yizhan dropping by almost every day to make sure he was eating.

He barely had any time to himself anymore. And as a result, Spades had been appearing less and less.

This seven-day break… it might be his only chance to spend some real time with Spades.

"Liar." Fang Dian almost didn't want to call him out. But sensing something, she leaned closer, studying Bai Liu's expression. Hesitantly, as if testing or confirming a suspicion, she asked, "Bai Liu, the reason you don't want to go back… is it because of someone at school?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he turned his face away, toward the window—away from her eyes.

"No way!" Fang Dian exclaimed, grabbing Bai Liu's chin and forcing him to face her, grinning mischievously. "Who is it? Huh? Who is it? Who is it?"

"Do I know them?"

"Which class is she from?"

"How tall? Cute? When did you start talking? Have you held hands yet?"

Bai Liu shot her a cold look.

Fang Dian raised both hands in surrender, still grinning. "Alright, alright, just one last question. You answer it and I swear I'll drop it. Won't even tell Mr. Lu."

Bai Liu gave a reluctant pause. "What is it?"

Fang Dian's voice softened. Her tone shifted as she rested her cheek on the desk, head tilted slightly. "This person…" Her eyes were gentle now. "Is this the person you want in your future?"

Bai Liu went quiet. His eyes drifted back to the corner where Spades had disappeared, and after a moment, he gave a faint, nearly inaudible, "Mm."

"Got it." Fang Dian ruffled Bai Liu's hair, ruining its usual neatness before pulling back. Then, she opened her shoulder bag, pulled out a crumpled hundred yuan note, and placed it on the desk.

"Here—your commission for playing matchmaker with me and Lu Yizhan."

She smiled. "I've been saving it for the right moment. I think this is it."

"Go treat yourself to something fun over the break."

Bai Liu glanced at the money, then paused. "Thanks. I owe you—"

"Nah." Fang Dian cut him off with a wave and slung her bag over her shoulder. She was already halfway out the door, tossing her voice playfully over her shoulder: "Just promise me you'll at least smooch, okay? Newbie in love~ Bye~"

As soon as Fang Dian vanished from sight, Spades reappeared. He leaned over Bai Liu's shoulder, brow furrowed in confusion. "What does 'smooch' mean?"

Bai Liu: "……"

...It's the meaning behind the reward you keep asking for every day.

The next day, Sunday.

Bai Liu, dressed in his school uniform, appeared beside one of the city's bustling shopping streets—with the invisible Spades quietly trailing beside him.

Spades looked around, visibly disoriented. "Where are we?"

"It's a busy street. Lots of foot traffic, lots of money changing hands," Bai Liu replied calmly. "Young people come here to waste their energy

and kill time."

Spades furrowed his brow, even more confused. "Then… why are we here?"

Bai Liu paused.

This went back to the night before.

He'd used one of the school's computers to search things like [best places to go on a first date] and [fun date ideas under $100].

The answers weren't exactly helpful.

"A hundred bucks? Bro, don't be cheap."
"Honestly, just break up and give me your girlfriend—I'll take her out myself."
"Can you even buy a meal for two under a hundred anymore?"

But there were some more well-meaning responses too:

"Try the XX shopping street nearby—they're running lots of promotions. If your girlfriend doesn't mind discounts, it's a great budget-friendly date spot."

Bai Liu had considered asking Spades whether he minded discounted goods—but after he'd explained, all Spades seemed to register was: going out for a good time.

So he'd stared blankly at Bai Liu for half the night, not listening to a word.

Now, they were standing in a lively, slightly old-fashioned street filled with small shops and stalls. The crowd was dense, and as the post had promised, nearly everything was on sale or part of some event.

Even so, Bai Liu had very little money to spare.

"If you see something you like, you can tell me," he said flatly. "But I probably can't afford it."

Spades gave an interested "Ooh," then asked, "What would it take to afford one?"

"Discounts," Bai Liu replied, making eye contact. He pointed at a bright red logo. "See that sign? On sale. If it has that, we can consider it."

“But some cheap ones don’t even need a discount—”

Before Bai Liu could finish, Spades suddenly grabbed his hand and took off running.

They stopped in front of a large arcade.

“Can I buy this?” Spades asked.

Bai Liu glanced at what he was pointing to and froze for a second. It was a horror-themed shooting game—players took down zombies with guns in a dark booth concealed by heavy green curtains.

A large screen outside displayed the game trailer, and a bright banner hung beside it:

Amazing Price: $20!

“You like…” Bai Liu’s voice grew curious, almost amused, “playing horror games?”

Spades nodded immediately. “Mhm.”

Bai Liu blinked, then shrugged. “Alright. This one, then.”

As they entered, the arcade owner gave Bai Liu a strange look. “You sure about the two-player mode? You’re alone.”

“I’ll control both sides,” Bai Liu replied, expressionless.

“…Right.”

The owner raised an eyebrow but continued, “Just so you know, the screen projects your gameplay onto that big street display out front. You’ll draw a crowd. You okay with that?”

“I don’t mind.”

“Alright.” The owner accepted the cash, then lazily lifted the curtain for him. “Go on in.”

“Just a warning,” he added, “this new machine’s hard. You need to play two-player mode for at least a full minute to trigger any output. No refunds.”

Bai Liu’s eyes flicked to a sign with game details posted inside.

“You offer a bonus for playing more than thirty minutes?”

“Yeah.” The arcade owner chuckled. “Not that you’ll make it.”

“What’s the bonus?”

“Well, for couples who last over thirty minutes, we give out a movie ticket. Forty-five minutes gets you the movie plus a fifty-dollar meal voucher for the street. And if you last more than an hour—it’s a full date package. Movie, drinks, balloons, flowers, and a $300 voucher.”

Bai Liu’s gaze sharpened. “Over an hour?”

The arcade owner faltered at the intensity in his eyes. “Y-yeah… but the current record is thirteen minutes in two-player mode. No one's hit the reward threshold yet.”

“And you only get one try for the challenge…”

Before he could finish, Bai Liu had already stepped through the curtain.

From inside, the owner heard the student’s voice, calm and resolute:

“I only have one day off. I won’t be coming back for another try.”

Then, as if that settled it: “Are the movie tickets and vouchers redeemable today?”

The owner stared, dumbfounded. “If you win… yeah.”

So he’s really planning to win it all in one shot?

Why… do I feel like he actually will?

Twenty minutes later.

On the shopping street, a crowd had gathered around a large gaming screen, growing steadily as exclamations of disbelief filled the air.

"Holy shit, that move was insane!"

"...They haven't lost a single life yet? No way—is this even the same game I'm playing?"

On-screen, two characters armed with guns dashed through an abandoned building. Walkers roamed the ground below, but they were cleared out so quickly by the players that the audience barely had time to register their presence.

Each character's score bar—one on the left, one on the right—was climbing so fast it looked like they were about to break the game.

The arcade owner stared in awe, rubbing his eyes. If he hadn't seen Bai Liu walk in alone earlier, he would've assumed two top-tier players were inside doing some hardcore practice.

"Wait a sec… their life bars are linked. Isn't this couple mode?" a boy in the crowd suddenly asked, his face paling. "Shit—don't tell me one of them is a girl?"

"???? Whose girlfriend is that strong?!"

"Damn, these moves could stomp me flat—and you're telling me it's a girl?!"

The discussion under the big screen quickly veered off-topic. Shock at the pro-level gameplay turned into intense curiosity about the mysterious "girl" behind the controller. Soon, most of the crowd had moved to the arcade's exit, eager to catch a glimpse of her.

Just then, Hou Tong—on break from school—was walking past the arcade. She wasn't particularly fond of the place, having once tried a horror game on Bai Liu's recommendation and being terrified out of her mind within three minutes. She still held a grudge.

"Eh!" A girl next to Hou Tong suddenly grabbed her arm, shaking it with excitement. "Hou Tong, wait! Look at the name on the screen—is that Bai Liu?"

Hou Tong turned reluctantly—and froze.

Sure enough, on the left side of the screen, the nimble player at the top of the leaderboard was tagged: [Bai Liu].

"Wait… isn't this couple mode?" her friend whispered, glancing sideways at Hou Tong with growing horror. She mentally screamed at herself for pointing it out.

Bai Liu is playing couple mode… with another girl?!

Hou Tong's eyes snapped toward the other player's name—[[Spades]].

?????

What kind of girl has *that* name?

The hour mark hit. The two characters on screen froze in place. The game was over.

In an instant, the crowd surged toward the game booth's exit, mostly teenage boys, hyped up and shouting over one another as they squeezed in for a look.

"They're coming out! I bet five bucks she's a beauty!"

"Nah, she's a dinosaur!"

"No way, she's gotta be hot!"

Under the arcade's colorful lights, the black-out curtain lifted just slightly. A pale, slender hand slipped through the gap, letting streaks of light and wind filter inside. They caught on strands of soft black hair, lifting them gently.

The crowd held their breath. One boy gulped audibly.

The figure emerged. His damp hair and collar clung slightly to his skin from the sweat of an intense hour-long session. His open collar revealed a delicate, sharply defined collarbone. His skin was so pale it almost glowed; his lips were strikingly red.

Bai Liu looked up. "Boss, it's been an hour."

The crowd froze. A few boys sucked in sharp breaths. One of them leapt into the air, yelling, "I won the bet! I said it was a beauty!"

He looked so out of place here, it was surreal.

The arcade owner waved his hands, trying to disperse the growing commotion. "There's no pretty girl! He's a guy! He just played two-player mode alone, so scram already!"

"He played *couple mode* by himself?!" The crowd reeled in disbelief. All eyes turned to Bai Liu.

Only now did they realize—yes, the beautiful "girl" was actually a boy.

Bai Liu gave them a cool glance and walked over to the counter. “My full couple’s package.”

The owner, still in disbelief, reluctantly handed over the vouchers. “Didn’t see your girlfriend with you. You really used those vouchers solo?”

Bai Liu nodded. “Mm.”

As he turned to leave, the group of boys blocked his path.

One boy stumbled forward, eyes shining with admiration and awe. “Beauty—no! Handsome! Handsome boy!”

“Forget girls, just date yourself tonight! No—wait—come play another round with us!”

“No more games,” Bai Liu said, attempting to sidestep them.

They blocked him again, hands folded as if in prayer, faces full of pleading.

“C’mon, man, you were amazing just now! Just one more round—take us along!”

Seeing that they meant no harm, Bai Liu paused and casually made up an excuse. “The vouchers are only good for tonight. If I don’t use them, they’ll go to waste.”

“Then let’s use them!” they exclaimed, fists pumping. “We’ll pay for a date if that means you’ll game with us!”

“Pick one of us—anyone you like! We’ll go to the movies right now!”

“You think it’s your turn to date him?” A cold voice cut through the crowd. Hou Tong walked up, head held high, looking down at Bai Liu with an air of haughty pride—but her eyes were unmistakably hurt. “You came out to play without even inviting me?”

Another beauty. The boys were stunned again, eyes wide with disbelief. Their gazes turned back to Bai Liu in utter reverence.

Whoa… this guy ditched his girlfriend to game solo?!

“Your girlfriend?” one of the boys asked, tone caught between envy and disbelief. “She’s just as beautiful as you.”

Spades, expression unreadable, stared straight at Bai Liu. “Girlfriend?”

Bai Liu: “...”

Bai Liu turned everyone down.

Hou Tong felt wronged this time, genuinely confused. “Why? You don’t even have a girlfriend. Would you really rather eat alone than with someone else?”

“Being alone suits me better,” Bai Liu replied as he headed out the door. He paused briefly at the threshold. “When I’m alone, I have someone to keep me company.”

Hou Tong didn’t understand what he meant. She stood there watching his slim figure in the school uniform disappear into the neon lights of the crowded shopping street, her eyes brimming with tears.

“There’s no one there…” she sobbed. “Isn’t that still being alone?”

Bai Liu redeemed his voucher for two large buckets of soda and played every two-player game from one end of the shopping street to the other—with Spades. He cleared each level alone, yet always in two-player mode, leaving shopkeepers and onlookers staring in disbelief.

The prizes he won were sold to passing boys and girls, and the money he made was used to keep playing. Eventually, a shopkeeper, overwhelmed, handed Bai Liu a gift and begged him to stop.

By the time they reached the end of the street, night had fully set in. The 100 yuan Bai Liu started with had turned into over 200.

In a shadowed alley at the far end of the street, they stood side by side. Bai Liu sipped from his drink and turned to Spades. “Anything else you want to play?”

“You can stop only picking the stuff that’s on sale now.”

“That,” Spades said, raising his hand and pointing firmly toward something in the distance, “How much is that one?”

Bai Liu followed his gaze.

A towering Ferris wheel stood by the riverbank, ringed in glowing LED lights that flashed and changed to display various messages.

Right now, the message read: [Ren Qiang ♥ Yan Xue — Live and let live, together forever ✧]

Spades looked straight at Bai Liu. “I want that.”

Bai Liu: “……”

The Ferris wheel was the most popular attraction on the street. It offered a panoramic view of the riverside cityscape once you reached the top—ideal for couples, or for those looking to kill thirty minutes. Each cabin would pause at the top for two minutes, during which custom light messages could be displayed upon request.

Popular ones included: “Love you forever,” “Together always,” “Get rich overnight,” and more. Recently, with the college entrance exams approaching, some messages had shifted to more academic blessings like “Top of the class” or “Golden rankings.”

But it was expensive. No discounts—150 yuan per person.

Luckily, thanks to their earlier game spree and the prizes Bai Liu had sold, they had just enough.

Normally, Bai Liu would have scoffed at the idea of spending 150 yuan for a half-hour ride on a glorified light show—something he considered a commercialized, gaudy symbol of love.

But now…

Spades stood beside him, holding his hand tightly. The neon lights shimmered in his black eyes as he stared at the glowing line [Together Forever], focused and full of longing.

It was probably one of the few phrases Spades recognized.

And who he had learned it for was obvious.

Bai Liu looked away. “Let’s go.”

“To ride it.”

“You’re alone?” the Ferris wheel operator asked, eyeing Bai Liu with surprise. Boys rarely rode solo. It was mostly girls or couples who came alone for the symbolism.

“Is that a problem?” Bai Liu asked flatly.

“N-no, not at all!” The man hurriedly waved his hands and tapped the screen to bring up the available banners. “Pick the one you want to light up when you reach the top.”

Bai Liu raised his hand, about to tap on [Together Forever] when Spades suddenly reached out and picked something else.

“This one,” he said firmly. “Pick this.”

Bai Liu looked at the banner Spades had chosen—and froze.

[Bai Liu: Top of the Class, Smooth Sailing Ahead]

“Wait a second,” Bai Liu said, glancing sharply at Spades. “Let me think about it.”

“Sure, sure!” The operator gestured OK. “Just come back before the next ride.”

Bai Liu pulled Spades aside, arms crossed loosely, a faint smile playing on his lips. “Why did you pick that one? Do you even know what it means?”

“I know,” Spades replied. “Your school has it hanging everywhere.”

That was true. Qiao Mu Private High School plastered the slogan on walls and posters. Everyone around Bai Liu talked about it. It was hard for Spades not to notice.

“So, why choose that one for me?” Bai Liu asked.

Spades paused. “You’ve been studying hard for it. Everyone around you wants it.”

He looked Bai Liu dead in the eye. “If they have it, you should have it too.”

“We only have enough money for one ride,” Bai Liu said quietly. “Are you sure this is the one you want? If you choose this, your name won’t appear. You won’t be able to pick ‘Together Forever.’”

Bai Liu had expected Spades to choose that one. The guy usually did whatever he wanted, and Bai Liu was sure he wouldn’t pass up the chance to see those words glowing above the city.

“So,” Bai Liu asked again, “have you really thought about it? Which one do you want?”

Spades looked at him for a long moment. Then he slowly lowered his head, but his voice held no hesitation.

“The golden title.”

This time, it was Bai Liu who paused.

“You want me to go gold that badly?”

“No.” Spades looked at Bai Liu. “It’s just… all those people have someone who wishes they were golden. You should have that too.”

Bai Liu fell silent.

He understood. Spades didn’t care whether he was golden—he just wanted Bai Liu to have people who *wanted* him to be. Like he did.

“Got it,” Bai Liu said. He turned toward the Ferris wheel. “Let’s go for the golden ticket.” After a few steps, he paused and glanced back. “Do you want it... under my name?”

Spades didn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

And so the Ferris wheel owner received the strangest banner request of his life. As the pod reached the top, a custom light display flashed across the sky in bold letters:

[Spades Loves Bai Liu — Always Golden, Always Smooth Sailing]

The bewildered onlookers gawked. “What kind of slogan is *that*?! Did a schoolboy couple just go up?”

The Ferris wheel owner: “……”

The end of their tour was a movie—an obscure, icy horror flick. Aside from a couple who left halfway through, the only ones left in the theater were Bai Liu and Spades, sitting side by side in the best seats, a small bucket of popcorn resting between them.

They watched in silence.

The horror film flickered like a stuttering flame, its terror reflecting frame by frame in their equally dark eyes. On screen, the protagonists screamed and fled. Off screen, two hands—slowly, awkwardly—reached for each other beneath the seats and laced their fingers together.

Then Spades whispered, a touch of longing in his voice: “If only we were in this horror game.”

Bai Liu, still holding his hand: “……”

…What kind of alien romantic fantasy *was* this?

Spades kept staring at the screen, the grotesque images flickering in the depths of his pupils. His tone was sincere.

“There, I could give you everything.”

It was nearly nine when they stepped out of the cinema. The path outside was lined with movie-themed shops—gaudy, surreal, and filled with horror memorabilia.

Bai Liu couldn’t go two steps without checking to see if Spades had wandered off again.

Spades, naturally drawn to the creepier exhibits, kept drifting away, his curiosity outpacing his awareness of Bai Liu.

Once again, Bai Liu turned—and found Spades gone. He frowned, scanning the storefronts, until he spotted him standing outside a nearby shop window.

Spades had both hands pressed to the glass, eyes fixed on something inside, desire radiating off his body like heat.

Bai Liu: ……

That ominous feeling crept up his spine.

He followed Spades’ line of sight—and froze.

Inside, an assistant was arranging merchandise. One item in particular stood out: a tall, thin, hand-sewn ghost doll costume. It looked crude and half-finished—uneven stitching, hollowed eyes, a cheap, haunting presence.

The moment Bai Liu saw it, his heart slammed against his ribs. His vision blurred. One instinct roared through him:

—This is his.

—He wants it back.

The clerk gave the suit a pat, set it on a wooden hanger, and turned to lock the door.

Bai Liu didn't hesitate. He pushed through the door.

"Hello," he said quickly. "I want to ask about the price of that doll suit."

The clerk turned, surprised. "This one? It's probably expensive."

She paused. "Our boss picked it up from an orphanage after… something happened there. He said it was a collectible and wasn't for sale. But today—out of nowhere—he said he's getting into the perfume business and isn't collecting anymore. So he gave me the costume to display."

She looked him over. "Our boss is a foreigner. He sets high prices. You're a student, right? I'd really advise against jumping into this."

"Can you tell me the price?" Bai Liu asked, eyes steady.

She flipped through a small binder. "Twenty thousand."

Bai Liu's breath hitched. He steadied himself, thanked her, and walked out.

He reached for Spades' hand. Head lowered, expression unreadable, his grip tightened.

20,000… It's too much.

Spades suddenly said, "I want that."

Bai Liu tensed, ready to explain they couldn't afford it—

—only to see Spades pointing at a small freezer labeled *[ON SALE]*.

"I want ice cream," Spades said simply. "Can I have the kind that's on sale?"

The desperate pull inside Bai Liu's chest softened. He exhaled. "Yes."

The vending-style freezer was stocked with various flavors of sorbet.

Spades leaned over to choose, then paused. "What's your favorite flavor?"

Bai Liu was silent for a while. Then: “Strawberry. The sweet kind.”

“Then I’ll get that.”

Bai Liu glanced around. “There’s none left. Only vanilla.”

Spades looked heartbroken. “No more……”

Bai Liu couldn’t help a small smirk. “Why does it have to be my favorite?”

Spades lowered his head, tone calm and sincere. “If I eat your favorite flavor… maybe I’ll become your favorite too. And maybe… you’ll like me a little more.”

He raised his eyes. “Your solo time is ending, Bai Liu. I’m leaving. So… before I go—can you tell me you like me?”

The light in the freezer flickered, then went dark. Silence fell between them.

The smile slowly faded from Bai Liu’s face.

When he spoke, his voice was cold.

“Don’t.”

“I hate you, Spades.”

On the way back, Spades trailed far behind Bai Liu, who walked quickly, head down, alone. Every time Spades tried to catch up, Bai Liu would say, flatly:

"Leave me alone. Don't come over."

So Spades kept his distance, just far enough to see Bai Liu's back.

The two of them moved through a bustling crowd, occasionally separated by invisible threads, as laughter and chatter swept between them like waves.

This silence, this distance, lasted until Bai Liu returned to school. He stopped suddenly beneath the darkened school building, his voice even:

"I need to grab something from class. You go back to the dorm first."

Spades stood still for a long moment before letting out a soft "Oh," turning slowly and walking back down the path they always took together, counting the steps—three at a time, then five—like trying to hold onto something already slipping away.

Bai Liu never once looked back.

The building's hallway lights were off, but not the classrooms. It was the holiday period, and Qiao Mu Private High School allowed students to study late, keeping classrooms open until midnight.

Bai Liu climbed the stairs alone, the corridor dim, quiet, and seemingly endless as he made his way to the last classroom.

He didn't turn on the lights when he entered. Instead, he walked to his seat, sat down slowly, rested his arms on the desk—and didn't move.

There was one final question left on the test paper in front of him. Beneath it, in his sketchbook, were rough doodles of Spades and himself—of Fang Dian and Lu Yizhan crowding around his desk, filling it with notebooks and snacks. In the bottom right corner of the drawer, Bai Liu could feel the card left behind by the man who had once offered him help.

His books, pens, and papers were all untouched, exactly as he'd left

them. Since then, no one had dared sit in his seat again.

—Bai Liu was in the best shape he'd been in in eighteen years.

It was as if everyone was doing their best to create a warm, safe world around him—encouraging him to study, to grow up, to take the entrance exams and move toward a future he could believe in.

Bai Liu's eyes slowly dropped to the page in front of him, his hand tightening into a fist as he stared at the mess of tangled string he'd drawn—two puppies caught in a knot.

Then, suddenly, a piece of paper slipped from his drawer. Lu Yizhan's handwritten notes tumbled out, followed by a small charm for exam success that slid to the floor.

[Bai Liu, Sister Dian and I want to talk to you about something.]

Lu Yizhan scratched his head awkwardly but smiled, hopeful: [It's not anything urgent, really. The entrance exams are coming up, and things are finally calming down, so… I wanted to ask about your plans after the exams.]

[I just wanted to know… after you graduate and get a job—would you be willing to live with Sister Dian and me?]

Bai Liu blinked, giving Lu Yizhan a look that said, *What nonsense are you on about this time?* [Aren't you and Sister Dian getting married? Why would I live with you? Aren't you worried people will gossip?]

Lu Yizhan paused, then said softly: [Because I don't want you to live out there alone, with no one to rely on.]

[We're serious about this. Sister Dian and I plan to save up after graduation, renovate the house, and invite you to move in. We want it to be a place where you'll feel comfortable. You like horror games, right? Sister Dian's even designing a special room just for you to play in.]

Lu Yizhan smiled gently: [Once you're off work, you can game with her. When I get home, I'll make dinner. Simple stuff.]

[What do you think?]

[Sister Dian and I will be here for you—playing games, eating meals together, taking you to the hospital when you're sick… being your

family.]

[When senior year ends, you won't have to be alone anymore.]

By the flickering freezer light, Spades looked at Bai Liu with an unreadable expression—strangely calm, strangely steady. He didn't take his eyes off Bai Liu as he spoke: [Your time alone is coming to an end.]

Lu Yizhan said: [Sister Dian and I will always be there for you.]

Spades said: [I'm leaving.]

Lu Yizhan said: [So you'll never have to be alone again.]

Spades said: [Before I go… can you tell me you like me?]

Memories swirled in Bai Liu's mind like the old vending machine's flashing lights—disjointed, cold, and relentless. Scenes overlapped and blurred, moments both real and imagined, warm and cutting.

Bai Liu leaned down, slumping over his desk. His eyes drifted to the empty space beside him—the chair Spades used to occupy. It seemed to hold every emotion and none at all, like a deep sea of nothingness.

He thought quietly.

Lu Yizhan, Fang Dian, and Spades each represented a very different path in life.

If he chose Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian, Spades would disappear. But in doing so, Bai Liu would have a normal, smooth, and comfortable life. There would be no doubt that Fang Dian and Lu Yizhan would take care of him, playing games and looking after him for the rest of his life.

The best things they owned, things they wouldn't use, would be given to Bai Liu. He would be able to live with them, as Lu Yizhan had said, in a conventional and happy life—having someone to care for him when he was sick, someone to play games with, someone to cook his meals, and someone who understood and empathized with all his joys and sorrows.

But if he chose Spades...

If he didn't choose Spades, the monster would disappear.

Bai Liu's calm mind faltered for a brief moment.

Spades, the monster, was like a massive disruption in Bai Liu's life, neither good nor ordinary. He pulled Bai Liu away from the life of "normal people" and dragged him into an unpredictable, endless future.

—Like a misplaced anchor.

If he chose Spades, Bai Liu had a vague feeling that his life would be completely different—a life filled with terror, instability, and desire.

And alone.

It was only in his mental isolation that Spades could exist, and perhaps, eventually, Fang Dian and Lu Yizhan wouldn't be able to exist around him anymore. Bai Liu might have to live alone, all the way until his death.

It was a terrible deal.

Choosing Spades meant sacrificing the peace he'd built over the first 18 years of his life in exchange for a monster.

How foolish would someone have to be to make such a choice?

Bai Liu gathered his things and stood up to leave for the dormitory. As he passed the corner by the stairs, he noticed someone following him. He turned, his voice cold. "I thought I told you to stay in the dorm and not follow me here..."

A red-eyed Hou Tong emerged from the shadows, looking confused. "What do you mean, stay in the dorm?"

Bai Liu stopped and calmly changed the subject. "What's the matter? Why are you following me?"

Hou Tong bit her lip, took a deep breath, and mustered the courage to speak. "I like you, Bai Liu!"

"I'd pay a million a year to talk to you about anything!" she continued, her eyes filling with determination. "I'd play horror games with you every day, give you the best things, and let you live in a big house with me! I'll make sure you never go back to class alone to get your things again. I'll be with you. When your exams are done, I'll take you to my parents. I've told them about you, and they love you! I want to

spend sixty-two million dollars to be with you until I’m eighty."

Hou Tong’s red eyes looked at Bai Liu, full of hope. "Will you... do it?"

Bai Liu was silent for a long time, gazing into her expectant and anxious eyes. His breathing slowly steadied.

Given a choice between Lu Yizhan, Fang Dian, and Spades for 62 million, how foolish would someone have to be to choose Spades?

Bai Liu didn’t know.

"I'm sorry." Bai Liu's voice remained calm. "I have someone I want to be with forever."

—Maybe the kind of madman who would rather be alone until he dies than let go.

Hou Tong let out a long breath, as if a weight she'd already known was there had finally dropped from her chest. She lowered her head and wiped at her eyes.
"…I know," she said quietly.

She had known, deep down, that Bai Liu didn't like her. He had never wanted anything from her—not even something as small as an ice cream.

It had always been a distant, restrained rejection.

"So all those horror games I played at home were for nothing," Hou Tong joked, forcing a smile. "I thought I'd at least get to play one with you before graduating."

"Haven't you already been playing horror games with me?" Bai Liu asked calmly.

Hou Tong blinked in confusion. "When?"

Bai Liu looked at her. "Isn't our school already like a horror game? Another lake, another girl falling in. It's starting to feel like a serial murder case."

Hou Tong: "……"

Is Bai Liu making a cold horror joke?!

But it did send a chill down her spine. She rubbed her arms, shrunk her neck in unease, and slowly took a step back.
"…My mom's waiting for me outside. I should go," she said nervously.

"Bye," Bai Liu replied. "Be careful on your way. Don't let anything… dirty follow you."

Hou Tong: "!!!"

Bai Liu stood on the first-floor balcony and watched until she got into her car. Then he turned his head slightly, glancing toward the shadowed corner by the boys' restroom.

"Now that Hou Tong is gone," he said evenly, "how much longer are you going to hide in the bathroom and eavesdrop, Bao Kangle?"

From the shadows emerged a short figure—Bao Kangle. His eyes were bloodshot, his fists clenched by his thighs, and in his hand was a bouquet of crushed roses. His expression twisted into something grim.

Bai Liu's gaze briefly fell on the roses, and he raised an eyebrow in faint recognition.

Bao Kangle stared at him with fury. He had come here tonight to confess—to intercept Hou Tong before she could do it. But hiding in the restroom, he had heard it all. She had confessed first. To Bai Liu.

And Bai Liu… hadn't even accepted.

Rage boiled inside Bao Kangle. How could he, Bai Liu—just an orphan with nothing but a face—have people like Hou Tong, Fang Dian, and even Lu Yizhan chasing after him? People who wouldn't even look at Bao Kangle were throwing themselves at him.

They begged Bai Liu to make friends with them, to love them, to let them spend money on him. And what about Bao Kangle?

He was the son of a teacher at Qiao Mu Private High School. On paper, he had everything—status, academics, pedigree. He followed Xu Wei's advice to court the elite girls, buddy up with top students, curry favor with the powerful. And what had he gotten?

Cold glances. Dismissive smiles. Contempt both overt and veiled.

Even the influential students who bothered with him did so out of boredom—mocking him to feel superior. And the moment Bai Liu showed up, these same students would abandon Bao Kangle, swarming around the aloof orphan who refused to bow to anyone.

Bao Kangle's status was lower than a stray dog's. At least when a dog barked, people looked. No one looked at Bao Kangle.

He was too dull. Too shallow. So transparently snobbish it was repulsive.

The top students? Bai Liu's friends.
The top girls? Bai Liu's suitors.
Even the top bullies? Bai Liu's favorite targets.

Bao Kangle had worked so hard just to gain a fraction of the attention that Bai Liu, the indifferent, rule-breaking outcast, received effortlessly.

He couldn't understand it. His grades were better. His family was better. His record was spotless. Wasn't he supposed to be better?

Breathing like a bull about to charge, Bao Kangle hunched forward, eyes rolling up with a mixture of hate and bitter realization.

Two days ago, he had finally figured it out.

He had overheard Xu Wei talking to the headmaster. Certain words stood out—clues that Bai Liu had something around him. Something strange. Like a prop. Or a ghost. Some kind of magic. Bao Kangle didn't know exactly what it was yet, but he was sure of one thing:

That was why Bai Liu had everyone's attention.

"Bai Liu." Bao Kangle gave a shaky, hollow laugh. "Didn't you say this school's like a horror game? That the lake's like a scene from a serial murder case?"

His voice hardened. "How about we go have a little fun, then?"

He held up a key, shaking it with a sneer. "I stole the key to the hill gate from my mom just for this."

"I promise—this'll be the scariest game you've ever played in your eighteen years."

He licked his cracked lips and fixed Bai Liu with a wide-eyed, feverish look.
"Wanna play?"

Bai Liu didn't even hesitate. "No."

Bao Kangle: "……"

What the hell?! This wasn't how it was supposed to go. Bai Liu loved horror games. Why wasn't he playing along?!

Reading the disbelief on his face, Bai Liu gave him a long look, the corner of his mouth twitching subtly—as if he were mentally writing "how dumb do you have to be to fall for such an obvious trap" across Bao Kangle's forehead. But his voice remained calm:

"The college entrance exams are coming. I need to get back to the dorm and study."

"It's best not to break school rules so close to graduation, fellow

student Bao Kangle."

When those law-abiding words left Bai Liu's mouth, Bao Kangle's expression cracked.

You?!
The student with the most infractions and the most toilet-cleaning duties in school?! Talking about rules?!

Without waiting for a reply, Bai Liu turned and started walking toward the dormitory.

He paused, glancing back just once, his tone dipping into real coldness.

"Like I said, Bao Kangle. I don't mind hanging around you sometimes. But not tonight. I'm going back."

That look made Bao Kangle's neck twitch, and despite himself, he flinched—his hand pulling back instinctively.

When Bai Liu really turned to leave, Bao Kangle finally panicked. In a flash, he remembered something his mother had once mentioned on the phone about Bai Liu—

"Yes, Bai Liu is obsessed with money. He likes to gamble, and some of his classmates said he's not exactly clean-handed."

"We'll bet!" Bao Kangle suddenly shouted, raising his voice. "Whoever makes it out of Gaucho Lake in one piece—wins."

"The winner gets a fortune!"

Bai Liu's footsteps faltered—just barely.

Bao Kangle's voice rose, shrill with desperation. "Twenty thousand! We bet twenty thousand—winner takes all!"

This time, Bai Liu came to a full stop, though he didn't turn around. His tone was mild, almost contemplative.
"Twenty thousand… not a bad offer."

A smug, sour grin twisted across Bao Kangle's face. "Twenty thousand is enough to get you to play, isn't it?"

Definitely just a money-grubbing bastard.

“Not interested,” Bai Liu said lightly, resuming his pace toward the stairs. “I already turned down a sixty-two million deal tonight. Another twenty thousand doesn’t move the needle.”

“I’m going back to the hostel.”

Bao Kangle froze, staring in disbelief as Bai Liu continued descending without a single backward glance.

“Wait!” Bao Kangle scrambled after him, panic mounting. Bai Liu was already at the turn in the staircase, disappearing fast. “If twenty thousand’s not enough—how much do you want?!”

Bai Liu didn’t even look at him.

Bao Kangle was unraveling. He’d promised Xu Wei and the headmaster that he could lure Bai Liu to the mountain tonight. If Bai Liu didn’t show, and the others waited in vain, everything would fall on him.

Besides money…
Bao Kangle forced a breath, struggling to calm the racing thoughts. Aside from money, what else does Bai Liu care about?

Something his mother said last night, during her call with the headmaster… there was something odd.

Xu Wei’s voice had been shaking: “There’s something strange following Bai Liu every day, like a ghost. He even drew it in his sketch—it looks like a ball of thread. Could it really be a ghost, Principal?”

The headmaster had replied sharply, clearly impatient: “It’s not a ghost.”

“But it’s important to Bai Liu—really important. It’s similar to what’s at the bottom of Gaucho Lake. I don’t know how many uses it has left, but once it runs out, it’ll disappear. So pay attention.”

“There’s something that looks like a ball of string around you,” Bao Kangle blurted suddenly, as if struck by divine inspiration. “That thing—it’s going to disappear soon!”

Bai Liu paused mid-step on the staircase, one hand resting lightly on the banister. He lifted his gaze slowly, eyes locking onto Bao Kangle at the top of the stairs.

“What did you say… about it disappearing?”

Bao Kangle visibly flinched but stood his ground, nerves fraying. He swallowed, voice trembling.

“I mean… that thread-like thing you use. It’s the same as what’s tied to the bottom of Gaucho Lake. It disappears after a while… or after a certain number of uses.”

Under Bai Liu’s cold, unreadable stare, Bao Kangle hesitated—then forced himself to go on in a near whisper, “If you don’t want it to disappear…”

He took a deep breath, straightening his spine. “Then come with me to Gaucho Lake. Retrieve the GCSE from the lake. You’ll find out what that thread really is—where it came from… and how to get it back.”

Qiao Mu Private High School

11:45 p.m., outside the heavy metal gate on the hill.

Bao Kangle's hand trembled as he fumbled with the key, despite knowing the headmaster had already dismissed the security guard. He couldn't help but glance anxiously left and right. It took several clumsy jabs before the key finally slid into the lock, and he pushed down the lever.

Clack.

The sound of the lock hitting the ground made Bao Kangle flinch. He turned shakily to look at Bai Liu, who stood calmly behind him. "It's open," he said, voice unsteady. "Let's go."

"Then go on." Bai Liu, unfazed, stepped forward, pushed open the iron gate, and began walking up the winding path.

Bao Kangle, who had never set foot here before, followed with visible unease, stumbling slightly as he kept close behind.

The hill was beautifully landscaped, with dense foliage casting eerie shadows in the moonlight. Every rustle sent a jolt through Bao Kangle, whose face had gone pale long before they reached Gaucho Lake.

Bai Liu ignored the nervous figure trailing him. After a while, the trees cleared, and the lake finally came into view.

The moonlight gleamed on the calm, glassy surface of the lake. A cool breeze rustled the dead leaves floating on top, sending soft ripples across the water. The moon's reflection shimmered and danced. It would've been a breathtaking sight—romantic, even—had it not been for the legend surrounding the lake. Instead of couples drawn to its beauty, it attracted obsessed seniors one after another.

Bao Kangle swallowed hard at the thought of something lurking in its depths. He shrank further behind Bai Liu, too afraid to look directly at the water.

Bai Liu's voice, like the lake's surface, was calm and undisturbed. "We're here."

"What's the bet you want to make?" he asked.

“The… the bet.” Bao Kangle stared at the lake’s seemingly bottomless darkness and stammered, “When the moon reaches the center of the lake at midnight, we’ll dive in and see who can spot and finish the high school exam paper at the bottom first.”

Bai Liu’s expression didn’t change. “Alright.”

Meanwhile, at the Special Merit Boys' Residence Building—

Lu Yizhan crept out of his dorm room, sticking close to the wall. He deftly avoided the corridor’s surveillance points, slipped out through the back kitchen, and scaled the wall.

Tonight, he was diving into Gaucho Lake again—to try and protect the exam paper prop.

Just as he landed on the ground, breath caught in relief, he froze.

In the moonlight, a man in a Heretic Bureau uniform stepped out slowly. One of his eyes was covered by a bandage. He looked at Lu Yizhan and gave a faint, mocking smile.

“Well, brother. Didn’t think you’d go back to your old tricks,” he said. “Climbing walls on a high school campus, really?”

Lu Yizhan’s expression hardened. “Cen Buming. Second team captain of the Heresy Bureau. You're here to investigate the Gaucho Lake heresy… Why is it you?”

“Why not me?” Cen Buming’s smirk deepened, almost fake with how sharp it became. “Oh right—how could it be me, when you tipped off third team captain Tang Erda instead?”

“But I intercepted your little letter halfway through. Brought in my second team instead—to stretch our legs a bit in the field.”

He crossed his arms and grinned. “After all, the biggest heretic in the world is right here—Bai Liu. As the field unit that specializes in hunting heretics, how could we not show up? Don’t you think so, brother?”

Lu Yizhan’s face darkened. “You’re not a hunter anymore. This has nothing to do with you. Bai Liu and I—we’re playing our own game. Stay out of it.”

“Not a hunter?” Cen Buming’s smile dropped, his tone turning icy. Hatred flashed in his lone yellow eye as he stared Lu Yizhan down. “Do you even realize what you’re doing?”

“You logged into this world line four years ago—without telling me, without telling Tang Erda, without alerting anyone in the Bureau. You met a Bai Liu who hadn’t even entered the game yet—”

“—and you didn’t kill him.”

“You spent four years with him. And you didn’t kill him!” Cen Buming’s expression twisted as he grabbed Lu Yizhan by the collar and slammed him against the wall of the back kitchen. “Do you know what you’ve done?!”

“You got Captain Dong and Captain Yu killed! You forced the entire Cross Judgement Army to reincarnate, one by one, selling their souls! You trapped Captain Fang in that place—he’s never getting out.”

“You—” his voice cracked with rage “—you’ve forced us into 658 world line reincarnations. You made me and Tang Erda raise lunatics!”

“And now you’re saying this?” Cen Buming’s voice dropped to a bitter sneer. “You say you’re not a hunter, that he has nothing to do with you. You’re trying to bring in the more ‘moderate’ second-gen hunter, Tang Erda, to help save Bai Liu from a heretical incident?”

“Lu Yizhan. Do you have shit in your head?”

“Maybe I do,” Lu Yizhan said quietly.

His grip tightened around Cen Buming’s wrist and, with a bruising force, he yanked the other man’s hand off his collar. He met Cen’s glare head-on, eyes blazing.

“But as long as I’m here, you won’t touch him.”

For a second, Cen Buming’s expression blanked. His temples twitched. Then he sighed, let go, and leaned against the wall beside Lu Yizhan.

He pulled out a cigarette pack, flicked it open, and bit down on one. Casually, he held the pack toward Lu Yizhan.

“You legal to smoke in this world line?”

Lu Yizhan hesitated, took one, but didn’t light it. “Trying to quit.”

Cen Buming snorted and lit his own.

They smoked in silence, side by side—only the glow of their cigarettes burning red in the dark.

“I hear you're training a third-generation hunter to monitor Bai Liu,” Cen Buming drawled, smoke curling around his face as he snorted. “What, Tang Erda—the second-generation hunter—is worn out already? Discarded him?”

“No.” Lu Yizhan rubbed his temples, already feeling a headache form from Cen Buming’s jabs. “He has other responsibilities.”

“Then I suppose I’m the only useless scrap left in the hunter squad,” Cen Buming said with a wry, bitter smile.

Lu Yizhan bit down so hard on his cigarette that the mouthpiece cracked, a sharp taste of tobacco flooding his mouth. He could almost hear what Cen Buming was about to say next.

“Then I might as well die—”

“That’s enough.” Lu Yizhan exhaled heavily, cutting him off. “According to the game rules between Bai Liu and me, a retired hunter can’t interfere. You know that. You can’t break the rules.”

“So that bastard wants me to be a spectator—watch everything and do nothing.” Cen Buming sneered, “You too, Lu Yizhan? You want me to just sit and watch?”

Lu Yizhan said nothing. Every word he could offer felt hollow next to the firestorm in Cen Buming’s chest. Silence settled over him like a weight.

Arguing with a colleague who fundamentally disagrees with you—it’s a kind of trauma you never quite forget.

Cen Buming crushed the cigarette between two fingers, letting the ashes fall as he turned to look at Lu Yizhan. His eyes were dark, glinting.

“I could accept being forced into the role of a spectator to keep the game going across the previous world lines,” he said quietly. “But not this last one.”

“Lu Yizhan, you’d better give me a damn good reason why you’ve

raised this little monster Bai Liu to this point. Or I'll put a bullet in him tonight."

Lu Yizhan was silent for a long time.

"Bai Liu… isn't like the others," he finally said.

"He's not a bad kid. He doesn't want to enter the game."

"The last one who believed that," Cen Buming cut in coldly, "was Wu Ruishu. You were there collecting his body."

"That doesn't convince me."

He took a slow breath, eyes gleaming with bitter amusement.

"Besides, I've found something… interesting. I'm sure you have, too."

Cen Buming's smile stretched thin and cruel.

"There's a group of teachers in that school. They're players. The headmaster's one of them."

"Do you know what those idiots have done?"

His eyes flicked back to Lu Yizhan, sharp as a knife. "They've decided that selling out their students counts as playing too. And even after all your suspicious behavior, they ruled you out—because of how innocent you look."

"So instead, they started filtering through the student list."

"Guess who came out on top of their suspect list?"

Lu Yizhan didn't answer. His face said everything.

Cen Buming smiled, voice quiet with venom. "—It's Bai Liu."

He stepped closer.

"Lu Yizhan, people aren't judged by how they behave in a peaceful world. They're judged by what they do when the world turns cruel."

"And you think I'm supposed to believe that this Bai Liu, who grew up wrapped in the safety you created, is a good person by nature?"

"If you really believe that—then prove it."

“Let him into the game. Let him claw his way to the top of a world ruled by desire and blood and power—then tell me he won’t break.”

“But you won’t.”

Cen Buming’s voice dropped, turning cold as stone. “Because we both know that’s not possible.”

“You’ve sealed off every shortcut for him—no status, no money, no way to fight back, not even against school bullies. He’s a blank slate. Weak. Fragile. He hasn’t grown into anything yet, which is the only reason he hasn’t done anything wrong.”

He leaned in slightly.

“But you’re afraid to let him become anything at all, aren’t you?”

Lu Yizhan’s hands clenched at his sides, knuckles bone-white.

Cen Buming paused, then said quietly, “I had the second team tail Bai Liu. Just now, they reported back—he and another student were heading toward Gaucho Lake.”

“If he comes into contact with any heretics, and shows even a hint of game behavior…”

He looked straight at Lu Yizhan.

“I’ll shoot.”

Lu Yizhan’s head snapped up, alarm rising in his eyes.

Qiao Mu Private High School

“You can’t do this!” Lu Yizhan snapped, his voice trembling. He took a deep breath, trying to steady both his words and his breath.

“He’s only eighteen. For the first time in his life, he’s taken a single step toward something normal—toward a real life. And now he’s being handed a copy of Bai Six, shoved into the same nightmare all over again. Everyone around him is being used to torment him, to drag him back into the hell he just escaped.”

“But he’s done nothing wrong. Not yet. And you have no right to sentence him before he even takes his first real step forward.”

Cen Buming looked at Lu Yizhan with a calm, unblinking gaze. His voice was steady, without a trace of hesitation.

“He’ll crack soon enough.”

11:55 p.m.

In the jungle, a mercury-bright lake mirrored the yellow moon above—a clear, cold eye watching from the sky. It gleamed like Cen Buming’s last remaining eye, peering into the shadows. Like the soft glow of an old television screen warming as it flickers to life, its light blurred and diffused—long strands of moonlight seemed to grow from beneath the water’s surface like hair.

“It’s almost midnight,” Bao Kangle said nervously, eyeing Bai Liu who stood silently by the lake.

“I... I think we should start walking.”

According to the legend of the lake, students must step onto its edge and circle around it to see the examination papers resting at the bottom, beneath the moonlight.

A narrow castellated platform ran along the edge of Gaucho Lake. It rose about sixty centimeters above the water and was barely fifteen centimeters wide—just enough space for one foot at a time.

As Bai Liu stepped onto the ledge, the jungle leaves rustled behind him. A blackened gun barrel slid out from the foliage, aimed squarely

at his head and heart.

Crackles of static electricity coursed through the jungle, and cold voices cut through the air:

“Team 2, this is Team 1. We have eyes on the heretically contaminated subject. Nine o’clock. The subject is currently at the lake. Per captain’s orders, be prepared to fire at once if he displays any aggressive behavior upon submerging in a mentally altered state.”

“Six o’clock, in position. Over.”
“Three o’clock, standing by...”
“Twelve o’clock—ready.”

A cold pair of eyes watched Bai Liu through the scope. In the moonlight, his thin white shirt clung transparently to his skin. The fine hairs on his neck and the downy strands on his face caught the light like silver threads.

Bai Liu stretched out his arms for balance, eyes lowered, and began walking—one deliberate step at a time.

Half of his shadow rippled within the lake, shifting and shivering with the water. The other half followed him outside the lake, cast in absolute darkness.

The world inside the lake shimmered with eerie brilliance. Outside, everything was silent, still, and black. And Bai Liu walked along the sliver of space in between, staggering forward on a ledge meant for no one to stay on.

Bao Kangle trailed behind, walking forward and back, his eyes fixed on Bai Liu. He was determined to supervise the full circuit.

The sniper's muzzle tracked Bai Liu’s movements as he crept forward. The moon reflected soundlessly at the lake’s center. Bao Kangle followed closely, muttering soft, frantic prayers:

“God, God, please let me score well on my college entrance exam.”
“God, God, please let us see the GCSE papers...”

As they neared the end of their circle and the lake remained still, Bai Liu silent, Bao Kangle grew anxious. He tugged at Bai Liu’s sleeve.

“Say something!”

Bai Liu paused and glanced sideways. “What should I say?”

“What I just said!” Bao Kangle urged, flustered.

“This is a wishing lake, okay? Haven’t you ever done one of those ‘Pensieve’ games? You’re supposed to make a wish. This lake asks for a god!”

Bai Liu lowered his gaze. The moon’s light fell like a halo across his lashes as he looked into the reflection of himself and the moon.

“I don’t like asking gods for anything,” he said softly, almost carelessly. “Because gods don’t exist.”

A breath. A beat.

“But if there’s a god in this lake,” Bai Liu continued, “Then let me see what it looks like.”

Bao Kangle turned to ask what he meant—but at that moment, Bai Liu stepped firmly onto the final stone. His step matched Bao Kangle’s exactly.

The wind roared to life.

The moon shattered across the lake like glass, bursting into blinding light. Waves spread outward, revealing the lake’s bottom—clear, radiant.

A set of student desks and examination papers emerged beneath the surface. And beside them, a warped silver-blue valve appeared—a gateway through which endless small televisions flickered, each one showing different players battling through horrific games, fighting, dying, surviving.

Team 2’s weapons were blown askew by the sudden wind. But as they realigned and looked down into the water, their eyes widened in shock.

“That’s the game lobby’s login!”
“This student’s entering the game!”
“He’s really a player!”
“Second Team, fire immediately!”

One soldier gritted his teeth, steadied his aim, and pointed his rifle at Bai Liu’s head.

And pulled the trigger.

“NO!!!”

Lu Yizhan burst into the clearing, heart racing. His voice cracked in panic. He surged forward, instinct taking over, grabbing the rifle just in time and shoving the barrel aside. His gaze snapped toward the lake.

Bai Liu stood with his back to him, hair tousled in the wind, arms still outstretched. He leaned forward slightly, eyes fixed on the glowing scene beneath the water’s surface.

Lu Yizhan’s pupils contracted sharply.

He watched, helpless, as Bai Liu opened his arms—then leaned forward—

—and fell.

“BAI LIU!!!”

Bao Kangle was also swept up by the lake, but when the group quickly gathered, the lake had returned to its calm state as if nothing had happened.

There was nothing at the bottom of the lake, and the two living people who had just jumped in seemed like sugar cubes dissolving in water, leaving no trace behind.

Lu Yizhan slumped at the edge of the lake, gasping for breath, his heart pounding wildly, unable to regain his composure.

The second team member beside him fought the urge to angrily scold the student who had suddenly appeared and caused all this trouble but finally refrained. "Take him back to the Heresy Authority and erase his memory. He should have seen everything just now."

"Damn it, I'll have to go back to Captain Cen and take the blame for missing that little brat!"

"Where is Captain Cen? Why isn't he here? He's supposed to be overseeing our operation!"

As he was speaking, Cen Buming emerged from the woods at a brisk pace, his uniform disheveled and his face nearly drenched in water.

"Lu Yizhan, you put sleeping pills in your cigarettes to mess with me..."

"He jumped in," Lu Yizhan, who was still by the lake, replied abruptly, without turning around.

Cen Buming's expression darkened as he swatted Lu Yizhan away. His gaze flickered to the bottom of the lake two or three times, his face growing grimmer. He turned to his team and snapped, "Did you shoot him?!"

The players fell silent, shaking their heads.

One of the bolder members shrugged and quickly spoke up, pointing to Lu Yizhan crouched by the lake. "That student came out to stop us, so we didn't dare shoot recklessly to avoid hitting an ordinary person."

Cen Buming almost laughed in exasperation. "An ordinary person, my ass!"

Lu Yizhan, the beast, had disappeared after arriving in this world line ten years ago, hiding away with Bai Liu. Now, none of the players knew that the famous leader of the prophet detachment had been second in his year at this mediocre high school, all while secretly raising his old rival.

Lu Yizhan slowly stood up from the edge of the lake, turning his head to look at Cen Buming. His face had smoothed into calmness. "Cen Buming, since you're so sure that Bai Liu will definitely enter the game and do bad things, how about I make a bet with you?"

"I'm sure you know the relationship between Bai Liu and Bao Kangle. If Bai Liu enters the game later, the first person he'll kill when he comes out will be Bao Kangle."

"But if Bai Liu doesn't enter the game and doesn't kill Bao Kangle, you will stop spying on him, stop attacking him, and treat him like a normal person. You'll let him grow up without interference."

Cen Buming narrowed his eyes. "What if he gets into the game and kills someone?"

Lu Yizhan took a deep breath, then glanced at the second team members. "I know these players around you are in the game, and I know you've been building your own team to eventually kill Bai Liu in the game."

"If Bai Liu does enter the game and kills Bao Kangle, I will join your team, become your tactician, and help you develop your team."

Lu Yizhan looked up, meeting Cen Buming's gaze directly. "But if I let him into the game, I will kill Bai Liu myself in the game."

"Is that alright?"

Cen Buming was quiet for a moment. "Deal."

A member of the team, who hadn't heard the conversation, raised his hand and asked, "So, can't we just go down and catch Bai Liu now? We can have this student go around and open the Gaucho Lake too, right?"

"The condition for opening this Gaucho Lake is that it requires a student who has failed the GCSE," Cen Buming sneered, sweeping Lu Yizhan aside. "Someone who has never failed an entrance exam in all the world lines could never be worthy of being a captain of excellence in entrance exams."

"If he could open it himself, we wouldn't be here every day, lying in ambush, waiting for other students to open it so we can clear out the heretics."

Lu Yizhan sighed. "…That's the downside of having a brother who knows you too well and has a sharp tongue."

At the bottom of the Lake.

Bai Liu fell through the lake into the center of a bubble-like transparent boundary, about three or four meters in size. It was no longer filled with water but air. In the middle of this boundary was a set of desks and chairs with language exam papers, a stationery box, an answer sheet, and a timer placed directly in front of the desk. The timer was counting down from 150 minutes to 149 minutes.

This was clearly a replica of the GCSE language exam scene.

In another enclosed space not far away, there was also a desk.

Seated at it was Bao Kangle, nervously fumbling with the exam paper that had appeared before him. His heart pounded in his chest, and his hands trembled violently.

He hadn't expected to get dragged into this too!

What now? What now? He hadn't even finished reviewing yet!

Across from him, Bai Liu had already sat down. He calmly scanned both sides of the paper, picked up his pen, and began writing without hesitation.

As the minutes ticked by, the bubbles surrounding them slowly began to shrink with every breath they took—like a countdown rewinding in real time.

A cold, metallic system beep echoed from the depths of the lake:

[Fifteen minutes remain before the exam ends. Please complete your answers promptly...]

[Next: Mathematics exam. Duration—150 minutes. Type—]

This guy doesn't even give them a break?!

Bao Kangle felt dizzy. His fingers were beginning to cramp, and a tightness in his chest made it hard to breathe.

At some point, the bubble around him had already shrunk to half its original size. It wasn't matching the exam's time limit—at this rate…

They wouldn't even make it to the English section. They'd drown halfway through.

Bai Liu began writing faster. He abandoned the final extended-response question in the math section, handed in his paper early, and moved on to the next subject—Science.

From the front, Bao Kangle heard the rustling sound of someone handing in a paper early. He turned in disbelief and saw Bai Liu already working on the science paper, calm as ever.

Impossible!

Bai Liu's grades were supposed to be worse than his—how was he faster?!

Bao Kangle's breathing became more ragged, feeding into the shrinking of the bubble as it responded to his panicked gasps. The lack of oxygen rushed to his brain, slowing his thoughts and movements as he tried to work through the problems.

Cold sweat dripped down his chin and splattered onto the test sheet, forming dark, ink-soaked clouds under his pen. His eyes began to flush red with strain.

Bai Liu gave up the last big question in Physics, quickly solved half of the biology and chemistry sections, and turned in his paper early again—switching to the final subject, English.

Bao Kangle was already unraveling. Hearing that Bai Liu had finished another subject, he felt the heat burst from his face. Blood trickled from his nose as he stared at his barely half-complete physics paper.

He was having a nosebleed.

Meanwhile, Bai Liu was carefully shading the answer sheet for the English section, even as the edges of his bubble pressed against his skin—it had shrunk that much. Yet, he still worked steadily.

Bao Kangle was in a much worse state. His lower body had already slipped out of the protective bubble and was now submerged in water. He stared at the English paper in front of him—he knew every word individually, but together, they made no sense. His panic had overwhelmed him completely. He couldn't even comprehend the questions—and he hadn't even started!

Then came a final, cold beep from behind him:

[Candidate Bai Liu has completed all the GCSE papers. The game is over.]

Their protective bubbles burst at once, and both candidates were plunged into the lake. Arms and legs floated, desks drifted upwards, and their hair swayed in the water.

Bao Kangle's eyes were bloodshot. Holding his breath, he reached out desperately for the English paper still hovering near his desk—his name the only thing written on it. He tried to keep writing, but Bai

Liu's eyes had drifted downward.

He'd noticed something earlier—something strange beneath the desk. When he first dove into the lake, he saw a silver-blue vortex swirling below, but it had vanished once he was submerged. Now, it was back.

An old test paper was sealed inside a ziplock bag, half-buried beneath a cracked tile at the lake's bottom. Bai Liu adjusted his position, sank to one knee, and wedged his fingers beneath the tile, yanking it upward.

Click.

The tile split with a brittle sound, and the paper floated free. Bai Liu seized it—just as a strange, mechanical voice echoed in his mind:

[Congratulations to Candidate Bai Liu for obtaining the prop: (The GCSE Paper That Never Gets It Right)]

[This paper mirrors the current year's GCSE exam. Only candidates who consistently fail will be able to see and interact with it. Each time a candidate completes it, they will only remember the questions they answered correctly. The others—they will never get right.]

[Congratulations to Candidate Bai Liu for completing the paper in record time.]

[As a reward, the candidate may make one wish on the paper—Initiating Wish Protocol—Unfortunately, the item is not powerful enough to grant the requested wish. Please try again next time...]

[–Zillah– Error Detected in Wish Request – Top-Level Game Authority Intervention – Candidate's wish is approved]

Suddenly, a violent gust erupted from the vortex, displacing the water around the lake's floor.

From within the gate-shaped vortex, the wind fell still—and a long black boot stepped forward. Just as the lake water began to collapse inward again, threatening to drown Bai Liu, the figure raised a gloved hand… and snapped his fingers with calm elegance.

Snap.

The water exploded into droplets—suspended midair, forming a curtain of scattered crystals around Bai Liu.

The figure stepped fully out of the silver-blue vortex. Through the curtain of droplets, Bai Liu could barely make out his appearance: taller than him, clad in a sharp, well-fitted suit. His boots echoed rhythmically with each step as he laughed softly.

"No thanks for saving you? I recall you hated water."

Bai Liu's back was pressed against the edge of the lakebed. He didn't respond—he simply stared at the man approaching him.

The stranger moved slowly, brushing aside the floating beads of water like strands of a curtain. He stopped a few meters in front of Bai Liu and smiled.

"This is your preferred safe distance, isn't it? Can we talk from here?"

"Don't worry about what's happening above—I've frozen time and space. No one can find us here, not while we're at the bottom of the lake."

Still, Bai Liu said nothing.

"Ah, right. While I know you well, this must be your first time meeting me. Allow me to introduce myself."

The man gave a polite, theatrical bow.

"You may call me Bai Six—a name similar to your own. I hope it brings you some comfort."

He straightened up with a pleasant smile.

"I'm the nonexistent god you invoked when you made your wish above the lake… and I've come to meet you."

“What do you want to talk to me about?” Bai Liu asks, calm and rhetorical.

“I thought you'd be the first one of us to ask a question.” Bai Six spreads his hands slightly, smiling with a face identical to Bai Liu’s. “After all, you must have plenty to ask after seeing what I look like.”

“Like why I, a god, look like you.”

“I don’t feel the same,” Bai Liu replies coldly. “You look twice as old as I do.”

Bai Six: “……”

“If you don’t like me as an adult…” Bai Six doesn't appear offended. Instead, he smiles, amused. Raising his hand, he snaps his fingers, voice tinged with indulgence: “Then how about this?”

“Would this make you more willing to accept me? To speak with me calmly?”

Before Bai Liu’s eyes, Bai Six rapidly transforms into a perfect replica of his eighteen-year-old self—a high school student in a white shirt and school uniform, indistinguishable from Bai Liu except for the black leather gloves and the easy smile on his face.

Bai Liu watches the transformation, his back slowly tensing.

…If he isn't currently suffering from some kind of mental break, then this being—this thing that can stop time and change its form at will—must be the so-called god.

“Let’s talk in a way we can both accept,” Bai Six says kindly. “Do you want to know where Spades came from?”

Bai Liu's gaze locks onto Bai Six, holding for a moment—before realization hits. “He’s related to you?”

“You could say that. But you also couldn’t.” Bai Six cradles his left elbow with one hand, his right resting under his chin. He smiles. “Everything in this world is connected to me—including you.”

“But the only thing whose birth had nothing to do with me… is him.”

“He was born because of you. He exists for you.”

Bai Liu’s breath catches, but he quickly regains composure. His eyes narrow. “Then if he exists for me, why is he gone?”

“Sometimes, a short separation is for the sake of a better reunion,” Bai Six replies with a smile. “And your reunion is already fated.”

“You’ll meet again in a grand horror game.”

“Horror game?” Bai Liu echoes, voice calm.

“Exactly. A horror game—one you and he will both enjoy.” Bai Six stretches out a hand, his smile deepening. “A game that lies just beyond this door.”

The moment he reaches forward, a silver-blue vortex in the shape of a door materializes before Bai Liu. Inside, he sees what he had glimpsed earlier—countless tiny screens filled with scenes of people fleeing, fighting, killing monsters.

“That’s where Spades came from,” Bai Six says, smiling. “If you want to find the one who left you, step into the game.”

Bai Liu’s gaze shifts past the swirling vortex and settles coldly on Bai Six. “So… is Gao Kao Lake tonight one of the horror games you arranged?”

Bai Six lets out a soft, admiring sigh. “What a quick deduction. As expected of my smartest derivative.”

“You want me to enter the game?” Bai Liu’s eyes narrow. “Spades is a product of the game. So you deliberately placed him near me to lure me in?”

“That’s a fair guess—and close to the truth, though not quite there,” Bai Six says gently, not offended by the accusation. “But yes, he is your anchor. It’s natural you’d be affected by him.”

“I expected you to leap into the game once you got your answer. But it seems…”

He raises an amused eyebrow. “You weren’t as shaken as I thought you’d be?”

“Perhaps I should offer you a bit more incentive… something more exciting to push you toward accepting this terrifying game.”

He arches his eyes with a subtle smile. “I can’t wait to see you enter the game, Bai Liu.”

“Let me think what might appeal to you…” Bai Six taps his lower lip twice in thought. Then his expression lights up. “Before that, let me show you what you’ve lost—thanks to this tedious, ordinary life.”

Snapping his fingers, the silver-blue vortex widens into a black screen. It flickers, revealing a fourteen-year-old Bai Liu at the orphanage, blank-faced as he eats with a spoon.

“Originally, your life was meant to start here… and lead into the game. But you deviated. You went to high school.”

“You could have reached eighteen with tens of millions in liquid assets, a guild, two major underground networks in the real world, three to five smuggling channels, and a loyal team working under you.”

“But all of that is gone now.” Bai Six sighs with regret.

“Because of Lu Yizhan, you got to enjoy the most wonderful of human desires. You suppressed them. Controlled yourself. Clung to safety. And now you live like a stray dog in a high school that has no true safe zone, not even—”

Bai Six extends a finger, from which a translucent thread flings out, piercing the back of Bao Kangle’s neck.

Bao Kangle flinched as though stung, snapping to his senses with a jolt. But fear contorted his face as he was manipulated like a puppet by the silken threads of Bai Six’s control.

“—Even minor characters like Bao Kangle and Xu Wei, whose names I can’t even recall from other worlds, can subject you to three years of school violence,” Bai Six said, his voice laced with a dry laugh.

“—Punishments like standing outside, scrubbing toilets, getting kicked out of the dorms... Xu Wei yanking your chair from the classroom, forcing you to sit alone on the ping pong table in the rain, bored out of your mind, flipping through an English textbook while Bao Kangle’s handwriting mocks you for being an orphan.”

Bai Six smiled, amused.

“I’m curious, Bai Liu—what were you thinking back then?”

Bao Kangle was suspended between Bai Liu and Bai Six, trembling so violently that he couldn't force a word past his throat—only a few broken, breathy "oohs" of air escaped.

Bai Liu leaned against the wall, his head bowed. His school uniform clung to him, soaked as though still caught in that rain-soaked memory. Time clung to him too—the ends of his hair and the hem of his jacket dripped water that hung motionless in mid-air, caught in the suspended flow of time.

Condensation curled slowly around him. He raised his head, his eyes devoid of emotion as they locked with Bai Six's.

"You seem to know me so well," he said tonelessly. "Why don't you guess what I was thinking at that moment?"

The smile on Bai Six's face widened.

"Is there a reward if I guess correctly?"

Bai Liu replied evenly: "Then I'll do what you think I'm about to do. Sound fair?"

"Hmm…" Bai Six considered, then chuckled. "A sly reward. Risky, but interesting. I like it. Deal."

With a twitch of Bai Six's finger, the puppet strings jerked Bao Kangle down. He tumbled to the ground in front of Bai Liu, his fear practically tangible.

"I guess," Bai Six said softly, "that you wanted to kill Bao Kangle."

"You had a plan—one that would let you kill him and his mother without anyone ever knowing. But you weren't sure if Lu Yizhan would catch on. He's smart, and he knows you."

"So you waited. Waited for the perfect chance, one even Lu Yizhan could accept. A chance where Bao Kangle's death would seem... reasonable."

Bai Six looked up, his smile sharp.

"And then came GCSE Lake."

"Senior year. Pressure's at its peak. A student jumps into the lake after being suspected of cheating—people say it's a superstition, a stress response. So, when another student jumps? It's just more of the same."

“You and Bao Kangle were known to clash. To others, you both seemed like the type to snap under exam pressure. It made sense that he’d provoke you to meet him at the lake. And you’d go.”

“There’s surveillance footage showing Bao Kangle provoking you at the school. But there’s none at Gaucho Lake.”

“So if you both jumped into the lake… and Bao Kangle just happened to ‘drown’ while you ‘tried’ to save him but couldn’t—well, who could blame you?”

“You’re afraid of water. Everyone knows that. It would be completely believable.”

Bai Six’s smile deepened with meaning.

“And Lu Yizhan would believe you. He trusts you. He’d never suspect it was a perfectly executed murder by his good friend—who just happened to have a passing urge to kill.”

“Am I right, Bai Liu?”

On the ground, Bao Kangle was stunned. He stopped struggling and stared blankly up at Bai Liu.

Bai Liu’s expression remained unchanged as he looked down at him. The water droplets still hovered in the air, frozen. But something in Bai Liu’s stillness made Bao Kangle shudder. His spine prickled with cold, and his face went pale.

From start to finish, Bao Kangle had always seen himself as the one in control. He thought Bai Liu might retaliate—but he’d never imagined this.

He just wanted to bully Bai Liu to vent. But Bai Liu had really thought about killing him.

This Bai Liu… he’s not normal. He’s a psycho!

Bai Six’s voice broke through, smooth and coaxing.

“You’ve already thought it all out—why not finish the perfect crime now?” He smiled, gentle and false. “No one in the world would ever know… except me.”

Bai Six flicked his finger. Bao Kangle’s body jerked upward, forced to his knees, neck bared, hands restrained behind him in a pitiful pose of

execution.

“Don’t kill me…!” Bao Kangle cried out, nearly wetting himself, sobbing. “I was wrong—I was really wrong! I won’t do it again! Bai Liu, please—don’t kill me!”

Bai Liu placed his wrist gently on Bao Kangle’s exposed throat, lowering his eyelashes.

“Lift your head, my child,” he whispered. “Let me see your first kill—it should be memorable.”

He looked up slowly, his grip tightening.

“You were right,” Bai Liu murmured. “I did think of all kinds of ways to kill this bastard and walk away clean.”

“But…”

His expression shifted—hair clinging to his face, skin pale and delicate. A strange, haunting smile bloomed across his lips, fragile and beautiful in its cruelty.

“God, I wasn’t just thinking about killing this stupid bastard.”

“I was thinking about Spades.”

Bai Liu smiled.

“So the reward’s off the table. I’m not killing anyone the way you want me to.”

“So, you're not going to kill Bao Kangle?” Bai Six smiled, a hint of surprise in his expression. “You've imagined killing him countless times. And now, you finally have the chance.”

“Why stop now?”

“My game with him doesn’t involve killing.” Bai Liu looked up, his tone flat. “I’ve seen you now. If you have nothing more to say to me as a god, you can leave.”

Bai Six stared at Bai Liu for a long moment. Then he stepped half a pace back and bowed in farewell. “Since it was you who made the wish, I’ll honor it.”

Behind Bai Liu, a silver-blue door shimmered into existence. Bai Six’s figure was gradually consumed by it. He smiled at Bai Liu, his tone laced with curiosity and amusement.

“You care so much about Spades, yet you chose not to enter the game.”

“You hate Bao Kangle so deeply, yet you chose not to kill him.”

“Bai Liu, do you know that people like you—bad at heart but trying to act good—are the ones who attract the worst kind of karma?”

The door closed, swallowing Bai Six’s smiling face. In the same instant, the stagnant lake surged violently, crashing over Bai Liu and Bao Kangle and carrying them to shore.

Bai Liu emerged clutching a pair of castanets, dragging himself out of the water. His face was pale as he dropped to his knees, coughing up a mouthful of lake water.

Hidden in the jungle, the members of Heretic Authority Team Two instantly raised their weapons, aiming at the kneeling figure.

“He’s out!” one of them whispered.

“Is he inside the game?”

“Not sure—wait! Look at his hands! He’s holding test papers! That’s a game prop!”

Cen Buming and Lu Yizhan crouched in the underbrush, eyes locked on Bai Liu. Cen's fingers brushed unconsciously over his death ring. Beside him, Lu Yizhan's breath hitched as he clenched his fists into the earth.

"Bai Liu…" A weak cry came from behind him.

"Help… help me!" Bao Kangle gasped.

Bai Liu turned. Bao Kangle was clutching the edge of the lake with one hand, a translucent puppet string still tied around his neck, connecting him to the fading silver-blue door beneath the water's surface. He was trapped, unable to rise, slowly being dragged under.

As soon as the door vanished, so would the string—erasing the only trace of evidence. Bao Kangle would drown seamlessly.

His face had turned blue from lack of air. In a panic, he cried out, tears streaming. "Bai Liu, help me! I won't bully you anymore! I'm sorry—really sorry!"

His grip weakened, fingers slipping.

Bai Liu stood motionless at the lake's edge, watching the scene unfold with eerie calm. Droplets of lake water ran down his lashes and soaked into his trousers.

His mind quieted.

What Bai Six had said was true—he had thought about killing Bao Kangle.

And not just Bao Kangle. Bai Liu had fantasized about killing many people: classmates, Xu Wei, the headmaster, even the shopkeeper in the alley behind the film store.

He had wanted a doll suit, and the money was coming in too slowly to be worth the wait. He had considered killing someone to get it faster.

Bai Liu knew he wasn't normal. In every environment, he had been the one cast out. Maybe, he thought, it was some instinctive human defense mechanism—a sense that warned others he was dangerous, a natural killer.

Not killing was already restraint.

But saving someone he'd killed a hundred times in his head?

Bai Liu looked at Bao Kangle, his eyes void of emotion.

Why?

Why did Bao Kangle expect to be saved, even knowing what kind of person Bai Liu was?

“Don’t kill me!” Bao Kangle screamed, voice raw. “Don’t just watch me die!”

“You abandoned me, didn’t you?! Bai Liu, I know you’re a good person! Please, give me your hand! Save me!”

Lu Yizhan's chest rose and fell sharply. “Ten more seconds. In ten seconds we can reach him,” he whispered hoarsely.

Cen Buming silently began the countdown.

“Ten… three…”

Suddenly, Bai Liu moved.

He stepped onto the casting platform, seized Bao Kangle by the shoulders, and hauled him out of the water like a sodden rag doll, flinging him to the ground.

Bao Kangle landed hard, choking and vomiting, his limbs convulsing as he gasped for air. Eyes wide and unfocused, he stared up at Bai Liu.

“Thank you,” he mumbled, voice trembling. “Thank you…”

Lu Yizhan sat heavily on the ground, breath coming in ragged bursts, his uniform already soaked through with cold sweat. Cen Buming’s piercing gaze lingered on Bai Liu’s pale, waterlogged face for a long, weighty moment before he finally raised a hand, signaling for the entire team to lower their weapons.

Bai Liu stared indifferently at Bao Kangle, who was convulsing on the ground. “Twenty thousand yuan. Bring it to me when school starts in a week. One cent less, and I will kill you.”

Bao Kangle flinched and nodded quickly, his voice trembling. “...I got it.”

“Get lost.” Bai Liu kicked him without expression. “Don’t let me see you again before school starts.”

Once Bao Kangle had stumbled away, Bai Liu slowly sank to the ground, leaning back against the lake's edge. He closed his eyes, breathing deep and heavy, his pale, wrinkled fingertips still trembling.

Water was disgusting.

Drowning in it was, without question, the worst experience of his life.

Lu Yizhan bowed several times to Cen Buming, murmuring polite words and mentally praying to the gods to take the grim-faced officer and his second team away. Then, he turned to Bai Liu—who was still slumped by the edge of the Gaucho Lake, his face drained of color.

Another rescue. Another near-drowning. It looked like Bai Liu would be out of commission for a while.

If you hate water so much... stop being such a damn hero, Lu Yizhan thought grimly.

His expression was complicated as he let out a long, quiet sigh. Then he stepped out of the shadows, crouched beside Bai Liu, and gently looped one of Bai Liu's limp arms over his shoulder to lift him up.

Bai Liu stirred, his foggy mind briefly clearing. The moment he realized who it was, his body loosened again. "Lu Yizhan?" he rasped.

"It's me." Lu Yizhan's voice was steady as he patted Bai Liu's back. "Come on, let's get you down the mountain."

There was a brief pause. "...Don't tell Fang Dian I came to Gaucho Lake," Bai Liu said quietly.

Lu Yizhan nearly burst into tears. "How am I supposed to hide it from her?! She's way too smart—she'll know with just one look!"

"Just help me lie a little," Bai Liu mumbled.

"I can't even lie to her about myself, and you want me to—ugh…"

Neither of them said what they were really thinking.

Like why Bai Liu had come to Gaucho Lake in the first place.

Or why Lu Yizhan, who had already returned to the orphanage, had come back.

Instead, they talked about trivial things. And as they chatted, Lu

Yizhan quietly supported Bai Liu, step by steady step, carrying the fragile eighteen-year-old boy—the one he'd watched grow up—safely down the mountain. Down from the place where so many guns had just been pointed at him.

When they reached the large iron gates, Lu Yizhan gave Bai Liu's shoulder a gentle pat and smiled. "Don't worry about what's in Gaucho Lake."

"I'll take care of it. You just focus on passing your exams."

With that, he waved and turned back toward the hill.

Bai Liu took the glucose and the random snacks Lu Yizhan had pressed into his hands and made his way alone back to the dormitory. With some food in his stomach, he had just enough strength to shove open the door and knock back the large man on the other side—but just barely. He staggered two steps and managed not to fall.

Spades immediately latched onto him, resting his head against Bai Liu's chest and hugging him tightly. His voice was muffled. "What took you so long to get back?"

Bai Liu pushed him away with a tired grunt. "Let me shower and change first."

By the time he returned from a hot shower, dressed in fresh clothes, Spades was already lying stiffly on the bed, his wide eyes locked onto Bai Liu like a guilty dog begging for forgiveness. He'd even scooted over to leave space for him.

Bai Liu, still towel-drying his hair: "..."

That's the exact look of a dog that's decided you've made up after it got in trouble…

And yet, he lay down anyway. Rather than throwing Spades off the bed, he dropped into the open space and collapsed right into Spades' arms.

Spades froze, too stunned to move. His body stiffened immediately.

It was rare—so rare—to see Bai Liu initiate contact like this.

Bai Liu lifted a hand and gave him a light slap, his voice muffled as he buried his face in Spades' chest. "You're too tense. It hurts. Loosen

up.”

He hesitated after saying it, realizing the weird phrasing—but Spades didn’t react to the double meaning. He simply nodded and relaxed slightly, wrapping his arms tighter around Bai Liu.

They stayed like that in silence for a while.

Then Bai Liu spoke, his voice unusually fragile. “You have to leave again, don’t you?”

Spades hummed. “I’ll probably still be around—”

“Don’t tell me when you’re going,” Bai Liu cut in sharply.

He curled further into Spades’ arms, hiding his face in the crook of his shoulder. His fingers gently clutched at Spades’ side as he murmured, almost to himself:

“Don’t leave me waiting alone for a date that’s already passed.”

“It makes me feel like a criminal waiting for my own execution. And I hate that.”

Spades was quiet for a moment. Then: “So what do you want me to say?”

Bai Liu lowered his eyes. “Tell me you’ll really be part of my future.”

“I can make a deal with you.”

“I promise I can wait alone until you come back.”

“But in return… you can’t leave again after that.”

Qiao Mu Private High School

Seven days later, school resumed. The students returned in disarray, only to be met with the chaos of a senior pep rally that same afternoon.

After class, Bao Kangle suddenly approached Bai Liu's desk and said stiffly, "Bai Liu… can you come with me for a moment?"

Bai Liu glanced up at the bulging 'brick' tucked under Bao Kangle's arm. "Going somewhere?"

"The bathroom near the teachers' office…" Bao Kangle replied, his voice shaky. "All the teachers are out for a meeting, so no one's around. No surveillance either."

Bai Liu stood with a neutral expression. "Alright. Let's go."

The teachers' office was indeed deserted. A frequent visitor to the staff restrooms, Bao Kangle led Bai Liu to the last cubicle, took a deep breath, and handed him the bundle he'd been cradling.

"Twenty thousand yuan," Bao Kangle said, his hand trembling. "It's the money my mom got from the headmaster. It should all be here. You can count it."

Bai Liu gave a small nod. "That's the right amount."

He turned to leave, but Bao Kangle hesitated and called out, "Bai Liu!"

Bai Liu paused. "Something else?"

"I… I stole this money… for you," Bao Kangle stammered, his eyes red and his whole body shaking. "If my mom finds out…"

He swallowed hard and looked up at Bai Liu with a pleading expression. "I won't turn you in, and you won't say anything either… okay?"

Meanwhile, back at the teachers' office—

Xu Wei had gone down to help prepare the rally grounds, but a sudden pounding in her right eye left her dizzy and distracted. Leaning on the handrail, she made her way back to her desk. No

sooner had she sat down than her phone rang.

Xu Wei's heart skipped a beat as she answered automatically. "Hello?"

A slow, displeased male voice came through. "Mrs. Xu, I'm not satisfied with how you've handled things."

—It was the headmaster.

Xu Wei's breathing hitched. "What seems to be the problem, Principal?"

"I gave you a 100,000 yuan deposit to investigate Bai Liu, didn't I?" the headmaster said coldly. "And after all that, your son couldn't dig up a single thing. Not one clue, not even an excuse to get this troublemaker expelled."

"Then this is where our cooperation ends."

Xu Wei shot up, her voice raised. "But that's not what you said before!"

"You clearly told me I'd get the full 2.5 million if I forced Bai Liu out of Gaucho Lake!"

"Did I?" the headmaster replied, almost lazily. "Strange—I don't remember that."

Xu Wei stood frozen, her mind blank.

"You're still young, Mrs. Xu. You'll have other chances to make money," the headmaster continued coolly. "I won't pursue the 100,000—it's a loss. But do your job properly from now on. What happened stays between us."

Click. The line went dead.

Xu Wei slumped to the ground in shock.

Last weekend, she had withdrawn the entire 100,000. Leaving only a few thousand at home, she'd spent the rest. Clothes, bags, skincare, designer heels—everything she'd been coveting since her income had dropped. Everyone around her had them, even the broke biology teacher next door. She used to be the fastest to get new things.

And she'd thought, I'm about to get 2.5 million. What's 100,000? So she'd splurged without restraint.

Now, with a tight chest and real regret sinking in for the first time, Xu Wei called her husband in panic.

“Hello… are you home? That paper bag on my bedside table—how much is left?”

“10,000?! How is there only 10,000 left?!”

Her husband grumbled, “You bought 90,000 worth of junk?”

“That’s not true! I only spent 70,000!” Xu Wei screamed, hysterical. “What about the other 20,000?! Did you take it?!”

“I didn’t touch your money!” he snapped. “You’re the one obsessed with every cent!”

His tone suddenly shifted, realization dawning. “Wait. Bao Kangle came in earlier this morning. He left all hunched over, like he was hiding something.”

“Kangle?” Xu Wei slowly stood up, her eyes drifting toward the still-lit teachers’ restroom.

Most of the staff were still out. The restroom would be…

She hung up the phone and staggered toward it.

Outside the men’s room, she stopped. A quivering male voice echoed from inside.

“Don’t let my mom find out I lost a bet and gave you her 20,000 yuan. She watches money like a hawk—she’ll go crazy.”

Xu Wei’s eyes reddened. She pushed open the door and saw Bao Kangle handing a paper bag to Bai Liu.

Bai Liu accepted it without hesitation. “Hmm.”

“You two…” Xu Wei’s voice cracked into a scream, her face twitching with rage. “What the hell is going on?!”

Bao Kangle turned pale. “Mom?! What are you doing here?!”

Fifteen minutes later.

Students gathered curiously around the office, drawn by the sound of furious screaming. Teachers passing in the corridor exchanged whispers.

“What’s going on? Why isn’t anyone at the meeting?”

“I heard it’s delayed—someone said a student stole tens of thousands from a teacher.”

“That sounds like Xu from Class 17, doesn’t it?”

“Someone stole from her?! Who’d dare?!”

Inside the teachers’ restroom, paper wrappings lay in shreds, red 100-yuan bills scattered across the floor. The stall door had been kicked open, heel marks embedded in the wood.

Xu Wei, red-eyed and furious, was being held back by two male teachers. Still, she pointed furiously at Bai Liu at the far end.

“Bai Liu! How much did you extort from my Bao Kangle?! Have you been bullying him? Forcing him to pay you?! Are you deaf?! Say something! Give it back!”

Bao Kangle stood anxiously between them. “Mom, it’s not like that. It was just a bet—I only gave him the twenty thousand…”

“It was mine to begin with,” Bai Liu said calmly. “He lost a bet, and the stakes were twenty thousand yuan.”

Xu Wei froze briefly. But as soon as she remembered the headmaster’s conditions, her eyes lit with a cunning glint.

“Bai Liu made you, didn’t he? He forced you to bet? Forced you to steal my money for him?”

Bao Kangle looked up, stunned. “No, Mom, it was you—”

Xu Wei cut him off, her eyes wild with desperation. “If we can prove Bai Liu coerced you into this—into gambling and stealing a large sum—that’s enough to get him expelled. Maybe even arrested.”

Expelling Bai Liu would win back the headmaster’s favor—and maybe the full 2.5 million.

Her chest heaving, she grabbed her son’s arms. “Isn’t that right?!”

Everyone turned to Bao Kangle, whose eyes darted frantically between Bai Liu and Xu Wei.

He realized, in that moment, what was about to happen if he didn't speak carefully...

If he didn't admit that Bai Liu had made him do it, it would just be a big fuss, then a small one—he might get beaten by his mother, and that would be the end of it.

But if he admitted now that Bai Liu had forced him into everything, he could walk away clean… and Bai Liu would have to take the fall.

Bao Kangle looked at Bai Liu instinctively.

Bai Liu was looking back at him, just like he had that night—when Bao Kangle was drowning. Calm, unblinking, unreadable. Not a flicker of emotion in his face.

Back then, Bao Kangle had reached for Bai Liu's hand and been pulled out of the water. Now, in this moment of panic, would he be the one to reach out and push Bai Liu under instead?

"Mom…" Bao Kangle's voice trembled as he looked at Bai Liu. "It was me. It really wasn't Bai Liu who—"

His words were cut off by a sharp, stabbing pain at the back of his neck. Bao Kangle's eyes went blank mid-sentence.

A pinprick of blood appeared at the base of his neck, and from that spot, the end of a transparent puppet string—no longer than half a finger—twitched faintly, as if being controlled from afar.

—The puppet thread Bai Six had pierced into Bao Kangle's neck remained hidden beneath the skin.

In a daze, Bao Kangle seemed to hear that god again—the one from that night—laughing lowly, whispering beside his ear, as he stared longingly at Bai Liu's retreating figure in the Northern Courtyard:

[Bai Liu, people like you—who choose to be good, who choose not to kill—will be rewarded.]

The puppet thread quivered. Bao Kangle's mind emptied. He raised his hand, pointed at Bai Liu with dull eyes, and said lazily, "Yes, that's right. Bai Liu forced me to steal the money to gamble!"

“He threatened to kill me if I didn’t pay up! He even forced me to jump into Gaucho Lake—I almost drowned!”

“He’s a murderer!”

3:00 PM. The pep rally on the playground, delayed by more than half an hour, finally began without further incident.

But this time, the opening speech wasn’t given by one of the school’s star students.

From the crowd, students had sensed something was off. A group of teachers, including the principal himself, were surrounding a student beneath the flag stand. The boy’s face was hidden from view by the crowd, but the reprimands were loud and cutting. Some teachers had even stepped aside to call the police.

Among the assembled students, Fang Dian watched with a rising sense of dread. She turned to a student coming from under the flag stand and grabbed his arm. “Who’s that student under the flag stand?”

“Sister Dian,” the boy replied. He hadn’t heard her clearly and thought she meant Lu Yizhan. “It’s not Lu Yizhan.”

“I know that.” Fang Dian raised her chin. “I was supposed to be one of the speakers. They haven’t called me up yet. I’m asking—what’s going on with that student?”

“Oh, him?” The boy wrinkled his nose with visible disdain. “He’s from an ordinary class. Rumor has it he got a classmate to gamble and then forced him to steal over twenty thousand yuan. And the victim turns out to be a teacher’s kid. The police are involved. They’re saying he’ll be disciplined and possibly expelled.”

Fang Dian’s heart raced. “What’s his name?”

“Bai Liu.”

Without another word, Fang Dian bolted toward the flag stand.

Bai Liu stood stiffly as a group of teachers pushed him into place. He held a freshly printed self-criticism letter. The principal gripped his shoulder tightly and stood by with a microphone, trying to look solemn.

“Students and teachers,” the principal began, “before we proceed with the pep rally, we have a serious disciplinary matter to announce.”

“Bai Liu, a student in Senior Class 37, lost his motivation and chose the wrong path—forcing a classmate to gamble away ten thousand yuan!”

“That such a student could come from a place like Qiao Mu High School, a place committed to learning and teaching excellence, is simply disgraceful!”

The principal took a breath. “As a disciplinary action, we will be expelling Bai Liu from the school.”

“—This decision will remain on Bai Liu’s permanent record. Every school he applies to will know exactly what kind of student he was!”

The crowd erupted. Shocked murmurs rippled through the student body as everyone began to talk at once.

"Wow, shit—doesn't that mean no school will take him? How’s he supposed to get into high school now?"

"I don’t know. I think he’s that kid from the orphanage. They probably couldn’t afford the fees."

"All through senior year, huh? That’s rough…"

"What’s so tragic? If you force someone to gamble, they deserve what they get!"

The headmaster exhaled heavily and glanced at Bai Liu beside him. "Now, Bai Liu, please read your written review."

"Read it? Hell no!" Fang Dian burst onto the stage, knocking the review out of the headmaster’s hand before he could pass it to Bai Liu. Without even looking at the man, she grabbed Bai Liu’s arm and pulled him away. "We’re leaving."

The teachers at the flag platform stared in shock and rushed to stop her.

"Fang Dian! You're not up yet—why are you going on stage?"

"I know," Fang Dian said calmly, looking up. "I’m not giving a speech. I’m taking Bai Liu with me."

The teachers blinked, confused. "Taking him? What do you mean? There's still class this afternoon!"

"I'm not going to class." Her voice was low and steady, her eyes fierce like an animal defending its own. "Didn't you tell Bai Liu to drop out? Well, I'm leaving with him."

"Are you crazy, Fang Dian?" Her homeroom teacher stepped forward in disbelief. "You're top of the class! The entrance exams are right around the corner—why are you throwing everything away for some delinquent with a record?"

"You two aren't even on the same path. Come on, step back over here!" The teacher gestured urgently for her to return.

Fang Dian looked at the teacher—one of the few genuinely concerned for her. Her tone softened. "Teacher, being first in my year, taking the exams—I can do that anytime. If I have to repeat the year, I'll still be top of the city."

"But Bai Liu is my friend. And I want to walk this road with him."

Her gaze was firm. A slight smile tugged at her lips. "If we don't go together now, we might never walk the same path again."

"I'm sorry."

She tugged Bai Liu along, brushing past the stunned teachers without a second glance.

Fang Dian remained calm. She brought Bai Liu back to the dormitory and began packing a bag for him. "This whole situation's suspicious. Don't panic. I'll stay behind to figure out what's going on."

"But you can't stay at school right now. I'll take you to my place first. You can study for the entrance exams there. I'll get you notes and ask my classmates if they know anyone who can help sort this out."

Bai Liu sat on the edge of the bed, a towel over his head as he wiped away the water someone had splashed on him. He watched her quietly before asking in a low voice: "Didn't you say you didn't want to get involved with those kinds of people?"

"The situation was different then. This is urgent now," Fang Dian replied matter-of-factly.

"Like how you just threatened the teachers over dropping out?" Bai Liu's voice was flat.

Fang Dian chuckled. "Something like that. At least it made them think twice about kicking out the city's top student right before the exams."

Bai Liu fell quiet again. "I really did place a bet."

"I know." She nodded. "You're good at gambling—but not with things like this."

"I bet 20,000." After a pause, he added, "It makes sense that they'd expel me."

"If you really want to drop out, I won't stop you." Fang Dian jumped up and sat on the desk across from him, resting her chin in her palm, smiling gently. "But you can't quit like this."

"Because I know you care."

"You worked too hard this year for it to end like this. I want you to do well on the exam."

She reached out to ruffle his hair. "Forget it for now. Go home and rest."

Bai Liu was silent for a long time. When he finally looked up, his damp bangs clung to his pale face. His voice was soft. "Sister Dian, I want a popsicle."

Fang Dian fell still.

Bai Liu rarely called her "Sister Dian," and almost never asked her for anything—not unless he was joking.

At that moment, hearing it for real, Fang Dian almost wished she hadn't.

She took a deep breath. "Alright. Sister Dian will go get it for you right now. Just wait here."

When Fang Dian returned with a bag of popsicles, the dormitory was empty.

Bai Liu was gone. The small suitcase she'd packed for him had disappeared. On the desk, under a cup, was a single hundred-yuan bill and a note:

[Borrowed earlier. Returning it now, Sister Dian.]

[Don’t drop out. I’m not worth it.]

Fang Dian stared at the note. Her breathing grew heavy. Slowly, she lowered the bag of popsicles.

Qiao Mu Private High School

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lu Yizhan had just handed the exam paper prop to Cen Buming to be sealed and was preparing to find the prop to unlock it from the game, planning to enter the game in the next two days, when he returned and heard about Bai Liu's situation.

"Bai Liu ran away?" Lu Yizhan sat in a daze on the sofa at Fang Dian's house, across from her. "How did Bai Liu run away?"

"I went to the orphanage and asked. He didn't go back." Fang Dian lowered her head, her hand pressing down on the coffee table. Her voice was hoarse. "I looked around the school, but there was nothing."

"Bai Liu didn't return to the orphanage, didn't go back to school, and didn't come here," Lu Yizhan muttered, his expression almost blank. He looked at Fang Dian and asked softly, almost to himself, "Is there anywhere else he could have gone?"

"Where else could he have gone?"

Lu Yizhan suddenly realized that, due to his interference, there were only three places in the world that could accommodate Bai Liu. Now, with the school and the orphanage out of the picture, the only place left was here.

But here... were the two people who had pushed him to this point.

Where else... could Bai Liu go?

He needed money for food, shelter, transport, and rest. Where would he get it?

Lu Yizhan slowly lowered his head, burying his face in his hands, and exhaled deeply.

Summer rains were frequent. When thunder struck, it usually rumbled just twice before the downpour began.

The owner of the arcade on Commercial Street saw the heavy rain and the reduced foot traffic as people took shelter. He sighed, considering closing early for the day.

He had just switched off the large display screen on the street when a hand, drenched and white with rain, gripped the descending shutter.

The owner froze, raising the shutter again.

The rain created a dense mist, blurring the busy streets. Bai Liu, soaked in his school uniform, stood quietly in front of this backdrop, looking almost out of place, as though he didn't belong to this world.

Bai Liu raised his eyes, calmly meeting the owner's gaze. "Are you still open today?"

"Uh… yes, we're open," the owner stammered. He was about to say it wasn't open, but upon seeing Bai Liu's drenched school uniform, he changed his mind. "Come in to get out of the rain."

Bai Liu walked in and glanced at the Old Xiang board. "That shooting game earlier... can the first-place prize be redeemed for money?"

"Yes, you can exchange it for five hundred," the owner replied, looking at Bai Liu's school uniform. "I remember you're in your senior year, right? There's no need to skip classes to come play. The entrance exams are important."

Bai Liu was silent for a moment before responding lightly, "I can't study anymore. I've been withdrawn."

The owner was shocked. "How did you get dropped from school? You're in your senior year! Won't your parents make a fuss at this point?"

"I don't have parents," Bai Liu said blandly. "Can you turn on the machine now?"

The owner, stunned, wanted to ask more but couldn't bring himself to. He sighed and turned on the machine for Bai Liu.

"You play," he said.

Bai Liu nodded politely. "Thank you, Old Xie board."

He lifted the curtain and went inside. Soon, the sound of gunfire echoed from the game in double mode. The owner sighed, his hands tucked outside.

He had seen the boy's golden banner on the Ferris wheel before. How could things have changed so quickly in just a few days...?

And what a lot of energy this kid had—dropping out of school, getting drenched, and still playing in duo mode.

The owner glanced at the two player names logged into the machine: one was Spades, and the other was Bai Liu. He chuckled to himself. The kid was just a teenager, yet had given himself a symmetrical game alias.

Bai Liu focused intently on the game, watching the two characters jumping across the screen, Spades following behind him, escorting him along the way.

Then, from beyond the curtain, a soft voice called out.

"Hello, have you seen this student?"

Bai Liu's pupils fluttered at the sound of the voice. The Spades character on the screen froze. Bai Liu jerked his head to look at Spades, but the monster he had just been playing with was gone.

Beyond the curtain, the soft female voice continued, full of sincerity and urgency: "I'm Fang Dian, the sister of the student in the photo. He's away from home right now, and if you've seen him, could you tell me? We would be very grateful."

The owner hesitated for a moment before responding, "I... haven't seen him."

"Here's our phone number. If you see him, please call us," Fang Dian said as she wrote down her number. "Thank you in advance."

"He loves playing horror games, so he might come here."

Bai Liu leaned silently against the gaming machine, his head tilted back, his hair hiding his eyes. All that could be heard was his shallow breathing and the sound of water dripping from his clothes.

The characters in the horror game crashed and were quickly gnawed to death by zombies.

When Fang Dian left, Bai Liu lifted the curtain and emerged. The owner immediately scolded him. "How can you say you don't have parents? Your sister came looking for you in the pouring rain!"

Bai Liu responded calmly, "Thank you for not telling on me."

The owner paused for a moment before sighing again. "I've had many

parents come looking for their kids, and it's basic professional ethics not to give them away. But your sister... she doesn't seem like the kind of parent, and she's really worried about you."

"Her eyes were red. It looked like she'd been crying."

Bai Liu hesitated before saying, "I didn't get a first prize."

"Let's see..." The owner lifted the curtain and walked in. "Second prize, not bad. Want to cash in? Two hundred dollars."

Bai Liu nodded. "Yes."

The owner handed him the money, then paused, sighing with relief. "You're a student... it's tough out there. You should head home soon."

Bai Liu took the money and turned to leave. As he heard the owner's words, he stopped for a moment and replied, "I'm not alone."

"Someone's keeping me company."

The owner asked, "Who is it?"

Bai Liu replied calmly, "Spades."

Bai Liu was already far away in the mist and rain.

The boss turned back, confusion clouding his mind. He glanced at the name Spades at the top of the fallen game character on the console's screen, and wondered aloud, "But Spades..."

"Isn't he just an NPC player who exists only in the game?"

"It's been four days," Lu Yizhan said, his voice strained, his dark circles so thick they seemed to fall to his cheeks. "Where the hell is Bai Liu?"

At this point, Lu Yizhan began regretting that he hadn't asked Cen Buming, the person who'd first gone to find Bai Liu, to send a few people to keep an eye on him.

Now, Lu Yizhan spent a third of his time worrying about Bai Liu getting into trouble, another third worrying about Bai Liu dragging others into trouble, and the remaining third dealing with exam papers, games, the orphanage, and school—feeling as though he might break from the stress.

Had Cen Buming's men tracked down Bai Liu, and if Bai Liu had been doing anything, Cen Buming would have dealt with it swiftly.

The game's properties also didn't mobilize heretics or props to track Bai Liu. Each of them was tied to Bai Liu, and if they were, Bai Liu could surely influence them through the heretics.

Bai Liu was the most unique child in the world. Yet, even with countless resources at his disposal, Lu Yizhan found himself resorting to the most common and time-consuming method of searching—just like he had when he and Fang Dian had searched tirelessly for him.

But despite all their efforts, they still hadn't found him.

Bai Liu was smart enough to know that if he truly didn't want to be found, no matter what resources Lu Yizhan used, it would be nearly impossible to track him down.

After days of exhausting search efforts, Fang Dian finally brought both good and bad news.

"I found Bai Liu in an internet café in the next district," Fang Dian said. "But... he doesn't want to come back."

Lu Yizhan's heart sank, and he collapsed onto the sofa, almost on the verge of tears. "Why?"

"We've worked so hard to clear his name!" Fang Dian exclaimed.

They had gone to great lengths to uncover the truth. The concealed surveillance footage revealed that Bao Kangle had forced Bai Liu into gambling. With Hou Tong's testimony, Bai Liu had been cleared of any wrongdoing.

When Bao Kangle was questioned about attacking Bai Liu, he stammered and couldn't explain. However, when Xu Wei was interrogated, he couldn't hold back and confessed to shady actions involving the headmaster.

The school underwent a harsh investigation, leading to the headmaster and Xu Wei being immediately arrested. Bao Kangle was expelled and given a demerit.

Meanwhile, Cen Buming helped to fix the issues with the exam paper from the game, sealing it as a heresy. Lu Yizhan had already undone its effects on the girl, using a prop to erase her memories of the event,

leaving her to believe that what she saw was just an illusion.

Lu Yizhan also wanted to eliminate Bao Kangle's influence, but the man was in such a poor mental state that Lu Yizhan wasn't sure if that would be effective.

Qiao Mu Private High School had been thoroughly cleaned out. The high school's lake on the hill had been filled in, and the area reserved for exceptional students had been disbanded. The new headmaster came to Lu Yizhan immediately after taking office, asking about Bai Liu and helping search for him for several days.

Everything was improving.

Many others, including Hou Tong, the Fang Dian volleyball team, and the new English teacher, were also eagerly awaiting Bai Liu's return.

But Bai Liu had no intention of coming back.

"I had a chat with Bai Liu," Fang Dian said, resting her chin on her hand, as though lost in thought. Her gaze was distant. "He told me he wants to live alone."

"He doesn't see anything wrong with dropping out and living by himself after this," she continued. "He has no expectations of high school or college, nor does he care much about what ordinary people do. But if the future keeps him isolated, he's used to that kind of life—and that's what he's expecting."

Fang Dian's eyes glazed over. "I think he meant it, but I don't think he really wants anyone."

"What do you mean?" Lu Yizhan asked, frowning.

Fang Dian took a deep breath. "It feels like... there's something I can't see."

"Stay with him when he's alone," she added.

In the silence of the rented house, Bai Liu lay alone on a wooden bed.

He had been living in an internet café before, but when Fang Dian arrived, Bai Liu had already left. Fang Dian had rented him this small house and helped him settle in.

Bai Liu lay on the bed, staring at a set of keys on the small table across from him—the same keys Fang Dian had left when she found him in

the internet café.

Next to the keys, Spades was also lying there, his black eyes staring back at Bai Liu.

The room was so quiet and dark that Bai Liu could see Spades' eyes glowing a strange silvery-blue, and he could clearly make out Spades' form, which was growing more translucent by the second.

"I'm leaving," Spades said.

"Why?" Bai Liu asked. "I'm still alone. Why can you go?"

Spades blinked slowly. "But you won't be alone for much longer."

Bai Liu's tone was cold. "You don't get to decide what I'm like."

Spades' voice softened. "Because I don't want you to be alone, Bai Liu."

He stood up slowly, approached Bai Liu, and gently scooped him up from the plank bed. With a soft and low voice, he added, "There will be many, many people around you in the future. I know you'll be happy that way, and I hope that happy you comes soon."

"I don't want you to be alone for too long," Spades murmured, tightening his hug around Bai Liu.

"We made a deal," he continued. "I promise you that, in the future, I'll find you, see you at first sight, follow you forever, and never disappear again."

Bai Liu gripped Spades' shoulders, but his gaze seemed distant.

His eyes wandered to the set of keys on the table, and after a long silence, Bai Liu closed his eyes. He wrapped his arms around Spades' shoulders and let out a soft, muffled cry.

Bai Liu is back.

The return of the man of the hour caused a stir at Qiao Mu Private High School, but Bai Liu's own life remained uneventful—or rather, he became the center of attention.

After the cancellation of the buildings on the hill, Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian started studying at the foot of the hill. The two often ran to Class

17 to drag Bai Liu along for meals, classes, games, and homework, much to his annoyance.

The new teacher in class was attentive and friendly, though never overbearing. She marked Bai Liu's papers in ways she thought were best.

The orphanage gave Bai Liu eight dollars a night for a bowl of beef noodles. Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian sometimes added extra for an egg, and over the last 50 days, Bai Liu had noticed he'd gained a little weight.

He was no longer alone—or rather, he had no chance to be. Surrounded by so many people, moments of solitude were rare.

Sometimes, Bai Liu would sit alone in the flowerbed downstairs, holding two popsicles, though he rarely ate both. He never knew who ate the second one. Such moments alone had become infrequent.

Then came the day of the GCSEs.

It was a gloriously sunny day, the summer heat sweltering.

Fang Dian and Lu Yizhan woke up early to have breakfast with Bai Liu. Lu Yizhan, nervous, kept reminding him, "Make sure you remember your answer key! Check it twice!"

After giving Bai Liu a final round of instructions, Lu Yizhan walked outside to the parents' area, waiting for Bai Liu's exam to end.

Fang Dian, in tears, stopped Lu Yizhan, who was so nervous he was walking in the wrong direction. "Stop!" she exclaimed. "It's not just Bai Liu's exam today; you have one too! Why are you waiting in the parents' area?"

"Oh!" Lu Yizhan slapped his head in realization. "I forgot I have my own exam today. I just remembered it's also Bai Liu's exam day."

Bai Liu sighed.

In the end, it was Bai Liu who sent Lu Yizhan into the exam room, saying, "Don't forget your answer card, Little Lu."

"You too!" Lu Yizhan grabbed Bai Liu's hand, tears in his eyes. "I'm sure you'll do great!"

Fang Dian also held their hands and smiled brightly. "Of course, Bai

Liu will do well!"

Bai Liu watched them wave goodbye and head into the exam hall. Instead of turning away immediately, he paused for a moment, watching their backs as they faded from view.

Just then, a black figure appeared beside him.

Spades took Bai Liu's hand, and Bai Liu slowly returned the gesture.

In the bustling exam hall, Bai Liu stood still, his hand grasping something in vain as people passed by, smiling and greeting him.

"Bai Liu, go for it!"
"Bai Liu, charge!"
"Steady, Bai Liu, you can do it!"

Each time someone greeted him, Spades would briefly disappear, only to return and resume holding his hand once the well-wisher left.

Among the crowd, Bai Liu and Spades seemed like flickering images from an old film, their silhouettes blurring in the sunlight—appearing and disappearing like a monster's silhouette beside the hero of a fairy tale.

Spades held Bai Liu's hand tightly when he was alone, then released it silently when surrounded by others.

When Bai Liu entered the final English exam room, the "monster" stood by the window, watching him write without looking away for a second.

When the bell rang signaling the end of the exam, Bai Liu instinctively turned toward the window to look for Spades.

He was gone.

Bai Liu stood frozen for a moment, then remembered he'd told Spades to wait by the ping pong table after the exam. "He must have gone there," Bai Liu thought.

Later, Fang Dian approached him, asking how the exam went. Bai Liu said it went well, and Fang Dian cheered, suggesting they go shopping afterward to celebrate.

Soon, Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian were swept away by classmates, leaving Bai Liu some time to himself. He returned to his seat, paused

for a moment, then pulled a roll of sticks from beneath his desk.

Ten sticks—just enough for two "cuteness" rewards.

The classroom buzzed with activity, with many students hiding in corners to confess their love. Bai Liu, expressionless, walked past them without a second glance, heading toward the flowerbed.

At the kiosk, he exchanged ten sticks for two strawberry-flavored treats and waited by the ping pong table in the hot sun.

The ping pong table was a secluded corner, popular among couples avoiding the watchful eye of the head teacher. Now, with no teachers or parents around, it was deserted.

The playground was full of boys and girls running and laughing. In the shade under the ping pong table, Bai Liu, with two ice creams in hand, waited for Spades, just as he had waited in the rain, plotting and hiding from the distant flashlight.

Now, he waited calmly, holding the strawberry-flavored treats, hoping Spades would join him, eat together, and finally hear those words: "I like you."

"I've said what I like and brought what you like to eat. Can you walk a little slower because I'm still alone?"

Bai Liu waited from sunset to dusk, but the monster never came. The ice cream melted completely in his hand. Had Spades really just walked away, without a word?

When they meet again, Bai Liu thinks he won't forgive him so easily.

Bai Liu slowly lowered his hand, still holding the ice cream, and with a calm expression, looked away and whispered:

"I like you, Spades."

Chapter End Notes

Bai Liu 🍙🍙🍙

Qiao Mu Private High School

In the Classroom

Mu Sicheng is still asleep in the back row as Bai Liu turns to the last page of his sketchbook.

The final page depicts a small figure sitting alone by a flower bed, holding two ice creams. The little man gazes down at the spot where the puppy string first appeared, as though waiting for it to reappear and request the ice cream in his hand.

This time, he’s ready to give it.

Bai Liu closes his sketchbook, his expression unchanged, calm as ever.

He has no memory of the past—nothing about Spades remains, erased as if it never existed, much like his memories of Xie Ta before.

It’s not hard to guess that this memory, too, has been folded away.

As always, Bai Liu has scattered [Anchor] around him, drawing Spades into the game—although, in the end, he did get in.

And... he made it as far as the challenge.

"Squeak—"

The classroom door suddenly bursts open, and Mu Sicheng, startled from his sleep, jolts awake.

"Wait." Bai Liu’s voice is steady. "The man who brought us up the mountain is here."

A figure steps forward, a red-eyed Bao Kangle, who glares at Bai Liu with a sinister look. "Don’t you like horror games? Then do you dare to bet with me?"

Bai Liu accepts calmly, "What’s the bet?"

"Jump in Gaucho Lake, answer all the questions, and come back up," Bao Kangle says. "Whoever finishes first wins."

He pauses, clearly searching for a reward, when he notices Bai Liu standing up, poised and ready. "Okay, let’s go."

Bao Kangle freezes. "You agree?"

"I've agreed before," Bai Liu smiles. "There's no point in wasting time. Let's go."

The hill overlooks Gaucho Lake.

Lu Yizhan stands quietly by the lake, a heavy sword in one hand, staring down at his reflection.

His face, distorted by the ripples of the water, is marked with bruises, but he remains still, as if deep in thought—or perhaps, lost in the absence of thought.

His mind drifts back six years, to the time when Bai Liu disappeared in his senior year.

During that period, Lu Yizhan visited Cen Buming once.

"Lu Yizhan," Cen Buming sneered, "What do you think I am? The most I can do for Bai Liu's regression is leave him alone in reality. You want me to help him with Qiao Mu Private High School? You want me to use my power to convince the school to let him stay?"

His words were laced with cold sarcasm. "I'm not as magnanimous as you are, and I'm not so eager to deal with Bai Liu's... derivatives."

Cen Buming's words swirled, but he caught sight of Lu Yizhan's bowed head, as though admitting fault. He swallowed back his curses, opting instead to cool down. "I can't help you. You can go."

Lu Yizhan, who had been silent, spoke up. "I couldn't do it."

He looked up, a faint, bitter smile tugging at his lips. "I couldn't help but doubt him."

Cen Buming turned, eyes narrowing. "What do you mean?"

"I know, rationally, that he's an innocent man," Lu Yizhan sighed, "But emotionally, I couldn't help but prioritize him..."

He paused, taking a deep breath. "I've been over-controlling his actions, inhibiting his development to keep him from hurting others. But in doing so, I'm denying him freedom, and I can't help but wonder —was that the right choice? Is it fair?"

Lu Yizhan leaned against the Heretics Authority corridor wall, gazing at the ceiling with vacant eyes.

"If he's innocent, I'm sacrificing him by doing this," he said softly.

"If he's not... I'm raising a tiger."

"Sometimes, I wonder what the right choice is."

Cen Buming frowned, ready to scold him. But Lu Yizhan raised his hands in mock surrender. "Okay, okay. I know what you're going to say—indecisive, falling into Bai Liu's game. But I've been thinking for a long time, trying to figure out a way to do both. I finally came up with something."

"I'm ready to let go, to let Bai Liu develop on his own."

Cen Buming was stunned, his brow furrowing. "What do you mean?"

"After high school, I won't interfere too much in his life. He can live how he wants." Lu Yizhan looked directly at Cen Buming. "If he ever crosses the line, I'll be the first to stop him."

"But as long as he doesn't, he'll be free to live as a normal person."

"To that end, I'll relax my supervision of him," Lu Yizhan's face hardened. "But I'll still be prepared with backups."

"If Bai Liu ever chooses to enter the game on his own, I need a presence there to stop him from crossing the line."

Lu Yizhan looked at Cen Buming. "I'm joining your guild."

"I'll bet my life that Bai Liu stays within the safety line, never stepping into the temple."

"At least, for now." Lu Yizhan added nervously, scratching his head. "To help Bai Liu graduate, senior brother, can you talk to Qiao Mu Private High School? Have them fill in the lake and cancel the hill under the guise of taking in heretics. Check the headmaster and the player teachers while you're at it."

Cen Buming was speechless.

It had all come back to this.

In the end, Cen Buming agreed, which explained why the issue with

Qiao Mu Private High School had been so easily resolved—and why the Gaucho lake was filled.

After that, Lu Yizhan never thought he would see Gaucho Lake again.

He never expected to meet Bai Liu here, by the lake, for a second time.

Lu Yizhan heard footsteps behind him and turned to see Bai Liu standing a few meters away. A clear, familiar smile spread across his face. "There you are."

Bai Liu remained expressionless, his gaze fixed on him. "You should've guessed I'd come."

Lu Yizhan glanced behind Bai Liu. "Where's Bao Kangle? He brought you up here, didn't he? Where is he?"

"He was knocked out by Mu Sicheng and left at the gate after opening the door." Bai Liu's tone was light. "That's all he's good for. After all, it's me and you who are in charge today, isn't it?"

No sooner had he finished speaking than Mu Sicheng emerged from behind Bai Liu, his claws raised high. He darted toward Lu Yizhan, aiming straight for his throat.

Lu Yizhan quickly raised his heavy sword to block, retreating. The next moment, Bai Liu appeared behind him, a dagger in hand.

Bai Liu placed one foot on Lu Yizhan's shoulder and yanked him backward by the back of his neck with his left hand. At the same time, his right hand slashed the dagger diagonally upward across Lu Yizhan's neck, drawing a thin line of blood.

In the game pool:

The host immediately shouted excitedly, "This is a classic thief and assassin match-up! The thief draws attention, while the assassin strikes from the shadows!"

"What a good match! The Reverse God has dropped three points of health, leaving him with only twelve!"

"Another hit! And now, with just ten points left in the Reverse God's health, things are looking pretty bad for the killer sequence!"

Liu Jiayi watched Bai Liu on the big screen, her eyes momentarily flickering. *This was how Mu Sicheng and Liu Huai worked best together back then...* she thought.

"Now let's see how the Reverse God strikes back. The Reverse God is retaliating! He raises his heavy sword and swings it left, aiming at Mu Sicheng—but it misses. Could his injury be affecting his gameplay?" The host stared at the big screen, his lips forming an astonished "O". "Wait, everyone, look! What skill is that?!"

"The space below Mu Sicheng's left foot has distorted, creating a gap in space! Isn't that the kind of gap only Spades' whip can tear open? But how did the Reverse God's heavy sword do that?!" >

In-game:

Lu Yizhan remained stoic, ignoring the constant attacks on him. He pulled his heavy sword toward the gap, tearing it wider, the opening expanding like paper being ripped apart, the space folding and breaking.

[System Alert: Player Reverse God uses personal skill (World Line Overlap)]

[Note: This skill can only be used once per game, so please choose your timing carefully.]

Lu Yizhan slashed to the left, and the gap widened instantly. Mu Sicheng inadvertently stepped into it. In a swift motion, Lu Yizhan flipped and pressed down on his sword, folding the twisted space above him like dough, trapping the stunned Mu Sicheng within it. He swung his heavy sword twice, sealing the space into place.

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng has been actively migrated out of the game map due to spatial folding. He is considered to have quit the game and will be treated as playing negatively.]

Mu Sicheng, now inexplicably in the audience, stood there, baffled. "????" What the hell just happened? Why did he quit the game?

After a brief moment of confusion, the crowd erupted in applause, startling Mu Sicheng as he stood outside the game.

The host, excited, added, "It's a rule skill! In addition to the Prophecy

skill, the Reverse God has a Space-level Rule skill hidden in his repertoire!"

"Two rule skills!"

"I've never seen the Reverse God use this skill in any of his matches since joining the league! It's likely that this skill wasn't originally his but was passed on to him by someone before he died. However, we know nothing about the player who transferred it to him!"

"This is bizarre!"

The host grew more animated as he spoke, "This skill must've been available to the Reverse God before this season. From mid-season play until now, the Reverse God has faced off against thirty-one strong teams, and Bai Liu is the only player who's forced him to use this skill."

"This showdown is getting interesting!"

On the big screen, Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan stood on opposite casting platforms, facing each other across the lake. The wind blew silently between them, a single leaf drifting across the water, haloed by the moonlight. The ground around them was littered with heavy swords, knives, and deep slash marks.

"So that's why you tried to protect Mu Sicheng from the game, even though you were fighting to the death earlier," Lu Yizhan observed, his neck still dripping with blood. Yet his face wore a helpless smile. "I saved you last time, and now you've figured out that I had this little trick left—sending people out of the game randomly."

"Leave a team member who can use that team member to consume this skill of mine," Lu Yizhan continued. "You've been setting up against me quite a lot, haven't you?"

Bai Liu replied lightly, "Pretty much the same as the setup you did against me."

The moon hung high in the dark blue sky, its light now casting down onto the lake. Lu Yizhan and Bai Liu looked up at each other at the same moment.

Lu Yizhan, battered and bruised at eighteen, and Bai Liu, equally hurt, stood on opposite sides of Gao Kao Lake. Their ragged school uniforms were torn from the fight, the hems fluttering in the night wind. They

faced each other with calm determination.

The bright moon tilted down, casting a dark, silvery blue glow on the lake, as though one of the eyes of a god was watching them with a knowing smile.

Bai Liu looked at Lu Yizhan impassively.

Lu Yizhan was silent for a moment, then he smiled with relief, his eyebrows arching. "Bai Liu, did I ever mention that you're quite different from when you were eighteen?"

—Even though it was the same appearance, the same attire, and the same stance by the lake.

But Bai Liu was no longer the same. His gaze, though calm, was filled with the weight of experience. He stood alone, yet there seemed to be many people standing behind him, his aggression unwavering.

"You've grown up," Lu Yizhan murmured, taking a deep breath as he held his heavy sword against his side. He lowered his eyes to the reflection of his still-young self in the lake. "…I'm old."

—There was no one left behind me.

People grow up because they have something to fall back on, and they grow old because they have nothing.

The deep yellow moon cascaded away, and a set of tables and chairs appeared in the lake as the final map of Gao Kao Lake opened up.

Lu Yizhan and Bai Liu jumped at the same time.

The moment they hit the water, they raised their heavy swords and whips in unison, charging toward each other without hesitation.

Shrine.

Bai Six looked at Lu Yizhan with amusement as the stone encasing him slowly solidified, leaving only his right hand and half of his face visible. "Are you really going to do this?"

"Do that," Bai Six continued, "and there will be no turning back."

Lu Yizhan slowly raised his head, and as he did, fragments of stone

continued to fall from his body. He met Bai Liu's gaze and, with a hoarse voice, replied, "I'm going to do that."

Bai Six lowered his eyes, his fingers brushing across the stone table as a scene materialized before them. Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan were locked in a fierce underwater struggle. Bai Six smirked, amused. "It doesn't look like he's planning on holding back on you."

"Are you really going to bet against me this time?" Lu Yizhan asked.

Bai Six looked up, a smile curling at his lips. "Are you sure you want to bet your last God card—the Prophet, which is your own—on Bai Liu?"

Lu Yizhan, his petrified hand still, slowly pushed the Prophet card onto the table. "I'm sure."

"Good then," Bai Six folded his hands beneath his chin, his smile widening. "Let's clarify the terms of the bet."

"You said no matter how much Bai Liu desires victory, he will never be manipulated into doing something illegal in this copy—"

"In other words," Bai Six interrupted, "no matter how much Bai Liu wants to win, he will never kill you in this copy without a 'get-out-of-jail-free' card, right?"

Lu Yizhan stared intently at Bai Six. "Yes."

"Then let's rewind to before your copy begins."

Lu Yizhan pulled Zhou Gong aside and removed his death-free gold medal from around his neck, placing it on Zhou Gong. "I give you my death-free gold medal."

Zhou Gong's pupils dilated as he held the medal in his hands. "Captain?!"

"Why are you handing over your immunity from death?!" he demanded.

A normal death warrant cannot be transferred, borrowed, or handed over, it can only be used by the person who received it.

"Because I made a bet with the evil god." Lu Yizhan spoke calmly. "I

told him that Bai Liu wouldn't kill me without my death-free gold medal. He didn't believe it, so he changed the rules for me and allowed me to hand over the medal for this one tournament."

"Listen carefully, Zhou Gong: when you go on the field, go straight for Bai Liu. He won't kill you at first, because he doesn't kill innocent people in the game. But he will find many ways to eliminate you—like getting your soul note."

Zhou Gong shuddered, his face falling. "I can't protect myself from him, Captain. He's too clever, and he's already bought Captain Tang. What if he buys my soul note too?"

Lu Yizhan leaned in closer, his voice lowering. "That's what I want to talk to you about. When the time comes, show him your 'get-out-of-jail-free' card right away. Bai Liu will eliminate you quickly instead of wasting time on your soul note."

"Your soul notes aren't valuable to him."

Zhou Gong stared blankly, replying with a soft, defeated, "Oh QAQ."

It seemed like a good plan, but the tone of it didn't sound reassuring.

"But Captain, if you give me the gold medal, you won't have any immunity from death yourself," Zhou Gong said, clearly worried.

"Don't tell anyone," Lu Yizhan paused, "And don't let Bai Liu figure out that your medal came from Spades, who withdrew."

Zhou Gong's worry deepened. "Captain, what are you going to do?"

"Bai Liu will kill you if you step out there like that!" he protested.

[Lu Yizhan, Bai Liu will kill you!]

Lu Yizhan was momentarily lost in thought as he remembered a time when Cen Buming had said the same thing, with red eyes and harsh curses, after leaving the Deer Hunter's Guild a year ago.

"Lu Yizhan, what are you doing?!" Cen Buming's fury was palpable as he pinned Lu Yizhan to the ground, the Death Ring leaving scratches on his face. His eyes were bloodshot, and his voice came out like a growl, "Do you even realize what you've just said?!"

Lu Yizhan, blood trickling from his mouth, calmly turned his head, wiped his lip, and repeated, "I said, I will devolve my God sign to Bai

Liu."

"I will sell my soul to him."

"I want him to take my place and become the next Prophet."

Cen Buming's chest heaved as he glared at Lu Yizhan, murder in his eyes. "So, you've gone mad, haven't you?"

"What about everything we trained for? The years we spent in the game preparing to kill Bai Liu?"

"What about every loyal second-tier team member of the Deer Hunters, who fought for you?!"

"I'm sorry," Lu Yizhan replied calmly. "The Prophet's power goes to Bai Liu. He's the only one with a chance of winning."

Cen Buming's eyes darkened. "You're saying the only chance of winning is through a werewolf?" His voice was icy.

Lu Yizhan spoke matter-of-factly. "We can't beat Bai Six. He's too strong. But Bai Liu? He's possible. As long as he's on our side, playing against Bai Six as our Prophet, the game will never end. It'll never be a win or a loss."

"This world line will continue," he added, "and that's a win."

"Is that a win?" Cen Buming sneered.

"No," Lu Yizhan admitted softly, "but it's not a loss either."

"It's the only option I can think of."

"Bai Liu's been mentally stable for years. He grew up in a peaceful environment. His pursuit isn't so extreme. Apart from a few moments of strong desire, I don't see him falling into the game unless Bai Six has his anchor."

"I'm sure Bai Liu wouldn't have joined the game if Bai Six hadn't had that hold on him."

Cen Buming slowly released his grip on Lu Yizhan's collar. With a quiet groan, Lu Yizhan propped himself up and limped toward the door.

As he passed Cen Buming, he paused, bowed his head, and muttered

an apology before walking outside.

"Brother," Cen Buming called out behind him. "Have you ever thought about how badly Bai Liu would die if he really was a werewolf and sold his soul to a werewolf Prophet?"

"He’s my last friend," Lu Yizhan said quietly, leaning against the wall. "I know he won’t kill me."

"Where does this belief come from?" Cen Buming asked through gritted teeth.

Lu Yizhan paused before responding, his voice firm. "A long time ago, I asked Fang Dian how to win all the time in the game."

"Fang Dian and I said, 'Cheating.'"

"I said, 'The other guy is someone I can’t beat, no matter what. Someone who can’t be beaten, even by cheating. How can I win?'"

"Fang Dian and I said, 'Then just cheat off the field so he has no way of beating you.'"

"I asked her what that meant, and she smiled and said, 'I cheat off the field with you and Bai Liu, and Bai Liu cheats off the field with you too.'"

"Because you couldn’t let us lose, you made sure we won every time. You kept this up for ten years, and if you wanted to win, you just made sure no one else could beat us. It’s a kind of emotional trust-based cheating."

"I said Bai Liu wouldn’t let me win—he’s too competitive. And Fang Dian smiled and said, 'No. The day he grows up, he’ll know how to let you win.'"

Lu Yizhan turned back to Cen Buming with a small smile. "I think that day will come."

In the viewing pool, on the large splash screen, Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan are locked in a fierce battle, their whips and heavy swords swinging at each other in a blur. Their movements are barely visible, but the life levels of both players are steadily dropping.

The host, sweating nervously, exclaims, "The Reverse God only has

five life points left! There's a good chance he'll be taken out with one more strike!"

"Is this where the playoffs for the killer sequence are going to end? Are we really going to have to start all over again next year?!" one of the commentators adds, his voice tinged with anxiety.

Zhou Gong's face pales—this isn't just about stopping here. The captain has no immunity, and death is final. There's no 'next year' for him.

At the Shrine, Bai Six smiles, watching the scene unfold on the screen. "If Bai Liu realizes you don't have a death warrant with so little life left, he'll strike quickly. Are you really sure you want to bet against me?"

"You've never won a bet against me, oh prophet," Bai Six adds with a grin.

Lu Yizhan remains silent. His hand presses down on the God Zhang card beneath him as he watches Bai Liu, his eyes unwavering, attack on the screen. His breathing grows faster, his mind racing.

What are you thinking, Bai Liu? What kind of person are you, Bai Liu?

Are you going to kill me... or not?

Bai Liu.

Lu Yizhan closes his eyes, his eyelids heavy, like stone. On the screen, Bai Liu transforms his whip into a knife and drives it into Lu Yizhan's virtual heart.

[System Alert: Player Reverse God's life value reduced to 1!]

[Warning! Warning! No exemptions! Player is about to die!]

[Player Reverse God is about to quit the game.]

In the game, Bai Liu hears the system's beep. His pupils flicker, and he immediately reacts—Lu Yizhan has set him up!

That guy broke the rules and moved the death-exemption medal! The Spades-marked medallion of Zhou Gong isn't Spades', it's Lu Yizhan's.

The Lu Yizhan in the water jerks his head up, teeth gritted, eyes red with a mixture of despair, grim determination, and sorrow. With a mighty effort, he raises his heavy sword and drives it toward Bai Liu's heart, catching him off guard.

[System Alert: Player Reverse God uses the monster book identity "Reverse God's Judge"—using the highest-level Judgement skill.]

[- Judgement of the Evil One.]

The heavy sword erupts in a blinding white light, and Bai Liu's life drops rapidly.

Lu Yizhan forces the sword deeper into Bai Liu's heart, pinning him to the water. The two men are so close they can almost see each other's eyes. Bai Liu still clutches his dagger, enough for another attack.

One more strike, and Lu Yizhan's life will reach zero. He'll die, and the game will end.

Bai Liu's gaze is vacant as he looks at Lu Yizhan, his mind wandering uncontrollably.

It feels like the same lake bottom where Lu Yizhan once rescued the fourteen-year-old trying to grab Xie Ta's hand.

The same place he helped the eighteen-year-old down the side of Gaucho Lake.

Where he pulled the twenty-four-year-old from the watery dungeon of the Heretic Authority.

But this time, it's Lu Yizhan pushing him into the water.

Do I kill him?

Bai Liu's expression remains impassive as he looks at Lu Yizhan's bloodless face. Blood suddenly bursts from Bai Liu's heart, flooding the lake.

He never understood why Lu Yizhan wanted to save him.

Now, he still doesn't understand why Lu Yizhan stopped him.

Lu Yizhan has always done things Bai Liu couldn't comprehend—teaching him things he didn't get, letting him live like a normal person in a world he doesn't understand, stopping him from hurting

others and preventing others from hurting him.

But why?

Why do you do this?

Why, when you’re clearly the one trying to kill me, does your hand tremble so violently holding the sword, and why are your eyes so red —as if you’re killing the one person you least want to kill?

Bai Liu loosens his grip on the dagger.

Lu Yizhan opens his eyes, pushing the God card down onto the table beside the Werewolf card. He looks up at Bai Six across the table. "I bet."

"I bet he’ll become the next generation of prophets and defeat you!"

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has zero life. Exiting the game.]

The Challenge

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After a brief handover to the other members, Bai Liu calmly logged out of the game.

The circus members understood the situation and didn't place any blame on Bai Liu.

To be honest, they had no right to blame him. In fact, the few members who had been cleared out early in the game by Lu Yizhan were more to blame, as Bai Liu was the only one who had made it to the end.

"Don't stress about it," Tang Erda said, patting Bai Liu's shoulder with a somber expression. "Get some rest. We have a tough battle ahead."

Bai Liu let out a slight sigh of relief as he logged out of the game and lay down on the bed in his rented room. He stared at the ceiling, his breathing soft and steady.

He hadn't carried over his injuries this time; he had been awake from start to finish.

Including the final blow.

"Lingling—" his phone suddenly rang. Bai Liu picked it up without checking the screen, and when he did, there was no sound on the other end, only uneven breathing. So Bai Liu remained silent.

After a long pause, a bitter laugh echoed from the other side. "Shall we talk?"

"Where do you want to talk?" Bai Liu replied smoothly. "My place or yours?"

"Come on over," Lu Yizhan said, rubbing his face. "I'll cook for you. Is there anything you want to eat?"

Bai Liu paused for a moment. "Anything."

"Alright, I'll wait for you at the grocery store. Since you just got out of the game, don't ride your bike—take a taxi. I'll reimburse you."

Bai Liu opted for the most expensive express taxi.

When Bai Liu arrived, he asked Lu Yizhan to come down and pay the driver. Lu Yizhan, wearing an apron, wiped his hands in shock while pulling out his phone. "Why did you take a detour for over a hundred?" he asked.

The taxi driver responded truthfully, "The boy said he was going to a shopping street near Qiao Mu private high school, so I took a long detour. He went down to buy something and came back for the same price."

Lu Yizhan realized he'd been pranked. "....."

He turned to Bai Liu. "What did you buy?"

Bai Liu glanced at him, deadpan. "A body. Do you want to report it now?"

"..... No need." Lu Yizhan quickly lowered his head, wiping his hands vigorously on his apron. Then he muttered, "I'm sorry."

Bai Liu paused for a moment but didn't respond. He simply continued on his way.

When he reached Lu Yizhan's door on the third floor, Bai Liu stopped and raised his hand to knock. But Lu Yizhan whispered, "You have the key."

"Fang Dian gave it to you last time."

Bai Liu's hand stopped mid-air. He paused for a second, then found the key and inserted it into the lock, turning it with a slightly rusty motion.

The door didn't open.

Lu Yizhan whispered again, "You're turning the wrong way."

Bai Liu: "....."

Bai Liu glanced at him briefly. "Why don't you open it?"

"No, no, no!" Lu Yizhan smiled awkwardly. "You haven't been here in a while; it's normal. A few more visits, and it won't happen again."

Bai Liu shifted his gaze back to the door, lingering for a moment on

the lock and key, before turning it twice more in the opposite direction.

Finally, the door opened.

A wave of heat and the smell of soup filled the room, accompanied by the sound of bubbling in the kitchen. The freshly painted wallpaper in the living room had a few watermarks, likely from an accident with the hostess. The TV was playing loud entertainment, and three or four large dishes sat on the dining table, steam rising from them.

It was a lively, almost festive atmosphere.

Bai Liu stepped inside.

"Bang..."

A firework cone went off with a loud pop, and Fang Dian jumped out from behind the shoe cupboard, grinning widely. She held a firework cone in one hand and a cake in the other, shouting, "Happy 25th birthday, Bai Liu!"

Bai Liu froze mid-step. His eyes shifted slowly from the bustling room to Fang Dian’s face, adorned with a birthday hat and lit candles on the cake, and finally to the cake itself, with the number [25] displayed in candles.

Oh. So it’s my birthday.

He had forgotten about it in the rush of everything.

Bai Liu had celebrated nearly all his birthdays since high school with Fang Dian and Lu Yizhan. But on his 22nd birthday, something happened to Fang Dian, and afterward, Bai Liu never went back to her house for his birthday.

No matter how much Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian invited him, he always declined. The invites slowly turned into a text message with birthday wishes and a takeaway cake. Bai Liu would eat the cake like beef noodles for breakfast, scan the message, and that was the end of his birthday.

Now, suddenly, he remembered—oh, right, it's my birthday.

He also realized that, like the Mad Lamb tactician, he had lost to Lu Yizhan in the past: first against the Deer Hunter and now against the

Killer Sequence.

"Come in, come in!" Fang Dian noticed Bai Liu hadn't reacted, so she grabbed his shoulders and ushered him in. She stopped and looked at him with some surprise. "You're wearing a white shirt. Aren't you cold?"

"It's September, almost October, and it's rainy today!" Fang Dian shook her head, disapproving of Bai Liu's thin attire. "Is that all you're wearing? Will your little body be okay?"

"I'll go get you something to wear!" she added.

As soon as Fang Dian set the cake down, she disappeared into the other room, rummaging for clothes.

Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan sat on the couch in silence, watching a cartoon on the TV.

Lu Yizhan took a deep breath, clutching his apron, and spoke first. "...What do you want to ask?"

Bai Liu's tone was light but pointed. "What's your game with Bai Six, aside from Werewolf? What's your next plan?"

Lu Yizhan gave a bitter smile. "I'm prepared to give you the prophet status."

Bai Liu paused, turning his head to look at Lu Yizhan, his eyes narrowing. "You're going to sell your soul to me? Won't that kill you?"

"It would have," Lu Yizhan sighed, extending his hand. "First, you find the paper money and trade it for my soul. After that, you'll understand what's going on."

Bai Liu stared expressionlessly for a moment, then fished a ten-cent coin out of the corner of his wallet, holding it up right in front of Lu Yizhan's stunned face. "Ten cents for your soul."

Lu Yizhan's entire body stiffened. "At least one bill! Ten cents is too little!"

"No, forget it." Bai Liu calmly withdrew the coin. "Lu Yizhan, you know what? It's a buyer's market. You're the one selling your soul, not

me, so I don't want it."

Lu Yizhan was silent for a moment. Then, with a touch of humiliation, he extended his hand, eyes glistening with the threat of tears. "At least fifty cents! Ten cents is too little!"

"I can buy it for fifty cents." Bai Liu clasped his hands over his chest, his tone cold. "But later, you'll need to transfer me forty cents. The real price is still ten cents, so consider this me helping you 'bump up' the price."

Lu Yizhan: "..."

"I only have one soul note and don't plan to open a wholesale shop, so no need to fake the price," Lu Yizhan muttered in resignation.

"A penny's a penny," Bai Liu replied, almost dryly. "Here." He dropped a dime into Lu Yizhan's palm, and almost instantly, a new soul note appeared in his wallet. He pulled it out, his brow furrowing quickly.

The note wasn't as new or straight as Bai Liu's usual ones. It was old and slightly wrinkled, with a hole the size of a baby's fist in the top right corner, surrounded by a black ring, as though it had been burned.

Bai Liu's gaze snapped up as he glanced over Lu Yizhan's right shoulder, where the Soul Crusher had struck him. His tone dropped. "Your soul was damaged when you were hit by the gun?"

"Yes." Lu Yizhan spread his hands helplessly. "My soul was incomplete after my last injury. So, even though I sold my soul to you, it's not fully 'sold' to you. It's in a kind of Schrödinger's sold soul state."

"It's kind of a cheating violation," Lu Yizhan added with a rueful chuckle.

Bai Liu stared at him intently before suddenly asking, "When did you start planning to make me a prophet?"

"-It was before you took a bullet for me, wasn't it?"

Bai Liu's voice was calm as he continued, "So, at that time, you deliberately stood in my way and got shot so you could sell your broken soul to me? And then give me the prophet status you couldn't afford, so I'd take on the so-called responsibility of saving the world?"

“Is that why you raised me, Lu Yizhan?” Bai Liu’s voice was colder now, tinged with a hint of bitterness. “Either to kill me as a criminal, or treat me like an heir... a tool?”

Lu Yizhan raised his head slowly. Rather than evade Bai Liu’s question, he answered smoothly, “Fifty percent.”

Bai Liu immediately understood.

What Lu Yizhan was saying was that he raised him fifty percent because of what Bai Liu had just said.

“Then there’s fifty percent.” Bai Liu lifted his eyes, meeting Lu Yizhan’s gaze. “What’s the other half?”

Lu Yizhan locked eyes with him for a long moment, then closed his eyes, exhaling slowly.

What’s the other half?

This was the guy who stayed up late studying at fifteen because he said so, who refrained from touching his classmates at sixteen because he stopped him, who managed to show off his four hundred grades at seventeen in the most subtle way, and who hid popsicles under Fang Dian’s bed to buy Cutie Dots.

At eighteen, he jumped off Gaucho Lake but controlled himself and didn’t get into the game. At twenty-two, he broke down outside Fang Dian’s surgery, his hands shaking as he folded his memories.

Now, at twenty-five, closing in on him with only one life point in the game.

Because he is human, and I am human, and we can’t avoid, or sever, those emotional ties that arise.

“The other fifty percent...” Lu Yizhan’s voice trembled slightly, a forced smile crossing his face. “...is because you’re my friend.”

“I know it may sound ridiculous, but it’s true.”

“I’m sorry you had to find this out on your birthday.”

Bai Liu took a deep breath, averting his gaze as silence stretched between them for a long moment.

"You gave me fifty percent of the reason," Bai Liu said quietly, "and I

received fifty percent of your soul."

"We're even," he added, putting away the half-burned soul note.

Lu Yizhan looked up in shock. Before he could speak, Fang Dian poked her head out of the room and, noticing them, asked curiously, "Bai Liu, I'm looking for your coat and jacket. How tall are you now?"

Bai Liu responded, "177 cm."

"Wow, you've grown a bit," Fang Dian mused, "But Mr. Lu's clothes still won't fit you. He's 6'5", and you're a bit shorter."

She paused thoughtfully. "Then you can wear mine first. I'm 5'8", and the jacket should fit you just right."

Bai Liu nodded, "Oh."

Fang Dian found a camel-colored coat and draped it over Bai Liu's shoulders. As she did, she frowned and said, "What's wrong with you? Have you been eating properly?"

"No, you really need to eat more," she insisted, pushing Lu Yizhan, who hesitated, toward the kitchen. "Go bring out the pig's feet soup to nourish Bai Liu."

After some reluctant prodding from Fang Dian, Bai Liu ate two large pieces of pig's feet and a bowl and a half of rice. Finally, he set the bowl down and repeated, "I'm really full."

"Nonsense," Fang Dian retorted, giving him a pointed look. "Your stomach isn't even bulging—there's plenty of room for more."

Bai Liu sighed inwardly, "..."

It felt like he might explode at any moment.

Lu Yizhan, nearly in tears, intervened. "You should let him save some stomach space for the cake."

After dinner, Fang Dian mysteriously pulled Bai Liu onto the sofa. "Sit here," she said. "I'll go get your birthday present."

Within minutes, she returned with three large, dusty boxes and a brand-new one. Bai Liu's gaze immediately froze on the old boxes.

Fang Dian grinned as she opened the first box. "This was your

birthday present when you turned twenty-two."

Inside, there was an old console and a collection of game cards for horror games.

"Lu Yizhan and I went to a flea market to get them," she laughed, proud of herself. "They're all out-of-print games. You've never played them!"

Fang Dian moved on to the next box. "This was for your twenty-third birthday."

Inside was a set of formal wear that looked very expensive at first glance.

"I thought you might need it now that you're working," she said wistfully. "Mr. Lu and I saved up for it—it cost a few thousand dollars."

When she opened the third box, Bai Liu's eyes twitched. It was filled with amulets and prayer charms of various kinds, all from different temples.

"These are from temples Mr. Lu and I visited, and some I had my friends bring back from overseas," Fang Dian explained, her voice softening. "You always had bad luck in those days. Though I don't believe in this stuff, sometimes you just think, 'What if?'"

She smiled at Bai Liu. "If there really are immortals in heaven who can bless us, it's okay for Mr. Lu and I to ask for a little help."

Bai Liu was silent for a long time before murmuring, "Thank you."

"You don't need to thank us," Fang Dian said, waving away his gratitude. Her tone turned a little melancholy. "I was going to give this to you every year, but you never came, and I didn't want to push it. I didn't know what you'd think. If I gave it to you and you didn't want it, it might cause you trouble. I didn't want you to feel obligated."

She sighed, looking down. "So, I ended up not giving it to you every year. But I'm glad you're here this year."

She smiled again, though it was faint. "At least you're here now. Everything's ready for you."

She paused, rummaging through the box and pulling out something new. "Oh, and this!" She proudly placed it in front of Bai Liu. "This will keep you warm. You can wear it later."

Bai Liu's eyes widened in disbelief as he saw what Fang Dian had pulled out—a full set of red autumn clothes, including trousers and even red underwear. He quickly and calmly tried to refuse. "Isn't this unnecessary?"

Fang Dian didn't seem to hear him. "You didn't wear these on your birthday, and I think that's why you're unlucky!"

Bai Liu frowned. "..."

He didn't quite agree with that assessment.

Fang Dian pressed on, holding up the clothes. "These are padded and warm. You need to put them on while it's still your birthday!"

Bai Liu turned his gaze slowly toward Lu Yizhan, who was standing behind Fang Dian, shrugging helplessly.

Fang Dian cut through their silent exchange. "Lu Yizhan wore a red autumn coat and trousers for the whole year he was born. It's useless to ask him for help."

Bai Liu: "..."

Lu Yizhan: "..."

And that, it seemed, was that.

Chapter End Notes

> The red autumn coat and trousers are likely a playful or traditional gift meant to bring good luck, particularly for a birthday. In some cultures, the color red is believed to symbolize good fortune, prosperity, and protection against bad luck. Fang Dian's insistence on Bai Liu wearing them could be rooted in a belief that the red clothing would "ward off" misfortune or "bring better luck".

The Challenge

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After Bai Liu's calm but firm refusal, Fang Dian reluctantly abandoned the idea of having him wear the red trousers in front of her.

She helped Bai Liu pack the leftover food into a stainless-steel lunch box. "You can store it in the fridge for a couple more days," she said. "No need to cook again—saves time."

Lu Yizhan helped Bai Liu gather his birthday presents. "There's a lot of stuff, and it'll be hard to carry. I'll call a taxi for you to take it all back."

"What kind of car?" Fang Dian gave Lu Yizhan a strange look before her gaze returned to Bai Liu. "Are you heading straight home?"

Bai Liu paused. "I don't have any clothes with me. I can't stay here overnight."

Fang Dian raised an eyebrow. "What about your friends? It's your birthday—aren't you going to go out with them and have some fun?"

Bai Liu was quiet for a moment.

To be honest, he had forgotten about his birthday, and since he had never mentioned it to his teammates, he doubted they knew either.

"They don't know," Bai Liu replied.

Fang Dian was increasingly confused. "How could they not know? Muke even came to me to check if your birthday matched the one on your CV."

"Jiayi asked, too."

Bai Liu froze. Slowly, he turned back to Fang Dian. "Did they ask you?"

Fang Dian didn't think much of it. "Yeah, I just called to confirm that you were eating at my place."

Bai Liu remained silent, his mind racing. A sudden memory of the

subtle sounds of recent renovations on both floors of his house hit him. An unsettling sense of foreboding washed over him.

On the other side, outside Bai Liu's rental house, Du Sanying found himself squeezed in the middle, feeling as if he were being held hostage. He watched in horror as Muke scanned the room indifferently, before turning to the butler—who was dressed in a sharp suit—and asked, "Do you have the title deed the landlord gave you for this property?"

"Yes," the butler replied respectfully. "We offered a price slightly higher than the market rate, and the seller agreed quickly. The formalities were completed yesterday. The house is now in Mr. Bai Liu's name. We just need to wait until he has time to visit the title department to complete the transfer."

"In addition, we've bought the upper and lower floors, as well as the next door, to facilitate your planned modifications."

Muke nodded. "You're almost done with the renovations upstairs and downstairs, right?"

"Almost," the butler confirmed. "As for the old block you mentioned, we've also purchased all the units on the third floor, as well as the second and fourth floors. They're under renovation as we speak, so by the time Mr. Bai Liu returns, he'll be able to live wherever he prefers."

Muke waved his hand dismissively. "No need to pretend for now."

He had purchased the house in Lu Yizhan's neighborhood because Bai Liu seemed to get along well with both Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian when he visited for dinner, suggesting he might want to live near his friends. But now, with the chaos of the killer sequence, Muke was filled with resentment.

Lu Yizhan had betrayed Bai Liu, and Muke had only worsened things by sending Bai Liu to Lu Yizhan's place himself.

Those two better stay as far apart as possible.

"Good," the butler said with a polite nod. "So, are we just decorating this room for Mr. Bai Liu's return on his birthday?"

Muke snapped back to attention and gave a reserved nod. "A simple

renovation will do."

"I've already contacted Sister Dian to stall for us. Bai Liu just left and won't be back for about three or four hours. You have time to clean the entire house, replace the stove and water heater, install wallpaper, put in isolation doors, and move in the appliances that have already been delivered. They should be ready for use right away. Just make sure to avoid using solid colors for the wallpaper—Bai Liu doesn't like that..."

Muke continued giving instructions in an organized manner, and soon the entire house was buzzing with workers.

Mu Sicheng, who was nearby, watched in disbelief.

"Is this a simple renovation?" he muttered. "This place is already being finely decorated!"

Du Sanying weakly raised his hand, watching tearfully as Muke oversaw the major transformation of Bai Liu's old, rundown rental house. "So... when Mr. Bai Liu comes back and finds all this, and I give him the key, he won't kick me out, right?"

Liu Jiayi, watching from the side with her arms crossed, clicked her tongue. "The power of money."

Tang Erda, frowning, interjected, "Won't Bai Liu be angry if we move his things like this? Should we call him first and let him know?"

Before he could lift his phone, Liu Jiayi quickly stopped him, looking up at Tang Erda with a disapproving expression. "Do you know what a surprise is?"

"We've been working on this for Bai Liu for the entire month, hiding it from him, and you're about to ruin it before he even sees it?"

Tang Erda still seemed uncertain. "What if he doesn't like it?"

Liu Jiayi shrugged nonchalantly. "A surprise is a surprise—part of the deal."

Tang Erda sighed. "I suppose you're right."

"Don't worry," Liu Jiayi muttered softly, "Bai Liu wouldn't dislike a place that looks like it's getting richer."

Tang Erda reluctantly agreed. "That's true."

Muke suddenly spoke up again. "What about the cake? Is everything ready for the birthday party?"

Muke's quick thinking and constant orders had the butler struggling to keep up. Wiping the cold sweat from his forehead, he managed a strained smile. "On my way, young master."

"Didn't I ask you to bring the ingredients straight to the fridge?" Muke's brow furrowed as he stepped forward and opened the fridge door. "It looks too empty."

The butler lowered his voice. "A lot of the ingredients just arrived and didn't make it in time. Should I buy some more to fill it up?"

Muke jotted down a list of items. "Go get these things for me. Bai Liu's not working well right now—get him something better."

The butler glanced at the list, his eyes widening as he stammered, "Y-Young master, do you really need five sets of towels, toothbrushes, and slippers?!"

Muke replied calmly, "Well, except for Jiayi, the rest of us are moving in with Bai Liu."

"We don't want to be too far from him."

The butler blinked in surprise, his gaze darting to the various handsome men around Muke of all shapes and sizes. He lowered his head, his voice trembling as he asked, "Do they all plan to live with Bai Liu? Do you mind, Master Muke?"

Muke frowned slightly. "As long as Bai Liu doesn't mind, I don't mind... What, no?"

The butler shuddered and silently retrieved the list. "I-I'll get right on it."

Muke's presence was overpowering—he radiated an undeniable authority.

Liu Jiayi suddenly spoke up, her tone slightly sulking. "How about... getting six sets? There's another guy who's probably going to sleep with Bai Liu, too."

"You should probably buy him a set as well. He probably doesn't have anything."

The butler's face turned pale. "!!!"

All this, and one more to come!

Can Bai Liu handle it?

The housekeeper couldn't help but wonder if he had misjudged Master Muke and the nature of his relationship with Bai Liu.

Although Young Master Muke insists that his soul belongs to Bai Liu and refuses to stray too far from him—because only Bai Liu can make his heart beat again—what if… what if they aren't actually in that kind of relationship?

Just in case, these four men with vastly different personalities are all moving in with Bai Liu to run a studio together. It'll make things easier for everyone, right...?

Just as the butler was about to convince himself, Muke's expression darkened slightly at Liu Jiayi's words. His jaw tensed, and he nearly gritted his teeth as he muttered, "...That's right. Bai Liu already gave Spades the coordinates. He'll come looking for him sooner or later..."

"Then let's prepare six sets," Muke said after a pause, steadying himself. His tone carried an unusual trace of gloom and helplessness. "If he's coming to live with Bai Liu, there are a few other things that need to be handled."

With a tight-lipped expression and a faint flush on his face, Muke swiped to add two more items to the shopping list. "...Make sure to buy these too. Get the best ones—something comfortable to use."

The butler glanced at Muke's additions. His pupils dilated. His eyes widened.

Condoms.

Lubricant.

Holy shit.

Was it really what he thought it was?!

The butler left in a daze, clutching the list like it contained the secrets of the universe.

Fortunately, the house Bai Liu had acquired was relatively clean,

having undergone little renovation. It was tidy enough when he moved in.

As Muke looked around the newly furnished home, he let out a sigh of relief. Even Tang Erda, who had been tense all day, finally seemed to relax.

The house wasn't extravagant, but it was practical and homey. Once everything was set up, the entire space was bathed in warm hues of yellow, exuding a comforting, lived-in feel—like a place where one could sit down for a cozy meal or doze off on the couch in the afternoon.

Just as the decorators left, Muke received a call from the butler. "Young Master, Mr. Bai Liu is coming up the stairs. Get ready to bring out the cake."

"Got it."

Muke shot a look at Mu Sicheng, who immediately grabbed the cake and carefully wheeled it toward the door.

Tang Erda stood beside the entrance, his posture stiff, his expression grave, and a firecracker in hand. He looked less like he was celebrating Bai Liu's birthday and more like an undercover agent poised to assassinate a target.

Muke: "..."

He mouthed a silent command to Tang Erda: Smile.

Tang Erda forced a stiff, cold twitch at the corner of his lips.

Now he looked even more like an agent feigning amusement to cover up murderous intent.

Muke gave up just as the door lock turned.

Bang! Bang!

"Bai Liu, happy 25th birthday!"

Bai Liu stood at the entrance of what was now an entirely different rental house. Though he had already pieced together most of the situation, he still raised an eyebrow and smiled.

"Did I walk into the wrong apartment?"

The circus group partied until midnight. A drunken Mu Sicheng clung to Bai Liu's back, howling about what a legendary night it had been.

Muke, somehow still sober, called taxis one by one to get everyone home.

Du Sanying, also completely wasted, ran laps around the house, mimicking the beeping sound of a go-kart. Muke, with the help of the butler, managed to wrangle him into a furnished room on the lower floor to prevent him from drunkenly running out and causing trouble elsewhere.

Then, on his way back upstairs, the butler tripped, broke his foot, and had to be rushed to the hospital in tears.

Muke: "..."

He had completely forgotten that Du Sanying's luck affected everyone.

By the time Muke finally left, Bai Liu had already called for the Mu family's driver to come pick him up.

Drunk and emotional, Muke sat in the car, his eyes shining with a thin layer of tears. He looked up at Bai Liu, reached out for his shoulder, and choked out through his tears,

"We won't lose again."

"We'll never let you lose again."

Bai Liu gently placed a hand on Muke's shoulder, his voice steady and calm. "Me too."

—I won't let you lose again.

By the time Bai Liu finished tidying up his room, it was nearly 1 AM. He opened the fridge to store the leftovers, only to find it already packed full.

Bai Liu: "..."

He understood that they meant well, but their grasp on basic household logistics was… lacking.

With no other choice, he began reorganizing the fridge, removing unnecessary items to make space. But when he reached the freezer, his hands suddenly stilled.

To stock the freezer, Muke had the butler buy an assortment of ice creams—most of them expensive brands, each tub costing upwards of ten, even dozens of dollars. Yet among them, there was a single, cheap Lovato.

Strawberry-flavored.

Bai Liu slowly picked up the familiar ice cream, his thoughts drifting back to that afternoon.

The afternoon he had waited so long for Spades to show up—only for Spades to never come.

Outside the window, the streetlamp flickered twice.

As if drawn by an invisible thread, Bai Liu instinctively turned his gaze toward the dimly lit street below.

Spades was standing there.

Bai Liu froze at the window.

—It was like a spell transcending time and space. Seven years later, Bai Liu once again held a strawberry-flavored Lovato in his hand.

And the person he had waited for, the one who never appeared back then—

—Had finally arrived.

Chapter End Notes

Awwwwwww!!!!!!

The Challenge

Bai Liu stared at Spades through the window for a moment. Just as he was about to turn around and go downstairs to fetch him, he saw Spades scale the streetlamp in two or three swift movements. With a powerful leap, he launched himself from the pole, braced a foot against the wall, and caught hold of the security bars outside Bai Liu's window, lifting himself up effortlessly. He landed right in front of Bai Liu, staring straight at him.

Bai Liu: "……"

His gaze flickered to the streetlamp, now bent from Spades' impact. His eyes lingered on it for a beat.

…By all logic, when players return to reality, their in-game physical stats shouldn't carry over. They're supposed to revert to normal human standards.

And yet, Spades' strength was still so—

Unreasonable.

Was this after being nerfed?

For the first time, Bai Liu felt a genuine sense of unease under Spades' direct, aggressive gaze. He parted his lips to say, "Go down, I'll come get you," but before the words left his mouth, Spades had already snapped through the security bars Muke had installed just this afternoon. Without hesitation, he slipped between them, pushed open the locked window (yes, another lock broken), and climbed in. The moment he had one foot inside, he lunged forward and wrapped Bai Liu in a crushing embrace.

The sheer force knocked Bai Liu back several steps until they both tumbled onto the couch together.

Bai Liu, still a little lightheaded from the drinks earlier, felt the world spin as Spades pressed against him, leaving him momentarily breathless.

"Get up first." Bai Liu attempted to push Spades off, only to feel the other bury his head in the crook of his neck, nuzzling against his skin. Bai Liu's eyelids twitched, and his tone turned sharp. "No kissing."

Spades' movements paused. Then, he slowly rubbed downward.

Bai Liu's temples throbbed violently. He inhaled deeply. "No biting either."

"But I missed you." Spades' grip tightened. His legs pinned Bai Liu in place, making it impossible for him to move. "I can come to you, so why can't I kiss you?"

Bai Liu: "……"

Who the hell taught Spades that human social etiquette involved breaking into someone's home and kissing them?

"Get up first," Bai Liu ordered, his voice turning cold. When that didn't work and Spades remained firmly latched onto him, Bai Liu paused, adjusted his approach, and said, "If you get up, I'll reward you."

Spades sat up immediately, staring at Bai Liu expectantly.

Bai Liu: "……"

Lowering his gaze, Bai Liu knelt up and pressed a featherlight kiss to Spades' eyelid.

"Okay." Bai Liu leaned back against the couch. When Spades instinctively tried to move closer again, Bai Liu pressed a hand to his chest to stop him. Then, for some reason, he gave a soft, almost amused smile. "Why do you want to kiss me?"

Spades looked at him seriously. "I passed. That means I can kiss you now."

—Last time Bai Liu had said, "You passed," before kissing him. So, in Spades' mind, the logic had evolved: as long as he passed, he could keep kissing Bai Liu.

Bai Liu sighed, the corners of his lips quirking up slightly. "It's not that passing qualifies you to kiss me."

He released his hold on Spades, tucking his legs up onto the couch. Resting his chin on his knees, his dark eyes—slightly hazy from alcohol—held an emotion Spades couldn't quite decipher. His voice was soft, but the warmth in it was undeniable.

"It's because I like you, so I allow you to kiss me."

Spades froze. Then, after a beat, he asked, "Like? What is that?"

Bai Liu's gaze dropped as he explained in an even tone, "'Like' is an emotion without cost-effectiveness. Usually, it happens between people and is accompanied by a rush of dopamine and hormones, making them temporarily lose their rationality—forget how to weigh benefits and losses."

"All in all, not a good thing."

Spades immediately responded, "Then you're not allowed to like me."

A pause. Then, with an expressionless face, he added, "And you're not allowed to like anyone else either."

Bai Liu was silent for a moment. Then, with the smallest hint of a smirk, he said, "I don't do things that aren't profitable. So if I like you, it must be worth it."

Spades asked, "So what do you want me to do?"

Bai Liu slowly lifted his eyes to look at Spades before suddenly smiling. "I was hoping you could help me eat my soon-to-expire Cutie Pie."

Spades, slowly: "?"

Bai Liu stood up, picked up the Cutie Pie, and handed it to him. "This one."

It seemed that Muke's housekeeper had been in a hurry while stocking Bai Liu's freezer, tossing in a Kourtney after buying all the expensive ice creams nearby. Unfortunately, it was about to expire.

Bai Liu had long accepted his luck—he always ended up buying nearly expired treats—so he wasn't surprised to find it was only a day away from going bad.

Spades took the Cutie Pie from Bai Liu's hand, looked at him seriously, and asked, "As long as I eat your expired Cuties every time, you'll always like me, right?"

Bai Liu met Spades' gaze, silent for a long, long time, before replying, "Every time, yes."

Spades' eyes snapped open, and he immediately went to bite down—only for Bai Liu to calmly reach out and stop him by pressing against

his teeth. “You haven’t taken off the wrapper yet.”

Eventually, with Bai Liu’s assistance, Spades devoured the expiring Kauai in two or three swift, vicious bites, with all the enthusiasm of a Kauai killer.

Somehow, it got all over himself—and Bai Liu.

Before heading to shower, Bai Liu took a moment to give Spades a crash course in basic household safety. This included: do not touch electrical sockets, do not eat things with hard textures (like coffee tables), and—just in case—do not attempt to chew on anything that might actually hurt him.

After all, Bai Liu had a responsibility to take care of his lizard.

Then, Bai Liu prepared to call Lu Yizhan to ask about Spades’ situation in reality. But before he could dial, he turned around—only to find that, in the time it took for him to whip back around, Spades had already gnawed off all four corners of the coffee table out of sheer curiosity.

Not to mention, he had done it in a strangely precise and artistic manner.

With a blank expression, Bai Liu pried the chewed-up corners out of Spades’ mouth. Then, deciding he really needed that shower, he made the call.

The moment the line connected, Bai Liu stated, “I have Spades.”

Lu Yizhan sounded confused and alarmed. “……? How many points do I have to pay as ransom before you let him back?”

Bai Liu: “……”

Lu Yizhan quickly backtracked. “Just kidding! I already know where you are with Spades.”

“He’s in a bit of a strange state,” Bai Liu said, pausing. “His physical condition in reality seems to be the same as it is in the game.”

“Yeah,” Lu Yizhan replied, unsurprised. “Spades is a monster. In reality or in the game, he’s basically a living stat panel.”

“This guy has always lacked a sense of restraint. We didn’t dare release him into reality before, afraid he’d get out of control and flip

the sky upside down. During testing, his grip strength alone measured over a ton. He doesn't regulate his strength—he could easily crush someone's wrist by accident. But now that he listens to you, I figured it was safe enough to let him in."

Lu Yizhan sighed. "Spades' eye condition has stabilized for now. So… is he well-behaved now that he's with you?"

Bai Liu lifted the phone and slowly glanced at Spades, who was currently lying on the floor, sniffing at the remnants of the Cutie Pie he had dropped. Bai Liu quickly covered the receiver.

"Spades," he warned calmly, "no licking the ground. And if you lick the ground, you are not allowed to lick me."

Spades let out an "oh" and then asked, "But there's still a lot of Cutie left on the floor."

"Forget about it," Bai Liu said coldly. "It has been slaughtered once and for all and will never come back to life."

(At some point, Bai Liu had explained to Spades that expired Cuties were bad for him. Somehow, Spades had interpreted this as Cuties being some kind of monster, leading him to begin a full-scale hunt for them throughout the house, hellbent on eradicating the entire species.)

Bai Liu uncovered the receiver.

On the other end, Lu Yizhan sounded confused. "Why did you suddenly go silent?"

"Bad signal," Bai Liu replied smoothly. "What were you saying?"

"I was asking if Spades is behaving himself."

Bai Liu, indifferent: "It's… okay."

Lu Yizhan let out a relieved sigh. "That's good. He doesn't have much common sense, so I was worried he'd get into trouble."

"I'm going to take a shower now."

"Alright—wait, no!" Lu Yizhan suddenly shouted in panic. "I still have something important to tell you!"

Bai Liu paused. "What is it?"

Lu Yizhan hesitated, stammering, “Ah, this… this is…”

Bai Liu cut in, tone cold. “If you don’t spit it out, I’m hanging up.”

Lu Yizhan took a deep breath, bracing himself. Then he shut his eyes and blurted out, “—It’s about you and Spades!!!”

Bai Liu fell silent for two long seconds. “…What are you trying to say?”

Lu Yizhan spoke at a breakneck pace, clearly flustered. “It’s just—listen—you have a normal human physique in real life. You’re not operating on a game panel. But Spades is. He’s still at his inhuman game-level stats in reality because, well, he’s a monster.”

“…Okay?”

“He’s—uh—he’s a mermaid-type creature. The strongest parts of his body are his waist and legs.” Lu Yizhan’s voice dropped to an embarrassed mutter. “So, if you two ever—uh—do anything, just… make sure he’s careful. Or he could actually break your bones.”

Bai Liu: “……”

Lu Yizhan sighed, utterly mortified. “Also… I made a mistake. When Spades was younger, he didn’t understand human biology. He kept thinking he was a lizard. So I, uh, gave him a lizard-based sex-ed lesson.”

“…Excuse me?” Bai Liu’s voice was dangerously level.

“I know, I know! I was lazy, and I was wrong!” Lu Yizhan wailed. “But, um, the problem is that the lizard mating process is kind of… barbaric.”

Bai Liu’s grip on the phone tightened.

Lu Yizhan hesitated before forcing himself to continue. “So, in the wild, male lizards bite their mates’ necks, wrap their tails around their legs to pin them down, and, uh… yeah.”

Lu Yizhan groaned. “Just… maybe don’t let it happen in reality.”

Bai Liu abruptly hung up, his expression still calm—

—but his breathing had become just slightly uneven.

We can't do it in reality, then. Bai Liu had been rational and calm—so calm—when he made his decision.

To steady himself, he opted for a cold shower, instructing Spades to find a large pajama top to change into while he washed. His clothes were dirty, and Bai Liu had already tossed them into the washing machine.

Spades obediently changed.

Unfortunately for Bai Liu, the pajamas he thought would fit—clothes that were oversized on him—were still too small for Spades.

The fabric stretched awkwardly over Spades' frame, his ankles and navel exposed. Even with his lack of common sense, Spades knew it didn't fit. So he took it off. (And, in the process, ripped it apart.)

With nothing else to wear, Spades searched for another option. He tried on several of Bai Liu's shirts—none of them fit. One by one, they died tragic deaths, their seams giving way beneath the strain of Spades' shoulders and back.

Then, finally, Spades found something: a large doll costume wrapped in a storage bag.

The moment he laid eyes on it, something shifted. His black irises turned silvery-blue.

He put it on. It fit perfectly.

It wasn't supposed to be clothing—it was a mascot costume, designed to be worn over regular clothes—but on Spades, it looked just like pajamas.

The moment the fabric touched his skin, an unconscious instinct took hold. His body moved before his mind caught up, drawn toward the bathroom where Bai Liu was showering.

—He vaguely remembered this feeling. He had to show Bai Liu. Bai Liu would be happy if he saw.

Despite Bai Liu's repeated warnings not to enter while he was in the shower, Spades pushed open the door.

Bai Liu, his lips pale from the cold water, had only just shaken off a strange sense of unease when he turned and saw Spades standing

there—doll suit on, silver-blue eyes staring at him.

His expression went cold. “I thought I told you not to come in—”

The words died in his throat.

Spades, completely unbothered, looked at him and said, “I like you, Bai Liu.”

Bai Liu exhaled sharply, reached out, and cupped Spades’ face before pulling him into the bathroom. He pushed Spades against the door, closed his eyes, and kissed him.

Spades shuddered under the cold water, but his hold on Bai Liu was possessive, overwhelming. His arms wrapped around him tightly, his head lowering, teeth scraping against the back of Bai Liu’s neck before biting down—not too hard, but firm enough to make Bai Liu inhale sharply.

A gasp. Two hands pressing against the frosted glass, leaving smudged prints as Spades’ grip refused to loosen.

The water was freezing. Spades should have been cold too.

But the heat against Bai Liu’s back told him otherwise.

So, lizards—creatures known for their cold blood—could heat up like this when they got intense?

Bai Liu bit his lip, his breath coming fast. His mind, usually so sharp, had blurred into a haze.

And as the bite at his neck pulsed with a dull ache, Bai Liu lifted his head slightly, eyes lazy, gaze unfocused.

His thoughts drifted to the showerhead still pouring water over them.

Love—this thing.

Really terrible value for money.

Feelings this out of control—so absurdly reckless—had no return on investment at all.

The Challenge

After an utterly chaotic night, Bai Liu's alarm clock went off at 7 a.m. sharp.

A deep, indescribable soreness weighed on his body, as if he had been thrown to the ground and trampled all night. His back ached, his joints protested with every slight movement, and a dull, numbing pain spread through his limbs. The unhealed wound on the back of his neck pulsed faintly.

…It shouldn't have been like this.

At the start of last night, Bai Liu had maintained control, issuing Spades a single command at a time, dictating every move with calculated precision. But the moment Spades stripped off his shirt and loosely tied it around his waist—when Bai Liu, breathless and collected, was lifted by Spades and ordered him to enter—

The second half spiraled completely out of control.

When Bai Liu had finally exhausted every ounce of strength and stomped down on Spades' waist in an attempt to push him away, Spades simply pressed him against the cool mirror of the bathroom, lowering his head to whisper hoarsely in his ear:

"I like you, Bai Liu."

At that moment, Bai Liu's mind went blank, severing all connection to reality.

When he woke again, his eyelids felt heavy and crumpled with exhaustion. He sluggishly reached toward the bedside table, aiming for his phone to silence the alarm, only for a large hand to press against his back—beating him to it. A second later, the alarm clock was sent flying, crashing to the ground. Then, that same arm tugged Bai Liu into a firm embrace.

Spades, still half-asleep, mumbled in a groggy, dazed voice, "…Sleep more."

Bai Liu, fully engulfed in Spades' arms, let his eyes drift over to the bedside table, where his phone now lay face-down, its screen shattered beyond repair.

Great. Another phone destroyed.

He made two weak attempts to sit up, but with an 85kg lizard sprawled on top of him and his limbs still drained of strength, even moving his fingers proved difficult. After another futile push, Bai Liu finally relented, speaking in a muffled voice against Spades' chest:

"Let go. I need to get up."

Spades' eyelids twitched, but he made no move to release him. Instead, he wordlessly tightened his legs around Bai Liu, locking him in place.

Bai Liu, immediately sensing something was off: "…"

Without hesitation, he shoved Spades' face away and firmly rejected, "No."

If they did it again, he was genuinely going to die.

At last, Spades cracked his eyes open, revealing dark irises, half-lidded and hazy—not as sharp and detached as before, but carrying a strange depth of emotion. Somewhere between human and monster.

From Bai Liu's angle, the morning light streaming through the window cast Spades' features in an almost gentle glow, the edges of his eyes reflecting a faint silvery-blue halo.

Spades lowered his gaze, moving instinctively. His hand traced up Bai Liu's spine, pulling him closer before leaning in to press a soft kiss against his lips, exhaling warmth against his skin.

"Why not?" Spades' voice was thick with sleep, rough yet subdued—not hoarse from overuse like Bai Liu's, but carrying a low, unfamiliar tenderness. "I like you so much."

—From an ignorant lizard to a dangerously grown man overnight.

Bai Liu's lashes trembled as he caught Spades' wandering hand just before it crossed into dangerous territory. His grip was firm, unwavering.

"If I say no, then no."

Spades exhaled through his nose, and then—"Then don't go."

Now clearly understanding the distinction between leaving and

staying, Spades rolled over, pressing Bai Liu further into the bed. He reached up, brushing wet strands of hair from Bai Liu's forehead before resting his own against it, their noses nearly touching. His dark eyes bore into Bai Liu's, unblinking.

"Can I kiss you?"

Bai Liu's chest rose and fell slightly, his breathing a touch uneven. But his expression remained as composed as ever.

"A kiss is fine."

At those words, Spades wasted no time. He leaned down, scooped Bai Liu up, and pressed him against the wall, deepening the kiss with unwavering intensity.

As their lips met, a warning bell went off in Bai Liu's mind. This is bad.

The way Spades kissed him—pressing so close, lips insistent, hands steady as they framed Bai Liu's face—was making his thoughts slip dangerously out of focus. Bai Liu started to push him away, intending to call for a stop.

But Spades, still catching his breath, buried his head in Bai Liu's shoulder, his voice coming in a quiet, urgent whisper against Bai Liu's ear:

"I'm not going in."

"Just let me kiss you a little longer."

"I like you so much, Bai Liu."

.....

Finally, Bai Liu got into the game.

By the time he emerged again, in reality, it was almost ten o'clock.

As soon as Bai Liu stepped out, he kicked away the lizard still clinging to him. With the Little Witch's antidote, he had mostly recovered, but when he first entered the game, the system had informed him that he only had sixty-seven life points left.

The lizard, which had cost him thirty-three life points, trailed after him into the bathroom. Bai Liu turned his head, and it finally stopped.

The mirror in the washroom was shattered.

Spades followed Bai Liu's line of sight. He seemed to pick up on Bai Liu's unspoken question and answered naturally, "Last night, when I penetrated you here, I pushed too hard, and your back shattered the mirror—"

"All right." Bai Liu interrupted him calmly. "Shut up."

His gaze swept across the bathroom, and his brow lifted slightly when he spotted two tiles on the toilet, visibly cracked from a punch.

Spades, dutifully and without hesitation, explained, "I had so much fun doing it here yesterday that I wanted to hit something to let off steam. So I did."

He tilted his head. "You saw it too. Don't you remember?"

Bai Liu: "……"

Right. He had been high for the second half of last night. Too lost in the moment to remember.

The bathroom, which Muke had just renovated yesterday, now looked like a battlefield after a single night.

Suppressing the dull ache building in his temples, Bai Liu maintained his composure, washing his face and brushing his teeth while leaving Spades to do the same.

The two men stood before the fragmented mirror—one coldly indifferent, the other expressionlessly brushing his teeth with such efficiency that it almost looked like he was taking out some deep-seated resentment on the broken glass.

After finishing up, Bai Liu turned to change out of his pajamas, intending to find clothes for both himself and Spades—only to encounter a new problem.

First, he had nothing in his wardrobe that Spades could fit into.

Second, Bai Liu wasn't the kind of person who enjoyed shopping for clothes. His wardrobe mostly consisted of a few sets of white shirts and blazers. The only new addition was a formal suit gifted by Sister Dian and Lu Yizhan just yesterday.

Meanwhile, Spades had already worn through two of his outfits. The

remaining three or four sets weren't unwearable, but they were old—some had loose threads, missing buttons, or just didn't look quite right anymore.

Bai Liu's gaze drifted to Spades, who was currently folding a quilt with clumsy, naked dedication. Then to the smashed phone on the bedside table. Back to the nearly empty wardrobe.

A thought, one that had never crossed his mind when he lived alone, surfaced.

Shopping.

This room feels a little too small for two people.

A Milk Tea Shop in a Commercial Center
"What did you just say?!" Mu Sicheng nearly spat out his soda in Muke's face. "You're telling me Bai Liu called you? Bai Liu—the same Bai Liu who wouldn't even change his underwear unless it completely fell apart—just asked you for recommendations on clothes and daily necessities?"

Muke disdainfully sidestepped the near soda spray and then heard Mu Sicheng continue incredulously, "This is Bai Liu we're talking about! Bai Liu, who once said he wouldn't replace his shoelaces unless they snapped in half!"

"That's just an exaggeration," Muke said flatly.

Mu Sicheng, still stunned, propped his chin on his palm. "This is the same stingy Bai Liu who only spent two dollars and thirty-one cents on our dog tags. And now he's actually letting you recommend clothes?"

"And you suggested one of the most expensive shopping districts in the city—and he agreed?"

Mu Sicheng, still baffled, gestured around at their surroundings—the interior of one of the priciest commercial centers in town. "Has he been possessed or something?"

Muke shook his head with mild disapproval. "Honestly, he should have been wearing clothes of this quality all along. His old ones were never that great."

Mu Sicheng chewed on his straw, nodding in agreement. "Yeah, rag

quality. It's a miracle they haven't disintegrated after everything he's been through in the game. I've told him to change them before, but he refused, saying it wasn't cost-effective."

Sitting next to them, Tang Erda—who had no shopping expertise and whose own clothes had been picked out by Bai Liu—frowned in thought. "Bai Liu's clothes… are that bad?"

Muke and Mu Sicheng turned to him in perfect unison.

"Very bad," they answered together.

Tang Erda, wearing the expensive clothes Bai Liu had chosen for him, suddenly felt guilty. "I… I'll help buy him some new ones next time."

"No need," Muke interjected, his expression momentarily unreadable before he gave a mild smile. "I have memberships at all the custom clothiers. It's easier if I handle it."

Mu Sicheng sneered. "You always pay, Muke. Not fair. This time, it's on me—I've been waiting forever to make Bai Liu try something on."

Tang Erda, watching the sudden shift in atmosphere: "???"

What the hell? Why did this just turn into some kind of territorial dispute?

Meanwhile, Liu Jiayi, sipping her milk tea, swung her legs idly and glanced away, a knowing look in her eyes.

…Those two had long been dissatisfied with Bai Liu's wardrobe. They'd been scheming to dress him up for ages. There was no way they'd let Tang Erda, a straight man, beat them to it.

Just then, Liu Jiayi's gaze sharpened.

"Bai Liu's here." She spotted him in the crowd, glancing at his watch as he approached. But then her eyes narrowed further. "Wait… someone's with him…"

Both Mu Sicheng and Muke's faces darkened instantly.

Tang Erda, cautious, stated the obvious. "It's Spades."

The milk tea shop door swung open. Bai Liu stepped inside, his expression calm. Without preamble, he introduced the man beside him:

“Spades. My boyfriend.”

His gaze flicked between them. “Where’s the best shop for him to pick out clothes?”

The Challenge

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Muke brushed past Spades, his polite smile barely masking his unease. “Not exactly the best place to take Spades’ on a shopping spree.”

“What kind of clothes are you even buying here? These prices are ridiculous,” Mu Sicheng scoffed openly. “Just go to the wholesale market and grab a couple of burlap sacks—same thing.”

Bai Liu looked up. “I want to buy something. Any recommendations?”

Mu Sicheng opened his mouth to retort, but quickly backtracked. “Uh… of course! Expensive clothes are always better!”

Muke’s smile widened. “I do have some suggestions. There are bespoke shops nearby that might suit you. Any particular style? Shirts, suits, maybe?”

Bai Liu thought for a moment before shrugging. “I need something durable, easy to move in, and resistant to wear and tear. I’m not too picky about style, so I’ll leave it to you two.”

Mu Sicheng’s hand shot up. “Me first! I know just the place.”

Bai Liu nodded. “Fine, let’s start with your suggestion.”

Muke, a step behind, pursed his lips, but Mu Sicheng gave him a triumphant look and took Bai Liu by the shoulders. “Go, go, go, go, go __”

Mu Sicheng froze mid-step, sensing something was off. Glancing back, he saw that Spades had already claimed Bai Liu’s shoulder—and, more surprisingly, Bai Liu was holding Spades’ hand.

Spades met Mu Sicheng’s gaze with his usual blank expression. “What’s trending?”

Mu Sicheng yanked his hand back, shaking out his fingers, still tingling from Spades’ grip. He clicked his tongue in irritation. “Like you’d know! You don’t have a clue about fashion!”

Ironically, Spades really didn’t—but somehow, he pulled it off

effortlessly.

Mu Sicheng sat gloomily on the sofa, legs shaking as he watched Spades step out in a black and red tracksuit. A four or five-centimeter-wide athletic headband rested across his forehead, and loose five-part track pants revealed his strong, toned calves.

Damn lizard was too tall for his own good—nearly 6"3. He took two casual strides, and it was like watching a professional athlete in motion. His short hair had been pulled back, revealing his sharply defined features. Yet, with that overly refined face and complete lack of expression, every glance he threw carried an oppressive aura—like he was ready to attack at any moment.

Mu Sicheng locked eyes with Spades for thirty seconds before he was the first to look away, gritting his teeth in frustration. He slammed his fist against the sofa in defeat.

Damn it. Lost again.

Same tracksuit, yet Spades looked effortlessly cool while Mu Sicheng looked like a damn jumping monkey.

“This outfit…” Bai Liu’s hesitant voice drifted from the fitting room. He lifted the curtain with one hand, glancing at the group. “Who picked this out for me?”

Everyone’s gazes snapped to him—and then collectively froze.

Mu Sicheng shot to his feet, punching the air in triumph. “Holy shit! I told you it’d be perfect!”

Bai Liu was clad in a form-fitting red, black, and gold racing suit, accentuated by a cropped jacket with padded shoulders.

The suit hugged his waist seamlessly, the fabric stretching smoothly over his legs. He stood with impeccable posture, the curtain held open with casual ease. His matching helmet rested under his right arm, while his half-length hair, slightly tousled from changing, framed his face.

He blinked at their staring and spoke in a flat tone. “Doesn’t seem to suit me.”

“It absolutely does!!!” Mu Sicheng objected vehemently.

Seeing Bai Liu remain unmoved, Mu Sicheng switched tactics. “Look, you’re always borrowing my motorbike. Isn’t it only logical for you to have a racing suit?”

“This even comes with a helmet—it’ll keep you safer when you ride! Plus, it’s exactly what you asked for: durable, athletic, and tough.”

Mu Sicheng gestured emphatically from Bai Liu’s head to his toes. “And it looks cool as hell!”

“But it’s not practical for everyday wear,” Bai Liu countered calmly. “What am I supposed to do with this? Race? I don’t race.”

Mu Sicheng had no comeback for that.

But as Bai Liu turned to step back into the fitting room, Mu Sicheng quickly followed, pressing his case. “I race! You can wear it while cheering me on!”

He was getting desperate now—this was his chance to get Bai Liu to play one of his other favorite games with him. After all, he didn’t have many friends to hang out with in real life.

Bai Liu shot him an unreadable glance. “And what would that make me? A racing girl?”

Mu Sicheng eyed Bai Liu’s half-length hair, then his waist, rubbing his chin in mock contemplation. “You could probably pull it off… Stuff in some fake boobs, give me a boost… Honestly, quite a few guys on our team would probably wanna chase you—”

Before he could finish, Bai Liu yanked the curtain shut in his face.

Silence.

Then, after a moment, Bai Liu’s voice came through the fabric. “Let Spades in.”

Mu Sicheng flinched. “Why?”

“To help me with the zipper.” Bai Liu’s voice remained unbothered. “I can’t reach it.”

Mu Sicheng: “……”

Expression dark, he trudged over to Spades. “Hey. Bai Liu wants you.”

Spades glanced at him, and his tone suddenly turned ice-cold. “Bai Liu won’t be cheering for you in this outfit.”

“And no one on your team is allowed to chase him.”

Mu Sicheng bristled. “What the hell does that have to do with you?”

Spades peeled off his headband, turning to face him. His silvery-blue irises gleamed under the store lights, and he blinked slowly.

Calmly, he said, “Bai Liu and I are playing a game called ‘love.’”

“And in this game, we can only have each other.”

"If they break the rules of Bai Liu and my game, I will kill them, turn them into monsters, and bring Bai Liu back into the game to play with me alone."

Spades finished speaking and brushed past Mu Sicheng's shoulder with a deliberate, almost provocative force. Mu Sicheng flinched slightly from the impact, but Spades' face remained impassive.

A shiver ran down Mu Sicheng’s spine. His scalp prickled, and he took a moment to grimace and rub his shoulder, still sore from the hit. Cold sweat dampened his back—a delayed reaction to the confrontation.

Spades was serious.

That monster still hadn't developed a proper sense of social norms. He felt nothing for ordinary people in this world.

And he really would kill someone for Bai Liu.

"Fuck."

Mu Sicheng stared at Spades' retreating figure as he lifted the curtain and stepped into Bai Liu's fitting room, head slightly bowed. A chill crept up Mu Sicheng’s spine.

There was no telling what this monster would do if Bai Liu ever stopped wanting him.

Spades entered the fitting room. Before Bai Liu could say anything, Spades wrapped his arms around him from behind and, in a rare moment of vulnerability, mumbled in a lowered tone, "Don’t encourage him."

Bai Liu quickly pieced together what Spades had overheard. Lowering his gaze, he let out a soft laugh and patted Spades' head, which was buried against his shoulder. "Mu Sicheng is just looking for someone to play with."

"How about we go watch him race?"

Spades hesitated for a moment. "Wearing this?"

"Do you think it looks good?" Bai Liu asked.

"It looks good." Spades' voice was cold as ever. "But if you go out in it, you'll be chased."

Bai Liu hummed in agreement. "I don't really like this outfit either. Not practical for daily wear—bad cost-performance ratio. I won't buy it—"

"Buy it." Spades interrupted abruptly.

Bai Liu: "....."

A strange sense of foreboding crept up on him.

Spades stared at him intently. "It looks good. Don't wear it out. Buy it."

Bai Liu: "....."

This was an extremely inefficient use of funds for a racing suit.

Yet in the end, it was purchased.

When Mu Sicheng reached the checkout counter, he noticed Bai Liu about to swipe his card. His eyes widened at the sight of two dozen racing suits stacked on the table.

He pointed at them, stunned. "Did Bai Liu buy all of these?"

"No." The receptionist checked the bill and replied respectfully, "The total was charged to a Mr. Lu Yizhan's card."

Mu Sicheng was full of questions. "Lu Yizhan paid for this?"

Meanwhile, at the other end of the store, Spades was reaching for yet another racing suit—a blue and white uniform-style one—when Bai Liu's eyes twitched, and he quickly stopped him. "No. No more. I already bought enough clothes for myself."

"Okay." Spades regretfully put it down. Then, almost immediately, his eyes shifted to another item. "There are other clothes."

Bai Liu sighed, expertly blocking Spades' next impulse buy. "I've already bought enough. There are other stores to visit. Do you only want me in sportswear?"

Pausing, Bai Liu's gaze dropped to the card in Spades' hand. "Did Lu Yizhan give you that card?"

"Yeah." Spades answered honestly. "He said I could always use the money when I'm outside. He told me to just cash in my own points if I needed more."

Bai Liu stroked his chin thoughtfully. Spades didn't have an ID, so the card had to be under Lu Yizhan's name. "How many points did you redeem?"

"One point."

Bai Liu extended his hand. "Give me your card. I need to check your balance."

Across town, Lu Yizhan was buried in paperwork when his phone buzzed with a new text message.

[XX Bank: Hello, your account (ending in XXXX) has been charged ¥78,011.30 at 11:17 on September 22. Your remaining balance is ¥679,202……]

Lu Yizhan stared at the long string of zeros in his balance.

?????

Didn't he specifically tell Spades to only spend what was necessary and not to redeem too many points?!

There was no limit on the amount Spades could exchange, no waiting period—and he was last year's champion, the league's most popular player for two consecutive years, with the largest gambling pool in the game.

If Spades started cashing in all his points and spending them freely, he could single-handedly trigger a financial crisis.

For a moment, Lu Yizhan simply gripped his phone and stared at it in stunned horror, feeling a wave of dizziness wash over him.

Chapter End Notes

How many points did he cash out!??????

The Challenge

After quickly calling Liao Ke to handle the account, Lu Yizhan was on the verge of collapse when he received a call from Bai Liu.

As soon as the call connected, Bai Liu said, "Wipe out the account you set up for Spades—there's too much money in it, and something's bound to happen."

"I've asked Liao Ke to take care of it," Lu Yizhan replied, rubbing his face. He laughed bitterly, "I've got the money in your account now. Keep an eye on it and don't let him cash it out again—it should be enough to last him a thousand years."

"What are you guys buying, and why is he suddenly cashing out so much?"

Bai Liu paused before responding, "Clothes."

"..." Lu Yizhan was speechless. "What kind of clothes could cost so much?"

"But you've worn out those clothes, it's time to replace them. Buying new ones is a good idea," Bai Liu said casually. "Keep an eye on Spades. I'm off to work."

"Happy birthday, Bai Liu," Lu Yizhan added, his tone light, before hanging up.

Bai Liu turned around and slightly opened his hands for the tailor to begin fitting him. He placed the phone he had just used on the glass table beside him, then, with two fingers, took a bank card from the shirt and trousers he had just removed. He handed it to Spades, who was waiting next to him, his eyes raised. "From now on, you can use my card for anything you want to buy. Not someone else's."

Spades took the card with a soft "oh."

Liu Jiayi, who had been nearby, let out a subtle tsk. Bai Liu is really playing the role of the bully here.

Those who didn't know might think they were swiping his money.

The shirt shop was one Muke had recommended. He had noticed that Bai Liu had been wearing shirts for a while and thought this shop had

excellent fabric and craftsmanship.

The seamstress, a highly skilled professional, was now adjusting her glasses and positioning her arms to measure Bai Liu's bust and shoulder width.

After a few words, Muke translated for the tailor: "Shoulder width, 44 cm; bust, 88 cm. Everything looks normal and standard."

The seamstress then slid a soft measuring tape around Bai Liu's waist, patted him gently on the back, and gestured for him to take a deep breath. Bai Liu obediently complied.

The seamstress paused for a moment after the measurement, her expression slightly surprised.

"You're quite skinny," Muke remarked, his tone suddenly serious. "Your waist is only 68 cm—just under two feet."

The seamstress nodded and added, "But it looks good in clothes like this."

"No," Muke quickly disagreed, "You can't be this skinny, even if the clothes look good on you."

The seamstress shrugged helplessly and went off to pick out a dress for Bai Liu. As she did, Bai Liu lowered his hand and pointed at Spades. "Measure him, too."

Muke replied calmly, "He's too big for his height. The shop doesn't have anything for him."

Bai Liu stared at Muke for a moment in silence, then said quietly, "There are other shops that suit him. I'll take you there later."

"Thank you," Bai Liu smiled and said politely.

"No need to thank me," Muke sighed.

A moment later, the seamstress returned with a full set of clothes. She had selected a satin folded collar shirt and a pair of high-waisted dark suit trousers, both made from the most comfortable fabric, as Muke had ordered.

Bai Liu took the clothes and changed into them. After a few moments, he lifted the curtain and paused before stepping out.

All eyes shifted toward him, and Mu Sicheng, who had been sipping his tea, choked and spat out a mouthful in surprise.

The top of Bai Liu's shirt was a deep V-neck, which extended all the way down to his waist and stomach, tucked neatly into the high-waisted suit trousers.

The shirt, carefully chosen by the tailor, featured a subtle satin ripple on either side of the collar. As Bai Liu walked, the fabric seemed to ripple like waves, revealing the faint scar of a reverse cross in the center of his chest.

The shirt was half tucked into the belt of his trousers, the rest hanging loosely. The semi-transparent hem swayed lazily as Bai Liu moved.

His hair had been roughly styled by the tailor into a slightly messy wet look, with only a few strands falling irregularly by his eyes. The tailor also gave him a pair of small round-rimmed glasses with gold rims. As Bai Liu adjusted his cuffs, he looked up, his eyes meeting theirs with a soft, questioning tone. "Doesn't this look good on me?"

Even Tang Erda couldn't help but take a step back in rigidity.

... This is giving off such a tacky vibe.

"This set is too..." Mu Sicheng walked up, comparing the current Bai Liu to the man before him. His brows were furrowed. "It's not bad, it's just... too..."

Liu Jiayi succinctly summed up the situation: "Playboy."

"I don't think it's an everyday look. It's a bit too revealing," Bai Liu said, casually lifting the curtain. "I'll go change again."

"Wait." Muke's voice interrupted.

"No need to change." Spades' voice followed firmly.

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow and asked, "What's wrong?"

Muke's eyes lit up, clearly excited. "What's revealing about it? Don't you think you look amazing in that? The whole world will go crazy for you when you walk out like this!"

Spades gazed at Bai Liu and said seriously, "Very nice. Buy it."

Bai Liu: "..."

It seemed like he was starting to understand Muke's taste.

Spades was reluctantly controlled by Bai Liu after trying on eight outfits, eventually leading him to the same shop where Tang Erda had previously gotten his clothes.

This time, it was a more conventional men's tailor—nothing too extravagant. Bai Liu bought four or five identical sets of white shirts and trousers, in a kind of replenishment mode. He was used to wearing them and didn't feel the need for anything else.

At the tailor's suggestion, Bai Liu also picked up two suits that were more formal and practical.

However, Spades' fitting process was a bit more unusual. He had to stare at the tailor for what felt like forever during his first fitting, sweating under the scrutiny.

Muke stood by, eyes fixed on the tailor as he waited for Spades' measurements. Mu Sicheng, walking casually past the fitting area, exchanged a brief glance with Muke. Both men clenched their fists, holding their breath.

We can't let Spades win this one!

After all, despite his lean physique, Spades' chest certainly wasn't as big as theirs!

"Height: 190.6 cm," the tailor announced.

"Bust: 113 cm," she continued.

There was a brief flurry of measurements, followed by the usual exclamatory, "PERFECT!"

Muke: "....."

Mu Sicheng: "....."

Why does Spades have such a large chest? This doesn't make sense!

Mu Sicheng, still in disbelief, dragged a dazed Tang Erda to the curtain and, with a grin, said, "It's okay, you're still two centimeters taller than him."

"Our team didn't lose!"

Tang Erda: ????

Spades emerged from the fitting room and locked eyes with Mu Sicheng.

— Damn, we lost!

Spades had dressed in a black suit and a plain white shirt, the cuffs only peeking out by about three or four centimeters. The suit was well-fitted, but it could easily have been mistaken for something a security guard or insurance salesman would wear—nothing remarkable, except it was on Spades.

Yet, in his eyes, there was a stark emptiness. Unlike Tang Erda, whose fierceness suited the uniform, Spades' disconnection made the formal suit feel out of place. There was no adherence to the rules of proper attire in his gaze, only a pure sense of disorder and indifference.

In contrast, while Tang Erda looked like a person, Spades seemed like a monster in human skin. The wildness in him clashed with the formality of the suit, making him even more imposing.

Spades briefly glanced at Mu Sicheng before his eyes moved to Bai Liu, who was sitting on the sofa. Bai Liu put down the magazine he'd been flipping through and looked Spades over from head to toe, then smiled and said, "Nice."

Mu Sicheng was stunned as he saw Spades, who had looked out of place just moments ago, suddenly appear to fit into the suit. It was as if Bai Liu's casual compliment had made Spades drop the uncomfortable struggle with the clothes, allowing him to settle into the suit like it was meant for him.

In that moment, Spades seemed almost human—a man in a suit with a controlled, yet dangerous energy.

Spades walked toward Bai Liu, who instinctively opened his arms for a hug. "Don't you like the suit?" Bai Liu asked.

"It's not comfortable," Spades replied.

Bai Liu nodded in understanding. "So, should we try another one?"

Spades, who had rarely worn formal attire, was clearly uncomfortable —wearing formal clothes for the first time is difficult for anyone, let alone someone like Spades. But after a brief pause, he said, "No, this

one looks good. Buy it."

Bai Liu smiled warmly. "Alright, we'll get it if you like it."

He then lowered his gaze to gently caress Spades' face, speaking softly, "But that's how the real world works. Beautiful things come with their own set of rules. If you want to enjoy them, you have to endure some discomfort."

"Beautiful things are delicate," Bai Liu said softly. "If we press too hard, they shatter."

Spades met his gaze, his face serious as he inquired, "Will I shatter you as well?"

Bai Liu gave him a reassuring smile. "Of course not."

He paused for a moment, then added with a slight smirk, "I'm not nice enough for that—I'm much worse."

The Challenge

Apart from shopping for clothes, Bai Liu had a long list of things to buy during his rare trip to the shops, and by the time he finished, it was almost 4 p.m.

The men were still in good shape, their spirits high as they carried their bags without a trace of fatigue. Eventually, Muke called a car to take them all back to Bai Liu's house.

"Anything else you want to buy?" Muke glanced sideways at Bai Liu. "Phones, daily necessities, clothes, shoes—we've got it all. What about a watch or some accessories?"

"No," Bai Liu declined calmly. "I already have a watch, and accessories just get in the way when I move or work."

Muke turned to look at Spades. "What about him? Do we need to get him a beauty treatment or something?"

At the mention of "beauty treatment," a chill ran down Tang Erda's spine. He instinctively took two steps back, but Muke caught the movement and, with a cool expression, grabbed him by the arm before he could escape. "You too. You're getting one later."

To Muke, Tang Erda and Spades were both men who had been in the game world far too long—rough around the edges and hopeless at taking care of themselves. Someone had to intervene.

Spades was at least tolerable. His body ran cold, like ice, and despite his complete lack of self-care, he was somehow always inexplicably clean—like he had some kind of self-cleaning function built into his physiology.

Tang Erda, on the other hand, was a different story. Although he kept himself neat in a purely functional way, his appearance was more about presenting a serious face than actual grooming. He simply didn't meet Muke's standards for "team image" and "visual traffic appeal."

"But Bai Liu and Mu Sicheng haven't had treatments either," Tang Erda protested, dragging them into it with a deadpan expression. "They should get one too!"

Muke gave them both a once-over and replied without hesitation, "They don't need it."

Tang Erda was stunned. “Why not?!”

“Because they actually take care of themselves,” Muke said flatly.

Though Bai Liu was always seen in a simple white shirt and suit trousers, he was never caught looking disheveled. Even on low-resolution screens, his grooming was impeccable—every strand of hair perfectly in place.

And Mu Sicheng? That man was practically obsessed with appearances. His wardrobe was probably larger than everyone else's combined. He never wore the same outfit or shoes twice when going out, and he always smelled like some high-end athletic body wash.

Then Spades, clueless about modern human indulgences, tilted his head and asked, “What is a beauty treatment?”

Bai Liu answered crisply, “A process humans use to enhance their appearance—usually to attract others, sometimes just for self-satisfaction. Given your current face and body... I don’t think you need one.”

Spades blinked in understanding. Then, with sudden determination, he said, “I’m going.”

“…” Bai Liu sighed. “Suit yourself.”

After three months away, they returned to this familiar place.

Tang Erda was practically dragged in by Mu Sicheng and Muke and pinned to the sofa. The moment the barber’s cloth was draped over him, he stiffened as if someone had sealed him in place. With his back straight and expression frozen, he sat unmoving, fully resigned to his fate.

Spades, however, was less cooperative. He tugged off his “cloak” when the barber wasn’t looking and turned to Bai Liu with a frown. “What is this?”

The barber began dry shampooing his hair, pouring liquid over his head and lathering it up. Spades, utterly confused, asked again, “What is this?”

When the hairdryer came out and began blowing, Spades reached up, pinched the barrel, and asked, “Is this attacking me?”

The barrel crumpled slightly under his casual grip. The barber stared in disbelief at the stainless steel mouth of the dryer, now visibly dented.

Muke rushed over, quickly pulling the barber to his feet with an apologetic smile. Pointing at Spades, he explained, “Sorry—he’s a bit... strong. And new to this. It’s the first time we’ve taken him out.”

“Any damages, I’ll cover them, no problem. Please just... keep going.”

The barber, still in a daze, nodded slowly. Then he turned to fetch a higher-quality hairdryer, stumbling slightly as he walked off, his face a mixture of shock and confusion.

When the barber returned, his hands were trembling as he resumed blow-drying Spades’ hair. The moment he noticed that Spades seemed ready to stir up trouble again, Bai Liu—who had been quietly flipping through a newspaper beside him—finally moved.

“Hurry up and finish the cut. Let’s go home,” Bai Liu said calmly.

Muke, sitting nearby, raised his hand and naturally poured a glass of water for Bai Liu, placing it gently on the small glass table beside him. Bai Liu murmured a quiet thank you in return.

Standing at the back of the room, the barber flinched. He cautiously glanced at the young man who had been silently reading the newspaper with his head down, and suddenly felt as though he had just identified the true authority among them.

At first, he had assumed the leader of the group was someone from the Mu family—perhaps because the young man had been so low-profile. Upon entering, he had simply nodded politely, taken a seat, and begun reading, without issuing a single order.

But when he spoke, that subtle air of command and effortless superiority was unmistakable. His presence naturally demanded control.

Even the way Mr. Mu poured him water—it was instinctive, like a respectful junior serving an elder.

People like Mr. Mu, from elite families, are always sharply aware of who’s important in any room. If this young man were truly someone of that caliber, how was it possible the barber had never heard of him in all his years in the business?

Who the hell was this guy?

Bai Liu picked up the glass Muke had poured and was about to take a sip when his gaze met the barber's in the mirror. Catching the man watching him, he smiled faintly. "Something wrong?"

"No, no, not at all!" The barber shook his head frantically, blow-drying Spades' hair with increasing care. His tone softened as he addressed Bai Liu. "Is this your first time here? I don't think I've seen you before."

Emboldened by Bai Liu's approachable manner, the barber ventured to keep the conversation going.

"I've been here once before," Bai Liu replied, smiling. He nodded toward Tang Erda, seated on the other side of the room. "I brought a colleague over there."

The barber followed his gesture and spotted Tang Erda—then stiffened in shock. "You were the one who brought him here last time?"

That visit had caused quite a stir in the shop. Tang Erda's appearance and charisma were so striking that even in their salon, which regularly worked with celebrity studios, he had stood out. They'd all joked that if he ever joined the entertainment industry, they'd line up to style him.

But three months had passed, and Tang Erda had yet to debut. The gossip had died down, and the junior stylist who'd been obsessed with him had pouted for weeks.

Now, while blow-drying Spades' hair, the barber couldn't help but steal glances at the group Bai Liu had brought.

Muke was known in certain circles for his looks, though he clearly wasn't destined for entertainment. But the others—these three men—each looked like future stars.

The man with deep blue eyes—what a presence. The kind of looks and build that radiated righteous fury, like a weapon forged into human form. Even as a straight man, the barber's knees felt weak just looking at him.

Then there was the younger guy with headphones, probably a college student. A sporty type with excellent taste, sharp features, and a strange, charming blend of awkward handsomeness and subtle danger.

Definitely the kind of guy who'd set hearts on fire from ages 18 to 32.

And then… the one he was styling now.

At first, he hadn't thought much of this one. Spades' hair had clearly gone untouched for months, unkempt and completely covering his face. His style was practically nonexistent.

But his build—broad shoulders, narrow waist, ideal proportions—was on another level. Possibly even better than the blue-eyed guy's. The only question was whether his face could match it.

Already, the barber had convinced himself: Bai Liu must be some kind of low-key giant in the entertainment industry. After all, top-tier beauties like this were rare—and no other industry gathered such a collection of eye-catching people.

And wasn't the Mu family rumored to be stepping into the entertainment world? Maybe this Bai Liu was their future collaborator.

The barber's tone grew more respectful. "Your artists are all incredibly good-looking. We'll definitely support them when they debut."

"I'm not from a media company," Bai Liu said evenly.

The barber paused, blinking. "Ah… may I ask what line of work you're in?"

Bai Liu smiled. "Just a laid-off worker."

"???" The barber was stunned.

Was this some kind of powerful man's joke?

Unable to stop himself, he blurted, "And… what's your relationship with them?" He winced immediately, knowing he had overstepped. Still, curiosity burned in him. "I mean, especially… with this one?"

Bai Liu glanced at Spades, who was resting his chin on his hand, and gave a lazy smile. "The others are friends. He's my boyfriend."

Barber: "..."

For a second, he wanted to protest: You sure picked a rough one for your boyfriend.

Then, while snipping the hair from Spades' forehead, he brushed it aside—

And froze.

His breath caught. His mind went blank. One single thought echoed:

Take it back. Take all of it back.

What level of beauty makes someone gasp out loud? In the entertainment industry, they rank faces: pretty, handsome, stunning, once-in-a-decade, once-in-a-century, once-in-a-millennium...

No matter how much fans hype up their favorite celebrities, stylists tend to place them into one of four categories: average, average-but-makes-you-feel-things, exceptionally good-looking with a few weak knees, and finally, so stunning it kills all attraction—unbeatable and untouchable beauty.

As for those rare celestial-level faces—what the stylists call "gods and goddesses"—well, the studio might listen to them once in a thousand years.

This was only the second time in the barber's life that he'd seen a face that transcended those four categories. The first had been Zhao Muchi, currently the most popular actor in the country—someone described as a "once-in-a-million-years" face.

It truly felt like witnessing a sculpture shaped by divine mercy, every detail sculpted with love and reverence.

The barber fought back the urge to scream for his coworkers and simply swept the hair gently from Spades' eyelids with a brush, afraid to use too much force and somehow disturb the perfection of the face before him.

But as the haircut continued, the entire studio slowly came to a halt. Everyone drifted over and gathered around. After securing Bai Liu's permission not to take any photos, they stared into the mirror, watching Spades' features emerge with reverence, whispering in awe.

"...Holy shit. That's a real face."

"The last time I was this dumbfounded by someone in person was Zhao Muchi. He looks amazing on camera, but somehow, even better off-camera."

"So, who looks better—him or Zhao Muchi?"

"...Hard to say. Not the same type. Zhao Muchi has that kind of face that makes me scream and want to climb him like a tree—just raw lust. But this guy... honestly, the longer I look, the worse I feel. Like, I'm not even worthy to look."

"Wait, isn't Zhao Muchi supposed to come in today too? Are the two legendary faces about to meet?"

"What are you talking about? Didn't you hear? Zhao Muchi's studio called earlier—said something came up, so he canceled."

"Come in, come in!" A voice called eagerly from down the hall. "No, no, we're totally free this afternoon! We'd be thrilled to have you!"

At that, the gossipers quickly scattered.

"Boss' voice. Run! Stop slacking off before he sees you!"

"Who's coming that's got the boss acting like this?"

Muke frowned and turned to the person in charge. "Didn't I reserve the entire studio for us this afternoon?"

The manager broke into a cold sweat, silently cursing his boss for dropping the ball. He stammered, "I-I'll contact the boss right away! I'll ask him to reschedule the new guest. We'll make sure you go first!"

He spun on his heel and ran off.

A moment later, the department head's anxious voice echoed through the studio: "You're already here? Why didn't anyone tell me?! Who's using the space? No worries—we'll sort it out. Your time is precious. Everything will be prioritized for you! Please, come in!"

Muke's face had completely darkened. He was about to lash out when Mu Sicheng, visibly annoyed, stepped forward to back him up.

Just then, the studio's glass door swung open. A tall figure stepped inside, leather riding boots clicking against the floor. He chuckled, pushing the door fully open, then leaned casually against the frame, arms folded across his chest. With a smirk, he swept his gaze across the room and said, "This doesn't look like a negotiation, boss."

The boss nodded quickly. "Negotiating now, Mr. Zhao!"

Muke and Mu Sicheng froze, and even Tang Erda and Liu Jiayi paused for a beat.

The newcomer had shoulder-length red hair, silky and fluffy, loosely braided over his right shoulder. His eyes were narrow and expressive, his nose upturned, and just beneath his left eye was a teardrop beauty mark that twitched when he smiled—an expression radiating sensual, teasing charm.

He was undeniably dazzling—the kind of man who seemed destined for the screen. But that wasn't why Muke and Mu Sicheng couldn't take their eyes off him.

No, they were staring because Zhao Muchi was wearing a satin white V-neck shirt tucked into high-waisted black blazers. Written in chalk along the edge of those blazers—faint but unmistakable—was the name "Bai Liu."

It was the outfit Bai Liu had tried on earlier. The one still in the shop, waiting for alterations. He was supposed to pick it up after this.

But here was Zhao Muchi—wearing it. Wearing Bai Liu's clothes.

Muke stood up, face cold, and immediately called the boutique. His voice was sharp. "Why is someone else wearing Bai Liu's outfit?"

A long silence. Then, "We're very sorry."

"I don't need an apology," Muke replied icily. "I need you to take that outfit off the thief and return it to us."

"He's not a thief," the voice on the other end snapped. "Mega wears it better. The outfit chose him."

Muke's chest rose and fell with restrained fury. Then he went still. "If you can choose the person who fits the clothes best, I can choose a better tenant for the shop you currently rent."

Sensing the threat, the caller immediately softened. "I'm sorry! I'll find Mr. Bai Liu a different outfit that suits him better! I only gave this one to Mega because… I thought he was your friend."

"Friend?" Muke's eyes narrowed. "Why would you think that?"

The voice hesitated. "Because he bought a lot of clothes for Mr. Bai Liu too. You can pick them up later."

“Fine. I’ll come by.” Muke hung up before the person could say anything else. As he turned, he found Zhao Muchi still standing there, smiling faintly, one hand raised as if he’d been waiting for him to finish the call.

“All done yelling?” Zhao Muchi asked with a smirk.

Muke: “……”

The self-consciousness was irritating, but Bai Liu had to admit the tailor had been right—this ostentatious outfit did suit that wannabe aristocrat.

Bai Liu disliked revealing clothing and always buttoned his shirts to the collar. In contrast, this man had undone his shirt all the way down past his belt, showing off his firm waist and abs. Paired with tall riding boots, the look radiated a kind of arrogant aristocratic sensuality—so brazen it almost felt indecent to look at.

Completely unfazed by the hostile atmosphere, Zhao Muchi sauntered up to Bai Liu, spun a swivel chair around, and sat down across from him, lazily crossing his legs with a smile.

"Hello, Mr. Bai Liu—or should I call you Head of the Wandering Circus?"

The moment the words left his mouth, the entire room tensed. Tang Erda immediately rose and moved behind Bai Liu, Mu Sicheng glared daggers, and Muke silently gestured for the others to clear out.

"Relax." Zhao Muchi shrugged, still smiling. "I’m not here with bad intentions. On the contrary—I’ve spent a lot of points on Spades this year."

Bai Liu looked up. "You’re the top investor in Spades this year?"

Zhao Muchi snapped his fingers and propped his chin up lazily, casting a dreamy glance at Spades. "Yep. I like him a lot."

Wang Shun had given Bai Liu some insight into Spades’ backers—namely, the top two investors over the past two years. He had his own ways of analyzing them, but rumors helped fill in the blanks. Last year, it was said Hearts was the top gambler on Spades, followed by someone nicknamed Whiplash—a mysterious investor said to be relentlessly pursuing Spades, just like Hearts had.

This year, with Hearts pulling back, Whiplash had claimed the top spot.

Unlike Hearts, who had employed underhanded tactics, this man's pursuit was blatantly direct.

Zhao Muchi glanced at Spades with open admiration, clicked his tongue twice, and looked smugly pleased by Spades' current appearance. Then he shifted his gaze to Bai Liu and grinned. "Didn't know you liked this type. You should've told me—I could've dressed the part."

And then, almost casually, he asked, "So… have you done it with Spades yet?"

Mu Sicheng exploded, "That's none of your damn business!"

Zhao Muchi leaned back on the sofa with exaggerated disappointment. "Damn. So no first blood for me, huh? I've been drooling over him for ages."

He sat up again, eyeing Bai Liu and Spades with amusement. "So Spades is yours now? Your boyfriend? He does seem to listen to you."

Bai Liu met Zhao Muchi's gaze evenly. "What is it that you want?"

Zhao Muchi leaned forward, his eyes gleaming with innuendo. "Here's a thought—let Spades sleep with me, just once, and I'll throw all my points at you."

Mu Sicheng gawked in disbelief, pointing at Spades, then at Bai Liu. "They're boyfriends! What the hell are you even saying! Spades wouldn't sleep with you, okay?! He only—ahem—in Bai Liu's bed—"

Tang Erda stepped in, covering Mu Sicheng's mouth and offering Zhao Muchi a cold look. "That's enough. Please leave."

Unbothered, Zhao Muchi folded his hands and scanned Bai Liu again, this time more intently. Then he smirked. "You're easy on the eyes too."

"If Spades can have you, I wouldn't mind having a go either."

He grinned wider. "If it's with you, I don't mind being on top or bottom—your choice. And I'll match my previous offer, point for point. You're worth the price."

Mu Sicheng: "....."

Tang Erda: "....."

Muke: "....."

Bai Liu smiled coolly. "How generous. I'm flattered."

Zhao Muchi's gaze turned predatory, lingering on Bai Liu's long, elegant fingers wrapped around a newspaper. His eyes narrowed with interest. "Your in-game look appeals to me more though. The gloves. The whip. Very stylish."

"Still, no," Bai Liu replied politely. "I already have investors."

"Shame." Zhao Muchi sighed, feigning disappointment, and handed Bai Liu a card. "Here's my contact info. If you change your mind, call me anytime."

Bai Liu turned to Muke. "Let the others back in. We're done here. Give the room to Mr. Zhao."

Muke nodded stiffly and summoned the rest of the staff. Zhao Muchi simply sat there smiling.

As they were leaving, Zhao Muchi stood up suddenly and turned to Spades, his eyes gleaming. "Hey—do I look good in this?"

Spades stared at him blankly. He said nothing. Bai Liu glanced at Zhao Muchi, equally silent.

Apparently expecting no answer, Zhao Muchi just shrugged and sat back down, untying his braid with satisfaction. He began listing his preferences for a new look:

"Dye all the hair black. Cut it medium length—just long enough for a ponytail..."

"Trim the nails like this—it fits leather gloves better."

"How about a white dress shirt with trousers? Think it suits me?"

"No more leather boots—just regular leather shoes and white socks. Something office-appropriate."

Mu Sicheng's temple throbbed. But since Bai Liu wasn't reacting, he held himself back—until they left. Then he let out an outraged groan.

"He’s copying you!"

Muke's expression was just as dark. "Exactly the same."

Bai Liu stayed calm. "Let’s go pick up the clothes."

On the way there, Mu Sicheng fumed louder and louder until he finally socked Spades in the chest. "This is all your fault! You’ve caused Bai Liu nothing but trouble! That guy literally asked you if he looked good—why didn’t you say something?! Just tell him he’s ugly!"

Spades gave Mu Sicheng a puzzled look. "Was he talking to me? I don’t know him."

Mu Sicheng: "....."

God, this is even more infuriating!

When they arrived at the shop, the staff apologized profusely, offering to make all of Bai Liu’s future orders free for life. But Muke still looked grim. One assistant tailor hesitated before stepping forward.

"We really didn’t mean any harm. We thought Mr. Zhao was your friend… He knew your measurements and said he was buying a gift as a joke."

"He bought me clothes?" Bai Liu raised a brow. "What kind?"

The assistant hesitated again, then gestured behind a curtain. "They’re over here."

Bai Liu approached the curtain, Muke trying to stop him. "That guy’s trouble—just ignore whatever he bought—"

"Open it," Bai Liu said blandly.

Mu Sicheng kept ranting: "Even if you don’t know him, when he talks to you and asks if he looks good, you should just curse him out!"

Spades interrupted, gaze fixed on Bai Liu’s back. "He wasn’t talking to me. That guy—when he asked if he looked good—he was asking Bai Liu."

Mu Sicheng froze. "Huh?"

The curtain opened, revealing a scandalously designed women’s suit—tight black straps, long gloves, brown stockings, and a whip.

The assistant handed Bai Liu a note. "He left this with the outfit."

Bai Liu unfolded it. The handwriting was as flamboyant and teasing as Zhao Muchi himself:

— [With this cut, you'll look even better in women's clothes than men's, baby.]

City in the Sky

Chapter Notes

> Content Warning: This arc will subject you to scenes so harrowing they may induce nausea, cause your stomach to churn violently, and trigger an overwhelming impulse to gouge your own eyes out to escape the horror. Reader discretion is strongly advised.

In three days, the next challenge would begin.

Bai Liu had sent Spades back to the Killer Sequence just two days ago. He had since returned to the Wandering Circus to begin preparing for what came next.

Wandering Circus – Meeting Room

Wang Shun stood at the front of the room. His nerves were evident—he was speaking faster than usual, and his explanations lacked their typical ease.

"Tomorrow is our second challenge," he announced.

"This will be our final meeting before the tournament." He paused, then added with a bitter smile, "As much as I hate to add pressure, this is our last shot at making it into the league this year."

He tapped the system panel, and a projection flickered to life behind him.

"Let’s go over the guilds again. We can eliminate the Killer Sequence—they already won a challenge and are locked into the playoffs. That leaves seven teams in the card pool."

"There are three main teams we need to worry about. They're currently ranked second to fourth: the King’s Guild, the Deer Hunters, and Golden Dawn. All three are strong. Each has at least one popular team member, meaning they’ve already secured their exemption cards. In other words, they have no need to maintain popularity points anymore."

Wang Shun’s voice dropped slightly. "That means, when they go up against us, they’ll likely forfeit the first two matches and force a showdown in the third—"

He looked around the room, then exhaled deeply. "—which happens to be our weak point: the team match."

Tang Erda frowned. "But all three of those teams added new players this year. Based on the replays, their teamwork isn't great. Could we target the newcomers in the team match as a possible weak link?"

It was standard thinking—new players often struggled to mesh with the rest of the team and could be a liability. But Wang Shun let out a bitter laugh.

"I wish it were that simple."

"Yes, these teams' newcomers lack coordination at times, but their weaknesses are completely masked by the strategies built around them —and their individual strength."

He tapped the screen again.

"Let's start with the King's Crown's newcomers. First up, Phoebe."

The video projected on the panel showed a girl with long blond hair and green eyes. She stood with her hands clasped at her chest, three pairs of pristine white wings fanned out behind her. Her expression was ethereal, pure as the first snowfall. With her long lashes lowered, she murmured a prayer over a kneeling player, whose eyes were empty of all hope.

"May the Lord bless you to hell."

"Come, let me share the gospel with you."

As she finished the chant, her white feathers snapped shut, wrapping around herself and the other player. A moment later, the feathers turned black and leathery, like bat wings. When they unfurled again, the player was gone—nothing left but a pile of bones. Blood stained the corners of Phoebe's lips. She licked it away with an innocent smile, eyes now a deep, glowing red. Two curled goat horns had sprouted from her forehead.

The video froze at the moment she licked the blood from her mouth.

Mu Sicheng shuddered. "Isn't her title 'Nun'? Why does she look like a vampire?"

Wang Shun sighed, staring at the screen. "According to what I've

managed to dig up from contacts in the King's Guild… Phoebe's skill set is similar to the Witch's. It's extremely rare—a dual-phase skill that allows her to switch identities from the Monster Book."

"She has two forms: Nun and Witch. In her Nun form, she can enchant her captain and teammates through prayer, reducing the damage they take. Essentially, it weakens enemy attacks. She also has a skill called [Gospel], which compels enemies to feel goodwill toward her—lowers their guard and makes them confess things to her."

"And once that happens..." Wang Shun's tone turned grim. "That's when she switches to her Witch form. She attacks, drains their blood, and devours their flesh. Her damage output is brutal. A player like Mu Sicheng would be drained dry in about ten seconds."

He tapped the image of the white bones on the screen. "The end result is this."

Mu Sicheng recoiled. "Don't use me as a damage benchmark!"

"But she has a clear weakness." Bai Liu leaned forward, eyes fixed on the screen. "She can't take close-range attacks, can she?"

Wang Shun nodded. "That's my assumption as well. Her defense seems low. She's usually positioned as a control player. Hearts often places her behind the Titan [Shield] for protection. But Phoebe doesn't always stay there—she roams the field a lot, so she becomes a common target."

"However, because her damage output is so high, players who go after her often end up dead themselves. So far, she's made it through every team match without needing to withdraw."

Bai Liu's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "She's a decoy—part of a roaming strategy."

"A what?" Mu Sicheng looked confused.

"She's bait," Liu Jiayi answered coldly. "Hearts sends her roaming on purpose, drawing in enemy attackers. She's like a spider spinning a web, then pouncing when her prey gets stuck. Roaming players usually do this, but since Liu Ji and Qi Yifang aren't good at roaming, Hearts gave that role to Phoebe."

Liu Jiayi studied the frozen image. "And she plays it beautifully."

"She might not coordinate well with most teammates, but she works closely with Hearts." Bai Liu rested his chin on one hand, eyes thoughtful. "She's skilled enough to sync with a tactician. That's not easy."

"She can't be used as a weak point."

Bai Liu made a quick judgment and turned the conversation sharply:
"What about Liu Ji and Qi Yifang?"

Wang Shun sighed, clearly at a loss.
"What can I say about those two..." He rubbed his temples. "They're not particularly strong, but Hearts has taken them under her wing. They're extremely obedient, and their skills are quite unique. I haven't found a clear weakness yet."

"Qi Yifang, whom you met at the Rose Factory, plays a roaming position. His skill is tied to the identity of a weather announcer—very unpredictable. He lacks control over it himself, but if used strategically, the effect can be unexpectedly powerful. His basic attacks, though, are stable and don't deal much damage."

"Then there's Liu Ji. His intelligence stat isn't high, but his obedience is off the charts. The moment Hearts gives an order, he executes it with zero delay—it's like Hearts is his brain. His skill is called [Flaming Bone Hammer]."

Wang Shun pointed solemnly at the image of Liu Ji, whose body blazed with flames and exposed glowing bones.
"That's his berserk state. When his spirit level drops below 40, he ignites. A single hit from him is comparable to taking a bullet from Tang Erda's gun."

After the meeting ended, Bai Liu stayed behind to discuss match details with Wang Shun.

Wang Shun looked anxious.
"You'll still be the one drawing the opponent team. And with your luck, you'll probably pull the current strongest in the pool—the King's Crown."

"Facing your old boss already?" Bai Liu quipped, smiling. "How do you feel about that?"

Wang Shun let out a laugh, half exasperated. "The moment you go on stage, Hearts will know I used my last connections in the guild to dig

up Phoebe's skill profile. She'll be out for my head before we even get to talk about me being a former team leader."

He paused, then added, more seriously: "It's Jiayi I'm more worried about. I don't know what she's thinking."

"Hearts treated her... very well."

"Why?" Bai Liu's voice was calm, almost flat. "You've been around Hearts long enough—do you know?"

Wang Shun hesitated before answering. "It seems the Queen treats Jiayi well because they share something in common—an intense dislike of men."

He glanced cautiously at Bai Liu, then added, carefully: "Especially the kind of selfish men who exploit others for profit... or lure in little girls. Anyone like that who crosses paths with the Queen tends to meet a very bad end."

Bai Liu: "..."

He changed the subject without responding: "I've lost two games in a row. Has Charles contacted me yet?"

Wang Shun looked puzzled. "No. Which surprised me, honestly. I even approached him myself. He just told me to tell you not to worry—there'll be no shortage of investment."

"Because apparently," he continued, "someone else has their eyes on you."

Bai Liu narrowed his eyes. "Who?"

Wang Shun's expression turned a bit strange. "I don't know. Charles only left you a gift box. I saw it just today. He said no one else was allowed to open it except you. It's from another investor. Apparently, once you open it, you'll know who it is."

"Give it to me," Bai Liu said.

When he saw the box, Bai Liu immediately understood Wang Shun's odd expression.

The box was pink and black lace, edged in rings of crystal. It looked luxurious... and vaguely obscene.

Bai Liu opened it without a blink.

Wang Shun froze as he peeked at the contents, then jerked his head up, eyes wide. “What the hell is this?”

Inside lay an elaborate set of lace lingerie—corset, panties, garter belt, and leg rings—all feminine. A small card was tucked beside them.

Bai Liu plucked up the card and read the playful, flirtatious handwriting:

“To match the outfit you got last time. It fits you well. Wear it in the next game—just for me.”

Gamblers' Union Guild

Charles lounged behind his desk, watching someone across from him with an amused expression. “Do you really have a thing for Bai Liu?” he asked, his tone light but probing. “He’s a dark horse I’ve invested in. I’d prefer if you didn’t swoop in and disrupt that.”

He smiled faintly. “Men who fall into your hands usually don’t end up very well.”

Zhao Muchi sat across the table, his eyes half-lidded, lazily avoiding Charles’ gaze. “Not really. Didn’t Spades come out of it just fine?”

“That’s only because he didn’t sleep with you,” Charles said, spreading his hands with a wry smile. “It’s not you he likes—it’s Bai Liu.”

“I hold no hostility toward him,” Zhao Muchi replied lightly. His tone had lost the teasing, flirtatious air he wore around Bai Liu and Spades. Now he sat upright, his expression composed and aristocratic. “I’m just reminding Bai Liu.”

“Reminding him of what?” Charles’ eye twitched.

Zhao Muchi’s lips curved into a mischievous, lazy smile. “Reminding him that he’ll be wearing women’s clothes for me soon—whether he wants to or not.”

Charles paused, his smirk fading. He tapped his fingers twice on the table, steadying himself. “What do you know? Did he come to the island to see you again?”

“Who are you talking about?” Zhao Muchi lifted his eyes. “Bai Liu… or Bai Six?”

“Maybe both. Maybe neither. You’ve only just found out, haven’t you?” Charles chuckled, playing along. “And now you’re asking me the same thing? Let’s not pretend, Muchi. We both know you were placed in this world as a pawn—for Bai Liu.”

“What did you think of all those years you spent on that island, wrapped in love and lust, waiting for that man in the City in the Sky… ever since ten years ago?”

“Do you still want to be his pawn?”

“No,” Zhao Muchi murmured. He rested his hands under his chin and smiled—a hazy smile, like a man immersed in a dream he refused to wake from. “It wasn’t one-sided. He came to see me on my eighteenth birthday. On Bai Liu’s eighteenth birthday. On that island, too.”

With that, Zhao Muchi stood and turned to leave. Charles watched him go, his expression unreadable, before calling after him, “This time… will you press Bai Liu?”

Zhao Muchi’s steps faltered slightly. He let out a soft laugh. “Do you really think I like Bai Liu? I don’t like him.”

“I’m pressing his opponent.”

The Next Day — The Game Pool

The cheers had been deafening from the moment Bai Liu stepped into the arena. Ever since his victory over Spades in the last challenge—shattering the myth of Spades' undefeated streak—Bai Liu’s popularity had surged. Though he'd lost slightly to the Reverse God, he now stood firmly in ninth place among the top ten players.

He was a star.

Everything felt familiar—so much so that the host didn’t even bother with a proper introduction. Instead, he cracked a joke:

“This must be the first time you’ve seen a team play a challenge twice, right? How novel—getting a second shot by taking over another guild!”

—An obviously sarcastic jab, clearly implying that Bai Liu was shameless, bending the rules to get a second challenge.

But the truth was, Bai Liu hadn't broken any rules. He had earned this challenge.

As soon as the host began taunting, the crowd fell silent—not for Bai Liu, but against the host. Shouts rang out: "Get off commentary if you're that bad!" The host broke out in a cold sweat and wisely shut his mouth.

He'd forgotten something important—Bai Liu might be a newcomer, but he was also a top ten player now. Mocking him wasn't just risky—it was dangerous.

Bai Liu stepped forward to draw a lot. His expression was unreadable as he handed it to the staff. They opened it and held it up for all to see —

[King's Crown]

The host's excitement returned instantly. He raised his mic, yelling, "It's the guild of our second most popular player—Queen of Hearts! The King's Crown!"

"Will the Wandering Circus succeed in their challenge? We'll find out!"

"Personally, I don't think it's likely. I mean, look at the Queen—not only gorgeous, but powerful!"

Wang Shun opened his system panel and saw the support rate plummeting again. He clenched his fists. A bead of cold sweat slid down his temple.

He knew the support would drop once the matchups were revealed. But this… this drop still startled him.

"Will both tacticians please come forward and shake hands?" the host joked. "Shaking hands with the Queen is the dream of every male player in the game—except maybe Spades. Bai Liu is one lucky guy."

Hearts approached in a sharp outfit—tailored trousers, hair tied back in a ponytail, a beret perched at an angle.

"I've been looking forward to this match for a long time," she said,

curling her red lips into a smile as she extended her hand. “At last, the day has come, Bai Liu.”

Bai Liu met her gaze and returned the smile. “I hope it’s a good game.”

“Yes!” the host shouted. “The match officially begins!”

[System Alert: The King’s Crown guild forfeits the single and double events.]

[System Alert: Proceeding directly to the regatta.]

[Loading the game…]

[System Alert: Both teams logged into the game “City in the Sky.”]

[(King’s Crown) vs (Wandering Circus) — five-player team match begins.]

Inside the Game

Bai Liu opened his eyes.

He was in a dim, swaying container. It was pitch dark. He quickly opened his system panel, using the glow to assess his surroundings and read the mission briefing.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu gains status — (Prepared Witch)]
[Main Quest activated]
[Game Background: A small coastal nation is under siege by an invasive eel species. These eels reproduce rapidly and infest everything. Now, even turning on a faucet results in eels pouring out.]

[Scientists have tried to eliminate them—burning, chemicals, acid—but nothing works. Then they discovered one strange fact: female human saliva can dissolve the eels.]

[A new biological plan was proposed: have women eat the eels alive. But soon, those women began to change. They grew scales, became monstrous—witches. Some could fly, teleport, or even devour others.]

[The Holy Inquisition declared: the eel transformations only happened to evil-hearted people. The eels revealed their true nature. Kill them all, and peace will return.]

[But now, the country is out of women. They've begun trafficking women from abroad.]

[You are one such "woman," smuggled from another land.]

[Main Quest: Obtain the Witch's Heart and place it on the tower in the City in the Sky to end the Witch Trials.]

[Side Quest: Do not reveal that you are male. If the witches find out, they will kill you.]

[System Note: Witches kill all men on sight.]

Bai Liu lowered the panel slowly, his eyes drifting down to examine his clothes.

They were dirty.

But unmistakably women's clothes.

City in the Sky

Bai Liu wasn't alone in the container. In the other three corners huddled three young girls, no older than sixteen or seventeen. Each had a different face, but all looked equally terrified—hugging their knees and whimpering.

Bai Liu glanced around, then quietly retreated into his own corner, calmly observing the surroundings.

There shouldn't be any witches in this container—at least not in the traditional sense. These girls were too miserable, too frightened to seem capable of murder, let alone witchcraft.

He brought up the system panel and confirmed that both the appearance modification and voice modulation features were locked. As expected, the system didn't allow players to use privileges to disguise themselves or deceive NPCs in this witch-themed copy.

Still, with the dim lighting and the loud noises outside, it was hard to tell his gender. Bai Liu deliberately lowered his voice and asked, "Do you know where we're going?"

The question only made the girls cry harder, their fear intensifying.

"We're being sent to the Land of Witches," one of them answered in a trembling voice. "It's a terrible place."

Bai Liu repeated softly, almost rhetorically, "The Land of Witches?"

"You don't know?" Another girl looked toward him in surprise, then let out a bitter laugh. "You must be from that country. Only a girl from there wouldn't know about the Land of Witches."

"That country?" Bai Liu quickly followed up. "You all speak Chinese?"

The girls' faces suggested they came from all over the world, but they all spoke fluent Chinese. For Bai Liu—who had always struggled with English—it was a rare relief to be able to communicate so easily with NPCs in a copy.

"It's because the mutated Seven-Star Eels from the Land of Witches have spread through the oceans and contaminated the world. Now, in every country, women who ingest the eels become witches," the girl explained, her voice trembling. "The Inquisition's power has expanded

globally. They hunt witches everywhere."

"Everywhere... except your country."

The girl looked at Bai Liu with envy in her eyes. "Your country doesn't label witches as evil. It doesn't permit the Inquisition to act there, forbids private witch trials, and strictly bans the use of raw eel consumption to 'purge' witches. It's the safest place in the world for girls."

Another girl added in a whisper, "That's why we learn Chinese from birth. If we're lucky enough to escape there, we won't be arrested or burned."

The first girl looked at Bai Liu sympathetically. "It's tragic—you were trafficked out of there."

"The Land of Witches is the worst place in the world to be a woman."

As they spoke, the container jolted twice—they were being moved off the ship. The girls panicked, clustering around Bai Liu, their bodies shaking with fear as the door began to creak open.

Blinding light flooded in. A fat, broad-shouldered man appeared in the doorway, sweeping his gaze over the girls with a disgusting mixture of contempt and hunger, like a butcher examining meat.

"Come on out," he sneered. "Let's see the pretty little witches who want to swallow eels."

Terrified, the girls huddled closer to Bai Liu before stepping out. The last girl in line had her rear pinched by the man. She screamed in horror and covered herself, tears streaming down her face.

"What are you doing?!"

The man sneered at her chest. "Just a little touch. What are you screaming for? Scream again, and I'll report you to the trial court as a witch. See if you're still so loud after a round of torture."

The girl froze, her face going pale. She held back her tears and followed the others, no longer daring to speak.

Bai Liu cast a glance back at the man, who was still leering at the girl's body with visible greed.

Her trousers, soaked from seawater, had become translucent. Yet she

didn't even dare to cover herself, her fists clenched in humiliation as she walked forward in silence, tears slipping down her cheeks.

Bai Liu slowed his pace, silently moving behind her to block the man's gaze.

The girl glanced back at him, wide-eyed, then quietly wiped her tears and whispered a small "thank you."

The man's leering eyes shifted to Bai Liu's waist. Rubbing his hands together, he grinned. "Not bad either."

Bai Liu: "……"

Truly, not a man with high standards.

Soon, they were led into a massive, empty warehouse. A large screen stood at the front, framed by a banner that read [Preparatory Witch Training Coven] in three different languages.

Bai Liu briefly scanned the space. Around a thousand young women, their ages seemingly between fifteen and thirty, stood packed tightly together. Every face was young.

"Preparatory witches."
A man in black priestly robes, around thirty or forty years old, stood at the front. Three interpreters stood beside him, translating his words in unison across multiple languages.
"I am your interpreter for tonight. My name is Quan Zhendong. You may call me Mr. Quan."

Quan Zhendong smiled warmly.
"You may be wondering—why do we call you witches, when witches are evil beings the Inquisition works so hard to eliminate?"

He gestured broadly, his face radiating false compassion.
"Because you are about to make the ultimate sacrifice. A group of great women offering themselves for the redemption of our sins—for the preparation of witches."

"This title is a warning!" Quan Zhendong suddenly snapped, voice rising as his gaze swept the girls like a burning torch.
"'Preparatory Witch' means that every time you suffer—when you devour eels alive to save us—the demon inside you stirs. It will tempt you. Whisper lies. Tell you that we are persecuting you."

“But that is wrong. That is the devil trying to make you betray us!”

“Everyone is born with sin. Your suffering is atonement. God sent down the seven-star eels and revealed that only you can devour them. This was predestined. Why else would men be unable to digest the seven-star eels?”

“Only the Inquisitorial Court can forgive your sins and guide you in resisting the demons within,” Quan said solemnly. “The title of 'Reserve Witch' is a reminder: as you suffer for redemption, you are always a hair’s breadth from becoming a witch.”

“Each of you is a witch in waiting.”

He raised his arm high, voice thundering:
“Whenever you see this title—be vigilant. Be strict with yourselves. Do not be swayed by temptation—”

“—Kneel, and devour with gratitude the eels God has bestowed upon you.”

Silence followed. The crowd stared blankly at Quan Zhendong’s impassioned sermon. Some clasped their hands in prayer, lips moving fervently. But most stared ahead with dead eyes.

“Now,” Quan said briskly, “we will explain how to destroy eels quickly—and your future job options.”

He drew a teaching stick and tapped the screen. It lit up immediately.

“Let’s begin with the swallowing procedure.”

“The most effective agent against the eel is your digestive tract. The fluids secreted by your esophagus and mouth dissolve the eel’s shell and lining, reducing it to a pool of blood in seconds.”

“The human esophagus measures around 40 cm. A mutant seven-star eel is about the same length. You must swallow the eel whole. Let it slide down into your throat. It will still be alive. It will wriggle and struggle in your esophagus. Do not bite. Do not vomit. Do not let it escape.”

“In about ten seconds, it will be completely dissolved inside your body.”

“I understand this might be hard to picture,” Quan continued. “So

now, we'll watch a demonstration video."

He tapped the screen again. A young woman's face appeared. The footage was grainy, old—but clear enough.

The girl was strikingly beautiful. Her face, saintly. She wore a full knight's uniform. Her eyes were a faint violet, her thick, curly brown hair tied in a neat bun. She sat straight-backed, composed. No older than twenty.

"Hello, everyone," she greeted in stiff, serious English.
"I am Knight #1 of the Saintly Patrol. My name is Quan Baola. I'm nineteen. I will now demonstrate how to properly devour a seven-star eel. This one is approximately 41 cm long and weighs 450g."

The scene shifted. A plastic tub of writhing seven-star eels was placed before her, unceremoniously.

"This is the mutant seven-star eel—a highly dangerous marine creature."
One of the eels tried to bite her, its fanged mouth gaping. Without hesitation, Quan Baola snapped its head in place.

"It secretes mucus that corrodes everything it touches."

She looked up at the camera. Her violet eyes burned with resolve.
"As long as there are saintly patrols, no girl will ever be forced to swallow an eel and risk becoming a witch."

"Please, trust us."

The camera wobbled, clearly urging her to hurry. Quan Baola hesitated. Her steady hand trembled slightly, but she opened her mouth and began to swallow the eel.

"Wait."
A male voice interrupted mid-swallow.
"Baola, we're going to take X-rays for cross-sectional imaging. Hold that position."

The footage changed to a scan. The eel could be seen writhing inside her esophagus—dissolving slowly into blood. Her throat moved with the eel's struggle.

Off-camera, men watching burst into murmured laughter and commentary.

“Damn, she swallowed deep.”

“The holy maiden, huh? Can’t touch a man, but sure gulps down eels. Bet she enjoyed that.”

“Too bad she’s a saint. I’ve got some eels for her too—hehehe.”

“Saint? Nah. Not anymore.”

When the scan ended, the camera cut back to a pale, visibly shaken Quan Baola. She held the remaining half of the eel in trembling hands.

The cameraman teased:
“Come on, Baola. Don’t you want to eliminate all the eels? Swallow the rest.”

She was quiet for a long time. Then, eyes fixed on the lens, she slowly swallowed the rest.

“I will,” she said firmly.

Back in the warehouse, Quan Zhendong’s voice dropped.
“Do you see a brave, faithful knight of the Holy Maiden on that screen?”

He paused. “It grieves me to inform you—Baola has fallen. She has become a witch.”

He folded his hands.
“Let her story be a warning.”

“When the seven-star eels first emerged, Baola proposed the Saintly Patrol—a volunteer force of women trained to devour the eels so that others wouldn’t have to.”

“These women were holy. They swore before God to remain celibate. It is known that women corrupted by lust fall more easily into witchcraft.”

“Baola was their leader.”

He pointed accusingly at her image on screen.
“But she fell. A priest accused her of seducing him during a late night in the church—after he had consumed many eels. He claimed she used witchcraft to force herself upon him.”

“Her soul has been corrupted by the devil.”

He clenched his fists, momentarily lost in his own fury.
Laughter broke out among the guards. One man whistled.
“Yeah! I’m the poor priest!”

City in the Sky

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Quan Zhendong nodded toward Quan Baola on the screen and sighed regretfully. "It is a very sad story—one that everyone entering our kingdom should hear, even if only sideways."

"When Baola was first accused of being a witch by the priest, the tribunal had already ordered a trial and execution. Yet many people throughout the kingdom refused to believe it and questioned the tribunal's decision."

"They held procession after procession for Baola—large gatherings of men, women, and children, all of whom had been favored by Baola's patrols. They demanded that the tribunal reopen the trial, unwilling to accept that Baola could be a witch."

"But the facts proved otherwise," Quan Zhendong stated solemnly. "The tribunal's rulings are never wrong."

"Now, let us review Baola's trial in its entirety."

He pressed a button, and the screen shifted to reveal a vast and solemn courtroom.

In the center, Baola was bound to a stake, hands tied behind her back. Despite her predicament, her expression was not wretched. Her purple eyes looked steadily at the judge on the bench as she firmly declared, "I am not a witch. I did not seduce him. I am innocent."

The priest who had testified against her stood at the plaintiff's table, head bowed, eyes averted, unwilling to meet Baola's gaze.

The crowd behind Baola—her supporters—were fierce in their defense. Some wept, others cursed the priest vehemently.

"You slander Baola!"

"Don't you dare look her in the eye and claim she seduced you!"

Quan Zhendong explained matter-of-factly, "This was early on, before the court had fully established its authority. People questioned its decisions, and today, such outbursts in court are considered serious

offenses. Keep that in mind."

The bishop, seated high above the judge's bench in the video, tapped the table and commanded in a deep voice, "Silence."

"Plaintiff, state the circumstances under which the witch seduced you."

"That night, in the church..." the priest's voice grew faint as all eyes fixed on him. "She took off her clothes, lay before the idol, smiled demurely, and beckoned me, saying, 'Come here, let me come to you.'"

"Her back was so white, her waist so soft. Her eyes glowed purple like a chimera in the moonlight, and two shining ram's horns grew on her head. I was unaware for a moment..."

The priest bowed his head in apparent shame; a dark expression flickered in his eyes.

"It was my weakness that I could not resist and was bewitched by the witch. I repent before God and accept all punishment for my sin. Even if I am publicly judged, I will denounce Baola as a witch so no one else will be deceived by her false virtue and be bewitched as I was!"

"How can that be!" The crowd erupted again with vehement emotion. "Baola would never do such a thing!"

"Silence!" The bishop struck the table once more, his gaze coldly fixed on Baola. "The accused, state your case."

Baola was silent for a moment. "I did take my clothes off then, but I didn't know anyone was there—I was only there to change."

The bishop asked, very coldly, "Did you have relations with this priest?"

Baola's fingers clenched briefly before she quickly regained composure. "Yes, but not as he described..."

"You have disqualified yourself as a holy woman by having sex with a priest," the bishop interrupted coldly. "You stand just a hair's breadth from being a witch after all the lies you have spun. If you cannot keep your heart pure and instead strip and seduce others at will, then you are no different from a witch."

—An understatement that effectively pronounced Baola guilty.

Just as the verdict was about to be delivered, two middle-aged men

and women from the crowd—both looking old with gray hair and wrinkled faces—burst out sobbing at the fence, reaching desperately to touch Baola, still tied to the stake.

"Baola! My child!" The two tried to climb over the fence, cursing furiously. "You damned inquisitors! You are the evil ones! Let go of my Baola!"

"I told you not to be a fool trying to be good. We should never have taught you so well! We should have sent you away when you were born!"

"Oh, my dear Baola!"

Baola's calm eyes twitched; she bit her lower lip as she looked toward the grieving couple. Her eyes reddened slightly, but she obeyed the courtroom's rules, making no sound nor daring to speak.

Despite their grief, these visitors were her parents.

The jury began to clamor again when a priest hurried up to the bishop, whispering urgently into his ear.

"There's another procession for Baola outside the court, my lord."

"We held this trial publicly, and with Baola's parents present, many people are demanding the trial of the priest, accusing him of lying."

"Though we must assert our authority and cleanse the inner circle, given the current situation, it would be unwise to move Baola prematurely. It would provoke the wrath of the people, my Lord Bishop."

The bishop's eyes darkened as he glanced at Baola, then he nodded slightly, gesturing for the priest to relay the message. He spoke solemnly: "Despite the heavy accusations from the priest, Baola is known to all of us as a holy woman. Throughout all the time she has swallowed eels, she has never harbored a corrupt heart and has remained pure. To accuse her so lightly cannot easily convince us, nor can it destroy the jewel of our church."

In just two or three sentences, the bishop shifted his stance, casting a casual glance at the flustered priest across the room. "Father, do you have any evidence that Baola is a witch beyond these accusations?"

Of course, the priest had no proof. He had only caught wind—through

whispers within the Holy See—of a grand purge intended to bring Baola down and bolster the church's prestige. Emboldened by this rumor, he dared to claim that the saintly woman of national renown had changed her clothes, allowed himself to lust after her, and forced himself upon her at her weakest moment.

Baola's reputation was so untarnished that no one disliked her; the Holy See had long looked the other way. The priest thought he could follow the current and that nothing would go wrong.

But he never expected that Baola, the Virgin, would have so many supporters even now—turning the tables completely.

The priest finally panicked and stammered, "No, Your Grace, I have no other charges."

"Are you lying, then?" the bishop asked solemnly. "Are you slandering our greatest Virgin, Baola?"

The priest saw the coldness in the bishop's eyes and realized his fate was sealed. His lips pale, he looked toward Baola on the judgment pillar, hoping—absurdly—that the ever-merciful and great Virgin might speak for him and save him.

But Baola never glanced at him once, even though this man had forced her to endure what she hated most. She remained strong, holy, and just swept past him without a second thought. Her eyes held neither love nor hate—only a calm, distant light as she moved away.

It was as if he were nothing more than an ant, unworthy of touching the coat of her flying knight, no matter how much he struggled.

"He does lie," Baola said.

For a moment, a violent hatred surged through the priest. Since this woman would never look at him again, and since he could not harm her any other way, he resolved to drag her down to hell with him.

It mattered little to him if the most beautiful Virgin in the world was condemned alongside him.

Fueled by this dark resolve, a sudden, brilliant idea struck him.

"I did not lie!" the priest shouted, chest heaving, tears streaking his face. "I was indeed seduced by a witch! But I was wrong in my accusation—that witch is not Baola!"

“Oh?” The bishop’s interest was piqued. “Was there another woman that night?”

Baola shot back swiftly, her rare icy directness fixing on the priest: “It was only you and me that night. Don’t drag other women into this and bite off more than you can chew.”

“It is true there were only two of us,” the priest said, eyes glazed with bitter penitence, as if condemning a real witch. “But, Baola, do you know that witch spawn can use their mothers to seduce men they desire, so they may be born into the world? The mother becomes the cradle in which they are conceived.”

“What an evil monster.” The priest’s eyes dropped to Baola’s belly, lips trembling as he licked them. “It is not you who tempts me—it is the child in your womb.”

“You are a victim, too, Baola.”

Baola’s expression blanked as she slowly lowered her gaze to her stomach, confused.

Almost immediately, every eye in the room followed.

The bishop’s glance lingered meaningfully on Baola’s belly. “Order Baola to be examined.”

“No! Never!” The priest snapped, voice sharp with urgency. “Any examination would alert the witch in Baola’s womb and allow her to escape. The witch is cunning. We can only wait until she is born and fully attached before we can put her to death.”

This would delay things for at least ten months—time in which the Papacy might clear Baola’s name.

The bishop considered briefly and then nodded. “You have a point.”

“Then we wait ten months…”

Baola’s father suddenly interrupted, his voice sharp and eyes blazing with hatred as he faced the priest and bishop. “What if Baola isn’t carrying a child? Does that mean the priest lied and should be executed? Burn him!”

The bishop paused. “That would be just.”

“If Baola is carrying a boy,” Baola’s father took a trembling breath,

eyes tearful as he looked at his daughter, “then she is innocent, and this priest deserves to die.”

“We in the Holy See are always fair,” the bishop declared with displeasure, “and will execute any lying priest. But if Baola is carrying a girl, that girl must be put to death.”

“We will monitor Baola carefully during this time, to ensure she does nothing to let the witch escape.”

Baola’s father tried to argue further, but the bishop rose and said coldly, “This trial is over. The meeting is adjourned.”

The video paused, and Quan Zhendong looked around at everyone. “This was Baola’s trial.”

“Of course, what followed is well known in our country: Baola did become pregnant, and by the time she gave birth in October for another trial, she was deemed a witch and defected—this was the infamous [Witch’s Heart] trial.”

Quan Zhendong smiled arrogantly. “That case proved the priest’s accusations were true: Baola was a witch.”

“Here is the video from that time.”

He pressed play again. The footage returned to the courtroom.

The priest waited anxiously in the plaintiff’s chair, cold sweat dripping down his face like a father waiting outside a maternity ward—which, in a way, he was. Baola had just been admitted to the hospital.

But his wait was not hopeful—it was filled with fear and bitterness. He was not awaiting a newborn child related by blood, but the guillotine descending.

His face pale, he whispered prayers, clutching the cross on his chest. “It must be a girl… it must be a girl…”

Outside the delivery room, Baola’s father trembled, unable to speak fully, clutching his wife and shedding tears as he prayed, “If there is a God, please give Baola a boy!”

“I will offer you everything in the future!”

The delivery room doors burst open. A nurse, tears in her eyes, exclaimed, “It’s a boy!”

“Baola, it’s okay!”

Baola’s father made a three-pointed prayer gesture, his eyes rolling back as he collapsed weakly, a tearful smile spreading across his face. “Good Baola, doing good still pays off…”

The nurse urged, “Quickly take Baola and the child to the Holy See. They won’t condemn the priest until they see for themselves!”

Baola’s father nodded shakily. “We will go together.”

The priest fell to his knees as the news reached him, eyes vacant as he looked up at the bishop, who ignored him, tapping his fingers on the table with annoyance and staring grimly at the pillar of judgment where Baola was to be tied.

Such a chance to destroy Baola, the church’s spiritual pillar, had slipped away.

The courtroom doors flew open, and someone pushed in a pale, wheelchair-bound Baola, her purple eyes still clear despite everything, holding up the newborn baby.

“The priest is lying,” Baola said. “Please execute him, Bishop.”

The bishop cast her an inscrutable glance. “Bring the child forward and show him to me and the priest.”

Baola looked tensely at the infant. “Please be careful—he’s only just born.”

The bishop lifted the swaddling cloth, peered inside, then dropped it in disgust, waving for the child to be taken away. “A boy indeed.”

Again, the boy was presented to the priest, swaddled uncomfortably under the tribunal’s harsh lights. The infant opened his eyes—a striking pair of violet eyes.

The baby’s soft face and purple eyes so closely resembled Baola’s that at first glance, he looked more like a girl than a boy.

…More like a girl.

The priest gave a sudden jolt. He stood up abruptly and pointed at the infant with righteous indignation.
“Bishop, this is the child—the very eye! It is the witch who seduced me that day!”

The bishop paused for a moment, seemingly considering the priest's words, though he appeared to doubt his sanity. He emphasized firmly, "It's a boy."

"Yes, yes, it does look like a boy," the priest replied, holding the child in his arms. He traced the child's face slowly from forehead to chin and spoke with conviction,
"But look closely, my lord bishop—look at his face, his eyes. Don't you think they are too delicate, too beautiful to belong to a boy?"

"Especially those purple eyes," the priest added. "The exact same eyes I saw the night I was bewitched!"

The bishop stopped tapping his fingers, narrowing his eyes as realization dawned.
"You mean...?"

"This witch is fresh from the mother, and powerfully witchy. We all know what witches are capable of," the priest said, his tone dripping with insinuation. "What if, for example, this witch can conceal her true gender?"

"It only looks like a boy, but what if it harbors a [witch's heart]?"

The bishop nodded slowly, approving the thought.
"You've thought it through. There is indeed a possibility the child is a witch."

The priest wiped the sweat from his forehead, took a deep breath, and bowed his head humbly.
"I am a priest. This is my duty."

Baola stared at the child in the priest's arms with a strained expression.
"It's a boy," she said incredulously. "How can he be a witch?"

Her father hissed angrily,
"You beasts! You even want the children..."

"Silence above the tribunal!" the bishop ordered coldly, waving his hand dismissively. "Cover his mouth and drag him away."

A security guard immediately appeared, covering Baola's father's mouth and dragging him off.

The bishop turned his gaze away with satisfaction and looked at Baola

with seeming benevolence.
“The Holy See has always been fair. The concept of male witches is new, and we do not judge lightly.”

Baola stared at her child, voice trembling.
“How will you judge him?”

The bishop paused in thought.

The priest grew impatient and quickly suggested,
“My lord bishop, there is only one way to tell if the child is a witch.”

“In what way?” the bishop asked.

A cold chill crept up Baola’s spine. She looked at Father God Xiang, her expression frozen, as if she had guessed what was coming.

“That’s a Seven-Star Eel!” the priest said with a wry smile. “Witches must have eaten the eel and be able to digest it. Just put the boy with the eel and see if he can digest it—then you’ll know.”

—Of course, when children and eels are put together, the child is the one who dies.

Once the child dies, the trial is over. Witch or not, the trial’s outcome is the same: the child is a witch.

The bishop nodded without hesitation.
“You have a point.”

“Bring the Seven-Star Eel Pond here.”

A large transparent tank filled with writhing seven-star eels was brought into the ecclesia. The priest, expression solemn, lifted the struggling child toward the tank.

“Wait!” Baola tried to stand from her wheelchair, but failed. Her voice cracked with desperation, tears welling in her eyes.
“He’s still a boy! He can’t be a witch!”

“Please, don’t judge him like that!”

“Judging witches by their gender is a superficial view,” the priest retorted, turning toward her with a twisted, triumphant smile. His cold gaze was almost enough to make her scalp tingle, but his tone remained compassionate.
“He is my child too, but for the greater good, I am willing to sacrifice

him."

"Baola, you are a holy woman—you understand this, don't you?"

With that, the priest moved forward, gripping the child in one hand, kissed his cross, whispered a reverent Amen, and prepared to throw the child into the tank.

Behind him, Baola's pale purple eyes darkened to a deep violet. Her breathing quickened. Scales sprouted across her face, her body stretched, and tears streamed from her eyes.
"Let him go."

The priest turned, horror flickering across his face as he stepped back.

Baola fixed the priest and bishop with a hoarse voice:
"I confess. I confess my sins."

"I seduced the priest that night. I am the witch. I stripped to lure him."

"I am the witch! I have the [witch's heart]!" she cried, voice cracking. "But this child is innocent. You must let him go!"

The bishop nearly screamed his command,
"Seize this wicked witch!"

The video abruptly ends here.

Quan Zhendong glanced around at everyone present.
"This is a disgrace to the Saints Patrol. I hope you all learn from this and do not follow Baola's path."

"Baola has now defected to the corrupted witches of the East. If you encounter her, make it your priority to kill her. The Order will reward you handsomely."

He then shifted to a more instructive tone.
"Now, let me introduce you to the ways out."

Quan Zhendong smiled faintly.
"Despite what happened with Baola, your best chance for advancement remains the Virgin Patrol. However, the Virgin Patrol is the most dangerous—closest to the devil, the most demanding, and extremely difficult to enter."

"But the Holy See stands at the very top. If you join the Holy Virgin

Patrol, you will receive the best treatment possible."

"Besides that, there are two other options: fixed affiliation or entry into the company witch post. You can learn more about those later."

He paused briefly, lowering his voice.
"There is a fourth way—a secret channel, not publicly known."

"That is the Island of the Holy Virgin, also called the City in the Sky."

At the mention of the City in the Sky, the burly Holy See security guards exchanged vague, knowing smiles, while others frowned and hesitated.

"The City in the Sky is an island suspended high above the kingdom, blessed with beautiful scenery and tranquility. Women sent there don't have to do any work involving absorbing eels. They live and work normally—like a Noah's Ark, a pure land created by the Holy See for the purest women."

Quan Zhendong's expression softened as he continued slowly.
"Sooner or later, the witch's plague must end. The [Witch's Heart] trial has shown that children born to women who have swallowed eels are no longer safe, regardless of gender. They may possess the [Witch's Heart], perpetuating this terrible curse."

"For humanity's survival, we've created the Sky City—an island, or perhaps an airship—suspended high in the air where no eel can reach. Pure women, untainted by eels, are sent there to live and reproduce with pure men. This way, they bear normal children, ensuring the world's continuation."

A woman cautiously raised her hand.
"Excuse me—on the City in the Sky, these pure men are...?"

"Men of the Order, of course," Quan Zhendong answered immediately. "All men of pure faith who belong to the Holy See may set foot on the Island of the Sky to find their Eve."

The woman bit her lip nervously.
"And if a man is not a member of the Order—if, hypothetically, I have a husband who isn't in the Order—is he eligible to go to the island?"

Quan Zhendong's eyes briefly darkened before softening into a kind smile.
"Those men could be sons of witches, very impure."

He gently stroked her head.
“Break it off with him. Only by uniting with a man of the Order will you remain holy and be safe from the hidden witch’s heart that corrupts others.”

The woman asked softly, a cross resting on her chest.
“What does it take to get to the island?”

“Ah, I’m sure you’re all curious,” Quan Zhendong said warmly, looking at the group.
“The Island in the Sky is truly a Noah’s Ark, created by the Holy See for anyone seeking escape. But our power to create such a refuge is limited.”

He sighed regretfully.
“We want to save the world and rescue everyone from this witch-polluted land—but even Noah’s Ark, built by God, couldn’t save everyone. Only a limited number may go to the Sky City.”

“To protect this pure land from contamination, strict criteria are in place for women who are sent there. We hope you understand—women are more susceptible to eel corruption, and this pure land is far too important to risk.”

“But this isn’t discrimination. Quite the opposite—we treat women favorably. Only women may reside permanently in the Sky City. Men can visit, but only for one week before they must return.”

Quan Zhendong looked upward, then back to the group.
“Women who qualify for the Sky City must meet three conditions:”

“First, be under 25 years old.”

“Second, have no male or female relatives with a history of prosecution as witches or witch offspring.”

“Third, never have swallowed an eel.”

He smirked slightly.
“Of course, there’s a fourth, unofficial condition. It’s not required, but if met, it increases your chance of being recognized as pure.”

“We know the devil often corrupts through evil sexual relationships. Women without such relationships are less likely to be contaminated.”

“So, the fourth condition is: women who remain celibate are given

priority."

"Now, let us all begin choosing our futures."

After a brief pause, the women in the warehouse began moving in all directions, Bai Liu hidden among them. The Order's guards chatted casually in a mix of English and Chinese.

"Why aren't there any resident men on Sky Island anymore? Wasn't there one? The prettiest, most… whorish one?"
"Heh heh heh."

"You've been whoring?"
"How dare you! He's noble—purple eyes, son of the Virgin, top rank on Sky City. Only the biggest shots, bishops, and those who can 'serve' him get a chance. Not us lowly minions."

"I heard his father forced him to be classified as female because he was the son of a witch. They put him on the Sky City roster, made him start receiving guests at twelve years old, and every night there's a queue. I don't know how he endures it."

Bai Liu hesitated as he approached, then looked up and asked, "What's his name?"

The two clerical guards tried to ignore him but stopped, uncertain, upon seeing his face.
"What? You want to go to the island too?"

"I do," Bai Liu smiled, repeating, "What's the name of this son of the Virgin?"

"No one gave him a real name," the guards answered, exchanging looks. "On Sky City, no one uses their real face or name. Everyone gets a code name—usually a playing card."

"This son of the Virgin is known as Hearts. Everyone calls him Queen Hearts."

Chapter End Notes

If every man died, I think the world would be a better place.

City in the Sky

Meanwhile, in Sky City.

[System Alert: Player Hearts has logged into the game.]

[Player Hearts gains in-game status: Sons of the Virgin]

Hearts, sleeping on the couch, logged into the game and slowly opened his eyes. His pupils contracted for a moment as he took in the sight of the familiar burgundy flannel tent draped before him—almost like an irritated animal, instinctively drawing a weapon. In his case, a playing card, which he swiftly slashed through the tent.

The sharp edges of the card tore the fabric into pieces, scattering like a shower of blood. Across the table lay a pair of playing cards, intertwined ambiguously. The lower card was the Queen of Hearts—the symbol for Hearts himself.

The card on top usually represented the person who had stayed the night.

After reading the instructions, Hearts relaxed, rose, and slowly ran two fingers over the Queen of Hearts card before lowering his gaze and letting out a lazy chuckle.

“So, this is the game map.”

Reality, Heresy Authority — Third Bureau, 2 PM

A helicopter touched down quietly on the roof of the Third Bureau. A group of men dressed in black bodyguard uniforms stepped out, carrying briefcases. No sooner had they landed on the third floor than members of the Heresy Authority surrounded them, guns raised.

Originally, the Three Bureaus were built on a small island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. But when the island sank, Georgia—the current head of the Three Bureaus—used her own funds to rebuild and expand them on a different coast, closer to the original site.

Now, the Three Bureaus are heavily guarded and house a large number of dangerous heretics. Their primary role is to secure these captured heretics and lease some of the safer ones to countries that

have agreed to accept them.

The men in black raised their hands in a gesture of surrender to show they posed no threat. One carefully produced a reservation ticket and said cautiously in English, “Hello, we have a prior reservation to lease a heretic and have already paid a deposit.”

A Heresy Authority officer glanced at the ticket, slowly lowered his gun, and gestured for them to follow.

The group exhaled deeply and trailed behind the officers, descending to the reception area on the ground floor.

One member of the Heresy Authority knocked on the captain’s office door. A serious, dignified male voice replied softly but politely, “Come in.”

The man holding the reservation ticket pushed open the door and stepped inside.

He took a deep breath at the sight of Georgia seated behind the desk. No matter how many times he had seen him, Georgia’s striking presence still caught him off guard—especially here, where the somber institutional atmosphere seemed at odds with the commanding figure before him.

“Greetings, Captain Georgia.” The man bowed respectfully and sat across from him, sliding the reservation ticket forward. “We’re here to collect the previously reserved low-risk heretic—the Seven Star Eel.”

Georgia’s eyes scanned the ticket but made no move. Instead, he folded his hands calmly in front of him. “I need to re-examine your rental qualifications.”

Instantly anxious, the man replied with an accent, “Why another inspection? We’ve already passed three rounds of checks!”

Georgia’s impassive expression calmed him. He realized a hasty attitude would not sway the discreet head of the Third Bureau.

“Captain Georgia, the water in our country is severely polluted. Even after multiple purification processes, boiling it for consumption still harms everyone.”

The man pulled out his phone and played a news clip for Georgia.

"...Water pollution is worsening. This year alone, twenty-three infants and children have died from drinking unpurified water. People protest daily, demanding government solutions."

"Hospitals and food services have nearly halted due to the crisis. Suicide and mortality rates rise daily, as this invisible epidemic spreads. With no recourse, people have turned to major sects and rising ecclesiastical powers."

"Many pray to God for relief, but we all know that's impossible..."

Suddenly, amid the broadcast, a voice hissed wildly in the background: "Who says it's impossible?! God must fix this!"

"Won't God help us?"

The presenter was soon dragged offstage amid chaos, and the video cut out.

Georgia's eyes twitched slightly but he remained silent.

The man pressed on bitterly, "Captain Georgia, I'm sure you've read the reports. The spread of an orange-level medium-risk heresy is increasing mortality. According to Joint International Regulations, if a heresy exists that can resolve this crisis, it must be leased to us!"

"This is to save the innocent people of our country!"

Finally speaking, Georgia glanced coolly at the ecclesiastical insignia on the man's sleeve. "We generally lease only to government departments, not to the Holy See."

"But you see the situation now." The man sighed. "The people distrust the government and trust only the Holy See. The government is keen to bring the Holy See under its control."

He smiled haughtily. "The Holy See wouldn't have the Authority's appointment tickets without government backing. You can consider the Holy See as a government department now, given its popular support."

Georgia remained unmoved.

The man's patience thinned but he held back. Slowly, he slid a hefty cheque across the table. "If this is about the deposit, we can renegotiate."

—That was blatant bribery.

Georgia lifted his gaze, cold as ice. “You think I’m short of money?”

The man immediately retracted the cheque, smiling awkwardly. “Of course not. I know your status—you’re the heir to the Kingdom of Gold.”

He had clearly made a grave error trying to bribe someone who literally owned uncountable wealth.

Georgia, the Grand Prince of the Land of Gold, had never asked the General Administration for a single penny to rebuild the Third Bureau—larger than a sea island and still expanding. How could he accept a bribe smaller than a fingernail cap?

“Don’t mention that title. I’m just a civilian now,” Georgia said in an unusual tone. “My kingdom is dead.”

The man nodded, “Yes, yes.”

Indeed, the kingdom had fallen, but the gold was still Georgia’s.

“Is it true you can’t lease the heretic to us?” The man’s eagerness spilled out despite the silence. “We’ll return the water once the contamination is cleared. I can sit here all day expressing sincerity to pass your test—I could spend ten years. But every hour children in my kingdom die from polluted water!”

“You wouldn’t want those children to suffer as you once did—watching your people perish and your country die, right?”

Finally, Georgia moved. He looked up, stood, and said, “Show me the lease application again.”

The man exhaled deeply and handed over the document. After a careful review, Georgia nodded. “It meets the requirements.”

“Come with me.”

Georgia led the way, walking briskly but calmly. “The Seven Star Eel is a low-risk heretic recently captured. It’s not very dangerous and easy to contain. We’ve discovered it dissolves many pollutants in water and has a unique purifying effect.”

“When this report arrived, I sent notices to regions where water pollution exceeded low-risk heresy danger levels, suggesting heretics

could be leased to address pollution."

Glancing back, Georgia said, "This is the Seven Star Eel."

Before the man, two eels coiled in separate tanks. He struggled to mask his greedy excitement. "This low-risk heretic will solve our water pollution, right?"

"Yes." Georgia nodded, his tone turning serious. "But even low-risk heretics are still heretics."

"The only hazard of the Seven Star Eel is reproduction. It breeds exceptionally fast. If males and females share a tank, by morning it will be filled with offspring."

"That's why we lease only male eels separately, to prevent complications."

The man's eager eyes dimmed. After a pause, he cautiously asked, "Can't you lease the female?"

"No." Georgia refused firmly. "The eel dissolves only inside a human body. While the resulting liquid isn't overly harmful, it causes mutations."

"Interestingly, dissolution depends on gender: male eels dissolve only in male internal cavities; female eels only in female internal cavities."

The man looked shocked, "The internal male cavity?!"

Georgia glanced over him lightly. "Saliva dissolves females better; intestinal fluids dissolve males better."

The man chuckled nervously and clutched his hips. "Captain Georgia, don't you find this conversation embarrassing?"

"Embarrassing?" Georgia's gaze returned to the eels. "If it takes this much to save my hometown, what's so embarrassing about it?"

Regaining composure, Georgia added, "Male Seven Star Eels can't reproduce alone, so leasing them is safe. No need to worry."

"But one eel isn't enough to purify quickly." The man stared at the female eel. "Can't you lend us the female as well?"

"No." Georgia's tone was cold. "The female is unstable. We've observed its breeding—it recently produced almost exclusively

females and is poised to expand rapidly."

The man's eyes lit up. "All female offspring?"

—Wouldn't that be enough to solve the problem by itself?

"So, the mothership is not leased," Georgia stated simply, then glanced over at the men. "Come over for the leasing process."

"Oh—yes, of course." The man reluctantly tore his fond gaze away from the female eel. "Captain Georgia, you asked me to make a call to inform my country and explain that only one eel was borrowed, so we can prioritize the region for use."

It was a perfectly reasonable request. Georgia nodded. "Go ahead."

She returned to her office, while the man headed to the helicopter landing pad on the top floor of the Heretic Bureau to make the call.

Inside the office, Georgia sat frozen in thought, jaw clenched, eyes fixed on the water contamination report the man had just handed him. A team member beside him noticed his expression.

"Captain, are you still unsure? There's nothing wrong with the procedures he followed."

"And it's only a low-risk heretic, right?" someone else added.

Georgia frowned. "I know."

He hesitated, then said, "I just thought…"

The team member pressed, "Thought what?"

Georgia narrowed his eyes and glanced at the man's profile. "It feels like too much of a coincidence." He lowered his voice. "One minute, the country has a serious water pollution outbreak, and the next, they're leasing a low-risk heretic to solve the problem?"

"It's like…"

Something unseen was setting them up.

On the top floor, inside the helicopter and away from the Heretic Bureau staff, the man's face twisted in barely-contained excitement

the moment the call connected.

“Hey, I saw the Seven-Star Eel.”

“Is it really like you said? That once dissolved, its bones can be refined like mineral ore and used to forge weapons?”

“The Holy See needs weapons. The sacred minerals are dwindling, but if we can get our hands on the Seven-Star Eel, it’s an endless resource —we could arm the entire Holy See.”

“…Money isn’t a problem. We’ve got backing from the major plutocrats…”

“But there’s one issue,” he said, suddenly lowering his voice as he cast a dark glance toward the Third Council building. “The head of the Third Council only lets me borrow male specimens. Without a female, there’s no way to reproduce.”

The bishop’s hoarse laughter crackled over the line.

“Father Quan Zhendong, don’t worry. God will bless you.”

“What do I need to do?” Quan Zhendong asked eagerly.

“We’ve been blessed by the gods. The divine relics in our possession rival the heretics in power,” the bishop said with a rasping chuckle. “They’ve helped us pull off more than one theft.”

Quan frowned. “But the Third Bureau has tight security. If the Matrix goes missing, I’ll be shot down before I even get airborne.”

“No need to steal the Matrix,” the bishop said coolly. “Don’t you remember what the director said? The females reproduce quickly— and the next generation are all female.”

“All we need to do is speed up the breeding, then steal the female offspring. Pair her with the male we leased and—”

The bishop let out a satisfied sigh. “God loves the world. The Holy See is glorious.”

Quan Zhendong laughed, eyes gleaming as he looked down at the Bureau for the Treatment of Heretics.

“God loves the world. The Holy See is glorious.”

3:00 a.m.

Quan Zhendong practically ran up to the helicopter, breathless, frenzied, as he stared at the two eels now entwined in the tank.

“Got it, Bishop!”

“Well done,” the bishop laughed, clearly intoxicated—glasses clinked faintly over the line. “Send the eels back and come relax on the sub-island.”

“You’re on the sub-island?!” Quan’s excitement instantly gave way to panic. “Are you insane? Have you forgotten what happened to the people on the main island?”

“Sky City’s original island was taken over by the Empress. Everyone there is her slave or pawn now.”

“She’ll find out about your little hideout behind her back eventually. When she does, she’ll torture you. How could you go there?”

There was a long pause. The bishop's breathing grew heavy.

“…You’re right,” he muttered. “I was too caught up in the success. The Queen has been busy lately, hasn’t toured the islands… I’ll get off the island right away.”

“Don’t ever go back to the Sky City sub-island,” Quan warned harshly. “If you don’t want our great ecclesiastical cause destroyed by that lunatic—that Queen—once she finds out.”

After hanging up, all of Quan Zhendong’s earlier euphoria had drained away. He slumped back in his seat, drenched in cold sweat. It took a long while before he dared unlock his phone and swipe through the photo albums.

He hesitated at one.

“Queen’s Album.”

His finger hovered above it, trembling, before he tapped.

The first image was of a breathtakingly beautiful boy, no older than 13 or 14, with glowing purple eyes. He stared lazily, coldly at the photographer, regal and untouchable.

Quan's breath hitched. Unconsciously, he clutched the phone to his chest and murmured, almost entranced:

"…Queen."

Every man who had ever met the Queen reacted the same way.

Twenty-five years ago, a dancer rose to fame in their country. She was renowned for her interpretation of Salome—at just nineteen, she mesmerized audiences with her performances. Her home life had been idyllic: loving parents, a kind upbringing. She soon opened her own dance studio, and during the height of her fame, her first national tour was a charity effort—all proceeds donated to those in need.

A devout believer, she was soon called the Holy Virgin.

Said to be of foreign descent, she had radiant violet eyes and an angelic smile. Though she played eerie, witch-like roles on stage, in real life, she was a gentle, bashful girl who accepted flowers with shy smiles. The contrast made people adore her all the more.

But during one charity tour, disaster struck.

A priest forced himself on her, then claimed it was she who had seduced him. He offered "proof"—photos of her smiling on stage, her hand in his after a show. Pictures where she merely looked at him like she did everyone.

But in a nation that revered priests, the public took his word. He claimed he left the priesthood for her, declaring his love and faithless devotion.

Public opinion erupted: Why won't you marry him? He gave up everything for you. You're having his child.

She refused.

Even as a believer, she wouldn't marry the man who violated her. The pressure grew unbearable, especially once she was discovered to be pregnant.

In their country, life is sacred from conception. The Virgin gave birth to the child.

The nation turned harsher: Why won't you marry him now? Girls of faith urged her: If it were me, I'd marry him. He loves you. He

sacrificed for you. Isn't that enough?

But she stood firm—until a bishop appeared.

A man of higher standing, purer status. He too claimed to love her. He boldly declared his feelings, confessing:

"I first saw you at 14, performing Salome. I was captivated, but restrained myself—we were both meant for God. But now… may I ask you to stay with me?"

The nation rejoiced. The Virgin relented. She married the bishop and left the country, finally finding peace abroad.

The Bishop seemed to have truly loved the Virgin.
His home was filled with portraits of her as a teenage girl, taken when she first appeared on stage. Every one of her early performances had been recorded and replayed endlessly—he would watch them with something close to reverence, even obsession.

"You were so beautiful," the Bishop once exclaimed. "I'm sorry I didn't meet you when you were fourteen. I would have courted you like a madman."
He smiled, wistful. "It's a shame you were already eighteen when I first saw you on tour."

The Virgin felt a strange unease, staring at her too-young self frozen in one of the Bishop's photographs. But the tenderness in his voice made her lower her guard.

"Would you like my child?" she asked softly.

"Of course," he said, almost playfully. "She'll be as beautiful as you. Why wouldn't I?"

Later, as she gazed at the infant's room—lined wall to wall with pink clothes, dolls, and glittering accessories—she hesitated. "You seem to really like girls?"

"Yes," the Bishop replied, smiling gently. "Especially girls as beautiful as you were at fourteen."

"And if the child..." She looked up at him, her voice tentative, "is a boy?"

He fell silent. The light faded from his eyes briefly, but then he forced

a smile. "No. It will be a girl. I expect it to be."

"You could have the gender checked," she suggested.

"No." He gently rested his hand on her belly. "I won't disturb her descent with instruments. Have you forgotten? In our doctrine, it's considered disrespectful to test a child before birth. It disrupts their arrival."
His voice softened into a murmur. "They'll fly away from our hands like angels."

Time passed. The baby was born.

It was a boy.

The Virgin would never forget the look on the Bishop's face. Disappointment hung over him like a shroud—as if the long-awaited gift, so lovingly anticipated, had revealed itself to be a mistake.
It was like biting into a fruit you'd waited forever to taste, only to find it was made of plastic.

"I'll take the child," he said coldly. "You will stay here."

"Where are you taking him?!" the Virgin cried out.

"The Island in the Sky," he answered with indifference. "A Holy Land constructed by the Holy See. Perfect for a newborn. He'll be raised in the teachings of the Lord. There are priests up there who prefer boys. They'll educate him properly."

The Virgin stared at him, stunned. "What is that place?"

The Bishop's eyes roamed her disheveled hair, her no-longer-youthful face, the hardened expression in her eyes. He sighed, regretful.

"You're no longer the maiden I loved. I can let go. If you wish, you can come to the island too."

He smiled again. "You've given me your best years. Now, you can return to the island, rededicate your body to God. The Order will still welcome you."
"There are still many who like you."

The City in the Sky.

No one could have imagined such filth could float above the clouds.

When the Virgin first arrived, the Bishop—once again in full regalia—greeted her with a strange, theatrical tone.

"Amazing, isn't it?" he said. "There are floating islands in this world. We bought this one from a mysterious gentleman. He had all kinds of magical artifacts, though the price was... excessive."

"You can't scout this island easily. It requires an invitation to even land here."

He continued, "The Sky City runs on a membership system. Without a referral from a senior member of the Order, you cannot enter."

"Those who come here either have devout faith—or something valuable to offer in support of it."

The Virgin recognized faces from television—powerful people from across nations, walking past her, each surrounded by ecclesiastical attendants, conversing quietly.

"They don't have enough status to access the inner perimeter," the Bishop noted. "Only the truly important enter there."

"Inner circle?" she asked.

"To reach the inner circle, a simple referral isn't enough. You need a different kind of card."

She tensed. "What kind of card?"

The Bishop's smile widened, and then—slowly, deliberately—he spat out the word:

"A person."

He stroked her hair with an almost fatherly affection.

"Those entering the inner circle must be closely bound—otherwise, betrayal is inevitable."

"So we exchange our most cherished person... our business card, if you will. We let others experience what we've experienced, so we are united. Loyal. Unbreakable."

He laughed softly, gazing at her vacant expression. "I once loved you

too much to use you that way."
"But now, you're perfect for it."

"Of course, you can refuse. The Lord is merciful."
"Then I'll just change cards. The boy is close enough to me. I don't prefer boys, but others do. There are already several boys on the island."

He leaned in.

"None are as beautiful as your son. I doubt anyone would turn him down."

He studied her expression, amused. "Thinking of rebelling? Don't. The Inquisition reaches everywhere."
"If you disappear here, no one will ever find out. The boy will still be mine—and still be my card."

"Of course," he added, almost cheerfully, "his biological father is also on this island, with his own business card."

The Virgin said nothing. She gazed out at the floating island, then closed her eyes.

Years passed. The boy grew up.

He lived alone in a vast villa on the island, forbidden to leave.
By birth, he should have been a devout child—his father a Bishop, his mother a sanctified Virgin.

Instead, he hated the Church with a visceral disgust.

His father was distant, even cruel. The boy often feared the man might one day kill him—for something as small as cutting a favored rose.

But his mother...
His mother was the kindest, most beautiful person in the world.

She wasn't always home, but when she was, she hugged him tightly, told him stories about distant lands and magic, and smiled so warmly that he forgave her absences without hesitation.

She never told him stories from the Church.

"Why not?" he once asked.

She paused. "Because I want you to believe in what you choose, not what others do."

"And what should I believe in?"

She smiled at him, eyes soft. "Love. Respect. Kindness."

"What good is it to believe in those?" he asked, skeptical.

Her gaze turned distant. "Believing in them brought me pain. I suffered for them. Most people only use such words to justify hurting others."
Then she looked at him, radiant. "But faith in them also brought me you."

"You are the best thing my beliefs have ever given me."

His mother was a dancer—her Dance of the Sevenfold Veil was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. She still performed it, often.

Before leaving, she would dress beautifully, then turn to wave at him from a field of flowers, her violet eyes sparkling.

"I'm going dancing!" she'd call.

And from the balcony, he would shout back, "I'll wait for you!"

She always returned late—sometimes with his father—her clothes torn, her eyes distant.
She would bathe, dress again, and come to hug him.

"The dance is over for today," she'd whisper.

Sometimes, he saw bruises on her skin.
"Dancing is too hard," he once whispered. "Can you stop dancing?"

She was quiet for a long time. Then she smiled. "Mummy has to work too. If I don't dance, how will I earn money?"

He declared, "Then I'll dance."

"I've watched your tapes so many times—I know how. I'll go instead!"

She laughed softly. "You're too young. I was twelve when I first went on stage. How old are you?"

Twelve.

He remembered that age.

When he turned twelve, he thought, he would dance for her.
So she wouldn't have to anymore.

As the days passed, he began to sneak around when she was out dancing. He would slip into her dresses, carefully recreate the makeup she wore, then mimic her movements and expressions to the rhythm of the music playing from her old tape.

He was growing up—slowly, surely—and becoming more and more beautiful.

She started to look at him differently, her gaze growing confused, almost panicked. Often, she'd bark at him in a flurry of nerves:

"Go outside! Roll in the flower field!"

"Wipe that makeup off!"

"Stop playing with flowers! You're a boy! You shouldn't play with those things!"

But when he was eleven, he placed a flower playfully behind his ear, twirled around in front of her, tilted his head, and asked, "Does it look good?"—for the first time, she looked at him with something like fear.

She broke into hysterics.

"Didn't I tell you? No girly stuff!"

"You're a boy, not a girl!!!"

The yell stunned him into stillness. The flower slipped from his head, falling and scattering into broken petals at his feet.

"I'm sorry..." she whispered, slowly crouching down. She covered her tear-filled eyes, voice trembling. "I shouldn't have yelled at you. I just… I just don't understand. I've told you so many times, why do you still like those girly things?"

"You're obviously a boy..." she added, lowering her hands and looking up at him through teary eyes.

He pressed his lips together and said stubbornly, "But I don't like being a boy. I hate them—all those boys. They treat you so badly."

He was thinking of the way her male visitors—the bishop, the men from the church—looked at her with that smug, knowing smile. Their eyes roved over her like she was something less.

He hated the way they looked at her.

She was the best person in the world, danced more beautifully than anyone he had ever seen. They were trash—unworthy of even being near her.

“I want to be like you,” he said. “Not like them.”

Tears slid down her cheeks. She gave a shaky smile, sniffled, then raised a pinky finger toward him.

“It’s my fault,” she said gently. “I shouldn’t have thought you could just do whatever you wanted. But… make one promise to me.”

“What is it?” he asked.

She leaned in and said quietly, “Don’t pretend to be a girl when your father’s home.”

He nodded without hesitation.

On his twelfth birthday, after confirming that his ridiculous bishop of a father had gone off to some place called Sky City and wouldn’t be returning that day, he turned to her excitedly and asked:

“Can I dance for you?”

“I’ve learned it all! I’ll dance for you!”

“Oh?” she laughed, clapping her hands. “That good? Alright, I’ll be the judge.”

He changed into the same costume she had worn in her youth. He applied makeup with solemn care, layered on a sevenfold sarong, and began to dance—perfectly mirroring her movements from the old tape.

“Do I look good?” he asked as he twirled, beaming, his violet eyes shining with excitement. “Did I do it right?”

“You look beautiful,” she said softly. Her eyes were glassy with tears,

but she smiled. “Even more beautiful than I was back then.”

“I thought so,” said a voice.

A deep, male voice. Quiet, and burning just beneath the surface.

At the doorway stood his bishop father—who wasn’t supposed to be there. He stared with a slow, sick smile.

“It’s quite beautiful,” the man said. “Twelve years old and just as perfect as I imagined.”

And in that moment, for the first time in his life, he saw a look of absolute despair on her face.

He gave his bishop-father a sour look—one that would normally earn a sharp reprimand. But today, the bishop was in a particularly good mood. He crouched down to look him in the eye, smiling warmly and kindly.

“You look lovely in that dress today. Your mother was right—you dance even better than she did.”

“Twelve years old...” the Bishop sighed, voice clipped. “What a wonderful age. Just right for dancing.”

He smiled and asked, “Would you like to dance at Sky City? It's the perfect place for someone like you.”

Sky City was where she used to go to dance. He had always wanted to help her so she wouldn't have to work so hard. His eyes lit up. He nodded without hesitation.

“I’ll go!”

“No!!!”

Her scream came at the same time as his reply, shrill and frantic.

Tears welled in her eyes as she stared at the Bishop. Her voice trembled.

“You promised me. You said you’d never take him to the island as long as I was still the card!”

The Bishop gave her a cursory glance, his gaze sliding over her body with thinly veiled distaste. Still, his tone remained polite, even apologetic.

“Let me see... how long have you held that position?”
He tilted his head, feigning thought.
“I did keep my word, as agreed.”

“But,” he added smoothly, “you’re getting too old to be a business card, even if you're still beautiful.”

His calm smile didn’t waver.

“You know how it is. People don’t like old cards. Your beauty’s carried

you far, but after all—"

"You're thirty-three."

The bishop's gaze slid to the boy, still veiled in gauze, and his voice turned soft with satisfaction.

"It's time for a new card."
"Will you dance for me on the island tonight? For your mother's sake?"

He agreed.

So the Bishop took him to the island, just like in the story of Salome. Only this time, he played Salome—dancing for his so-called father before returning home.

So this was dancing, he thought later, soaking in the bath. No wonder her clothes were always torn when she came back.
He didn't understand it—there didn't seem to be anything special about it. Still, once he was done, he ran to find her with the same joy she used to have after dancing.

The bastard bishop had told him she'd never have to dance again if he went to the island in her place, dancing for different people in the evenings.

He agreed without hesitation.

After all, it was hard work, he thought with a small, grown-up sigh. But now he could do it. He could dance for her.

She wouldn't have to suffer anymore.

Smiling at the thought, he knocked on her door like he always did, ready to hear her stories.

But when she opened the door, he froze.

She was lying in bed, more haggard than ever. Her gaze flicked to his pajamas, to the bruises hidden underneath. She took two sharp, shaking breaths.

She tried to smile at him as she always did—pretending everything was fine—but this time she couldn't.

She covered her face and sobbed.

“I’m sorry!!!”

She threw her arms around him, clinging tightly to his back, sobbing as if it would tear her apart.

“I’m so sorry!!! I never should’ve brought you into this world!”

“It’s all my fault!!!”

He stood there, stunned, as her tears soaked through his shoulders.

There were many things he couldn’t understand. Like why she seemed even more broken now, even though he had taken her place.

Every time he came down from the island, no matter how clean he was, she always knew. And little by little, she withered.

“I’m not working hard,” he said awkwardly. “Don’t worry about me. It’s just dancing. Everyone says I’m the best dancer on the island.”

She looked at him with a complicated expression, like he was a child who understood nothing. But she still smiled and whispered:

“You’re the most beautiful.”

“You’re the most precious.”

No matter how much he tried to comfort her, how hard he worked, she faded with each passing day—like she was slowly dying of something incurable.

Eventually, when he was fourteen, she became truly ill.

In just two years, her brightness had dimmed into a shadow.

He stayed at her bedside, forcing a cold, composed expression so she wouldn’t see his fear.

She was pale on the hospital bed, but her grip on his hand was gentle.

“I never knew what I was supposed to do,” she said, smiling faintly.
“I didn’t want to be a burden, but I think... I think I’ve always been your faith, right?”

“Like you were mine.”

“I’m afraid if I leave, you’ll be lost. But if I stay, you’ll keep going in

the wrong direction."

Her eyes welled with tears, but her smile was free.

"But God's freed me. He made the choice for me."
"Leave Sky City. Go. You dance so beautifully—there's a world beyond this place waiting to be your stage."

"There are people out there who will see your dance and treasure it. Not just monsters. Real people. I've seen them."

She passed away.

One quiet afternoon, he sorted through her things and found a photo: she was sitting on the Bishop's knee, smiling brightly in the sunlight.

She looked so happy—so unaware of what awaited her.

He hated the photo. But it was one of the few where she smiled like that. He nearly tore it in two but held back. He couldn't destroy the only smile she left behind.

So he kept it—disgusted.

He buried her in a field of flowers.

Then he stood there, in the daylight, for a long, long time.

And then, suddenly, he ran.

Tears poured down his face as he fled.

She told him to go far away—so he would.

But he failed.

The Bishop quickly caught him. Papal ships surrounded the island—there was no escape.

He had always lived on the floating island above the sea, and now that she was gone, he had nowhere to run. No one to hold on to.

On his sixty-seventh failed escape attempt, after another brutal beating, he was thrown back onto the island and forced to "receive guests."

As they dragged him to the stage, he looked at the Bishop's back and,

for the first time, truly wanted to kill him—to pick up the silver fork of a nearby candelabra and stab him until he stopped moving.

But he knew it was impossible. The Bishop was always surrounded by three or four armed Papists.

Just then, the Bishop's usual arrogance cracked.

"What? That gentleman is here?"

He barked orders in a rush:
"He doesn't like outsiders. Clear the inner circle. Empty it completely. I'll receive him alone!"

The Inner Circle—those were the highest guests. Each one powerful beyond belief.

Now they were being dismissed like dogs, all for one unknown man.

Even he, hands and feet bound, was tossed aside and forgotten.

In over two years on the island, he had never seen such treatment.

The Bishop, head bowed, welcomed the visitor with deference.

He turned his head, straining to see.

The man wore a dark cloak and boots, a long black whip trailing the ground in one hand, and a ghostly mask on his face.

Guests of the Inner Circle always wore masks and voice changers, to hide their identities—and their shame.

But the regulars always recognized each other. And this man was not a regular.

"I haven't been on this island in a long time."
The man's voice was soft, threaded with a quiet laughter. It buzzed faintly through the voice modulator in his mask, not quite audible.
"You've turned it into a stage, haven't you?"

Before him, the bishop didn't dare lift his head. Cold sweat clung to his skin.
"We're grateful to you for selling the island to us."

"No need to be nervous," the man said lightly. "I'm not here to trouble the buyer. Since I sold this hover island to you, you're the owner, and

I'm just a guest."
He smiled beneath the mask.
"I only came up today because I stumbled into something sad. I thought… maybe I could find someone to keep me company awhile."

"I heard you work on a membership basis," he added. "But I don't have a business card. No one referred me either. So forgive me for just walking in."

The bishop shook his head frantically, eyes shining.
"You don't need any of that!"
"What kind of companion are you looking for? We have everything here."

The man chuckled softly.
"Someone good at imitation."

The bishop and the man crumpled on the floor both froze—shocked.

—There was no better mimic on this island than him.

He'd been steeped in roleplay for two years, trained to replicate a person's essence on sight. Given a photo, he could instantly channel the feeling they carried.

So, though still aching from a recent beating, the bishop dragged him up again, had him washed, and—at the strange guest's request—sent him to the room.

The bishop warned him harshly:
"Behave yourself. If you displease this gentleman… I'll dig up her bones from under the flower field and crush them."

So he sat there, suppressing the restless heat pulsing through his body, praying the night would pass quickly.

But the guest didn't move fast. Instead of rushing him, he calmly removed his cloak, laid a poker card on the table, then took a seat on the wide sofa opposite him.

The room was dim, veiled in burgundy flannel. Thick red candles flickered faintly in the sconces. By their haze, he could just barely make out the markings on the card—

—A spade. He couldn't make out the number.

The guest remained shadowed—only a silhouette, cross-legged, visible through the drapery and candlelight. Black leather gloves. A black bone whip resting carelessly on one knee. Both were wet from the rain outside.

He wasn't surprised. Some guests brought their own "tools." He steeled himself for what would come.

But then the man asked something unexpected.

"Do you like water?" the guest asked softly.

He hesitated.
"…I guess I do."

The man smiled.
"Me too."

"But the child I'm closest to… hates water. Even though he was born in it."
"I gave him life, but he couldn't form a soul—couldn't take my place like I'd hoped."
"And the moment he finally grew a soul… he left me."

"I watched him grow, but he never looked back at me."

"It's a sad thing to watch," the guest said, handing him a set of clothes gently.
"Tonight, he'll betray me for good, to offer his soul to someone else."
"Would you… play his part, and keep me company?"

He stood, confused. He had no idea what role this man wanted him to perform. Still, he stepped behind the curtain and changed.

The outfit was a shabby orphanage uniform, clearly meant for a teenager. A bandage crossed one eye.

The more he looked, the more baffled he felt. As he dressed and stepped out, he wondered—was this guy into some strange kink?

"Is this how I wear it?" he asked.

The guest smiled.
"Yes. You look perfect."

He pursed his lips, then moved toward the man's knees out of habit—but the guest's voice stopped him.

“Don’t come closer.”
The tone was flat, almost lazy.
“Just sit. And don’t turn around.”

Still confused, he asked,
“…So what should I look at?”

The man handed him a book.
“Read this.”

It was styled like a fairytale, but the pages were filled with gruesome murders. It had been torn apart and stitched back together. On the cover, in faded letters:
The Long, Thin, Ghostly Book of Murder.

So he sat half-curled, reading under the dim candlelight while the guest silently watched.

After a while, he couldn’t hold back.
“I’m just… supposed to read?”

“Don’t look at me,” the guest replied flatly.
“He never looked at me. You’re playing him—so don’t look at me either.”

“Just read the book.”

Rain pattered outside.
Inside, he sat reading a fragmented book of horrors, the candlelight wavering. The burgundy drapes swayed gently between them.

For a moment, the room felt like a dream.

It was as if he were back in a little courtyard, lounging on a recliner while she watched him read from a storybook. Not a hired performer in a crumbling room.

Time passed—he didn’t know how much. Long enough to grow drowsy.

“You’re sleepy, aren’t you?” the man asked, smiling.

He jolted.
“No!” he insisted, embarrassed.

“Do you have any other requests, guest?” he asked, suppressing a yawn.

The guest chuckled. Hearing it made him blush. He quickly sat up straight.
“Do you… have any other requests?”

—It’s time to dance, isn’t it?

But the guest only said,
“No. The night is over. You’ve made it quite pleasant for me.”

He blinked—wasn’t that line too soon?

“Why pleasant?” he asked, too curious to resist.
“All I did was read.”

The guest smiled faintly.
“Because, through you… I remembered a soul I could never have. One that left me.”

“He was never quiet with me. But you were.”
The guest rose, picked up his whip, and looked back one last time at him, half-kneeling, dazed on the floor.
“Thank you for your company tonight.”

He stammered.
“N-no… You’re welcome.”

—For the first time on this island, someone had thanked him.

“You improved my mood tonight,” the man said gently.
“Is there something you’d like in return?”

What kind of sentence was that? He’d never heard anything like it.

He fumbled for an answer.
“Is… is this part of the payment, guest? You already paid when you entered the island.”
If the bishop found out he accepted tips, he’d destroy her garden.

“Not payment,” the guest said.
“A deal.”
He knelt down, tilting his masked face, smiling gently.
“You put me in a better mood. My mood’s valuable. You’ve earned a more expensive request.”

His fingers curled slowly.
“I—I don’t want to dance this month.”

“Done,” the guest said simply.

He grew braver.
“I want to take someone’s bones and bury them in a real, hidden grave.”

“Done.”

He hesitated again, then asked one last thing:
“I… want to leave the island. Just for one night. Is that okay? I want to see the outside world.”

The guest paused. For a second, his expression darkened—maybe he’d gone too far.

Then the man reached out his hand and smiled.
“Yes.”

He stared, stunned.

“You don’t hate water, do you?” the guest asked kindly.
“Would you like to go under the sea?”

He slowly placed his hand in the man’s.
“…I think I would.”

What was with this guy?

Who even was he?

As schools of glowing fish and drifting whales passed overhead, he stared blankly at the guest standing beside him.

The guest smiled.
“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

He lifted a gloved hand to his chin, as if musing.
“How can anyone hate the water?”
“It’s so beautiful beneath the sea.”

And his mind went blank. Only one thought echoed—

—Had he just met a god?

From that night on, the strange guest—who claimed to be a "god"—began visiting every evening.

On the second night, he arrived in the same clothes, carrying the same books. The only difference was a small, curious one: this time, he was wearing contact lenses—or were they called contacts?

Hesitantly, he opened the small box the guest handed him with a smile. Inside lay a pair of silver-blue lenses.

"I left in a bit of a hurry last night," the guest said politely. "I forgot to bring these. They're unused, the safest kind. Would you mind wearing them?"

Of course, he didn't mind.

He changed behind the curtain, slipping into the tattered orphanage clothes and placing the silver-blue lenses into his eyes. Then he sat down and flipped open his book. As he felt the guest's gaze fall upon him, a subtle shiver prickled across his scalp.

—Those weren't the same eyes as last night. Not after he'd put in the lenses.

The guest watched him with intense focus—or was it nostalgia? As if he had spent countless lifetimes in this quiet haze, watching a silver-blue-eyed statue who never spoke, never looked back, only turned pages and read in silence—for a million, billion years.

Perhaps sensing his unease, the guest spoke, his voice soft and smiling: "Does my gaze make you uncomfortable?"

After a moment's pause, he shook his head truthfully. "No."

—Because the way this guest looked at him was different from how the others did.

There was no hunger in that gaze, no desire. Just a calm, distant focus—like someone watching a character on a screen, or an NPC in a game.

The other guests never saw him as a person.

But somehow, he felt more human in this guest's eyes than he ever had in anyone else's.

After a few moments of shared silence, he spoke up tentatively. "Are you... fond of the child I'm playing?"

The guest considered the question, his expression thoughtful. Then he gave a quiet laugh. "I don't really understand what you people mean by 'fondness.'"

"I've just grown used to His company—even though He never answered me."

"Is the boy your heir?" he asked without thinking. "Then you have every right to keep him from leaving, if that's what you want."

—That's how every man in the inner circle treated their children: as something they could claim, control, and never release.

Name cards, inheritance, jobs—everything was predetermined.

Children like him, born into those inner-circle families, could never escape the grip of the circle or the Holy See. Their fates were etched in stone from the moment they were born. There was no deviating from the path laid out for them.

So he was confused. A man powerful enough to clear the entire field of inner-circle men... was grieving the idea of a child leaving him?

It was absurd.

"It's true," the guest said, smiling gently, "I could have kept Him with me, back when He had no soul—when He was just a statue."

"But not anymore. Not now that He has a soul."

"He would endlessly resist my hold, fighting to break free—for the sake of his own aspirations, for those he wants to protect. The moment he gained a soul, that struggle became inevitable."

The guest looked at him with wistful eyes, something deep and unreadable swimming in their depths. "He understood love. And because of that... he gained a soul."

"He's no longer one of us. And we can no longer sit together under the stars in peace."

“But couldn’t you bring me to the sea?” he asked awkwardly. “Aren’t you supposed to be like... a god? Even then, you still can’t keep the child?”

The guest smiled again. “Even a god cannot keep a man who possesses a soul.”

He slowly straightened his back, repeating the words softly—confused, but filled with an aching kind of longing: “A man... with a soul?”

Then her voice echoed in his mind:

[Get out of here. Get out of the City in the Sky.]

[A wider stage awaits you.]

"Thank you for your company tonight." The guest rose, drawing on his cloak, and smiled at him with a nod. "Is there anything you'd like?"

His thoughts were a whirlwind, and he blurted out a string of requests —none of them particularly coherent—yet the guest accepted them all without complaint.

"Will you... will you take me off the island tonight too?" he asked finally, more cautiously this time. "Just down to the sea, like last night?"

"Down to the sea...?" The guest let out a soft laugh. "If that’s all, do you really like the sky that much, just off the edge of the island?"

He froze, caught off guard.

The guest extended a gloved hand toward him with a gentle smile. "I’ll show you the universe—the place where I was born. Want to come?"

His eyes lit up. Without hesitation, he reached out and grasped the hand. "Let’s go!"

That night, when the guest brought him back to the island, his mind was still reeling with the silver-blue vastness of the stars. He collapsed onto the thick fleece blanket, dazed, before suddenly springing up, vibrating with barely contained excitement. He punched the air, humming nonsense, then flopped back down and rolled over, kicking his legs in the blanket, hugging the pillows.

It was beautiful.

This world—so vast, just like she said.

He slowly, tenderly pulled the photograph from his inner pocket. With practiced ease, he covered up the dog-man in the picture, staring only at her sunlit face. Then, he gently pressed the photo to his chest, curled up under the fleece blanket, and fell asleep smiling.

The starry sky beyond the island was brilliant.

In the days that followed, the guest came almost every night, taking him to the furthest reaches of the world and fulfilling his every wish.

They sat on the ocean and watched mermaids swim past. They gazed at ancient beasts frozen beneath the Antarctic ice. They squeezed into crowded trains and rode them back and forth.

Sometimes, the guest would joke, "That passenger mirror is going to explode one day."

He'd blink, puzzled. "Why?"

The guest would laugh. "Just because I thought it would be funny, so I designed it that way."

He never really understood these strange remarks, but it didn't stop him from enjoying himself.

No one had ever taught him how to play before. But now, he felt like he had finally found the friend she had spoken of.

Still, deep down, he knew—this guest would leave one day. He didn't know why, only that the thought filled him with dread, so he ran from it, avoided it.

Until one night, the guest brought it up himself.

As he sat quietly flipping through a book, the guest said suddenly, "I won't be coming tomorrow night."

"Where do you want to go tonight?"

The guest said it so lightly, as if bidding farewell to a TV show after dinner, completely unaware of how cruel those words were.

His fingers trembled as he turned the page. He looked up, stunned, then forced himself to steady his voice and asked, "Just tomorrow night?"

"No," the guest said with a smile. "Not just tomorrow. I won't be coming back at all."

He sat frozen, holding back his expression, trying to look cold, unreadable. But then something struck him. He suddenly leapt up and ran, shouting, "Wait for me!"

"Just wait for me for a moment!"

Tears fell as he hurriedly wiped them away and pulled a hidden sarong—the same one from the Salome dance—from beneath his fleece-lined bed.

[There will be people in this world who truly see you dance—who appreciate your beauty. They exist. I've seen them.]

He took a deep breath, slipped into the sarong, and emerged with trembling shoulders.

"May I... may I dance for you?" he asked, voice shaking.

The guest answered gently, "Yes."

He had danced this dance countless times before, in candlelight and behind flannel curtains, while being watched with eyes full of hatred and lust—eyes that once stared at her the same way.

But not this time. Not tonight.

The guest simply sat and watched. He didn't interrupt. He didn't rush forward. He didn't sprawl on the floor to grope his feet. He didn't whisper any of the words that he now understood—and despised.

When the dance ended, he turned with tear-filled violet eyes, clutched the hem of his skirt, and asked softly, "Was it good?"

"It was beautiful." The guest smiled. "Your soul is as beautiful as your dance."

At last, he smiled through his tears. He stepped back, lifted his skirt, and gave a slight bow—just like she did at the end of every performance in the video.

"Thank you for watching."

City in the Sky

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After the dance, instead of making the usual requests, he simply talked with the guest.

"What is it that you do?" he asked carefully.

The guest paused for a moment, then chuckled. "I thought it was a rule on this island not to pry into a guest's business?"

He tensed immediately, about to apologize, but the guest laughed again and added, "I'm not doing anything important—just a drifter who enjoys playing games."

Noticing the guest didn't mind the question, he relaxed and asked more tentatively, "Then why are you leaving so suddenly?"

"Ah, that..." The guest considered for a moment before answering. "I can't actually exist in this world. I can only come through prayers and invocations. This time, I was able to stay longer because *He* kept calling me, wishing for me."

"But now He's stopped calling. So, I have to go."

"Can't I pray for you to return?" he asked.

"No," the guest said calmly, with a small laugh. "You don't believe in me. I can see it in your soul—your faith lies elsewhere, in something stronger."

He blinked, stunned. "A stronger faith...?"

The guest smiled. "She's beautiful too, isn't she? Your faith is beautiful too."

He fell silent for a long time. Then, with a faint, hoarse laugh, he nodded. "Yes. I think so too."

"So, where would you like to go tonight?" the guest asked, as he always did. "Is there anything else you want?"

Head bowed, fingers curling tightly into his sarong, he looked up with

reddened eyes—but his voice was clear:

"I want to leave this island. For good."

"I want to kill every man on this island."

"That's my only wish tonight. Is that okay?"

The guest paused for a heartbeat—then suddenly smiled. "What's this? A wish to God Xiang?"

"Wishes to God Xiang always come at a price. Do you accept?"

Something in the guest's voice chilled him. This was different. The way he looked at him made his skin crawl—but still, he nodded.

"If you can make it happen, I'll pay any price!"

"So young," the guest mused. "Only the young say such impulsive things."

"He said the same thing to me, not so long ago."

"But I," the guest added with a wicked glint, "as an evil god, have no reason to refuse a sacrificial offering."

He reached out, tapping a gloved finger to the center of the young man's forehead, and whispered:

"Then… as you wish."

A flash of silvery-blue light engulfed him, and he passed out.

When he woke the next evening, his mind was foggy. Dazed, he sat up too quickly and accidentally knocked a stack of playing cards off the table. One had fallen face-up.

It was a Spades card. And on it, words were written:

[The price of a wish is pain.]

[This pain includes yours—and the pain of those you wish to destroy. I accept both the pain you cause and the pain you endure.]

[A friendly suggestion: sometimes, it's more satisfying to let those you hate live. Their suffering might be worth more than their death.]

His fingers curled slowly around the Spades card, his purple eyes darkening. His breath hitched—just as the door behind him slammed open.

His “bishop” father strode in, grabbed him by the hair, and dragged him out.

"That one’s gone," the bishop said coldly. "Time to serve the others."

"You’ll be hosting two tonight." His eyes flicked to the sarong he was still wearing. "No—make that three."

"It’s been a while since I’ve seen you dance."

He clutched the Spades card tighter, breath coming in short bursts. Before he could even stand, the bishop shoved him into another room—where two men, dressed in ecclesiastical robes, were already waiting.

The bishop yanked him upright by the shoulders and sneered, "These two priests have been waiting. You may begin your dance."

He had barely taken a step when one of the men lunged forward with a lecherous grin. Reflexively, he snatched up a nearby candlestick and struck the priest hard across the head.

A scream rang out.

He laughed, quick and sharp—but the bishop tackled him to the ground, furious.

His right wrist was stomped underfoot. The Spades card slipped from his grip as the bishop twisted harder.

As the others circled him—grabbing at the sarong, sneering at his body—his gaze locked onto a playing card lying on the table:

Hearts Queen. His mark.

It lay between two other cards.

And in his eyes, something ignited—something darker than pain. A hatred beyond anything he had ever known.

Kill them!!!

I will kill these men!!!

[..... Violent desire detected .....]

[Player Hearts has logged into the game.]

Inside Sky City, Quan Zhendong — still youthful in appearance — sat restlessly on a chair in the middle of a corridor. He shifted uncomfortably, peering in from time to time with anxious, curious, and almost salivating eyes.

Behind the door at the end of the hall, a priest who had brought him tonight was inside, having ordered Hearts Q — said to be the most beautiful of them all in Sky City.

Quan Zhendong had only just received the priesthood of the Holy See. His superior, in cryptic tones, had told him that to celebrate his induction into the Order, he would be taken to a "supreme purgatory" — a place reserved for men of the cloth alone.

When he first arrived, Quan Zhendong had been stunned into silence for thirty minutes, then quickly adjusted. Still, out of a sense of modesty, he politely declined to "count his cards" — saying it was his first time and he felt unprepared.

"Next time," he had murmured.

That modesty lasted only until he saw a picture of Hearts Q. He had gone slack-jawed. The priest had laughed, clapped him heartily on the shoulder, and said, "I saved up two months of contribution points to order him for an hour. I even had to queue. If you want, I'll give you ten minutes."

Quan Zhendong feigned refusal twice before accepting.

But now an hour had passed. The priest who promised to spare ten minutes still hadn't emerged. Growing anxious, Quan Zhendong kept glancing down the corridor. After confirming no one was watching, he approached the door and knocked.

No response. He called the priest's name.

A faint, broken voice answered from within: "Help… help…"

It didn't sound like a man lost in pleasure. It sounded like a man dying.

Unease twisted in Quan Zhendong's gut. He slammed the door open.

The stench of blood hit him like a wall. What he saw froze him in place — a vision straight from hell.

The deep red velvet drapes had been soaked through, dark blood dripping from their folds. On the ground lay three or four bodyguards in twisted positions, limbs bent at unnatural angles, blood pooling beneath their slack bodies. Their eyes were wide, pupils dilated. If not for the subtle movements of shallow breath and pain-induced tremors, Quan Zhendong would have assumed they were already dead.

Further inside, the two priests who had ordered Hearts looked like they'd been disemboweled — their organs visible, their faces scorched. One priest's lower body had been completely crushed into an unrecognizable, sunken mess that made Quan Zhendong's skin crawl.

That thing's gone! Completely gone!

The bones that used to attach to it aren't even intact anymore!

Despite their catastrophic injuries, both priests were somehow still alive.

Quan Zhendong's mind went blank. Driven by a horrified curiosity, he stepped further inside.

"Help… help…" came the bishop's faint cry — the island's master himself. Once arrogant and patronizing, his voice now trembled like a broken poker chip.

"Leave me alone…"

Quan Zhendong parted the curtain — and stopped breathing.

The bishop's shrill, choked screams echoed through the room. Before him sat a man, slouched lazily in a wide sofa chair. In the dim candlelight, his eyes shimmered an eerie violet so dark they were almost black. Blood soaked him from head to toe — dripping from his hair, pooling at his feet, staining the floor beneath.

He held a deck of cards, shuffling them with unhurried ease, and asked in a light, almost playful tone:

"I'll ask again. What's his name?"

The bishop whimpered, voice cracked and hysterical, "I-I really don't

know! People just call him King! He never leaves a name behind!”

“Is that so?” The man lowered his lashes — blood running down the length of them like tears. His voice dropped, heavy with judgment. “You know nothing, then.”

“Useless men.”

As the words fell from his lips, he flicked a card from the deck — held between two fingers — and sent it flying.

“Aaaahhh! AHHHH!!!” The bishop’s screams tore through the room.

The candlelight flickered.

Quan Zhendong turned, face pale, and finally caught sight of the bishop’s body by the shifting glow. Blood drenched him, but unlike Hearts — who was clearly covered in someone else’s — the bishop was unmistakably soaked in his own.

He lay sprawled on the ground, limbs splayed grotesquely. Playing cards had been embedded into every joint of his body — one per socket. His muscles spasmed in uncontrollable agony, but the cards pinned him in place, denying him even the mercy of thrashing.

Hearts’ latest card had landed squarely in the bishop’s groin. Blood erupted from the impact.

Quan Zhendong stood frozen in horror, watching the bishop twitch in agony. *How could this not hurt?*

Panic surged. He turned to flee — but his foot landed on a crumpled scrap of paper, loud in the stillness.

Hearts looked up.

Blood trickled down his once-alluring face, now ghastly. He leaned back in the chair, elbows draped lazily over the armrests, bones loose like he had none.

Then, through the wavering candlelight, he raised his head. Violet eyes glinting. Lips curling into a slow, dangerous smile.

“You’re my next guest, aren’t you?”

Chapter End Notes

Fuck yes!!! Kill them all

City in the Sky

Hearts drenched the City of the Skies in blood, and on a rainy night, he turned that place—hailed by the Holy See as a pure land—into a hell on earth for its inhabitants.

It rained heavily for three days straight, yet the blood on the island could not be washed away.

But Hearts did not kill the men outright; instead, he inflicted upon them a far colder punishment —

— He transformed the City of the Skies into a Court of Judgment, a court for men alone, where every man fixed at specific coordinates on the island could accuse others who had been there. Those accused were summoned back to the island to stand trial, face sanctions, and endure the penalties demanded by their peers.

And if they refused? Something far worse awaited them—Hearts had the means to torture them mercilessly.

Over the next four years, the City of the Skies became Hearts' Island of Judgment, completely under his control. Men who endured the brutal trials were forced to leave the island and start new lives, broken and reshaped by the ordeal.

In the end, the city reverted to an island — inhabited only by Hearts himself and the dying men left after their trials.

Hearts still refused to let them go, harboring an endless, simmering hatred that could have fueled endless trials, summoning men back one by one to torment them anew.

No man dared disobey him. In private, they called him the Empress—a terrible figure who tortured and tormented them, like a Dacromos sword hanging high above their heads, forcing them to live in constant fear. They were afraid to act rashly, afraid to return, afraid even to remember what they had done.

During those four years, with the aid of men condemned to the island, Hearts extended his reach from Sky City to the Holy See itself. He began to control the growth of the Order, forbidding any man who entered it from touching a woman — or else they would be summoned to the Sky City Inquisition and judged by him.

The Holy See found itself caught in the crossfire of Hearts' oppression. Outwardly, no one dared speak against him, but privately, resentment simmered.

"A man in a woman's skin," the bishop muttered, taking a hard sip of wine.

Since Hearts had mutilated him four years ago, the bishop had aged badly; his face was deeply lined, making him look even more sinister as he grimly said, "And yet he tries to control the Church."

"God will punish him severely!"

"But not today, at least." Quan Zhendong glanced at the bishop with sympathy, who whispered in fear, "He's got you summoned to the island again tonight."

The bishop began trembling at the thought, barely able to keep composed. "What other cruel tricks could he have planned?"

Quan Zhendong whispered with a wry smile, "Like shoving fireworks up your ass again? You were in the hospital for two months last time."

The bishop fell silent. Suddenly, he sprang to his feet in the tavern: "I don't want to go to the island! Kill me! I don't want to see him!"

— Four years ago, he could never have imagined that going to the island would become such a terrifying ordeal.

"Suicide is a sin," Quan Zhendong advised. "He won't always go that far."

But Quan was wrong. Not long after, the bishop lay dying in the hospital, tears in his eyes, choking on his words as he gripped Quan's hand: "He… he put me with the horse in heat…"

"That thing has…?"

The female doctor nearby adjusted her glasses and spoke clinically, "We had to amputate about 40 centimeters of his intestines. He can't eat heavily anymore, and he's prone to prolapse and excessive gas, so please take care of him."

"Yes, yes," Quan Zhendong replied blankly, staring at the emaciated bishop curled on the hospital bed, covering his face and crying in pain like the women who had once cried after being violated. His mind

went blank except for one thought —

— Hearts must be stopped. He can't be allowed to continue like this.

They will all be tortured to death by him otherwise.

The Holy See quietly established a secondary island, holding secret meetings there.

"This can't go on!" one priest said in horror. "We've all been summoned—I'll be next on the island!"

"It can't go on!" another cried out in pain. "He torments me every time he appears in women's clothing. I can't even bear to be near women anymore—I'm terrified!"

"Me too!"

"Me too. A woman came to me for prayer, and I screamed when she touched my hand. I'm still scared."

"These sinful women!" One priest slammed his fist on the table, his voice vicious. He had been accused by seventeen women on the island and tried seventeen times at their behest. He could barely sit now, and his hatred for women was deep. "They're all horrible, witches who mutilate us. They deserve to go to hell!"

"But…" another priest hesitated, fearful of Hearts, "Maybe they're just returning the favor. Perhaps once the trial ends, we'll be free."

"What do you mean, 'an eye for an eye'?" the first priest snapped bitterly. "We only did what had to be done! Who are they to return it to us?"

The other priest said nothing for a moment. "What had to be done?"

"Exactly." The standing priest's voice dropped low as he recited their daily prayer, "Have you forgotten what our catechism says about women?"

"They are to serve us, pray for us, lie by our bedsides, contribute to humanity's creation and continuation, and relieve our desires. Otherwise, why create women at all?"

He stressed, "The Catechism states women were made by men, created to help us, and therefore it's right that we do whatever we please to them."

“Of course, I know all that.” The other priest nodded, but with hesitation added, “But Hearts…”

“He’s a man.”

“Shouldn’t he be doing this for us, as doctrine demands? Isn’t it normal for him to return the favor?”

Silence fell. The great banner of sacred doctrine they had just raised seemed pierced in an instant.

“He grew up stealing his mother’s clothes, wearing them, imitating her, and going daily to those dances meant only for women.” The bishop, newly tried and dying, spoke from a corner in a sombre tone. “He looks like a woman, speaks like a woman, and aids those arrogant women in punishing us. Though he has a man’s body, his heart belongs to a woman.”

“He even volunteered to come to the island and dance for us — and enjoyed it.”

The bishop said without irony, “How is this different from the wicked witches in the catechism who actively seduce men?”

“So what if he’s a man? He has degraded himself into a woman, a lesser breed created by God to assist us.” The bishop struck his wheelchair violently. “Then we cannot blame ourselves for treating him as we treat women.”

“What right does he have to call a spade a spade? He deserves whatever he gets!”

Meanwhile, on the City in the Sky.

Hearts was not always alone on the island. Those who left it at first resisted returning, but over time, many found themselves drawn back to visit him.

Hearts was always open to those who came back.

Tonight, rain poured again beyond the island’s borders. Hearts opened the door to welcome those who had braved the weather, smiling at the once-familiar faces.
“I told you not to come if it was raining,” he said lightly.

“I have something important to tell you today!” a girl said excitedly, reaching out subconsciously to shake Hearts’ hand.

Hearts jerked his hand away as if shocked by an electric jolt. Then he paused, softening.
“... I’m sorry.”

Without another word, he turned and hurried to the bathroom.
“I’m going to wash my hands,” he muttered over his shoulder.

The girl watched, wide-eyed, as Hearts disappeared.

The woman beside me sighed quietly,
“... He still isn’t comfortable with normal female touch, is he?”

Inside the bathroom, Hearts practically ran. He unlocked the door quickly, grabbed a wire brush, and scrubbed his right hand—the one the girl had touched—so fiercely that it bled. He didn’t stop until his palm was raw and crimson.

Leaning on the sink, he slowly raised his eyes to meet his reflection.

Blood dripped from his fingertips into the basin, spreading in a circle, staining the water—and his purple eyes.

In the mirror, he was eighteen years old. Though he wore a wig and carefully applied makeup, his masculine features grew sharper with age: the knot in his throat, broad shoulders, prominent joints, a taller frame.

No matter how much he tried to stop it, a harsh man was slowly growing inside him—threatening to replace the female face he had crafted as his own.

An unbearable nausea welled up inside him, especially whenever he accidentally touched a girl.

He realized that no matter how hard he tried to hide it, whenever he came into contact with these girls, they saw him as a man—

Just like the brutes.

Hearts braced himself against the sink, dry heaving from the rising sickness.

He was growing older and beginning to understand everything that had happened before. He grasped the pain she endured, the cruel

dance she performed for all those men watching—

And with that understanding, he grew to hate men.

He hated the way they stared at her, drooled over her, used her, and destroyed her.

But to his own surprise, he was becoming a man too.

He hated it, feared it, and desperately wanted to tear away that shell. More than once, he'd inquired about sex change surgery. He never presented himself as a man in the game, disguising himself by every means possible. Yet the moment a woman touched him, an overwhelming disgust for his own sex surged within him.

Every time he neared the edge of madness, her voice echoed softly in his mind:
"Even though you are a boy..."
"...But you're good looking too."
"You are most valuable."

That guest's gentle voice, accompanied by a smile, would add,
"You have a very beautiful soul and dance."

Hearts gasped violently, eyes red and breath caught. Then, unable to control himself, he smashed the mirror with his right hand.

Why must I be a man?

When Hearts finally emerged from the bathroom, he stood with his usual grace—his right hand carefully bandaged.

The girl's eyes lingered on his injured hand before she quietly said,
"I'm sorry."

"It's nothing." Hearts quickly changed the subject, leaning back on the sofa with a lazy smile.
"Is there some good news you want to share with this old man on an empty island?"

The girl, amused by his self-description, exchanged a look with the woman before speaking carefully,
"That's right."
"She's getting ready to get married."

The woman looked at Hearts with gentle hesitation.

“I wanted you to know.”

The smile on Hearts’ face vanished instantly. He stared at them, stunned, vacant, almost overwhelmed, and whispered,
“You... are getting married?”

He felt as if he might slip off the island and fall away.

“Is it you two?” His hands trembled, but he quickly composed himself and smiled, winking.
“Bless you, then.”

The girl and woman exchanged a brief silence, then looked up at him.

“No.”

Hearts asked hoarsely,
“Why?”

The woman smiled bitterly.
“I had a child while I was on the island—Phoebe. She was taken from her father at birth. Now his ex-wife has died, and he needs a beautiful woman to be his next wife. So he has approached me.”

Without hesitation, Hearts said,
“I can help you kill him.”

“He’s an arms dealer, more powerful than you can imagine,” the woman replied bitterly.
“I don’t want you to go through this for me. He’s especially harsh with his children—the ex-wife’s child Daniel was nearly trained to death. If I weren’t Phoebe’s nominal mother, Phoebe would be illegitimate, and her life would be even harder.”

“I don’t want her to become just another card, you understand?”

“I can raise her,” Hearts said firmly, almost urgently.
“I can bring her to the island.”

The woman’s voice softened.
“And then what? She’ll have to leave the island one day. Her father’s forces are everywhere—just like the Order. She can’t stay here forever.”

“You’re still fighting the Holy See. You don’t have the energy or resources to take on something that big anymore. You’d just draw

fire.”

Hearts faltered.

“I won’t be able to come up to the island to see you,” she said, wistful and reluctant.
“Take care of yourself.”

She reached out to tap Hearts on the shoulder, then hesitated and turned away.

They left again.

Hearts remained still, sitting silently until a knock came at his door.

A man wearing a mask and cloak, carrying a black whip, stood outside.

“Hello,” the uninvited guest smiled on the rainy night.
“Seems the island has a new owner now?”

Hearts jerked his head up and stood.

Meanwhile, on the secondary island.

The priests spoke solemnly,
“No, the Queen has grown too powerful. She’s expanding her influence, even taking control of the minerals. We stand no chance of opposing her.”

“Not necessarily.” The bishop in the wheelchair grunted, struggling to prop himself up as he half-stood. “Everyone, look here!”

“It’s true that in this current peaceful state, we can’t gain any advantage over the Queen.”

“But!” The bishop’s eyes darkened with a sinister gleam, “When people suffer and lose all hope, they will inevitably seek refuge with us in their confusion!”

The priests shifted uneasily.
“You’re right, my lord bishop, but there’s no tribulation now…”

“If there’s no suffering, then create it.” The bishop smiled arrogantly, folding his gnarled hands behind his back. His gaze was as sharp and

venomous as a viper's. "God sends tribulation to test the world—so why shouldn't we?"

"Send tribulation?" A priest asked, incredulous, eyes wide. "What kind of tribulation?"

The bishop's gaze drifted casually to the newspapers pinned to the nearby fence. His eyes locked on a headline: Water Pollution Widens Due to Industrial Development. His lips curled into a knowing smile.
"God sends floods to cleanse the world."

"Then let us unleash the water pollution."

On the City in the Sky.

"Why are you back again?" Hearts looked at the visitor with disbelief. "I thought you said you'd never return."

"I've been summoned once more." This time, the guest's voice carried a distinct pleasure—unlike last time, now he came willingly, even happily.
"I am very pleased."

"On my way back to my shrine, I noticed the island had changed. I came to see and found you had become its new master."

The guest praised him, "You've adorned this island beautifully, and I can smell pain everywhere."

There wasn't a single corner of the island unused for trials—courts for judging men were scattered throughout.

Hearts listened, lowering his trembling eyes slightly, and replied haughtily,
"Thank you for the compliment."

"You look…" The guest paused, sizing him up. "...like you've changed quite a bit since before."

Hearts' fingers clenched briefly, his voice tightening as he answered,
"More like a man, wouldn't you say?"

"That's not true. I see you struggle to read the surface. It's the soul that counts." The guest laughed softly. "Your soul bears more pain now than ever before."

“What pain do you suffer from?”

Hearts was silent for a long moment, then slowly lifted his head, inhaled deeply, and said,
“I’m suffering because I’m not strong enough.”

“I thought being master of this island would be enough. But no matter where I put them in this world—those men—”

His face twisted in pain, purple eyes flashing like deadly blades, his murderous intent blazing,
“—they remain trapped, imprisoned by islands forged from their own filthy desires!”

“Would you want to become stronger?” The guest’s interest piqued. He opened his hands slightly and asked,
“Thank you for your company tonight and for sharing this rare pleasure with me. I can tell you how to grow stronger.”

Hearts took a heavy breath, raising his eyes to meet the man’s.
“How?”

“No matter how strong you are, your power alone will always be limited.” The guest smiled knowingly. “Form guilds. Join leagues. Tame those members as the Holy See tamed you. Make them your followers and your instruments.”

“With God-level faith and power, there’s nothing you can’t do.”

Hearts asked softly,
“Even kill any man?”

“That includes killing any man.” The guest laughed, “Including killing me.”

The words hit Hearts like a thunderclap, and he stared incredulously, instinctively replying,
“I’m not going to kill you.”

“I am a man in this world too, and you’re perfectly capable of killing me.” The guest found amusement in his words, forming a fist on the armrest and resting his head lightly against it with a smile.
“I don’t hate your aggression—on the contrary, I appreciate it very much.”

“If you do kill me, I might just fall in love with you for a moment

before I die."

The guest smiled and said,
"I suppose you like me, judging by your attitude. Aren't you impressed by my offer?"

Hearts' heart pounded wildly, his feigned calm shattered by the man's words. His head spun for a moment.

"I didn't…" His lips parted pale, almost breathless. "I just…"

"Didn't like me?" The guest chuckled. "Then why have you hated men so much, yet let me onto the island anyway?"

For a moment, Hearts was silent, his mind blank. He hadn't allowed a man on the island for four years—except during the trials.

"I won't force you to kill me," the guest said, "it's just that your soul is far too valuable… Sorry for bringing up something that upset you." He softened, but soon smiled again.
"No matter, the most likely person to kill me is about to enter the game."

"I will soon be dead by his hand."

The guest laughed heartily,
"I came today to share that good news with you."

"What?" Hearts' mind went blank, even his expression faltered. "Who will kill you?"

"Remember the child I asked you to play with four years ago?" The guest smiled.
"The child who gave Him a soul is now eighteen. He just summoned me at a lake."

"It's incredible to think that this kid, though not yet in the game, has a soul growing ever stronger. If he enters the game, he will quickly become powerful enough to kill me."

The guest sighed with rare emotion,
"Unfortunately, he declined my invitation to enter the game."

Hearts had little time to ponder, but he let out a sigh of relief and immediately asked,
"So, you're not going to be killed anytime soon?"

“Of course not.” The guest smiled slowly.
“He will come into the game one day to kill me.”

“It is his destiny, and we are fated enemies.”

The guest joked wryly,
“After all, I’m the ultimate villain in his story, and the day will come when he kills me.”

“Why…” Hearts asked, his voice trembling slightly, “why do you have to be killed?”

The guest looked at Hearts, watching him like a character on a screen, then smiled faintly.
“Because it’s funny, isn’t it?”

“You seem sad.” The guest inquired softly. “I’d like to ask you to play someone for me. If that’s inappropriate, I’ll be off for the night.”

“If I am killed, this will be the last time I see you.”

The guest stood and bowed slightly.
“It’s been a great pleasure seeing you this evening.”

Hearts jerked his head up, tears still threatening, and answered with conviction,
“I’m not sad. I’ll play.”

“That’s good.” The guest pulled out a school uniform and handed it to Hearts, along with a pair of contact lenses, whispering softly,
“He’s rather cold.”

Hearts took a deep breath, accepted the clothes, and went to change.

Approaching the guest in the uniform, he said admiringly,
“I can’t believe you haven’t met him. You do a great impression.”

“Except for the eyes.”

“Oh yes, I forgot to bring you black invisible eyes.”

Hearts blinked in surprise—black? Aren’t they silvery blue?

“But there’s something else different besides the color.” The guest regarded Hearts thoughtfully as he looked into his eyes.
“That boy wouldn’t look at me like that.”

“He hates me.”

“You like me.”

The guest smiled politely, as if addressing a game character,
“Can you please change that look? It’s not how that kid looks.”

A shiver ran down Hearts’ spine. He clenched his fists, took a deep breath, and looked up again, fixing his gaze on the guest in the chair.

The guest finally smiled with satisfaction. “Yes, that’s the look.”

“That look that’s going to kill me.”

Hearts seemed to realize something and spoke slowly, his voice hoarse: “Isn’t the child I’m imitating... the same child I imitated last time?”

“Not the last one,” the guest chuckled. “This is the one that’s going to kill me *this* time.”

“Why...?” Hearts’ voice trembled with emotion as he struggled to keep his composure. “Why should I imitate the child who’s going to kill you?”

“Why?” The guest looked at Hearts with a mix of understanding and mild distress. “Because I want to die so badly, but the boy won’t kill me now.”

“I want you—who are good at impersonation—to play him first, to simulate killing me all over again.”

The guest looked up and smiled. “Do you mind?”

Hearts could no longer remember how he sent his guest away. Staring out at the heavy rain outside the island, he was lost in a trance, his mind endlessly replaying their last conversation.

[Will you be in the game?]

[I am everywhere; the game is my incarnation.]

[Can I find you in the game?]

[Sure.]

[What do I have to do to see you?]

[Be number one in the league. I only accept the most valuable players.]

[...Who is the player who killed you?]

[It is I who have a soul.]

[What is the name of your... ?]

The guest stood at the edge of the storm-battered island, his cloak rattling in the gale. His laugh was soft and indistinct: “Name?”

“You can’t call me by my real name. Just call me by my code name—call me Spades.”

Then he fell backward with open arms, plunging from the island in the sky and disappearing into the endless, choppy waters below.

Hearts stood at the island’s edge, silent and stoic. Then, turning back, he logged off with a determined gaze.

— He was going to win. He was going to be strong enough to beat everyone. He was going to take first place!

He was going to kill the man who... killed him!

Quan Zhendong, his face marked by years of wear, looked at the young queen in the photograph with a complicated expression. Shaking his head, he ended his memory and turned toward two eels swimming in a tank, his eyes darkening anew.

They had planned for six or seven years to endure the Queen’s oppression until the Papacy could rise again.

This was a rare opportunity that could not be missed.

— Game Prep, Witch Sorting Warehouse.

Bai Liu stared at the large screen, seemingly understanding, but remained still.

The Witch’s Heart—the key element in this game connected to the trial—was either in the possession of the Virgin or the Son of the Virgin, whose codename was Queen Hearts, likely the login identity of

Hearts himself.

This meant the possibility that the game's key prop, the Witch's Heart, was already in the player's possession could not be ruled out.

After all, on their side, there was a little witch who also seemed to have a witch's heart—the game might as well be a tower-defense scramble, with both sides competing to seize the Witch's Heart from the opposing team.

The loudspeakers on either side of the warehouse repeated announcements in a continuous loop, in various languages:

"Be on the lookout for witches. Report them—they are the source of sinners!"

"If you find a witch invasion, report it to the Holy See immediately! Do not contact witches privately, or you will be treated as their accomplice! Trial with the witches!"

Nearby, two security guards from the Order sighed, hugging their chests as they chatted quietly.

"It's been rough in the east lately. Witches are attacking the edges of the contaminated area every day."

"They say witches have infiltrated the Order? What could they be up to?"

"The Holy See's fine, but apparently a number of witches have slipped into civilian areas. Some civilians are secretly smuggling witches from the eastern contaminated zones to the west safe zone. What are they thinking? The Holy See is protecting them! How dare they help the witches?"

"Yeah, the civilian areas have been patrolled more recently to stop witch smuggling. It's made our workload so much heavier."

"We'd better be careful."

The two men walked past Bai Liu, who twitched his ears and glanced away in the opposite direction.

"Bai Liu..." a small, hesitant voice called out.

Many of the taller women nearby looked like they came from distant countries.

The voice had come from that direction.

There seemed to be no one in men's clothing there, and since the local custom was to wear large, curvy dance dresses, Bai Liu paused briefly before heading that way.

Then...

Bai Liu looked up calmly and let out a soft laugh: "Pfft."

Mu Sicheng, already out of breath from his tight corset and wide skirt, was furious at Bai Liu's reaction. He grabbed Bai Liu's head and pulled him aside, squeaking, "What 'pfft'? You think I don't hear you laughing behind that expressionless face? Ha!"

"You're laughing your ass off! And you're the one wearing women's clothes!"

Bai Liu slowly averted his eyes from Mu Sicheng's foundation-covered, bloodied face and asked calmly, "Where's Tang Erda? He should have landed around the same time as you."

"I'm looking for him too." Mu Sicheng was about to scratch his head in frustration, but stopped as the corset tightened painfully. He gasped and retreated, "Fuck, this is way too tight!"

"How do they move in these things?"

Mu Sicheng couldn't help but admire the group of women, "Amazing."

"Tang Erda's taller than me. He should be in that group," Mu Sicheng pointed. "Are we going over?"

Bai Liu nodded, and they approached together. From afar, they heard the group of tall women gather around one of the tallest, gushing with admiration.

"Your breasts are huge! Can I touch them?"

"You've got such a fit body! It's all muscle!"

"You look so healthy and strong. Where do you work?"

Bai Liu could see Tang Erda's face straining to endure the girls' curious touches on his chest and waist, forcing calm gratitude while his ears and the back of his neck flushed red.

“Thank you for the compliments on my... large breasts, but no touching.”

“I work out regularly, so my muscles are more visible.”

“I haven’t decided where to go yet.”

Watching Tang Erda, surrounded and poked by the girls, desperately pleading for help, the two men gave another slow, thorough look at the white lace basket hat perched on his head, the flushed cheeks, the huge skirt support, and the corseted cleavage above.

Mu Sicheng: “Pfft.”

Bai Liu: “Pfft.”

City in the Sky

After coming out to meet up, Tang Erda glanced helplessly at Mu Sicheng, who was desperately trying to stifle a laugh. Bai Liu, meanwhile, turned his head away calmly, clearly embarrassed. “Is… it really that funny?” he asked.

“It’s fine.” Bai Liu lightly slapped Mu Sicheng on the head. “Stop laughing and get down to business.”

Mu Sicheng couldn’t hold it in any longer. Clutching his stomach, he laughed so hard tears streamed down his face. “You actually have an E cup! Hahahaha!”

Tang Erda: “……”

Bai Liu: “……” — as team leader, he bit back his laughter.

“Captain Tang has broad shoulders and a wide back, so this size is the only one that fits,” Bai Liu explained calmly, trying to ease Tang Erda’s face, which was turning bright red with embarrassment.

Mu Sicheng wasn’t done. Suddenly, he yanked open Tang Erda’s collar and peered inside, then pointed dramatically and said to Bai Liu, “But he definitely doesn’t have an empty cup — it’s practically full!”

Tang Erda: “……”

Bai Liu: “……” You know Mu Sicheng.

At this point, Tang Erda just wanted to disappear — he was an honest man and simply couldn’t handle it anymore.

“Go find Muke,” Bai Liu quickly changed the subject. “He should be over there.”

Soon, Muke joined them. He looked the least out of place in women’s clothing — a simple top and skirt suited him, and with his short hair, he looked very neat and clean.

“Have you searched for Jiayi?” Muke asked seriously. “If players can have a witch’s heart, then this game is probably a tower defense game. One of the two Team Fangwu members has the witch’s heart, and we’re fighting each other over it. Jiayi is likely the one on our team with the witch’s heart.”

— He had come to the same conclusion as Bai Liu.

“Jiayi’s login point shouldn’t be here,” Bai Liu said lightly. “She’s too young to meet the group’s criteria for screening as a reserve witch.”

“So where would she be?” Muke frowned.

Bai Liu looked up and smiled. “If I’m right, the game should have landed Jiayi in the Witch Zone.”

“Because she’s already a witch.”

Muke was momentarily stunned, then quickly replied, “Jiayi is in the eastern contaminated zone!”

Eastern Contaminated Area.

Liu Jiayi’s eyelids fluttered. Just as she was about to open her eyes, she became aware of a crowd around her, watching intently and holding their breath.

“She’s finally awake!”

“Who put her in the contaminated area?”

“Is she an eel-tainted child? My God, she’s so young! Didn’t those heartless ecclesiastical men make rules forbidding girls under fourteen from swallowing eels?”

“And you actually believe the rules they make? They’re just a bunch of animals!”

A majestic yet gentle female voice cut through the murmurs. “Bring her here. Carry her over for the doctor to examine.”

Liu Jiayi felt herself lifted gently. A man, presumably a doctor, checked her over. After a long breath, he reported to the imposing woman, “Baola, she’s fine. She just fainted. No visible signs of contamination.”

Baola paused thoughtfully. “Not tainted as a witch, then. When she wakes, if she doesn’t want to stay and wants to leave, then send her away.”

At this, the room fell silent. Then, in low, resigned whispers, the

crowd responded, “Yes.”

A young woman’s voice broke the quiet, sharp with indignation and defiance. “Baola, why send her back? What good is there?”

“She was abandoned and sent back. Should she grow up there until fourteen, only to be forced into eating eels for those men of the Church?”

“Can’t we just let her stay? Let us raise her as a witch?”

Baola’s voice remained calm. “Not every girl wants to be a witch, You Zhen.”

Her words ignited a furious fire in You Zhen. “What’s wrong with being a witch? Why can’t I be one? Is being a witch some kind of disgrace? Everyone here is a witch!”

“After all the oppression we’ve endured, why do you still crave that filthy ‘safe haven’ and despise being a witch?”

Baola’s voice softened, almost like a stream, “Did you choose to become a witch? Did any of us choose this?”

You Zhen’s voice faltered, breaking into quiet sobs. “...No.”

No girl here would choose to become a witch unless driven to the brink of despair. Baola was the same, forced into this fate.

“We were all made witches by the Church,” Baola said softly. “So here, at least, when a child chooses her own path, we must not force her to become a witch.”

“I want to give them the freedom to choose who they want to be.”

“Whether she chooses to be a witch or not.”

You Zhen slowly sank to her knees, tears streaming down her face as she whispered, “Would any child really choose to be a witch? To yearn for us tainted ones, forever cut off from the safety of the monsters?”

“How could they want to be the dirty witches the world judges us to be, growing up in a safe zone? They would only dream of becoming holy nuns in the Order, controlled by those men! Instead of letting them be sent back and coerced into becoming nuns, we should force them to become witches — our fighting force!”

Her voice grew darker and filled with hate.

“ You Zhen,” Baola whispered, “What is the first rule of the witch code?”

You Zhen fell silent again, took a deep breath, and answered slowly and shakily:

“Witch Code #1: Witches never judge witches.”

“Whether she is already a witch or a reserve witch.”

Baola spoke softly, “With the contamination spreading, until it is stopped, any girl in the safe zone could become a witch. Whether she wants to or not, we see them all as reserve witches. There is no tribunal in the Witch Quarter — we never judge witches.”

“ You Zhen, what is the second rule?”

Her eyes closed, voice steadied: “The second rule of the witch code: all those who persecute me will die by my hand.”

“Our hatred, our desire to kill — it is focused on those who persecute us now. These emotions are precious; we cannot let them weaken.”

Baola stepped forward and patted You Zhen on the shoulder. Her tone was steady.

“Witches are not shameful.”

“Witches are our weapons.”

“In a chaotic world, powerful weapons are both desired and feared. Children in the safe zone dream of becoming nuns because they are afraid they won’t be able to wield a weapon — that it will harm them.”

“The Church teaches them from childhood: weapons are sinful, and those who hold them will be punished until they lay them down. Those who resist will lose everything, and only those who submit will gain more.”

Tears welled in You Zhen’s eyes again. Choking back sobs, she asked, “So what should we do? How do we make them yearn for witches, and choose to become one?”

Baola laughed softly. “We show them how to hold the weapon.”

“Let them see our strength — how sharp, how invincible we are when armed. We are unstoppable, unlike the men of the Church.”

At that moment, Liu Jiayi finally opened her eyes and saw Baola in the sunlight.

The woman was dressed in a witch’s robe over a sleek knight’s outfit, carrying a cowhide bow and a quiver full of feathers and arrows. Her purple eyes and strong bone structure marked her as a half-breed, taller than You Zhen beside her. Her tall witch’s peaked hat sat crookedly on her head, as if it might fall off any second — lending a slightly comical contrast to her solemnity as she tapped You Zhen’s shoulder.

You Zhen raised a hand, amused yet helpless. “Baola, your hat’s coming off.”

Baola blushed, fumbling to adjust it. “Ugh, this witch’s hat is so hard to wear. Why do witches have to wear this anyway?”

“Baola!” The doctor called out in surprise, “This child is awake!”

Baola turned her head sharply, the hat now even more askew. Her eyes lit up. “Awake?”

Liu Jiayi watched as this seemingly regal witch leader quickly and elegantly composed herself, approaching with a calm smile and extending her hand.

“Hello, I’m Baola, head of the Witch District.”

“Welcome to the Witch Quarter.”

Liu Jiayi sized up Baola: a stunningly beautiful woman, seemingly in her thirties, whose calm and composed demeanor radiated an unshakable strength — a natural leader.

Instead of softening her own expression, Liu Jiayi extended her hand firmly. “Hello.”

Baola laughed lightly. “Do you want to go back?”

Instead of asking how Liu Jiayi ended up here, Baola cut straight to the point. Liu Jiayi inwardly admired the directness — clever.

Wherever Liu Jiayi was from, being in the Witch Quarter likely meant she had been abandoned. So Baola’s question had an obvious answer:

no.

A normal girl might be overwhelmed with fear, but Liu Jiayi was not.

“But this side of the Witch District only accepts witches,” Baola said gently. “You’re staying here — do you want to become a witch?”

“A witch like me.”

All eyes turned expectantly to Liu Jiayi.

“No,” she replied.

For a moment, everyone’s eyes dimmed. Even Baola sighed — the Church’s brainwashing was too strong.

“I don’t have to become a witch,” Liu Jiayi smiled mischievously, “Because I’m already one.”

Baola was stunned. Then, before she could react, the witches around erupted in cheers.

You Zhen swept Liu Jiayi into a big, tearful hug. “The moment I saw you, I knew you were the one! I knew you’d choose the witch!”

“Baola!” A witch in costume hurried in, face anxious. “The Order is attacking the Eastern Contamination border! Many newborn witches are there — they’re still vulnerable!”

Baola’s lips tightened. She turned calmly and gave the order, “We’re moving to support the border now.”

“But there’s a raid on the trial courts today,” the witch reported nervously. “There are 352 witch trials in 82 tribunals in the safe zone. We planned to rob the courts!”

“If you go to reinforce the border, we won’t have enough witches to rob all the courts today.”

“Once accused in court, those girls will be burned alive.”

Baola’s fist clenched briefly; her face darkened. Then she composed herself.

“Split into two teams. I’ll take a small force to the border. The rest of you will rob the courts.”

“No, Baola!” The witch protested anxiously. “The Order is using heavy firepower on the frontier! It’s too dangerous for a small force!”

“I’m stronger than them. I’ll be fine.” Baola tapped the witch’s shoulder calmly. “Move out.”

Liu Jiayi slowly raised her hand, smiling. “Can I come with you to the border?”

You Zhen, holding her tightly, shrieked, “What foolishness! You’re not even tainted — you have no strength to fight the Papacy...”

“Zee...!!!”

Liu Jiayi pulled out a can of poison, tossed it lightly into the air, and flipped it to spray over the clearing.

Dark, asphalt-like corrosion appeared on the ground. The solid earth melted away completely.

You Zhen fell silent, dumbfounded.

Baola looked steadily at Liu Jiayi. Then her eyes curved into a smile. She extended her hand solemnly.

“You are officially welcome to the Witch District.”

“Come along!”

Liu Jiayi slipped from You Zhen’s arms and trotted after Baola. You Zhen stared at her empty arms, swallowing hard.

“Are all newborn witches this strong now?”

“What the hell!” A witch nearby slapped You Zhen’s back excitedly. “Good for us!”

“Go! Go rob the courts!”

“It’s not just robbing courts today,” You Zhen sighed with a smile. “The Order brought in another batch of reserve witches. We have to rob the warehouse too.”

In the meantime, prepare the witch picking warehouse.

Bai Liu and three others each received three messages from Liu Jiayi.

[Auxiliary to the Court of Robbery.]

[Don’t lie to the witch. Surrender.]

[Tactician access granted to me.]

Mu Sicheng, full of questions, looked at Bai Liu in confusion and asked, "Jiayi, what does this mean?"

Bai Liu calmly glanced over the messages, then looked up at everyone. "You all know that Jiayi has been the other tactician on our team, right? Her judgment matches mine. If I die or lose my judgment during the game, she takes over my tactician privileges and becomes your tactician."

—Bai Liu had explained this many times before, and everyone nodded slightly in acknowledgment.

"But there’s another situation: if she determines that her tactical ability in this instance should take precedence over mine, I will hand over tactician privileges directly to her."

"In this game copy, although I haven’t died or lost judgment, my assessment and access to information have been far superior to hers," Bai Liu said calmly. "However, she is the one truly suited to formulate tactics here, so I’ve decided to transfer the tactician position to her."

"From now on, Jiayi is our tactician, and I’m just a player who follows her orders. Got it?"

Everyone was silent for a moment, then quickly responded, "Yes!"

[System Alert: Does player Bai Liu confirm transfer of tactician privileges to player Liu Jiayi?]

[Once transferred, tactician privileges cannot be reclaimed in this game. Please consider carefully.]

[OK.]

———

Game pool.

The crowd erupted as the Tactician icon vanished from Bai Liu’s head

and appeared above Liu Jiayi's, sparking whispers and discussions among the audience.

"What's going on? Letting a little girl take the tactician role?"

"Bai Liu, are you crazy? This is a guaranteed loss!"

"Good thing I didn't bet on him, or I'd be out money!"

"Tch, this is just a farce. Forget it. I'm waiting for the playoffs. The Kings Crown will dominate then."

The presenter exclaimed, "Oh my God, what am I seeing?!"

"The Roving Circus's tactician... well, no longer the tactician. The captain is really making a mess!"

"In all my time officiating, this is the first sudden transfer of tactician privileges mid-game... Does he understand how much damage this could do to his team?"

The host clicked his tongue twice. "It seems the Drill Hole challenge was too easily won and is now wasted by our circus captain."

"For the little witch? Haha, this is probably the youngest tactician in the entire league right now, isn't it?"

Wang Shun, sitting on the bench, broke into a cold sweat watching Bai Liu hand over the tactician authority without hesitation.

Though Bai Liu is right—Liu Jiayi is a very strong tactician, trained by Hearts as the successor and next generation of tacticians at King's Crown—this was her first league game. She's completely new to the league, let alone to the tactician role, and she inherited Hearts' style.

The odds of winning look slim from any angle.

This is their last chance at the challenge. If they lose, they're truly doomed. Bai Liu just gave away the most critical role in the match—the tactician privileges!

As soon as Liu Jiayi requested it, Bai Liu gave it up without a second thought. That was daring, even reckless.

Wang Shun's heart tightened watching the system panel display the plummeting support and betting rates. Wiping sweat from his forehead, he took two deep breaths to steady himself before daring to

glance back at the giant screen showing the game.

He had no idea how this game would unfold.

None of the spectators could guess either—because no one understands the little witch's tactical style.

This is her first time as a league tactician.

Wang Shun stared at Liu Jiayi on the screen and slowly clenched his fist.

Come on, little witch.

———

The game took place on the borderline of the eastern contaminated area.

The Papists were armed with all sorts of weapons. The man leading the group stood atop an armored car, shouting into a microphone, "Everyone listen up! Witches are dangerous! Like the Seven Star Eels, when they become estranged, they're no less deadly than swords, spears, water, or fire!"

"They share some traits with the Seven Star Eels, and some have mutated with evil powers!"

"But they are human! Despite possessing powers granted by the Seven Star Eels, they have vulnerabilities just like humans. If we keep attacking, they will bleed, get hurt, and eventually perish!"

"Attack!"

With the command, the borderline was engulfed in intense cannon fire. Someone nervously approached the bishop standing on the highest point, telescope raised, commanding troops.

"My Lord Bishop, you said witches are powerful and our weapons might not kill them."

"No, our weapons will kill them," the Bishop replied with a wicked smile. "These weapons are forged from the bones of the Seven Star Eels."

"Bones of the Seven Star Eel?!" the man asked, surprised.

"No harm in telling you," the Bishop waved carelessly. "We've been preparing this plan for over ten years, and mass production is about to begin."

"The Seven Star Eel's bones are extremely strong material for weapons. Over the years, after dissolving the Seven Star Eels, the leftover bones have been collected and forged into weapons."

"One of those weapons was used in this attack on the Witch Quarter."

The Bishop looked sorrowfully across the polluted eastern area, a look of undisguised triumph on his face.

"As powerful as they are, witches are only on par with the Seven Star Eels. Their powers come from the Eels, but they can't match the hardness of the Eels' bones — the hardest part of their bodies, which even a witch cannot dissolve."

"Quan Baola..." the man said with reverence, "she's so tough. She broke through our lines multiple times, destroyed many inquisition courts. How can she fight these weapons?"

"No way out," the Bishop said arrogantly, looking up at Quan Baola stepping out of the contaminated area with a strange glint in his eyes. "Any witch stands no chance against these weapons."

"And Quan Baola is no exception."

As Quan Baola stepped out of battle range, the Bishop raised his hand to halt the attack, watching her with a tone shifting from venom to compassion as he folded his arms in prayer.

"Baola, for your past as our Holy Virgin, and for all witches who have contributed, God is merciful. He commands me to give you and all witches one last chance—"

"—submit to us, and we will judge you with mercy."

Quan Baola's purple eyes were icy cold as she asked rhetorically, "Like fire?"

"Though it's not gentle," the Bishop said softly, "if you wish, we will judge you as you desire."

Without hesitation, Quan Baola drew back her bow, aimed it at the Bishop—who stared at her but was not the one being addressed.

"The third rule of the Witch's Code—"

The Bishop's eyes instantly turned cold. "It seems you will not submit."

"You may not understand until the moment of your death that witches can never defeat the Papacy. What you've been doing is futile."

As he spoke, countless longbows rose behind him, lined with small, sharp arrows forged from the bones of the Seven Star Eels.

"It's still a rough weapon," the Bishop grimly smiled, "but enough to kill you eel-swallowing monsters!"

At the same time, behind Quan Baola, all the witches drew their bows, their eyes fierce, repeating her words solemnly as a call to war.

"The third rule of the Witch's Code—"

"Whatever judges me has not made me perish—"

"—shall be weaker than me!"

Both sides released their arrows simultaneously.

Arrows streaked through the air. The witches dodged skillfully, firing again and again, while the opponent's line of fire caused no harm—the witches' tough outer skin repelled bullets.

But the Bishop's forces suffered heavy casualties from the witches' uncanny accuracy, speed, and strength.

The Bishop's gaze darkened as he grabbed an archer by the collar, growling and pointing at Quan Baola on the high ground.

"Aim at Quan Baola! If she dies, this rabble will scatter!"

All the bows and arrows were instantly raised and aimed in unison at Quan Baola.

An arrow struck her right shoulder, bursting it open with a spray of blood, and her bow was violently knocked from her grasp.

Several witches nearby flinched and cried out together,
"Baola!"

"What is this?! How can it penetrate our protection?!"

Quan Baola gasped briefly, then, steadying herself, drew a bone arrow with one hand. Her purple eyes remained calm and focused as she said,
"Don't worry about me. It's good this weapon concentrated the damage; it won't spread the injury. Let's end this quickly."

"Baola!!!" a witch's voice rang out sharply beside her. "Watch out!"

Another volley of white Seven Star Eel bone arrows streaked toward Quan Baola.

Despite the pain in her wounded shoulder and blood staining her cheek, she swiftly reached behind her back and pulled out a cluster of arrows from her quiver. Her purple eyes flared fiercely as she fixed her gaze on the incoming barrage.
"Sorcery — Ten Thousand Arrows!"

In an instant, the single arrow in her hand blossomed into a million shimmering purple shafts. Without hesitation, Quan Baola drew and released them all.

The purple arrows surged forward, intercepting each of the Seven Star Eel bone arrows midair. They collided, shattering and falling to the ground.

But the bishop, trembling with fury, snatched a lone arrow and aimed it directly at Quan Baola's heart.
"Death to you!"

Her quiver was empty, and the arrow came too fast—nearly in the blink of an eye.

Without hesitation, a witch beside her sprang forward, throwing herself around Quan Baola, her spine trembling as she stood firmly in front of her.

She awaited the bone arrow from the Papacy, prepared to die in her place as if accepting a trial.

Suddenly, a black poisonous mist rose before Quan Baola, corrupting the arrow the moment it entered.

Beneath the feet of the Papal troops, swampy mud began to bubble and spread. One man screamed in terror as the corrosive muck consumed him, silencing him as his organs dissolved.

The bishop nearly lost control as he climbed down from the foremost chariot, stumbling back in horror. His eyes fixed on the corroded Seven Star Eel bone weapons sinking into the spreading swamp, he screamed hoarsely,
"What is this thing?!"

"It can actually corrode even Seven Star Eel bones?!"

As the poisonous mist cleared, Liu Jiayi stepped forward, a cold frown creasing her face. She raised her eyebrows in disdain before breaking into a sweet, mocking smile aimed at the festering clerics.
"Just a little witch's poison."

"Stupid bastards."

The bishop stared at Liu Jiayi, disbelief evident in his eyes.
"Who are you? Where did you come from, you filthy witch who's defected?"

"Defected?" Liu Jiayi clicked her tongue. The sweet smile vanished instantly, replaced by a sharp, unpleasant tone.
"I don't like that word."

Supported by Liu Jiayi's steadying shoulders, Quan Baola rose to her feet. She slowly raised her bow, aimed it squarely at the bishop's shaking head. Her smile turned serious as she said without hesitation,
"I don't like that word either."

"She's not a filthy witch who's defected."

"She's a precious witch we found by chance."

With blazing eyes, Quan Baola released the arrow. The rushing wind stirred her long hair as the shaft flew true—

Piercing straight through the bishop's skull.

At the same time, the witch is ready to pick the warehouse.

As Bai Liu and the others hid in the crowd, Mu Sicheng looked around warily before whispering into Bai Liu's ear, "But I still don't know what Jiayi's three messages mean, so explain them to me."

"No need to explain." Bai Liu gazed stoically into the crowd of a dozen women who were slowly poking their hands over the edge of their skirts, obviously reaching for their weapons, and raised an eyebrow slightly, smiling, "You'll see what that means in a minute."

There was a witch in the container they were in, no wonder there was a side quest.

Muke was instantly alert, he looked around and said very softly, "There are witches, aren't there?"

"Right." Bai Liu's tone was calm, but there was a hidden smile on his face, "It seems that this Pre-Witch Sorting Ceremony is not going to go as smoothly as those in the Order had hoped."

Almost immediately after Bai Liu's words, a girl about three metres in front of him raised her hand and brushed it through the loop of her right leg, where a pistol appeared to be concealed, and she wore a very small red stud in her right ear, staring deadpan at the Quan Baola video on the big screen, her breath catching and her chest heaving.

She was waiting with bated breath, and despite her overwhelming anger, she was still waiting with bated breath - waiting for an order to attack.

The red stud in her right ear flashed for a moment - a signal for some sort of attack, it seemed, and without hesitation she raised her arm, drew her pistol from the inside of the leg loop of her long skirt, and looked up into the stands.

With a look of unspoken hatred and determination, the girl raised her hand to the projector showing Quan Baola's teaching video, almost hoarsely shouting, "How dare you show the video of Baola's trial!"

"You don't deserve to see her more than once!"

The trigger was pulled, the bullet fired, the projector burst into

flames, Quan Baola's projection on the big screen disappeared for a split second, and the whole warehouse was silent for a brief moment before everyone started crouching with their heads in their hands, screaming in shock.

Bai Liu quickly pulled the still unresponsive Mu Sicheng into a crouch, and he held his head very respectfully, pretending to be an ordinary civilian.

Tang Erda and Muke quickly followed suit and crouched down.

The dozen or so witches in the crowd moved quickly as they drew their guns and began to strafe the clerical guards on either side of them.

Quan Zhendong, hiding in panic behind the Papal Guardian in the stands, shouted, "Change to the witch's special seven-star eel bone bomb!"

"Catch these wicked witches!"

The ecclesiastical guards changed weapons instantly, and with fierce eyes they slung a strip across them and replaced it with a rapid-fire gun, loading the loaded strip and aiming it at the witches.

The bullets spewed out instantly, and these Papal escorts fired not at the witches at all, but loaded straight up and strafed the entire field indiscriminately - which meant they would also hit the innocent prep witches.

But they didn't care, what was a few dead prep witches if they could kill them.

But the attacking witches cared.

The witch in the lead, the one who fired the first shot that hit the projector, her face instantly sank as she raised her hand, made a grasping gesture, and said in a deep voice, "Witchcraft - Fishscale Tail."

Her legs instantly elongated into a long, immense snake tail that surrounded all the reserve witches in the entire field, and the bone bullets fired at her all penetrated and set into her snake tail, blood gushing out of it, and her upper body, which was crouched on its back, shuddered and stifled a grunt of pain.

" Leah!"

A witch next to her looked incredulously at Leah's wounded snake tail: "Why did that bullet go through your snake tail!"

"It doesn't matter." Leah looked up with a pale face, her gaze still calm and harsh, "Let the reserve witches go first, we'll break off!"

Tang Erda, circled by the snake's tail, looks on, gun out of his hand, and can't help but keep looking back, Mu Sicheng's monkey paws scratching the ground, his eyes whoring Bai Liu every now and then... -He could see that he was eager to help.

Bai Liu stopped him coldly, "No, we can't move easily without an order from the tactician."

Tang Erda gritted her teeth and held back; Mu Sicheng gave a grumble but was honest.

-- Bai Liu was right, in the league field, they could never act easily and interrupt the tactician's layout without Liu Jiayi's orders.

In a panic, the prep witches were swiftly evacuated under the protection of Leah's snake tail, the whole process taking less than thirty seconds, and by the look of it everyone knew their way around.

Leah's snake tail had been beaten to a bloody pulp and she finally couldn't hold on to her form, turning back into her human form, flipping and rolling and hiding in a nearby corner, her back pressed against the wall, she pulled a bottle of alcoholic disinfectant from her back and bit into it, pouring it over the dense wounds on her transformed back to normal legs.

She winced in pain, but gritted her teeth in ghastly pallor to hold back a cry of pain, her chest heaving violently, and then with a glance up -

-- and Bai Liu, who had purposely hidden in this spot and hadn't moved yet, the four of them went wide-eyed.

Leah: "....."

Bai Liu: "....."

The bullet grazed the wall by Leah's face, and she jerked back, turning sideways, her freshly decontaminated, bruised legs turning back into snake tails, coiled and stacked in front of Bai Liu and the four men she

was protecting behind her, almost in a menacing tone, "Move!"

"Walk what?" Quan Zhendong came down smugly, he looked at Leah's bruised snake tail and tsked twice with what looked like regret, "Looking at the injuries, Leah, can you still walk? Or crawl?"

"You were a member of the Virgin Patrol, with a God-given name, but look at you now?"

"How wretched, how dirty, why did you want to defect with Baola so badly? You clearly weren't a witch when you were that one."

"Aren't you?" Leah's eyes turned into vertical pupils as her emotions rose and fell, and her voice was hoarse, like a snake swimming, "I think I always was."

Quan Zhendong's tone went cold: "Arrest her and take her to the trial court."

The escorts to the left and right loaded their guns and placed them against Leah's neck, and whistled playfully, "Come with us, snake woman."

Leah's jaw lifted slightly as the gun prodded her, and she gasped twice before saying calmly, "I can come with you."

"But you let go of the four reserve witches behind me."

As if he had heard something extremely funny, Quan Zhendong laughed out loud, "You actually think that you are in a position to negotiate with us who have the Seven Star Eel Bone Bomb?"

"We'd be kind to you if we didn't scrape your snakeskin alive right now."

Tang Erda's dark blue eyes sank as he slowly gripped his gun in his right hand, Mu Sicheng's monkey paws began to turn and move with bony knuckles and fangs bared, while Muke pursed his lips and looked at Bai Liu with a tense expression -

--And Bai Liu was unmoved, he remained calmly waiting where he was.

The moment the escort's hand was about to touch Leah, the receiver at Bai Liu's waist vibrated and the four men looked down at the same time to see a message from Liu Jiayi -

--[Help has arrived].

A motorbike with a loud roar crashed straight through the roll-up door of the warehouse, and the man driving it dipped to the floor and spun the whole thing around and spun it in, knocking the escort in front of Leah straight away, before sticking his heels out and braking on the floor.

After a huge heel scrape, the car came to a slim stop in front of Leah's snake's tail.

Mu Sicheng looked stunned as he leaned in with a whisper, "A master car player!"

The woman in the car stepped down, dressed in a tight black leather outfit with a short jacket on top, and casually removed her helmet, revealing her short, hot and damp black half-length hair inside. She casually tossed her hair, turned her head and tossed her helmet aside, then with a turn, she stood tall, her eyes disgusted, and stomped the heel of her polished shoe on the neck of Quan Zhendong, who had been knocked to the ground by the motorbike and was screaming, covering his broken leg. Quan Zhendong's neck.

Quan Zhendong screamed again at the heat, but the woman stepped on his neck with utmost contempt and crushed it twice: "Whose snakeskin did you just say you were going to skin alive?"

"How about I shave you alive first, you horny lot."

" You Zhen!" Leah let out a long breath as she deflated back into her original form, her tone delighted, "What are you doing here?"

The whole scene was quickly controlled by the witches You Zhen had brought with her, and all the Papal Guards were killed, leaving only Quan Zhendong at You Zhen's feet.

"There's a big player in the district, so we're free to back you up." You Zhen wiped the sweat from her head and looked at the wound on Leah's leg and frowned, "What happened? You're hurt too, why are so many witches hurt today?"

"The Order seems to have developed a weapon against us." Leah raised her chin indifferently, "Our God Quan father should know something on the inside."

You Zhen made an OK gesture and she nodded with a somewhat evil

smile, "Got it, I'll take him back and have a nice chat with him."

"So what's with these four women?" You Zhen looked at the four 'women' behind Leah with some curiosity, then a light went on and she clapped her hands together, rubbing them together with a slight excitement, and said meaningfully, "They're the ones we rescued from the witch reserves who want to join the witch district, aren't they? !"

Leah looked into You Zhen's expectant eyes, and for a moment, she opened her mouth, unable to speak.

They did save many groups of witches in reserve, but only a few of each group they saved were willing to join them, and it would have been nice to have one in each group - mainly because in that chaotic situation, the Order would have attacked indiscriminately to kill them, and they would have let them simply run away to protect most of the witches in reserve. There really wasn't much chance of asking each other if they wanted to join.

Because they too, after all, had almost gotten themselves killed, it seemed a bit inappropriate to go after each other and ask them again.

But this time there are actually four left .....

Leah can fully understand You Zhen's anticipation, because even she can't help but look forward to it.

She turned around with a feigned composure, trying her best to put on her gentlest and friendliest face, and couldn't help but begin to regret that she was the one here and not Baola - if it had been Baola, surely these people could have been persuaded to join the Witch District.

"You guys ....." Leah had barely gotten halfway through her sentence when You Zhen rushed up to her, her eyes all bright and happy: "Are you guys staying because you like witches and aspire to be witches? You stayed because you like witches and aspire to be witches!"

"We welcome you to join us!"

You Zhen was so happy that she even tried to shake Tang Erda's hand, but stopped in mid-air for fear that she would hate witches and just looked at them with that bright look in her eyes, "Really?"

--the light in her eyes was so brilliant that it was as if a nod from them could turn into a spark to ignite the light in her eyes into a pyrotechnic eruption that would send her leaping up in place with joy.

Tang Erda opened his mouth in the face of that look, almost a little at a loss for words, he didn't know how to refuse - he was a man.

Mu Sicheng is also silent.

"I was told to be honest with you all and not to lie to you." Bai Liu calmly removed his wig, "As much as I'd like to just say I want to join you, before I do, I have to tell you-"

"- we're men."

Mu Sicheng also slowly removed his wig, followed by Tang Erda and then Muke, and as if in silence, without a word, they removed their inappropriate feminine attire - as if they did not wish to do so at the moment.

The light in You Zhen's eyes just slowly went out and then changed again - from a brilliant light to a teary one.

She shook her head incredulously and stepped back, seemingly unable to accept the reality, and laughed in a trance, pointing at them all: "You, all of you, are men?"

"How is that possible?"

"One ....." You Zhen stubbornly compared a one with her fingers as she questioned them with tears in her eyes, "Not a single girl?"

"Is there not a single girl among you who has stayed because she aspires to be a witch?"

Leah pats You Zhen's shoulder wordlessly as a gesture of comfort.

You Zhen tilted her head back to hold back her own tears, she took a deep breath and lowered her head back down to that extremely aggressive look again, she suddenly drew her gun and pointed it at Bai Liu's head and questioned him icily, "OK, you're a man, so let's move on to the usual witch to man interrogation session, a friendly suggestion, don't lie to the witch. Unless you have two lives-"

"- First question, have you ever done anything to harm a witch?"

Bai Liu held up his hands calmly, "No."

You Zhen continued to question coldly, "Have you ever watched any of the witch trials without making a sound?"

Bai Liu said, "No."

You Zhen asks, "Do you think that the existence of witches is sinful and wrong, and that the reason why eels are digested only by witches is because we are born sinful, and God is punishing us and we must atone for our sins?"

"Never." Bai Liu spoke in a calm tone, "The first child to cry for me and heal me was a witch."

"She is one of the most valuable friends I have in this world, she is someone I would trust with my life, my victory and my trust."

"If she is the one who is sinful in God's setting, the one who is wrong, the one who has to atone for her birth all the time--"

Bai Liu looked straight at You Zhen: "Then I will kill God for her."

You Zhen looked at Bai Liu steadily for a long time, she lowered her gun and then turned around, she raised her hand and wiped her eyes hard before choking back her insults, "Get lost, you stinking men, don't let me see you again!"

Bai Liu looked at You Zhen's back as he left and dropped the hands he had been holding up. He watched from afar as You Zhen walked halfway across the room, kicking the warehouse door several times in anger, crying and cursing at the same time.

"I'm so angry! I can't believe all the people we saved were dog men!"

"Not one, not one girl left for me!"

"Wooooooooo! Why!"

Leah pats You Zhen's shoulder in silent relief, You Zhen buries her head in Leah's shoulder, sobbing in silence, and walks away in harmony.

"..... eh, it feels like a wrong thing for me to be a guy." Mu Sicheng sighed from the bottom of his heart as he felt a little hard.

Tang Erda sat with a stony expression and nodded approvingly.

"What will Jiayi have us do next?" Mu Sicheng sat down on the floor of the warehouse and looked up at Bai Liu with some sadness, "Hurry up and let me do something! Otherwise, I feel so sorry for them!"

Tang Erda nodded solemnly once again.

"Why didn't you just let us do it?" Mu Sicheng thought for a moment and he asked Bai Liu, "That Leah witch is hurt so badly!"

Bai Liu gave Mu Sicheng a sidelong glance, "Because the other side doesn't need it."

"When Quan Zhendong was about to touch Leah, the hand behind Leah's back made a gesture that she should still have witchcraft at her disposal."

Bai Liu withdrew his gaze and spoke in a light tone, "They are perfectly capable of handling things on their own, so you're just adding to the trouble of interrupting their offensive rhythm."

Mu Sicheng scratched his head a little awkwardly, "Is that so?"

"So are we doing other things that will disrupt them doing things too? Is there anything we can do?"

"Of course I did." Bai Liu looked at You Zhen's departing back, " Jiayi gave orders for us to assist them in robbing the court."

"A court robbery?" Mu Sicheng was stunned, "What robbed the court?"

Muke explains, "The tribunal here tries many witch cases every day, and they are supposed to be there to rob these trials."

"But there should be a lot of these trials, right?" Tang Erda inquired, slightly puzzled, "How do we determine the time and place of the court robbery?"

Bai Liu's eyes strayed to the priest's clothes left in place by Quan Zhendong, who had been dragged away by Leah, and his eyes narrowed for a moment as he walked over, reached his hand in for a moment, and took out a paper letter with two fingers.

Almost simultaneously, the receiver on Bai Liu's waist vibrated.

[Father's Service, Court Robbery Schedule.]

City in the Sky

"Looks like this is it." Bai Liu smiled and turned his head to show everyone a dense page of paper letters, "Our next course of action."

Mu Sicheng immediately swooped in: "Where is the next trial?"

"Trial Court 2." Bai Liu's fingertips trace down the timetable as he sees the details of the trial, his eyes turning dark, "The trial is against a hotel proprietress, aged 41, accused by her guest of sneaking into his room to bathe and deliberately tempting him into depravity."

"Fuck!" Mu Sicheng's fists hardened, "This is exactly like the Quan Baola trial!"

"No, it's not exactly the same." Bai Liu nodded his correspondence, "This is the forty-second time this lady boss has been tried, and she has not pleaded guilty in any of her previous trials."

"She had already been tortured, or identified, by water baptism, fire, and bone identification, but she bit the bullet and did not confess, and she survived the torture without dying, so the tribunal could not declare her a witch, and she was acquitted."

"This is the forty-third witch trial this guest has brought up against her, and this one calls for the use of fire to identify whether she is a witch or not."

Mu Sicheng was dumbfounded: "Forty, forty-three trials? What's wrong with this man? Why doesn't he go and die?!"

"Her body can no longer withstand this torture." Muke's tone was strained, "If we don't succeed in robbing the court, she'll be burned to death in the courtroom."

Trial Court 2.

The boss had been tied to a pillar in the shelter directly below the courtroom for three nights, a process known as sedation, during which she was not allowed to eat or drink any water, the purpose of which the Holy See said was to remove the impurities from her body - a more plausible explanation, of course, being to prevent her from having the strength to struggle in court. to struggle.

There has been no shortage of witches who have defected after killing

the trial judge in a straightforward outburst in court before.

She gazed vacantly at the glazed painting directly above the shelter, showing an image of a god with a baby in his arms, smiling in loving compassion, just as they had heard every day - [God loves the world, the Holy See is great].

God will have mercy on every good person, and God will watch over every good person - except the witch.

Immediately after dawn, she would be dragged up to the court of judgement with a stand of firewood at her feet that was said to be lit only when the witches were burned - but she knew from her last experience of being set on fire that it seemed to burn without the witches.

"Number one pending trial of the witch." A man in the escort pushed through the gloomy shelter and he looked at her tied to a post in disgust, "Get ready for court."

She was tied to a post and resisted to the courtroom, her head hanging morosely, having lost the strength to even look up.

"Silence! Silence!" The bishop above, who was acting as judge, hammered his gavel twice with cold hardness, "The court is solemn, please keep silence!" The courtroom gradually fell silent.

"Raise your head and look the judge squarely in the eye." The bishop said coldly, "Defendant."

She couldn't really lift it up, but well, this seemed to be a common enough situation for them to give her a long stick under her chin and stiffly lift her chin up to look squarely at the Bishop.

The Bishop withdrew his eyes in satisfaction, "The trial begins."

She slowly rolled her eyes and looked around the courtroom of the trial.

The witch trials consisted of four parts, the first part being the plaintiff's presentation of the reasons why the other side was a witch, the second part being the defendant's own defence, and the third part being the proof that you were not a witch - a proof process that involves testing you with various holy objects to see if you can withstand them.

If she can withstand the sacred test without dying or confessing her sins, she is not a witch.

But these holy trials are no different from torture.

The fourth and final part is the delivery of the verdict by the jury.

The first is called the Pontifical Jury and consists of four priests of the Holy See, while the second is called the Popular Jury and is selected by the Holy See from among the general public to judge her, and usually consists of about twenty men, basically all men who are interested in joining the Holy See - supposedly to avoid witches. All the members of the jury selected by the Holy See were men.

The existence of this tribunal was set up by the Holy See as a sign of fairness, representing that the public could also interfere with the outcome of the witch trials.

Both types of jury members were given two cards, one for guilty and one for not guilty, to pronounce on the outcome of her trial - it could be said that her fate was decided by these men.

Even if she passed the third part of the sacred test, as long as the final result given by the Inquisitorial Panel was guilty, she was not completely innocent and she still carried witch suspicions and could be indefinitely prosecuted - as she is now.

What she found very confusing was that it was quite simple to get a verdict of not guilty from the jury, which is what the Holy See has been promoting - only if one of all the jury members in the room raised the [not guilty] sign for you, then you are not guilty.

But she had been through forty-three trials, and not once had she seen the red sign representing [innocence], and every time she had endured the holy trial, and endured the severe pain, and turned back with joy and hope, expecting to see even one red sign.

All she saw when she turned around were dense, held up, cold, black [guilty] signs.

But what exactly is she guilty of?

"Plaintiff, state the defendant's crime of witchcraft." The bishop inquired icily.

The one who stood at the plaintiff's table, her former guest, accused

her righteously: "She slipped into my room to bathe! She had demonic ram's horns on her head! I saw it all!"

"That's my room." No matter how many times she'd heard it, she couldn't help but want to argue weakly, "You're the one who's in the wrong room."

The man glared at her with an almost malevolent, mortified look, "That's what you seduced, too! You deliberately left the door open to shower while I was passing by! Don't you dare say you didn't do it on purpose!"

The whole court was in an uproar.

Several priests nodded rather approvingly, "Only a witch would bathe with the door open in order to lure men and kill them."

"I just forgot to close the outermost door." She said in a faint voice, "My bathroom door was closed."

The Bishop frowned, "But you do look suspicious, so why did you leave the outermost door open?"

With her last ounce of strength, she shouted out through her tears, "And I have proved myself, I have withstood the forty-two tests of the holy things! I am not a witch!"

"I am not guilty!"

There was a moment of silence in the room.

The bishop reluctantly turned his head to the plaintiff: "That is indeed also true, do you have any other evidence?"

The man who was the plaintiff's face tore up with a very grimace as he looked with a very sinister gaze at the lady boss strapped to the courtroom, his hands balled into fists and clenched.

Why is it that this woman just won't admit her guilt, just won't submit - she's obviously forty-one, an old woman, and not worth much money, wouldn't it have been over if he'd just screwed her in the bathroom? And to shout and scream and make people think he'd done something to disgrace him!

And when you're tried, too, fuck, you don't even plead guilty! How can she not plead guilty! Every time she pleads not guilty is a slap in

the face and a trampling on his dignity!

He must screw this woman! Otherwise how can he meet people in the future?

The man took a deep breath as he put on an expression of horror and then said, very shakily, "I, I wasn't going to say this because I don't know if I was wrong about this, Your Grace, you know that we can't judge anyone who isn't a witch lightly."

"But I did see her that night, saw more than one witch in her bathroom! There was another witch next to her talking and laughing with her, and they were talking about attacking the Order!"

"It's likely that she's contacting and housing witches privately!"

"What?!" The bishop's face changed, "There's actually something like that, why didn't you say so earlier!"

The plaintiff bowed his head in shame: "Because I don't want to accuse people at random."

"You are a good and merciful boy." The bishop sighed tersely, "But this is too big a matter, you should have told us at the first trial, then we would have just condemned her as a witch."

She struggled hard, her eyes filling with tears, "I'm not a witch!!!"

"I didn't do those things!"

The bishop ignored her hiss and indifferently banged down his gavel, "And now, the jury passes sentence."

An almost shudder ran down her spine, then she turned slowly, slowly, the tears in her eyes finally falling.

The black [Guilty] sign is like a tombstone, neatly erected behind her, and the [Guilty] on it is her epitaph.

"Well, the sentence is now pronounced." The bishop's gavel was about to fall again, "You have-"

Hidden in the shadows, You Zhen's face was a cold mix of murderous intent, her gun already raised - but not yet.

The men of the Order had surrounded the entire courtroom so tightly that there was not a single woman from the judges to the escort, and

it would be extremely difficult for them to blend in - and she was the only one of their party to do so at the moment - and firing now would only spook them and make it easy for them to jump the gun and simply kill the witch on trial.

At a time like this, even with her overwhelming disgust and hatred of men, You Zhen pondered the possibility of getting everyone to blend into the Inquisition together as men, which would make the rescue much easier - but the chances were too low, these people in the Order had too many ways of targeting witches, and she was able to blend in this time because many of the Order had been drawn out The security lines in the eastern part of the Chancery were loosely guarded.

But let her watch this trial unfold and listen to the wails of the judged without moving .....

You Zhen gritted her teeth and closed her eyes as she clenched the gun in her hand.

"Snap - click."

With a crisp, sharp twist of the bone, the black one held up by one of the men on the floor with [Guilty] written on it was violently flipped over to the eye-catching red [Not guilty], the bishop's falling gavel gave a lurch, and You Zhen's eyes snapped open, and he looked at the jury.

The witch on trial looked incredulously at the red sign that had appeared, and a little light slowly emerged in her eyes.

"This juror." The bishop narrowed his eyes as he searched for the man holding the not guilty sign in a sea of members dressed in black, "Why do you think she's not guilty?"

"Because the plaintiff is lying." It was an unhurried man's voice, which made the Bishop let his guard down, "The man I saw contacting the witch that night, it was him."

"He has been compelled by the witch and is a spy on the witch's side."

The whole room was in an uproar.

"How can that be?!"

The plaintiff also panicked, it was a big charge, and he retorted hoarsely, "You're lying!"

"I've never contacted a witch before!"

"Is that so?" The man asked calmly and rhetorically, "But you clearly said you saw two witches talking together, about attacking the Inquisition, and in that case you didn't think to come and report to the Inquisition, but instead you rushed into the bathroom uncontrollably, doesn't that already mean you were seduced, compelled and corrupted by the witches?"

There was a silence in the room.

Noticing that the bishop's gaze had changed, the plaintiff was utterly alarmed: "I was not tempted or bewitched! I resisted the temptation of the witch! And I judged her!"

"-but only to tell us at the forty-third trial that you saw another witch?" The man laughed softly, "It's hard for me not to believe that you fell in love with another witch."

The venue was filled with a cacophony of discussion and the whole atmosphere had become chaotic.

The man's face was covered in cold sweat as he looked to his left and right with a pale face, and after realizing that no one would be on his side, he defended himself, almost frightened and out of breath: "There is no other witch! I was wrong!"

"I just said I didn't always see it!"

"So it's you who's lying, is it?" The man questioned him in a calm tone.

The plaintiff gritted her teeth, "Not a lie, I admit I may have been mistaken! But this woman!"

He pointed fiercely at the lady boss tied to the post: "She's still guilty! She's still a witch! She is to be put to death!"

"What is the basis of the crime?" The other man inquired blandly, "The ram's horns you saw? You can't even be wrong about how many people are in the bathroom, a pair of ram's horns, are you sure you saw the right one?"

"Silence!" The Bishop angrily banged his gavel, "This juror, please be silent!"

"You do have some truth in what you say, but this plaintiff's testimony

is not always empty." The Bishop nodded, "Then, as is customary, let us give this Witch of Judgement Number One a holy relic."

"Roast her with the holy fire, and if she does not scream in agony and die from the burning of the holy fire, then she is not a witch."

As the Bishop waved his hand, the firewood was quickly brought up, and the moment it was lit, a water arrow fell from the sky and struck the firewood, and the sacred fire was extinguished.

"An arrow that can extinguish the sacred fire?!" The bishop looked up in alarm as he looked at You Zhen who had suddenly appeared at the top, with a sinister gaze, "It's the witch!"

"Witchcraft - Rocket." You Zhen drew her bow full again and she aimed the blazing arrow at the plaintiff who was running around in fear and curled her icy mouth, "Your trial is over, how about we play a game of trial too?"

"The rules of the trial are - if you are not burned to scum by the fire of this arrow, then you are not scum."

The arrow was released and landed on the plaintiff's clothes, and he was violently set on fire, almost instantly being burnt to the bone, and he rolled miserably on the ground and was soon reduced to a pile of cinder-like ashes.

You Zhen jumped down from the highest point of the tribunal, his heel crushing over the pile of ashes, and sneered, "Looks like you're a real scumbag after all."

The witches kept pouring in through the window You Zhen had opened, and Leah's snake's tail pushed right through the door of the courtroom, where You Zhen, with one arm crossed, looked down at Bai Liu's group, holding up the not guilty sign, his eyes narrowing unkindly.

--What are these dogs doing following them?

Mu Sicheng held his sign in both hands and came up next to Bai Liu who had raised his hands in surrender to show he was harmless: "Why didn't we just break out of the trial court?"

"It's so hard to watch these idiots blazing away!"

"Because our tactician gave us the task of assisting in robbing the

court, not robbing the court ourselves, we should distinguish the difference between assisting and main attacking, and do things when it's our turn to do things." Bai Liu looked at You Zhen with unblinking eyes, "If we make random moves, we will only interrupt their deployment and attacking rhythm."

"The real protagonists of this copy are the witches."

Bai Liu gives You Zhen a friendly smile while explaining to Mu Sicheng, "Get your bearings, we're just supporting characters."

You Zhen showed his teeth threateningly to Bai Liu, grunted and turned to walk away.

Trial Court 3.

"Witch on trial number 17." The Bishop questioned icily, "You were accused by your father of stealing the family's belongings at will and secretly buying magical materials to practise witchcraft, correct?"

The young girl tied to the post shouted back through her tears, "I earned that money myself! I didn't steal it! I didn't buy any magic! It was just some food!"

"It was my father who tried to take my money!"

"Those were all demons disguised as food, and it appears the charges are true." The bishop slammed down his gavel carelessly, "The jury passes sentence."

In the midst of a pile of black [guilty] raised signs, a red [not guilty] sign was held up.

"I have an objection Your Grace the Bishop." Bai Liu questioned calmly, "If what the defendant bought was a magical object disguised as food, did the plaintiff eat it?"

"And having eaten what the defendant bought, was the plaintiff also contaminated?"

The bishop looked to the plaintiff, "Have you ever eaten?"

The plaintiff's eyes dodged, "No, no! Of course not!"

"I'm not so sure about that." Bai Liu spoke with a smile, but his words were cruel, "If your daughter is a witch, then she certainly has enough power to tempt you to eat a demon disguised as food."

"This is an emergency trial, so it's not more than eight hours since you charged her, and you shouldn't have finished digesting by now if you ate a magical object at your last meal. "

Bai Liu raised his eyes and smiled, "Why don't you cut open your belly and see if there's a demon inside or not?"

"If there were no demons, wouldn't you be able to clear yourself?"

"Are you crazy?" The plaintiff looked incredulously at Bai Liu on the jury, "You're asking me, a living person, to cut open my stomach?!"

As his words fell, an immense snake's tail caught in the curtain of the door, its sharp tail plunging directly into the plaintiff's stomach, his pupils shuddering and spreading rapidly as he fell to the ground spasming and spitting blood - from the pain.

For the snake's tail that had plunged into his abdomen hadn't stopped churning as it flipped through his intestines, wrapping around and cutting out the stomach pouch - with food dripping out of it.

-- those are the very same magical creatures that have just been accused.

"It does look like it's eaten." Leah said coldly, retrieving the snake's tail and giving it a slightly disgusted shake, "Disgusting stuff, and the smell of alcohol."

When she finished, she gave a slight sideways glance at Bai Liu, who had his hands up in the jury box and was backing away self-consciously, and her eyes lingered for just a moment before she turned and left.

Trial Court 4.

The bishop lowered his gavel: "The jury pronounces its verdict."

Bai Liu holds up a sign: "I feel innocent ....."

The moment Bai Liu finished her statement, You Zhen opened the doors of the courtroom with a cannon fire blast and she sneered, "Let me pronounce my sentence before you do."

Trial Court Seven.

The bishop ordered icily, "If she does not confess, then go up to the sacred fire to be identified."

"Your Grace." Bai Liu held up the not guilty sign and raised his eyes calmly, "I think there are holes in the plaintiff's charge just now ....."

After a seventeen-minute defence, Leah's serpent's tail contracted, curling up all the members of the Synod who had listened to Bai Liu's arguments to the point of drowsiness at once.

A rocket from You Zhen set everyone on fire, and in the midst of the howling, Leah looked icily around at everyone and said, "Did you enjoy your appraisal of the sacred fire?"

.....

By the time the cleaning of the courtroom was nearing its end in Court No. 77, You Zhen finally turned her head, her face covered in various wounds - the new weapon invented by the Order had still done some damage to them, but this did not detract from the anger and energy in her eyes now, as she drew her gun and took a few quick strides. She drew her gun, took a few quick steps and quickly approached Bai Liu's group, who were not far behind them and had made no effort to cover their tracks.

"What the hell do you want?!" You Zhen angrily disliked Bai Liu's head with his gun, "You've been following us for almost the whole way!"

Bai Liu raised his hands in a very familiar way, and with a glance at Leah, who was more calm and silent, he asked tentatively, "I thought that you acquiesced to our following?"

--And it is.

Bai Liu, who were responsible for infiltrating the tribunal by posing as jurors, delaying the trial and distracting the bishop, worked with them to open the doors of each tribunal, which gave them time for a more mature deployment and made what should have been a particularly difficult task of cleansing the tribunal much quicker and easier, while also reducing many witch casualties - both to the witches on trial and to themselves. -Both the witches on trial and themselves.

This is why Leah acquiesced to Bai Liu's following.

Leah was a little more even-keeled: "What do you want to do?"

Bai Liu was sincere: "We want to submit to the Witch District."

"What?!" You Zhen's voice instantly rose as she looked at Bai Liu with

eyes that went from tentative to hostile and a cold tone, "You want to enter the witch district?"

"The witch quarter will never take in men, get lost."

With that, You Zhen dragged Leah away - she was now really angry.

"You can use us as an aid." Bai Liu spoke in a calm tone, "- like today."

"This place, the Inquisition, is naturally repulsive to you, but we can be your instruments, helping you enter and assisting you in your attacks, which will reduce your casualties."

"- You're preparing for a big battle, aren't you? With tools like us, your attack will go a lot smoother."

Leah's back stopped, she turned her head and at the same time held You Zhen's shoulders as she continued to walk forward and looked straight at Bai Liu and asked, "Why are you helping us?"

"There's no way they're going to help us!" You Zhen finally turned her head in anger, "Come on, Leah! They're in the witch zone for a reason!"

"Like saying something about respect and liking, but ending up using and swindling the witches in the witch quarter!"

--something that is not without precedent in the Witch District.

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow, "We definitely wouldn't."

"My desires are mainly directed at my boyfriend and money."

You Zhen was about to laugh at Bai Liu's lie, but when she met Bai Liu's eyes, she narrowed her eyes for a moment and stopped short of cursing.

"We can tell when a man is lying." Leah says to You Zhen, "He's not lying."

You Zhen's mood eased, but her expression was still icy as she pointed at Tang Erda and sneered, "What about him? He looks like a straight guy, he can't have a boyfriend too, can he?"

Tang Erda: "....."

Bai Liu's tone was subtle: "It's true he doesn't have a boyfriend."

You Zhen was about to mock when Bai Liu sighed and said, "It took all his strength just to love one man."

Tang Erda: "....."

You Zhen: "....."

"What about him?" You Zhen pointed at Muke.

Bai Liu rubbed his chin thoughtfully, "He has a heart condition and can't think about that."

Muke: "....."

You Zhen took a deep breath as she pointed to Mu Sicheng: "What about him! He's always a heterosexual man, isn't he?"

Bai Liu's eyes scraped over Mu Sicheng's body before he gave a regretful tsk - Mu Sicheng was indeed straight, which was a bit of a problem.

Mu Sicheng's scalp tingled at Bai Liu's look, and then he saw Bai Liu's eyelids twitch as if some good idea had occurred to him and said in a dawning tone, "He does like the opposite sex, but he shouldn't be considered a man with us; we rarely treat him like one."

Mu Sicheng: "????"

You Zhen: "????"

"What is he if he's not a man?" You Zhen asked incredulously, pointing at Mu Sicheng.

Bai Liu smiles: "Transport and monkeys, whatever you like."

You Zhen started to get dizzy as she pointed at Bai Liu's group and circled around, "What kind of a strange group of men are you, anyway?"

Bai Liu laughed softly and shrugged, "Maybe we're just a group of normal men who want to follow the witch's tactics?"

You Zhen's eyes sweep over Mu Sicheng, who is furiously chasing Bai Liu with his monkey claws.

A gay man, a half-gay man who has failed at being gay, an asexual heart patient, a transport and a monkey - you guys don't have

anything to do with normal anyhow, do you?!

But in the end, Bai Liu and his team were not able to join You Zhen's team.

"No men are accepted in the Witch Quarter." You Zhen pointed warningly at Bai Liu's nose, "Stop following us or you'll get your asses kicked!"

Leah, in a rare moment of hesitation, gave them a complicated look in her eyes, "We can't take you in right now because there's no way to deal with the changes you've caused since you came in."

"But ..... witches don't hate all men, as you'll soon see."

As he watched You Zhen tug Leah away, Mu Sicheng sighed with mixed feelings, a rare moment of frustration: "Are we still going? They don't seem to want us to?"

"Follow." Bai Liu was very straightforward, " Jiayi's orders are to assist the robbing court, so we will follow them to the end."

"Actually ....." Mu Sicheng scratched his head, "we could split up with the witches and rob the other courts, couldn't we? That would be more efficient too?"

Bai Liu said, "No, it's not an assisted robbery, it's us acting on our own."

Mu Sicheng was a bit confused: "Does it have to be an aid? Why?"

Bai Liu gave Mu Sicheng a bland look: "Our aim at this stage was to join Jiayi, that is, to enter the witches' quarter, but as you can see, because we are men, the witches are very hostile to us."

"Yeah." Mu Sicheng went on as a matter of course, "but if we show more ability, help them out a bit more, rob some more courts for them, then maybe they'll-"

Bai Liu coldly interrupted Mu Sicheng's speculation, "-then we'll never enter the witch zone again in our lifetime."

Mu Sicheng's hopeful elaboration stalled, and he asked, with a sense of wonder, "Why?!"

"Because in this copy, our position is completely different from theirs, we have a vested interest in the environment, and if at the same time we are powerful enough to even force our way past them to take the lead, to interfere with their decisions, to interrupt their plans, it would lead to a terrible outcome -" Bai Liu looked levelly into Mu Sicheng's eyes. -Bai Liu looked Mu Sicheng flat in the eye, "If they accepted us easily and we turned against them, they wouldn't be able to accept the consequences at the moment, we would become enemies and both would lose."

"That's why they will never easily agree to our decision to enter the witches' quarter - even if we have no animosity towards them, people change."

Advertisement

"It was a wise decision, in a situation like this where we can easily backtrack to gain greater benefits after we defect, there is no need to interfere too much with the other side's decisions if we are really sincere in wanting to join their organisation, rather it is more important to show our own sincerity, so we can only assist - -that's why Jiayi gave this order."

"Otherwise, with Jiayi's current position in the witch district, she could have just told the person in charge on the other side that she wanted to let us in - and I'm sure they would have seriously considered it, but that's not what she wanted."

Muke nods: "So Jiayi wants us to impress the witches ourselves by our actions and get them to accept us slowly."

"In the context of a witch trial like this, sincerity is more important than competence." Bai Liu said in a light tone, "The men who tried them were all very capable men in the Order."

"So what do we do next?" Tang Erda enquired intently.

Bai Liu replied calmly: " Jiayi didn't order us to stop, so we continued to follow."

"But next they we see how the situation assists, not necessarily all the people being tried in the tribunal are saved and they do it before we do it."

Tang Erda frowned, "Why?"

Bai Liu's tone was calm: "For it is men who will be judged next."

Trial Court 77.

Mu Sicheng and Bai Liu, hidden behind the mass jury, rose slightly on tiptoe to look at the defendant tied to a post in the middle of the courtroom, then withdrew his eyes in some shock: "It's really a man!"

"Don't witch trials only judge witches! Why are there even men!"

"Have you forgotten about the Witch's Heart trial?" Bai Liu's tone rippled, "After that, in addition to the witches on trial, anyone connected to the witches will be tried as well."

"Unless you are the one testifying against the witch, if you have a witch in your family, then you will definitely be implicated."

The bishop in the judge's chair slammed his gavel, "Silence!"

Advertisement

"Defendant, your wife defected in court three days ago after being accused of being a witch, and have you secretly assisted her since then?"

The man tied to the post shook a little and did not speak.

The bishop slammed the hammer hard, his tone lowering, "Answer me, accused, or you will be pronounced guilty together for aiding the witch!"

"Your family's property will be confiscated by the Holy See in court as a punishment, and you will be executed or sent to the borderline to do hard labour until you die in order to atone for your sin of marrying a witch!"

"But we won't completely deny you a choice, after all, you are a victim too." The bishop's voice became softer, "Now, there are two choices before you."

"The first option is to permanently separate yourself from your witch's wife, to report her to the Holy See at the first sign you see her, and to contribute half of your family fortune now, to buy holy water from the Holy See, to drink it in court to cleanse you of the witch's spell, and to swear that henceforth you will always belong to the Holy See and serve as a member of it, dedicated to killing all witches you see. "

"The second option-"

The bishop's voice gave a beat and went noticeably colder: "That is, you confess your sins and we judge you, and the rest of your family, with holy fire like a witch's trial."

"What's your choice?"

All eyes turned to the man tied to the post, and the room fell silent, and all that could be heard was the rapid, disordered breathing of the man with his head down, his expression confused and frantic, as if he were a trapped beast struggling.

Hidden in the shadows, You Zhen's breath caught in her throat and she stared at the man with the same expression of self-realisation that the man was struggling with.

"The witch district took in a witch three days ago, supposedly his wife who defected." Leah said softly, "The witch said that her husband and the rest of her family had helped her defect."

"She regretted defecting at first because all her family would have been tried except for her."

"But what she fears more than regret is seeing the outcome of her family's trial."

"- is betraying her, is it?" You Zhen took a deep breath as she raised a hand to wipe her reddened eyes, her tone sarcastic and sobbing, "We could help her save her family from harm, but her family wouldn't necessarily choose the outcome of being saved by us."

Advertisement

"They'll choose something else, they'll choose to be on the opposite side of us - they won't go with us."

You Zhen's hands were shaking as she said this, and so was her voice: "It's like when I went to save my family."

Leah tapped her silently on the shoulder. "I ....," the man asked, looking up, almost hoarsely, "can I choose neither?"

"I can give you all the family fortune, but I don't want to be part of the Order and go on a witch hunt, can I?"

The bishop rejected him icily, "There are only two kinds of people

here, the enemies of the witches, and our enemies."

"You are not the enemy of the witch, then you are our enemy."

"The jury pronounced its verdict."

The gavel fell heavily.

The men's backs were also flush with [guilty] signs - these were jurors who, after trying a witch or a person associated with a witch, were able to share in a portion of the property of the person tried as a reward from the Holy See.

Tang Erda looked at the firewood placed at the man's feet with a stony brow: "Do we save it?"

"Wait." Bai Liu's tone was unhurried, "They save us before we save them, we don't move until they do."

Meanwhile, Leah looks over at You Zhen, whose gaze is struggling and her expression frozen, and asks her in a low voice, "Is this an option we can save?"

You Zhen stared dead into the man's face, her teeth clenched as her chest rose and fell twice, then, the moment the torch was lit, she drew her bow and arrow behind her and aimed it at the head of the bishop sitting on the high dais, saying in a harsh and cold tone.

"This choice does not satisfy me, and on principle I do not want to save any man."

"- but in principle I don't want to spare any sluts either."

Advertisement

"Witch's code number four." You Zhen hissed out through clenched teeth, "- Do not ignore the judgment of the innocent!"

As the bows and arrows were released, the court was in turmoil and Bai Liu's eyes flickered as he quickly ordered, "Match their attack."

After a soldierly rescue, Bai Liu stepped forward and lowered the man tied to the post and quickly retreated with the witch, holding the unresponsive man down before the Order could make a second comeback.

Immediately afterwards, the two sides met up.

You Zhen questioned, "Why are you still following me?"

Bai Liu quickly threw up his hands in surrender and innocently stated, "I just saved this person and wanted to ask how you were going to place them?"

You Zhen and Leah both stare blankly at the sight of the still unresponsive man with the burns on his body.

--Handling men has always been a problem for all witches.

In order to protect the witches, men are not accepted in the witch quarter, but sometimes they do save male relatives of the witches from the court, such as parents, brothers, and husbands - men who would have been saved by the You Zhen women after they had made the choice to side with the witches in the court and would have been burned at the stake.

But then came the problem that although they had saved the men, it had always been a problem to place them.

Baola Currently an area is being created around the Witch Quarter to house the men, but the Witch Quarter is very polluted and it's not safe for the men to stay there, but it's not possible to send them back to safety .....

And with this area already full, the matter is currently on hold against the backdrop of the impending Great War and is now at a complete standstill.

You Zhen, in a rare moment of silence, stares at Bai Liu without saying a word.

Bai Liu's loins vibrated as he glanced down at the message he had just received from Liu Jiayi and looked up, smiling as he offered his resolution, "If you don't mind, you can place the rescued males on our side and we will help you process and vet them."

"You can treat us as a third-party organisation [of normal males who submit to witch deployments], where we don't enter the witch zone and use our male identity to lurk in the safe zone while we submit to your deployments and help you attack."

Advertisement

You Zhen gave a puzzled ahhh, and Leah raised her eyebrows subtly -

-- a decision that works perfectly, almost as if the tactics were tailor-made for the girls now.

Bai Liu smiles and asks, "What do you think?"

The message from Liu Jiayi at his waist reads - [third party organisation].

Meanwhile, the papal palace.

The Pope's Palace is the most central institution in the kingdom, housing the Pope, the highest authority in every generation of the Papacy, and the Cardinals, Archbishops and Nuns who have risen from the episcopate to the core of the Papacy. -Today, for the sixth time, the papal palace has been renovated and expanded and is now nearly half the size of a city.

The current generation of popes had a very striking proposal for the extended papal palace - he extended it below the island in the sky and built a staircase to the sky.

But this is not surprising; every generation of popes has been the master of the island of the sky, and this extension arguably overlaps his territory both above and below the sky, and makes it easier for Papists to get on and off the island at any time, and below the stairway to the sky, which connects to the nunnery hall of the papal palace.

The Nunnery is a place in the papal palace where nuns are brought up to be educated. Every year, girls between the ages of 8 and 14 are collected from all over the world and, after being verified as having no contact with eels or having swallowed eels, they are brought to the papal palace to be educated in scripture and doctrine and to be brought up to a holy and undefiled nature. The eels are then taken to the inner sanctum of the papal palace, where they are educated in the scriptures and the teachings of the Church.

The nuns need to remain pure so they don't have to swallow eels. The role of the nuns is to purify things and people contaminated by witches, which also includes a prayerful purification ritual after each trial, where the nuns devoutly pray for an hour in front of the burned witch to destroy the witch's soul - this is to prevent the witch's soul from escaping from the body and out of the body and swoop down into the bodies of other women to continue to haunt them.

The best purification is done by young nuns, that is, those under the

age of eighteen. Then after a nun reaches the age of eighteen, according to the doctrine, her purification becomes progressively less effective, and although the merciful Holy See does not excommunicate them for this reason, most nuns consciously withdraw from the Order at this time.

There are two very "good" ways out for nuns who leave the Holy See.

The first is that she can marry a man and never be accused of being a witch again for the rest of her life, because she was once a holy nun.

Secondly, that they have priority to board the Sky City.

So becoming a nun was the best path for most young girls who had not yet been accused of being witches, bar none, and having a nun who had quit the Order as a wife was the greatest fantasy of all men - when a commoner had a nun in the family, they were insulated from the whole witch trial thing, because the holiness of the nun would purify everything.

Advertisement

So the families who gave birth to girls would do everything they could to send their children into the Order to be raised as nuns, and the families who gave birth to boys would frantically teach their children from the start that you must work hard now, that everything you do is so that you can afford to marry a nun when you grow up.

-- if you are not a nun, if you are not surrounded by nuns, then you will one day be judged by the Holy See!

As a result, nuns became a particularly popular profession, but there were, after all, only a small number of nuns, so competition between members of the nuns' reserve was fierce - as fierce as the competition for their suitors.

Although the doctrine requires only purity and piety in the faith of the nuns, when the Holy See selects, preference is always given to good-looking and distinctive young girls, and many parents even go to great lengths to give their children, who are only teenagers, plastic surgery in order to send them to the nunnery - but this was soon strictly forbidden by the Holy See.

"Don't go about modifying your appearance at will, we need you to stay as you are." The priest who selects the nuns for the Order explains compassionately, "That is how God has given you to look."

With this fierce competition, every nun selected is naturally beautiful and pure, and this year's batch boasts one of the most beautiful nuns since the witch trials.

She did not come from within the kingdom, but from outside it, with bright green eyes and long, silky, curly, shimmering blonde hair that made her look as innocent as the angels accompanying God in the glazed paintings - and that was the reason why everyone praised her as the most beautiful of all, she fitted perfectly into everyone's fantasy of the word nun.

It was so touching whenever she closed her hands and lowered her eyes in pity to pray for those who came to her with their complaints.

"I hope your affliction dissipates soon." She whispered softly, "May your soul go to heaven after death."

"Thank you!" The man who had come to complain was on the verge of tears of gratitude, he reached out his hand to subconsciously shake the nun's hand, but soon came to his senses as if suddenly awakened by the nun's avoidance and blushed with great embarrassment, "Sorry, I forgot that nuns are not allowed to touch us ordinary men who are not of the Order."

She simply smiled and waved her hand to show that she didn't care.

More and more grateful, the man stole a couple of glances at the nun and took a deep breath, gathering his courage before daring to ask: "You, may I ask when you will probably leave the Order?"

-- In this kingdom, asking a nun when she will leave the Order is like asking when she will marry.

"Of course! I know I'm not good enough for you!" The man was quick to defend himself, but under the gaze of the nun's innocent bright green eyes, his words seemed so weak that he stammered, "I... I was just asking a question! You don't have to answer me either!"

"Leave the Holy See?" The nun smiled gently, "I turned sixteen this year, when do you think I will leave the Order?"

Advertisement

"Two, two years later?" The man stumbled over his answer.

"No." Sister's bright green eyes shone with an unknown emotion as she

curled her lips and her tone was so careless, "Anytime, of course."

The man, dizzy and confused, left the nunnery and passed a priest with his head bowed, anxious and in a hurry, in the inner garden of the papal palace, who pushed open the door of the nunnery and, after seeing that she was the only nun, wiped the cold sweat from his forehead before crying out, " Phoebe!"

Phoebe turned around, her green eyes darkening for a moment, "Still no word on Hearts' identity in this game?"

Qi Yifang, dressed in a priest's outfit, was swept up in a cold sweat as if by reflex by Phoebe, and he replied weakly, "..... No."

Phoebe commented in a lazy tone, "You and Liu Ji are two real losers."

Qi Yifang: "......QAQ."

Empress, where the hell are you? Come on! We can't hold Phoebe!

First they were drawn in the challenge and had to play one more game, and now they have lost contact with Hearts as soon as they logged into this copy, and they can't get in touch with them. Hearts.

" Where's Titan?" Phoebe sat casually under the idol, took an apple that these people had offered to the god, took a big bite and with a sweep of her green eyes Liu Ji, "You didn't let him be found, did you?"

"No, no!" Qi Yifang shook his head frantically, "We hid Titan on the beach like you told us to! Liu Ji is currently in charge of the Order over there and has not been found!"

"But it is true that the Queen has not yet been heard from."

Qi Yifang's face fell in worry: "This is not right, the Queen usually contacts us, it's not right that we have all rendezvoused and she hasn't heard from us yet."

Phoebe lifted her eyes a little, "I got a tip that there's someone on Sky City from the title Queen of Hearts."

Qi Yifang was delighted: "Then it must be the Queen! Then let's go up and find ....."

Advertisement

"But that guy is a guy." Phoebe scanned the stunned face of Qi Yifang,

who knew nothing, with amusement, and said almost nastily, "And you know that you can't change your gender in the game, so what do you think, or what do you expect ....."

"Is this man the Queen?"

Qi Yifang's expression went blank: "Ha?!"

Phoebe, after admiring Qi Yifang's dumbfounded expression, withdrew her gaze in bemusement and her tone became cold again, "Can't go up to the Sky City to find it for now, I don't know what's on that map, the fact that the Hearts are stuck up there and can't come down to us means there's something wrong with that map in itself. "

"We should start by sweeping the map from below the island."

"But, but ....." Qi Yifang's mind was already overwhelmed by what Phoebe was throwing out one after another, and he could only stutter, "But we haven't met up with the tactician yet! But we haven't met up with the tactician yet! We're just going to push! We should wait until the Queen joins us and then push after the tactician is out. ....."

"Why do we have to wait for him?" Phoebe interrupted Qi Yifang impatiently, she looked up, her eyes and words completely cold on her obviously innocent face, "He can't come down from the island to us on his own, that's his own waste too."

"It's league time and I don't leave time for waiting for crap."

Qi Yifang was so dumbfounded that he was on the verge of tears: " Phoebe, but we don't have a tactician! How can we play in the league without a tactician?

Oooooh, he misses Jiayi at this point, who also acts as their tactician, but at least it's a negotiated one, and Phoebe is the type who is so strong that there's no way to interject, except for Hearts who can barely communicate with her on an even keel - and that's mostly because Hearts has a higher panel than Phoebe, and Phoebe is the type who can just send you off on the spot in order to win.

--whoever you are.

"It's just that Hearts isn't there, so why no tactician?" Phoebe gave him a strange look, "Aren't I human?"

Qi Yifang just wanted to hold his head and scream - he knew it!

Whenever Phoebe was brought into a match, every game was a major usurpation - Phoebe would constantly steal tactician's rights from Hearts, and would sometimes even turn on Hearts, thanks to Hearts' experience.

This is the reason why Hearts didn't let Phoebe into the team before.

Advertisement

Phoebe is a very aggressive and ambitious player, with strong mobility and aggressiveness. Although she is a supportive individual and takes the [control] position, she can play all the [roaming] and [main attack] positions, and can be said to be a talented all-round player, in some ways even stronger than Liu Jiayi at the beginning, and Bai Liu and the Reverse God, who are on the same level. He was the same level of player as Bai Liu and the Inverse Gods, dragging their teammates, who couldn't keep up, to death every time.

She's a natural tactician - Qi Yifang has heard the Queen say this about Phoebe more than once.

But Phoebe has one Achilles' heel - and that is that her tactics are so aggressive that she can easily die on her teammates.

In other words, the team is too weak.

Qi Yifang, as a teammate who has always been mocked by Phoebe as a [loser], is really afraid of Phoebe taking control.

She doesn't care about them at all.

But now that Hearts is gone, there's no one in the room who can hold Phoebe down!

Phoebe bounced lightly off the pedestal table under the idol, she threw away the core of her nibbled apple and clapped her hands together in a slightly cheerful manner, her bright green eyes curved in a smile, " It's just as well Hearts isn't here, I don't like his weak style of play at all, it's not cool at all."

"He's stuck on the island now and can't get out, so if he has any sense and wants to win this game, he'd better delegate his tactician privileges to me now."

"Of course it doesn't matter if we don't delegate." Phoebe shrugged indifferently, "Just wait until he can't hold out and die on the island

and leave this game, and the tactician privileges are mine."

She folded her hands and closed her eyes in prayer, "Lord, then I wish Hearts to go to hell right now."

"?!?" Qi Yifang was scared and wanted to cry, like a poor child whose parents had left home and had to stay with bad kids who bullied them, all he could do was shiver and whisper back, "Phoebe, the Queen is at least our president, right? Wouldn't it be nice if you cursed her like that?"

"President?" Phoebe gave Qi Yifang a light-eyed sidelong glance, suddenly smiling innocently with curled lips, "Maybe not soon."

Qi Yifang was stunned: "..... What does it mean that the Queen will not be the President right away?"

"That weakling." Phoebe smiled sweetly, her hands folded under her jaw, a holy glow all over her face, "Gave me access to the guild's heir before this year's tournament in order to escape what he didn't want to face oh."

Advertisement

"-as soon as he does die, I'll be the president of the King's Crown."

"So please let him go to hell quickly."

Qi Yifang's mind was now completely blank: "What? The Queen has given you the authority of the President?!"

Phoebe's system panel vibrated, and a prompt popped up saying

[System Alert: Player Queen Hearts has transferred the team's tactician authority to you, please deploy carefully and lead your team to victory!]

"What a weak approach to Hearts style." Phoebe snorted very softly as she smiled and waved the system panel in her hand at Qi Yifang whose expression was on the verge of dementedness, "Tactician access is mine now too."

"Come with me, loser mate."

Ornamental pool.

Wang Shun winced when he saw the Tactician logo appear on

Phoebe's head, a reaction echoed by the large crowd in the auditorium.

Now even the host looked numb, his face dazed as he looked at the big screen and spoke into the microphone with a bit of a break, "Nation, the King's Guild has also delegated their tactician authority to the new players ....."

"So what's this?!"

The host said incredulously, "Two freshman playmakers duking it out?! In a crucial game that will decide whether or not both families make the playoffs?!"

Whispers from the audience.

"Wow shit, a newcomer versus a newcomer, so who wins and who loses is not certain?"

"..... What are these two presidents thinking?"

"Am I the only one who cares what the nun just said; that she's the new president when the queen dies?! What's going on here!?"

Yuan Guang, who was sitting next to Wang Shun, was also tense, he was sitting here on behalf of the merged Russell Cemetery, he had been dizzy from this operation when Bai Liu had delegated his authority to Liu Jiayi, and now that the other party had also delegated, he was even more dizzy and had to hold Wang Shun and ask him: "What is this? "What the hell is going on here?"

"I didn't expect the ..... Empress to give Phoebe the guild and the Tactician's authority so quickly." Wang Shun's face sank slightly, "All I know is that a long time ago she didn't want to be the president anymore, that's why she picked Jiayi as her successor and groomed her to take over her authority."

Yuan Guang was stunned: "You don't want to do it anymore? Why? She's one of the strongest players in the game?

"I don't know." Wang Shun bowed his head heavily as he folded his arms in front of himself and was silent for a moment before speaking, "The Queen's skill would make me the person I wanted to see in the core of my greatest desire when I looked directly at her, so I never succeeded in testing her mind."

"Why would a top player in the prime of his powers give up his position?" Daniel asked bored as he leaned over the railing and turned his head to Cen Buming, "Hey President, you look like you know everything, do you know why?"

Cen Buming clutched his chest and gave Daniel a nonchalant sidelong glance: "Shouldn't you know more about the King's Guild?"

"That dangerous nun, that's your sister, isn't it?"

"Biologically speaking, she is indeed my sister." Daniel looked at Phoebe on the big screen with a slightly resistant expression and tsked in annoyance, "But by all accounts, a more accurate definition of her status would be my competitor than sister."

"And a pretty strong contender at that."

Cen Buming raised one eyebrow slightly, "While I have no interest in your family affairs, I can listen if you want to talk about them."

--what a gossipy sentence of rejection.

Daniel couldn't resist switching hands and mopping his jaw as he stared at Phoebe on the big screen for a moment, his apple-green eyes darkening.

"You should know who I am in reality, right, President? I don't need to give you any more information about my background, do I?" Daniel's voice sounded suddenly.

Cen Buming gave a cold nod, "I know. "

Advertisement

--An arms dealer so powerful that the Bai six of other worlds would be willing to cooperate with him, would choose his heir from among his own offspring in a way that could be described as cruel, as if he were taming a beast.

Daniel, the winner of the offspring of these fights, inherited the group after his father's death and became one of the best and most easily discharged guns in Bai six's hands.

"My father had many lovers, he didn't care for them and wouldn't let them into our family, but he would bring back all the children of his born of these lovers and teach us to handle and shoot a gun from the

time we started walking." Daniel cocked his head and said in a casual tone, "My mother was the first wife he took into the family and then he killed me when I was five because she betrayed him and was praying at bedtime."

" Phoebe's mother was his second wife and he married Phoebe's mother when she was already raised in the Cinchimani family until she was five years old, when I was almost seven."

Daniel paused for a moment and, as if amused, began to play a question and answer game with Cen Buming: "Why do you think my father chose Phoebe's mother as his second wife out of a long list of lovers?"

Cen Buming was quiet for a moment: "I don't know."

--in short, there would be nothing in this little madman's family that could be routinely inferred.

"It's because of Phoebe." Daniel leaned back lazily in his posture, "My father was going to marry the mother of another boy - another of his lovers."

"But Phoebe changed his mind."

Daniel looked up, he looked at Phoebe on the big screen and his tone was dark: "At just five years old, Phoebe was a perfect inheritor of his genes, even surpassing him, she was cruel, powerful, cold, clinging to her gun when she was crawling, with an innate desire to control anything she could plunder and move up the ladder, compared to other heirs who only cry, Phoebe is as good as a creature of another species."

" Phoebe's excellence impressed my father, and although there had never been a female heir in the Cinchimani family, Phoebe swayed him."

"He decided to marry Phoebe's birth mother to pave the way for Phoebe's place in the heirship."

"When I was thirteen and Phoebe was ten, our family had an heir trial." Daniel looked at the big screen and recounted in a calm tone, "The trial was simple: shoot a living person ten metres away with an apple on their head."

"These living people were our closest adoptive mothers at the time,

and all the children came on crying, except Phoebe."

"-despite the live target she had to shoot at, the living person standing across from her with the apple on top was her biological mother."

"We had to fire a total of ten shots, we would be given apples to change, some of the kids broke down and stopped on the first shot, and people on the field kept getting hurt and dragged down again for resuscitation."

"There were only two kids on the field who finished firing ten shots, one was me and one was Phoebe, my live target was my servant at the time who was uninjured and ended up leaving the field in tears, I called a time out when I got to the sixth shot and took a minute break."

Daniel paused for a moment, " Phoebe didn't call a timeout."

"She just calmly held the gun up and fired ten shots with uncanny precision at the apples that kept being replaced over her own birth mother's head."

"On the third shot, her mother couldn't hold it together and broke down on her knees and started crying and praying, saying she wanted it all to stop, and my father asked Phoebe if she needed to take a break, and Phoebe said - no."

"She said to hold mum in place and just keep changing apples, it'll be over soon."

Cen Buming is silent.

Daniel looks up: "- and now Phoebe is still the number one heir to the Cinchimani family."

"She didn't seem satisfied with having to wait until her father died to get what she wanted, though, so-" Daniel shrugged indifferently, "I wasn't surprised to see her in the game for that matter. "

"Did you just say that all the kids on the field cried except the nuns?" Cen Buming asked thoughtfully in return, "So you cried too?"

Daniel: "....."

City in the Sky

In-game.

Qi Yifang followed Phoebe cautiously, eyeing her up: "Are we really not going to save the Queen? She's given you access, so she must be in a critical condition, right? Why don't we go up to the Sky City and watch ....."

"He gave me access because he knew I had the advantage over him." Phoebe interrupts Qi Yifang's crumbling comment as she gives him a spare glance, "He should have done this a long time ago."

"He's never going to win with that soft defensive play, he's only wearing himself out."

"Relying on [shields] doesn't make you weak ....." Qi Yifang's defensive voice faded under Phoebe's emotionless gaze, "We also got second in the ....."

"If this is the right tactic, why would Hearts want me on the team?" Phoebe countered gently, "Why should I be given the status of heir to the presidency and access to the tactician?"

" Hearts is only doing this to show - he knows himself that he can't win that way and he's using me to help him win, so doesn't that just prove that I'm doing the right thing more than he is?"

Qi Yifang was anxious and upset: "I'm still don't understand, the Queen can still fight, she's so young, why is she so anxious to give you the guild to inherit?"

"Is she leaving the guild to do something?"

"He's not leaving the guild, he's trying to get out of the game, he's trying to escape it all." Phoebe replied in a light tone, "So he's been looking for an heir to take over the guild, first the witch and then me."

"Get out of the game?" Qi Yifang asked incredulously in return, "There's a way out of the game?"

Phoebe replied in an even tone, "Of course we do, don't we have people leaving the game every day all around us?"

Qi Yifang was confused: "Around me? How did they leave?! How

come I don't know?!"

"What's the best way to get out of the game, apart from winning the league and making a wish at the end?"

"Die." Phoebe yawned lazily, looking at the dumbfounded Qi Yifang with that gentle smile on her face as she prayed, "You can leave even after you die, have you forgotten?"

Qi Yifang stopped dead in his tracks, his expression blank for a few seconds before he realised what Phoebe meant by that.

"You mean ....." Qi Yifang questioned Phoebe incredulously, "You mean the Queen wants to die?!"

"Or what?" Phoebe shrugged, "What reason but death would motivate a ruler at the peak of his power to seek an heir?"

"Why?!" Qi Yifang was going crazy, his mind was shaken, and his pupils were lax, "Why is the Queen seeking death?!"

Phoebe, with that pitying, careless smile on her face, replied, "Because he's weak."

"No matter how many [shields] he finds to protect himself, he's still too weak to face here, to face himself anymore, both in and out of the game."

" Sister Phoebe!"

Far away, across the nunnery, a man in bishop's clothes was calling out to Phoebe, who was waving, his voice tinged with urgency: "Please come quickly!"

"The Pope has been attacked on the Island in the Sky! The witches are attacking all the Inquisitorial Courts and we need your help!"

Phoebe raised her eyebrows a little: "The Pope was attacked?"

If her information was correct, the pope was the same priest who had promoted Quan Baola, captain of the first generation of saints.

He also succeeded in suppressing Quan Baola, who was a powerful witch, and further established the position of the Holy See, so to speak, and his promotion was like a rocket. He was soon promoted to the papacy.

No matter how well prepared he was, no matter how terrible the sorcery used on him, he was useless and died without a scratch. It's hard enough for anyone to attack the Pope, who seems to have armour all around him.

It was the first time I had heard of this attack.

..... and still attacked on the Island in the Sky.

The ordinary NPCs of this world are already shocked by the majesty of this Pope who has no part in the attack on the witches. The existence of this Pope has made them more and more convinced that God exists and blesses the people of the Holy See, and the more they dare not disobey the Holy See, not to mention those who are screened by the Holy See to get on the island of the sky, there will be no one who will not think of attacking the Pope.

Unless this assailant of the Pope has the strength and confidence to kill this Pope at first sight.

Phoebe narrowed her eyes - she suspected the attack had been done by Hearts.

But if the attack was carried out by Hearts, the pope should not have been attacked, but killed - and cut to pieces, by a thousand cuts.

So what's going on? What's on Sky Island? Why is this Pope not dead?

The Island in the Sky.

Hearts is half pinned to the ground by a group of men, surrounded by a scattered pile of playing cards, a mess of knife marks on his face and a pile of used up game props on the floor.

His shoulder-length hair slid down the side of his face to his god, his eyes brimming with red and purple as he looked in the dim candlelight, and on his lips were dried blood stains that he licked away before he slowly raised his head to look across at the man sitting in the chair - a man dressed in a pope's line, with a face so familiar to him that he couldn't help but start to laugh, and so he did laugh.

"Do not be rude to the Pope!" Someone raised his sceptre in anger and gave him a sharp blow in the face.

So he was slapped across the face, blood dripping from the corners of his mouth, and Hearts slowly pushed his tongue against his cheek,

which was sore and numb from the headstock of the sceptre, and laughed more and more, almost to the point of a frenzy.

It was so funny, he hadn't dreamed of this scene for years and he actually saw it again in this fake game.

"You ......!" The man was about to fight when the Pope, sitting within a wide sofa chair, raised his hand to stop him.

The loving, middle-aged Pope looked at Hearts with an inexplicable pity: "He is after all my child, there is no need for that."

"But he attacked you! My Lord Pope!" The man next to him accused with righteous indignation, "This foul son of a witch actually tried to kill us all!"

"If we had not had the blessing of God, we would have died by his hand!"

Hearts Lifting his eyes, he looked up at the panel of monster books that was spinning above the heads of the Pope and the group of cardinals :

[Witch Trials Monster Book Refresh - Pope (Master of the Sky City) (1/4)]

[Attack Value: Attacks against members of the Order are weakened, weakening one member of the Order by fifteen percent of their blood at a time, attacks against witches and the judged are enhanced, weakening the opponent by twenty percent of their blood at a time (combat style has been unlocked by combat)]

[Attack: Sacred Scepter, Words of Judgement]

[Weakness: ?? (unexplored)]

[System Alert: Unlock the first page of the Witch Trials Monster Book, "The Pope", due to player Hearts' persistent attacks]

[Note: The NPC should have been promoted to Pope for leading the coming of the Witch Trials period and gained the Oracle Blessing shield, which can ignore attacks from all males in the area ruled by the Papacy and all witches who have been judged and can trigger rebound attacks under special circumstances].

[System Alert: Player Hearts, because you are both a tried witch and a

male in the area ruled by the Holy See, every attack you make against the Pope will trigger the bounce mechanism and be bounced back to yourself, please attack with caution].

[The Witch Trials Monster Book Refresh - Cardinal (Sky City VIP) (2/4)]

[Attack Value: Cannot attack the Pope, one attack against a member of the Order will weaken one member of the Order by ten percent of their blood, attacks against witches and the judged are enhanced by weakening the opponent by fifteen percent of their blood at a time (combat style has been unlocked by combat)]

[Attack: Mallet, Doctrine Recitation]

[Weakness: ?? (unexplored)]

[System Alert: Unlock the second page of the Witch Trials Monster Book, "The Cardinal", due to persistent attacks by player Hearts]

[Note: As this npc has gained the Oracle Blessing shield for judging countless witches, it can ignore the attacks of all males in the area ruled by the Holy See and all witches judged, and can trigger rebound attacks under special circumstances].

[System Alert: Player Hearts, because you are both a tried witch and a male in the area ruled by the Holy See, every attack you make against the Cardinal will trigger the bounce mechanism and be bounced back to yourself, so please attack with caution].

"That was ..... so much fun." Hearts cocked his head and looked up, his eyes amazingly bright and his face not at all disheveled, but with a smile on his face at the Pope's familiar face, "It has been a long time, my father."

"After all these years, I can't believe I'm in your clutches again."

"So, guess this time ....."

Hearts twirled his wrist and two fingers on his hoisted right hand flashed a playing card while he lifted his eyes and smiled almost lazily, "How soon will I destroy your island?"

Meanwhile, the witches' quarter.

Having defeated the Order, Quan Baola took Liu Jiayi back into the

witch's quarter, where she spread out a map and began to talk seriously to those around her about the next attack.

Liu Jiayi was watching, and as she watched, she suddenly frowned and tugged on Quan Baola's coat: "Can I ask a question?"

Quan Baola turned his head to look at her: "What's the problem?"

"This location is the core of the Papacy, right, with the Papal Palace below and the Sky City hovering above, so generally speaking we should attack this place first, right? Once we take this place, all the main members of the Papacy will be wiped out, and the remaining Inquisition will not be a problem, so we can take our time to clear it." Liu Jiayi wondered, "Why are all your attack routes bypassing this place?"

Quan Baola's face stilled, the rest of the witches did not have as much control over their emotions as Quan Baola did, and a few of their faces sank instantly.

Liu Jiayi was keenly aware that something was wrong: "This place, is there something bad to fight?"

Quan Baola remained quiet for a moment, but opened his mouth, "Everyone who has been on this island is immune to the witch's attacks, and in some cases can even bounce back from our attacks."

"The last time I prepared a small team to go to the island once." Quan Baola's purple eyes dimmed for a moment, "Everyone gave it their best shot, but it ....."

A witch next to her whispered through gritted teeth, "Any attack on them is ineffective as long as the witch has been tried!"

"I have tried to board the island many times in all the years since I defected to the witches' quarter." Quan Baola said in a very soft voice, "We even formed a team from the males that were rescued after realising that the witches couldn't make it to the island, but there was still no way to attack them."

"Some say that the Sky City is the closest place to heaven, that they are blessed by God because they judged us and did the right thing, and that God gave them the Island of the Sky to protect those who go on it from us wicked witches. "

Liu Jiayi reacted almost instantly - this island should be a boss of size,

with armour stacked on it.

And the gauntlet is deliberately aimed at witches.

Liu Jiayi looked at the floating island on the map and pondered - if a witch who had been judged could not attack, and neither could a male of the local population, then there were only two identities in this map that could fight a boss.

The first is from within the Holy See.

The second is a witch who has not yet been tried - like her.

But both identities are a bit of a problem, Liu Jiayi narrows her eyes slightly - no wonder the witches have been holding back on this area, it's a zone that has been formed entirely against them.

"Witches like me, who have not been tried, should be able to attack them." Liu Jiayi spoke calmly, "But it's rare for someone like me to join the Witch District on my own before I've been tried, and there's no way to gather a team to attack the Upper Sky Islands, is there?"

Quan Baola was quiet for a moment, then nodded: "Yes."

Girls who have not yet been judged, even if they already have the signs of a witch, that will not easily defect and join the witch district, they will try to hide themselves until the moment of their trial comes to position.

"It is also possible for those within the Order to attack the Upper Sky City." Liu Jiayi said thoughtfully, "But the people inside the Order are too dangerous for you to contact, and even if you can turn one or two of your insiders, you won't be able to form a scale and form a war party."

But again, the Sky City is the core functioning area of the entire Papacy, and if they don't fight their way up there, the more vetted witches there are, the more cardinals will be eligible to ascend, and the more they won't be able to fight against, the more people with armour.

There are now two entry points, the first of which is from within the Holy See.

There is a very good entry point within the Holy See, and that is - the resident group of nuns on the City in the Sky.

Quan Baola seemed to have thought about this a long time ago as she recounted in an articulate manner, "We tried to contact the girls on the Sky City and they went up there and never came back down, which is not the same as what the Holy See told them at the beginning, nor is it like what the Pope told them before, that they were to be free to pick their partners up there and choose which of them they liked that and be happy with each other forever, but to be chosen by a different man every week, or even every day, and then be with each other."

"But they can't leave the Sky City, they can't contact the outside world, and naturally they can't tell the girls down on the island who still want to go up to the Sky City what they see up there."

"And you witches know what it's like up there, though." Liu Jiayi calmly adds the second half of Baola's sentence, "But when you speak, no one believes you at all."

"And in this extreme situation, the City of the Sky, as the only clearing for the female inhabitants who have not yet been judged, their best retreat apart from the witches, someone who denigrates the City of the Sky would be denigrating their last chance of survival, and they would not believe it."

Quan Baola did not speak, her expression had a still, skilful look, her eyes were slightly downcast as if she was a little sad, and it was a long time before she spoke softly, "Why don't people want to believe what the witches say?"

"Why do people prefer to believe in the casual trials of the Papacy rather than in the death-defying struggles of witches?"

"For no one will listen to the words of the judged and will feel that the other side is all arguing against their own crimes." Liu Jiayi replied in a faint tone, "Nor will anyone listen to the Holy See when you have cleansed the whole kingdom of all the tribunals of judgment after you have fought your way up to the city of the sky."

Quan Baola took a deep breath: "But fighting our way up to the Sky City is a big problem, and although we can reach the girls up there, they have never swallowed an eel, are not witches, have no resistance against the Papal bunch, and are so tightly controlled by the Papal bunch that it is difficult for us to see them. "

"But it's certainly an entry point." Liu Jiayi's tone changes, "There is another entry point that we can use for us."

Quan Baola was stunned: "What entry point?"

Liu Jiayi looked up into Quan Baola's shining purple eyes, and her tone couldn't help but start to wander a little: "But I'm not sure you can accept using these people as an aid to cut in."

"- is a group of men who have been used as reserve witches and transported from a foreign land."

"They are not local and not affiliated with the Order, so the attack on these people on the island should be effective."

"A male from another country?" Quan Baola nodded very gently as she replied seriously, "I will give the offer some serious thought, but we have another, quicker and more direct solution on our side."

Liu Jiayi asks, "What is the solution?"

"[The Heart of a Witch]." Quan Baola's tone was solemn, "We have a copy of the [Witch's Code] here, in which it is written that there will be a powerful witch who, hardened by extreme pain and hatred, will harden her otherwise insubstantial soul into a ruby red heart, and that by placing this heart on top of the highest Tower of Babel in the Sky City, the light emitted by the heart will break all the protection of the Holy See, and at that time we can ....."

A witch next to her raised her voice to interrupt Baola's somewhat agitated narrative and looked at Baola with great concern and seriousness: "The Witch's Heart is only a legend, Baola, you are not allowed to read it anymore!"

"If we ever catch you reading this legendary story in secret again, and privately using some so-called painful cultivation to harden your soul, it's going to be your ass!"

Quan Baola couldn't resist arguing, "But everything else in the [Witch's Code] is useful, and we've learned a lot of witchcraft from it, and if the [Witch's Heart] in the [Witch's Code] really exists, then all it would take is a heart, and everyone wouldn't have to work so hard to attack the island in one go!"

"But the extraction requirement for [the Witch's Heart] is [the soul leaving the body]!" The witch who was arguing with Baola couldn't help but raise her voice, "That means you're going to die! Baola!"

"You're going to die, and your soul becomes a heart so we can get your

[Witch's Heart]!"

Liu Jiayi captures the key phrase: "Witch's Heart?"

"You mustn't listen to Baola." The witch next to her advised bitterly, "It's just a legendary item that is said to break all the protections the Order has against us, but it's not even known to exist and no one has ever seen it, we're not going to get our hopes up on it!"

"But I think there must be a witch's heart that can conquer all things." Quan Baola's eyes were determined, and she smiled, as if jokingly, "I'm known as the [First Witch] by those in the Order, what if the [Witch's Heart] is in me?"

The witch looked warningly at Quan Baola: "Baola!"

Quan Baola threw up her hands in surrender and whispered, "Okay, okay, I know you don't like it, I won't say anything."

Meanwhile, Liu Jiayi looks to his refreshed system panel.

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Liu Jiayi for obtaining the key information - If you obtain (Heart of the Witch)].

[Only when a witch dies, her soul is separated from her body, and the heart that is formed is called (the heart of a witch) and can break the protection of all the members of the Order.]

Liu Jiayi's eyes narrowed for a moment - this shows .....

Wouldn't that mean they would have to kill the witch to get each other's hearts?

" Baola!" You Zhen's voice came from far away, a little excited, "We're back!"

Quan Baola turned his head and made sure everyone was back with a look before smiling, "Looks like everyone showed up in force this time."

"That's for sure!" You Zhen smiled triumphantly, her eyes shining, "We brought back all the witches on trial this time! Not a single one was left out!"

Quan Baola looks to Leah next to him: "What about the families? Did you bring them back?"

Leah and You Zhen were both eerily silent for a moment, they had saved the men before, but basically, they didn't take them to the witch area, they just saved them and ran, but every time Baola would ask.

At the look on their faces, Quan Baola, helpless and in tears, sighed: "Did you leave her outside the courtroom again?"

"I'll go down later and bring the people back and take them to the witch sanctuary, they were victims of the Order too, there's no need to take it out on them." Quan Baola paused for a moment, "Many are still children, only a few years old, you shouldn't do this."

Many of the males on trial were [sons of witches], whose mothers were tried in the first place, executed or defected after being condemned as witches by the Papacy, and they were in the second place, and these children were basically no more than fifteen years old.

You Zhen whispered in defense: "..... usually kids we still bring back."

They all know how Baola was tried and how Baola's children are still confined to the Island of the Sky as [sons of witches], the queens of the ..... gang.

So, You Zhen, no matter how much she disliked men, could not help but think of the infants who had been tried by the priest for having a [witch's heart] when she saw these tried, young [sons of witches], and saved them to bring them back.

--for not bringing it back, who knows if these children will also be brought up to the city in the sky because of their overly beautiful appearance, or for other reasons.

"But why not this time?" Quan Baola enquired softly.

You Zhen paused for a moment as she and Leah looked at each other and took a deep breath before speaking, "Because a strange organisation took them in and I thought they were a more appropriate place to house the men on trial."

"A strange organization?" Quan Baola frowned slightly, "What kind of organisation?"

Leah and You Zhen told Quan Baola everything, and Quan Baola realised something almost instantly, turning her head to Liu Jiayi behind her, her eyes wandering, with a smile in her voice: "This is what you said, a male from another country that can be used as another entry point? "

Liu Jiayi resisted the urge to cover her face and gave a very difficult muffled cry.

..... admits it's really embarrassing to know such an odd bunch of men.

"You know these men?" You Zhen looked in shock at Liu Jiayi, who also reacted quickly and asked incredulously, "You wouldn't be the witch who healed him that that guy said was willing to slay the gods for you, would you?!"

Liu Jiayi pursed her lips and nodded a little, "If he didn't know any other witches, it would have been me."

You Zhen scratched his head a little awkwardly, "Eh, it's someone you know, huh? Tell me earlier ....."

She had been so good at targeting them and ended up throwing the men at them and then fierce them away.

"No." Liu Jiayi looked up, her tone even, "If they can't even make peace with you and do their job as auxiliary witches, there is no need for you to be kind to them for my sake."

"They don't deserve your kindness if they can't even show that kind of sincerity."

You Zhen flinched for a moment, and Quan Baola's eyes moved to Liu Jiayi before a genuine smile appeared, and she turned her head to Jiayi, held out her hand and said in a cooperative manner, "Can I meet them?"

Liu Jiayi held out his hand and shook Quan Baola haughtily: "They are always at your disposal if you want them to be."

Quan Baola winked as she smiled a little, "I hope we have a good time together then."

Liu Jiayi breathed a sigh of relief in his heart - at last he was willing to meet Bai Liu and the others.

When she had suggested it, Quan Baola had said she would consider it, but it was clearly a very low priority - the seemingly mild-mannered head witch was in fact very thoughtful and vigilant, and she was very clear-headed, and would never open the door for men to enter the witch quarter until she had dealt with the relationship between the men on trial and the witches. She is very clear-headed and will not open the door for men to enter the witch quarter until she has dealt with the relationship between the men on trial and the witches.

It also means she won't just accept the help from a bunch of exotic men.

But now You Zhen's attitude has made Quan Baola reconsider the matter - as a third party group outside the witch zone, this group also has the ability to protect young victims such as the Sons of the Witch on trial, better place other men in the safe zone and train them to be able to defend themselves, while also They can also be used as a support team to clear the Inquisitorial Court of their friends, and because they are only in the support position, they will not cause major damage to the witches when they attack, even if this team turns against them.

This solves all the current problems perfectly and has been implemented once and seems to be working quite well - a tactic she had developed at the beginning.

But she was also prepared for the tactic not to work, as she was unsure how well Bai Liu would work with the witch team and whether she would succeed in impressing them.

Liu Jiayi watched Quan Baola's back as he turned to continue his deliberations and couldn't help but curl the corner of his mouth a little.

But not a bad job so far, it seems, with this oddly shaped group of men.

At the same moment, the oddly shaped group of men were sitting in a sad huddle.

They got them to clear out an abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of the last Inquisition, cleaned out all the eels inside once more, and then placed the men and children who had been rescued from the Inquisition today here in the warehouse and were about to prepare for their rest.

It's supposed to be a relatively easy process that doesn't cause Mu Sicheng to break down and scream for help: "Bai Liu, what am I going to do? You've got to help me!"

Bai Liu rolled his eyes to look at him, "No what to do."

"But I really don't know how to carry a baby!!!" Mu Sicheng was really going crazy, he had a small child in his arms who looked four or five years old and was now buried in his arms, grabbing his hair and crying, "Mummy! I want my mother! Didn't you say you'd get a mother if you came with you!"

"Where's my mother!"

Mu Sicheng was going crazy, his brain buzzing with tears: "There will be a mother! I will find your mother! Will you stop crying!"

Yes, that's right, they're all bringing up children.

When the judge asked the sons of witches in a coaxing tone whether they would choose the Holy See or your foul and sinful witch mothers, all the little children howled in the court dock.

"I want my mother!"

"You're the bad guy! You took mummy away! You give me back my mum!"

So the trial process for small children was exceptionally easy and quick, unless the father next to them sternly demanded that they change their confessions, and almost all the children were pronounced [sons of witches] in court and sentenced to some lowly drudgery to be brought up as slaves in the kingdom.

Tang Erda rocks a small two-year-old child from side to side in one arm, both of whom are tired of crying and fall asleep in his arms, clutching his collar and sobbing in their sleep, their eyes red.

"What brutes." Tang Erda's face was stony and cold, but the words came out softly, as if she was afraid of waking the children up, "To try children this young and to torture them."

These seven children included two girls, one aged four and one aged six. After going to court, both girls, probably because they had witnessed their mother's trial, were very resistant to and afraid of the Holy See, and began to cry when they went to court, refusing very

strongly the bishop's request to join the Holy See to be cleansed of impurity, and not willing to drink holy water to prove their innocence, and were finally pronounced [guilty] by the whole jury.

Not pronounced [sons of witches], but straight up [witches], saying that the wicked witches came to earth with the help of their tainted mothers, who had not yet awakened to witch consciousness only, and that they were to be burned with holy fire in court, or identified.

The two girls, one now on Bai Liu's back with her head tilted against Bai Liu's shoulder, the other in Bai Liu's arms, patted gently on the back, curled up insecurely in a small ball, arms and legs twitching gently, a little ash from the fire still on their faces, also tearfully asleep.

Bai Liu glanced down at the stain on the little girl's face and gently wiped it off with his sleeve.

Muke had only one with him, but the boy was quite quiet, only sleeping restlessly, waking up now and then to cry and then drowsily clinging to Muke as he fell asleep again, he had been looking at the child with some distress and mixed eyes, and when he heard Mu Sicheng's painful cry for help raise his head, he could not help but say with amusement, "Don't argue with him, he is He's just scared, he's tired of crying and he's sleeping."

Mu Sicheng was also getting teary-eyed as he was hung by the energetic little boy's neck, riding on his back and crying loudly for his mother and father, and almost choked up as he looked to a silent Bai Liu and Tang Erda: "Why are you ..... so skilled with children? Why are you so skilled with children?"

Tang Erda, in particular, is so skilled with 2 two-year-olds.

"I was surrounded by new fathers who were anxiously looking up parenting experiences every day, and I followed some of them." Tang Erda pauses slightly, "Probably know how to bring up."

Mu Sicheng, the boy, had finally tired of his antics and had fallen asleep next to Mu Sicheng, clutching the corner of his coat, and he breathed a long, relieved sigh of relief - normally he would have been furious with such a child.

But now .....

Mu Sicheng looked at the burns on the little boy's arms, remembered the little boy crying hysterically at the bishop in court, saying, "Burn my mother if you can, burn me if you can," and tsked again, taking off his jacket and covering him up.

Not bad for a bit of backbone.

"What do we do next?" Mu Sicheng's head is spinning at the thought of new children coming in every day, "I can't even bring one in, what's going to happen behind me?"

"Let the others who have been admitted take them, there are relatives of these children among them." Bai Liu's tone was even, "We'll just leave one of us here, the rest of us have to go out on the circuit, and the court has a new trial every day."

Mu Sicheng gave a loud, fiery cry, "There's a trial tomorrow? Can this trial court be burned down?"

"Of course it's going to burn." Bai Liu calmed, "Preparations for the big battle should be underway in the Witch Quarter, we'll just wait for the catch."

"Speaking of which ....." Muke frowned, "it's a bit odd, with all the fuss we've made since we logged in, why hasn't the Kings Guild come looking for us, we haven't heard a word about them? "

"What are they doing?"

"We landed on the Witch side, they should have landed on the side

that is hostile to us, the Holy See." Bai Liu pondered, "That's what I've heard, the Queen of Hearts landed her copy on the Island of the Sky, which is the heart of the Papacy."

"As to why there's no movement now ....."

Bai Liu narrowed his eyes slightly, "I don't think there's no movement, it's just that it's movement we don't know about yet."

Muke paused: "What do you mean?"

"From the information we've gotten so far, there were two people tried in that [Witch's Heart] trial back then, one was Quan Baola and the other was her child, also known as the Son of the Virgin." Bai Liu spoke in a calm tone, "These two characters now happen to be one in the other camp as Hearts logged in, and one as the leader of our side, exactly one on each side."

"If this is a fair game design against each other, then there is a great possibility that these two people who belong to both camps have the so-called [Witch's Heart], and what we, as people from the witch's camp, should do is to go and grab the other side's [Witch's Heart] before putting it on the high tower."

"The other side's [Witch's Heart]?" Mu Sicheng came over a little confused, "According to you, doesn't someone on our side of the camp have a [Witch's Heart]? Can't we just send our [Witch's Heart] up to the tower?"

Bai Liu gave Mu Sicheng a light-eyed sweep, "From the main quest, your idea is fine."

"But only if we, who have taken Quan Baola [Heart of the Witch], are not killed by the rioting witches before we ascend to the Sky City."

"Wait ....." Mu Sicheng reacted slowly as he asked back in shock, "Isn't this [Witch's Heart] a spell or a prop or something? It can't really be a witch's heart, can it?!"

"Maybe it's worse than that." Bai Liu slowly lifted the receiver with a message just sent by Liu Jiayi, who raised his eyes and whispered, "[The Witch's Heart] is the heart condensed from the soul of a witch after her death."

Meanwhile, the papal palace.

It is late at night at the moment.

In the empty nun's hall, the Bishop looked pityingly and salivating at Phoebe, who sat opposite him, and sighed in his heart at the beauty and beauty of the young girl, who had grown to an age when she was ready to be enjoyed.

"You're turning sixteen this year, aren't you?" The Bishop took Phoebe's hand and placed it over hers like an elder, patting it gently twice, "Have you thought about what you'll do when you become an adult?"

Phoebe withdrew her hand without moving and looked at the bishop in a prayerful manner, "Did you not come to speak to me about the assassination of the Pope?"

"The two things are related." The Bishop feigned seriousness and withdrew his hand into a fist and coughed, " Phoebe, you are the best nun of our generation in the Papal Court and concern for your going is as important as concern for the assassination of the Pope."

"Is that so?" Phoebe was noncommittal as she smiled, "It doesn't look like something big happened to the Pope then."

The bishop looked compassionate as he gripped the cross on his own breast: "The Pope has the blessing of God, and even if he were to be attacked by more evil men, God would protect him from the slightest harm because of his merits."

"But that's not the case with the others."

The bishop sighed: "The Pope and the bishops accompanying him were attacked by a regular dweller on the island of the sky, but soon, by the blessing of God, after a brief fright, they took control of the regular dweller who had suddenly turned on them and were ready to take him into custody."

"At first there were no casualties, but something went wrong during the interrogation of this occupant."

"But that regular occupant, who grew up on an island as pure as that in the sky and had never touched an eel, could actually use witchcraft!"

This bishop's brow furrowed sadly: "Whenever he looked directly into the eyes of anyone, he became the one the other person feared and

wanted to see most; all were bewitched by his sorcery, and whenever he succeeded in bewitching someone, he cruelly ordered that person to harm himself in the most vicious and painful way."

"Twenty-one cardinals have died under his sorcery."

Phoebe's eyes narrowed slightly - it was Hearts' personal skill, and it was Hearts who had assassinated the Pope.

But this guy usually rarely use personal skills on NPCs and players, after all, this person does things lazy and expensive and picky, prefer to make people, can lie under the shield or use flat A slowly torture the opponent's case, is definitely not just open a big give the opponent a pain, can be said that a strange fetish and fault.

Hearts' poker flat attack is enough to kill these clerical npc's in this copy, so why would they fail the first attack and only cause a wound drain the second time they fire a big skill?

-- and ..... only twenty-one dead bishops?

In true Hearts fashion, if things had gotten to the point where he was willing to open up his skills indefinitely, the island would have been slaughtered by now.

"And then what?" Phoebe inquired softly, "What happened after he killed the twenty-one cardinals?"

"He has bewitched the Pope with the same sorcery!" The bishop shook his head bitterly, "The Pope was trampled under his feet and mocked with abandon, this man played with the Pope like a little worm, he made the bewitched Pope kneel on the ground and bark like a dog, he made the Pope lick the blood of others on the ground after they had died, the Pope was bewitched by him and did as he was told without resistance."

"At last he gave the order for the Pope to kill himself by swallowing the decorated sword in the room, and it looked as if the Pope was about to be killed by his bewitchment, but he suddenly stopped his order."

Phoebe raised her eyebrows slightly, "Stopped? Why?"

She'd never seen Hearts stop halfway through a big skill, and it was the kind of scene where they just looked like they were having fun, and to be honest, usually in these situations Phoebe would think

they'd just have to wait and win as Hearts came down from the Sky Island and bloodied the ladder to them.

The bishop paused, "The Pope said that God blessed him, so God controlled the evil demon witch the moment before he was about to kill him."

"But actually ....." the bishop gave a slight pause, "we don't know why he stopped so suddenly."

"All we know is that he looked up at the mirror across the room and then stopped moving at all, allowing us to tie him up and take him to the prison in the Sky City, as if the demon wizard who had been killing people with impunity before did not exist, as if his soul had been drained away and he had become a puppet-like puppet, never to resist again. "

Phoebe finally showed a bit of surprise now, "Stopped resisting when you saw the mirror?"

Hearts is not the type to drop his weapon at the last minute, rather, he is a vindictive, vengeful, vindictive, vindictive man who has no room for a third emotion in between, and Phoebe only knows two people who can make him drop his poker hand in the heat of hatred. -Phoebe

-- One was his mother, who had been dead for ten years.

-- One was the strange guest who boarded the Island of the Sky back in the day, a man who is supposed to be dying.

In other words, if the Queen of Hearts is not a player but a monster, then the [Weakness] option on this monster book called [Queen of Hearts], as long as you live to explore it, then you will see the [Weakness] with both his mother's and the guest's names written on it in unmistakable detail.

Neither that man nor Hearts' mother appearing in this copy is very realistic.

"Yes, it is true that the sight of the mirror stopped the resistance." The bishop nodded, "So when the Pope came down from the Sky City, he also brought down this mirror that had protected him."

"I have come to you at this time because the Pope is in shock, he may have been corrupted by some degree of evil witch power and needs to be purified, he is now resting in the palace and is very weak, you are

our best nun so I would like to ask you to go and purify the Pope of some residual witch power."

"Besides." The bishop's face finally became serious, "The witch's power has become so ubiquitous that it has managed to infiltrate even on the Sky City, our counterattack against the witches is imminent, you, as a nun, are the main force in our purification of the witches, the Pope may also have a reason for seeking you this time to discuss the matter of attacking the witches."

City in the Sky

The main hall of the Papal Palace.

This is the main hall, which only the Pope and his entourage are allowed to enter, and which is guarded by guards so thick that not even a mosquito can get in for a day, and at this time of the Pope's assassination, is lined with all sorts of mechanisms and guards for witches.

The closely guarded Pope was now huddled in his seat with fear on his face, his chest heaving violently, panting so hard he was about to vomit.

The fear of having escaped death at the hands of the Queen of Hearts still hung over him like a sword, as she stepped on his head, looked at him with the indifference and hatred of an ant, and said to him with a lowered head.

"What on earth gave you the confidence to say the words you are my father?"

The Pope, who had never been threatened with death so close to him again after the Witch's Heart trial, looked up in a trance, opposite the mirror, the mirror in which Hearts had stopped moving after one look.

Just as he was about to kill himself under the compulsion of the Hearts, the Hearts stopped moving as if frozen in time and were taken to the bottom of the cell.

-- like the enemy killing you is even more frightening because you don't know why the enemy spared you.

The Pope shuddered in fear and closed his eyes, but couldn't help thinking - it was all right, the prison at the bottom of the Sky was so hard there was no way a man could get out of it!

But at the same time, it occurred to him in some trance -

What was it that made his own child, whom he had judged by his own hand, so powerful, and what was it that spared him?

Is it because he’s his father?

If the Pope had asked this question and Phoebe had heard it at the

door, she would have laughed out loud at the sheer hilarity of what he said and broken her pretense of innocence.

If there were 10,000 bad revenge stories in the world about poor children of their biological scum fathers who show mercy to their fathers and let them off the hook in revenge, there would not be one with a protagonist named Hearts.

--This is a guy who can keep his adoptive and biological fathers and twenty-three stallions in heat together.

A man who makes a fool of himself with Hearts can only get himself killed.

The bottom cell of the Sky City.

Hearts' arms and legs were suspended by two thin, long white bone chains from the loops on either side of the cell, his shoulders pulled straight and immobile by this drawn-tight chain, his long crimson hair sliding down the back of his scarred, naked neck in front of his blade, the ground shuddering as blood dripped down the ends of his hair to the ground.

He slowly lifted his head to look at something directly above him, unable to resist a lazy grin on his face.

"No wonder I was told that the prison at the bottom of Sky Island was the best prison in the world for men and that I would never be able to get out, it's because of these things."

"It's quite a trick to hide the male eels and make a prison out of it."

Above Hearts' head is a huge, transparent glass pool filled with millions of tossing male eels, the sides of which are set into the rocky crevices of Sky Island, and it is at the bottom of this pool that Hearts is imprisoned. He could look up and see through the glass bottom the grey bodies of the eels writhing and tangling, like noodles coming to life, tumbling in the pool's boiling water.

The bone chain in his hand could not have trapped him, but the loops on either side of this chain were stuck to the glass, and if he ripped it off, this whole pool of male eels would have tilted and fallen on top of him, drowning him and wrapping around and climbing up his body.

Eels are pervasive, and male eels in particular - a monster that is said to be digestible only by the intestinal fluids of males.

If he did not want to swallow the digestive eel in reverse, then he had better not act rashly - the bishop who had brought Hearts here threatened him so viciously, but at the same time there was fear and hesitation hidden in his eyes.

Although the word was that this was the one place in the world that was sure to hold a man, no one knew if this place could keep an eye on Hearts, so the cardinal watched Hearts' expression carefully and found that instead of being angry, he had a vague smile on his face and snorted very softly.

"A prison that's sure to hold men? Are you sure?"

The Cardinal was stunned for a moment when he saw Hearts turn his head and look up at the top of the cell, his purple pupils reflecting the boiling, writhing eels in a light, sarcastic tone.

"Aren't there more women locked up on this island?"

Hearts was trying to make a point as he continued to threaten in a stern voice: "You will not escape! In addition to this layer of organs, the pool of male eels, we have another layer of organs that are naturally formed on this island, and you will never get away!"

"What organ?" Hearts cocked his head on his arm in boredom as he looked over at the Cardinal, a smile on his face that actually held an indescribable sense of seduction, "I've lived on this island for so long, I'm surprised I didn't know there were no naturally occurring mechanisms?"

"Will you tell me?"

The Cardinal quickly looked away, breathing heavily - it took less than a second of looking directly into that overly beautiful face, those purple eyes, before his heart began to tremble and his mind was turned upside down, what a terrible witchcraft!

"The island was sold to the Pope by a very mysterious gentleman." It was clear that at this moment he was supposed to be leaving after imprisoning Hearts, but his mouth uncontrollably continued to explain at Hearts' questioning, the resulting fear and fascination on his face twisting into an eerie expression as his voice trailed off, "That gentleman, when he sold the island to the Bishop, told the Pope that it was an island that would never hit the ground, that would forever be suspended in the air, a city in the sky for all to look up to."

The expression on Hearts' face faded and he looked at the Cardinal with a slight inclination of his head, "And?"

"Did he say anything else? Like why the island was being sold to the Pope?"

The Cardinal shook his head, "No, none of us know the transaction, only that the gentleman sold the island to the Pope."

Hearts stared at the other man: "How high did the gentleman he ..... bought the island for?"

--He had always known that the island had been sold by Bai six, but he didn't understand that the other man, who was obviously a god and had spent a huge amount of money and expenses taking him out on a casual trip, didn't look like someone who was so short of money that he needed to sell the island, or such a bizarre island in the sky.

Although ..... he himself knew that without this island in the sky, there would be other islands in the sky to bear the ugly desires of these men, this island was Bai six just the trafficker, he did not know what would happen afterwards, he was just an outsider.

But in those four years, after Hearts had learned that the island had once belonged to Bai six, when a thunderstorm raged outside, Hearts couldn't help but look out of the window and wait for the peculiar, masked guest to step onto the island, and something else was uncontrollably mixed in with the anticipation.

..... is like Bai six - the god who was the first to take him off the island, the guest who took him to see the sea, to see the sky, to see the earth, the friend who held out his hand to him, who gently smiled and answered all his requests and said yes, the friend who was supposed to bring him the brightest joy memories, is also using this territory, once his own, to bear the pain he has felt for over ten years.

Hearts couldn't help thinking, "Why, Bai six, why sell the island?

Is it really just about the money?

"That gentleman didn't ask for money." The Cardinal replied to Hearts, "He made a deal with the Pope that had nothing to do with money."

"A deal?" Hearts repeated those two words word for word as he slowly looked up, "What deal?"

"That gentleman said that he had come in response to the Pope's desires and wishes, that he had come to grant the Pope's wish, to sell and give the Pope an island that floats in the sky, that can do anything and will not be easily discovered, and that only those you allow on the island will be allowed to do so." The Cardinal took two steps back with some trepidation at the momentary hollow look in Hearts' eyes and stumbled over his words, "But, but as the price for granting the wish-"

"That the Pope should henceforth be sacrificed for all the suffering produced by himself and those around him, and for all the suffering produced on this island."

[Are you ..... making a wish at God Xiang?]

The guest smiled at the fourteen-year-old Hearts: [Yes, I will grant all your wishes].

[But the price is that henceforth you and all those around you who suffer because of you shall be sacrificed to me].

Hearts blinked very slowly and his fingers, bound up in bone chains, twitched spasmodically.

..... For so long, he had avoided himself in general and hadn't been able to ask the question when he met Bai six on that occasion at the age of eighteen, knowing he was dreading the answer.

But the answer really came without fear, and his emotions, his brain, and even his soul seemed to turn into a blank, an infinite blank.

The island is first sold to his father, who exploits everyone on the island according to his own desires to cause suffering, and then chooses him to mutilate those who exploited him back then again in the course of his rebellion, causing suffering a second time and inducing him not to kill them, prolonging the suffering of both sides indefinitely by means of a trial.

-a rather beautiful reckoning, doubling, oh no, infinitely multiplying the painful sacrifice.

From start to finish, it was what he expected.

He was just one piece of the game that the bad gods had devised in the world.

Hearts looked laxly ahead of him, a gap in the rock, through which he could faintly see that it was raining outside the island, with a slight pattering that calmed all boiling emotions, like the night he had wished for Bai six.

[Is the price I have to pay for granting my wish a sacrifice of pain to you?] Hearts asked him softly, "Is it important to you to sacrifice pain? Does it mean that you don't exist if no one offers pain?

[No, if I really ceased to exist because of it, I would be delighted by it instead]. The guest sighed softly as if in sorrow.

Hearts queried: [Then why do you need me to sacrifice pain?]

[Because .....] the guest smiled and answered him, [It is the soul that bears the pain that is interesting and beautiful.

The guest with the peculiar mask smiled, extended his hand and said to him, "This time, will you come with me to see the earth?"

They went to the crowded train, where the guest smiled and said to him, [I put a bomb in that man's mirror].

Hearts looked curiously at the man in the carriage holding up a huge mirror and asked: [Why did you put a bomb in that man's mirror?]

The guest laughed a little: [Because this is the game I designed].

[Wouldn't a lot of people die if it exploded like that?] Hearts wondered, [Why was it designed that way?]

The guest laughed and answered him-

-- [Don't you think that's an interesting design?]

City in the Sky

The Bishop froze abruptly as he saw Hearts' head drop abruptly into silence, and he scanned Hearts' expression carefully.

There was nothing on Hearts' face, no sorrow, no joy, no anger, no fear, not a glint in those purple eyes that had been so bright, and he lifted his head slightly to look at the crack in the rock at the bottom of the island in the Sky, where the storm had poured in, the cool, moist wind blowing against his dry face, causing him to blink, and then to smile very softly.

Then, he wept.

The bishop was stunned and, out of surprise, his words stuttered: "You, you're crying?"

In all his time on the island, the Bishop had seen thousands of women cry on the island, but he had never seen Hearts' tears, not even on the night Hearts came to the island at the age of twelve.

All the men who ordered Hearts complained that no matter how much they tossed it, they never cried, that face was so beautiful, those eyes were so brimming, how charming they were when they cried, why didn't they cry?

Later, Hearts' tears, along with his beauty, became a legendary feature of the island, and the men who came to the island were always drunk, asking Hearts with fascination and longing in their eyes - Why don't you cry? I would have to give my life for you to cry for me?

Hearts just raised his eyes with a lazy smile, "Tears are a sign of pain."

"If I weep, I will shed one less pain, and I will not shed a single tear for you mortals, for the sake of the God in whom I believe."

"You're not worth it."

"Did I cry?" Hearts asked back in a daze, "So it was me who cried?"

"I thought it was the rain from outside the island through the cracks, blowing water down on my face."

"..... gap? There's no gap here where the wind can blow in ....." The Bishop followed Hearts' gaze, then looked puzzled, "That gap?"

"Look a little closer, Hearts, that gap isn't a crack in the rock, that's a doorway."

With the Bishop's reminder, the rocky crevice was instantly transformed into the slightly open slit of a silver-blue door with an endless stream of silver-blue light stars inside, and the crack in the rock that Hearts had just seen was like an illusion.

The bishop looked to Hearts: "This is the second organ of this prison and the secret of the island's ability to float."

"The reason why the Sky City never falls and floats in the sky is that it relies on the wind currents blowing out of the very bottom crevice of this island."

"The gap was left by the gentleman who said that the chasm was a doorway he had left on purpose, that the other side of the door led to the abyss and sin, and that he told us not to look directly behind the silvery blue glow of the doorway, which would cause those who looked directly to see beneath the ecstasy, and that what was on the other side of the door would slowly suck us into the other side of the door and then never come out. "

"It's an unsightly, unspeakable chasm, and we purposely built the sky prison on the opposite side of the chasm; you have to pass through it to leave, and with the pool of male eels, no one has ever managed to get out from underneath it."

The bishop condescendingly pronounced to Hearts, "Don't struggle, you will be trapped on this island for the rest of your life."

When the bishop in charge of Hearts emerged from the bottom of his cell, he soon received a phone call from the Pope, which he respectfully answered with the Pope's heavy question, "Have you locked him up?"

"Locked up." The bishop spoke in a submissive tone, "Hang him for a couple of days, and when he is weak, we will interrogate him properly, making sure to get to the bottom of how he acquired these sorceries."

"Well." The Pope was silent for a moment, "There is no need to be too harsh with him, may God protect us all."

Borrowing from the Pope's words, he asked, "..... What did he see at the bottom of the cell, when he looked straight into that gap?"

Hearts was not the first prisoner they had put in the Sky Island, a prison that, apart from being tightly held, was the equivalent of a lie detector and a truth-teller, as the slit had the effect of confusing the mind and allowing one to see what one's heart desires most, as well as having the effect of being a good interrogator of prisoners.

All one needs to do is to imprison the prisoner in it, and the prisoner will say what he sees when he looks up and sees the chasm, to learn what is in the prisoner's heart - even the most stubborn, even the senior fraudster who has fooled himself, will have to face his innermost desires and truths in the presence of this chasm.

The Bishop was not surprised that the Pope asked this, for Hearts had surprised everyone by not laying a hand on them today, and was waiting to see the outcome of Hearts' interrogation after the chasm.

But there is clearly no way to please everyone with this result.

" Hearts ..... saw a cleft in the island." The bishop replied hesitantly, "He said that he opened out through the cleft and saw that it was raining outside the island."

"The seam does not deceive us." The Pope was silent for a long time as he slowly repeated the Bishop's words, "So the Queen's heart yearns for ..... a rift in an island where it is raining?"

Papal Palace, main hall.

The Pope and Phoebe came face to face with the bishop who had brought Phoebe, whose eyes were cloudy on his sagging face and whose tone was slightly shaky, not like a powerful pope, but like an ordinary old man on the verge of decaying into the ground.

"I ordered the Cardinal to hold my attacker at the very bottom of the Sky City, where there was absolutely no way he could escape."

"But this incident is also enough of a wake-up call."

The Pope's eyes, which had been cloudy, suddenly sharpened as he spoke in an abruptly low tone, "The Island of the Sky! This pure land that belongs to me and to God, that a witch's power could go up there!"

He lifted his heavy sceptre and pounded it into the ground, causing it to shake with anger and rebuke, "How negligent you who watch over the ground have been in allowing witches to ascend the stairway to

heaven, allowing the only Noah's Ark of mankind to be polluted by the evil that has spread upwards!"

"Twenty-one cardinals have died, and even I have been threatened." The Pope shook his head sorrowfully, "These are all men of merit who have tried countless witches in the midst of the witch trials, and they actually died in the safe zone delineated by the Holy See, what do you make the people think of us? If word gets out, won't the prestige that the Holy See has so easily built up be destroyed overnight?"

"We can't even defeat a group of rabbles that defected from the Inquisitorial Court led by a Holy Maiden Patrol leader who defected from the Holy See, and we're talking about clearing out all the witches!" The Pope jerked his scepter to the ground, "Where is the captain of the escort guarding the stairs to the island? Punish them severely!"

The bishop who had led Phoebe in had shaken his shoulders and reported in a very low voice: "Your Holiness, we have kept the news under strict lock and key, and it should not get out."

"And the Stairway to Heaven ....." the bishop paused as he raised his head slightly to look at the scepter in the pope's hand, swallowing a mouthful of saliva and reminding in a whisper, "My Lord Pope, are you forgetting? You are the only one who can open the Stairway to Heaven."

Phoebe, who had been keeping her head down, looked up with her at the moment, followed the gaze of the bishop next to her, looked at the sceptre in the Pope's hand, and then raised an eyebrow.

The sceptre looks ancient and heavy, like it was carved from some extremely old wood, with an uneven surface, in the shape of an octopus with its tentacles ringing upwards. There is some cottony detritus, but none of this is the first reason why this uniquely shaped sceptre catches the eye -

--This jewel has a faint layer of silvery-blue light in its centre, and with the sceptre shape of the tentacles, and the suspended head of the jewel, it looks like a ctenophore glowing in the ocean.

The bishop carefully raised his hand to indicate to the Pope to look at the scepter in his hand, "My Lord Pope, the stairway to the island can only be opened by the scepter that can be held in his hand."

"You begged the gentleman who sold you the island, saying that you

wanted the floating island, the [Sky City], to be well hidden, that only those you wanted to go up could go up and those who didn't could not, that you wanted the island to be like your home and that only you had the key to the island."

"The gentleman agreed to your request and literally made you a key to the city of the sky."

"He wrapped a small section of the rift with a gemstone, making the light coming through the rift mild and safe, so that nothing would happen if you looked directly at it, and then placed this gemstone on your scepter, gifting you as the key to the island; the rift wrapped in the gemstone is of the same origin as the rift in your gemstone, so only the scepter in your hand can open the ladder to the island, regardless of whether the escort Captain guards the ladder or not, as long as the scepter is still in your hand and the [key] to open the island is still there, it is unlikely that any witch will be able to get to the island and contaminate it."

The Pope looked to the jewel on the sceptre and fell into silence.

After a long, long interval, the Pope spoke, "You are right, as long as the sceptre is in my hands, no one will be able to board the island."

The bishop, who thought he too would be severely punished, let out a long breath.

"The chasm encased in the sceptre jewel that that gentleman gave me ....." the Pope fell into a memory, and he whispered in a trance, "possessed such great strength that a chasm so short, less than a metre, at the bottom of the island, could hold up an island floating for more than ten years without sinking, so dangerous and sharp a crevice, and yet that gentleman was able to easily wrap it into a safe jewel, which was easily gifted to me as a key."

"I have wondered about the material of this gem, like the scepter I hold, and have used many hard, unbelievable materials to try to wrap the gap at the bottom of the island, and I have tried every gem in the world, and none of them have been able to resist the strength of that gap, but in the blink of an eye, they are ashes."

"In the end I couldn't help my curiosity, and I asked the gentleman what kind of stones and materials would encase and fill the chasm under the island."

"That gentleman laughed and told me that there is no gem or material

on this earth that can fill the gap that leads to the abyss."

"I held up my scepter and asked him, "And what is this jewel in my hand?"

The Pope paused for a moment as he said in a trance, "The gentleman smiled and answered-"

"- is the heart of a suffering soul congealed."

"Only a jewel condensed by a soul in enough pain after leaving the body can close the door to desire and the abyss."

City in the Sky

"Phoebe." The Pope bowed his head, his gaze obscure, "You are our best nun, this battle with the witch, you must do well to act as a spiritual symbol, do not let the people believe blindly Quan Baola, her power to compel the mind is extraordinary, you must win her."

"Afterwards, I shall allow you to go to the island."

"But I'm not of age, can I?" Phoebe, with an innocent expression, asked in a puzzled tone, "Isn't the Sky City only for nuns who are of age?"

Looking at Phoebe's pure and beautiful appearance, the Pope's eyes smiled meaningfully: "There are exceptions."

"The last Queen Extraordinary has left the island for the time being, and a place has just opened up for you to take over from him and continue your duties as a nun on the island, purifying the foul desires of everyone who comes to the island, which you seem to have the potential to do, so I am giving you permission to come to the island early."

Phoebe winked and she smiled, "So I thank His Holiness in advance?"

Not catching Phoebe's questioning tone, the Pope nodded rather smugly, then waved his hand: "Go down, I will give the details to the Bishop who is leading you, for now I will discuss other matters with him."

Phoebe bowed nicely and withdrew.

After Phoebe left, the Pope's face quickly clouded over: "Has the continued output of male eels improved?"

"No." The bishop shook his head with a somewhat fearful expression, "At first, the female eels that we stole were consistently producing female eels, but then gradually, one or two male eels began to come out of the ten thousand, and we were happy at first, because then these male eels could mate with all the female eels, unlike before, when only one male eel could mate, and so the production The rate would be faster, and we had all the women then turn in the eels they could not digest, the male eels, to the Holy See, saying we would take care of them, but in reality we were putting them out into the waters everywhere."

"Soon we had the great eel explosion, a time when the eel production was actually getting out of hand, so much so that some homes would turn on the tap and eels would come out. Not only were the eel bones collected every day, which the families themselves were digesting and handing over, but the popularity and income were increasing by the day, so the Pope at the time acquiesced in the continuation of the eel project."

The bishop swallowed: "But by the time the first witch appeared at a later stage, the Pope was also frightened and he really moved to try to suspend the plan, but then Quan Baola appeared."

"She appealed to the people not to blindly allow women to swallow eels, but to find other solutions, and was willing to come forward to solve people's problems first, and she soon formed the Patrol of the Holy Virgin, which was then a spontaneous organisation independent of the Holy See, quick to solve problems, and the leader Quan Baola The Holy Patrol was a spontaneous organisation, independent of the Holy See, quick to solve problems and the leader, Quan Baola, was so quick and friendly that people gradually preferred to go to Quan Baola to solve their problems rather than the Holy See, whose authority was weakening, and after hinting twice to Quan Baola that she wanted to collect her Holy Patrol and being refused, this made the then Pope angry and increased the deployment of the male eels."

"Under these circumstances, witches began to appear in droves and the Papacy pulled off the witch trials, which Quan Baola did not approve of and stood in opposition to the Papacy by flagrantly opposing them."

"But at a later stage, when both eels and witches were growing in number, the population, which had been under the protection of the patrols of the Holy Virgin, finally lost control and they fell to the Holy See, and at this time you seized this opportune moment and succeeded in trying Quan Baola, and after Quan Baola was tried for defection, the country finally came completely under the control of the Holy See, even the Holy Virgin The patrols were integrated into the Holy See."

"We've finally stopped the eel project, but, but ....."

The Pope finished the second half of the sentence in a sombre tone, "But the output of the male eels is completely out of control."

The Bishop shuddered and nodded, "Yes! There are now enough male eels collected from all over the country that the prep witches can't

digest to fill the pool under the Sky City prison, and the amount is still climbing, we have no idea how many wild male eels are out there in the wild ....."

"This male eel but, but ....." the bishop stifled a shudder and broke down and cried out, "but it takes our intestinal fluids to dissolve it, O Pope!"

"Shut up!" The Pope viciously interrupted the Bishop's miserable cry, "Don't I know?! Why else would I hide these male eels on the Island in the Sky to isolate them from these female eels?!"

The bishop shuddered at the yell, paused for a moment and quickly spoke again in a whisper, "Why are there more and more male eels, weren't the ones that had been producing before always female eels?"

The Pope also fell into an eerie silence.

Yes, didn't all the eels start out as female eels? Why did they suddenly start producing male eels in large numbers?

The other end.

The night was silent, all curled up on the ground in a deep sleep, the full moon hanging in the sky but half obscured by a huge island.

Bai Liu sits on the top floor as he looks out over the island, his eyes narrowing for a moment.

"You came up alone, are you going to talk to Jiayi about something?" Tang Erda was still awake, he and Bai Liu were used to keeping watch for the others, and on the first night of the game they usually stayed up while the others slept, so when he saw Bai Liu coming up, he followed him.

Tang Erda sat down propped up next to Bai Liu and looked at him with a tilt of her head, "You're still worried about Jiayi, aren't you?"

After all, it was the first time I had taken over the authority of a tactician and it was such a crucial game.

"No, she's more thoughtful and stable than I am." Bai Liu shook his head as he looked up at the island, his tone calm, "I was thinking about something else."

"What is it?" Tang Erda asked.

"Jiayi just told me that the witch side told her that the eels that were heavily contaminated were female eels, that male eels were indigestible to the witch, but that male eels were rare." Bai Liu pondered, "Any creature has a tendency to overpopulate, and it is rare to see so many females outnumbering males in a species that has already overpopulated, usually more males than females."

"A creature that is on a mission to reproduce will indeed produce females in large numbers in the early days, but when the number of females reaches a certain amount, it will be the other way around and the creature will start producing males in large numbers again. This is the way to achieve an overproduction."

Tang Erda, somewhat puzzled, asked hesitantly in return, "You mean to tell me that ..... actually has a large number of male eels present that the witches can't digest, don't you?"

"Well, that's my personal guess." Bai Liu paused, "Any kind of monster has its corresponding weakness and way of elimination, it's the setting of this game, I was actually thinking that if the witch's digestive juices can't destroy the male eel, then by the symmetrical setting of this game, the one that can digest the male eel would be ..... "

Tang Erda eased out, "Male digestive juices."

Bai Liu smiles: "Bingo, that's what I was thinking, and I was thinking a bit worse, I thought it might be intestinal fluid."

A chill ran down Tang Erda's spine as he looked at Bai Liu's mischievous smile and held his forehead helplessly, "I can finally see why you led me up here to talk to me about this, Mu Sicheng would have jumped up and down covering his butt when he heard your speculation about the setting."

"Why do you guess it's intestinal fluid?"

"Because if the liquid in which males can digest eels is also saliva, then there's no way it would have gone undetected in this case." Bai Liu rested his cheeks and spoke in a lazy tone, "Now the eels have become so excessive that they need to go abroad to smuggle women over to fix them, but ordinary civilian families can't afford to pay the price for the services of a prepared witch, and because of the mass witch trials, many families no longer have a single female in their household."

"In such extreme and desperate situations, there are also males who go

on to imitate the behaviour of witches by swallowing eels and trying to digest each other."

"At least two men in the pile we rescued from downstairs had done that, and they had strange scratches on the corners of their mouths, still fresh."

"If this speculation that male digestive juices can digest eels is assumed to be true, then at least the upper digestive tract, which is easy for ordinary people to experiment with, is unlikely, otherwise the situation with the witches would not be so lopsided, then I think the lower digestive tract, which is relatively more difficult to experiment with, or rarely thought of, is more likely."

"That is, the intestines."

" Jiayi and I are in agreement with our suspicions, but there is no suitable candidate for the experiment on her side at the moment, so there is no way to draw the most accurate conclusion, and to avoid baiting, so she is not informing the witches of her deduced conclusion for now." Bai Liu scanned Tang Erda for a moment, "So we have a mission tomorrow other than saving the witch on trial."

Bai Liu smiled and said, "-that is to catch a priest from the Pontifical Jury and give Jiayi an experiment."

Tang Erda, who was sweating profusely, let out a long breath, "This is no problem!"

He was scared to death! When Bai Liu had just given him a glance, he thought Bai Liu was going to say that since there was a shortage of people, why don't you go and experiment on Jiayi?

At the other end, the papal palace.

The smile on Phoebe's face as she emerged from the main hall faded for a moment into a bemused expression as she walked briskly across the gardens, her eyes pausing motionlessly as she looked to the staircase on her right that led straight up to the island before reaching the nun's hall.

The ladder was shrouded in a silver-blue light, and she had tried twice to get up it on the way in, with nothing to show for it but the loss of seventeen points of blood - as that pope had said, it was indeed impossible for anyone to get up there without the key.

But the [sceptre], which is the key, is held by the Pope for a moment.

This Pope must have some special monster setting or buff on him if he can lock Hearts in a prison, and she'd better not do anything rash until she knows for sure.

But that doesn't mean she can't move either.

" Qi Yifang, the Bishop will issue me with an assignment later to take charge of some witch trials, remember, wherever he tells me to go, you and Liu Ji will apply to go to whichever court." Phoebe gave her orders to Qi Yifang in a cold tone.

Qi Yifang asked suspiciously, "What is it to do?"

Phoebe looked up at him, no emotion in her turquoise pupils, but a pure smile on her face as she folded her hands and prayed in a reverent tone, "What else could I go and do? To send the Inquisitor to hell, of course."

"-isn't that the essential work of a nun?"

The Pope can't move, so let's start with the priests at the bottom and see what level of the Papacy the monsters she can kill with her hands are on.

Qi Yifang was creeped out by Phoebe's laugh, but as a league-quality player, he knew the moment he learned Phoebe had taken tactician privileges that the only word he could say to Phoebe was, "Yes."

"Tomorrow is a tough day, so get some rest tonight." Phoebe smiled and waved her little hand at Qi Yifang, "Remember to pray before you go to bed so that the Lord will bless you with a good night's sleep."

Qi Yifang: "..... Good, good QAQ."

Oooh, Queen, miss you!

Phoebe returned to the nun's hall and stood beside her white lace bed, a silvery white moonlight spilling over the edge of it, she slowly lifted her head and looked out at the incredibly bright moon, its light glistening on her long golden curls, her look indifferent and holy, her turquoise eyes like emeralds on a laurel crown, a misty glow, she closed her eyes and folded her hands against her chest Prayer.

She always stood and prayed; she never knelt to anyone, not even in

prayer, and there was no one on earth who could make her kneel, not even God.

"May the Lord protect ....." Phoebe opened her mouth and said this, suddenly stalling, then she shrugged her shoulders indifferently, "Of course you don't have to protect them, I'll make them go to hell myself. "

She finished lying down on the bed, her head impartially in the very centre of the pillow, not a crease in the coverlet, and she folded her arms across her chest in a very disciplined way of sleeping - the way her devoutly religious mother had taught her to sleep, as if in prayer.

All things she once did not understand and found troublesome, but she was used to them.

She has been noticed by her father for as long as she can remember.

Her father looked at her incredulously and, in a rare move, held her over his knee in a pile of boys, removed the gun she was clutching in her death grip and asked her, "Why are you holding a gun on your brother? And you loaded it? Who taught you that?"

What was her answer? Something like, "Kill him so I can get the bear he's holding, it's mine and I've warned him three times and he hasn't given it back to me."

"No one taught me that, but I've seen you use it."

Her father asked the creature who was supposedly her brother to give her back the bear, but all the other did was cry and bite the dust and wipe his own tears with the bear, so without hesitation she grabbed her gun and shot the bear in the little boy's hand, the huge recoil of the gun dislocated her arm straight away and everyone stood up, including her father.

"What are you doing Phoebe ?!" Her father looked at her in amazement.

The stupid boy who had originally grabbed her bear grabbed the gun-shattered remains of the bear's Muppet and sat on the floor in fear, pissing all over the floor, as she looked at her father but smiled bizarrely, "He touched the bear and got it dirty, I don't want it, but he can't have it either."

Her father looked into her eyes as if he had seen a monster and a

genius, and he asked her in awe, "What do you feel like now, Phoebe ?"

Phoebe arched her eyebrows and smiled, "I feel very happy."

-a pure harnessing of power and the joy that comes from threatening an opponent.

Since then, no one in the Cinchimani family has dared to take what belongs to her, and her father has married her biological mother, a woman of unknow origin, in order to give her a legitimate claim to the heirship.

The first moment the woman saw her, she was stunned in place.

She stood next to her father, dressed exactly like a little boy, in little boy riding boots, a small jacket, her blonde hair cut just a few centimetres short and tucked into a cap, and simply curtsied courteously to her own mother, whom she had never met: " The Cinchimani family welcomes you, Mother."

--she looks almost exactly like her father.

That night her mother sat on her knees at the foot of her bed and prayed all night, and with tears in her eyes she said, "I'm sorry I came so late, they made you this way."

"You look just like your cold-blooded and cruel father ....."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that about you." She placed her hand over her heart and prayed reverently for her, "The Lord will protect us."

"Mum." Phoebe who was lying on the bed spoke very coldly, " The Cinchimani's do not believe in gods, we only believe in ourselves, I respect your beliefs but if you want to pray you can go to your room, if that is not enough I will have the servants build you a special prayer room, if you can, please go back to bed, I have gunsmithing lessons in the morning. "

Her mother knelt at her bedside in silence for a long time and left, lost in thought.

There was a brief ripple in her days after she received back her mother, who was really a strange woman, always with unrealistic expectations and wishes, always with incomprehensible tears and

prayers, always with delusional yearnings for freedom, talking to herself all day long, saying that she hoped the Lord would bring about the destruction of the dark family so that she and her children could be free again.

She was surrounded by people who whispered in her ear that her mother was in fact crazy.

But Phoebe felt otherwise, she felt that her mother should have been a normal person, but in the Cinchimani family, normal people don't survive.

Just a poor, helpless, normal person.

As her mother prayed again with tears in her eyes for Phoebe to pray with her, Phoebe looked at her mother with downcast eyes and very rarely agreed to this waste of her time to work on her fighting skills and firearms.

"It's only five minutes." She said calmly, "I can pray with you for five minutes on Mondays, Wednesdays and Sundays."

Her mother cried tears of joy and said, "Enough is enough child.

She was dressed for service as a nun, and when her mother said she would kneel down to pray Phoebe coldly refused, and her mother had no choice but to kneel beside her in prayer.

"Pray that my Phoebe may escape here as a bird to a free paradise."

Phoebe indifferently read along, "Pray that all those idiots in training today will fly gun themselves to a boundless hell."

Phoebe's mother: "....."

After her mother cried and laughed and corrected Phoebe's prayers three or four times to no avail, Phoebe finally fell in love with this prayer of verbal hell before bedtime (?). Her mother, a normal person who had always felt weak and incompetent in the Cinchimani household, condoned her cursed prayers.

Wasn't this a stain on her devout faith? Why not accuse her of doing wrong, but just cover her face and laugh helplessly beside her every time she finished cursing?

Finally, at one point, she asked, and her mother looked at her with a

smile and stroked her forehead: "One's unrealistic faith in the gods is an escape from one's own weakness and incompetence, and you are right, prayer is indeed a very weak act, and no matter how much I pray, there is nothing I can do to take you away from the Cinchimani house, and under these premises I have no way of accuse you, for you are right in your opinion."

She asked, "Then why pray?"

"I am not praying at God Xiang." Her mother answered her very softly, "I am praying to my soul, to your soul, and I am trying to tell them that even if they are going to be trapped here for the rest of their lives, to keep their hearts filled with love and hope, both yours and mine, and to keep our souls as they were, waiting for the day to come when they will fly away from here as little birds."

"Even if that day is the moment when death comes."

"It's just a reminder."

Her mother, dressed in the garb of a nun, knelt reverently before her, clasping her hands in the moonlight with her eyes closed and whispering, "My child Phoebe and I will one day have the freedom we want."

She looked at her mother's reverent, almost holy face in the moonlight and realised for the first time that this woman possessed a strength she had always ignored.

-a power very different from holding a gun, a sense of conviction that cannot be destroyed by firearms or external forces.

She believed in something, even if it would not come to pass, and Phoebe saw for the first time such a strange faith - a faith so weak, so pliable, yet so indestructible that she dared to say that even if her father had held a gun to her mother's head, she would not have stopped to pray for it.

Phoebe had always been taught by her father that the weak could be broken, but she felt at the moment that no one in the Cinchimani family could break her mother who was praying.

But she deserves to be weak, but she is clearly weak.

Phoebe doesn't like the underdog.

But she extended her daily prayer time with her mother to fifteen minutes.

Gradually, as she grew up, her dominance among the heirs became more and more apparent, and her father's subordinates' attitude towards her changed from disapproval to admiration for her excellence, only to be followed each time by "It's a pity Phoebe is a girl."

Phoebe is so calloused by this phrase that she is completely uncomfortable with it.

It's just that her father would always lament, "Yeah, if only she was a boy like Daniel."

Daniel was her father's other child, three years older than her, another heir to her father's throne, with a similar history to hers - married to Daniel's mother as his rightful wife - and who, like her, resembled their father.

The resemblance is as much in personality as it is in appearance; they are both standard blondes, and when Phoebe cut her hair short and wore men's clothes, the two stood together like twins, with the same haughty, aloof and powerful look.

Of course, they never stand together.

Just as the offspring of lions compete for the food that is thrown at them before they even open their eyes, the other person's status in relation to theirs is [competitor] before they realise, they are [brother and sister].

"It's almost time for the heir selection." Her father patted her on the shoulder, " Phoebe has always had the best grades and apart from her gender, she is the perfect heir."

"I've been thinking about it all night, and if she manages to win the heir selection, then I'll basically be able to identify her, and as far as the gender hassle goes, I'm going to let her show herself to the public in male attire all the time."

"Always in male attire?" A subordinate joked, "What a cruel father, Phoebe hasn't developed yet, how are you going to get her to pretend to be a man at a later stage?"

"What's that?" Her father said gently, "Just corset her breasts and she

won't develop any more."

" Phoebe is cruel as a man, strong as a man, the only downside is not really being a man, but the good thing is that she is not weak at all and won't be able to take even this pain of a breast corset."

So that night, Phoebe was subjected to a tight corset and her mother was beside herself, her expression falling into a complete trance as she held up the corset: "What is your father up to?!"

"Such a tight corset, you're only ten years old! It'll deform your chest!"

"It's not like we're going to start wearing them today." Phoebe lay impassively on her bed as she yawned, "I'll wear it when I start to develop."

"No!" Her mother got serious in a rare moment, "You can't wear that! You're a child, you have to develop as you should, and no one can disrupt your normal growing up process!"

"I'm not obsessed with breasts." Phoebe turned her head lazily to her mother who was lying on the edge of the bed, "It's just an organ, size doesn't matter, if you have to corset your breasts to win the heirship, then so be it."

"That's not the problem!" Her mother retorted sternly, "The problem is that you can obviously win without a breast corset! Why do you need a girdle!"

"Can you win without corseting your breasts?" Phoebe asked suspiciously in return, "The group of subordinates said that too much boob would keep jiggling and affect the speed of the draw, didn't they?"

"Go to hell dog men!" Her mother exploded in front of her for the first time ever, explaining to Phoebe in all seriousness, "Didn't anyone tell you that too much noise affects how fast a man can run?"

Phoebe thought back for a moment and she rubbed her chin, "That's not true."

Daniel should have developed, right? I didn't see a crotch jam when he was speed running either.

Her mother asked, "So why would breasts affect the speed of putting the gun away?"

"Why not let the tools adapt to the organs that humans already have, and let the organs adapt to the tools that humans have invented? Humans can invent different underwear for their gender, why not different guns?"

Phoebe paused for a subtle moment as she looked at her mother, who was suddenly seething, "Calm down."

"But my father will not be satisfied without this corset." Phoebe spread her hands in a flat tone, "He's not dead yet, so at least I can't disobey him explicitly, let alone you, of course."

Her mother wilted quickly, looking tearfully at Phoebe.

After a moment, her eyes lit up, "I can alter this corset for you so that you can wear it, but not squeeze it."

"Try it on?" Her mother handed it to her nervously after altering it, "Is it still tight?"

Phoebe took the modest-looking corset, paused for a moment, then put it on, "It doesn't strangle anymore."

She would have been suffocating even to catch her breath in it before, but now she had a gap to catch her breath.

Watching her mother stay up all night altering and sewing corsets next to her, Phoebe's feeling ..... was amazing.

She didn't really care much about it, things like her underdeveloped breasts just seemed inconsequential to her, and her seemingly gentle and soft mother would get so angry over this insignificant matter and then go out of her way to get her clothes altered just to give her a gap where she could breathe.

There was only so much leeway she could give in the Cinchimani household, given her weakness.

Her mother let out a long breath, "That's good."

Phoebe looked at her and was tempted to tell her that in the Cinchimani family it was pointless for the weak to struggle for this gap, but swallowed the words as she watched her mother begin to pray on her knees again.

Her mother knelt at the foot of her bed and prayed reverently, "May

both my child and I grow up and die free."

After her mother had prayed and left, Phoebe looked out the skylight at the moon and wondered, "What is freedom?

Phoebe reached out and touched the corset that had been loosened a little under the pillow so that she could continue to develop normally, and she stroked the fine stitching on it and thought - is this freedom?

What a fragile freedom.

Soon it was time for the Heir Apprenticeship, and after all the children had been given the content of tomorrow's exercise, they all crouched down and bawled, the only ones who managed to keep their manners and say goodbye to their father before leaving were her and Daniel.

But she saw Daniel's open hand spin twice, his hand shaking so much, his apple-green eyes hollow and cloudy - the servant who was to top the apple had been left to him by his mother, one of his most loyal servants and playmates.

It was she who finally reached out and swung the door open for Daniel.

As she left, she could hear her father's grumbling behind her, "This batch of kids is so spoiled, they should have been weaned off their intimacy earlier."

"How can they inherit the Cinchimani family if they don't have the courage to raise a gun to someone, they are close to, when they can be betrayed at any time in the future."

The subordinate next to him exclaimed, "Yes, back then, when you discovered your wife's betrayal, you killed her with hardly any hesitation, you could say it was very thunderous."

"My heir should have that kind of manners." Her father returned lazily, with a note of regret, " Daniel is a cold-hearted boy, but he's actually very accepting, not as much as Phoebe, who fell out with me for a while after I killed his mother."

"I hope this time he doesn't let me down again and can muster the courage to pull a gun on his own mother tomorrow, just like Phoebe did."

There was a pause in Daniel's back as he walked ahead, and Phoebe

could clearly see his fists clench and then leave.

Phoebe turned her head indifferently and went back to her room, she also opened the door twice this time before opening it, not because her hands were shaking but because her palms were sweaty - why they were sweaty Phoebe couldn't figure it out, she knew she wasn't one to have sweaty hands or she wouldn't be able to hold the gun.

But why?

"You're back." Her mother opened the door and carefully and worriedly inquired, "You look so pale, what was the heir trial about?"

Phoebe looked into her eyes, that feeling of sweaty palms coming back, and she took a deep breath and told her all about it.

But to Phoebe's surprise, her mother was very calm about it, saying, "You are free and able to fight for the heir, so if you want to shoot me, shoot me."

"In every way, you're the best kid I've ever seen and I'm sure you won't miss a beat."

Phoebe sat on the edge of the bed, her hands only beginning to tremble at this point: "What if I miss?"

"Then I might have died." Her mother's voice was as calm as a windless lake under the moon, and she actually smiled demurely as she said it, "But death at your hands is better than death at the hands of the rest of the Cinchimani family, isn't it?"

"You will see my soul turn into a little bird and fly away from here."

"Mum." Phoebe interrupted coldly, "I don't believe in fairy tales."

Her mother sighed regretfully, "All right."

That night at prayer time, her mother prayed those same prayers as always, and very rarely did she stand, but instead and sat up at the head of the bed, looked out the window at the moon, closed her eyes, and for the first time truly prayed in her heart.

"God ..... hope you bless me not to miss tomorrow."

"Of course, it's okay if you don't bless it." Phoebe opened her eyes and she looked at her mother's face with her eyes closed and still praying, her gaze blazing as she took a deep breath, "I will not miss the shot."

Next day.

After everyone had fired the first shot, the whole scene was in chaos and Phoebe's mother crouched down in a suspicious half-crouch, her mind blank for a moment - she knew exactly that she had hit the apple, so why was she down?

Soon someone came up to inform us, "Some bullets from other children came flying over the barrier we had erected and grazed Madame's arm."

"Do you want to pause for a moment?" His father asked her in a seemingly gentle manner, "I'll let her continue topping the apple in a different position."

Her expression was cold and unforgiving, but her chest rose and fell violently in that corset - she was grateful at the moment for the gap that allowed her to breathe properly in this situation, otherwise she would surely have suffocated from lack of oxygen.

"Temporarily ....." she was just about to lower the gun and open her mouth when she saw her mother's muzzle through the scope.

Her mother, who was half on her knees, in a prayer position, with apples placed on her head, looked at her, with tears in her eyes but no fear in her expression, and said-[Shoot]

[You'll win, you can win, you're a genius.]

[You won't miss.]

"No pause." Phoebe said calmly, "Just keep mum steady in place and keep changing apples, it'll be over soon."

She pulled the trigger.

-- As she had done before, ten shots, and she didn't miss a single one.

Her father looked at her with awe, as if he were looking at a formed leader, and said tersely, "You're perfect as a boy, Phoebe."

"That's not really a compliment, Father." Phoebe put the gun down with a cold expression, she shook off her shaken hand and looked around the room, "I'm a lot better than those other boys you call boys."

City in the Sky

Her father had a rare moment of speechlessness.

It's true, Phoebe was not only the first child on the field to finish, but she was also the fastest, the youngest and the one who didn't show any emotional reactions from start to finish.

It took ten minutes before another child appeared who had completed the task - Daniel.

Unfortunately, Daniel's maid ran away, crying and wailing, as soon as Daniel had finished shooting, and Daniel stayed where he was, his hand shaking as he dropped his gun, his head bowed and his emotional reaction heavy.

So, her father spoke coldly and resentfully, " Daniel is a boy, but no more so than you, and he reacts too heavily to the shooting of those close to him."

Phoebe gave a noncommittal shrug, and she turned around to unwittingly lock eyes with her mother, who had been helped off the field.

Her mother, whose feet had gone limp with fear, saw her look over, but winked playfully, gave a veiled thumbs up and said with a muzzle - [That's amazing!]

Phoebe lifted the corners of her lips very slightly.

Phoebe was one of the few kids who was in the mood for a trip to the range's washroom when she came out of the washroom and heard a subtle cry.

The two looked at each other wordlessly, their understanding developed over years of rivalry allowing them to understand almost quickly what the other was up to.

Daniel quickly looked away and his tone was extremely harsh, "Warning Cinchimani - Phoebe, you better not come and watch me laugh at this time, I'm in a bad mood and I'll kill you."

But as there was still a certain amount of crying in his voice, it made the threat seem weak.

Phoebe leaned neatly against the wall with her chest clasped, her tone even: "You don't have the courage to shoot a servant, do you have the courage to shoot me?"

Daniel gazed at her almost bloodily, his tone self-deprecating and sarcastic: "I certainly don't possess the courage to shoot at my own mother, unlike you, you and my father are practically identical."

Phoebe looked at Daniel, who still had tears in her eyes, thought for a moment and said seriously, "I didn't really have the courage to point the gun at her either."

Daniel "Ha?!" He gave a weird and subtle stare at Phoebe who didn't look like she was lying: "You just shot your mother ten times."

"All I have is the ability to never hit her." Phoebe shrugged indifferently, "I'm not incompetent and weak like you, it's just a ten metre target, I have that confidence."

Daniel: "....."

The man really owes it to himself.

But even with Phoebe's indebtedness, Daniel is still unable to say a word in rebuttal - and in this respect, the guy is a genius.

In almost all of her father's tests, she comes first by a wide margin, and sometimes Daniel feels that she is not competing with a human being, but a machine made to rule the Cinchimani family.

"So?" Daniel disliked it back with no good grace, "Did you come to me and say that just to show off your excellent heir qualities?"

"No." Phoebe's tone and look went cold for a moment as she jerked closer to Daniel, the resemblance bringing a sense of oppression he couldn't have imagined, he took a step back as Phoebe's green eyes, darker than his, stared straight at him, "I'm telling you this because I hope you'd better run fast enough to catch up with me. "

"The sole heir will have my father's eyes all over my head, and that can't be good for me, or my mother."

"A piece of affectionate advice for you - give up those childish weaknesses of yours, Daniel, when you have the ability to shoot someone who won't kill the person you care about across the street, you won't be hiding in tears like a puppy who's been kicked by its

owner."

After saying this, Phoebe instantly regained her indifferent expression as she naturally pushed Daniel away and washed her hands, waving her hand and turning away, "By the way, I hate it when people say I look like my father, next time I say that I'll smack you."

Daniel was stunned for a moment before he slowly looked up and then he broke down in a second: " Cinchimani - Phoebe!!!"

"This is the gents!!!"

The days went on smoothly amidst all the bickering until the year Daniel turned sixteen and Phoebe thirteen, when they were officially put on the Cinchimani stage for the last time.

The theme of the competition was [Cowboy] and they had to walk ten paces back to back like two western cowboys, then turn around and draw their guns to face each other and hit a blood bag tied to the four joints of the other's hands and feet as well as the neck and abdomen, and they won.

But with a real gun.

So, this competition has two results, the first one of which breaks the blood pack with precision but does not kill the other.

The other was one of them killed the other outright.

Her father, sitting leisurely on the viewing platform, explained to Phoebe: "If one of you beats the other to death, it means that you have a hard-on for the other, that the other is not available to you, and I don't like to see a bruising power struggle after ascending to the top, so it's only fitting to let the strongest man settle his heart before he gets to the top. "

In short, it means that if one of them has doubts about the other, then they will simply kill each other in this match and sit firmly in the first seat of the heir from then on.

"But if the strong man is merciful at heart, cherishes and uses the other side, controls his guns, and not only is not killed by the other side in the struggle, but instead simply disperses six blood packs on the other side with precision - this is proof enough that whichever side is victorious has the ability to control the other side, then naturally can stay and be used for you."

Her father looked at Phoebe and smiled lovingly, "But the Cinchimani family has had only one heir from this pedestal for generations, Phoebe, do you understand what I mean?"

" Daniel is not a suitable brother for your use."

Phoebe was just silent and didn't answer, it wasn't that she didn't mean to answer, but a sudden cramping in the small of her back and she got up to go to the bathroom about an hour before the game started.

A sharp pain that ripped through her abdomen came in a steady stream. She was alone in the bathroom, and she slumped over the toilet, gasping for breath, her fists clenched, cold sweat seeping from her pale face.

The constant, vague pain was almost like the ache from an unhealed wound after being punched hard in the abdomen; she had never been so weak.

What's wrong with her .....?

Soon, after seeing the blood on her trousers, she reacted - she should have gone into some kind of physical reaction, something her mother had been readily reminding her to carry.

There would be no such thing as sanitary towels in the Cinchimani family bathroom, so her mother would have placed them in her clothes from the time she turned twelve, but the Cinchimani family bathroom had all kinds of clothes that could be changed at any time - after all, all kinds of juvenile episodes happened here all the time.

Phoebe quickly changed out of her clothes and, staring at the countdown on her watch, she sat on the toilet and leaned back, closing her eyes and adjusting her breathing to the bizarre abdominal bouts of pain.

"Hello." Daniel's voice came hesitantly, "It's about to start, what are you doing?"

Phoebe's eyes opened and she saw Daniel standing outside the ladies room, looking suspiciously at a clearly pale Phoebe: "You're hurt?!"

"No." Phoebe flatly retorted, and after a moment added, "Well, it amounts to an injury, after all, it's bleeding."

Daniel hesitated for a long time: "So you're on ....."

Was it the one he was thinking of?

Phoebe gave him a cold look, "My womb is bleeding, the lining of my uterus is peeling off, I'm getting used to the sensation, nothing else you can go away."

Daniel: "....."

Would it kill the man to be polite?

Daniel wanted to ask if it would affect the game, but looking at Phoebe's rapid breathing and pale face covered in cold sweat, he withdrew his question in good faith - well, the little devil did look pretty affected by the situation.

"Shall we put the match on hold then?" Daniel asked politely.

"No need." Phoebe raised her eyes, her demeanour still calm and arrogant, "I'll beat you just the same, you just might have to bleed a little, don't worry, it won't be much more than me."

Daniel: "....."

"Father wouldn't agree to a reprieve either." Phoebe spoke calmly, "Come on."

"Wait." Daniel paused for a moment as he glanced at Phoebe, looked away, pulled out a tablet of painkillers and handed it over, his voice slurred, "Do you want ..... to take a few before you go up?"

He's used to taking two painkillers before going into the ring because he's been bloodily abused by Phoebe for years.

Phoebe looked at Daniel with a strange expression, "Why are you helping me?"

"Not helping you." Daniel looked equally cold, "Just giving you a pro-tip, take it or leave it."

With that, Daniel dropped the painkillers and was just about to turn and leave when Phoebe called out to him, her tone subtle, "You're thanking me for not listening to your father and plundering what your mother left you all those years ago, and for forcing you to grow up chasing me all the time, aren't you?"

Daniel's back was turned, then he left.

"I'm in for a real treat." Phoebe muttered to herself as she simply broke open the painkillers and took two, her face quickly returning to normal.

"The game is officially on."

Daniel and Phoebe stood back-to-back on the dais, their movements identical as they quickly stepped forward and held their guns flat against the sky, their equally green eyes focused on the gun in front of them.

"Ten, nine ..... three, two, one."

"Duel!"

Phoebe took a deep breath and turned diagonally across the room, dodging the first shot from above, then quickly rolled closer to Daniel who was ten paces away, cocked the gun with a stern gaze and pulled the trigger.

"Bang-!"

"Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang!"

Almost in the blink of an eye, Daniel was on the ground, Phoebe pale and breathing heavily as she held the gun up to Daniel, who was bleeding from the side of his neck.

Daniel opened his eyes.

Phoebe withdrew her eyes expressionlessly as she turned without looking back and walked off the stage, stumbling a little on her way down the steps and quickly steadied herself.

All six of Daniel's blood bags were broken with precision, and only his leg bled a little from a graze - exactly as Phoebe had said earlier.

Looking at the side of Phoebe's face as she calmly talks to her admiring father, Daniel's eyes wavered for a moment -

--This guy is, no matter what the situation, incredibly steady with his hands on the weapon.

It was ..... pure power, so powerful that he couldn't even afford to resist.

What kind of faith is harboured to maintain such stability in this sinful family?

City in the Sky

That night.

Phoebe was lying on her back, and when she first found out she was having her period, her mother was clearly delighted: "You're growing up Phoebe!"

But soon this delight turned to bitterness at the sight of Phoebe's pale face and the bloodstains on her body: "But it doesn't seem to be a good thing for girls to grow up around here."

Phoebe lay motionless on the bed like a corpse, her eyes vacant as she covered her belly and said, breathlessly, "Can I curse all the gods who make women bleed during their periods to hell when I pray tonight?"

Her mother smiled up, "Of course."

"Phoebe." Her mother, lying next to her, looked at her pale face and asked her, somewhat distressed, "Why do you want to be the heir to the Cinchimani family?"

"This is not a good place for you to grow up and if you are able to leave now, you can ....."

"Is there a place in the world, where I can grow up?" Phoebe asked in an unusual tone, "or rather, a place where I, with my Cinchimani name, would not be found by my father?"

Her mother was silent.

"It's normal not to." Phoebe rippled, "Then I'll just get the Cinchimani family and make it fit for me to live in, and that's it."

"If this place is not free enough, I will be its controller and make it free."

Phoebe turned to her bewildered mother, "You don't need God Xiang Ming to pray at that time, you just need to tell me what you want and you will have it all."

"If you want to be a bird, I can get them to make artificial skeletal robots so you can really fly in the sky like a bird."

"If you want to leave Cinchimani forever, I guarantee you will never

see the Cinchimani family again and if you want Cinchimani to disappear, then it will disappear."

"Mum." Phoebe looked at her, her face still a little pale, but her tone was normal and sure, "The only true freedom in this world is to be strong."

"There is no freedom for the weak."

Her mother said nothing for a long time, then she asked Phoebe softly, through tears, "Maybe you're right, Phoebe."

"..... You remind me of someone, a friend of mine who helped me a lot, but I haven't seen him for a long time since I came here, and I miss that boy."

"I want to take you to meet him."

"I'm fine these days, but it's hard to get past my father when you're going away with me." Phoebe thought for a moment, "Wait until Daniel's seventeenth birthday, he's taking over some of the family business to go on an adventure, my father will be going along on a visit to Daniel and will be away for at least a month, we can run away during that time."

Soon after, Daniel's seventeenth birthday arrived.

Cinchimani children do not celebrate birthdays until they reach adulthood, and the first birthday they will be widely celebrated is the bar mitzvah - that means they have lived to adulthood in a tussle.

And to start killing.

On the day of coming of age, the Cinchimani children take their own guns and go to the Cinchimani family's private prison, pick one of the prisoners who has been locked up - perhaps someone who has betrayed the family or someone from another family who has been locked up - and fire the first shot of their turbulent lives at the prisoner, killing him with their own hands. This is an iconic ritual that signifies that you are henceforth a member of the family, born to kill those who are hostile to the family and those who betray it.

It is reasonable to assume that they will not receive a trial assignment until they reach adulthood.

But since Phoebe's intention on the shooting platform was to train

Daniel, Daniel came off the shooting platform and was taken on various missions by her father, who led him to do them all very well, so this time, Daniel is going on a trial mission on his own, with his father monitoring him from start to finish and not interfering or helping - which means Daniel will officially be second in command of the Cinchimani family. This means that Daniel is now officially the second in command of the Cinchimani family.

Before leaving, Phoebe stood at the corner of the stairs on the third floor and looked at Daniel in front of her.

Daniel is growing fast, having grown a head taller in just a few months, his soft blonde curls looking out of place in his hands, his apple-green eyes cold as a cocktail of ice, his gun at his waist, his right hand bandaged, the smell of blood as he brushes past Phoebe's shoulder, his whole persona an extreme and twisted desire to kill.

--It's hard to imagine being a little boy four years ago who would hide in the bathroom and weep after shooting.

"There's training in mind before you move." Phoebe said blandly, "Not saving some strength for yourself to save your life?"

"Oh?" Daniel scattered back, his apple green eyes playfully sweeping Phoebe, "Do you care if I die or not? The future head of the family?"

Phoebe gave Daniel's face a sidelong glance of unwashed oil paint - the man was getting crazy, painting himself in various clown masks before going on a mission, and although the intention was to disguise himself from outsiders, the choice of this also exaggerated approach said something in itself.

"I know the servant your mother left you on your last mission betrayed you and was shot dead by you." Phoebe paused, "but I left you alive on the firing table because I wanted you to be second in command, not a madman."

"Do yourself a favour."

"Me as second in command?" Daniel's nervous laugh came from behind her, "Be careful, Lord of the House, I may have blood in my bones from my mother's side, called betrayal."

"Is that so?" Unperturbed, Phoebe shrugged her shoulders and replied indifferently, "This blood is cleaner than the Cinchimani blood, no matter what?"

On the night of Daniel's departure, Phoebe uses her powers to get her and her mother out of the Cinchimani family, and after a few rounds of transfers, Phoebe and the girls make it to Sky Island.

That was the first time Phoebe saw Hearts.

The man, draped in a graceful robe of interlocking red and black patterns, his long hair falling, a long dark red tassel earring in his right ear, leaned languidly in the sofa, looking away from the island at the rain, his purple eyes half-closed as if lost in thought, the teardrop beneath his eyes faintly visible in the dense candlelight, a beauty that could not be discerned in its gender.

To be honest this is the first time Phoebe has seen such a beautiful human being.

But she didn't like Hearts.

"You look weak." Phoebe looked at Hearts and raised an eyebrow, "The man who gave my mother faith is actually a weakling?"

Phoebe's mother turned her head in disbelief, " Phoebe!"

"I'm weak?" Hearts turned his head to look at Phoebe and he smiled, "What am I weak in? My appearance? Do I look weak?"

"No." Phoebe looked Hearts straight in the eye, "My mother kneels at my bed every night praying to leave the place that traps her, why don't you have that faith?"

"Why are you afraid to leave this island that traps you? What are you holding on to on this island?"

The smile faded from Hearts' face as he looked levelly into the green eyes of Phoebe, who looked squarely at him impartially.

"Can I ....." Hearts turned to a somewhat baffled Phoebe's mother and smiled slightly, "talk to her alone?"

After Phoebe's mother left.

"You cherished your mother and sent her to see me specifically to protect her, you were good to her." Hearts paused for a moment, "What if one day she leaves you?"

"Why did she leave me?" Phoebe asked rhetorically.

"She died." Hearts said very softly.

"What made her die." Phoebe asked.

"The disease, the island, her faith, the many people." Hearts replied, "People are fragile and die easily."

"If it's a disease, I'll cure it, if it's an island, I'll blow it up, if it's faith, I'll make her change." Phoebe looked up arrogantly, her eyes were as strong as ever, "What kills her, I will destroy."

"..... What if ....." Hearts looked up, his purple eyes held a lot of emotion and his tone was as soft as the rain off the island, "was she herself?"

"What if she doesn't want to live herself?"

--sudden illness, each on-time decline, the final long-accepted farewell, the long-prepared last words, like a dance play that she had rehearsed countless times, played out before him to fall.

Hearts repeated the words very softly, "What if it was she, herself, who had chosen to die?"

Phoebe choked, and she got stuck in a rare moment.

Phoebe had no answer to this question when she was escorted off the island that day by Hearts, and she looked back at the man in the large, wind-blown tunic standing on the edge of the stormy island, and Hearts' eyes fell for a moment on them as they boarded the boat, through the darkness of the storm, and then moved away again.

--It was as if he was expecting an answer from her too.

When she got back that day, her mother told her about Hearts and finally just sighed, "I knew Hearts' mother, and it was a wonderful person, just ....."

"Not everyone can live and die like that."

And what about you - Phoebe wanted to ask the question but she didn't end up asking it because she didn't know what the answer to the question was that she would be satisfied to hear.

Soon, this issue, which Phoebe had forgotten about, came to her and her mother in an unexpectedly poignant form.

When Daniel disappears during a trial mission, his father becomes furious and mobilizes almost the entire family, but Daniel is never found again. After clearing out suspicious enemy homes outside, her overly suspicious father quickly turns on those within the family.

What was important to her father was that someone dared to move his men in front of him, against his wishes and out of his control.

During one round of family purges after another, the fact that Phoebe and her mother had left the family during Daniel's trial mission was soon revealed to the tortured servants.

No one can do in front of her father what her father does not allow and does not know, including her as the heir.

Phoebe was used to being thrown in jail and tortured, her father used to discipline her when she didn't answer and behave as he wanted, it wasn't unique to her, Daniel, or to every child in the family who had been in private prison.

But what was different this time was that her mother came in too.

Before she was arrested, Phoebe repeatedly warned her mother that the officers at the private prison would administer a lie detector to her and that they would not torture her as long as she told them the truth - it was a tradition in her family that the Cinchimani family would treat honest people well.

So Phoebe knew that if she was honest, she would be out of this filthy prison in a week at most.

She did confess honestly that she had gone to Hearts, whose bizarre island in the sky was not accessible to anyone without Hearts opening the door anyway, but the tense way the men repeatedly asked her where exactly she had gone made her subconsciously a little anxious.

..... This was in the case of inconsistent statements from the inmates on both sides of the conspiracy, repeatedly verifying the statements before asking her the same questions over and over again.

On the tenth day, honest Phoebe is released from the bastille, but her long-held ominous premonition is verified when she meets her tortured and bruised, dishonest mother.

Her father sat aside in the overseer's chair and looked at her with a downcast expression, "Your mother was as foolish and stupid as my

former wife, who also betrayed me by refusing to tell me honestly where she had been."

"The Cinchimani family has no room for dishonesty, but she is your mother, and you are my only heir, and I will give her one last chance for your sake and in your presence."

Her father looked to her mother, who was on her knees with her hands nailed to a bloodstained wooden post, "Where did you go? Seen someone?"

"If you give an honest account this time, I can let you live."

"Honesty?" Her cloaked mother tilted her head, Phoebe had never thought her always weak mother could actually put on this look in front of her father, with sarcastic disdain, she was covered in bruises and was actually laughing, "I've told you a million times."

"I ascended a territory of freedom that a sinful man like you could never ascend."

"I met someone as beautiful as you will ever see."

"Name the place and the name." Her father's face had gone completely gloomy, "Your daughter has already given part of the information, if you give a truthful account of how you found the place, I will let you go"

Her mother looked at her father with hazy eyes and smiled hoarsely, "You have been to that place before, and you have seen the people I have seen."

"But it's been almost a dozen years, so it's normal for you not to remember, but you're going to hear from me to go along with tricking him into opening the door for you to go up to that place-"

"-never."

"That place was once known as the Pure Land, and now it really is the Pure Land; you are not worthy to ascend to disturb his purity; even if I die, I will not let you see my late friend one more time."

Her father's face stilled for a moment, then he raised his hand and a squire beside him solemnly drew his own gun from his back waist and placed it in her father's his spread palm.

Phoebe stared deathly at the gun, she was familiar with its construction and had used it a thousand times, but right now, looking at the blackened muzzle, for the first time, she had a strange feeling - she was fearing the tool she had used countless times.

Her heart pounded wildly.

"You are the second wife to betray me." Her father adjusted his gun carelessly, "I'm sure you already know what happens when you betray my first wife, I never regret killing a betrayer of my family with my own hands, but the only thing I think I did improperly in that case was to alienate Daniel from me because of it."

"I failed to teach my young one competently what a betrayer was, leaving him not to understand what I had done in killing his mother, growing up quite rebellious and drifting away from me until he grew up betrayed and suffered a lot in the mission."

"Once you've done it, I won't make the same educational mistakes this time."

Her father looked up at Phoebe, reached out and held her shoulder forcefully, put the gun in her palm and said coldly, " Phoebe, as a worthy heir to the throne, you know how to treat a betrayer, don't you?"

Phoebe's chest rose and fell sharply in the corset that had grown and tightened as she developed, the little gap her mother had made for her by carefully altering it day and night was not enough for her to breathe in such a tense scene, and she subconsciously gripped the gun with a rare expression of post-choking stasis.

"Just like you did when you were ten -" her father whispered, "with a gun to your mother's heart."

"It's like knocking an apple out of the hat, punching through that heart."

She looked to her mother who, as always, looked at her with a smile, as she had done that day of the heir test, and said to her with a muzzle: [Shoot it].

Phoebe took two deep breaths as she slowly raised the gun without a tremor in her hand, then flipped and pinned her unresponsive father in a swift motion, pressing the muzzle against his temple with an icy expression.

Almost instantly, all the attendants drew their guns on Phoebe.

Her father slowly raised his hands, a crack of horror appearing in the expression he had been holding in his hands, "What are you doing, Phoebe ? Why do you dare point a gun at me ?!"

"Why wouldn't I dare?" Phoebe cocked her head, her expression sweet but her tone icy, "The moment you taught me to point a gun at my mother, you should have expected me to have exactly the same courage to point it at you, my esteemed father."

"Untie her."

Her father froze for a moment and ordered, "Untie her mother."

But at the same time, her father made a very faint downward gesture, which Phoebe saw with quick eyes - a coded signal from the head of the house, meaning to shoot.

So, Phoebe shot her father's hand first, without hesitation, and almost as soon as her father screamed, the guards froze their guns.

"I said, untie her." Phoebe was about to hyperventilate from the corset, but her tone was still calm.

"..... True to form, a child I have raised with my own hands, courage and reflexes not missing a thing." Her father actually looked up with a little appreciation covering his own palm that was gushing blood, he stared at her with a sinister gaze, "Perhaps with a little more time you could actually succeed in taking power from me."

Phoebe felt acutely uncomfortable as she saw her father pull out a circular object with the sign of the reverse cross from the lining, the scent of the object emitting made Phoebe want to back away for a moment.

"It's the family's new smuggling business, the scientific name for this is [Heresy] and it has all sorts of effects you can't imagine." Her father laughed out loud, "Like this one in front of you, the effect is that if you shoot me, the gunshot wound caused will be transferred to the person who matters most to you."

"And the gunshot wound in my body heals." Her father held up his intact palm and looked over at her with a smile, "Amazing isn't it? I carry a lot of these [heretics] around with me."

Phoebe's pupils fluttered and she turned her head to look at her mother - she was on her knees covering her hands and bleeding all over the floor.

"It seems I have not taught you enough." Her father suddenly gripped her gun, his look and tone turning grim and cold, "Then let's re-teach you starting with this lesson today."

Her father took hold of her gun and snapped it at himself, at the same time a loud gunshot rang out behind Phoebe and her expression and movements were frozen as she was cupped by his face and turned her head to look over.

Her mother, struck through the heart, collapsed in a pool of blood.

Phoebe tried to breathe hard, but couldn't muster the strength.

Because she felt the little gap in her bodice that she could use for breathing, disappear.

[System Alert: Player Phoebe's desire to log into the game has been detected.]

After Phoebe crawled out of her first single player game covered in blood, she went on a mad scramble to find something that could heal her wounds.

She knew that as long as she didn't log out of the game now, her mother's time would be frozen shortly after the moment she was wounded, and that her shot had missed a bit and not hit her heart squarely, so maybe there was still hope!

But soon Phoebe realizes that the game, which seems to be omnipotent and can grant everyone's wishes, has no healing props - the player has no access to props that can restore life points, and she can't find any that can instantly heal gunshot wounds.

Phoebe logged out of the game in a trance and chose a random coordinate.

Unfortunately, her mother did not die.

Hearts had sent someone to follow them after sending them off the island, and when things went wrong, Hearts realised something was wrong and quickly sent someone from their guild, or player, to infiltrate the Cinchmani family by any means necessary to bring her

mother, who had been shot, out and bring her to the island under close guard.

Phoebe meets her unconscious mother on the island.

"I used a lot of props to keep her vital signs up." Hearts sat end over end next to a speechless Phoebe and was quiet for a moment before saying, "But there are no healing props in the game, there's only so much I can do."

"I'm sorry."

"I fired the shot and I caused her to be where she is." Phoebe's tone was flat, "I'm sorry it's not your turn to say that."

The two men lapsed into silence as they looked at each other without a word.

"She hadn't fallen into a coma when we rescued her, she was just a little fuzzy on consciousness." Hearts paused and whispered, "Her last words were left for you."

"She said, Phoebe, you are right, it is the strong who have freedom, and a weak person like her is not worthy of freedom in this world, no matter where she goes, under the island, only to pray and struggle."

"She lives, and to you, perhaps, it is only a burden of the weak against the strong."

Phoebe's hands clenched in her lap.

Not so!!!

I'm the weak one to you now! There's nothing I can do!

Hearts got up and left, and Phoebe stood alone at the foot of her mother's bed for a long time, then she looked out of the window at the moonlight for a moment, then folded her hands and slowly knelt down.

"O God." She closed her eyes and chanted softly in a hoarse voice, in a gesture of reverence, as her mother had clumsily corrected her earlier, "If you do exist, I pray to you with devotion."

"I hope she survives."

"Did you know?" A player whispered, "That little witch, the player

who recently made a big splash on the Newcomer Rank 1, actually has a healing skill!"

"Wow, a healer? The major guilds are going to go crazy for her!"

"Yes, the King's Guild has spent more than a million charging points, but I have not seen her join, and she has harsh conditions for healing, never easily heal players, she does not even see pulling in front of her, completely depending on the mood to heal, sometimes a dozen players at a time, sometimes not a single treatment, and she will not only heal, or poison people, sometimes you beg for treatment to make her guilty, directly give you poison stun.

"It's kinda dangerous to find her then."

"Yeah, the big guilds are getting defeated, we bottom players are better off just watching the action."

The chattering player walked past Phoebe, who stared unblinkingly at a player covered in black robes in front of the entrance - the little witch.

Hearts' admonition was still ringing in her ears - [The Little Witch is a very dangerous player, you've only just entered the game, follow the guild and brush up on your skills, leave the subjugation of the Little Witch to the guild].

[Don't go near the little witch, she only plays dangerous big books with more than fifty people, you're just sending heads if you follow her in].

Her mother had weakened to a very dangerous threshold.

In fact, after using so many props, she shouldn't have weakened so quickly, but it was as if her mother had lost her will to live, decaying so quickly that she could feel her breath grow faint every time she came close.

Phoebe finally had to face the question Hearts had posed to her - [what would you do if she chose to die?]

She also gave the answer - there was nothing that could be done, nothing that could be done.

But she can't just sit back and wait either - it's Phoebe's idea to approach the little witch and gamble at least once.

She, a novice player who had entered the game less than a week ago, just followed the high-ranking novice list one [Little Witch] into the highest difficulty copy in the small TV area - a large copy with more than fifty people.

Then unsurprisingly, they were abused to the hilt.

Phoebe was not sure how much she was relying on her obsession, dragging her body, almost corrupted by the monster, to the ground with her hands braced in death, towards the witch who was standing on the ground, jumping lightly, spraying poison everywhere and dispersing the corrupted monster.

The poisonous mist mixed with the monster's brooding blackness and lunged towards Phoebe's face, and she looked into the twisting black mist in a trance, almost seeing the blackness that represented death descending before her.

It was as if she had seen the chaos of blood in the private prison that night.

..... Is this the end of her?

She had never lost since birth, ignorantly thinking she was the strongest in the world, only to be vulnerable as an ant in this world and never get the freedom she wanted.

The black mist is broken by the shaking cloak, the monster is dispersed by the poison and the forest falls into a shimmering light.

The little witch in her cloak lifted a corner to reveal a pair of grey eyes, and she seemed to be "looking" in Phoebe's direction, reaching out and handing her the white bottle in her palm: "Here you go, the antidote. "

--the miracle of the world that had come to her in a most bizarre way.

The one who gave her light was an invisible fellow.

She clutched the antidote handed to her with a death grip, braced herself to sit up, but couldn't, and thanked her somewhat rawly, "Thank you."

Phoebe was quiet for a moment and asked weakly in return, "Why did you give me the antidote?"

"Because you're too persistent too." The little witch knelt down and looked at her curiously, "The others who wanted to follow me would have scolded me for running away when they saw that I kept putting out poison without giving an antidote, but you kept following me no matter how badly I was hurt, and you're a girl."

The little witch shrugged her shoulders, "I'm still gentler with girls than I am with dog men, so here you go, here, use it."

"I don't need it." Phoebe refused with a very gentle shake of her head, "I'm taking it out and giving it to someone else."

"Huh?" The little witch sounded puzzled, "But I can't bring my antidote to the game."

Phoebe: "....."

The little witch was slightly alarmed: "Hey! Don't you cry! I can think of something!"

"..... that's right ....." After clearing the entire map of monsters, the game ended without Little Witch and Phoebe logging out of the game, Little Witch sat on the edge of the game's cliff and thoughtfully, "You're bringing it to your mother to use, let's see, there should be a trick to it."

"Ah there it is."

The little witch snapped to attention with a high five, "I know that Charles, the gamblers guild leader, has a skill that allows him to store skills to take out and use, and he's been pulling my strings lately, so let him use his skill to store a bottle of antidote for me, and you can take it out and use it."

Phoebe.

The rumours that the Little Witch's intelligence panel is in the nineties don't seem to be true, as she came up with Charles' skills almost at the same time as the Little Witch.

But .....

"Why do you want to help me?" Phoebe asked softly, "I'm just a weakling who is of no use to you."

"Is it because of sympathy?"

The little witch asked back with a slight hesitation, "You just pretended to cry to gain my sympathy, so why do you now look like you mind if I help you out of pity?"

Phoebe: "....."

Seen out.

Indeed, she had just heard the little witch say that she would be gentler with the girls and had quickly pretended to cry and sell out - she thought the other girl might eat that up, not realising that she had been shown up.

But seeing as it still ate up the set, it made Phoebe even more suspicious.

"You just said that your mother chose death because she felt she was weak and a drag on you." The young witch rested her jaw and changed the subject with a flourish, "It is strange that the weak have no freedom."

"What's so strange about that?" Phoebe asked rhetorically, "Isn't it an iron law of the world that only the strong can have freedom?"

"Even in the game, it's the strong who have more."

"Now you are weak even before me." The little witch shook the antidote in her own hand, "Where did you get the antidote from me, or the freedom to free your mother?"

Phoebe paused: "My freedom comes from your blessing."

"The freedom of the weak comes from the charity of the strong."

"Not oh." The little witch retorted calmly to her, "I did not help you because I gave you charity or sheltered you, it was your faith that moved me."

"That persistence and belief that I could definitely get the antidote out of my hands struck me, and I knew that as long as you didn't die, you would follow me around until I gave you the antidote, and the odds were that if I didn't give it to you now, I would be annoyed by you subsequently, so I gave it to you."

Phoebe was stunned.

"The source of freedom for the weak is faith, and there is freedom for

the weak as long as they believe that what imprisons them will one day be overcome by themselves." The little witch's robes fluttered in the wind of the cliff, her voice floating in the wind from beneath her hood, "I too was once an oppressed weakling, but I too protected others in their plight, you too are now weak, you too are struggling to protect what you want to protect, we all have that freedom."

"It is not because one is strong that one has freedom, but because one aspires to freedom that the weak become strong."

Phoebe got the antidote and on the night her mother woke up, she knelt alone in front of her bed and prayed.

"God." She whispered, "I have seen only hell, never heaven, since I was born."

"If only a place as wonderful as heaven really existed in this world."

"Then please do let the little witch go to heaven."

City in the Sky

After that, Hearts managed to introduce the Little Witch to the Guild.

After Hearts had contacted the young witch two or three times, he had no hesitation in putting her on the permanent squad for the next league and began to focus on her development, before which Hearts had a chat with Phoebe.

The conversation took place in a sombre room piled high with burgundy duvets on the island, in the pouring rain of an afternoon.

"I was ....." Hearts' stunningly beautiful face showed a rare glimpse of real weariness from its slouch, as he leaned back in a chair so wide that it looked like a bed, his feet curled up on it, his long burgundy hair dripping wet down the side of his face to his slightly open heart. "I was going to let you join the team."

Phoebe gave him a quick glance and hit the nail on the head: "You went to see your mother?"

She knew that Hearts' mother was buried on another island far from here, and if that was the case with Hearts, it could only mean that the guy had gone to visit his mother's grave before going to the island.

"Well." Hearts clearly didn't want to talk about it, he avoided Phoebe's eyes, his voice calmed down again and he moved the conversation back, "But Little Witch is a better fit than you, your skills overlap and you're a bit too extreme for the league so early on, Little Witch has developed very smoothly in all areas, she's a better fit than you. She's more suited to the team, and with her ability, although she's still a novice, she could even take over the tactician's position."

"I don't have a problem with being her replacement, she's strong, I deserve to be her replacement." Phoebe looked at Hearts and her tone was direct, "Even you should be her replacement."

"You're too weak and less likely to win than she is to win as a tactician."

"You're not as strong as she is."

Hearts was silent for a long time, he raised his hand over his eyes, his body leaned back and his voice was hoarse: "..... you're right."

"She was so young, through so much, so heavily suspicious, and in the midst of the hatred, she actually remained calm and had the will and the strength to protect others."

"..... I don't know what else I can protect, even your mother, my old friend, was saved by her."

"You're right, I should indeed be her replacement." Hearts slowly lowered his palm over his face as he looked across at Phoebe and whispered, "I want her to be the president of the King's Guild, and the true tactician of this warband."

"You're letting her go as president?" Phoebe perceived something keenly, "So you're leaving the guild are you, and what are you going to do?"

Hearts inclined his head, his eyes stoic as he gazed out over the island at the rain, and did not reply.

That night he went back to his mother's grave, a small European village in the middle of nowhere, which Hearts had bought, but which he did not care for, and which only contained his mother's grave.

It was raining heavily, and Hearts stood silently and wordlessly at his mother's grave, with a black umbrella, for a long, long time before he knelt down, hugging his knees and curling his body up like a child who feels the cold, lifting his head from them and looking quietly with those purple eyes at the picture on his mother's grave.

"I met a very powerful little girl." He said softly, reaching out to brush the droplets off the photo, "More powerful than Phoebe, who saved Rebekah the last time I told you."

"I want to give her the guild."

" Phoebe is right, I am indeed weak, and no matter how many [shields] I have to protect, I don't have the courage to bring you back into this world."

Hearts grows lighter in tone.

Phoebe had asked her a long time ago why she didn't resurrect her mother, when it was possible to do so with the power of the Guild, and Hearts sat in her desk chair for a moment, lost in thought, before replying with a scattered smile - the dead have a will.

Did you ask her if she wanted to live again when you just brought her back to life? If she lives and suffers and wants to die again, do you want to kill her again with your own hands?

-or watch her kill herself again?

What can be done with a resurrection?

The world still had the Papacy, still had the head arms dealer, still had everything to override him, to easily take her freedom from his hands, to demoralize her beautiful existence, and ten years ago he could not protect her, and ten years later he had not succeeded in protecting anyone who went down from the island.

As Rebecca said to Phoebe's father before she married him - what's the difference beyond the island?

But it's just a bigger island.

The only island free from the shackles of the world, Sky City, still floats in the sky, overcast and filled with the stench of blood left by the trials of that year, the only place he can master and protect her.

But if she came to life, was he going to let her live as he had for decades on an island covered with the traces of having hurt himself?

He had entered the game burned by anger and hatred, and after gaining the ability to sanction his enemies, he repeatedly tormented and judged them, growing weary as they were painfully tortured in this extreme, hatred with great intensity.

Hearts begins to feel a little empty and tired, sometimes feeling an uncontrollable disgust after seeing in the mirror a face that bears a slight resemblance to that of the man - the man who started it all, his biological father.

Disgust, hatred and exhaustion intermingled to drain him, and he was on the island, alone, lying in a trance in his flannel listening to the rain, the playing cards that once represented the settlers above scattered on the floor.

Why keep judging theirs, their guilt is established, why not kill them - Phoebe asked him - kill them and it would be over.

He was always reluctant to give that group of people a break so easily, to let them and his own mother all end up in one place - dead, and

whether their spirits after death would nag her for the freedom she had so easily gained, and because of the note the guest had left him, he always saw death as the best outcome for these people, but that day at Phoebe's puzzled questioning, Hearts took a rare moment to ponder - what would happen if he did kill them?

What will I do after I kill them?

Hearts asks himself very gently.

He has been on this island for twelve years since that day.

He started the guild wanting to become stronger, and he did, as he had hoped, become stronger, the whole world was his power, he even had the power to fight and confront the arms dealers, the daily flow of points in the guild warehouse reached a horrible lot, and in the early days he was a little relieved to leave the island, to become an actor as he had wanted to be in his childhood, to show himself to everyone, and He had naively hoped to receive the compliments she said, without any hint of desire.

But the truth is that you just can't get it, and the people he has come into contact with, from fans who have written to his studio for three years straight to investors who say they chose him because they believe in his acting, come in all shapes and sizes, very much willing to sleep with him if he wants to, or if they taste the extra meaning in a look he gives them.

Power, money, love, almost the top of these things he has seen, with a cold and weary gesture.

Was there really someone who was just genuinely complimenting her beauty, as she said? Or was it just that she was wrong and there was actually a glow of desire in his eyes?

He had no wishes, no desires, no things he wanted to do, no places he wanted to go, staying on the island day by day listening to the loud sound of the rain falling and walking away. He became lazier and lazier, even playing matches, preferring only to open [Shield] to torment his opponent instead of taking the initiative, acting as if he expected that one day someone would suddenly kill himself on the field.

It all came to an abrupt end when the black bone whip in the hands of the player named Spades was seen.

He could no longer recall the exact moment he had seen Spades, it was like hearing an explosive thunderclap on a rainy day, he was almost still, all his thoughts came together and he sat up straight for a rare moment, staring blankly at the black bone whip that Spades wielded on the small television.

"What's his name?" He heard himself ask.

Wang Shun respectfully replied to him, "Empress, he is the dark horse of this term."

"He doesn't have a name, he seems to have a code name, Spades."

You can't call me by my real name, just call me by my code name, you can call me Spades.

What followed was a logical progression, with Hearts' mad quest for Spades rightly interpreted as a quest, and he was rarely so career-minded as to chase Spades all the way to second place in the league - but only because Spades is a guy who only sees the game and his opponents, and if not If you don't meet him on the field, this guy will never respond to your questions and will walk right past you as if he didn't see you.

After losing the match, Hearts stood in front of Spades, and the hosts kept shaking their hands, but Hearts never held out their hands.

Hearts looked at Spades with barely any emotion in his eyes, a look of anticipation, "Your whip and code name, who gave you that?"

There is no such thing as a coincidence in this world that just happens to match up.

Spades replied, "I don't remember."

Hearts was silent for a long time before he extended his hand and looked up again with that impeccable lazy smile, "Very nice to meet you and I hope to see you on the field next time I see you."

"At that time, I hope you will remember the answer to your question."

Later on, Phoebe entered the game, the young witch joined the guild, and after many unsuccessful attempts to test Spades, Hearts got lazy again and started to let go of his power in the guild, letting the young witch take over in turn.

"So what the hell are you going to do?" Phoebe approached Hearts alone on a rare occasion and she stared at the other woman, "What are you going to do away from the guild when you're letting go so quickly and the little witches will all take over the Kings Guild by the end of this year?"

Hearts was quiet for a long time and spoke in reply, "Go outside the island."

His eyes were half-lidded and he smiled scatteredly, "Go to the dance where no one wants to sleep with me afterwards."

Phoebe is quiet for a moment - apart from a few essential things, Hearts hardly ever goes off the island, he loathes it as much as he loathes the island.

"With a face like yours, places like that don't exist." Phoebe replied nonchalantly.

-- Hearts' favourite dance is the Dance of the Seven Veils, a dance that is a bit seductive in its own right, and which Hearts dances to the point of seduction, a man who has grown up on this island of lust, and whose bones are soaked with compulsion.

"Well, I know." Hearts responded lazily, a smile still on his face and a certain sigh in his tone, like he was lost in memory, "I've only danced that one time where the other person just purely admired me, and I waited ten years for that guest, even the guild was named after him."

"And then never saw it a second time."

"I searched for him for a long time ....." Hearts rested his jaw, the candlelight swaying beside his face, his long lashes falling in wavering shadows, "and every time I was going to find it, I was so close to losing it. "

"Think outside the box." Phoebe said lightly, "Maybe he's already dead?"

Hearts laughed out loud for a moment, then went quiet again, "It might end well for him."

"That guest ..... did yearn for death."

Phoebe's heart swelled with a sense of foreboding, and she looked at Hearts' face, which was haunted by the candlelight, even in its

contemplation, and almost instantly guessed what the other woman was thinking, and she pressed Hearts somewhat sternly: "So ..... you feel good about dying because of him too, do you? Is that right?"

"So, you left the guild because you wanted to die, did you?"

"At first ..... when he said he wanted to die, I did find it hard to accept, I even wanted to kill the person who was going to kill him." Hearts spoke very softly, "But after all that time, now that I think about what he said, it doesn't seem like anything is wrong."

"It's all boring to me, and I don't need to bring her back into this uninteresting and dirty world."

"- Death might be a good ending."

"Even if I go to hell after I die, it might be cleaner than this island I'm on now."

Hearts tilted his head slightly, the faint glow of the candle reflected in his godless purple eyes, and raised his hand to flick the wick casually as the candle light went out.

So not a ray of light could be seen on the island.

The sound of rain outside the window is piercing.

A few months before the league was due to start, something changed, and Phoebe was the first one to notice that something was wrong with the little witch.

She knows that Liu Huai, the weak and incompetent man, is at the heart of the little witch, but the Guild has Liu Huai well under control, and although the little witch is always silently "looking" at the controlled and somewhat muddled Liu Huai, not looking like she approves of what they are doing, she does not stop them from doing it.

For someone as timid, incompetent and weak as Liu Huai, such tight control might also be a form of protection.

Phoebe dislikes Liu Huai, one might even say loathes him, and although she has changed her mind about the underdog, she dislikes Liu Huai as a weakling with no conviction and a passion for betrayal.

She is certain that Liu Huai will be the young witch's weakness, and

she feels that Hearts shares her opinion - otherwise this guy wouldn't have pulled off some kind of grooming operation for a prep group of brothers.

But Phoebe is not happy about this kind of operation.

"If a person's core desires could be easily replaced or transferred, they wouldn't be core." Phoebe hit the nail on the head, her tone tinged with disgust, "And these brothers you're looking for are too inferior for the young witch to easily transfer to these men."

Hearts smiled noncommittally as he asked her, "And what do you think it means to be a quality brother to a young witch?"

"Being able to understand her to some extent, support her in what she wants to do and be able to get her to successfully empathise, similarity in appearance to Liu Huai is a must, as well as similarity in experience, such as having taught her a lot and believing in her abilities ..... " Phoebe raised her eyes, "And finally, preferably also as cowardly as Liu Huai, so that she can be protective."

The smile on Hearts' face faded.

Phoebe said nonchalantly, " Hearts, I can't believe you haven't noticed that the little witch has similar complex feelings for you as she does for Liu Huai."

"You're the perfect person for her [brother]."

"You only need to use the skill once on the little witch and you will become Liu Huai in her eyes, you and her brother are not only identical in appearance, your personality and the role you play in her current experience are also similar, with your skills you can also completely replace Liu Huai in the little witch's mind psychologically, Liu Huai's weakness is replaced by you With this weakness replaced by you, the Little Witch can become stronger and more stable ....."

Hearts' tone faded: "That's enough."

Phoebe looked Hearts in the eye: "If you are determined to make the little witch overcome her weakness, why don't you want to lie to her yourself?"

"Obviously you're the right one for the job."

"Me in person?" Hearts gave Phoebe a smirking look, "I'm [the Queen]

in her eyes, how is she going to accept me as her brother?"

Phoebe looked up, " Hearts, there's no use running away."

"You're a man, and in that way, you're fit to be her [brother] as well."

"You've done all the bad things, dragging your feet like this will only backfire, don't be a vicious and cowardly person in power, Hearts."

"Well, that's the end of the discussion on this matter." Hearts gathered his expression, his eyelashes dropping, "Go ahead and leave, I'll think about it."

Phoebe paused for a moment, pushed open the office door and left. Hearts sat alone in his chair in silence for a long, long time before slowly pulling open the drawer under his desk, he took out the picture that was in the drawer and placed it on the desk.

Hearts slowly lowered his head, leaned it on the table, buried it in his elbows and looked at the picture of his mother's bright smile, his voice too soft to be heard.

"..... I hate the idea of becoming a man to lie to her and win her over."

"It will make me think of you."

"..... So I got someone else to do the job." Hearts slowly lowered his head as he gave two abrupt low chuckles, " Phoebe's comment was pretty spot on, I'm so cowardly and vicious ....."

"But I really ....."

"I don't want to lie to Jiayi."

City in the Sky

Phoebe's prophecy came true when the Little Witch defected two months before the tournament and the whole King's Guild was in chaos, Phoebe was in a state of unprecedented depression and she was so mad that she almost killed Bai Liu, but Hearts stopped her.

"Can't we at least give it a chance, so we can see what kind of person she chooses?" Hearts said this to Phoebe, "I'm not going to let you get involved in this until you've calmed down."

"For you to deal with?" Phoebe raised an eyebrow, "A coward only misses opportunities over and over again."

"If you had chosen the best option from the start, the witch would not have defected at all, you left her open - at first I asked you to kill Liu Huai, you wouldn't do it, then I asked you to pretend to be Liu Huai, you wouldn't either, and now there is someone willing to kill and replace Liu Huai at the same time, the witch's defection is a natural one."

Hearts pauses: "True, but the gap is perhaps also freedom of choice, isn't it?"

"It was her own choice."

Phoebe paused and added with a sneer, "I watched the replay, and it was more Liu Huai's choice than the little witch's, wasn't it?"

"It's her choice, too." Hearts said, "I can bring her back, but only if you stay out of it."

Phoebe replied, "You better be able to."

Hearts met the player who also used the bone whip, Bai Liu, who was flying around the small TV screen with a very casual, loose smile on his face, spreading his arms wide and laughing in the wind created by Qi Yifang.

The wind ruffled Bai Liu's shaggy hair as he smiled and held out his hand to Liu Jiayi and said, "Yes."

"Whatever you want to do, whatever you choose, is fine."

[Yes.]

[Whatever you want to do, you can.]

Hearts' fingers curled slightly at the familiarity that followed him, and he remained still in front of Bai Liu's small television for so long that the attendant next to him cautiously reminded him, "The Queen?"

"Sorry, just got lost in thought." Hearts lowered his eyelashes and raised his hand in order as he turned his head without looking at Bai Liu's small television, his tone indifferent, "Round him up."

..... Could it be him?

Or was it another trick he deliberately set up to play his game - just like Spades, after he had calmly and clearly followed his choice of death, and then released such a player more similar to him to continue to entice him to live and suffer endlessly in this game.

All thoughts were only fleeting, and Hearts soon returned to his old languid self, ordering a methodical and vicious round-up of Bai Liu - even if it was really him, there had to be a price to pay for taking away his only heir, who had been so carefully groomed.

..... If it was really him, he could have easily survived these tactics of his, right .....

"So that's why you let him take the little witch?" Phoebe looked coldly at Hearts, "And let me take over?"

"Do you think this Bai Liu guy is similar to the customer you've been waiting for?"

Hearts gave Phoebe a quick glance, " Charles intervened to bail him out."

"And you let him go?" Phoebe sneered, "You can use that as an excuse to put off the rest of the guild, but you can't fool me, if you really wanted to round him up, then even if Charles had intervened, he would be dead by now."

"The bone whip, the soul, the love of trade, the tone of voice, the way you act, even the way you treat the little witch, all remind you of yourself back then, don't they? Bai Liu is a lot like that customer, isn't he? And because of that resemblance, you've gone soft on this man called Bai Liu."

Hearts is silent.

" Hearts." Phoebe said coldly, "You'll regret letting Bai Liu go today."

Soon the day of regret came.

Hearts' pupils trembled lightly as he looked at Bai Liu in his school uniform in the first group battle of the challenge - the uniform he knew, he had worn it, and he remembered that it was the first thing he had worn in his adult life that wasn't from the island, the first man he had imitated - -was the outfit and the request that the guest brought.

[The pupils of that child's eyes are black].

[Don't look at me like that, he looks at me cold, he hates me, he doesn't look at me with such like eyes].

[He refused to kill me.]

[Speaking of which, he's about the same age as you, also eighteen this year].

Hearts had never seen the customer look at his finished imitation with such emotion in his eyes - even the first time he imitated the silver-blue boy, the customer's eyes were still calm and wistful, without much emotion, but that time, after he had done his full imitation as requested, the customer's eyes He was expecting "him", or to be more precise, the customer was expecting the boy he was imitating.

The guest, wearing a mask, smiled and said to the boy he played, "I look forward to you, to the day when you grow up and have the desire to come to me."

"I can't wait to meet you."

He asked his guest, "Who is this?

The guest smiled and said, "This is the man who will kill me in the future."

"Or to describe it a little more accurately, it's a me with a soul."

Trembling and confused, he inquired softly, "What does it mean, a you with a soul?"

"I am a god without a soul, and this human being you are playing, he is a derivative of me, to be more precise, he has the same appearance, the same personality traits, the same desires, he is identical to me in

everything except that he is not a god, a mortal version of me, so to speak."

"By definition, he was derived from me and should not have had anything different in him from me, but it is very strange that he in this world, apart from his appearance being the same as mine, has personality traits and desires that are completely different from mine, as well as the most important point-"

The guest slowly sat up straighter, his tone rising slightly: "- I am soulless, but he is."

"A [me] with a soul, I am strong enough to imagine that he is powerful, and if there is some kind of being in this world that can kill me, it is bound to be him."

"Why do you look so angry when you hear that I am to be killed by him?" The guest looked at Hearts with a smile, his head tilted to one side, resting on the back of his hand, his tone slightly diffident, with a kind of ambiguity, "If you like me so much, you might like him better than me."

"Because I don't understand [love], but he can."

"I wouldn't like him!" Hearts showed an expression as if he had been humiliated as he retorted angrily, "I wouldn't like someone who was going to kill you! My liking is not something that can be so easily transferred!"

"Oh? Is that so?" The guest's tone dazzled, and his lips curled in a smirk, "And you've only met me twice, so why do you like me?"

"Just because I was in the right place at the right time, with the right powers just in time to help you get your wish, you like me, don't you?"

"Is it me you like, or is it this person who has appeared just at the right time? Would you like this person if it wasn't me and it was someone else?"

Hearts was still, and he looked up incredulously, eyes wide and breathless, but unable to answer a single word.

He stood up, lowered his eyes and straightened his black leather gloves, pulling them upwards a little.

"As I understand it, human liking is also a superficial and utilitarian

thing that can be easily created and transferred."

The guest said with a smile, "If you really want to prove to me that you won't like him and express your loyalty to my liking-"

"-then kill him and prove it to me."

The moment the words were spoken, Hearts felt the guest give Hearts a very light pat on the head and he looked away from Hearts with a smile in his eyes as if he was looking at Hearts and the person Hearts was playing, "If you really like me that much."

The pupils of Hearts' eyes trembled slightly.

--This was the first time this guest had touched him.

"What a rare visitor." Charles folded his arms in front of himself as he looked at Hearts, who had pushed open his office door, and said with a grin, "What could possibly be going on that would make the high and mighty Queen knock on my dirty gambler's door after watching the challenge and not even having a rivalry meeting?"

Hearts walked up to Charles and looked at him with a misplaced look in his eyes, "I want to know what's behind Bai Liu."

"Behind the scenes information?" Charles spread his hands as he smiled politely inquiringly, "The Queen and I have been working together for a long time, of course I am willing to sell you a lot of information, after all I even did things like create a fake identity within the Gamblers Guild to invest in Spades for you last year."

"That's not you helping me." Hearts retorted impassively, "It was you who agreed to work with me because you yourself needed an extreme gambler to boost Spades' status and build up his popularity."

Last year Hearts was trying to get in touch with Spades, which is why he was dropping points to work with Charles - he was trying to ask Spades where he got the bone whip from, normally a novice would have a personal connection with the gambler who backed him the most, but Spades was a player who was out of the ordinary. After all the points Hearts had dropped, the man didn't even give a second glance to the punters at the top of the leaderboard, nor did he have any desire to lynch.

It was only after Hearts had fought him in the ring and killed him in a bloody fight that they got a reply from Spades about the origin of the

bone whip - [I don't know].

"Spades last year, Bai Liu this year." Charles teased. Charles teased, "Queen, you have a great eye, you pick my dark horses with precision every time, last year you were willing to work with me because you wanted access to Spades, is that the same reason this year?"

"I don't like Bai Liu." Hearts retorted in an indifferent tone, "I just want news of him."

Charles shrugged, "Well, it's basic ethics for me not to question my clients, but I sell my news here by the bar, what news do you want? Career? Background? Marriage? A relationship? Or something to do with the league?"

"For the sake of our cooperation for so long, I'll give you a friendly price of 10,000 points for one."

Hearts looked up: "I want all the information you know about Bai Liu, no matter how much you know."

City in the Sky

In-game.

The next day, as the first rays of sunlight hit the holy statue of the goddess in the highest tower of the island floating in mid-air, the nuns sleeping in the papal palace and the witches in the polluted area opened their eyes at the same time.

They jumped lightly from the mattress where they had been sleeping, put on their clothes and brushed their hair sideways while walking unhurriedly towards the door of the room they were knocking on.

The Cardinal pushed open Phoebe's door and said lovingly, "It's time for you to go out to the witch trials, my child."

"The witch trials are starting today." You Zhen, standing outside the door, took Liu Jiayi's hairband and tied it for her, her tone heavy, "but today we're going to prepare for a sneak attack on the Pope's palace, try to break out of the staircase once to see if we can get up there, and not be able to spare the men to rescue the people at the tribunal."

Liu Jiayi tilted her head slightly, and she smiled sweetly: "At times like this, aren't the men who are put in the city useful?"

"If they don't want the witch to win the war and then judge them in reverse, isn't this the time to show their loyalty and offer to go to the rescue?"

You Zhen tied her hair with a flourish.

Phoebe put on her nun's hat and she turned her head, her hands joined in a gesture of prayer, her expression innocent and holy: "I'm ready to pray for those who deserve to go to hell, Bishop."

The Cardinal, thinking Phoebe was talking about the witch, nodded compassionately, "Good child. You are doing the right thing."

Phoebe, as she walked past the Bishop with her eyes downcast, said briskly, "May the Lord bless you to hell, my Lord Bishop."

The bishop did not catch it, and asked back in confusion, "What did you just say?"

"Nothing." Phoebe smiled sweetly as she put her hands behind her

back and winked, "I'm praying for your future."

Meanwhile, the Western Safety Zone warehouse.

Bai Liu's communicator vibrated, and he took it out and saw the message Liu Jiayi had just sent.

[Break out in two units.]

[Bai Liu open Mu Sicheng panel and Muke go to the Pope's Palace, your skills are obscure and suitable for sneaking, search for the sky ladder inside the Pope's Palace, the sky ladder is said to have a mechanism, only the Pope can open it, look for the key to open the sky ladder on the Pope, cooperate with the witch to open the sky ladder and wait for the Sky City].

[Mu Sicheng and Tang Erda lead the rest of the group to attack the Court of Judgment, save and capture only, do not fight, avoid confrontation with the King's Guild who may be on the side of the Holy See, come to the Papal Palace and break out with the witches after saving them].

[Let Tang Erda be aware of the two-sided high-damage match between the nuns and Liu Ji].

" Phoebe ." Qi Yifang followed the nun with anxiety, "Are we really going to split up? The opponent is that Bai Liu, he is very extreme, he may sacrifice the players in his hand to swap with us, if Bai Liu plays a swap tactic, our side of the queen is on the island, one less player, it is very disadvantageous, it is better not to ....."

Phoebe gave him a bemused glance: "Since when can a regular player question a tactician's choice?"

Qi Yifang shuts his mouth in embarrassment.

"Their tactician for this one won't be Bai Liu's." Phoebe shifted her eyes back and dropped the bombshell in an unusual tone, "As you said, Bai Liu is a guy with extreme tactics, but so far what we know, both the breakout of the Inquisitorial Court and the witch matchups on the sideline are solid tactics, not aggressive, with the main focus on preserving their own team and reducing casualties."

"This tactic is not the style of the crazy Bai Liu."

"It's more like the handiwork of a little witch."

Qi Yifang was stunned: "You mean ....."

"I suspect the other team made the same tactician change as we did, because on this map, which is clearly the Little Witch's home turf, and that profit-minded Bai Liu is a man, there's no advantage to be had on this map." Phoebe's tone is muted, "He's probably going to do the same as Hearts and transfer his tactician privileges."

"And if it's a little witch as a tactician ....."

Phoebe's eyes lit up and she spoke in a pleasant tone, "I've watched and watched her grow and no one knows the tactics she'll use better than I do."

"Her tactics have always been based on protection and stability, then in this case, in order to minimise player damage and maintain player cooperation, she would most likely split up the more seasoned players and take the novice players separately, such as Bai Liu with Muke and Rose Hunter with Mu Sicheng, and then press the main task on Bai Liu, such as attacking the Pope's Palace to find the key to the Ladder, and press the main task on Bai Liu. For example, attacking the Pope's Palace to find the key to the stairway to heaven, and pressing the offensive tasks on the hunters, such as saving the witches awaiting trial today from the Inquisition."

"When the little witches split up, it's only natural that we should split up too, otherwise they'd be running a double quest and we'd be running a single quest and the quest would be twice as slow as they are."

"The problem now is how to split it up."

Phoebe turned around and she looked over at Qi Yifang and Liu Ji who were following her, her eyes narrowing slightly as she made her rounds.

It was as if she knew the little witch well enough to guess the pairings the other woman had given her, and the little witch, being so intelligent, naturally knew her well enough to guess the pairings she would use.

But Phoebe is not the kind of tactician who changes his tactics just because his opponent guesses.

She believed in her choice, so what if she was guessed, she could win all the same.

"Liu Ji and I will go to the Inquisition, Qi Yifang will stay in the Papal Palace and work with Titan's skills to steal the Pope's scepter." Phoebe calmly gave the order, her gaze obscuring towards the ladder next to the nuns' hall across the street, "No surprise, we're going to have a winner today."

Meanwhile, the eastern contaminated zone borderline.

Leah, stationed in position, watches the approaching white dots not far away and a sense of foreboding comes over her.

She saw the ecclesiastical troops of the Inquisitorial Court pushing a large vat of eels this way, along with many bows made of eel bones, led by the bishop, who was holding a loudspeaker and shouting at the witch-contaminated area.

"Listen up, witches, we've developed a plethora of secret weapons against you! If you don't want to be killed by a hail of arrows! Step forward and surrender now!"

"Now the merciful Lord is giving you a brand new path."

The bishop pointed to the male eels being pushed over next to him, "These are the male eels that have been surrendered by the indigestible offerings of the congregation, and we have heard that you have a child with strange sorcery on your hands, a little witch whose sorcery creates a poisonous swamp that can dissolve even eel bones."

"If you will hand over the young witch and allow her to use sorcery to digest these male eels, then the Holy See will let all of you witches live."

Seeing no response from the witch quarter, the bishop narrowed his already tiny eyes into slits in displeasure and raised his volume, "Just hand over one of her witches and you will be forgiven by the Holy See and have the right to re-enter the safe zone."

"You will only help your warlike spirit by keeping her, but how can she protect each and every one of you at all times when there is only one of her? After the invention of the eel-bone arrow, your resistance will one day fail."

"Not only that, but not only will your domination of her not save you from yourselves, but the day you dominate this strange little witch, the less these male eels are dissolved, the less eels will be produced, and the more people will be harmed by these eels! More women will

be corrupted into witches by swallowing eels!"

"Don't you claim to be saving all witches? But by acting so selfishly you are clearly forcing them to become witches, you are making an enemy of all mankind!"

Leah gritted her teeth and raised an arrow and shot - that was the signal that there would be no consent.

The bishop was wrapped in a dense shield of bone, and the arrow struck the top of the bone shield in front of him, a threat so close that he could not help but grimace.

"It seems, then, that you do not accept the forgiveness of the merciful Church."

"An unrepentant dirty witch indeed."

The bishop raised his hand and spoke in a sinister tone, "Release the arrows!"

Thousands of arrows were shot out, aimed at the witch zone.

Leah's eyes sank as she turned her feet into snake tails, enclosing the entire patch, and took a deep breath - the battle was coming and she was ready to die.

Witch Code #5 - If the ultimate in freedom requires sacrifice in exchange for it, then sacrifice also symbolizes a freedom.

-a freedom of the soul after death, a freedom of the future.

As the first sharp arrow pierced Leah's snake's tail, spilling blood, she looked up with an expression so painful that she grimaced at the island floating above the sky, breathing heavily, her voice hoarse as she ordered

"Attack-!!!"

Papal Palace.

Bai Liu and Muke used the map given by Liu Jiayi and Muke's shadow sneaking skills to quickly make their way around the back door of the papal palace, knocking out two priests, dragging them into the shadows, stripping them of their clothes and changing into them, and sneaking through the shadows all the way to the main hall of the papal palace.

Muke, hidden in the shadows, scanned the front of the main hall and his brow furrowed: "What's with all the guards?"

"It's not just the guards, look over there." Bai Liu nudged Muke's shoulder and pointed to the side of the main hall, "There are lots of cardinals chanting and a choir."

"It must be that something has happened to the Pope in the main hall and he's in shock, which is why so many people have come to watch."

Bai Liu rubbed his chin in thought, "But we weren't even in the papal palace yesterday, and we didn't do anything to the Pope, it must have been the Hearts who did it."

"This greatly increases the difficulty of our stalking." Muke looked grave, "We're not sure what level of monsters these guards are, whether they can be killed, what buffs they have on them, and on top of that, even if we could kill them, so many guards would take us a lot of time, and finally, we're here to steal the key, and such a big noise of the key would scare the Pope inside, and let him run away with the key, we would have made a trip for nothing up."

"It's not just that." Bai Liu added, "The worst that could happen is that the Pope runs straight onto the island with the key and unlocks the ladder so that we can't climb up, while the attacking witches will be surrounded by heavy guards."

"From Jiayi's description, the witches couldn't have withstood such heavy casualties."

Muke nodded, worried, "So our operation must not go awry."

"So heavily guarded and the Pope is clearly a glutton for punishment, the kind of man who is always cautious ..... What would it take to not spook the snake and be seen and still manage to blend into the main hall?"

The same question plagued Qi Yifang, who was wandering anxiously around the side entrance of the main hall.

He was clearly given the status of a priest of the Holy See, but was likewise turned away by the Pope when he asked for an audience - news of the witch attack had reached the papal palace, leaving the Pope as if he were a bird of prey and would not receive anyone.

It also made Qi Yifang, who had been given the task of stealing with

care, understand why Phoebe had unbelievably left him with the big guy, Titan.

It's a Titan to break through if he can't negotiate!

..... is really a tactic used by Phoebe, a guy who likes to come on strong.

Qi Yifang could not help but smile bitterly at the thought, but not only would there be more variables if he forced his way in, but the Queen, who was imprisoned by the Holy See, would surely be affected, and he did not want to force his way in until the final step.

But what would he do to meet the frightened Pope if he didn't come strong?

Qi Yifang has a headache.

Seriously, he didn't think the Pope would receive anyone in this situation.

Muke echoed the same sentiment, his brow furrowed: "There's no gap in the main hall to sneak into, we'll have to force our way in."

"..... looks as if it is." Bai Liu looked at the door to the main hall, his eyes narrowing slightly, "but the cost effectiveness of the strong attack is just a little on the low side."

"How about a different kind of bet."

Muke was stunned: "A bet?"

"It's true that the Pope doesn't open the door to receive anyone." Bai Liu analysed in a calm tone, "But there is one exception, according to the information Jiayi gave us, this Pope has a great deal of respect for the man who sold the island to him in the first place, and although I'm not sure who this man is, Bai six is behind all the games I've come across so far."

"How about the bold assumption that if the man selling the city of skies to the Pope was Bai six, in this offensive situation, this Pope, who made his fortune on the island in the first place and who is terrified beyond belief, is bound to receive Bai six, the god who has helped him grant his wishes."

"And I look exactly the same as Bai six."

Bai Liu said in a light tone, "If my suspicions are correct, the Pope would have opened the front door to greet me if I had come forward to see him."

"But what if the person selling the island to the Pope is not Bai six?" Muke's brow furrowed, "Just like the previous game, Bai six found a medium to reach the other side, which is possible."

"Then it's not too late to make a strong attack then." Bai Liu said, straightening his gloves and adjusting his expression as he walked straight out with his hands held high.

"?! Who!"

The guards turned their bows on Bai Liu, who was in a surrender position, and demanded in a fierce tone, "Who are you?"

Bai Liu explained without skipping a beat, "I am a guest of the Pope."

"A guest of His Holiness?" The guard's tone was suspicious as he aimed his crossbow at the aorta next to Bai Liu's neck and approached to pick up Bai Liu's chin, "His Holiness has no appointments today."

"Perhaps if you tell His Holiness whether the key to the Island in the Sky in his possession needs repair, he'll remember." Bai Liu raised his eyes in a wave.

-- If Bai six is the one selling the island, then the key in the Pope's hand that can jam a witch to death is more than likely something the bored god did with his own power at his own whim.

He did not think that a mediocre and foolish mortal like the Pope could possess the ability to make the key to the Sky City.

The guard hesitated for a moment but turned his head and asked the man next to him to pass on the message for him.

"I'm not accepting an audience with anyone!" As soon as the Pope saw the guards enter, the man in a state of panic shouted in a fury, "Who told you to open the door! What if you let in those witchy witches!"

The guard who entered fell to his knees in fear at the Pope's yell and reported tremblingly, "Yes, yes, Your Holiness, a man claiming to be your guest has come."

"I have no appointment with anyone today! Arrest him and put him to

death! He must have been sent by the witch!" The Pope hysterically slammed the fine China cup in his hand in front of the guards, "Now get out! Leave me alone in safety!"

The splattering of the cup scared the kneeling guard, who hurriedly stepped back on his knees and nodded frantically, "Yes Lord Pope!"

"I'm going to torture and execute this witch spy who claims to have once sold you an island that could be repaired with the keys to the Sky City!"

The Pope's barking antics gave a lurch and his stormy expression instantly froze on his face as he jerked to his feet holding his seat, "Who did you say it was?!"

The guard shrank his shoulders in confusion, "One, a man who claimed to have sold the island to you once."

The Pope took two deep breaths and he stepped tremulously from his seat, but then thought of something and walked back, pacing anxiously back and forth, his chest heaving violently with emotion as he muttered to himself in a trance, "How could that One come in person?!"

"..... No, not necessarily, that one's mind ..... will get involved in anything that's interesting, and now that the witches and we're in a big battle, this might be interesting in that one's eyes too ....."

"Maybe, maybe it will really come to my aid!"

"Describe it to me." The Pope held the arm of the throne of God and asked warily, "What does that guest ..... look like."

"He looked to be a young man in his early twenties, with a white blouse and black gloves in his priest's outfit." The guard described it carefully, "looked to be from an unusual background and was calm when we aimed our bows at him."

The Pope closed his eyes and walked quickly downwards, almost rolling off the throne of God, "And invite him in!"

The guards nodded hastily, "Yes, yes! I'll invite that distinguished guest in right away!"

The doors of the Palace's otherwise closed main hall opened in layers, revealing the opulent interior to Bai Liu, and the stained paintings on

the huge, glazed glass refracted in his face with layers of glittering light, causing him to blink very slightly.

The guard who had just pointed his bow at Bai Liu bent ninety degrees to him respectfully and reached out to lead the way for Bai Liu: "I didn't recognise you just now and offended you, please forgive me for my crime."

"His Holiness says that whenever and wherever you wish to come, the main doors of the papal palace are always open for you to enter."

Bai Liu nodded slightly and followed the guard forward, while glancing at Muke who was waiting nearby.

Muke, who had been waiting with bated breath beside him, let out a long breath as he collected the dagger in his hand and rejoined the shadows, following closely behind Bai Liu's pace and instantly sneaking into the papal palace.

Qi Yifang's ears twitched as he heard a greeting coming from the main hall and, stopped by the guards at the side door, he was about to seize the opportunity to rush in when the guards held him back again.

"His Holiness the Pope is receiving his honoured guests." The guard's tone took on a distinctly warning tone, "I would ask His Holiness the priest not to trespass in the main hall."

Qi Yifang gritted his teeth and his face sank as his hand moved to reach inside the priest's robes and grip his weapon - a weathervane.

His code word with Titan was that if there was an unusual storm here at the papal palace, Titan would storm the sea and hammer the papal main hall.

He wanted to solve all this in a peaceful way, but it seems that the Pope can't afford to do it, so he has to use the [storm]?

..... But who exactly is the guest who, under these circumstances, can still make the Pope, who is so afraid of death that he keeps the doors of the main hall of the papal palace closed, open them and receive them with such high specifications?

Qi Yifang's eyes move to the main hall of the papal palace, and he is lost in thought.

Inside the main hall of the Papal Palace.

At the sight of Bai Liu, who was welcomed inside by the guards, the Pope stepped down from his throne, trembling with excitement, and stopped two metres away from Bai Liu, and with a very submissive and humble gesture, he lowered his body and raised his right hand in a hat-raising salute.

"I can't believe it's really you!" The Pope looked up, his eyes welling up with tears, and followed Bai Liu step by step as he led him up to the throne, and standing on the steps beneath the throne, the Pope bent down with immense humility and said, "Please sit on the throne; there is no place worthy of you in the whole papal palace except here."

"Isn't this your seat?" Bai Liu lowered his eyes and asked rhetorically with little emotion in his tone, "You gave it to me, so where are you sitting?"

"Before the gods, there is no place for mortals." The Pope tilted his head, clutching his hat in his hand, and looked at Bai Liu with a devout and maniacal faith in his eyes, "You taught me that, have you forgotten?"

"We believers are not worthy to be seated in your presence!"

Bai Liu sat down nonchalantly, leaning on the armrest with one elbow, propping his face up, his eyes half-closed, his tone placidly inquiring, "You've seen my face?"

"By chance, I had the pleasure of meeting you." After seeing Bai Liu's face, the Pope had no doubts about Bai Liu, recalling, "You did not deliberately hide your face when I made a wish to you."

With a dispensable nod, Bai Liu asked in a light tone, "Where is the key to your sky city?"

"Oh!" The Pope, not doubting it, respectfully offered his hands to the scepter he held as if it were his life, and inquired with some apprehension, "I have used this key for decades, is there something wrong with it that needs to be fixed?"

Bai Liu lowered his eyes to this sceptre that was placed in his hand.

The wooden cameo sceptre is crawling with the huge tentacles of the creatures of the deep, uneven to the touch, which wrap around and climb to the top where a cloudy jewel of silvery blue light hovers.

The warm glow of the gemstone is reflected in Bai Liu's dark pupils like a cosmic rift torn from the midst of the night.

--The silvery-blue chasm from which Bai Liu has stepped out, as Bai Liu has seen countless times.

Seeing Bai Liu just survey the sceptre without a word, the Pope clasped his hands together nervously, swallowed and asked again, "Yes, is there something wrong that you need to fix with your own hands?"

"Something's wrong?" Bai Liu's seemingly perceptive voice sounded softly as he casually leaned back on the divine throne, which was somewhat large for him, legs folded and swept a seemingly smiling glance at the Pope standing before him, his posture and eyes appearing so careless, the end of his tone even bringing out some laughter, "This scepter does have something to be repaired."

The Pope was extremely disturbed by the look in Bai Liu's eyes and his voice trembled as he inquired, "Yes, what is the place?"

Bai Liu turned the sceptre, held it, and smiled sideways as he replied to the Pope, "It is the owner of this sceptre who deserves to have it repaired and replaced by a better one."

" Muke, kill him."

With this laughing command, the assassin, hidden in the shadows, leapt to his feet, his eyes blazing and cold, his dagger in his hand, stabbing the Pope in the side of the neck as his pupils snapped open!

The Pope narrowly dodged it and cried out in panic, crawling forward on his hands and knees, "Come, someone, help!!!"

At the same time, Qi Yifang took hold of the weathervane and looked to the guards in front of him, asking once more solemnly, "Is it true that I can't go in?"

The guard lifted his chin haughtily, "How many times have I told you, you're just a priest."

"A priest has no business setting foot in the papal palace without permission."

"Eh, there's no way out then, although I don't like killing NPCs in the game, nor do I like [Storms]." Qi Yifang sighed helplessly, his eyes

staring as he took out the violently spinning weathervane from his priest's outer robes, "But sometimes, only a storm can wash away all the filth."

"It is the order of my tactician that I must enter the papal palace, so please die for that order!"

[System Alert: Player Qi Yifang has used the skill to summon a two-hour localized mega-storm].

The wind and rain suddenly arrived, and like a player full of destruction, the huge rainstorm and the wind rushed into the papal palace with impunity and began to destroy everything, and the guard, who had just been strutting his stuff, was instantly blown up in terror, clutching the pillars of the papal palace for dear life before he could steady himself and shouting in fear: "What is this!"

In the distance came the sound of a giant running fast and roaring, and the earth shook with it - it was Titan on his way.

Qi Yifang, his entire body drenched, the weathervane spinning to the point of resembling an electric fan suspended in his hand, the ends of his hair and face covered in droplets of water, looked away, wiped a handful of rain from his own face, sighed and answered the guard NPC's question with a subtle chuckle in his voice:

"It's a storm, haven't you ever seen one?"

City in the Sky

Trial Court 23.

This is the first witch trial court to be held today.

The witch on trial, tied to the central pillar, was a young girl, looking no more than sixteen or seventeen years old, who opened her mouth a little to say something, but only managed to make a few fractured sounds.

And with that, she was met with a fierce "No noise in the Court of Judgment!" from the guard next to her. Keep your mouth shut!"

"She can't hear." The bishop sitting above said indifferently, "She's deaf and dumb, let's gag her first."

The guards gagged the cowering girl's lips with a ball of cotton, and she looked around her with a confused and frightened look on her face - she didn't seem to understand what she was going through, and no one was there to explain what was happening.

"Your mother defected on the day she was declared a witch, so we had to try you next, and then we found out that you were born deaf and unable to speak." The bishop spoke coldly, not caring whether she heard or not, "Of all the children born in this world, why are you the only one born deaf and dumb."

"God never chastises the good, and if you are deprived of hearing and speech, it must be that you have done something to anger God and he has sent down chastisement on you."

"-like the fact that you are simply an evil witch who was born into this world!"

Although she could not hear it, the Bishop's expression of disgust and accusation was so obvious that the girl shook her head in subconscious horror, her eyes filled with tears and she kept moving her hands, trying to argue in sign language, but her hands were firmly bound.

Someone could not help but whisper in defence of the young girl: "My Lord Bishop, this child, who cannot hear or see, has been at home since she was born and has never gone out, and has never done anything bad, so she cannot be a witch, can she?"

"It is forbidden to make noise in the court." The bishop gave the man a cold look, "Do you defend this witch to be tried, are you compelled by this witch to be tried together?"

The man's neck craned, and he closed his mouth uncomfortably.

He was a neighbour of the child's family and had watched the child grow up. After the child's mother was reported for confirmation in the witch trials, the child and her father were dragged off to other courts and now there was no one left in the courtroom to speak for the child, so after he got jury service, he thought he'd come - at least to speak for the child. At least he could say a few words for the child who could not speak.

But it turns out that there is no difference between being dumb and not being dumb before the Holy See - you will be condemned no matter what you argue.

"But God is not so cruel." The bishop's words changed, "Originally witches like you were to be tested by holy fire, but now that the war is on and there aren't enough women in the country to digest the eels, the Holy See isn't so uncaring."

"So we changed the way the test was done."

The bishop waved his hand absently, "Serve the eel boxes."

A box full of eels was pushed by the guards in front of the young girl, who looked at the box with horror and struggled violently as if she realised what was going to happen.

The bishop was unmoved: "If you can finish digesting this box of eels in court and still maintain your mind, not fall under the devil's spell and become a witch, swear eternal allegiance to the Holy See, always clean and digest eels for all mankind, and come to the Holy See monthly to receive your share of eel digestion - pretty much the amount you have in front of you - we will be able to release you without charge."

At the bishop's raised hand, the guard loosened the young girl from the pillar, made her kneel before the box of eels, held her writhing head down in front of the box, pulled the ball of cloth from her mouth, and haughtily and disgustedly ordered, "To prove you are not a witch, begin to swallow."

"Swallow quick! There are many more witches to be tried today, don't

waste our time."

The young girl's teeth were clenched, her eyes red, her thin shoulders trembling, unwilling to speak.

The guard cursed and began to reach for her mouth, forcing her to start swallowing.

Hidden from the jury, Mu Sicheng's blood pressure rises sharply, his fists clench for a moment, Tang Erda's face drips with gloom and the gun in his hand is loaded.

"Fuck." Mu Sicheng cursed, "Are they animals?!"

This young girl reminds them of Jiayi.

"Shall we do it?" Mu Sicheng turned his head to Tang Erda.

Tang Erda shook her head calmly, "It's easy to hurt her now, the guards are too close to her."

"But we can't just watch her ....." Tang Erda paused, "wait another thirty seconds, if we can't we'll force a rescue."

Mu Sicheng took a deep breath and gave an OK gesture.

"Wait, my Lord Bishop, before she begins, should I not pray for her purification?" A soft, feminine voice came, interrupting the guard's compulsion to allow the young girl to swallow the eel.

Mu Sicheng and Tang Erda tensed up the moment they heard the voice, and they turned their heads sharply to look over.

The blue-eyed girl with long, curly, brilliant blonde hair, dressed in a pure, white, two-tone nun's habit, her hands clenched slightly in front of her in a prayerful gesture, looked at the bishop with crystal eyes and asked sincerely, "May I pray for her before the trial begins? It is my job as a nun, and I ask you not to refuse me."

After seeing the look on Phoebe's face, the Bishop couldn't help but have his heart beat wildly as he almost struggled to take his eyes off the small patch of pale skin exposed on Phoebe's chest, made a gesture of invitation and stuttered, "Of course! If you don't mind the other side being dirty."

Phoebe smiled sweetly and curtsied slightly, "Thank you, Your Grace, for allowing my capricious request."

The bishop was simply mesmerised by the rumour of the most beautiful new nun, who leaned forward and spoke to Phoebe with misty eyes, seemingly forgetting about the witch on trial on the stage: "But what brings you here so soon? You should still be in the First See, where the trial has not yet begun."

"Is that so?" Phoebe winked playfully, "Probably because with my help, all of today's trials have ended extraordinarily quickly, those witch trials in the Inquisition are over oh Lord Bishop."

"Believe me, your trial here today will also be over soon."

Phoebe curled her mouth downwards and approached the shivering maiden, the curve of her smile somewhere between holy and cruel, and spoke in a soft voice: "- Soon, my lord bishop, you too will be able to finish your work and go to rest with my help, like the other bishops of the tribunal up."

"Forever Oh~"

The bishop did not hear Phoebe and asked something in confusion, but Phoebe did not answer but jumped twice lightly and took small steps down the steps to the young girl.

Phoebe raised her hand and she slowly signalled, "Are you a witch?"

With tears in her eyes, the young girl looked at Phoebe, who had come to her with fear and a hint of expectation - the first person she had spoken to since her capture - and was about to shake her head in denial when, for some reason, the shake suddenly stopped and her fingers moved as if she wanted to say something in sign language.

Phoebe glanced up at the guard next to her, "Untie her."

The guards hesitated, but untied the young girl, who, with difficulty, was signalled shakily by the red marks strangled on her wrists: "I don't know what a witch is."

"All I know is that my mother was convicted as a witch."

"If she's a witch, I suppose I am too."

Phoebe crouched down with amusement as she said in sign language, "How dare you admit to being a witch in front of me when witches are subject to trial and much torture by the Holy See?"

With tears falling from her eyes, the young girl questioned in anxious and puzzled sign language, "But they say mummy is a witch!"

"Mum's fine, so the witch should be fine too! Why should the witch be judged!"

"You're right." Phoebe arched her eyebrows into a smile as she signalled, "I don't think a witch trial is necessary either."

After the exchange with the young girl, Phoebe turned her head and looked up at the Bishop with a look of regret: "My Lord Bishop, she has just admitted to being a witch."

The bishop froze, "Seung, admitted?"

"Since she confessed to being a witch, is it customary to burn ..... her with holy fire oh no, to test her?" Phoebe inquired in a calm tone.

"Well then, now that you admit it." The bishop hesitated, "..... Then let's go to Holy Fire."

The torches were piled under the pillars and the young girl was confusedly set back up again. The neighbour looked away uncomfortably, not wanting to see the cruel scene, and Tang Erda and Mu Sicheng looked at each other, ready to strike.

"She shall not speak, she shall not hear, this is the mutilation of her body, this is the penalty God has given her, she is condemned to burn and go to hell as a witch, and after death her soul shall suffer burning and shall not go to heaven." The bishop recited the doxology with righteousness and seeming compassion, and concluded with a salute, bowing his head and whispering, "May the Lord forgive her sins."

The young girl should have been terrified as the crowd came by with torches, but she looked at Phoebe, standing directly in front of her, and for some reason felt a sense of trance and calm.

She looked at the blonde nun with a light smile, signalling to her as if she were chatting.

"You know what? The fact that they pronounced you a witch by physical mutilation is my favorite."

"You remind me of another witch."

"I haven't prayed sincerely for a long time, but let's make an exception

for you today."

The nun lowered her long, curling lashes over her turquoise eyes and whispered a prayer with a look of innocence, "May the Lord bless her to heaven."

[System Alert: Player Phoebe uses the skill (Prayer - Gospel)]

[This skill can confuse all NPCs as well as players within a partial range, causing the other party to open their hearts to the player, believe everything the player does, feel close to the player, and involuntarily approach the player].

Phoebe's huge white feathered wings spread out behind her and the holy light spread throughout the church, dazzling the senses and putting them in a trance, as if they were lost in a heavenly dream.

The moment Phoebe's wings protruded from behind her, Tang Erda, a keen veteran player, caught Mu Sicheng, a novice who hadn't yet reacted, backing up sharply and quickly jumping onto the side wall of the church, climbing through the cut-out at the top and looking inside, narrowly avoiding Phoebe's evangelistic reach.

As he watched the bishop of the church roll out of his seat at Phoebe's feet, the guards dropped their torches in a daze and knelt to confess their sins, the other men crawled to Phoebe on their knees with dumbfounded expressions and reverently confided in her, Mu Sicheng patted his chest with a sense of relief, "Holy shit, that's a lot of skill, it's a lot of range. "

Tang Erda's face, however, did not look good: "She's stronger than I thought."

..... is clearly a control position player, but it looks ..... so aggressive and imposing.

A normal control and roaming player would be the type of Muke who deliberately hides his presence, but Phoebe's presence from start to finish is significantly over the top, which is not characteristic of control and roaming players.

Phoebe is in control of the field, a characteristic of the main attacker and tactician.

"I suspect she's not just taking on the control and roaming position." Tang Erda's tone sank a little, "She may have taken on the role of lead

attacker and tactician as well."

"Main attacker and tactician? Mu Sicheng was a bit incredulous, "Control, roamer, tactician, main attacker, this guy takes it all on, is she a hexagonal warrior?!"

"She's a player in the same league as Bai Liu and Reverse God, growing up to be a formidable opponent, and this is only her first year in the league." Tang Erda's tone got lower and lower, "No wonder Jiayi assigned me to play Judgement Court, Jiayi should have guessed that Phoebe was the main attacker and would come to sweep Judgement Court, with her attacking ability, I guess only you and I with high defence can carry the load."

"It's a tough battle."

Inside the courtroom, Phoebe walked unhurriedly up to the young girl, she untied the ropes that bound her: "You leave."

"Today's trial is no longer about you."

The young girl looked at Phoebe's face in confusion and signaled, "Isn't it my trial? Why is it not about me?"

"How will you be judged?" Phoebe shrugged her shoulders, and she smiled, "Everyone but you of course, I don't like judging witches."

The young girl looked at Phoebe incomprehensibly, but soon, induced by the Gospel, she obediently left and helped her dazed neighbour away, and before she did so the young girl looked back at Phoebe, whose mind was somewhere between lucidity and chaos, and seemed to see Phoebe waving at her, smiling and saying in sign language.

"Bye-bye, Miss Witch."

Phoebe lowered her eyes to the prostrate men and ordered softly, "Let me think, how would you better end this?"

"Burning I've already used, how about just-"

The white feathers on Phoebe's back vibrate lightly and flip upwards from their low end to become black bat wings. Her originally pale green eyes darken in colour and give off a ghostly luminescence, two sharp teeth show at the corners of her mouth and two small red horns about a finger long grow out of her forehead.

[System Alert: Player Phoebe has equipped the monster book form "The Witch Who Fell to Hell"]

Phoebe grinned impishly with that innocent face, her tone playful and nasty: "How can you judge people to hell all the time and not have seen it yourself?"

"Why don't you let me pray you to hell today, it's part of the nuns' work."

[System Alert: Player Phoebe uses the skill (Hell's Prayer Song)]

[This skill increases the damage of your player Team Quan by four hundred percent (including yourself) for fifteen minutes, with a cooldown of two hours.]

The whole church was instantly shrouded in darkness, and the ground seemed to be filled with gusts of wind and chill as if countless spirits had arisen, and countless slimy, invisible ghostly corpses and skeletons crawled out of the ground, holding the hands and feet of the men who had not yet come to their senses, sucking their yang energy face to face and soon reducing them to nothing more than skeletons.

Mu Sicheng was completely dumbfounded by this hellish sight: "..... What the hell is this? Phoebe doesn't have this skill in the information given by Wang Shun! Isn't her big skill a single bloodsucking attack?

Tang Erda frowned: "It's really a main attack, and a ranged attack, this card is hidden deep enough by King's Guild, Phoebe hasn't used this skill in previous matches, and Wang Shun doesn't have any inside information, so it should be King's Guild's card for the playoffs."

That bishop, briefly awake for a moment after the Gospel, his face rapidly drying up as seventeen or eighteen skeletons grabbed his hands and feet and sucked the life out of him, looked in horror at Phoebe standing in the middle of the tribunal and asked, dry and hard, "Why .....?! "

"Aren't you a nun?!"

"Why do you want to be on the side of the witches when the Holy See has spent so much effort to train you?!"

Phoebe sat on her little legs shaking on the high judgment table, she cocked her head a little and repeated the Bishop's words in an uncomprehending tone, "Why?"

"It's true that you can win games with nun status, and it's kinda nice to win too."

"But I can win on the side of the witches, I chose to be on the side of the witches-" Phoebe spread her hands innocently, a good-natured smile on her face, "That's because, naturally, I like witches a lot. "

"Even though they're not the same kind of witch, using the same title is right up my alley."

Phoebe jumped down from the judgment seat and stepped on the Bishop's dried up head with a smile.

"And it's too easy to kill cowardly and dirty men like you, it doesn't take much effort on my part, it's just a handy thing to do, and I'm happy to do something for that I like."

The bishop stared at Phoebe in death, struggled twice in resignation and turned into a skeleton.

"The two people who are peeking out." Phoebe carelessly stomped on the skull's head as she looked up at the empty spot at the top of the tribunal court with a harmless smile, "You guys don't think I turned on my big skill just to kill these inconsequential NPCs, do you?"

Tang Erda's eyes gleamed as she quickly grabbed Mu Sicheng's shoulders and reversed the jump, plunging off the top of the clerestory.

At the very moment Mu Sicheng was caught and jumped, there was a loud popping hammer behind them, and Mu Sicheng looked up at the huge hollow where they had just been hiding, and there stood a man covered in flames, holding up a huge bone half a man high, which was also ablaze.

[System Alert: Player Liu Ji has equipped the monster book identity "Burning Freak"]

[System Alert: Player Liu Ji uses skill (Flaming Bone Hammer)]

[This skill burns forty points of the player's life and triples the original S-rank killing power to SS-rank].

[Player Liu Ji is in the range where (Hell's Prayer Song) is in effect, the boosted killing power is quadrupled again, raising the killing power to twelve times its original size, and one hit can penetrate the

protection of the current top player, dealing between twenty and twenty-five percent life damage.]

And where they had just stood the dome was now completely smashed open, with a huge hollow at the top of the ecclesiastical church, as if it had been bombarded by some missile, but being within the range of Phoebe's skills had left the church still shrouded in darkness, with not a single ray of light coming through.

Liu Ji, who was burning, leapt from the hollow of the dome, the bone hammer he was carrying hitting the ground hard, creating a deep depression in the ground, so loud that Tang Erda and Mu Sicheng, who were standing firmly on the ground, were shaken.

Mu Sicheng felt this huge attack and oppression for the first time, and his scalp tingled as he looked across at the burning monstrosity - it wasn't his imagination, was it? This guy's attack damage was so high, it felt like his blood bar was going to go down halfway when he took an attack.

It wasn't like this when I saw Liu Ji in the Rose Factory before, what happened in between?

Tang Erda's back muscles were completely tense as he pulled out his gun and stared deadly at Phoebe, the witch standing in front of him: "So it's not that the King's Guild didn't recruit a main attacker this year, it's not that you didn't prepare a main attacker and let Liu Ji be your main attacker, but that you cooperated and this is your full main attacker form, is that right?"

Phoebe's wings vibrated with pleasure and she smiled briskly with her hands behind her back, "No, oh no."

"Rather, as long as I'm around, anyone in our guild can be the main attacker, so no matter how crap someone is, they can put up a nice attack with my assistance."

Liu Ji who is burning life points: .....

Although, it's true, but ..... so hurtful Miss Phoebe QAQ.

"Now I'm sure you know what the key to our confrontation is." Phoebe walked nonchalantly towards Tang Erda, her smile looking friendly, but Tang Erda and Mu Sicheng stepped back, "We are both tasked with the main attack, and are both key attackers on the team."

"-that means that whichever side gets a head start and is able to grab the key to the stairway to heaven by settling the opponent first and being able to rendezvous back with the larger forces of the papal palace and overwhelm them with numerical superiority."

"Which means-" Phoebe's wings vibrated and disappeared into place, and the next second, she appeared almost out of nowhere in front of Mu Sicheng, gripping him by the neck and saying in a cold tone "Whichever side loses first, loses."

"- Then let's take care of the weak newcomers in your main attacking team first."

Mu Sicheng's pupils tightened.

City in the Sky

At the same moment, the Papal Palace.

Bai Liu and Muke leapt backwards to avoid the punch, and the Pope, smashed under a piece of ceiling, escaped, looking dazed and stunned, his legs shaking as he watched the scene.

Bai Liu pulled his whip from his haunches, raised his eyebrows slightly and looked across at Qi Yifang and Titan, who had emerged from the centre of the storm with a smile: "It seems that we are not the only ones who want to get to the island."

"It's been a long time, Mr. Bai Liu." Qi Yifang nodded politely, his hand hovering over the spinning vane that was spinning more and more furiously and raised his eyes to the sceptre in Bai Liu's hand, his eyes pausing for a moment as his expression became obscure, "As expected of you, Mr Bai Liu, to have entered the Papal Palace and obtained the key to the island while I was still hesitating. "

Muke stood unmoved behind Bai Liu, who stood up straight as he shook his whip, shaking the rain off it, and asked with a soft smile, "You are no match for me, and your tactician is cruel to you to force you to stand in my way and let me kill you like this."

"It is true that I am no match for you, and it is also true that my tactician is cruel." Qi Yifang's face slid down with rain, but his expression did not change as the wind vane in his hand spun to a sharp stop, "But a match is a match, and a tactic is a tactic."

"What we're going to do doesn't change whether we die because of it or not, that's what the King's Guild trained us for."

Qi Yifang looked straight at Bai Liu: "We were born to serve the Queen and to serve the victory to the death."

"What a devout faith." Bai Liu spread his hands appreciatively as he gave a smirking glance at the Pope who was climbing out of the ruins of the main hall with Titan's help, "But looking at the clothes, I suppose you're set to be the Pope now? Isn't that a bad thing to say in front of your other top boss?"

Muke came up to Bai Liu's ear, he covered his arm and his tone was a bit low: "Just now my dagger hit that Pope NPC but it bounced back, I unlocked his monster book, this guy is immune to all attacks from

men and judged witches, he even has a fifty percent chance of triggering a bounce, he's a very hard NPC to kill. "

"But the weird thing is ....." Muke hesitated, "The monster book says it's only witches who have to be judged and males in the ruled area that are immune and bounce damage, we don't fall into that category, but we also get bounced damage."

Bai Liu glanced at the bleeding wound on Muke's arm: "That's the wound the Pope bounced back from? Show me the monster book your panel unlocked."

Muke showed Bai Liu the Pope's monster book and Bai Liu's eyes narrowed as he quickly tapped out and swiped his system panel to refresh it, his gaze pausing for a moment and his tone of voice becoming clear: "So that's it."

The status setting on his system panel changed from [Prepared Witch] to [Witch wanted by the Holy See pending trial].

Muke also reacted and his face sank in a flash: "So it's the identity setting?!"

"Although we are men, and logically not immune, we were set up as reserve witches to begin with." Bai Liu explained articulately, "And after that time when we were rescued by the witch team, we, as defecting reserve witches, had come under the witch team in the eyes of the Holy See, and so the Inquisition wanted us, so our status is now that of witches awaiting trial."

"But it's still not right, even if we're witches on trial now, we're not part of the damage exemption for attacking the Pope." Muke wondered.

Bai Liu continued in a calm tone, "But we have now come to the Papal Palace, the heart of this trial of witches, so as [witches to be tried] we are being tried by the Papacy at this moment."

"It just happened to fall within the immunity range that invalidates attacks on popes and bishops."

The Pope, staggering and being helped to his feet by the guards, shouted in hysterical rage, "Arrest and execute these two witches' accomplices!"

"Where's the priest! Where's the priest who just rushed in and saved

me!"

Qi Yifang replied in a very soft voice to the Pope, "I am here, Your Holiness."

The Pope hid behind Qi Yifang as if he had seen a savior, shivering from the wind and rain, but still ordering in a commanding manner, "I just saw you order that giant, that giant you called to save me, didn't you? Quickly, tell that giant to kill these two thieves and take back my sceptre!"

"The giants are indeed powerful, but so are those two, so in addition to that I need your help, my Lord Pope." Qi Yifang whispered softly, "Will you make it possible for me to marshal your team?"

The Pope hesitated for a brief moment, but he turned his head to look at the sceptre in Bai Liu's hand and, with a grit of his teeth, agreed: "..... you mobilise it."

Qi Yifang, standing at the front, raised his hand and dragged the weathervane in front of him, looking at Bai Liu and Muke, who were surrounded by the cardinals, and replied to the Pope with no expression on his face: "As you wish, Your Holiness. "

Looking at the Cardinal who kept approaching him, Muke and Bai Liu stood back-to-back, his face turning ugly: "The monster book says that the Cardinal is also immune to damage from attacks like ours [by the Witch on Trial]."

"That's a problem." Bai Liu's tone was even, his whip flicked to the side as he looked at Qi Yifang, who was looking across the Cardinal and him, with a little smirk actually on his face, "It seems that the other side's tactician, has been preparing against us for a long time."

"Purposely lured us, a group of [witches to be judged], to fall into the injury-free category."

In the midst of the grey and stormy weather, the giant's huge shadow loomed in the white light of the lightning, treading on the ruins of the papal palace, his body stepping heavily as he approached, his breathing deafening like the faint sound of thunder, giving a great sense of lingering oppression.

Titan clenched his fists, his expression fierce, his eyes white, and hissed as he hammered down on Bai Liu and Muke in the centre, while Qi Yifang dragged the wind vane high in his right hand and

waved his left hand down in a harsh tone.

"Thunder burst!"

Thunder flashes and crackles on the weathervane.

[System Alert: Player Qi Yifang uses the skill to override extreme weather (falling thunder) over a localized area with the overlay of (Storm) area weather, which can last up to one minute with reduced stamina and will enter a ten-minute period of stasis, unable to move.]

A purple and white thunderbolt flickered down from the swirling clouds at the centre of the storm, condensing into the shape of a sword and plunging straight into the ruins of the papal palace where Bai Liu had fallen, the flash of lightning falling from in front of Bai Liu's emotionless black pupils, exploding fiercely and scattering sparks the moment it touched the ground.

Several laser-like flashes of lightning shone in the sky, blinding the eyes, and the top of the ruins of the papal palace was silent, the only sound to be heard was the cacophony of rain washing over the thunder and smoke.

Qi Yifang's heart pounded wildly as he stared at the smoke filled area, and he held his breath - he was about to enter a ten minute stasis period, and if he didn't chip away at Bai Liu's blood this time, it was going to be hard to do so later!

Bai Liu, Bai Liu, this monster of a guy, was not such a scary player to him even a month ago.

The growth is just horrible, and although he's also growing like crazy under Phoebe's pressure, it's not even on the same scale as a monster like Bai Liu who is crushing his own growth - it's horrible, growing to the same level as the Queen after only a few months.

Even a strong attacking tactician like Phoebe avoids its presence when formulating tactics.

"Eh!?" Qi Yifang pointed incredulously at his nose as he looked at Phoebe, incredulously repeating himself to the team, "I'm going to stop Bai Liu ?!"

"I can't even stop him!"

"Of course, I know you can't stop him, so I'm giving you Titan."

Phoebe swept Qi Yifang with an afterimage.

Qi Yifang whispered, "But even if we give me Titan, I don't think we'll be able to stop Bai Liu ....."

Just when Qi Yifang thought he would be despised by Phoebe as the underdog, he saw Phoebe fall silent for a rare moment before agreeing with him with a slightly irritated squint and a tsk, "Yes, you and Titan can't stop Bai Liu either."

" Bai Liu is strong, he is the ace of their team, the kind of ace that can turn the tide."

"It's consistent with Spades' role in the killer sequence."

"For a team like ours that doesn't have a strong main attacker, Bai Liu is totally a card face that can wreak havoc, if I were the Little Witch I'd have him on the main quest too, he's got a good brain, flexible skills and will push through quickly despite being a little less cooperative, other than that, the one thing that's still troublesome for us is that Wandering Circus as a team has, in addition to Bai Liu, the ace, and a fairly high defence and high attacker as the main attacker."

Phoebe looks to Qi Yifang: "It's the hunter with the mysterious identity."

"Their team doesn't have a shield position, and the roaming position is two rookies, not strong, but their main attack and Bai Liu, their ace, can completely fill the gap, and with the little witch taking on part of the return and [shield] role, this is a tough team to beat."

"..... Indeed." Qi Yifang smiled bitterly, "Especially since our side's ace is still trapped on the island."

"The mechanics of the league are relatively fair." Phoebe raised her eyes as she pinpointed, "Since the game traps our aces and gives us such big identity setting limits, they must and will somewhere from eating big limits."

"If they're in the witch camp, for example, then they'll more than likely be immune to injury when they attack members of the Order, then we just have to be flexible and use that."

Qi Yifang was stunned: "How can ..... be used flexibly?"

"I don't recommend a head on confrontation with this Bai Liu guy, this

guy's tactical style is messy and unscrupulous and could easily wear us out." Phoebe lifted her eyes to Qi Yifang, "So for him, I decided to use attrition tactics, that is, to use the relatively weak fighting force in our team to stall him, what did your king say, the tactics of Tian Ji horse race?"

"That is, use your control skills to stall Bai Liu, Qi Yifang."

Qi Yifang: "..... Okay, Miss Phoebe, what do I have to do?"

Although expected, it still felt like I'd taken an arrow to the knee.

"Hold Bai Liu off the island until we get back." Phoebe lowered her eyes, "I'll do everything I can with the rest of the team to clear out their main attacker Hunter, until then, just do what you can to stall Bai Liu from getting to the island before you die."

"It's best if you survive, and if you don't-"

Phoebe looked at Qi Yifang: "Then use your best, make your death worth more to us, cause more damage to Bai Liu and pave the way for the team that will be on the island."

Qi Yifang was quiet for a moment, then took a breath and looked up with a firm gaze, "I know."

As the lightning cleared, Qi Yifang's body went rigid. He looked at the fallen figure in the middle of the ruined main hall, took two deep breaths and was just about to breathe a sigh of relief when a soft laugh suddenly came from behind him.

"Obviously an acquaintance, but so hard on me the moment we meet."

Qi Yifang's breath caught in his throat and he couldn't turn his head fast enough to see a gloved hand on his shoulder, and further up, a Bai Liu slowly falling from mid-air, his ponytail knocked to one side at the back of his shoulder, the bone whip drawn from behind him tingling with lightning, the pupils of his dark eyes curving slightly, looking at Qi Yifang with a smirk, a teasing smile The black pupils of his eyes curved up slightly, looking at Qi Yifang with a smirk and a teasing tone.

"How sad, to meet and strike me with lightning, am I so unappealing?"

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu loads player Muke's panel and uses his personal skill (Flash Strike)]

"That can't be helped." Bai Liu withdrew his hand and vibrated his whip, smiling as he waved it over, "I'm a man who holds a grudge; if you slash me, I'll be sure to return the favour."

The flashing thunderbolt was instantly in front of Qi Yifang's eyes, and his pupils almost gritted their teeth as they reflected the flashing thunderbolt.

-- Bai Liu, who didn't hesitate to abandon his teammate Muke at the moment the lightning descended, and used Muke's skill to steal away!

He used Muke as a shield to protect himself from the lightning bolt! The man who fell on the rubble was Muke!

How can you call Phoebe's tactics brutal when you're taking a teammate's crumbs!

Bai Liu's whip threw itself on Qi Yifang's face, knocking him ten metres away.

Qi Yifang is on the ground, breathing heavily, barely holding himself up to look at Bai Liu.

Bai Liu approached him nonchalantly, smiling as he straightened the whip in his hand, "You have this look on your face as if you're accusing me of using a teammate to defend myself from a knife, but isn't that a normal thing to do?"

"In this game, everyone prioritises preserving the more valuable player, like Phoebe giving up you for my main attacker."

"I would also give up my teammates to preserve the more valuable myself."

Qi Yifang's face froze as Titan behind him snarled and brought his fist down on Bai Liu, who swung his whip back to avoid it, raising his eyebrows to look over as Titan stared at him and dropped his fist again.

[System Alert: Player Titan uses the skill (Dimensional Shield) on the area in front of player Bai Liu]

[After using this skill, different spaces will be cut into different dimensions of time and space, neither living nor non-living beings will be able to enter another space, light and sound will no longer be able to propagate, and the spaces where the skill is implemented will no

longer be merged under the same multidimensional space]

[The skill lasts for one hour and has a cooldown of one hour.].

A black hole the size of a man suddenly appeared and swallowed Bai Liu, with star-like fragments swirling inside.

The moment he sees Bai Liu wrapped in the black hole, Qi Yifang finally lies on his back, his eyes slack, looking up at the sky where the rain continues to fall.

..... just now almost thought he would die.

Finally, Bai Liu was able to trick Titan into using his skills.

He took great pains to use up his big skill, playing Bai Liu, in order to trick Muke, the assassin in Bai Liu's panel, into an instant escape [Flash Strike], so that Bai Liu, a man with too much freedom, would not be able to make a gimmicky escape, and then be able to use Titan's skill to load Bai Liu in.

Next -

Qi Yifang looks over at Muke, who is being set up by the guards, and his chest heaves violently - by letting these guards kill Muke, he has replaced one of his team members and succeeded in his mission .....

Wait! Mission!

Qi Yifang, his body in a state of rigor mortis, sat up straight in extreme shock, having just suddenly realised that something was wrong - his mission was to get the sceptre and delay Bai Liu's arrival on the island.

But the scepter is in Bai Liu's hand!

Bai Liu got the scepter straight into Titan's space! His mission is ruined!

[I would also give up my teammates to save the more valuable myself.]

Bai Liu's chuckling voice suddenly rang in Qi Yifang's ears and he winced violently, looking over at the racked Muke who wore a smile as if he had seen this coming, even as he raised an eyebrow at him in a slightly haughty grin.

Shit! It's a trap! The person being played was himself!

Qi Yifang's face was incomparably sunken - Bai Liu's aim from the beginning was to trick Titan's great skill and wrap him in a dimensional shield, so that although he could not move, he had the key prop, the scepter, and in Titan's dimensional shield space, even in the Pope's Palace There is no one who can harm him in such a place.

In this field, the witch is free to move, Bai Liu has no way to use the witch's panel to heal herself or her teammates at will. In a head-to-head duel, when she finds that the environment is not favourable to her team and she cannot attack the NPCs in the Pope's palace, in order to prevent her ace from being seriously injured and depleted, putting her team at a disadvantage, she simply abandons her teammates and enters Titan with her scepter instead of fighting them. The scepter went into Titan's dimensional shield!

And it stayed for an hour!

Even if Qi Yifang kills Muke now, it won't matter, he's stalemated, Titan's skills are on cooldown, Bai Liu has one of his big skills in his hand, and he still has his scepter, so he'll have to wait for it to come out before he can get to the ladder, but by then, the Little Witch's army will have already hit and matched him!

With the little witch around, this guy will get his blood back and won't die again no matter what!

They miscalculated!

Qi Yifang's face almost twisted when he realized this - he and Phoebe both thought Bai Liu was a rampaging, extreme tactical type who could fight to the death in key events like the Challenge, not caring about his own blood levels and playing like that. I didn't expect this guy to be able to play like this!

No, if that's the case, they'll be totally passive when Bai Liu comes out!

Qi Yifang looked up and yelled sternly, " Titan, go to the courtroom and help Phoebe kill the hunters!"

--Make sure you change the hunter before Bai Liu comes out, or you're screwed!

By the time the hunters converge back on the defensive and Bai Liu comes out of his shield, the double attack formation of the witch as a

healer plus Bai Liu and the hunters is too much for them to handle!

City in the Sky

Trial Court.

Phoebe steps down the steps of the high church with her bloodstained round-toed shoes, Tang Erda and Mu Sicheng on their knees with burn marks on the ground, a burning Liu Ji struggling to get up as he covers his shot abdomen, the ground wailing with evil spirits, a mess, obviously having been in a bad fight.

"What a rarity." Phoebe raised her hand to the right, slightly spreading her five fingers, cocking her head in confusion at Mu Sicheng, who was on his knees, barely trying to get up again, "Aren't you a thief known for your speed?"

"Under the circumstances, it's only natural to escape from me and rejoin the main battle group, right?"

"Why stay here all the time and die with us?"

Phoebe's eyes rolled to Tang Erda, who had her gun pointed at her from the other side, and raised her hand upwards, "Our time is precious, and we don't want to waste it on a rookie thief."

[System Alert: Player Phoebe uses skill (Skeleton Armor)]

Tang Erda's eyes were cold and stern as she raised her hand and pulled the trigger. The moment the bullet exited the muzzle, layers of skeletons crawled out of the ground in front of Phoebe, like a hard armour.

Blocked again.

--This is supposed to be Phoebe's defence-boosting skill as mentioned in the Wang Shun profile.

Phoebe's two skills, one boosting defence and one boosting damage, are perfect for a main attacker, even if Liu Ji is not a strong main attacker, he can almost overpower them with Phoebe's skills.

Tang Erda gritted her teeth and looked at Phoebe, hiding behind her skeleton armour, and raised her gun again.

Ornamental pool.

Wang Shun, sitting at the front of the crowd, clenched his fists as he watched the situation on Tang Erda's side, while the teams at the back of the crowd, looking at the current stalemate, continued to discuss the situation.

The fact that the Kings, who finished second last year, were able to force out all of the cards they had hidden for the playoffs and still play in such an unpredictable situation speaks for itself.

--This is a very strong new team.

Killer sequence team side.

Lu Yizhan, who appeared out of nowhere, tapped Liao Ke on the shoulder: "I'm back."

Liao Ke looked at Lu Yizhan and gave him a seat: "Is it all done?"

"Well, I went out and spoke to Georgia and it's being dealt with." Lu Yizhan's tone was steady as he looked up at the big screen in the middle of the viewing pool, "Where are we at with the game?"

"You'll see." Liao Ke shook his head, "In this situation now, with every step the tacticians on both sides take I can't see what other cards they're holding and what they'll do next."

"Is that so?" Lu Yizhan smiled with arched eyebrows, "Even you look lost, these two little girls are playing quite well."

Liao Ke sighed helplessly and patted Lu Yizhan on the shoulder: "Don't make fun of me for not being able to read a game, give me a quick analysis, big tactician."

When they heard it was time to analyse the race, the other two, Bai Jiamu and Bai Yi, who had been watching the game with a bitter grudge, moved closer without a word - they couldn't understand it either!

The god of inversions who can commentate is finally back!

Spades was still watching himself, with his face expressionless, clutching his chest, looking a kind of thorough and indifferent, as if he knew all the shenanigans of both sides on the big screen, especially capable of bluffing, Spades always watches the game with this movement, if not as a teammate after the game with this guy to do a review, no one knew that Spades was watching the game, in fact,

when He's just staring at one spot and staring away.

Ask this guy after watching what tactics were used on both sides and he'll just tell you - [I don't know].

Ask him what he knew after watching the game and Spades will say - [I knew I could beat them].

[That's enough for the game, right?]

It was only after Lu Yizhan arrived that Spades was subdued by Lu Yizhan's tactics and was able to participate in the team's match review - still not a serious review, but at least he'll be able to take part in the replay sessions.

"I wouldn't dare." Lu Yizhan smiled as he looked at the big screen to collect himself and thoughtfully rested his jaw with two fingers, "..... Both sides split their teams, ah."

"The nun's intention is obvious, she knows that the weakness of the national Captain Wang Wu is that there is no strong main attack, so she wants to combine to send away the opponent's main attack, so she lets Liu Ji burn life, she directly opens a big skill, and tries to send Tang Erda the hunter away quickly, then even if Liu Ji dies in the process of burning life, the situation becomes manageable. The situation becomes manageable."

"After the one-for-one, she held the little witch who could regain her blood, and Qi Yifang, a weak control player, was under less pressure and only had to combine with Titan to hang on to Muke and Mu Sicheng, a newcomer to the group."

"But that ....." Liao Ke frowned rhetorically, "doesn't make it a sure win, does it? She sold her team's only main attacker, sacrificed the big skills of everyone on the entire team, and just sent Tang Erda away, but didn't get the dominant position and put herself in a passive position."

"It's not a clever tactic."

Lu Yizhan pondered a little: "No, it's a good tactic."

"How so?" Liao Ke inquired, "I also think there should be something superior in this tactic, otherwise I wouldn't have fought Bai Liu and the others like that, but I can't figure out exactly what."

Lu Yizhan answers the question, "Who do you think is the most important for a team?"

Bai Yi, who was listening in rapt attention, quickly raised his hand to answer, "Tactician, of course!"

"Well, thank you for complimenting me on my importance, Bai Yi." Lu Yizhan received Bai Yi's compliment with a smile before continuing, "I don't deny the importance and central position of the tactician in the team, but if you ask the tactician of any team who is the most important part of the team, chances are he won't answer that you are the tactician."

Bai Yi dropped his hand in some confusion, "Who is that?"

"It's the ace player." Lu Yizhan explains gently, "Did you forget? Last year Spades didn't even have a tactician on his team and won with just his own ace."

"The most important thing for the tactician is the ace player on the field, this player can be in control, shield, main attack and roaming position, but using this card well will definitely have a game breaking effect."

"But ....." Bai Jiamu asked with a frown, "isn't the King's Guild's trump card this year the nun? She's already used her big skill; it hasn't done much good."

"No." Lu Yizhan looked up at the big screen, "When the tactician is Hearts, the ace is indeed a nun."

"But now that the Tactician is a nun, the Ace is the most useful face of the Captain Zhang’s staff in the Tactician's hand, so the Ace in the King's Guild would now be Hearts."

"And Hearts is on the island."

Lu Yizhan looks back at the others and asks with a smile, "Do you understand the nuns' tactics?"

Bai Yi and Bai Jiamu: "....."

Damn! I feel like I'm supposed to get it! But I don't! Can anyone really hear that and get it!

Liao Ke nodded his head in a daze. Stroking his palm, he said, "So

that's it! I see!"

Bai Yi: "....."

Bai Jiamu: "....."

You smart people don't need to talk to the last level, do you! Explain to me to the last level!

In some strange psychological way, Bai Yi didn't want to ask Lu Yizhan why, not because he didn't want to expose his stupid shame! It was simply that she didn't want to ask again!

So, Bai Yi, with some kind of mischief in mind, elbowed Spades, who seemed to be watching the game but was definitely lost in thought: "Hey! Spades, did you get that? You must not have listened; you must not have understood!"

If you don't get it, ask the Reverse God again for us! Thank you so much!

Bai Yi and Bai Jiamu look at Spades with such longing in their eyes.

Spades gave the two teammates an indifferent sweep of his eyes, "Heard and understood."

"I told you, you must not have understood it either, reverse god you say it more carefully ....." Bai Yi stopped in mid-sentence, he turned his head incredulously and looked over, his voice broke, "What did you say! "

Bai Jiamu couldn't hide his surprise, and even Liao Ke was a little surprised - not just that Spades would say he understood such a thing, but that Spades would actually listen to Lu Yizhan's in-game analysis!

This guy has been known to snooze on the league field before!

Liao Ke even gave Spades a psychiatric consultation, but only found out that Spades was depressed because he was not allowed to stay at home alone and had to go back to his own team, and that he was only a little more active when he came to watch the challenge today. He was only a little more positive when he came to watch the challenge today.

Everyone expected Spades to sleep through the challenge, keeping their faces open until now, and to be honest, Liao Ke felt that Spades

had done both teams a favour.

"You said you understood ....." Bai Jiamu couldn't hide the subtle expression on his face, "So you, explain it to us?"

Spades only swept him from start to finish as Bai Yi stabbed him, quickly moving his eyes back to the big screen, his voice not too fast or too slow in explaining, " Hearts stayed on the island, the nun used a ruse to stall the others from getting to the island, it would leave enough time for the ace Hearts to move freely, the nun was trusting her ace player Hearts Queen's, she felt sure that Hearts would break free from his prison on the island, so she was squeezing him for time."

" Hearts is the closest player to where the task is completed, and as long as they drag it out until Hearts can move, the advantage will easily come back to them."

"That's the ultimate aim of her tactics."

"That's right." Lu Yizhan nodded with a smile.

Bai Yi looked back at Bai Jiamu with a dazed expression, "Did I hear you right? Spades actually got it."

"..... has he actually been actually watching the game seriously today?!" Bai Jiamu What is even more incomprehensible is this.

Isn't this lizard always reckless in his games! A forceful type of player who would skip even NPC conversations! Why is it that he suddenly seems to be enlightened and is now seriously analyzing the tactics of other teams!

And such a good analysis!

"Why do you look so surprised?" Lu Yizhan smiled and spread his hands, "As I said it's not that Spades doesn't actually understand this, he's just used to a more direct approach and so doesn't want to understand such convoluted human tactics."

Bai Yi is still confused: "So why is ..... suddenly willing to understand?"

Lu Yizhan looked to the side of Spades' face who was staring at the big screen with his eyes in the wrong place, smiled, withdrew his gaze and said with a sigh, "Probably trying to understand someone who likes to express himself with these convoluted tactics."

City in the Sky

Trial Court.

The flaming Liu Ji regained his footing, wheeling his huge flaming bone hammer in the direction of Tang Erda, who retreated to avoid it, but was still grazed by the edge of his jacket, and thinking of what Wang Shun had reminded them, that being caught in Liu Ji's flames would keep burning off their life points, Tang Erda took off her jacket at once.

The sparks that had only touched the corners of the jacket instantly consumed the entire jacket, leaving nothing but ashes.

Mu Sicheng, who had caught a glimpse of Tang Erda's battle at the end of his eyes, gritted his teeth as he lifted his feet and disappeared in an instant, and in the next instant, almost instantaneously, he was behind Phoebe, his eyes bloodshot and his monkey claws raised high, slashing at the back of her neck.

Phoebe raised her hand without looking back, the skeleton armour wrapping her entire body without a single seam in almost a blink of an eye, the young girl's light voice coming out of the armour, "I told you, even the fastest speed is useless in front of my skeleton armour."

"It's like the lips of the dead are the best keepers of secrets." Phoebe's green eyes looked at Mu Sicheng through a gap in the bones, "The bones of a dead man are also the tightest protectors."

Mu Sicheng's sharp, outstretched claws grasp the skull with an ear-piercing scraping sound, and he clenches his teeth reluctantly as he presses down, eyes wide with rage, the bones of his monkey paws creaking.

Fuck! This thing is too hard! It can't be broken with a fast attack speed!

This guy is so invulnerable, this skill is so buggy! Is there such an outrageous and flawless skill!

Wait, it seems like this guy hasn't moved much since a while ago .....

Mu Sicheng's eyes suddenly twitched as he remembered the video clip Wang Shun had shown them of Phoebe using the Gospel to draw her opponent in, rather than allowing herself to take the initiative and

attack him.

So is it possible that .....

"Hey." Mu Sicheng slowly withdrew his monkey claws as he turned to Phoebe, who was hiding in her skeletal armour, and gave a somewhat sinister smile, "You've been moving at a reduced range since you used your skill, haven't you-"

"You have a range for using this Hell's Prayer Song skill that keeps decreasing over time?"

Phoebe's pupils contracted very lightly.

Almost immediately, Liu Ji came back to the defence with a wild hammer blow that sent Mu Sicheng flying, stripping off his burning jacket and landing on the church pillar with an outside foot, flipping into the air beside Tang Erda.

Tang Erda said quickly, "I just heard that."

"If the opponent's range of movement will narrow over time, that is convenient for us to escape."

"But if they all run, it'll send the guys back on the defensive and cause trouble for Bai Liu and the others, right?" Mu Sicheng huffed and puffed, shaking off his burned white eyes and grimacing, "What a horrible attack, we have to leave one of them behind to stall these two or they'll go back on the defensive and Bai Liu's side will be in trouble."

"I'll stay." Tang Erda took up the burden quickly, "You can't hold them both back."

"But you are their target, aren't you?" Mu Sicheng, in a rare moment of calmness, scanned Tang Erda, "Wouldn't you be doing what they want by staying here?"

Tang Erda was stunned: " Mu Sicheng, you want ....."

Mu Sicheng could only end up in one way if he stayed here - and that was to be killed by these two men.

Phoebe swiped back and raised her hand, and a million souls rose from the ground in a fury and swarmed in Tang Erda's direction, her face cold as she interrupted the two men's conversation, "I don't

remember leaving you time to discuss your options."

"Give me hell for all of them."

The moment she said that, Liu Ji jumped up and, using the cover of the skeletons surrounding Tang Erda, brought his burning bone hammer down on Tang Erda.

At the moment of impact, Mu Sicheng almost dodged in front of Tang Erda, his monkey paws crossed above his head and one foot retreated, resisting Liu Ji's hammer.

His arm was instantly enveloped in the surface fire of the bone hammer, and in the excruciating pain of the burning heat on his arm, Mu Sicheng reluctantly opened one eye and took two deep breaths to adjust his breathing before he hissed to Tang Erda behind him, "You go back to defend Bai Liu and the others, I'll hold off these two."

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng has a stacked status (Burning Both Arms) and is currently 78 .....76 .....]

"That's a great team bond." Phoebe waved her hand to the left with an indifferent expression, "You'd still look pretty cool blabbing about letting hunters escape if your life expectancy didn't drop so fast."

Black smoke cascaded over the ground, and in addition to the skeletons, still some twisted corpses crawled out of the ground.

Mu Sicheng's right monkey paw was already burnt to the bone as he gave Phoebe a raspy, gangly smile: "But my life expectancy is dropping even faster than you want it to, right?"

"What you want to trade away is the life value of the hunter, so every bit of life value I drop for him is a block to your plan, so you can count me as having earned it, right?"

"Stupid calculated strategy." Phoebe's scowl grew colder as she moved her hands back, "Is that what your shrewd tactician taught you to do against the enemy?"

The skeletons and zombies on the ground went berserk as Phoebe moved towards Tang Erda, who dodged them with one foot back, looked back at Mu Sicheng and quickly ran towards the entrance of the church.

" Liu Ji, stop him." Phoebe ordered coldly and quickly.

Liu Ji spun the hammer around a few times and slammed it hard into Tang Erda's only exit from the Order, flames erupting in every direction with the downward motion, Liu Ji pulled back and roared, about to swing the hammer right into Tang Erda's face. In a blink of an eye, he was in front of Tang Erda, deflecting Liu Ji's full force hammer.

The moment Tang Erda was about to step out of the front of the Order, the ground began to tremble violently, and the sound of the giant's swift running came.

Phoebe's expression froze for a moment at the sound of the running, and she quickly realised what was happening at the papal palace - the Qi Yifang guy had failed in his mission and had given them Titan in the nick of time, hoping that they would complete their mission quickly and return to help.

Before she could think, Phoebe gave another order, "Titan, stop the hunters."

The giant's mountainous fist fell from the sky like a meteorite, hammering a hole in the ground half the size of the Inquisition, which was hollowed out beneath it, cutting off the road to the Papal Palace directly outside the Holy See.

Liu Ji holds his burning bone hammer aloft as the giant pulls his fist out of the ground and drops it again in the direction of Tang Erda.

The bone hammer and the fist fell almost simultaneously, and layers of ash burst out as if a small explosion had just occurred.

When the ashes had cleared, there was a ragged Mu Sicheng on one knee on the ground, one fist clenched in one hand, his right hand all but burning from the flames of the bone hammer, choking and coughing as he raised his head, ashen, his knees hammered on the ground with a bloody scar, but his dirty face was actually wearing a smile.

An open, even somewhat lazy smile.

"Didn't I tell you guys?" Mu Sicheng curled his lips, "Your opponent now is me."

"Hunters who want to hunt us down, step over my dead body first."

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng has taken a heavy hit and has lost

33 life points, currently at 41 life points].

All expression was gone from Phoebe's face as she ordered coldly, "Kill him first, then go after the hunter."

City in the Sky

Papal Palace.

Qi Yifang gritted his teeth and stood up, somewhat in a state of rigor mortis, holding the shoulder of a guard next to him, not far from the Pope, who was going mad.

The Pope stood at a distance and did not see all the confrontation, it seemed to him that a thunderbolt had fallen and the two men on the ground had become one, and that the "gentleman" who had taken his scepter had suddenly disappeared, so that the Pope, unwilling to accept the truth, began to shake Muke's shoulders like a hysterical psychopath, like a madman. and asked him to give back his scepter.

"Leave him to me Lord Pope." Qi Yifang propped himself on the guard's shoulder and advanced towards Muke with a snap, his gaze obscure, "I have a way of making him give the key back."

Actually, there is none.

The key had been taken into Titan's dimensional shield by Bai Liu, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Qi Yifang is still frozen, unable to move quickly for ten minutes, and without knowing when Muke's [Flash Strike] skill, which allows him to flee, will expire, the best thing to do is to get Muke out of the Pope's hands and kill him now.

He fired a big skill, cost Titan another big skill, and ended up not only not getting the key but putting their team in a corner, so at least he had to replace one of the circus side players to do so.

And .....

Qi Yifang looks at the black fog that hovers over the spot where Bai Liu disappeared - the dimensional shield that swallowed Bai Liu.

..... If the King's Guild's information is correct, Bai Liu's whip and Spades' whip, which can rip through space, seem to go together, and if that's the case, if he's hitting Muke with a shield, maybe Bai Liu will... ...

"If you're thinking that if you kill me, Bai Liu might use his whip to rip through space and save me, then I advise you to give up on that idea."

Muke, who was being held in chains by the guards and cardinals with their swords and spears at his throat, looked at Qi Yifang and suddenly narrowed his eyes and smiled crookedly, "I'm not worthy of Bai Liu coming out to save me."

Qi Yifang turned his head to Xiang Muke and said with a light mockery, "You are very self-aware."

"The most important thing an assassin can do is to be self-aware." Muke slowly raised his eyes, the smile on his face curving wider, "You serve the Queen, I serve the King, we both have people we sacrifice and want to serve, so do you know what an assassin who is trapped by someone he cannot attack will do?"

Qi Yifang's heart rose with a sense of foreboding as he swept the cardinals around Muke and took two cautious steps back: "What's the matter?"

"He will attack ..... with his life in order to avenge the Lord." Muke lowered his eyes and his voice trailed off as he slipped a short dagger from within his sleeve, it was held steady as it landed in his palm and with a sweep outwards as he raised his eyes, the "-the only enemy he could attack in the entire field."

Muke's dagger grazed Qi Yifang's eyes, cutting a strand of Qi Yifang's hair and leaving a bloodstain under his eyes, while at the same time Muke's face was cut with a dozen bloodstains from the knives that were in his way, but Muke didn't care and kept on striking with a smile.

"You're not the only one who wants to kill me." Muke smiled crookedly, his white glowing blade pressed right into Qi Yifang's heart, "I want to kill you too, Mr. Qi Yifang."

Qi Yifang, still stiff, clenched his teeth as blood slowly seeped from the cut under his eye and dripped down his jaw to the ground.

The horrified voice of the Pope next to him resonated throughout the papal palace.

"Catch this fleeing assassin!"

Outside the papal palace.

Quan Baola's gaze was calm, and she waited until she had received a message from Leah before ordering, "Prepare to infiltrate the papal

palace."

"We can attack the priests, but take care to avoid the cardinals, who are unaffected by our attacks and have sceptres in their hands that can affect our witch power instead."

"If you encounter anything you can't fight against, retreat in time and don't attack strongly; our aim this time is to take by trickery rather than force, and preservation of numbers is the highest priority."

"Do you hear me?"

The witches responded in unison, "Yes!"

Quan Baola took a deep breath as she looked to Liu Jiayi, who was following her: "I hope your teammates will work well with us."

"My teammates obey my command, and they will cooperate fully with the witch operation." Liu Jiayi gave an OK gesture, "Just leave the co-ordinated dispatch with them to me."

"Now that there is chaos within the papal palace, it is most suitable for an invasion, let us prepare to go in."

"Then ....." Quan Baola looked to the island hovering over the papal palace, her complex eyes eventually solidifying into determination as she ordered in a deep voice, "Sky City attack, begin! "

The witches instantly dispersed and infiltrated the papal palace from different entrances on all sides.

Meanwhile, inside the lowest prison in the City of Sky.

Hearts raised his eyes and looked at the gap before him, his form shifting and eventually taking on the form of a fourteen year old boy, his slender wrists easily retracting from the chains that held him, Hearts maintained his teenage form as he rubbed his spinning wrists and looked sideways at the gap that was blocking him, raising his eyebrows slightly.

To get out of here, you need to close the gap with a gem on a strange sceptre to do so, otherwise gazing at that gap for a long time will not only cause hallucinations, but also a feeling that you will be swallowed.

But he's the granddaddy of playing with compulsion and spirit level

reduction skills, and this level of spirit level reduction doesn't affect him much, he's used to it.

But Hearts doesn't have one of those strange gems in his hands right now, but combined with the words of the bishop who sent him down, and the hints in the background commentary of this game - [The Witch's Heart placed on the tower will end the Witch Trials and bring the island down] - it's not hard to guess what kind of thing it would take to close The gap.

--That's the [Heart of the Witch].

That gem-like thing should be a prop similar to [Witch's Heart].

If this is the thing, combined with this [Son of a Witch] identity setting he got, it's not hard to guess that the [Heart of a Witch] prop is either in his possession or in the possession of another witch in his ..... possession.

And based on the current team configuration and the distribution of camps between the two sides, the game is currently heading more like a tower defence game, with both sides guarding their [Witch's Heart] and competing for the other side's [Witch's Heart], so it's likely that both he, the [Witch's Son], and that witch have the Witch's Heart on them.

If so .....

Hearts' face was expressionless as he took one step towards the gap, his body slowly changing from fourteen to twenty-four again, and finally he stopped in front of it and closed his eyes.

It should be possible to close the gap with something called [the witch's heart] in his body, right?

What are the implications?

What exactly does this [Witch's Heart] thing refer to?

What damage would it do to him ..... Never mind that, it didn't matter, Hearts opened his eyes in boredom, and the moment he was about to touch the slit he stopped, he looked back as if remembering something, at the large pool of writhing male eels above his head, and said to himself with a dazed look. "Almost forgot about this thing."

He remembered that below the Sky City, was the Papal Palace, right?

Wouldn't it be interesting for the priest-bishops who kept him here to see the large pool of male eels they had taken the trouble to collect and hide on the island to hold him fall off the Island in the Sky and onto their bodies?

The bishop who kept Hearts here had coldly told Hearts, "The City in the Sky is an island without a seam."

"So, the rain you see through this gap outside the island is all your own fantasy, it's all fake."

Hearts at that time just laughed lightly and asked back, "Really?"

The smile on Hearts' face was now thin, and he held a playing card that was slowly emerging in front of him between two fingers, dropping his eyes as he spoke reminiscently, "But the island in the sky I was on was full of gaps that could be seen beyond it."

"-that's an island with a lot of holes in it."

"I really hate it when the island I'm used to reverts back to something I'm not used to."

When Hearts was in a bad mood, he would use the island to vent his frustrations, flinging cards around like darts, sticking them all over the island, and the ground was covered in cracks from the cards, with many of the stones broken.

As if sensing that they could emerge from the pool, the eels surged agitatedly, and as the eels were about to pour out of the pool, Hearts flung a second, third, or fourth playing card, unfazed, and the sharp, knife-like edges of the cards The sharp edges of the cards scrape against the bottom of the channel with a metallic ping-ponging sound, eventually meeting in a circular shape.

The round shape of the stone slowly sinks into a hole through which the wind from outside the island pours in, blowing the hair away from Hearts' forehead, who looks at the hole without emotion on his face.

Outside the cave entrance all that can be seen are indistinct floating clouds and it is impossible to see what lies beneath.

But Hearts knows what's underneath.

He flung another poker card lazily at the crack in the glass pool of eels that had finally broken completely at the top of the prison at this

moment.

Like a spring gushing from a fountain, the eels bubbled up, wagged their tails and poured down through the hole through the clouds towards the papal palace.

City in the Sky

Four or five cardinals stood in Qi Yifang's way, but even so, the unpredictable Muke took half of Qi Yifang's blood.

With such a suicidal attack, Qi Yifang clearly knew that if reinforcements did not arrive soon, he would be cleared by Muke down to a bloodied bottom, and Bai Liu would come out and take him.

Before Qi Yifang could recover from this thought, he heard a guard screaming, "Witches, witches are coming in!"

"Don't panic!" A cardinal was shouting, "These witches are tried sinners, they cannot attack us holy monks!"

As soon as the cardinal's words fell, a black shadow suddenly fell from the sky above, and all looked up to see it.

The weather in this part of the papal palace was already within Qi Yifang's grasp, and this sudden appearance of shadows was not at all what he had expected.

"Eels!!!"

The guards screamed in horror, "It's the eels!!!"

"Eels are raining from the sky!!!"

The eel fell from the sky and hung like a vine and a snake on the Cardinal, who had just been screaming that the witch could not attack him, and when he saw the eel hanging from him, his face hissed in horror, and he shook his cloak frantically.

"Go! Go!"

The cardinals shuddered and shook the eels off themselves, "Call the reserve witches to digest these eels!"

"Okay, I don't think so ....." The cardinal next to him swallowed with a blank expression, he had just seen an eel get into one of the guards' clothes, the guard's immediately covered his buttocks and rolled on the floor with a twisted expression.

"This eel, the eel seems to be a ..... male eel."

The expressions of all the cardinals who heard these words froze, and the Pope stumbled a little and turned his head incredulously to the cardinal who had spoken: "What eel is this, you say?!"

The eels do not swim towards the attacking witch, instead they gather around the men and crawl up around their calves, and every man's expression changes.

Many of the bishops fell to the ground before they could take two steps. The originally holy and glorious papal palace was like a huge snake pit, hung with grey and black eels, and the screams and cries for help of the members of the Papacy were everywhere. In just a few seconds, the magnificent and lofty papal palace was turned into a hell on earth by a pool of male eels.

Qi Yifang dodged the approaching eels while dodging Muke who kept flickering closer to him with his dagger in his hand, gritting his teeth and looking at his panel - five seconds to the end of the stasis, twelve life points left, should be in time.

Five .....

Muke's dagger stabbed Qi Yifang in the side of the neck, bringing out a trail of blood.

Four ……

The voice of the witch calling was close at hand, and Qi Yifang heard Liu Jiayi's voice for the first time in a long time, which put him in a trance.

For a moment, he thought Jiayi had come to his rescue - just like when he was playing in the King's Guild before, whenever he was on the verge of dying, the little witch would descend from the sky and bring him out of the shadow of death.

Three ……

Qi Yifang finally heard Jiayi's voice, she was shouting, " Muke! Bai Liu!"

Two ……

Qi Yifang's eyes regained their composure as he looked towards the dimensional shield that was spinning and faintly showing signs of shattering, gripped the weathervane in his hand and took a deep

breath.

One ……

All the chaos is happening in this moment.

Bai Liu drew his whip and tore out of dimensional shield space. Qi Yifang gripped his wind vane and summoned the storm again, Muke's white-glowing blade stabbed relentlessly into Qi Yifang's heart, at the same time Qi Yifang's wind vane stabbed hard into Muke's heart.

[System Alert: Player Qi Yifang has zero life value to confirm his death, exit the game.]

[System Alert: Player Muke has zero life points to confirm his death and is out of the game.]

The howls of anger and sorrow of the giant at the loss of his comrades came from the far side of the court of judgement, the time limit for the prayer song descended by the nun had expired, and the burning monster who had charged for her fell to the ground after burning twice his life, along with the thief who had fallen, battered and burned beyond recognition, in the centre of the great hole under the giant's hammer, still laughing uncontrollably.

"..... wanders for the main attack, no loss."

[System Alert: Player Liu Ji has zero life points to confirm his death, exit the game.]

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng has zero life value to confirm his death, exit the game.]

The storm forms a barrier, blocking everyone's path to the staircase, and behind the Pope are clusters of eels chasing him, the old, decrepit man in a state of disarray, his expression frightened, panting, rolling and crawling towards Bai Liu with his sceptre, which he opens his five fingers to snatch from his hand, and which Bai Liu dodges with a deft step back.

On the Sky City, Hearts' eyes closed, he stepped in front of the gap, the wind blowing out of it seemed to blow his soul out, and the moment Hearts touched it, his heart beat wildly and fiercely as if it had frozen into a jewel, and his soul wrapped itself around the gap like a substance.

A silvery blue glow flickered erratically in this slit.

The entrance to the Stairway to Heaven hidden in the storm.

The scepter in Bai Liu's hand shook, and the silver-blue slit in the middle of the jewel glowed like a resonant light, as if it had an autonomous consciousness, and sprang up and flew into the Pope's hand.

The moment the Pope had the sceptre, he ran in the direction of the staircase with great joy, followed by Bai Liu, who followed the moment the Pope opened the staircase with his sceptre.

The moment the stormy Quan Baola found the stairway open, he sprinted up it, leading the team of witches behind himself, the Pope fleeing upwards on his hands and knees while constantly waving his sceptre back in terror, trying to use it as a key to close the stairway and stop the men coming after him.

But the staircase, which had always been able to close instantly, kept flickering as if it had malfunctioned, and could not be closed in any way but slowly.

The Pope realised just a moment later that something was wrong with the resonant seam beneath the City of Sky, and that was why the stairway would not close.

The young witch, almost blown away by the fierce storm, grabbed the pillars around the ladder, barely able to open her eyes to see around her, and escorted the witch and Bai Liu up to the island, ready to break off and go up last - she had to stop the other cardinals from going up, or Bai Liu and the witch would have a difficult fight against each other on the island. The Cardinal is immune to injury for them.

The Cardinal's scepter did a lot of damage to her, Liu Jiayi did not dare to zoom in easily and had some difficulty blocking it with the CD skill of poison. The moment one of the Cardinals was about to approach Liu Jiayi, the Hunter's swift shot arrived and hit the scepter in the Bishop's hand with precision.

The sceptre falls and Tang Erda appears.

" Jiayi, you go first to the island." Tang Erda quickly changed magazines, "I'll break off the rear."

Liu Jiayi nodded, and the moment she was about to step onto the

ladder, it suddenly flickered and quickly closed up, while at the same time the giant's frenzied hammer came down on the ladder, smashing it to pieces, and with it, the cold voice of the nun: "It seems we are too late after all."

"It's letting some people on the island who shouldn't be on the island."

In the midst of a storm that could have covered the sky, the nun slowly stepped down from the giant's lifting grip and came up to Liu Jiayi, who looked at her tensed up and suddenly smiled.

"It's been a long time, little witch."

"I am finally strong enough to stand on a battlefield with you."

Phoebe smiled sweetly as she cocked her head and whispered inquiringly, "Face me squarely for once, little witch."

"You're the one I want to win the most."

The moment she said that, Phoebe closed in on Liu Jiayi, raising her hand in a cold slash to the back of the neck, Tang Erda drew her gun back, and Titan moved in with a roar, slamming it down in Tang Erda's direction, separating him from Liu Jiayi.

Tang Erda frowned - this Titan's attack was not high, but his defence was ridiculously high, resulting in his opponent not being able to kill him, although he could not kill him either.

"Guess if the hunter sends Titan away first ....." Phoebe smiled and struck again, "or if I send you away first?"

Ornamental pool.

The crowd watched with bated breath, and although the whole situation was now in chaos, almost all of them realised one thing - the two sides were in the heat of the battle.

Lu Yizhan pondered: "With Phoebe and Titan holding Tang Erda and Jiayi at bay, Bai Liu couldn't use Jiayi and Tang Erda as his two power-ups, which is why Muke suicide swapped Qi Yifang out of the game and Mu Sicheng out of the game. So now Bai Liu has the speed panel of a thief and an assassin in his hand, which is good for Bai Liu - it's no coincidence that this was probably Jiayi's tactic from the start. If we encounter a switch tactic from the opponent, she should have dictated who to switch first."

"Because the game has come this far, it's all about who moves faster."

On the other side, Mu Sicheng and Muke, both a little bruised, were resting with towels over their eyes, breathing heavily and still recovering from the strenuous workout they had just had in the game.

Mu Sicheng suddenly spoke up, "I kept Tang Erda."

Muke calmly answers, "I kept Bai Liu."

The two men were quiet for a moment, then suddenly smiled in unison and raised their hands in a lazy high-five.

"The execution of the tactician's plan is complete."

City in the Sky

As soon as Bai Liu boarded the Sky City, he quickly switched to Mu Sicheng's panel and began to run, glancing from side to side as he did so.

It is an island of great beauty, full of birds and flowers, full of beautifully built pavilions entwined with flowers, in which walk maidens with white scarves and garlands of flowers, with beautiful faces and slender bodies, playing harps and singing about the gods.

The rest of the island looks like a medieval painting, except for the formal and somewhat unconventional marble tower in the middle of the island, which is a vision of paradise.

But a frantic Pope, followed by Bai Liu and the witch, spoils the dreamlike view.

"Stop them!" The Pope ran hard all the way towards the central tower, hissing orders, "Don't let these evil sorceresses get anywhere near the running centre of the whole island!"

Bai Liu's eyes look towards the tower, the end of the Pope's run.

The white tower with its rattling bells and the suffering statue of the goddess can be seen, the final end point of the game - once the witch's heart is placed on it, the game is over.

On the other side of the tower, Bai Liu spotted Hearts walking barefoot upwards.

The tower is surrounded by a circle of white marble steps that swirl upwards to the top, on which walk Hearts, bruised and battered, dripping blood with every step, but strangely, dressed and groomed with the same grace and naturalness as if he were walking at ease.

--It was as if he was going, not to the end of a game where he had to dig out his own soul for sacrifice, but to an end that had already been foreseen.

Bai Liu's eyes rested on Hearts.

He understood what Hearts was trying to do.

If you only need to place the [Witch's Heart] on top of the tower, and

it doesn't say that it has to be the opponent's [Witch's Heart], you can also place your own [Witch's Heart] on top of the tower.

But with the concept of [Witch's Heart] tied to the soul, no normal player would even do that - it no longer represents the kind of low-risk situation where death and a death-free medal can be waived, but rather the offering of the soul to this tower in the Sky City, just to end this vast witch trial.

After this, the player is likely to be left in this copy forever as a monster because his soul is left on this high tower.

But why make this choice?

Hearts was at the top of the island and could see Quan Baola, who was chasing and saving the nuns, and then easily attacked Quan Baola, who was unaware of his presence and defenceless, from high up, to take away the witch's The Heart of the Witch is offered to him.

Why did you choose to sacrifice your soul between an NPC and yourself?

"Cough ....." Between the smoke, Phoebe moved back on her knees, her feathers behind her stained with blood and her still face covered in various wounds, she looked across at Liu Jiayi almost without a glance, covering her mouth and choking violently, the corners of her mouth There was crumbling, dirty blood coming from the corners of her mouth.

She had just accidentally swallowed the poisonous mist the little witch had sneaked in and now her insides ached as if they were corroding.

But the little witch was equally bruised and battered, her Great Skill of Poison and Great Skill of Antidote drained from her, leaning against the ruined pillar of the stairway, barely able to stand, her arms and calves covered with the scars from her wings.

"You've grown up a lot from before." Liu Jiayi wiped the blood from his face and staggered to his feet, making another attacking gesture and aiming at Phoebe.

"You are also more powerful than before." Phoebe wiped the blood from the side of her mouth with her thumb and folded her hands in a prayer gesture.

The two men looked at each other and fought almost without

stopping, colliding, moving backwards and not stopping until they were dead.

They are the tacticians of the team, they plan and fight for the team's victory until the end, until they have used up their last bit of energy, their last bit of mental energy, their last bit of life.

Finally, they lie dying on the ground, immobile, staring up at the island hovering in the sky, with the distant roar of the hunters and Titan being confronted.

The wind blew past their bruised hands, and apart from the heaving of their chests, they were as dead as two bodies on the ground after a fight.

"I didn't think you'd actually let go of the key to the whole game and give it to Hearts." Liu Jiayi choked and coughed as she squinted at Phoebe, who had collapsed next to her and was slowly weakening from the poison, "Don't you hate Hearts?"

"But it can't be helped." Phoebe spoke with a smirk in her voice as she tried her best to turn her head and look at the young witch, shrouded in ghosts and corpses, "Who told him to be the team's ace in the hole?"

"It's a tactician's instinct to believe in aces, isn't it? Didn't you also put the key to victory on the player called Bai Liu?"

"Hmm." Liu Jiayi turned back to her eyes as she looked at the City in the Sky and paused for a moment, "..... What if Hearts chose to offer their souls?"

Phoebe's tone was calm: "I have sent him up with the other witch's heart."

"If he still chooses that way, there's nothing I can do about it."

"Is that so?" Liu Jiayi asked rhetorically, somewhat in a trance, "Wouldn't you be sad if the Queen did leave her soul here?"

"- Your favourite person in the guild is the Queen, isn't it?"

"For all your talk of his weakness, the one in the guild who trusts him the most, the one who has followed him, the one who insults him to keep him awake a little, the one who will put all his chips on him in the ring, the one who believes he will win to the end and live to see the end, after I leave, is only you."

"So the Queen has placed the Guild in your hands."

"You're like family to each other, right?"

Phoebe was quiet for a long, long time.

"I cannot stop a man whose soul has chosen to die."

"Mom did, and so did he."

Phoebe opened her eyes, her turquoise eyes reflecting the shadow of the island of the sky suspended in the sky, like a withered leaf falling into the heart of a clear lake, with a rare hint of watery mist and confusion.

"I can become strong, but I don't have the means to keep him alive."

"Hey." Liu Jiayi sounded a little helpless, "Don't cry."

"My ace player is still on the island." The little witch smiled as Phoebe had done when she first met her, those grey eyes curving playfully, then said to the light and proud, "That man would not allow anyone to spoil the value of his soul in front of him."

"The Queen's soul is so valuable that the guy would have done everything in his power to save it."

On the City in the Sky.

Hearts walked to the top of the tower, where he looked away from Bai Liu, who was standing on the ground, across the white doves flying with the bells and the falling rainstorm.

Bai Liu, dressed in a thin white shirt, his priestly garb draped over his shoulders and rattling in the wind, gazed up at the tower above Hearts with emotionless pupils in his dark eyes.

The storm swept through them as if to raise an even greater storm.

Hearts eyes drifted a little - the first time he had met that evil guest was also on such a violent and rainy day.

And now, also on such a rainy day, Bai Liu has landed on his island once again.

In the storm, Bai Liu, dressed in a priest's outfit, was dressed almost identically to the guest, but brought him a completely different

feeling.

Hearts lowered his eyes and gazed at Bai Liu in the storm.

He still had the same appearance he had shown before - long burgundy hair and red eyes - and his expression was still languid and careless, his eyes a little lost in thought as he fiddled with the cards in his hand for a moment.

This is not the first time he has confronted Bai Liu directly.

After realising that Bai Liu was, as the guest said, his soulful self, the words with a smile [You will like him because he knows love and affection]. just lingered in his ears.

So, Hearts, in an almost rebellious spirit, went to Charles to find out what kind of a character he was in reality, the one who supposedly had a soul and was impersonated by him, to say something like that to that guest, even to the point of overreacting at the first sight of Bai Liu.

The kind of thing everyone says to him at the end of their relationship - [Do you want to sleep with me?]

Desire and love are two different things, every player knows what desire is, but not many players stay in the game for love, everyone sinks in desire and turns into a monster in desire, Bai Liu, the guy who seems to be synonymous with desire in the game, the demon who trades his soul as a means of trade, would really know what love is?

He wanted to humiliate this [Bai Liu], who was appreciated by that guest as having a soul like no other and who knew how to love and feel, as if he had been humiliated by his own fondness when he was eighteen years old.

But when Hearts and Bai Liu locked eyes for a moment, he, in a rare moment, backed away.

His skills are born out of desire and love, and whenever the person looking at him has a desire in his heart that he can't get rid of, a lover he can't let go of, an old friend he hasn't seen in a long time, any emotion that he can't let go of or even fear, Hearts will become that person.

Hearts is so used to playing a thousand different faces for people to entertain and relieve the pain of not being able to release their desires

that they eventually don't even remember what they look like in the mirror, forgetting their original names and leaving behind a code-name for themselves - [Queen Hearts].

When he is within the game and this skill exists, each player cannot avoid looking at him when he looks at others through him, creating a projection of desire towards him.

When he is outside the game, a skill that does not exist, it is difficult to avoid that every viewer, while watching him, will become obsessed with the character he is playing and will have a derivation of desire for him.

He was in the game and on earth, as if he had never for a moment been free from gazing at it with desire.

There is no one, who is looking through him to himself.

Even that guest was hoping to see [Bai Liu] through him.

And the only person in the world who would look at him and really gaze at him and compliment him on his beauty, had gone forever twelve years ago.

But that time ..... when he actually walked up to Bai Liu in reality, looking straight into the dark pupils of Bai Liu's eyes, he actually saw his whole self in this guy's eyes - without any desire, any projection, any derivation of meaning.

Just simply, calmly, gazing at him in person.

--A man called Zhao Muchi.

So he left, as weak as Phoebe had said he was, unable to face such eyes as he had not been exposed to in twelve years.

And in this scenario, he is once again face to face with Bai Liu, and Hearts looks down at the playing cards in his hand and gives them a slight twist - to kill Bai Liu?

He had the power to kill him, he was his enemy, the man he had nagged to kill to prove that the longing and affection he had at least given was at least not a joke, and now that he was dying, why not kill this man and make him feel a little better before he died?

Killing him would have at least made Phoebe feel better.

The storm grew more violent, and Hearts looked across the rainstorm at the blurred figure of Bai Liu for a brief moment of silence before dropping his long eyelashes and gathering up his poker, turning back towards the higher reaches of the tower.

..... Forget it.

He doesn't kill people on rainy days.

He definitely didn't have a crush or a crush on this fake called [Bai Liu], it was simply ..... rainy days he didn't like killing people.

And with a win coming up, there's no need to make a scene.

Hearts goes higher and higher, and meanwhile the witches on the ground are rescuing the other permanent residents trapped on the island, while the island's original clerical guards are fighting the witches, and everywhere the sound of people hissing, attacking and crying turns the island from paradise to hell in just ten minutes.

Of course, for the witches and the people trapped on the island, it's the other way around.

As Hearts climbed to the top, reached out and touched the slitted silver-blue device that held the witch's heart, the pupils of his eyes reflected the silver-blue device and drifted back to the events of his own life.

The guild and the island were handed over to Phoebe, and it was all taken care of, and even without him, that Phoebe boy could have played quite well - or even better - in the next league, and his [shield] tactics were paradoxically incompatible with that Phoebe boy's aggressive tactics.

He had also found someone to deal with the matter of the Holy See, and the men who were at their wits' end could no longer make any big waves.

..... her grave, and he repaired it, and Rebecca will pay his annual respects for him afterwards.

The studio will announce his retirement tomorrow at the most, saying that he is ill and needs to recuperate and will not be taking on any more work.

Everything had been taken care of a long time ago, as if there was

nothing left undone.

Hearts closed his eyes as he reached out ready to grip the device.

A man lurched out from behind him.

The man, cloaked in the robes of the Pope, was in a frenzy, holding a scepter to Hearts' neck and threatening him hysterically: "It was you, wasn't it! You were the one who just destroyed the island's slit device, weren't you?"

--was the Pope who ran frantically up the tower.

Hearts was unmoved by the attempt to throw the Pope over his shoulder, but as he moved, the Pope waved his scepter and the jewel at the top of it flashed and a sudden, sharp pain shot through Hearts' heart, causing him to freeze in place, unable to move again.

"Surely it is you!!!" After seeing that the Hearts were not moving, the Pope laughed out loud in triumph and madness as he waved his scepter, "The guest who sold me the island said that as soon as someone had devoured the slit device with a very tough soul gem, the slit would malfunction, but at the same time, pieces of the slit would remain in the devoured soul gem! "

"The slit fragment remaining in your soul and the slit in the jewel on my scepter are of the same origin, they can resonate with each other, then I can manipulate you with my scepter!"

"-that guest said that it was to safeguard that no matter how many people tried to attack my island, the gap that engulfed my island shutting it down, I would always be able to control the group that had swallowed the gap as long as I held the scepter, and the scepter was owner-recognized, and that guest said that its owner was recognized by God as my prop, then it will always be my prop!"

"Then this way, I will always have the power to control this island, and the City in the Sky will always be mine!"

The Pope laughed almost insanely as he waved his scepter and commanded the island as if he were holding a remote control: "As long as this island exists, as long as these men's desires exist, the Papacy can still start over!"

"Fly to the west over the sea, my Noah's ark!"

With a roar and a huge amount of dust emanating from its circumference, the island slowly began to move, or rather, flee, in the direction of the sea to the west.

But before that, the Pope had another thing to do - he had to get rid of all these obnoxious witches on the island!

" Quan Baola!" The Pope shouted, his voice heard by the entire island through the amplification device on the high tower, " Look over here!"

"I have your son!"

"If you want to save him, be a good boy and get the hell off my island!"

Quan Baola, who was rescuing a trapped stationary resident, turned his head to look over.

The moment Hearts saw Quan Baola turn his head over to look at him, his pupils clenched along with his heart.

He who is used as a bargaining chip after being held hostage by his father, his mother who is threatened, her and him who are forced to board the island.

It was as if what he had experienced twelve years ago in reality and the [Witch's Heart] trial twelve years ago in the game were repeating themselves at the same time.

Ornamental pool.

Qi Yifang was so anxious that he was about to jump out of his skin, he was so nervous about the situation that he was about to hyperventilate, and for the first time, he wanted his opponent to win quickly rather than himself.

When he heard Phoebe say that the Empress wanted to die, he thought it was just Phoebe laughing at her, but now he sees that the Empress wants to die, but she wants to live forever!

Don't even want your soul!

Where is the game more important to the whole King's Guild than the Queen!

If you lose, you lose, but as long as the Queen is there, you can do it again next year!

If people die, there's no future at all!

"Although the Queen will be immune to damage when she attacks this stupid Pope!" Qi Yifang rolled in place in a hurry, "But her skills are usable, right!"

"As soon as the queen uses the skill, she becomes the person the pope likes or fears the most, she can compel the other person, and this pope can't threaten her!"

Meanwhile, on the other side, the killer sequence.

" Hearts is not going to use the skill on the Pope." Lu Yizhan's tone was smooth, "That skill would make him into, right now, the last person he wants to see himself."

"He tried it once, so he's even more unable to accept it and he's definitely not going to use it this time."

"Who?" Bai Yi asked curiously from next to him.

Lu Yizhan paused: "Who do you think the person with the heaviest papal desires would be?"

After a moment, Bai Yi said, with a slightly bewildered and stammering expression, "No, no?"

In-game.

The Pope stepped back while grimly smiling, "Why don't you use that strange skill of yours to threaten me anymore?"

"My dear boy."

"Do you share my fear of the person you become in your mirror when you look at me-"

"- Fear of the mother who left you alone on the island in the first place, Quan Baola?"

"Stop it!" Hearts' expression clouded over, his whole face misshapen and mad, "I will not allow her to be mentioned from your lips!"

"Shut the fuck up!!!"

That day, when he used his skills on the Pope, he took on her form in front of the Pope.

He saw himself in the mirror and saw a lustful, murderous mother, whose smiling, dark, uncertain look appeared on her face, so sickening and disgusting.

In that moment, he saw clearly the ugly and dirty depravity of his own soul.

He had actually used her face, made that face, done that kind of thing - he didn't even dare look at himself in the mirror.

If she were alive, she would probably fear and loathe him like that too?

-a man who, like all the other men on the island at the time, was full of bad desires, unable to control himself and self-absorbed.

Is there any place for those who have reached this point but death and destruction?

Even if he did, he would not accept it.

Just as Hearts at the age of fourteen punished those men, Hearts, now, torments herself in the same way.

"Your mother, Quan Baola is unable to attack me." The Pope laughed hoarsely, "If she is ruthless enough to abandon you first, what will her group of witches who follow her think of her later, and is a woman so ruthless really worth following?"

"But if she doesn't give you up now, she'll have to give up saving the others on this island, and you'll surely live in pain later when you think of the people on this island who died for you?"

"It's a relief to see Quan Baola and you in pain!"

"I pursued her so much back then, and she was so arrogant that she refused to even give me a second glance, and was so intent on saving those in the world, now I'm going to show her that a woman like her, no matter how much she struggles, she can't save anyone, and she can't escape me!"

"This is all retribution for her rejecting me back then! And you know what! Retribution!"

The Pope's face was red and bruised as he roared, and at the end of his roar he could hardly stand.

Hearts' eyes shifted back as he looked towards the device less than an arm's length away from him, slowly adjusting his breathing and moving motionlessly closer in that direction.

As soon as he held the device and consecrated his own (witch's heart), the island would be destroyed in an instant.

The fights, the confrontations, the threats, the games ..... all the things that disgusted him were over.

Including his own.

The same moment.

Quan Baola clutches his bow and arrow in his hand and stares up at the high platform.

Bai Liu leaned closer to her, "The Pope is immune to injury for all witches, with one exception."

"I can use the Little Witch's panel, they don't have the Little Witch wanted, the Little Witch is a witch who hasn't been tried, it's possible to attack the Pope with her panel."

"I'll use the poison fountain later, but it's too far away from the tower for the poison fountain's range to attack anywhere."

"But arrows can, can't they?" Quan Baola withdrew her gaze as she took a deep breath and looked squarely at Bai Liu, "My arrow through the fountain of poison will do, as long as it hits the Pope with precision, won't it?"

Bai Liu nods his head.

"Come on then." Quan Baola calmly agreed, her hand trembling vaguely, "I will hit this arrow!"

Hearts on top of the tower caught the Pope in the throes of euphoria and gripped the device, and a silvery blue gust of wind blew violently out of the gap and across the island.

The wind blowing out of this gap was in the opposite direction to the wind that was dragging the whole island along, and the two fierce winds collided so violently that the whole island broke apart with a karaoke sound, rumbling and crashing into the sea below.

The island was filled with exclaims of

"The city in the sky is going to fall!"

"The island is collapsing!"

"Everyone, run!"

The moment the Pope realised what Hearts was doing, he was furious and about to swing his sceptre and kill him.

Bai Liu, on the ground, hurtled towards the tower, using Mu Sicheng's panel, while Quan Baola, standing on the disintegrating surface, drew her bow with all her might, and as the witch's poison lifted, the cloak behind her flew up in the clash of winds, and from above the tower it looked as if two horns had sprouted from her head.

Her dress was half torn in the wind, exposing her waist and back, but this did not detract from her concentration at the moment, and her purple eyes grew brighter in the storm.

The Pope, on top of the tower, looked at Quan Baola and was in a trance - not only had the woman not grown old and ugly after all these years, but she had become more and more determined and beautiful.

He couldn't help but think of the accusation that had been concocted to slander him back then.

[Her back so white, her waist so soft, her eyes glowing purple like a chimera in the moonlight, and two glittering ram's horns growing from her head].

But she still looked at him as if he were an ant, as if he were grass, as if he were dust, and even though he had done that to her once and thought he had tormented her for decades, it was only after many years had passed and he saw Quan Baola again that the Pope realised at this moment that it was only his own opinion - that she did not care about him at all.

He had never been in her eyes - it was as if after all he had done, he still did not deserve her to look at her more than once, her eyes still looked at the high tower, at the clouds, at the wind, at the people she cared about.

Can't see the Pope as a jumper.

"WHY!!!" The Pope was almost in a frenzy, a huge, as if denied

cynicism eating away at him, "Why do you just look down on me!!!"

"In the name of the First Witch!" Quan Baola drew her bow to full strength and spoke in a hushed tone, "pronouncing Father Lee Woo Soon guilty of lying, mutilating his fellow man, and betraying his trust!"

She shoots a bow and arrow, Bai Liu lets loose a fountain of poison.

The arrow went through the fountain and struck the Pope's head with a single shot.

The Pope tilted his head back incredulously and fell from the top of the tower into the pool of male eels pierced by Hearts directly below, struggling for a moment with his hand outstretched, still engulfed by the eels and disappearing inside with a whimper of pain.

As Quan Baola shot the arrow, the island began to disintegrate and she ran two steps towards the tower, anxiously falling into the sea with the disintegrating rocks, and at the last moment before she fell off the island, she looked to Bai Liu, who was about to run up to the tower, and with tears in her eyes, she pleaded loudly.

"Please, you must save my child!"

"Don't let him die alone on this island!"

As the island collapsed, the tower began to tilt and lurch to one side. Hearts on top of the tower seemed to take a heavy hit and shook for a moment before holding the device and falling down with the tilting tower.

Bai Liu's eyes twitched, and he raised his hand to fling the whip while tapping on the panel.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu cuts to player Muke's panel and uses his personal skill (Flashing Strike)]

In a mere blink of an eye, Bai Liu appeared beneath Hearts, and with his whip he swept Hearts around the device. Hearts' heart was a burst of silvery blue light, and his soul seemed to have been sucked into the device, but at the same time, his left hand held the scepter, and the jewel on it was glowing with an intense light that resonated with Hearts' soul.

The gem and the device simultaneously hold Hearts' soul, actually

giving it a peculiar, almost-departed-but-not-quit state.

In this peculiar state, Hearts seems to have become unconscious, unable even to hold his weapon, the playing cards, which are scattered from his powerless right hand, are scattered in the air and fall down around the two men.

Bai Liu rolled the whip around Hearts' waist, grabbed the tall tower with his other hand, and led Hearts to hang above the tall building, his voice soft: "Zhao Muchi, wake up."

Hearts eyes looked up hollowly, his voice hoarse: "It's ..... you, Bai Liu ."

"I'm going to win, so you give up ....."

"Is that so?" Bai Liu's tone was even, his eyes dropping calmly as he looked at the Hearts he had caught, "I didn't just come here to win either."

"Outside the game, I promised Jiayi, I would save you, and inside the game, I just promised Quan Baola I would save you."

"I'm a man who makes promises that I can keep, and I usually do."

"- So in addition to coming to win you, I've come to save you, Zhao Muchi."

Hearts' heart skipped a violent beat, then at the same time, a stab of pain from the device sucked away accompanied it and he laughed hoarsely, "Save me?"

"What are you doing here to save me?"

"Then you clearly tried to kill me earlier at the tower." Bai Liu retorted back impassively, "Then what did you spare me for?"

Hearts was stunned for a rare moment, and soon he lowered his head and looked away, breathing hard and deep, trying to pull out of Bai Liu's hand: "Let go! I don't want a man to save me!"

"I hate men, get lost!"

"Is that so?" Bai Liu's tone was calm, "I don't think that's necessarily the case."

He pushed upwards and climbed on top of the collapsing tower that

was caving in, pulling the Hearts back beyond it with his other hand. Bai Liu turned his head and he looked down at the Hearts on the ground who were choking violently, looking straight at each other on one knee, his eyes and tone very calm, and held up a card.

"This is the skill card you just dropped, I didn't want to pick it up but I've seen it in Jiayi's hand, it's called a telekinetic heart, it reflects who the person looking at the card likes in their heart." Bai Liu twirled it between his two fingers, the card facing Hearts who looked up, he lowered his eyes, "I haven't seen your card, only you have seen your card, so this is your Heart card."

"That's me on your telepathic heart sign, isn't it?"

The man on the card, with black hair and pupils, indifferent eyes, white shirt and leather gloves, and, most iconically, the scar of a still-unhealed reverse cross over a slightly open heart.

Hearts' pupils tightened.

Bai Liu's tone was flat and judgmental: "You like me, don't you?"

For a moment, Bai Liu's bland face overlapped with Bai six's smiling face six years ago: [You like me, don't you?]

"I, ahem! I'm never going to like you!" Hearts looked confused and hideous, as if he was caught in that nightmare from six years ago, staggering up from the ground and muttering, "I'm going to kill you!"

"Just kill you and I won't like you ....."

"As long as I don't like you, I won't be like those men ....." Hearts looked in a trance, "I won't be so much like those men when I can unleash my disgusting desires on so many people when I'm being promiscuous and disgusting to people ....."

"My ..... favorite is something very precious."

"I'm going to kill you!"

[System Alert: Player Hearts uses the skill .....]

The moment Hearts uses his compulsion on Bai Liu, bewitching him, Bai Liu doesn't hide, he looks calmly straight at Hearts, whose long burgundy curls shorten and straighten, whose burgundy pupils fade to purple and whose body becomes slender.

After the use of the skill, he turns back into his original form in Bai Liu's eyes instead.

-- With so many skill uses, this was the first time he didn't turn into someone else's appearance after a skill use, but turned back into his own.

Hearts looked down at Bai Liu and stopped in stunned silence, tears slipping from his eyes, "Why, why would you ....."

Will I see myself in the midst of my desires?

"Because that's what your soul is like." Bai Liu raised his eyes and his voice was smooth, "I look at people only for the value of their souls."

"This is what you look like at your most valuable."

Hearts came to a slow halt, holding very gently to the device beside the tall tower, his breathing slowly becoming calmer from rapid, as if trying to recover from the effects of the device, he shook his head slowly, dizzily holding his forehead repeating Bai Liu's words word for word, "My most valuable look?"

"..... How did it get to be this way?" He asked softly and rhetorically, lost in thought.

"And what do you think you should look like when you are most valuable?" Bai Liu asked patiently.

"The most valuable look I could have had would have been, would have been a girl." Hearts eyes were misty and hazy as he looked at Bai Liu, he whispered, "If I was a girl, then she wouldn't have had to struggle for so long."

"From the moment I was born, I would have been seen by my stepfather, who wouldn't have noticed her, she wouldn't have gone to the island, it would have been me who went to the island from the beginning, and I would have been able to carry everything for her."

"She'll survive."

"I hate men."

"It was because I was male that she was unwilling to accept her fate to expect it, that she struggled so long for me, that she went to the island for me and eventually died so painfully."

A tear fell very slowly from Hearts' purple pupils, and he murmured softly, out of breath, "I hate myself."

"I hate all men."

Bai Liu looks at Hearts calmly: "You probably don't hate men."

"You just hate bad people."

"You like me don't you?"

"Aren't you bad?" Hearts asked back with a soft smile and tears, "You're the worst person I've ever met."

"Perhaps." Bai Liu was noncommittal as he smiled and held out his hand, "But at least for the moment, I'm here to save your soul, so at least for the moment, I'm still a good person to you, right?"

"If you trust me, you can temporarily store your soul with me, there is no need to waste your soul in this low level game copy, after you give me your soul, you can use the Witch's Heart to pass this copy as well, but then your soul will already belong to me and will never be violated, wouldn't it be more cost-effective?"

"As a deal." Bai Liu promised sincerely, "I can promise to meet one condition."

"People who have no way of surviving with expectations of themselves can appropriately place them on others."

"Why should I put it on you?" Hearts snickered, "Because you're bad enough aren't you?"

"No." Bai Liu looked Hearts flat in the eye, "because I can really answer your expectations."

"I can make this world, the way you, the people you want to bring back, would like to survive."

"I showed good faith in the deal." Bai Liu held out his hand and politely asked Hearts, "So what is your answer Empress?"

Hearts gazed down at Bai Liu's hand, he was quiet for a long, long time, so long that the tower that had fallen over the sea was drowning, and finally reached out and placed his hand very gently over Bai Liu's, asking with a touch of self-deprecation, "So, this is another wish to the gods, is it?"

"What will it cost me?"

"You have paid for it." Bai Liu gazed up at Hearts, "Your soul is my payment."

"That was a very beautiful and valuable soul."

Hearts looks stunned.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has taken player Hearts' (Witch's Heart)]

Bai Liu smiled: "I will do what I am told."

The Witch's Heart was placed on top of the tower, and Phoebe and Liu Jiayi, lying on the ground with only their breath remaining, watched the light coming from the tower above the sea as the eels on the ground were warmly dissolved.

"That guy ....." Phoebe laughed, a tear crossing the corner of her eye, "didn't die."

Liu Jiayi also laughed: "My tactics, how could I let Hearts die?"

"I really hope one day." Phoebe turned her head with difficulty, her eyes looking reverently at Liu Jiayi, "I can become as strong as you."

"The ability to have the power to save anyone."

The witches who remained in the papal palace wept with joy, Quan Baola, who had crawled out of the sea, was thrown up in a flock, while the bishops and guards who had been in the papal palace were pinned down and imprisoned by the witches, their expressions frightened and cowering - they too seemed to realise what was going to happen to them.

"It's time to start the trials against the witch trials." You Zhen crossed her arms and bared her teeth as she let out a long breath, "These men, how many people have been harmed by the witch trials in the first place, will have to be reckoned with!"

"That's natural." A bruised and battered Leah was dragged over and smiled back, "But before that, there's the Baola election ceremony."

"She's going to be the new leader."

The sea shone brightly and persistently, the witches in the contaminated areas were able to return to their original places and cry

with their families, those whose property had been taken by the Holy See were counted and returned to them, while the legal trials of those who had participated in the tribunal and even reported witches during the witch trials were in full swing.

The Inquisition has since become the exclusive inaugural centre for witches, and has become the centre of a legal system that is renowned throughout the world, with two entire books of strict regulations for witches, or women.

But these are things that happened later.

After the fall of the Sky City, the sun's rays, after the sea horizon had risen, were finally able to shine again on the ground.

Quan Baola looked back at the shimmering waves on the sea and shed tears as if in a dream.

The boy, at last, saved her child.

Since then, the Sons of Witches and Witches have ceased to exist, and after being cleared of false accusations and dirty laundry, only the living names of Baola, You Zhen and Leah remain.

They are not witches, nor are they sons of witches, just people.

[System Alert: Player Hearts exits the game.]

Playoffs

Slowly, the last players to exit the game walked out beside the large dark screen.

The crowd looked on in silence as the two teams emerged, largely in a trance, as if they hadn't recovered from the stalemate of the battle.

The MC, standing on top of the platform, took a deep breath as he waved his hand down and pointed to the side Liu Jiayi had stepped out from: "Game over."

"The winning side of the challenge is -"

"The Wandering Circus!!!"

"Let's congratulate the new team for beating the second-placed King's Guild team to advance to the playoffs!

After a brief silence, the crowd erupted in cheers and applause, but no match, no matter how exciting, can be cheered by everyone - a victory for one side naturally means a defeat for the other.

Qi Yifang, sitting in his seat, covered his red eyes, trying his best to hold back the tears that were falling, but after Liu Ji silently hugged him again and hammered him on the shoulder, Qi Yifang finally couldn't hold back and hugged Liu Ji and bawled.

"We all gave it our best shot! "

"Why did we still lose!"

Liu Ji reassured him clumsily, "Maybe we're not good enough."

Qi Yifang was even more upset: "You might as well stop, woo woo woo."

"It's okay." Liu Ji's face was covered in dirty burn marks, but his eyes were bright, "We'll be better next year, we'll win next year for sure!"

"Don't cry so weakly." Phoebe gave a sidelong glance to Qi Yifang, who was hugging Liu Ji and crying her heart out, "It's just for now, not forever."

"Train well."

Phoebe clenched her fist: "Even without Hearts, next year, I will take you all to beat the little witch."

"What do you mean ....." Qi Yifang looked up in amazement, "no queen?!"

Phoebe paused for a moment as a loud system beep sounded behind her.

[System Alert: The King's Guild has changed its authority, with the former president, Queen Hearts, transferring all authority to the new president, Sister Phoebe].

[System Alert: After a successful handover, player Queen Hearts has paid the default fee and requested to leave the guild.]

[The new president agrees to the withdrawal request and the player, Queen Hearts, has successfully withdrawn from the club.]

Qi Yifang's expression went completely blank: "What does it mean when the Queen ..... withdraws from the club?"

"It means what you see." Hearts walked out after Phoebe, his tone casual and natural, seemingly unaware of how much of a stir he had just made in the game, he even replied to Qi Yifang with a smile, "A player like me who sells souls to others is not worthy of being your president, there's too much uncertainty. "

" Bai Liu That greedy man has got my soul, I don't want him to get my hard-earned guild again through my panel and it's time for me to retire and give myself a long vacation after being president for so long."

" Phoebe has grown up to be a better manager of this guild than I am." Hearts spreads her hands lazily and smiles, "The position of president is for those who can, so it's out of the way."

The King's Guild, the second largest guild in the entire game, with an uncountable chain of points behind it, a guild that countless people dreamed of joining, was handed over by its founding fathers in such a flippant manner.

Qi Yifang was completely overwhelmed, as were the rest of the audience.

The crowd quickly snapped out of their end-of-game euphoria and

began to discuss Hearts' withdrawal in shock.

Hearts handed over the guild something they already knew about in the semi-central part of the game, but, quit?!

This is not a transfer of guilds and means that Hearts will never compete as a member of the King's Guild again.

The last time something like this made such a big splash was when the Reverse God was transferred.

The host was shocked too, but the game was over, it was gossip outside the game and out of his commentary, so he did his job respectfully and wrapped it up, "Will the tacticians from both teams please come to the front and do ....."

After that sentence, the host stuck his shell in a rare moment: "Since there was a tactician change for both teams in this match, we would like to ask the four tacticians before and after the change to come to the stage and do a post-match exchange."

Front of the stage.

Liu Jiayi and Phoebe walked ahead and the two girls shook hands in a natural manner.

"One day." Phoebe looked up at Liu Jiayi, "I'll catch up with you."

Liu Jiayi replies earnestly, "I'm waiting for this day."

"But until then, I will not lose to you."

After shaking hands and bowing, the two girls turned to leave, and Bai Liu and Hearts, who were walking behind them, stepped forward and looked at each other.

"You bought my soul for one point coin in the game." Hearts clasped a point coin between two fingers as he raised his eyes to look levelly at Bai Liu, "In return, you will fulfil one of my demands."

"Anything you ask for?"

Bai Liu calmly agrees, "Anything you want."

[Yes.]

Hearts closed his eyes, and now Bai Liu's smiling voice overlapped

with Bai Liu's in his head, and he took a deep breath before opening his eyes again, "Meet me at the shop where you first met me tomorrow at 6pm."

"At that time, I will tell you what I want."

"I won't wait long for you."

6pm the following day.

Bai Liu sits in an empty shop.

He arrived ten minutes early, the shop had obviously been contracted by Hearts and was closed straight away, he knocked on the door before entering, the owner handed him the key straight after opening it for him, Bai Liu raised his eyebrows in slight surprise, "The key to the shop is straight to me?"

"Yes." The owner's attitude was respectful, "Our shop was actually funded by Mr. Zhao in the first place, it's considered a big shop owner, it's just that the people below don't know about it, and Mr. Zhao didn't ask us to deliberately say anything about it."

"He said a valued customer would be coming to see him at six o'clock this afternoon, so just give you the keys to the shop straight away then."

Bai Liu took the key with a subtle look, "..... Okay, please."

Hearts This guy, surprisingly rich .....

Not far away.

Mu Sicheng, wearing binoculars, had a stern gaze and a cold tone of voice: " Bai Liu has entered the shop, are you still following?"

Tang Erda, who was hiding her body by the tree, was still hesitant: "It's not a good idea for us to follow Bai Liu's private date like this, is it?"

"Keeping Bai Liu safe is what we as a team are supposed to do." Muke's face smirked as he pushed the gold-rimmed glasses on his face, "Not to mention meeting with a high-risk individual like Hearts, just in case he has some strange designs on Bai Liu."

Lu Yizhan, cowering next to Mu Sicheng with a small branch, nodded in agreement: "Yes! What if something goes wrong?"

Liu Jiayi, next to her, rolled her eyes and spat, "Why are you here too, you killer?"

"Ahem ..... this ....." Lu Yizhan choked out a couple of coughs with clenched fists, and pulled Spades, who was crouched next to him staring at the storefront with a blank expression, over to him with a straight face. "Not out of gossip, of course! It's just that my team member is coming with me, and I'm half his guardian, so it's only natural that I come with him, right?"

Liu Jiayi: "......."

It's all about the gossip, right?

"But now that Bai Liu is in the shop and it's locked, we can't follow it, can we?" Tang Erda reluctantly discouraged, "What about going back? Bai Liu will be angry if he finds out we followed him on a personal invitation."

"..... Mmmmmm, yeah, won't do anything, just dropped something in the shop the last time I came in for a styling session and went back to get it." Muke called in a gentle tone, making a shushing gesture to the few people next to him, "Just hold the door open for me please."

Muke put the phone down and smiled harmlessly, "It's done, a clerk will be here later to open the door for us."

Mu Sicheng cheered up, " Muke is awesome!"

Spades seriously seconded: " Muke cattle ....."

Lu Yizhan interrupted quickly and seriously, "No swearing."

Tang Erda, on her forehead.

They went around to the side door and waited for the clerk to open it and then tried to follow them in, but Muke managed to sneak into the shop by easily fobbing the clerk off.

A group of people sneak around behind the dressing models in the changing room, looking through the half-open barrier at Bai Liu, who is sitting in the middle of the hall, reading a magazine.

Shortly afterwards, the main door opened again.

Bai Liu looked up to see Hearts, who had reverted to male attire, standing in the doorway.

He didn't wear the same flashy outfit as the first time, much more casual, his somewhat curly long red hair was braided and thrown behind his head, dressed in a very simple plain white top and jeans, looking like a college student playing an instrument, looking very different from the first time we met, as if the aggressiveness in his body had been washed away, becoming natural and leisurely.

"Right on time?" Hearts sat down opposite Bai Liu and naturally poured himself a glass of water, smiling at him slightly teasingly, "I thought you'd keep me waiting for a while."

"I'm always on time." Bai Liu put down his magazine and replied lightly.

"Is that so?" Hearts dragged his jaw on his water and smirked at him, "Then maybe I'm remembering wrong."

"I've always waited for another person before so I thought you'd make me wait too, I wasn't expecting it to be you waiting for me, I was quite surprised."

"Quite happy too."

"I never let traders wait for me." Bai Liu explains, "It's not very polite."

--Tang Erda frowned a little at the atmosphere.

It's too harmonious.

These two didn't even look like rivals who were battling it out on the field yesterday, instead they looked like two old friends who had agreed to hang out and had such a calm and friendly attitude making small talk.

"You are somewhat the same as him." Hearts looked down at his reflection in the glass and rubbed his fingers over the rim with a little movement, "but still more different."

"You didn't come to me to find out if I'm the same or different from him, did you?" Bai Liu looked levelly at Hearts, "What is your request?"

"If I asked you to do it with me once, you wouldn't agree to it, would you?" Hearts dropped a bombshell in a flat tone.

Mu Sicheng, hiding behind the curtain, gasped in shock and was

swiftly covered by a grim-faced Muke, while Lu Yizhan's hands were bursting with veins as he held Spades down, frantically waving for Tang Erda to help hold him down.

Only Liu Jiayi looks on quietly.

"But what if it's just a kiss?" Hearts lifted his eyelids, his purple eyes reflecting a dazzling light in the fluorescent light, his tone carrying a strange sense of compulsion, "Will you give it to me?"

"As I recall, your skills are subject to paper money if you don't meet the other person's requirements after you've traded them, right?"

Hearts had taken on a dangerous undertone by the end: "So if I do ask for your kiss and you won't give it to me, you'll be put in the paper money?"

"Why the kiss?" Bai Liu inquired slowly, having the leisure to raise his glass and take a sip of water at this point.

"Why?" Hearts looked at Bai Liu with a smile, "Maybe because Salome, the siren who danced the dance of the seven veils, also asked for a kiss from her beloved saint John."

"That's the story." Bai Liu rubbed his chin thoughtfully, "If I remember correctly, John the Saint would rather die than give Salome that kiss."

"Yes." Hearts' eyes moved to land on Bai Liu's lips, fingers curling for a moment before moving away again, his tone still lazy, "So in the end Salome just killed Saint John, cut off his head, and eventually kissed the lips on the dead head."

"- she finally got the kiss she wanted, just in a gruesome way."

"Are you threatening me?" Bai Liu raised his eyes and asked calmly in return, "There's no need to threaten, I'm a man who keeps his end of the bargain, so if you really want the kiss, come on over."

Hearts almost seemed to freeze in place when Bai Liu agreed, then very slowly propped himself up on the table and turned his head towards Bai Liu, looking at him stoically for a moment before slowly leaning down.

The braid slid off Hearts' shoulder and landed in Bai Liu's glass of water, droplets of water falling on the back of his hand, which was propped up on the table and clutching the edge, so cold that his palm

clenched for a moment.

The faces of the two men, as seen from behind the curtain, appear to be gradually overlapping and just about to fit together.

Even Lu Yizhan winced at this, but he quickly covered his mouth in death and stared in horror at the sight over there.

But by this time, Spades was strangely quiet, just staring at Bai Liu without moving, and Mu Sicheng looked at the man who was so agitated all the way and asked, bizarrely, "Aren't you going to go and stop Hearts?"

"No." Spades' icy voice came out almost simultaneously with Bai Liu's, " Hearts kisses don't go down."

"Why did it stop." Bai Liu tilted his head calmly and looked at Hearts, which stopped less than ten centimetres in front of his face, "Don't you want my kiss?"

"What are you trembling about?"

Hearts' shoulders, his hands propped on the table, and even his breath trembled.

"Or maybe I'll ask it another way." Bai Liu raised his eyes and spoke in a calm tone, "Why are you asking me for the kind of thing that you fear I will do to you?"

"So is going to bed, so is kissing."

"..... I have no fear!" Hearts lowered his head, fists clenched, and retorted Bai Liu, almost with some annoyance, in a sarcastic tone, "I thought you said I liked you? Why should I fear kissing the person I like?"

"There is no law that says so." Bai Liu said in a calm tone, "One must not fear the kiss of one whom one likes."

"I can be afraid too, so why can't you be afraid?"

Hearts' breathing slowly calmed as he collapsed onto the tabletop, face down, face buried in the table, his whole being radiating a sombre feeling, "..... Forget it, I don't want it."

As if anticipating this, Bai Liu picked up another clean glass and took another sip of water, "Well, you can change your request."

"I dropped that island and turned it into an island of the sea." Hearts was quiet for a moment, then suddenly spoke, his voice soft, "It has become beautiful."

"Go and see the island, Bai Liu ."

"Yes." Bai Liu pondered for a moment and he smiled up, "I've never been to a private island in reality, it should be beautiful."

"But apart from that, there's a small problem."

Bai Liu asks seriously, "Do you reimburse the costs of going?"

Hearts: "..... reimbursement."

"And then--" Bai Liu smirked, holding his cup of tea and lazily sweeping a glance behind him at the flickering curtains, "-- -Can I bring my family and friends with me to visit your island?"

Hearts looked up and he stared at Bai Liu's innocent face for a moment before finally smiling lightly in relief and saying, "Yes."

Playoffs

"So ....." Mu Sicheng took a bite of his fruit smoothie with a dazed expression while looking at Bai Yi and Bai Jiamu running around the beach in front of him, "didn't they just invite us to come and play on the island? Why is the killer sequence here too?"

After Mu Sicheng was found out yesterday, the group cheered when they found out that they had all received an invitation from Hearts to come to the island for a reunion, ah no, to be guests, Mu Sicheng was so excited that he stayed up all night packing his clothes, only to be told by Bai Liu the next day that he could not bring them.

"Why!" Mu Sicheng was furious, "I can't bring clothes, so how can I bring my swimming trunks for the swim!"

"Go straight into the game and go through the coordinates." Bai Liu shrugged innocently, "You can go into the game in your swimming trunks, so you can go through in your swimsuit, which is what I'm going to do."

"I recommend Tang Erda and Muke to do the same, it's easier."

Mu Sicheng: "....."

How can there be such a brazen person in this world!

But in the end, he entered the game in his swimsuit and tracksuit and logged on to the island via the coordinates given by Bai Liu, but as soon as he arrived, he saw the blue sky, white clouds and waves and went into the changing room to get changed. The first time Mu Sicheng walked into the changing room to change his clothes, his excitement had not yet subsided.

Bai Yi: "....."

Bai Jiamu: "....."

Mu Sicheng was furious: "Shit! How did you get on this island!"

"Because I went alone and invited the Reverse God and he politely asked if I could bring my team and family, I thought he was just being polite and agreed." Zhao Muchi, wearing sunglasses and sleeping on a lounge chair under a sun umbrella, wearing a flowery shirt with a slightly open collar and his braid hanging half-loosely outside the

chair, spoke in a lazy tone, "I had heard Jiayi say that he thought it was your country's etiquette to say that you were really just being polite about a lot of things and not really bothering each other, but I didn't think he would actually brought someone up here."

"As surprising as you are, you don't know what politeness is."

Bai Liu cheekily took the obviously sarcastic remark as a compliment and accepted it with a big nod: "Tactician's routine."

"Is that so?" Zhao Muchi pushed his sunglasses upwards to reveal a pair of smirking purple eyes, "I, a retired veteran tactician, don't seem to be aware of such tactics?"

"Then you can properly learn more about it." Bai Liu rubbed his chin, "This should be the new tactician I'm about to lead the way with."

Phoebe, sitting next to her on the lounge chair, rolled her eyes and looked breathlessly at Liu Jiayi, who was looking down at the crabs on the beach: "Is your president always this shameless?"

"Yes." Liu Jiayi didn't even look up, answering quickly for a second, then quickly shifted her attention and pinned the little crab up in thought, "So this is what a little crab looks like alive on the beach."

"It's the first time I've seen it."

She had never been to the beach before and was intrigued by the place.

"Go look outside." Phoebe, seeing Liu Jiayi's interest in these little creatures hidden in the sand, offered, "There's more stuff over there by the sea, I'll introduce you."

"But over there ....." Liu Jiayi looked in the direction Phoebe pointed, and her expression quickly turned = =, "They're going crazy, they're not going to scare away what I found, are they? "

Mu Sicheng, wearing a swimming costume and goggles, is on a surfboard, gripping the edge with one hand and swinging back with the other, his lean waist swinging back and forth, the outline of his abs visible, controlling the balance of the board, moving recklessly and quickly over the waves, cutting a smooth line, his hair blowing in the fresh sea breeze, letting out a delightful and triumphant "Whoo-hoo!" The sound is a delightful and satisfying "woo-hoo!".

They were followed by two crooked boards, on which stood Bai Yi and Bai Jiamu, whose boards were more stable, but neither of them was clearly thinking about surfing at the moment.

They are arguing.

"Bai Yi, don't grab my board! Slide yourself! I was going to overtake Mu Sicheng!"

"I don't know how! Shouldn't you stay at a time like this and teach your brother-in-law a lesson! What's the point of winning a meaningless surfing contest like this when you're always thinking about competing with others! You ungrateful nephew! Can't you put aside your unrealistic desire to win for the sake of your only brother-in-law!"

"Let go, Bai Yi! I'm going to fall in the water!"

"I wouldn't, I wouldn't!"

The two boards collided in a great tug, and Bai Yi, in a panic, pulled Bai Jiamu's swimming trunks and, to Bai Jiamu's shocked and horrified expression, hit the board with him and fell into the overlapping waves.

"Puff!" "Puff!" '

Within moments, a pair of swimming trunks and two boards broken in two were washed up on the shore by the waves.

Lu Yizhan looked at the two boards and slowly covered his face, " Mr. Zhao, the surfboards are from your island right? I will pay for any damage caused to you, as well as the expenses for our visit to the island, we will be reimbursed for the number of people and the number of days."

"I'm sorry for your trouble."

"Not much of a problem." Zhao Muchi elegantly lifts a tall glass from the Little Mu table next to him and takes a sip, raising it to Lu Yizhan with a friendly smile, "The two boards were props given to me by the director when I was filming, they weren't very expensive and I kept throwing them in storage. They also asked my opinion when they used them, so I can't blame them all."

Lu Yizhan breathes a sigh of relief.

Zhao Muchi says with a smile, "It's just signed by some people on it, a souvenir of my killing, and fakes are already fetching over 50,000 on the second-hand market."

"Counting your cost, it would cost sixty thousand."

Lu Yizhan's breath, which had not yet been released, choked rapidly, and he covered his chest and choked up violently, kneeling down before the two plates with a pale face, muttering incredulously, "One hundred, one hundred and twenty thousand!"

"Uh huh." Zhao Muchi smiled lazily, "As for the other fees you mentioned, I wasn't going to charge them, I invited you to the island, naturally I consider you a friend and won't count on these things, but since you have the sincerity to pay, I won't push back, then I'll inform my agent later to calculate the exact price for me."

"I hope you have a good time on the island, Reverse God Grand Tactician."

Lu Yizhan: "....."

Lu Yizhan is going into cardiopulmonary arrest.

Bai Liu looks away from Lu Yizhan, who has turned grey and is on the verge of sanding, and looks behind Mu Sicheng, who continues to surf and is about to reach a big wave, with a slight raised eyebrow.

Mu Sicheng was clearly excited about the big wave too, shifting his body weight back and licking his lips, "Watch me go up to the clouds, first reach-!"

No sooner had he said this than a huge black surfboard brushed past Mu Sicheng's head in a perilous position from behind him.

Mu Sicheng looked up in amazement at the man on the board coming out from above him on his left - Spades in his swimming trunks and goggles, his hands hanging naturally at his sides on the board, surrounded by a myriad of shimmering water droplets, his eyes in his black-rimmed goggles squinting at the devolved Mu Sicheng, indifferent.

Although Spades didn't say anything, the implication of the glance was unmistakable - [I'm the one who's number one].

Spades flipped steadily through the air on the wave and swiftly made

his way back to the beach, picking up his board with one foot and setting it aside, turning his head to look at Bai Liu, staring straight at him.

Sensing the barely concealed reward in Spades' eyes, Bai Liu applauded graciously, smiling and praising, "Very impressive."

"Shit!" Mu Sicheng, who arrived right behind him, held up his surfboard and jumped to his feet in anger, "He's not good at anything! If I hadn't been playing earlier, he would have got first place!"

Spades let out an oooh and turned to Mu Sicheng with an indifferent tone, "So, shall we do it again?"

Feeling provoked, Mu Sicheng was furious and Mu Sicheng decided to gladly accept the challenge and teach this ungrateful lizard the lesson of a lifetime!

"Just compare!"

"Are you guys playing some kind of sport?" A changed Fang Dian emerged from the changing room, holding up a beach volleyball and smiling sunny with her crossed arms, "I haven't been to the beach for a while, I just saw a beach volleyball inside the changing room, do you guys want to come and play?"

"Oh, yes." Fang Dian turned her head to Zhao Muchi who was lying on the beach, "Mega Islander, this ball I see in the toy basket, can I hit it?"

Yes, Fang Dian came too, she was picked up separately by Zhao Muchi in a helicopter and Zhao Muchi had a very good first impression of her, he had a very natural affinity for a bright and sunny girl like Fang Dian - you could say he agreed with Lu Yizhan brought the killer sequence up here partly for Fang Dian's sake.

--And Fang Dian, knowing that he owned the island, mysteriously called him Master Mega Islander like a martial arts novel, making him laugh for ten minutes, which was also inseparable.

"Sure." Zhao Muchi was noticeably gentler after meeting Fang Dian, "I have a special sports beach volleyball, do you want to play with that?"

"No need." Fang Dian smiled and patted the volleyball, "With sports games, props don't matter, the player you're playing with is more important."

Zhao Muchi narrows his eyes slightly at these words.

Was it his illusion?

..... always felt for a moment that Fang Dian had just seen him through.

" Mr. Lu." Fang Dian turned to Lu Yizhan and winked, "It's been a long time since you've played, why don't you play with me?"

Lu Yizhan came back to life the moment Fang Dian emerged from the changing room, looking at Fang Dian in her pink bow swimsuit, his mind dizzy for a moment before he nodded in a trance, "Yes, yes, Captain Fang."

"Volleyball is usually played with twelve people." Fang Dian looked around, "It's rare that we can barely get it together this time with so many people."

"Anyone want to play volleyball!"

Fang Dian shouted as she ran towards the beach with a volleyball in her hands.

Soon, with the response of the two captains, Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan, the volleyball team was barely assembled.

Team A, original member of the Killer Sequence.

Team B, Bai Liu, Mu Sicheng, Muke, Tang Erda, now with an additional Fang Dian.

"You go first, your first passer serves." Fang Dian tossed the ball over and warned with a smile, "Don't be lenient Mr. Lu! That won't be fun!"

Lu Yizhan smiled gently and responded, "Okay."

" Spades, you serve, hit it as hard as you can."

Next to them, Bai Yi and Bai Jiamu's pupils quickly quake with cold sweat.

Holy shit! Spades is a monster panel in real life! With a full tee shot you could put a hole in the sand! Captain, are you trying to kill your spouse by letting Spades serve!

Are you two couples so competitive in a game of beach volleyball!

"But Spades likes Bai Liu, I don't think he'll use his full strength ....." Bai Yi came up to Bai Jiamu's ear and whispered a forced.

"I suppose so." Bai Jiamu was just about to nod seriously, "That's why the captain gave the ball to Spades' ....."

Before Bai Jiamu could say anything, he saw Spades take the ball, nodded lightly and then tossed it up, his eyes quickly fixed on the falling ball, a strange light emanating from his hands, and aimed at the back of the ball.

The ball was hit into a fast-spinning, flattened depression that smashed into the opposite side of the sand, rubbing out sparks and arching into a half-man-high dune straight away.

Bai Yi looked dumbfounded: "Just now, Spades ..... did you use your skills to play?"

"Used." Spades replied calmly, "Don't you have to use all your strength?"

"It doesn't have to go as far as using skills!" Bai Yi broke down and covered his head, "It's just a game of beach volleyball!"

Spades' eyes were heavy: "But the opponent is Bai Liu, and you can't win until you get to that level."

Lu Yizhan nodded seriously: " Fang Dian is very strong, you guys give me a serious fight."

Bai Yi: "....."

Bai Jiamu: "....."

Don't really understand your adult love.

Is that how you want to win over your wife?

Playoffs

"Seven points for the A team." Zhao Muchi, the referee, lazily reminded, "Team B hasn't scored yet, so it's still Spades serving."

Spades threw it up, dropped it and hit it hard again, the ball almost flashed into the sand for the B team, even a highly physical man like Tang Erda didn't react, Muke tried to catch it once, but Bai Liu was quick to stop it - it would have been an obvious mistake to catch it.

"Can't catch it." Bai Yi looked incredulously across the huge sandy hole, muttering, "..... A ball from a monster like that can't be caught, no matter how you think about it."

"It does look like we can't catch Spades' ball." Fang Dian looked at the ball and rubbed his chin thoughtfully, "The strength and speed was a bit off the mark."

"Looks like we're not going to be able to catch this one, so should we take a timeout?" Bai Liu spreads his hands, his tone casual, "Tell the other team we can't catch it or something?"

Muke pursed his lips a little reluctantly, Tang Erda was relieved, but Mu Sicheng shouted, "Bai Liu, you have some backbone!"

"It's all about winning! You're so crazy in the game, why don't you go out and play volleyball with no determination to win! You're too decadent!"

Bai Liu shrugs noncommittally, "I have a disposable attitude to games like this where there is no concrete prize at stake, I don't have to win because I won't get anything, do I?"

Mu Sicheng: "....."

Shit, forgetting that the core purpose of this guy's game isn't winning at all, it's money!

"But it's no fun to let the other side waterproof the game, it's only fun if both sides do their best." Fang Dian shook her head, and after a moment's contemplation, she suddenly shifted her gaze to Bai Liu in her semi-opaque white shirt and raised her eyebrows subtly, "It's true that I can't catch it, but I have a way to keep Spades from serving it up."

Mu Sicheng quickly perks up and Muke jumps over to look at Fang Dian expectantly.

Only Bai Liu's heart was quickly filled with a sense of foreboding, his scalp tingling at that look in Fang Dian's eyes - the last time the woman had looked at him like that, when she had turned her head and auctioned off a million a year to Hou Tong.

..... such valuation and calculating eyes.

"What are you going to do?" Bai Liu asked calmly, side-eyeing Fang Dian's eyes.

"Ah, that's right!" Fang Dian smiled brightly as she slapped Bai Liu on the shoulder, "Spades loves you, doesn't he? Why don't you seduce him and make him lose his game so he can't serve with such power!"

Bai Liu: "....."

Sure enough.

"What's the difference between that and letting the other team let us win?" Bai Liu asked calmly in return.

"There's a big difference." Fang Dian, unmoved by Bai Liu's snubbing tactics, retorted with a smirk, "It's the difference between them being forced to lose to us, and losing to us of their own accord; the former is just a tactic, the latter is a surrender technique."

"Eh, don't resist, you're dying for our glorious victory! Go and seduce Spades!"

Fang Dian said as he pushed Bai Liu under the net.

Bai Liu stood still, took a deep breath and averted his eyes, "..... I won't lust after Spades ."

"Eh?" Fang Dian poked her head out from behind Bai Liu's back a little suspiciously, "You guys look pretty close, you haven't been seducing?"

Why, Fang Dian, could this woman ask such questions so naturally?

Muke and Tang Erda both quickly realise the meaning behind this statement, Muke's whole face flushes, he looks away politely and silently retreats, Tang Erda averts her gaze with feigned seriousness, clenches her fist and coughs twice, and pins away Mu Sicheng who has not yet reacted with her arm.

"Have you ever been seduced?" Bai Liu asked in a cold tone, intending to turn the tables on Fang Dian.

"That's for sure!" Fang Dian looked proud, " Mr. Lu can be easily fooled!"

Bai Liu: "....."

It was he who lost.

"Let me tell you ....." Fang Dian muttered mysteriously while holding Bai Liu's head and gesturing, "first you do this... then this ..... and finally this. ...then this ..... and finally this, got it?"

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow with a subtle look, "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." Fang Dian nodded with certainty, " Spades ate it up at first sight!"

Mu Sicheng, who was poking his head in the distance, looked at Fang Dian and Bai Liu together and scratched his heart with curiosity, frantically trying to get over to listen: "What are they discussing?"

Muke and Tang Erda, one looking to the sky and the other to the ground, remained silent in unison.

"The B team captain requests a timeout." Zhao Muchi saw Fang Dian raise his hand to signal a timeout, then took Bai Liu to the changing room and raised an eyebrow, "The game will start later."

Lu Yizhan watched as Fang Dian took Bai Liu to the changing room and began to look unsteady. He turned to Spades with grave eyes and patted him on the shoulder, telling him in a serious manner, "Whatever Bai Liu does later, keep your mind on it and serve well, okay?"

"Don't be confused by external things, stay true to your heart and we will have the final victory."

"I'll beat him." Spades nodded calmly.

The calm lasted less than three minutes before Bai Liu came out of the dressing room and Spades' eyes were instantly fixed on it.

Bai Liu unpinned his long hair, his white shirt that had been buttoned up to his heart - and most importantly, Bai Liu replaced his knee-length shorts with swim trunks, the triangular kind.

Fang Dian then poured water on Bai Liu's body, leaving her long hair and shirt damp and sticky, the long hair snaking down the collar to the top of her collarbone, where it coiled in the shape of a small snake, the shirt half-permeable against her skin.

"There!" Fang Dian looked convinced, " With Bai Liu dressed like this, we're going to win."

Mu Sicheng looked at Bai Liu with confusion: "Huh? Is this body different from the previous one?"

Lu Yizhan looked at Spades' almost nice open eyes and slowly covered his face with sadness - their team's main attack was still confused by something external and the momentum was gone!

Spades' attention was quickly diverted by the Bai Liu behind the net and his eyes were almost on the strands of hair on Bai Liu's heart, so he missed his serve and the volley narrowly missed the net.

"I'll do it!" Fang Dian moved quickly to net the ball from the back row and hauled it up steadily.

Lu Yizhan, the second passer on the other side, saw Fang Dian on the net and with a gaze in his eyes, he jumped to rest the ball and pushed it over again, which was dragged by Fang Dian.

"Don't think we only have Spades on our side." Lu Yizhan smiled gently, but his movements were stern, " Captain Fang, I've been waiting under the net for you to come at me."

"Is that so?" Fang Dian replied with a smile, pulling back and jumping up in a pose for a dunk, "I haven't underestimated you, Mr. Lu."

Lu Yizhan also quickly jumped close to the net and put his hands up in the path of Fang Dian's shot - he was obviously trying to block the net and make it impossible for Fang Dian to get past the ball. Lu Yizhan is taller than Fang Dian, he has long hands and agile movements, and has a wide defensive range.

As the two jumped to almost face level, Fang Dian suddenly winked at Lu Yizhan, who was staring at her intently, and whispered, "Honey, do I look good in this swimsuit?"

Lu Yizhan, dismayed: "?!?!"

His defensive hands quickly appeared to break, and Fang Dian's eyes

instantly went from flirtatious to fierce, her muscles tensing in her hands, leaning back and driving her entire body hard, snapping the ball down at that break with such force that it brought Lu Yizhan's entire body to the ground.

Fang Dian also landed on the ground and shook his fist and yelled NICE!

Lu Yizhan broke down: " Captain Fang, you cheated!"

"But ....." Fang Dian ruffled her hair and gave Lu Yizhan a flirty kiss, "cheating is a regular practice in the game."

"You have to accept that, husband~"

"One point for Team B." Zhao Muchi counted lazily as he silently plucked the sunglasses off his head and put them on.

What a shiny couple's light, it's going to blind him.

Fifteen minutes later.

Zhao Muchi, with his cheeks resting on his head, announced the result with amusement: "Fifteen to eight in favour of Team B."

Lu Yizhan fell to his knees as he looked at the ground and drifted off in disbelief, "..... lost, after all that complete strategic planning, I actually ..... lost."

Spades was silent, but with his head down, his expression sullen and his lips pursed into a line, it was clear that he too could not accept the result of the match.

Bai Yi broke down and pointed at the two men and shouted, "What's wrong with you! You look like you've given it your all and still lost! You two are the ones who are holding us back! Bai Jiamu and I are the ones who are crying on our knees!"

"In the second half, all they had to do was shout at you and you wouldn't move! Me and Bai Jiamu were running silly! We managed to score one point, but you gave the rest away! Are you spies sent to interfere with us?"

"Show some sportsmanship, please! Get rid of the temptation of beauty and play the game! You start off so formal, you get me and Bai Jiamu all fired up, and then you two pieces of shit drop the ball like

crazy!"

"You guys deserve the most serious volleyball game I've ever played in my life!"

Lu Yizhan: "....."

Spades: "....."

The two men apologised honestly, "I'm sorry."

Bai Yi was so angry that he almost had a brain hemorrhage: "I'm sorry! All the hard work I put into that game, all the youth I put into it, it was all for nothing!"

"One more game." Spades' eyes were determined, "I'll win this time."

Lu Yizhan was full of guilt as he rubbed the back of his head, "We will play well this time and not be led so easily by the other team."

"After all, we're only one team. I should have respected your feelings properly during the game."

Bai Yi heart's anger down some, he even a little moved to, tears are going to come out: "..... harm, we so long teammates, also do not need to say such things, and then a serious game to win back ..... "Come on the line.

Across the net Bai Liu spoke lightly, " Spades, no more fighting, let's go, let's go back to dinner."

Spades gave a quick oooh and flipped over the net and followed Bai Liu's back, clinging to Bai Liu's waist as he walked, walking in lockstep behind him.

" Mr. Lu!" Fang Dian waved excitedly, "We're having seafood tonight, come and cook!"

"Here you go!" Lu Yizhan ran over like a reflex, without looking back, "What do you want to eat?"

Looking at the backs of the two teammates who had completely forgotten about them, Bai Yi, who remained in place with tears on his face, was filled with numbness: "....."

What about the promise of another fight to win back the respect for him?

I was so naive to believe you guys!!!

Liao Ke, who was walking last, patted Bai Yi's shoulder sympathetically: "Want some seafood?"

Bai Yi yelled angrily, "EAT!!!"

Playoffs

After the meal.

As the group is herded off to the showers after a long day, Zhao Muchi looks at the back of Spades' departure and slowly turns his attention to Bai Liu's face.

Bai Liu has already finished washing up, the man seems to have a penchant for keeping himself clean, having showered as soon as he got off the volleyball court, and is now leaning back on the living room sofa in loose pyjamas, casually flicking through a book, with drops of water falling from the ends of his hair.

"If you keep looking at me like that." Bai Liu closed the book and looked up at Zhao Muchi next to him, "When Spades comes out, he's going to fight you."

Zhao Muchi looks over at the book Bai Liu is flipping through - Salome - and he closes his gaze with a dismissive smile: "I dueled with him, but I lost."

"Is there something you want to talk to me about?" Bai Liu enquired calmly.

"Can I go out and talk to you alone for a minute?" Zhao Muchi looked at Bai Liu.

Bai Liu asks, "What do we talk about?"

Zhao Muchi looks down: "Salome?"

Bai Liu changed back into his white shirt and trousers, packed up and went out with Zhao Muchi for a quiet stroll along the shoreline.

The waves lap gently on the beach, the sun has not yet set completely, and from the horizon you can see just a glimpse of the sunset, a shimmering orange light blending with the approaching night, reflecting the shimmering light on the cascading waves, and the soft warmth of the sea breeze.

Bai Liu wears leather shoes, but Zhao Muchi is barefoot, and the two walk along the beach not far from each other, leaving a trail of shoe and footprints.

"The book Salome, you left it on the sofa on purpose for me to read, didn't you?" Bai Liu brought up the subject in a flat tone.

Zhao Muchi replied with a quirked eyebrow, "Do I make it obvious?"

" Freaking obvious." Bai Liu looked up at him, "But after that your reaction was obvious, you kept looking at me and you were waiting for my reaction to reading the book."

"So, what do you think?" Zhao Muchi turned his head as he looked intently at Bai Liu, walking backwards with his hands behind his back and a lazy smile, and asked in return, "What kind of story do you think Salome is?"

"What do you think?" Bai Liu asked calmly, his pupils dark, reflecting the faint light of day and causing Zhao Muchi to drift off for a moment, "Do you like the story?"

He had watched her mother's tapes so many times and knew the story so well that when questioned by Bai Liu, he was too familiar to answer exactly how he felt.

Yes, what did he think of Salome?

What was his feeling when he first heard the story?

Almost twenty years had passed since he first heard this story? I think it was when he was five or six years old, and she was at the foot of his bed, holding him tenderly as she told this somewhat bizarre story of this beautiful and mad princess, Salome.

"Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, there was a beautiful and unfree princess who was so beautiful that everyone courted her, even her stepfather, the king at the time, coveted her beauty."

"The princess hated the atmosphere, and she but never met a man who could not love his appearance, until one day a man reputed to be a saint, John, was taken into the palace by the king, said to be the wisest saint in the world, who could see through everything, and even the king dared not look him in the eye, but only dared to imprison him at the bottom of a well, fearing to see in there the reflection of his own filthy soul reflection."

"Princess Salome was so curious about John that she begged the guards guarding the well to show her John in the well."

"The guards, obsessed with her moonlit beauty, granted her request to see John in the well ."

" Salome took one look at John and fell in love with him."

The young man could not understand such unexplained feelings and frowned, "Why would the princess fall in love with John with just one look?"

"She's a princess, and so many men around her love her, why would she love a prisoner locked up at the bottom of a well?"

She stroked the top of his head with amusement, lowering her eyes and telling the story with a little sigh in her voice, "This is where we're going to talk next."

"For only John told the princess that the king was wrong, that it was a despicable king who should not have had incestuous desires for the princess, for her mother, and that he deserved to go to hell. "

" Salome falls in love with John and she makes repeated advances to him, but John rejects him at every turn, and eventually the princess vows to have John's kiss, begging the king, her stepfather, to let him kiss him."

"And the king said, if you do a dance for me, even if John doesn't agree, I will cut off John's head and give it to you so you can kiss him."

"The king asks Salome, beautiful princess, will you dance for me?"

"The princess said that I would dance the most beautiful dance in the world for you and I would get a kiss from the most holy man in the world."

"She danced the dance of the seven veils for the king, a dance so beautiful that it finally moved him to cut off John's head, which the princess took up and kissed the dead saint in ecstasy."

"But I still don't get it." He furrowed his eyebrows and tucked his hands in a serious analysis, " Salome is pretty and a princess, why should she like John and John doesn't like her!"

"Maybe it's because John doesn't like her that she likes John." There was a lot of complexity in her tone that he didn't understand, "..... Maybe all the princess wanted was someone who watched her dance

and didn't want to kiss her."

At that time, he was not able to understand what she meant by that statement.

And at this moment, in the sea breeze and waves, Zhao Muchi looked at Bai Liu looking at him, his eyes so calm that there was not a single ripple, and suddenly understood the meaning of these words and why Bai Liu had said that day that he could not go on kissing.

-- because what he wanted ..... was never Bai Liu's likes or kisses.

Just a spectator who doesn't want to kiss him.

"I didn't like the way Salome ended." Zhao Muchi stopped in his tracks, the sunset reflected in his purple eyes, his tone light as a gust of wind, "She must have regretted it after she got that kiss."

"Is that so?" Bai Liu was noncommittal, "Your take on the story, it's interesting."

"Why do you think Salome regretted it?"

Bai Liu raised his eyes, no waves in them, "Because you think if you kissed down on me on that day, you'd regret it too, don't you?"

Zhao Muchi fell silent, then he quickly looked away and smiled: "..... Bai Liu, aren't people in your country very subtle in their speech? I don't think a blunt person like you would be liked, would you?"

"You can just say I talk obnoxiously, I don't mind." Bai Liu spread his hands with a smirk, "But it's true what you say, I am indeed unpleasant."

"I'm the opposite of you, I'm very likeable and everywhere I go people come up to me and confess their love." Zhao Muchi looks at Bai Liu with a smile and a teasing tone, "You're a bit insensitive to be rejected by someone like me, who likes someone like you, who is not."

"I've had a lot of people say that about me." Bai Liu smiles, "Maybe it's part of my personality."

"I don't hate that about myself, though."

Zhao Muchi looks out to the sea and takes a deep breath: "Do you ..... like to watch dancing?"

"Appreciate not." Bai Liu replied honestly.

Zhao Muchi: "..... At this time, I'd still like you to speak more politely."

"Okay, so is it okay if I re-answer?" Bai Liu corrected himself with good grace, "I do not really appreciate dance as an art form."

"But if you want to." Bai Liu's brow was calm, and he smiled a friendly and gentle smile, "I think you might refresh my perceptions and let me know anew that I was the one who was shallow-"

"- Dance turned out to be such a beautiful art form."

Zhao Muchi stared at Bai Liu for a moment and smiled as if with a sigh, "Has anyone ever told you that you're really a bad man who's good at coaxing people?"

"Is that so?" Bai Liu smiled nonchalantly, "Only you've said that so far."

"Do you mean you've only ever coaxed me?" Zhao Muchi lowered his eyes and said with a soft smile, "Stop it, I've seen more men than I care to admit."

In the sunset, Zhao Muchi, dressed in plain clothes and barefoot, gave Bai Liu a dance of the seven veils, and as time passed, the sunset light fell on Zhao Muchi's body like a veil, fading away layer by layer to reveal his original form, and he looked across at Bai Liu.

Bai Liu was promptly applauded on command.

Zhao Muchi sighed, "The look in your eyes tells me you didn't read it."

"Yes, I'm probably not really artistic." Bai Liu admits frankly, but soon he smiles and says, "But it's beautiful."

"You make me think that something like dance, which I can't find value in for the moment, still has its place in this world."

"Though the significance of that I may not understand."

"The highest compliment to the dance." Zhao Muchi stepped back on one foot, haughtily lifting the hem of her dress and bowing slightly in a curtain call gesture, "Thank you for watching."

Bai Liu smiles: "My pleasure."

A day later, in-game, the Wandering Circus Guild.

Wang Shun almost fell down as he ran to the conference room with a pile of materials in his arms, but he met Tang Erda halfway and helped him carry some.

"I'm glad I met you." Wang Shun let out a long breath.

Tang Erda wondered, "Why are there so many paper documents? Wasn't it all electronic before?"

"It's a long story." Wang Shun gave a bitter laugh and pushed open the door to the meeting room, "It has to do with our next game against, so let's talk about it inside."

The moment the door to the conference room was pushed open, Wang Shun took a deep breath and announced, "Gentlemen, our opponent for the next game is out."

"- is Golden Dawn."

Playoffs

At the same moment, in the real world, the Heresy Bureau is in its third inning.

"Captain." The team member knocked softly on Georgia's office door.

"Please come in."

The team member pushed open the door and Georgia sat behind her desk with her forehead in her hands, looking at the papers on her desk with a frown of contemplation.

"Captain, we have recovered all the Seven Star Eels that the Order picked up and secretly bred and are sorting them into different categories." The team reported truthfully, "Please ask the captain to check the situation at the shelter."

Georgia looked up and nodded politely, "Good work, I'll check in once I've finished with the paperwork."

The team member looked at the document on Georgia's desk reporting the irregularity of the loan of the Seven Star Eel, and hesitated before asking, "Captain, how did you find out that the member of the Order who borrowed our heretic was wrong?"

"Is it because of the man who came to you out of the blue?"

"Is he a member of the First Bureau of the Bureau of Heresy? But I've checked the active captains and members of the First Bureau, and I haven't seen a picture of him."

The person who came to see Georgia was Lu Yizhan.

After watching the beginning of the challenge, Lu Yizhan quickly figured out what the problem was, logged out of the game and went straight to Georgia, who had lent the Seven Star Eel heresy, and intercepted Quan Zhendong's helicopter, which was still carrying the heresy, and brought back the Seven Star Eel, which had not yet multiplied.

But the team was puzzled as to why the captain was meeting with a man who did not work for the Bureau of Heresy, and following his advice.

Georgia is a true aristocrat, very principled in his dealings with people, not aloof, but still aloof and distant. He was still not a man of words when it came to Georgia.

He has his own set of rules for doing things, which, of course, can sometimes be a little stereotypical and harsh - like the way he treats his only brother, Vice-Captain Armand.

The last time the team was somewhat surprised that Captain Georgia would approach someone to work with was the mysterious tactician in the game, the Inquisitor of the Reverse God.

Golden Dawn, despite being the third ranked guild in the game, has always been a very exclusive and secretive state in the game, with an extremely slow flow of people in and out, almost exclusively internal - that's for sure, the guild is basically full of people from all three boards and doesn't let extraneous people join easily.

And since the Third Bureau has always been a heretical guard, it has the number one reputation in the game for being a storehouse of secrecy, and the number one priority for secrecy is to be careful about who you come into contact with, and in the case of Captain Georgia, he has taken this to the extreme - everyone who sees him has to be vetted, and even when they are working together Georgia would still look at you with an overly cautious attitude, even if you were cooperating.

Trust is the hardest thing for Georgia to give, no matter who it is to.

For example, the reason why Quan Zhendong, who had taken the heretic away, could be recovered so quickly was that Georgia had sent someone to follow him.

From this point of view, the ease with which Georgia will enter into a partnership with the Reverse God in the game, contracting the protection of each other's warehouses, is really incomprehensible to this player.

This matter was also very controversial at the time.

As in this case, Georgia didn't hesitate to recover the Seven Star Eel the moment she heard the man say there was something wrong with it, and there were many objections from the team at the time, saying that it would be discreditable for the Heresy Bureau to take it back just after lending it out, but Captain Georgia stood firm and recovered it - of course Of course, it turned out that Captain Georgia was right,

and the man had stolen the male seven-star eel!

Georgia glanced up at the hesitant team member and frowned.

It was in the nature of the members of the Third Bureau to be suspicious, and Georgia wasn't going to accuse the member of caring about something he shouldn't. The Third Bureau kept the most dangerous brew of desire in the world, situated next to the most dangerous sea in the world, the Gulo Sea, and they should be suspicious of everyone who came near it, and Georgia was only frowning because he didn't know how to explain it.

--It's as if Georgia couldn't explain why she was working with the Reverse God in the first place.

Lu Yizhan is a very special presence and the entire Heretic Handling Bureau, except for him and Cen Buming, the two captains who made it into the game, had no idea that Lu Yizhan's identity was that of the once insane Prophet captain.

But they should have known, they all knew about Lu Yizhan ten years ago.

Had it not been for that incident ten years ago in his homeland, the Gloren Empire, which forced Lu Yizhan to use his skills to collapse the world's memories of the Gloren Empire, as well as collapsing and modifying his own traces of having existed in the Heretic Processing Bureau, resulting in the current crew having only a vague recollection of the existence of such a prophet captain ten years ago.

But it was hard to get a glimpse of Lu Yizhan's face and some specific information, like the files that were sealed in top secret by the Third Bureau, buried by Lu Yizhan's skills in the deepest memories of all the members of the Heretic Processing Bureau.

Lu Yizhan was able to use the memory folding skill three times, once on the Gloren Empire, but even after folding the memories, the Gloren Empire died.

--He is the only person left in the world who remembers why the Gloren Empire fell, apart from Lu Yizhan.

Once Crown Prince of the Gloren Empire, now head of the Third Council - Georgia.

When he knelt before Lu Yizhan, who was carrying a heavy sword to

seal off the entire Gloren Empire and prevent the disorder from spreading, the Crown Prince, who had never bowed his head before, bowed his head and woefully begged the other man not to fold his memory, saying that there should always be someone in the world who remembered how the country really fell, Lu Yizhan, after a long silence, agreed and told him with a sigh "Actually you don't have to think that everyone will forget the real, I am the executor and I will always remember."

"But you are not of the Gloren Empire." Georgia looked up, "I am the great prince they once worshipped in faith, and apart from my father, I am the one most responsible for this downfall."

"All can forget, but I, alone, must never forget."

"You still have your brother." Lu Yizhan said helplessly, "You and he are both princes, and you want him to remember the cruelty of it all too?"

"My brother, Armand, he's too young to remember all this because he doesn't really understand what's going on." Georgia pleaded sincerely, "But please, do let me remember."

Georgia propped himself up on the table and took a deep breath as he gathered all his thoughts, "That gentleman I can vouch for is not someone with ulterior motives against the heretics, but there is something special about him that I can't say straight away."

"If you still have suspicions about me, I'll go over to the Third Bureau later for the record, and you can do a proximity check on me, and I'll cooperate."

--A proximate investigation is when one of the three bureaus is suspected of lust or betrayal, the whole three bureaus will launch a series of investigations into that player, known as a proximate investigation.

"Yes Captain." The team member hesitated, "I'm not doubting you, it's just that you've really been in a bad shape lately and have been interacting intimately with some strangers who aren't on the Third Bureau's whitelist, and as a matter of process, we need to do a proximity check on you."

"I'm asking out of personal interest, is your recent condition ..... because the tournament is approaching?"

"Probably." Georgia closed her eyes and rubbed her temples, "I didn't think I'd draw the Wandering Circus that early."

"But that's only a rookie team, it shouldn't bother you so much." The player asked rhetorically in disbelief.

Georgia opened his mouth as he remembered that dream of his, and the [Bai Liu] in it, and breathed in sharply for a split second before answering softly, "The tactician on this team, he makes me feel threatened."

"And the thief Mu Sicheng."

Georgia paused but spoke anyway: "I had a dream in which he was the greatest enemy of the Third Bureau, would take orders from the tactician called Bai Liu, would often come here to the Third Bureau to steal valuable and dangerous heretics, would arrogantly send the Third Bureau teaser letters telling us what to steal, and many times succeeded. "

"Come here to the Third Council to steal heresy? And send a teaser letter?" The team member was a little amused to hear this, "Captain, you're too anxious to dream that kind of dream, who could steal heretics from here with this configuration of the Third Council?"

"Not to mention the theft, the heresy that the Holy See borrowed from here could easily be taken back."

As a result, before this team member could say anything, the door was violently pushed open by a team member who waved an envelope with an anxious expression, " Captain Georgia, we have received a teaser letter!"

The team member who was just laughing at the teaser letter looked incredulously at the team member who burst through the door and asked, "What teaser letter?!"

"The Heretic teaser letter!" The team member looked anxious, "The teaser letter is clipped to the electronic door of the heretic warehouse, but the door has been tampered with and is open, and right now we're taking inventory of the warehouse for any dropped heretics."

"The teaser letter says steal heretic number 0073 from us in two days!"

"Two days later?!" The player's voice rose incredulously, "Doesn't that happen to be the day of our game?!"

The moment he heard heresy number 0073, Georgia's eyes snapped open - it was a heretic named [Golden King].

--The heretic, who was his father.

Playoffs

Georgia propped herself up on the table and got up, "Have the islanders get ready, I'm going to check out the 0073 heresy."

Unlike heretics stored in warehouses, heresy number 0073 is an extremely special heresy. It is stored under an isolated island in the middle of the Gura Sea, on which is the branch processing department of the Third Bureau, and below the island, in the deep sea of about 3,600 metres, is this heresy number 0073.

To be more precise, heresy number 0073 is not a heresy, but a collective name for the six million heretics, including the Golden King, and is the largest and most expensive heresy the Bureau of Heresy has ever housed. --The King of Gold

-- [The Lost Country of Gold].

In the top-secret archives, which only Georgia and Lu Yizhan have access to, the heresy of 0073 is described in one sentence - [There are more than 16 million tons of gold stored here].

[Current Custodian of Heretics: Head of the Three Bureaus Georgia].

[Guardianship Purpose: To prohibit anyone from knowing, prying, or entering the sunken country of Gloren, the land of gold, to steal, sell, or cut up gold that has not yet awakened].

"Yes Captain!" The team saluted at the order.

As Georgia walked out of the office, he glanced back at the teaser letter left on the desk with a mixed expression, and finally turned to leave, his tone cold.

"On the day of the tournament, the three bureaus will be placed under emergency martial law and no suspicious persons will be allowed near the branch processing department of the three bureaus on the Gulo Sea, and special force may be used if necessary."

"Kill this thief who has come to provoke."

Game of the Wandering Circus.

Wang Shun took a deep breath and looked at the information he had just handed out in front of everyone: "You must be wondering why

this time it is not electronic, but such a heavy paper document."

"It was because our first enemy of the playoffs, Golden Dawn, had the most tightly guarded secrecy system in the game and it was difficult for me to probe the minds of the members inside and after a tough probe, I had no idea what skills they were employing, resulting in me not being able to transport that scouted information electronically or in skill form, I had to document it in text. "

"But with text, the scouting method becomes inflexible and easily discovered, the information that can be recorded in text is very limited, Golden Dawn is worthy of being the most tightly guarded guild, I have been detected several times when I went scouting." Wang Shun waved the text in his hand with a bitter smile, the green and black under his eyes obvious, "So I'm not getting much information this time, everyone will have to go up and scout for themselves, sorry."

Bai Liu smiled and waved the text in his hand, "That thickness, it doesn't look like limited intelligence, it's hard to say if we'll be able to read it before we get on."

When Bai Liu joked about it, Wang Shun laughed and relaxed a little: "With Muke around, you won't lose track."

Wang Shun collected his expression and began to explain, "First, let's go over the basic rules of the playoffs with everyone."

"There are eight teams in the playoffs and there are three matches - eight into four, four into two and a final."

"Although the same draw is made, the rules of the draw are different from both the pre-season and the challenge, and instead of being random, the teams are divided according to their current standings, ranked from highest to lowest, with first to fourth drawing fourth to eighth, in other words, meaning that the playoffs are all high versus low matches."

"We won against Kings Guild but we didn't finish at the top of the table, being eighth, so we were out of the draw for the whole playoffs."

"It may be bad news for the average newcomer to the guild, but for our guild -"

Wang Shun laughed helplessly as he looked over at Bai Liu, who

innocently spread his hands and replied with a smile, "It's a happy occasion."

"Yes." Wang Shun nodded with a sigh, "So I breathed a long sigh of relief when I saw that the team that drew us was Golden Dawn."

" Golden Dawn is the third ranked guild at the moment and with a not so strong tactical style, I was expecting this to be the easiest game we've had in a while."

"But only I thought."

Wang Shun tapped the information in his hand.

"The Golden Dawn I know is a team somewhat similar to Kings Guild, with good defence and secrecy, but not enough offense, but this year, just as Kings Guild introduced Sister Phoebe to counter their lack of offense, they introduced Armand. Armand."

Wang Shun tapped on the system panel and Armand's face popped up on the system panel, Wang Shun looked down and flipped through the information while clicking on the system panel to explain.

"It looks like Armand, like Phoebe, is a control position player and has not shone as brightly as Phoebe in the mid-season, the reason why he is a highly popular newcomer ....."

"It's the face, isn't it?" Bai Liu asked calmly and rhetorically, propping up his jaw.

"Yes." Wang Shun nodded, "Georgia, the Golden Dawn leader back then, was the same way, always popular and controversial because of his very refined and noble appearance, but then his strong skills and excellent competition performance broke the many controversies surrounding him, but now Armand is not so lucky, he is just a newcomer and already a number of players are mocking him as a vase."

"Not a surprise." Bai Liu looked at the panel thoughtfully, " Armand and the president called Georgia, their looks and aura gave me a very extravagant feeling, like a very well-born aristocrat, but usually, this innate nobility is extremely sought after by some people while being extremely disliked by others. "

"- like gold."

"Other than that, do you know anything about the skills of the players in this guild?" Bai Liu asked, closing the information.

"That part of the information, there is very little." Wang Shun smiled bitterly, " Georgia the president and tactician's skill is a golden leaf bow, skill related to time, but specifically some of the older players I still know some, like their guild's perennial ace - Chrissy. "

Wang Shun taps on the system panel, and a woman with brown hair and brown pupils and a dark profile pops up on the panel.

"I know her better because every year the best [Shield] bit player is chosen between Titan and Chrissy of the King's Guild, and I used to spy on this player named Chrissy in many ways under the Queen's orders." Wang Shun turned his head to look at everyone, "Her skill is the only one I know best, it's called [Non-Newtonian Fluid]."

"This skill summons a white fluid barrier that blocks all attacks in front of your Team Fang member - the barrier is so strict that you can't even get past Chrissy as long as you are aggressive, even if you don't act aggressively. The barrier of [non-Newtonian fluids] summoned."

"And the most troubling thing about this skill is that -"

Wang Shun sighs, "This skill has no CD and can be used all over the field."

Tang Erda subconsciously frowns - it's a skill that is specifically designed to grind down gun-based main attackers.

"Holy shit!" Mu Sicheng also heard his scalp tighten, "Universal across the board, how is this going to play?!"

"The skill originally had a CD." Wang Shun also had a big headache, "but Georgia, the captain's skill, can reduce the CD indefinitely when combined with Chrissy, and he can constantly reverse the time on Chrissy, bringing her back to a point in time where she hasn't used the skill yet, and eventually making the skill CD-free. "

"And Georgia, the captain, has a skill that works with every player."

"So, you're about to face a team where the whole team has no skill CD time."

Mu Sicheng's blood pressure rose as he listened, and his temples

popped: "No CD for the whole crew?!"

Then how can they fight? They can wait for the CD and the opponent can grind them to death with unlimited openings!

"Yes, Georgia's dominant control game has turned back all the disapproval from the crowd." Wang Shun let out a long sigh, "Before Phoebe came out of nowhere this year, Georgia was the control match that all the main attacking positions dreamed of. He was smart, calm and elegant, able to combine the beauty and strength of the battlefield, aiding all players across the court with superb precision and control."

"In previous years, Golden Dawn's only weak point was not having a very good anchor, and everyone would be sad that a superb control like Georgia wasn't paired with a proper anchor to lose out on the title."

"And this year, they switched out their previous lead offense for Armand and everyone thought Golden Dawn was dropping the lead offense and getting ready to play the double control position."

"But I used a bit of special tricks to get Armand's mid-season output numbers and found out that wasn't the case."

Wang Shun opened the file in front of him and looked at the data with complicated eyes: " Armand's skill on the surface looks like a control skill that summons a hurricane and stops the opponent's movement, it doesn't look like a strong output in the league, even invisible a lot of the time, his presence is not found on the battlefield --This does not look like a main attack."

"But did everyone see that? Armand's output figures."

The moment Tang Erda scanned the data, she stopped, and Wang Shun had mixed feelings: "To be honest, I didn't expect it to be as high as it was."

" Armand's mid-season output was almost equal to that of Spades, the top starter, which of course had something to do with the fact that the Gods had Spades on the field in the mid-season, but that's scary, the guy is a rookie."

"What's even more frightening is that -" Bai Liu raised his eyes to Armand on the panel, "- such terrible output figures actually didn't cause an overwhelming advantage on the field, but slowly won in an

unobtrusive way."

"This tactic is like a butterfly that intentionally hides itself in the middle of a hurricane."

Bai Liu looks down at the file, his eyes falling on the butterfly resting on his shoulder in Armand's photo: "- he's the one who started the hurricane that killed everyone, yet he disguises himself in such a beautiful and harmless way. "

"Is it to make the enemy let their guard down while they set off a bigger hurricane?"

Playoffs

Two days later, the first day of the playoffs.

If the atmosphere at the Challenge was buzzing, the atmosphere at the playoffs was almost boisterous, with people coming and going, floating machines everywhere hanging virtual banners, blasting electronic fireworks, and promoting their teams.

"Please support the Kabbalah Guild! It will not let you down!"

"The Gamblers' Union, a gambler's paradise, loaded with money!"

There were four games on the first day of the playoffs, so four viewing pools were opened. All four games of the eight-in-four were played in this round, and although the order of play differed, there were times when everyone was playing at the same time without being able to determine the time of the game, which meant that each viewer had to choose basically only one or two games to watch if they wanted to see the whole game.

The guilds were now setting off fireworks on every viewing pool to draw spectators' eyes over, and spectators were discussing and agonising over which viewing pool they were going to watch the game in.

"The killer sequence is against the Invisible Cloak Guild, and if Spades is confirmed to play, this one won't be much of a spectacle."

"The Gamblers' Guild is a bit interesting. The Gamblers' Guild was ranked fifth this year, but the second ranked King's Guild got squeezed out, so they moved up to fourth and got the right to draw against the Heavenly Masons, who are not too far behind them. ..."

"Kabala is up against the Deerhunters, right? The Deerhunters are double majors this year and have been going strong from mid-season to now, currently in second place, so it's going to be hard for Kabala to win."

"But to say that the most interesting game of the eight to four is really the one -"

All eyes surrendered to the same viewing pool - compared to the other pools that were constantly broadcasting commercials and blasting fireworks, this one was a little too quiet with nothing above it, but

that didn't stop it from being the most crowded pool by far.

"Golden Dawn doesn't like publicity, it's an old tradition." One question from the audience was, "Why isn't this dark horse being promoted this year? I thought Charles was secretly investing in it? Can Charles, the peacock, stand to have his dark horse in the playoffs so quietly?"

"When the killer sequence he backed made the playoffs last year, Charles the guy was laying the hype for the killer sequence all over the TV section."

"It could be ....." a viewer tried to answer, " Charles doesn't like this dark horse much this year? After all, the playoffs were a loss to the Killer Sequence, so a late title win is less likely."

"Doesn't sound like it to me." A spectator retorted, looking at the pool percentage count panel outside the viewing pool, on which the Wandering Circus was riding a wave of support, almost tied with Golden Dawn, and spoke up somewhat arduously, "..... Have you guys ever thought that Charles isn't betting on the promotion just simply because the Wandering Circus might not need it anymore?"

"That's an approval rating that doesn't need too much more publicity to build momentum."

The spectator, in a trance-like state, continued to murmur to the steady stream of people pouring into the viewing pool of the Wandering Circus vs Golden Dawn.

"They are, by now, unknown to everyone and no one."

Inside the second ornamental pool.

Wang Shun stood up and walked back and forth, taking deep breaths as he did so, and after the MC called for both tacticians to come forward and shake hands, he took a heavy, deep breath, like a string that had been stretched to the limit, his entire back tensed up and he looked straight at Bai Liu who got up and took off his gloves, ready to come forward.

"..... is going to start the race." Wang Shun said in a hard voice.

"Don't be so nervous." Bai Liu smiled, "Didn't we already agree on the tactics?"

"It's just one game."

Wang Shun nodded and exhaled slowly, "Yes, a team game, no more pairs or singles."

The eight teams that made it to the playoffs this year all played surprisingly well, with all of them firmly within the line of immunity. In a playoff that is so brutal that it doesn't require a single popularity match, almost all teams will only make one choice after receiving immunity - abandoning the single and double matches, which are a waste of energy and immunity. The team has to go straight to the team competition, which will determine the winner of the tournament.

"Although we are inferior to them in intelligence and do not have shield positions, because of this, we do not need shield player protection and will move far faster than them overall." Bai Liu raised his eyes, "We mainly adopted the tactic of spreading out our positions early on, avoiding head-on confrontation and gathering information on the copies and their skills quickly."

At the other end, Georgia, who was straightening the cuffs of her uniform, spoke in a steady voice: "Because of their unfamiliarity with our skills and the lack of shield positions, they will most likely adopt the strategy of running the map quickly and scattering to avoid us."

"This will limit the protection of our [shield] position and also allow us to collect information as quickly as possible."

"So we're going to strike early and fast to send them off this ace player before they run the map to familiarise themselves with the full copy of the map and the game pass key."

"Whichever side gets the copy clue sooner, the sooner they can win."

Georgia looked up at Armand who was standing opposite him: "- this is a battle with speed at its core, do you, as our main attacking player, know who the core player is that you're going to snipe?"

"And they're bound to go crazy early on and send our most important players away." Bai Liu looks to Mu Sicheng, "It's a speed rush against, do you know what kind of responsibility you have in this game?"

Mu Sicheng took a deep breath as he clenched his fist, which had turned into a monkey's paw, "I know."

Armand raised his eyes and the butterfly resting on his shoulder flicked its wings: "On command."

"As a thief, run with all your might and escape from that dangerous hurricane they brought." Bai Liu ordered calmly.

"As a team member, use all your chase to keep that restless thief in the middle of your hurricane." Georgia said indifferently.

After they finished, they turned and stepped onto the stage, walking step by step towards each other and to the centre of the big screen, both sides shaking hands in a very polite and courteous manner, the calm atmosphere contrasting with the intense screaming of the hosts:

"Everyone! It's a strong showdown between the strong dark horses that won the King's Guild, the Wandering Circus and our perennial powerhouse Golden Dawn!"

"And the first big, winnable game to open this year's playoffs!"

"Who will actually win! Let's wait and see!"

Bai Liu looked up at Georgia across the room.

At close range, Georgia's unconscious stern nobility was even more compelling. Although it seemed that this man was suppressing some of his minor habits, some details still showed that this man had been educated in quite good, even harsh social etiquette - from the angle of his eyes to the way he looked at people, the way he shook hands, even the angle between his toes and his feet It was as if he had been ordered to practise these manners a thousand times, as if he had engraved them into his bones and still did not lose his poise in the face of an enemy like him.

With just one glance, Bai Liu had a definition in his mind - the Golden Dawn captain must not swear or talk trash before a match.

It's really hard to imagine this kind of person who seems to be a materialisation of the term [elegance and nobility] fighting people in a bloody fight on the field.

"You've met me." Georgia held out her hand, palm up, and looked down at Bai Liu, " Georgia, Captain Golden Dawn."

" Bai Liu ." Bai Liu smiled and reached out for a handshake, "Captain of the Wandering Circus."

" Captain Georgia, who do you think is faster, the wind or a man?" Bai Liu smiled softly and answered himself, "I think people are faster."

Georgia straightens her body without hurrying, her tone even: "I think the person who can make the wind is the fastest."

"Then it seems we have different views." Bai Liu said with a smile, "But there's no need to argue now."

"We'll get the answer to that question at the end of this game."

The host waved his hand and ordered with passionate fury, "Will both tacticians please return to their positions and the match, now begins!"

Bai Liu walked towards the entrance next to the big screen, followed by Mu Sicheng, Bai Liu walked forward without a glance while calmly ordering, "The other team will come to control us as soon as they enter the field Team Quan, until then I will try to create a gap for you to get out and run the map, but after you run out, the other team will definitely release someone to chase you. "

"The man who is chasing you, and you know who it is."

Hearing this, Mu Sicheng subconsciously glanced back across the field at the Golden Dawn team, who were also entering the field a short distance away, and then paused.

The guy with the short brown hair turned his head this way and was staring at him with a good eye while walking in with a cold look on his face.

This man's pupils do not waver when he stares as if he were dead, and his vision is so focused that it is creepy, almost as if Mu Sicheng can detect the meaning within the eyes the moment the man meets them.

-- [You can run, but I will catch you.]

Mu Sicheng's scalp exploded at the stare and he bared his teeth at his opponent, only to have Bai Liu calmly turn his head around with a twist: "Don't get confused before you get in, the secret to running fast as a thief is to think that your opponent must not catch up with you, it's easy for Armand to catch up with you if you can't keep your mind on it. "

"If he's going to catch up with you, circle back to me and I'll figure it out."

"But I'll come back and bring back Armand, the core of the other side's output, too, right?" Mu Sicheng frowned and quickly objected, "The pressure on you guys will skyrocket."

"Yes." Bai Liu doesn't deny it, "The fact that the opponent doesn't have a CD will put a lot of pressure on us, so while you're running the map and collecting clues back to me, it's best to also function as a roaming position at the same time - hanging off the opponent's main attack."

"But without being sure of the copy and the skills of the rest of the opposing team, all our tactics are based on current intelligence."

Bai Liu looked up at the entrance to the game in front of him, "All, subject to my orders once inside."

[..... is loading the game .....]

[System Alert: Both players have logged into the game The Lost Kingdom of Gold]

[(Golden Dawn) vs. (Wandering Circus), five-man team competition, official start].

The Lost Land of Gold

The moment you climb in, Bai Liu falls into the ocean.

Bai Liu felt the tremendous pressure around him, and if it wasn't for his current inhuman panel quality, he would have been squeezed and burst from the water pressure the moment he was transported into this sea.

The deep sea is dark everywhere, but every now and then a wave of water tells Bai Liu that there must be some kind of large fish swimming around.

All in all a place not to stay for long.

Bai Liu turns his eyes to the only source of light in this deep sea - a huge city sunken at the bottom of the sea.

Bai Liu was suspended very high above the sea floor, the city was below him, he couldn't even see the boundaries, and even more bizarrely, the city was encased in a huge semi-circular glass shield - a shield that Bai Liu had a familiar feeling of, when he had been When he was taken to the Heresy Bureau, the shield outside the Heresy Bureau was of this type.

It is supposed to be possible to see inside through the glass shield, but with golden dust floating above the whole city, one can only get a vague glimpse of the city's magnificent buildings.

It looks like a city that once thrived, but has somehow been shielded and sunk to the bottom of the sea.

From Bai Liu's viewpoint above, the city glows with a warm golden light, and the golden dust inside floats up and down as if it were snow, looking like an oversized crystal ball of snow, with a fairytale quality.

--This would be the [Land of Lost Gold].

[System Alert: Please enter (The Lost Land of Gold), to unlock the main quest.]

Bai Liu swam downwards, and he soon touched the top of the shield, and the moment he did so he fell into the golden kingdom beneath the

sea.

Bai Liu's eyes were downcast as he looked up at the seemingly never-ending flurry of golden dust in the sky, reaching out to catch a bit of it and sip it away.

The texture is so fine, it feels like you can breathe in.

The ground was covered with this fine gold dust, from the magnificent and stately domed palace building in the sky to the buildings in front of us, all covered in a strange golden dust, and the ground was also covered with gold dust, so golden that one could not see it, and the whole city was incomparably quiet, not to mention the sound of people, not even the chirping of birds, so silent that only the sound of falling dust could be heard.

[System Alert: Ask player Bai Liu to find a fairy tale book that is widely circulated in the Golden Land to learn the backstory of the copy and unlock the main quest.]

Bai Liu jumped off the rooftop with a flick of the wrist. After landing, he found a landmark building nearby and sent a message to his teammates to meet up here, and within three or four minutes, all four team members arrived.

"No npc's or monsters were encountered on the way to stop us." Tang Erda received her gun behind her waist and frowned, "No encounters with Golden Dawn's men either."

"I had expected them to come in fast and furious as soon as they entered the copy, but along the way I observed the dust on the ground and saw no footprints of anyone else's movements other than ours."

"Yeah." Mu Sicheng looked at the bizarre surroundings of the replica and rubbed his goosebumpy arms, "I was all set to run, but no one came after me."

"It might have something to do with the game setup of this copy." Liu Jiayi tilted his head and tapped on his system panel, "Because the background explanation and main quest of this copy are different from the previous ones, instead of being given as soon as you enter, you have to explore on your own, the other party might be prepared to unlock the main quest first before acting like us."

Muke nodded in agreement, "But overall, it's not bad for us, it kind of gives us a cushion."

"I don't think so." Bai Liu shook his head in denial, " Golden Dawn was never meant to be a team that played a speed game, playing speed stations was our response, they like to slow down the tempo, but slowing down the tempo is not good for us players who can CD skills."

"The general idea is still the same as before, a quick fix."

Bai Liu's eyes narrowed slightly as he glanced down at the gold dust that had fallen on each of them, "I always felt more threatened by this copy itself, than Golden Dawn gave me."

"Let's find the fairy tale first."

"Yes!"

The group was led by Bai Liu into the nearest building, which was also covered in floating gold dust. The notice board at the front desk was so thickly covered in gold dust that it was hard to read, and Liu Jiayi knelt down and wiped the thick gold dust off the board before seeing what was on it.

Liu Jiayi stared at the writing on it for a moment, then waved his hand, " Muke, I can't read such characters."

"Here it is." Muke walks over to the notice and stares at it for a moment, pondering for a moment, "It's a very old little language, I can't understand it all, but I've taken an optional course in the modern language that evolved after it, so I can understand the general meaning."

"This notice says this month's notice that thirteen households have not paid their utility and gas bills this month, and that one household with serious arrears owes about 500g in total utility bills ....."

"Gold?"

Muke's tone was clearly hesitant when he saw the last phrase.

"Wow?!" Mu Sicheng crouched over with great interest, "A pound of gold for utilities, what did this family do at home? Did they raise goldfish?"

"What surprises me more than this is the rest of the place." Muke flipped the notice board forward, looking more and more peculiar as he did so, "This place has no currency of its own, the general equivalent of their daily transactions is gold, utilities are paid in gold,

everyday food is bought in gold, three apples 2g gold, a whole leg of beef smoked in 12g gold."

"..... uses gold for everyday transactions?" Mu Sicheng staggered at the sound of it, as he silently converted in his mind, "These prices are so outrageously high, people here are so rich."

"To be able to use gold as a trading currency and prices so high, this would be a very economically developed place, they did have a lot of money at one time." Muke frowned, "But certainly not recently, the rent for this building has recently increased four or five times, the unit cost of the various utilities supplied has increased almost forty times, and food like this can basically be said to sit on the floor and change price from day to day."

"That's why there were previous tenants who owed a pound of gold on their utility bills."

"All sorts of things are going up in price." Mu Sicheng questions hesitantly, "Shouldn't that mean that people in this place are getting richer?"

Muke looks at Mu Sicheng for a moment: "It depends on what the price increase is."

"If the price increases are for non-essential items that are already at a premium, such as luxury cars and watches, which are toys for the rich, then it means that people have money for something other than the necessities of life to enjoy, and this is really only a sign of areas that are getting better economically."

"But judging by the announcement of this building, some of the slightly higher end foods, like cheese, are dropping in price, instead the price increases are all for necessities like smoked meat apples utilities and rentals, that can only mean that money, or gold, is flowing into survival products in this area, which means that people in this area are having a very bad time, which is what is causing them to hoard in large quantities in a panic essential goods, causing the price of essential goods to double."

"What I'm seeing is basically the same thing." Muke nodded to the bulletin board, "There are more and more tenants in this building who can't pay their rent."

"But I actually find it hard to imagine that a place that uses gold as its circulating currency would necessitate a premium of this magnitude."

Muke spreads his hands, "As long as the place has a port and they're willing to use gold for foreign trade, I'm sure there are plenty of places in the world where 2g of gold would sell them four hundred apples, but I see no sign of foreign trade."

"A pound of gold, which has been the cost of living for many families for several years, is just a few months' worth of utilities for this building."

"The world is full of people who are madly thirsty for their gold, but they are cantoned here, unwilling to trade with the outside world and allowing prices to rise wildly."

"Maybe it's because too many people want their gold that they don't want it?" Bai Liu knelt down on one knee and raised his eyes to Muke who was stunned for a moment, "What is this little language you speak of in this place?"

"That's one of the things that's strange to me." Muke ponders for a moment and replies, "I am learning a very rare and minor language that is spoken in very few countries in the real world, a minor language whose origin is a civilised language that exists only in legend."

"It is said that more than a thousand years ago, beside this overseas sea of the Ancient Luo Sea, there was once a very prosperous ancient country, although this country was not a vast country, just a small coastal country, but this country was very rich, so rich that almost even the floor of their palace was paved with gold, and it was known as [the country of gold favoured by God], at that time it was almost the world's economic centre of exchange, and the small surrounding countries aspired to this country, and they imitated the language of this country, which has been passed on to the present day, and is this little language that I am learning now."

"But everything about this country at the moment has been deduced by everyone based on some existing historical documents from the surrounding countries, there are no real relics or historical information to prove that this country really existed, nor is there anything to prove that the language I learned originated from this land of gold."

"But now it seems." Muke looked at the gold dust covered display next to the reception desk, the radio, and a couple of very modern mobile phones, "this country really does exist."

"And it also developed silently, out of our sight, for a thousand years until its demise."

Mu Sicheng listened with mixed emotions: "..... How did you learn such a small language that is so remote?"

"Because my father wanted me to learn that a son like me, who couldn't inherit the family business, could only be used as an external showcase, and when I learned things that no one around me knew how to do, he would feel honoured by that, so I learned a lot of things that I found useless but he found classy, small languages being one of them." Muke replies with a wry smile, "You could interpret this as the boring vanity of a rich man."

"But it's not all bad if it comes in handy now, I guess."

"So the system is asking us to explore why this country fell, is it?" Liu Jiayi frowned and said softly, "[The Land of Gold favoured by God], that sounds like a lot of-"

She didn't go on, and Bai Liu looked at each other, and all was lost in translation.

--sounds just like Bai six.

"We're looking for fairy tale books, right?" Tang Erda looked carefully through the front desk directory, "Residents with children are more likely to have fairy tale books in their rooms, right?"

"There are three residents with children on the first floor and also on the third floor."

Tang Erda turned to Bai Liu with the address book in her hand, "Shall we go up and look for it?"

Bai Liu nodded, "Let's go."

The search for the fairy tale book was not difficult and as soon as Tang Erda pushed open the door to the second room, they found a fairy tale book on the gold dusted table top without any problems.

"The name of this one is [The Land of the Gods' Favoured Gold]." Muke took the book and read the words on it, then looked up at everyone, "This should be the one."

"You translate and we'll listen." Bai Liu sat down on the small bench

next to the sound and assumed a posture of attentive listening.

"I don't always get all the flips right." Muke took a deep breath, "But I try."

He turned the first page of the heavy fairy tale book, which was covered in gold dust.

"A long, long time ago, perhaps as long as a thousand years, there was a beautiful seaside country called Gloren, beside the Gulo Sea."

Meanwhile, Georgia stood in the palace, his eyes downcast at a place he knew and yet was unfamiliar with - the land of Gloren, which he had sunk with his own hands after ten years, the largest and most expensive heresy he had guarded on the sea for a whole decade, his only, unforgettable homeland.

This palace, this gorgeous palace sprinkled with gold dust, was where he was born and brought up, and he remembers when he was ten years old and the whole country celebrated his birth, the young man standing outside the palace terrace, standing on his tiptoes and looking down from beside the fence that was higher than he was, and the square was filled with his people cheering for his growth.

They set off fireworks, waved gold ground into gold dust, and called his name loudly and affectionately.

" Georgia!"

" Georgia!"

Gold dust and fireworks spilled over Georgia's shoulders, and the people's eyes reflected the best glow in the world as he held onto the railing in a daze, looking at the glitz and glamour and murmuring softly, "Am I really worth all that they've done for me?"

His father, the king of Gloren, laughed and held him by the shoulders: "You are the crown prince of Gloren."

"You are the king who will lead them to a brighter golden age in the future, who will protect them and uphold them."

"You certainly deserve it all!"

"But what if ....." Little Georgia clenched her fists hesitantly, "I can't do it right?"

"You won't do badly." The king stroked his forehead lovingly, "You are the best of princes, I know it, you may look cold and harsh but you are actually a good boy who has been responsible from the time you knew how to behave, and your greatest fear is to fail these people who are so eagerly waiting for you."

"And he who has such fears will surely make a good king."

"Hey." Seeing Georgia's ever-present frown, the king awkwardly stroked his brow open, "My boy, do you remember that fairy tale?"

"When the day does come that you don't do well, we are a nation of gold favoured by God and we can still go to God for help."

"But what if God doesn't help us?" Georgia couldn't hide his worry, which made him look a bit teenage, "No one will help us all the time for no reason, God helps us and will definitely make us pay for it."

"How can that be?" The king laughed innocently, "The whole point of God's existence is to make his followers happy who believe in him!"

"Captain?" Chrissy inquired softly, "What's wrong with you?"

"The system prompted us to find the fairy tale book and you led us all the way here, is this a place you know well?"

--The existence of Heretic 0073 is a top secret of the Three Bureaus, and apart from Georgia and Lu Yizhan, almost no one knows what Heretic 0073 looks like.

Georgia closed his eyes, gathered his thoughts, and when he opened them, he was the same calm and dignified captain of the Third Bureau again, "Yes."

"I remember that there is a book of fairy tales here, but I forget exactly where it is, so go and search elsewhere in the palace."

"Yes, Captain!"

Several members of the team responded and then trained themselves to start carpet searching the entire palace.

And after a brief stop, Georgia headed for the prince's bedchamber in the palace, walking with the same steady dignity as on the day he became crown prince, past the high platform where he was cheered by the people, past the meadow where he learned archery, past the

flower bed where Armand had been knocked, and finally to his bedchamber.

Everything here is as stereotypically standard as it was then, with thirteen bows and arrows of different sizes hanging on the wall in harnesses, and a huge bookshelf opposite containing various books in separate categories, many of which have been thumbed through and have gold leaf bookmarks pinned inside - specially made for him by his father.

When he was young, he would fall asleep reading them. In order to force himself to read more, Georgia secretly hid an ice basin under his bed, and when he became sleepy, he would stand barefoot on the ice basin for a while, relying on the cold temperature to keep him awake and force himself to read more.

After Armand found out and reported it to his father, Georgia was punished by his angry father.

[The body is fundamental to the rule of the state.] His father rebuked him sternly, [You are so eager and utilitarian to learn things that you cannot remain calm in such a peaceful environment, how can you make the people follow you without fear?]

At that time Georgia was punished for not being allowed to read, and although he received his punishment on his knees and was calm, he was also uncontrollably anxious.

-- as if something would happen to this kingdom, which is favoured by God's favour, if one minute of his gaze were missing.

At that time, the only book Georgia was allowed to read was the fairy tale book, The Land of Gold for the Families of the Gods.

This book is a household name for fairy tales in Gloren country.

But Georgia didn't like the fairy tale book and he resisted reading it, but he read it anyway at that time.

Georgia went to the bed and slowly sat down on the bed covered in gold dust, and on the bedside table was a Quan family blessing, which he wiped clean and saw Armand, only a few months old, and himself, with a stern face but still with a smile in his eyes, his father, who was smiling a little foolishly, and his mother, who was sitting in a chair, smiling brightly. mother.

-- Armand was four years old when their mother died, after which their father fell into disarray and gave the title of Crown Prince to himself in advance.

So this is one of their few Quan family portraits, and one of his favourites, so it was kept by his bedside, but when it sank Gloren, he was in such a hurry to carry a sleeping Armand that he didn't even have time to take it.

I never thought I would finally see it again after so long.

Georgia was quiet, then he turned over his pillow and saw the book of fairy tales that he had hidden under it, and he turned to the second page:.

" The people of Gloren are industrious and kind, and although the country they possess is not vast and the land is not fertile, each one of them lives happily by their hard work."

"It was a time when everyone was after gold, but there were no gold mines in the Gloren country and they couldn't get it, so they ended up getting used to a smooth life and multiplying from generation to generation."

" The people in the kingdom of Gloren were so happy in spite of their poverty that this happiness attracted the attention of God, who came down to the then king of Gloren and smiled and said, "Will you make a bargain with me?"

"The king asked, God, we are a poor nation and have nothing to trade with you."

"God smiled and said, "Yes there is."

"-that is the joy that is in you."

"In exchange for the pleasure you deliver to me and the pain you pay, I give you an inexhaustible supply of gold, enough to last you a thousand years."

"But after a thousand years, you will pay me for the pain."

"And the king thought long and hard, and he summoned the nation, and asked the opinion of every one of them, and the nation rejoiced, and no one could hate gold, especially such gold as fell from heaven, and all agreed to the gods' bargain."

Muke turned to page six and continued reading softly.

" The Gloren country has changed forever."

"This formerly goldless land became a land of gold, where peasants dug everywhere and patches of gold appeared in the earth, fishermen fished out and the fish in their nets spat out stones that were gold and didn't even need to be forged anymore, and soon Gloren became the richest country in the world."

"But this riches attracted many nations with evil intentions towards Gloren, who wanted to wage war against it and rob it of its gold, and the wise king, in his desperation, found the gods again and said to them, O God Almighty, please hide us and leave only a small opening where the gold can be sold, and it will be done. "

"God agreed, and he hid Gloren from the world, and no one will ever again be able to search out the land of Gloren."

"And so, after a thousand years of peace and plenty, it was time for Gloren to pay the price."

Muke turns another page and the fairy tale book ends.

The Lost Land of Gold

The moment Muke finished reading the fairy tale, everyone's system panel popped up.

[System Alert: Congratulations on unlocking the main quest]

[This is the Land of Gold that is paying the price. Please find the key item Hourglass of Time, turn the pain of the Land of Gold into tears in the Hourglass, and when the Hourglass is filled with pain to the satisfaction of the gods, sacrifice it to the gods at the offering table, complete the transaction, reverse time, and turn the Land of Gold back to its original state.]

"The Hourglass of Time?" Mu Sicheng asked with a quirked brow, "What is this?"

"It should be one of the props that can reverse time in this copy." Liu Jiayi replied, her brows frowning. Liu Jiayi replied, her brows furrowing lightly, "..... reversing time, the effect of this prop seems to be similar to that Golden Dawn captain's skill."

"Would it matter?"

"Skills are derived from the core of the player's desires, and props are gods, or systemic set pieces." Bai Liu rubbed his chin thoughtfully, "This is the first time I've seen a time prop and a time skill in a game, and if the two are somehow related, it would stand to reason that one's desires would be influenced by an already existing setting object to derive a similar item."

"Then by that inference, that captain of Golden Dawn, Georgia, maybe this country has some kind of close connection that we don't know about yet."

"If this is true, it could be a breakthrough, but it's also an advantage for them." Bai Liu spreads his hands, "They must be more familiar with the map than we are, for example, we don't know where to find this so-called Hourglass of Time now, but that Georgia captain most likely does."

"But we're not all clueless." Muke looked up, he turned the fairy tale book in his hand to the first few pages, "The Hourglass of Time is not explicitly mentioned in this fairy tale, but it is a drawn fairy tale book, and the illustrations here -"

Muke points to the somewhat childlike illustrations in the fairy tale book: "It's about the time when God made a deal with the kingdom of Gloren a thousand years ago, see? The thing that God handed to the king when the deal was set up."

"This should be the proof of their deal."

Bai Liu's eyes swept up and his eyes stopped at the hand of the god on the screen -

--In the hand of the -god is a finely crafted grey and black hourglass.

Meanwhile, at the other end.

"The Hourglass of Time?" Chrissy stared at the silent Georgia, "Captain, since you're familiar with this place, do you know what it is and where it's hidden?"

Georgia was quiet for a moment, and when she spoke again Chrissy could no longer detect traces of emotion, so calm that there was no trace of a ripple: "I know."

"It's just that place is a bit dangerous, so tell the rest of the team to get the mental bleach ready and come with me."

"Spiritual bleach?" Chrissy quickly trailed off, "Is that a very mentally polluted place?"

"Well, it's not just mental contamination, it's physical contamination as well." Georgia raised her eyes, "The Hourglass of Time is in the gold mines."

Unlike the one Bai Liu and the others had, Georgia's fairy tale book [The Golden Land of the Gods] did not end abruptly when the price was paid in a thousand years, nor did it say anything about the Hourglass of Time, but rather it described in detail The book does not end when the price is paid in a thousand years.

"Father." Young Georgia looked up and asked her father in disbelief, "Why is my fairy tale book different from the ones other people in the market are reading."

-- one might even say that it was a very different kind of fairy tale.

The fairy tales on the market for children to read are sweet and innocent, and God loves the world, but in the book of fairy tales that

Georgia gets, God does not love the world, and is even a little scary, for the gods smile and say to the king, then I will come and collect the price of suffering from all your people, and you will make their tears fill this hourglass, or the suffering will never stop.

The king at the time agreed and asked God what kind of tears it would take to fill this hourglass.

The gods told the king that the hourglass could only be filled by tears shed in a single moment of pain that could be worth a thousand years of gold, and that the moment the tears fell into the hourglass, the hourglass reversed with time, the transaction was complete and the pain ceased.

Georgia wonders, "Does this hourglass really exist?"

The king was silent for a moment: "It exists, people just don't know about it."

"Why not let everyone know about it?" Georgia shook her head disapprovingly, "All the fairy tales people see talk about God giving gold and blessings because he loves the world, and they believe they are the ones favored by God to live so ....."

"Happiness, is it?" The king stroked Georgia's head with a sigh, "But what good would it do to tell them the truth, to tell them that there really is an hourglass that needs to be filled with pain and tears, except to make them less happy?"

Georgia was stunned.

"In everyone's mind, Gloren has always been a land of gold, isolated from the rest of the world." The king stood up propped up on the edge of his bed, he went to the window, bathed in the moonlight, looked out over the lush and peaceful land and sighed ruefully, "It was a fairytale land, everyone believed they lived in a fairytale, that they were favoured by the gods and that there would never be a moment of calamity."

"That's why fairy tale books sell so well in this country."

"Even the fairy tales here." The king looked back at Georgia, "all stopping at the moment when a thousand years have to pay the price."

"It's not that I deliberately kept people in the dark by cutting out the second half of the fairy tale to deceive them; the fairy tale book that

was introduced nationally at the beginning was the one you're holding."

The king stretched his hands helplessly: "But the people fiercely resisted, they felt that fairy tales were not like that, that the Land of Gold would not be like that, that everyone should be hopeful and happy and live forever carefree in a fairy tale, so I cut out the second half and the fairy tale was pushed out."

"But it's just ....." Georgia shook his head very gently, his education had prevented him from saying anything critical of the popular outcry, but then he really didn't agree with it and frowned, "It's just ....."

"Just fooling yourself, aren't you?" The king laughed bitterly, "Sometimes I think there is nothing wrong with such self-deception, and I also deceive myself when I am happy, by lying to myself that the thousand years will really not come and that the gods will really favour our country forever."

"But that thousand years will really come." Georgia replied with certainty, "Just as the gold will come as promised, so will the pain."

The king looked at Georgia in bewilderment for a long time, then turned his head to hold the fence and lowered it to murmur, "..... Georgia, your lack of escape from pain makes me ashamed of myself."

"When I became king, when I was given the crown, I was also given an hourglass."

"Every king of Gloren is given a crown, but few know that with the succession of kingship comes an hourglass of time, which is said to have been passed down from generation to generation from the first kings."

"On the day I became king, my last one was already dying; he had been suffering from a long and painful illness and, on his deathbed, asked me to put the hourglass to his face and, struggling to squeeze down the tears, finally shed a single drop, which he watched expectantly and ecstatically as it dripped into the hourglass."

"He longed for the tear to fill the hourglass and end that millennial bargain, but unfortunately, the tear fell into the hourglass like a drop of water into the sea, without a sound."

"The last king died in agony and dismay, and before he died, he held

his hand in his death grip and told me that the millennium was coming, and that it was our duty that the king must fill the hourglass before the gods came down to extract the suffering of the people."

"-[It is the king's failing in his duty never to let his subjects who have been brought up in fairy tales disbelieve them], so he told me."

The king turned his head, his eyes a little red and his lips quivering, "So on the night I lost your mother, I thought of this hourglass and I tried to fill it, but I shed tears all night and so many tears fell into this hourglass that it didn't even fill the gaps."

"I began to fear this hourglass, which even the tears shed by those who suffer from death and the loss of someone dear to them cannot bear to fill, and I do not know what other pain in this world can fill this hourglass."

"So I fled, and I cowardly hid this hourglass in the mines that gave birth to gold."

"After hiding the hourglass in the mines, I began to have nightmares often." A fleshly trepidation appeared on the king's face, "I would dream of that god."

"He smiled and told me that the 1,000-year appointment was coming and that he would descend upon the world, remove the shield and lower the gold production to collect our pain."

"Then let's remove the shields and reduce the gold production." The young Georgia displayed a calmness beyond reason, "We shouldn't have to trade the suffering of our citizens for this gold that doesn't belong to us, when we get over this, everything will be fine again."

"It won't get better!" The king shed tears, he became a little hysterical, his face was one of undisguised fear, "When there is no more gold, everything will be spoiled to the core!"

"We've been living a thousand years sleeping on gold, everyone is living in a fairy tale, no one can imagine what it would be like to not be able to dig for gold underground, by that time everyone would be starving and freezing to death!"

"I must find a way to fill the hourglass before the 1,000-year appointment comes." His father said with tears in his eyes.

Unfortunately, when the last moment came, the hourglass still wasn't

filled.

Georgia lowered her eyes, "Go to the mine and look for the hourglass."

Meanwhile, at the other end.

The dust he inhaled caused Mu Sicheng to choke and cough several times, and he covered his mouth and nose as he brushed aside a building's notice board.

They are also running maps to gather information on the possible location of the Hourglass of Time.

The good news is that there was no enemy interference and they swept the map quickly, the bad news is that there was no enemy interference and they mostly went in the wrong direction.

But the map is so big that Mu Sicheng is a very fast mover, but even at full speed, he can't run to any side of the border for a while. With his headset, he runs forward while reporting information to the back, and he collects information and processes it at the back, so that the map can be scanned much faster.

"Saw a departmental bulletin board." Mu Sicheng choked and coughed louder and louder, "Ahem, filmed it and sent it to Muke, check it out."

Soon Muke's noisy voice came over Mu Sicheng's headset, "It's a bulletin board for the Gold Development Agency."

"The Gold Development Department?" Mu Sicheng questioned suspiciously, "What kind of peculiar department is that?"

"Not sure, but from the content of the announcement, it would appear to be the official department that manages the distribution and operation of gold." Muke explained calmly, "There were three announcements on this bulletin board."

"The first is the regrettable announcement that the country's 57 mining sites, seven of which are large, have seen a steady decline in gold mining for two years running, with the last six months even producing less than a tonne of gold in total to even keep the country running."

"The second announcement was to announce the recent suspension of the welfare policy of 600g of free gold per adult citizen per month."

"The last announcement is ....." Muke's voice became hesitant for a moment, "Hold on a moment, this one is smudged and I'm having a bit of trouble reading it."

Mu Sicheng hugged his chest and hmmed as he scanned the rest of his eyes to the last announcement on the noticeboard that he had wiped clean - it was actually understandable why Muke couldn't see this one, it was badly smudged and marked with red marker with lots of exclamation marks, dense and emotional looking.

"I've probably read the last announcement clearly." Muke's voice was still hesitant, "but I'm not sure I translated it correctly."

"The announcement specifically states that the heir to the throne of Gloren (i.e. the Grand Prince) insists on pursuing cooperation with the Heresy Authority, demanding that the Heresy Authority be stationed in the country of Gloren, sternly claiming that the gold produced in the mines is heretical, that it will have an adverse effect on people, that private mining is forbidden, that people should stay away from the mines, and that the mines are ready to be handed over to the Heresy Authority for to deal with it."

"The scribbled text on it would have been written on by an emotionally charged member of the public at the time."

"It's [Georgia traitors out of Gloren Nation!] and [the Heretic's Bureau is here to steal our gold, get out of Gloren country!] "

"[How can gold production be declining?! Has the rest of the gold produced from the mine been hidden by the traitor Georgia, give us back the hidden gold!"]

"[Georgia go to hell!!!]. ."

After a few moments, Bai Liu's calm voice came over the headset, "Looks like we've figured out the most likely place to hide the hourglass."

" Mu Sicheng, get the mental bleach ready, note the time limit for skill use and go to the mine."

"Where is the mine?" Mu Sicheng asked.

Bai Liu's voice came out of his headset, "You break into the Gold Distribution Department, which manages gold distribution and should have a map and location of the gold mines inside."

"OK." Mu Sicheng responded, turning around and violently kicking open the door, and was greeted by a huge amount of gold dust, which Mu Sicheng quickly covered his mouth and nose, but still inhaled some of it and began to choke and cough violently, swatting it away, half-smiling, and walking into the gold hair office.

The ground floor of the Golden Hair Office is very open, as wide as a stadium, and the height of the floor is estimated to be six or seven metres, with a magnificent octagonal ceiling hanging from the centre of the ceiling, crystal pendants hanging from the eight corners, with ribbons scattered in eight directions, connected to the floor, silk rosy ribbons covered with gold dust, and gold sculptures of animals in different shapes in the hall, beautiful, like some kind of celebration. The hall is also decorated with gold sculptures of animals in different shapes, as if it were the venue of some kind of celebration.

Mu Sicheng took a picture and sent it over to Liu Jiayi who tsked: "A department that manages money is so romantic, this country is really ....."

"Naive." Bai Liu's calm voice took over, " Mu Sicheng, get close and take a picture of these sculptures for me to see."

"Good." Mu Sicheng leaned in close to take a picture of the dog's golden sculpture for Bai Liu to see, but as he did so, he was keenly aware that something was wrong, "This dog ....."

The dog is wearing a collar, its mouth is wide open, its fur is well defined, it is crouched on the ground with its tongue out, looking in a certain direction, as if waiting for its owner, its eyes can be seen turning in an arc, but it just stops so suddenly, so lifelike that it is a little frightening - it is no longer like an ingenious sculpture, but like a real pet dog frozen in gold.

"Gold is not suitable for sculpture because it is too soft and difficult to carve very fine lines." Bai Liu's unhurried voice came through, "That's why the average craftsman doesn't purposely make gold sculptures

either, as it's very difficult to produce fine work."

"So ....." Tang Erda asked hesitantly, "the dog is most likely ....."

"There are not enough clues or information to be sure." Bai Liu skimmed lightly, " Mu Sicheng, don't touch."

Mu Sicheng stopped his hand from touching and scratched his head, "How did you know I was going to touch it?"

"What you must be thinking is that if this dog is a real dog being solidified, then most likely it is a monster, and if you unlock the monster book after touching it and let the dog attack you, we can identify the dog, right?" Bai Liu asked calmly and rhetorically, "But have you ever thought that if the dog is really a monster, do you think there will only be such a monster in such a big hair department?"

"Be careful when you go upstairs so you don't bump into any other statues."

Mu Sicheng paused for a moment as he looked towards the stairs hidden behind him and slowly but carefully made his way over.

Behind him, the eyes of the golden dog, which had been motionless, moved slowly a little, and a drop of saliva rolled off its outstretched tongue, which turned into drops of gold the moment it landed along its fangs.

There are also some animal statues in the corridor, a squirrel and a bird on the windowsill and two cats in the corridor, all of which Mu Sicheng carefully jumped over and photographed and sent to the large group to see.

"How strange, why are there no human sculptures?" Muke ponders the question, "It's all animals."

"Maybe it's because no one is at Goldfarb." Mu Sicheng replied after looking around, "There's a lot of golden dust falling on all the stairs in the front of the place, things have been emptied, it feels like no one has been here for a while, and the dog from before had the feeling of being a stray."

"Which means that this hairdresser's office has been empty for a long time, causing many stray animals to move in." Muke pondered, "and then turned into golden eagles here."

Mu Sicheng kicked open an office door, pried open a desk drawer and rummaged through it to find a map: "I found the map of the mine, do I need to look for other clues?"

"Not for now." Bai Liu ordered in a quiet voice, "Come out first, it's no accident that animals turn into golden eagles here, don't stay in a place like this until you know for sure."

"Is there a drop in life and spirit value?"

Mu Sicheng flipped sharply out of the windowsill to check his whereabouts and tapped on the system panel: "None of them."

There was a moment of silence across the headset, and Muke's slightly puzzled voice came through, "Neither do we."

"So, it's neither mental alienation nor a drop in vitality, how did these animals become golden eagles?"

"Is there a high concentration of gold dust in the hairdresser's office?" Bai Liu asked.

"It was high." Mu Sicheng replied quickly, "I was choking as soon as I got in."

"It should be related to this thing." Liu Jiayi's voice came through, "We found some masks on our side at the hospital, but it didn't work, these gold powders seem to be so fine that they feel like they can be sucked in even with the masks on, we found some information at the hospital and summed up some information to talk to you about."

"Many of the hospital's recent medical records are of miners." Muke explains calmly, "The miners here seem to be earning a lot of money, staying in very nice wards and using the most advanced treatments, and reading the notes on the medical records, these miners have been using the best protection and technology since mining and there have been no major problems, but after a certain point in time, the gold minerals here started to decline and the Gold Development Agency introduced a series of layoff strategies and the miners lost their jobs in large numbers and the population was very upset."

"Some time after that, about ten years ago, the date on the medical records, there was a sudden explosion of declining gold minerals, an increase in demand for miners, and many mines hired miners in large numbers."

"But it was also from that time onwards that miners became much more likely to develop occupational diseases."

"From the medical records over here it appears to be a disease of organ sclerosis, at first it was thought to be the same perennial miner's occupational disease as before, but then it became apparent that something was wrong and no amount of medication could alleviate this organ sclerosis, the number of miners suffering from the disease increased in large numbers and the seriously ill miners would even cough up some sort of golden red powder."

Liu Jiayi said, "We presume it would be bloodstained gold dust."

"Exactly." Muke nodded, "It would have been around that time that Georgia, the Grand Prince here, raised the heresy that the burgeoning gold mines were due to heretical influence and demanded that they be closed down and handed over to the Heretic Three Bureau to deal with, causing outrage."

"So the day Georgia insisted on handing over the mine, all the people went to the mine to stop it." Bai Liu continued calmly, "The people of the Gloren State did not trust the heretical processing bureau and they could not understand Georgia's choice."

"Even his father, the king of Gloren." Tang Erda let out a long, complicated sigh, "went to stop him too - we found a newspaper with the biggest headline calling on everyone to stop Georgia and giving him the title [The Great Prince of Treason]."

"They said Georgia was destined to become [a godforsaken man], and he would have been sixteen at the time."

"No wonder I didn't see anyone in the streets, they've all gone to the mines." Mu Sicheng came to his senses and then asked with some distress, "But there are so many points marked on the mining map, there are seven big mining points, which one is it?"

"There should be something else recorded on the DAC map of mining areas." Bai Liu asks, "Does it say anything about the recent increase in mineral extraction in each mining area?"

"Yes." Mu Sicheng replied.

Bai Liu: "Go to the nearest mine with the biggest increase."

"Let's see ah ....." Mu Sicheng looked carefully for a rummage, "Ah! 13

mine."

"Okay, you go first, keep quiet, we'll follow you closely." Bai Liu ordered calmly, "Don't clash with Georgia's army until I arrive."

Mu Sicheng: "OK!"

13 Mining.

Georgia stood on a treacherous hill, untouched by grass and covered in gold dust, through which some black mineral soil could be faintly seen, and looked down at the derelict tracks and wagons at the foot of the hill - once the most prosperous mining area in the country, with more than three thousand wagons a day and tracks that ran all the way to the centre of the city below the King's Castle.

After a long winter break, the first mining starts each spring, with excited miners driving the ore wagons out of the caves and transporting them across the snowy plains to the King's Castle below.

Everyone would grind the first load of gold mined into gold dust and scatter it cheerfully under the castle, celebrating the arrival of another carefree, fairytale spring in the land of gold with him and his father standing on top of the castle.

What an extravagant memory that he was laughing with them at that time, his pupils reflecting the golden dust falling from the sky - for a long time he thought this was what spring would look like when it arrived.

The gold will be transported in a steady stream to the Gold Development Agency, which will plan the gold to be sold for trade. They will collect information, plan and calculate the amount of gold to be sold every month and every year, within a range that will not devalue the gold outside, in exchange for goods that will make the whole country happy.

The Gold Development Agency, the Gloren's export to the outside world, is the only place where the entire Gloren country communicates with the outside world, and is known as the [Window to Gloren] and was once the most respected institution in the entire country.

Georgia once entered the service and relied on his ability to reach the position of Deputy Director of the General Administration, he had access to many core secrets, and it was through this window that he

learned of the existence of the Heretical Authority.

Georgia at the time did not approve of the GAO's approach and questioned the chief, who was older than his father and had managed the GAO for half a century: "Why was some of the gold not left as an emergency reserve when it was planned?"

"The amount of gold issued to nationals and for foreign transport can both be reduced appropriately."

"Why should we keep it?" The Chief Commissioner looked at him with a suspicious look, "Your Royal Highness, we have to make the best life possible for each of our citizens with the gold that we can extract, they can't live that well if we keep that much gold."

"But ....." Georgia clenched his fists and he bowed his head, "Gold, there comes a time when it runs out."

"Ha ha, how so?" The Chieftain laughed uproariously as if he had heard a great joke, "The waters of the Gulo Sea will dry up, the rice fields of the Gloren will wither, but only the gold-"

"- is inexhaustible."

"That day will not come." The Chieftain looked at the gloomy prince and winked playfully, "Hey, future king, cheer up, is it the gold and gold dust mined from the spring carts that didn't fall to you this year?"

The Chief Minister patted the silent Georgia on the shoulder and said with a loving smile, "Don't say such things about reducing the gold given to the people, the people of Gloren love you so much that they would all cry out in sadness if they heard that."

The Lost Land of Gold

Around the mine site.

Mu Sicheng's movements began to slow, and he looked cautiously at the gold sculptures gathered at the entrance to the mine not far away, moving his headset to his lips and reporting in a low voice, "Human sculptures in sight."

Having said that, he took a photo and transmitted it.

The human gold sculptures in the photograph are framed in various poses at the entrance to the mine, their faces and expressions very agitated and grim, some of them holding banners and appearing to raise their arms in shouting.

"The banner reads [Never hand over the gold mine]." Muke translated, "There were also some curse words, which I won't translate here."

"I'm slightly surprised, actually."

Muke pondered, "I read in the papers that after a period of decline, there had been a second burst of growth in gold, and the map Mu Sicheng found of the recent increase in gold confirmed this, that there must be something wrong with this second increase, otherwise there would not be a large number of new miners with strange organ sclerosis. It is because of this second increase that Georgia's resistance to handing over the mines has increased so much that the population, seeing the promise of increased gold, is unlikely to agree to a handover again."

"But here's the thing ....."

"It's written in the fairy tale that the god will only supply gold for a thousand years." Bai Liu picked up calmly, "If it was the god we know, he would have stopped supplying gold instantly when the one thousand year covenant was up, as per the deal, there is no way he would have continued to supply gold, this secondary explosion of gold minerals is not normal."

"And there's something wrong with Georgia handing over the gold mines to the Bureau of Heresy so decisively."

"He was a prince at the time, and even if he had realised there was a problem with the minerals, the most logical thing to do would have

been to shut it down and investigate it himself, not to so easily hand over the source of the nation's dependence to an outside organisation like the Bureau of Heresy, which would also have been more likely to gain support."

"There was room for manoeuvre and Georgia's approach could have been less aggressive." Bai Liu pauses, "but it should have been some kind of third-party factor that fuelled the conflict between the two sides."

"This third-party factor must have been something that Georgia could not have prevented, a force majeure factor." Liu Jiayi ponders for a moment before continuing, "And this force majeure factor would have been introduced by someone from within, and with a lot of support, otherwise Georgia would not have chosen to work externally."

"And this force majeure factor has led Georgia to believe that only the Heresy Processing Authority can handle ....."

At this point in the inference, Liu Jiayi and Bai Liu both stop for a moment.

The specifics of this force majeure factor are called out.

Bai Liu calmly stated the answer, "There were people in the Gloren country at the time who once again sought cooperation and deals with God to keep the gold mine producing."

The 13 mines are located in the interior of the mountains, and from the blasted exit of the mountain, a long-established track is followed down by a mine train, and on both sides it looks like some kind of relic treasure, full of heaps and heaps of gold, even excavated without much effort to refine it, which is already of considerable purity.

But twelve years ago, such a scenario, which had lasted for a thousand years, no longer existed in Gloren.

After a long winter break, the first carloads of ore mined in the spring did not even fill half the wagons, and the population looked on in fear and confusion at the miners sitting in the wagons, all waiting for the first carloads of gold ore of the spring to be ground into gold dust and sprinkled high into the sky - a rite of passage for the arrival of spring at Gloren.

But that year it was cancelled, and everyone knew that with such barren output they could not perform such extravagant ceremonies.

It was a sign of sorts that spring would never come for Gloren.

The gold minerals were declining month by month, the streets were full of unemployed miners and crying children, the monthly gold distributions from the Gold Board were decreasing by half, and his father sat at the fence overlooking Gloren, which seemed to be heading into an endless winter, and couldn't sleep through the night.

But Georgia was unusually calm, knowing that this day would come eventually.

A Gloren without gold would be a disaster in everyone's eyes, but in Georgia's eyes it might be an opportunity, an opportunity to get everyone out there.

Everyone has been trapped in this gold-mining land for too long, a thousand years, long enough to fear the outside world, which of course does have things to fear, but is much better than a Gloren without gold.

Georgia, who had already made her record, said calmly, "Father, leave Gloren to me," as if she had grown up overnight, tapping her father on the shoulder the night he fell to his knees and hugged him in tears.

His father looked up with teary eyes, "Do you have the means to make Gloren produce gold again?"

"I don't." Georgia replied calmly, "But, Father, talent is a nation's most precious gold."

"We are not at the end of our tether, the mines are still producing gold, we are preserving it, opening the Gloren window, cooperating, communicating and fighting with the outside world, and in the process, the will of everyone will become strong and our country will become stable and strong. "

"..... You let me think about it again." His father said in a trance, "Think again."

Georgia guessed that there would be a lot of resistance to what he wanted to do, but it wasn't absolutely impossible, though perhaps naivety might be in the bones of every Gloren - he was naive enough to think that God would never again come to this no longer happily-ever-after, fairy-tale believing Gloren country.

It is also naively forgotten that the pain of a thousand years of gold

equivalents is not covered by the howls of a child.

As Georgia tensed up and carefully pursued his filing, he heard strange noises coming from the court and some ministers began to frequent his father's dark conversations night after night, mistakenly believing that his filing had attracted the attention of these old-fashioned ministers and objecting to his father, which Georgia did not care for as the filing was well underway.

Until one day his father found him, clutching his hand in apprehension and excitement, "We have found God!"

"He's willing to trade with us again!"

Georgia's mind was blank for that moment and could only subconsciously ask in return, "God?"

"Yes!" His father was so excited he was almost jumping up and down, "Our high priest heard from somewhere in the Church that there was a guest who would sell islands suspended in the sea that resembled the god we described, and it took a lot of work on the part of the high priest and the other man was finally willing to meet with us!"

"He's coming to Gloren today, and I've got the DAC meeting him at the country gate!"

"Let's not talk about whether he's a god or not." Georgia pushed down the hand of his excited father shaking his shoulder and, holding onto the table and trying his best to remain calm, he looked up and questioned icily, "Even if he is, at this moment God is here to collect the price of our suffering, so what are you going to do? What can you do?"

His father became a little uneasy and timid under Georgia's gaze: "..... The customer said he could deal with us again."

"What's the deal ....." Georgia had to use almost all her strength to control herself from roaring so out of temper and instead asked calmly, "What is it?"

"He can supply us with gold for a while longer, through a special kind of stone [the gold point stone]." His father explained somewhat nervously, "We've tested this stone and just by burying it in the ground, the gold minerals do increase more and no clear side effects have been found, so you don't have to worry so much!"

"There's no gold in this world for nothing, Father." Georgia closed her eyes, "What does he want?"

His father said after a long silence, "Pain."

"He said he would charge us with the pain when the time came."

"When the time comes, when is it?" Georgia opened her eyes and asked the question softly, unable to contain the disappointment in his eyes.

"At least it's not today, not this year!" His father began to get angry too, pounding on the table, "At least he's bringing the golden stones so that our people can have a good spring this year! At least the children will be able to lie at home this year listening to fairy tales and sleeping peacefully! At least tonight, after the pointing stones are buried in the mines, I won't be hearing the cries of people at night who are afraid they won't survive!"

" Georgia, why do you always have to think so far ahead!"

"Can't even handle what's in front of us, so far away, does it really matter to us?!"

"What if it's another thousand years after the next one when he comes to collect the pain?!"

Georgia was silent, her fists clenched tight, while the king aggressively questioned, pointing out the window and looking directly at Georgia: "Do you want to see these people struggling outside?"

"If there is no more gold this spring, by the time winter comes, they will be starving to death; do you want them to starve alive this winter?"

"Put my strategy and your strategy together and who do you think the public will support?!"

Georgia took a deep breath, his chest heaving violently, "But ....."

"No buts!" The king sternly slapped the table, "Keeping the people in front of you alive is the most important thing, all your far-reaching concerns, wait until it's done!"

Looking at Georgia's pursed lips, the king paused and softened his tone: "Take a pause from those strategies you've been using lately."

"You're tired from doing all this too, so take some time ..... to rest and relax."

Georgia walked out of the palace with nothing on his face, as if his soul had been taken out of his body, lost in thought as he walked through the streets, surrounded by closed shops, daily necessities that had gone up in price, and people who were crossing their fingers and crying, counting how long they had left to spend their gold.

His face was so well known to many that whenever he walked past a person, one would ask him expectantly.

"When will the gold be issued, Your Royal Highness?"

"When does the mine resume?"

" Gloren wouldn't be without gold, would he?"

"God will not abandon us, will he?"

In front of eyes so innocent as to be almost a little frightened, Georgia opened his mouth and not a last word came out, his heart beating violently in his chest, his blood tumbling with some stirring emotion - an emotion he had learned to control when he was very young, before he learned to draw a bow.

The Dauphin was not to be impulsive or outwardly emotional, his every move had to be in line, elegant, decent, and capable of being nationally oriented, without any inappropriate behaviour, so to do all this Georgia trained himself almost rigorously and did not cry after he was five years old - because that would not be decent.

While Armand would cry from the fall, Georgia would just pat his bleeding knee and get up, pick up his tearful brother and walk to the palace as if nothing had happened.

"Don't run so fast next time, Armand." Little Georgia calmly reprimanded her brother, "Not a prince in sight."

Armand sobbed and wondered, "Brother, you fell down too, don't you hurt?"

Georgia paused, "It hurts."

Armand asked in a small voice, "So brother, why aren't you crying?"

"Because if even the crown prince of this country is crying over this

little pain." Georgia tilted her head as he looked up at the illuminated Gloren, her voice soft, "And who will bear the cost of the deal with God for them?"

"Then, then I won't cry either." Armand said somewhat sheepishly.

"No need." Georgia paused, "You're just a little kid, you're not a crown prince, it's normal for kids to cry."

"Just don't cry in front of people, Armand."

At this moment, Georgia, the Crown Prince, who never loses his temper in front of people and who is known as the "Golden Light", took a deep breath and turned towards the palace.

He ducked his head and hurried past the crowd of people watching him expectantly, teeth clenched, eyes a little red, a strange emotion rushing through his chest.

--Why don't people want to put up with a little more winter for the sake of the country?

Georgia burst into the palace, and, without looking away from the guards who bowed to him, he rarely returned the courtesy, but went straight into his room, took a most powerful bow from the wall, and headed without looking back towards the gates of the country, which were guarded by the Golden Hair.

He clutched his longbow, his eyes cold and stern.

--whether it was a so-called god or some strange guest, he would not allow the other to set foot in Gloren's country.

This is his land, this is his people, and no matter how naive they are, it is not the turn of others to exploit their suffering in the name of gold.

Georgia gripped her longbow and stood atop the towering walls at the entrance and exit, which were unguarded, for the soldiers had gone to meet the noble guest, or rather, the gods, and even on a normal day there were only three or four soldiers here, for the gods had hidden Gloren, and no ordinary person could enter here without being shown the way by someone inside the Golden Hair Office.

And today everyone was waiting inside, which meant that there was no one to lead the way and that guest could come in on his own.

No outsider had ever set foot in the Gloren without being led, so it was no wonder that his father was certain that this strange guest was a god.

The high priest waited by the entrance with apprehension and anxiety, the king was silent, his lips white, and the guards looked expectantly at the entrance, but after waiting for about half an hour,

there was finally a movement from the entrance.

The sound of a man's leather shoes on the hard ground came slowly, and he brushed aside the dense trees at the entrance to reveal a masked face, his voice laced with laughter, "I've been heading this way since I got off the Sky Island over there, and I hope you don't mind if I don't change my attire."

"I'm not late, am I?"

The man's proficiency in Gloren startled the high priest, who drew a breath and bowed in fear: "Not late!"

"Greetings, hello." King Gloren stepped forward a little nervously and held out his hand, "I am King Gloren."

"I know." The masked man, or god, had a casual, smiling tone as he took off his own gloves and held out his hand to shake the king's, "You are the main person I deal with."

"You are very much like that king of a thousand years ago."

"Yes, is it?" The king smiled reluctantly, then asked with a shudder, "And the gold ....."

"Don't worry." The man held out his palm, a shiny, mottled wedge of ore hovering above it, and he spoke in a gentle tone, "I've brought the pointing stone."

"I've given you samples before, this is the genuine article, just bury this gold point stone into the vein and the gold mine will produce a constant stream as before."

"A steady stream of gold?" The king's voice trembled as he repeated the man's words.

"Yes, with the use of this pointing stone, your future kingdom will have an inexhaustible supply of gold." The man smiled and spread his hands, "This gold pointing stone is more powerful than the one that that king buried in the vein a thousand years ago, and in time, your streets will probably be covered with gold dust at all times, gold statues will be everywhere, and each person may be able to have gold as big as himself."

"Your golden age will come again."

"But be a bit careful when you bury it in there."

He smiled and warned, "This bit of gold stone is a fragile item, and it's all I have."

The king swallowed nervously and tried to reach for the pointing stone as the man reached out too, ready to deliver it.

At the moment of delivery, Georgia on the ramparts stood erect, her gaze stern as she drew the bowstring to her ear with two fingers, the wind whipping his high light brown ponytail loose, the metallic colour of the bowstring deepening the pupils of his dark and light brown eyes.

The sharp point of the bow reflected a strange dazzle of light, and Georgia's chest rose and fell violently as he clenched his teeth - probably the most indecent and impulsive thing he had done since he became Crown Prince.

Assault on a foreign guest.

Georgia loosened the bowstring, and the arrow shot out as swiftly as a thunderbolt from the clouds, piercing between the king and the god and pointing straight at the pointing stone!

The man seemed to sense something and quickly closed his palm and gripped the pointing stone, but the arrow wind thundered through his palm holding the pointing stone and blood dripped down.

"Aye aye aye." The man turned his head with a grin to Georgia, who was once again drawing her bow on the raised platform, "It seems your country, it seems, is not very welcoming to a businessman like me."

" Georgia ?!" The king looked in shock at Georgia on the platform, her eyes red with anger, and he reprimanded, glancing timidly at the god next to him who didn't look the least bit angry, "What are you doing! Get down from there!"

"Guards! Hold the Grand Prince down!"

The High Priest almost went into cardiopulmonary arrest as he asked in a panic, "Is the Pointing Stone all right?!"

"It's okay." The man gently opened his palm, which was empty, and said with a smile, "I put it away."

"Quickly!" The high priest greeted in a hurry, "Have the city's doctor come and bandage the guest's palm."

"No need." The man smiled and waved his hand, "It's nice to get hurt once in a while, I haven't been hurt in a long time."

The High Priest stopped in amazement and looked around breathlessly.

"That ..... man's tone took on a light laugh as he turned to Georgia, who was being forced down the wall by a group of guards, "The man who shot me with a bow and arrow, was that your Grand Prince? "

The king's back instantly tightened when he heard the man mention it, and he side-stepped slightly in the direction of the man looking at Georgia: "..... is my eldest son and is not disciplined, so I ask your guest not to take it personally."

"Why would I count, he's very interesting." The man smiled with amusement and made a polite request, "Can I talk to him?"

Looking at the man's still bleeding hand, the king hesitated and could only nod reluctantly in agreement, "..... I will have him come down and confess his fault to you, and I will chastise him myself when I return, so please do not be too harsh."

Georgia was pinned down in front of the man, his hands tied behind his back by the guards, and there was a look of blazing untamed submission in his eyes that was a far cry from the elegant and gentle appearance this prince had always displayed.

" Georgia ." The King's voice tightened as he sternly squeezed Georgia's raised head, "You have committed a felony by attacking a foreign guest!"

"Apologize to this guest!"

"I'll go back and collect my punishment, I'll accept any kind of heavy punishment." Georgia was forced to keep her head down, but her voice remained icy, "But I will not apologise."

"He's not a guest of Gloren's."

The king was in a hurry: " Georgia!!!"

"No need to be so harsh, let go of your hand." The man interrupted the

king with a smirk, "Your name is Georgia, isn't it?"

The king let go of his hand and Georgia slowly raised her head and looked straight at the man without speaking.

"You have a very nice soul." The man laughed lightly, "It is surprising and pleasant to me to see such a soul still in such a country."

"As your reward for showing me such a worthy soul, then here's the deal: since you insist on saving this fairy-tale corrupted kingdom from me, the big bad guy you think you are, I'll give you a chance."

"Let's play a game."

The man waved his hand and the vanished pointing stone reappeared in his hand, its palm length stained with a hint of blood, floating in front of Georgia's eyes, giving off a warm, bright lustre like gold.

"In three days." The man chuckled softly, "In three days I will come here with this pointing stone, and if you can find a way to close all the mines and keep any of them from burying the pointing stone in the vein, I will leave with the pointing stone forever and never come to this kingdom again."

"But if you don't make it."

"- whether the pain of that nod to a thousand years ago, or the pain of this one now, when that time comes, the price of all the pain will be paid by you together."

"And your answer is?"

Georgia lifted her head, her brown eyes clear: "Good."

-- just as the king a thousand years ago naively agreed to a deal with God, so he naively agreed to a game with God.

and thought they would be victorious.

13 The heart of the mining area.

Mu Sicheng carefully made his way through the dense cluster of humanoid gold sculptures on the outskirts of the mine towards the mine car, reporting into his headset as he reached the edge of the track, "There are traces of erased gold dust on the track, it's still relatively new."

"That would be the trail that Georgia and the others left down there." Bai Liu said, "This proves we're on the right track, and if Georgia and the others came here too, then it can only mean that this is indeed where the Hourglass of Time was hidden."

"The mine is in the mountain and there are many gold sculptures at the entrance." Mu Sicheng surveyed the surroundings and reported in a whisper, "There are two tracks at the entrance to the mountain with mine cars on them, one of them must have been driven away by Georgia and they drove into the mine, I saw the drag marks of the mine car."

"The mine is very deep, I shone a light on it and all I could see was a lot of shiny gold in there, it was a bit shaky, I couldn't see the rest clearly, I guess I'll have to go in the mine cart to find out what's going on."

"Do I wait for you to come before I go inside, or do I go down first by myself?" Mu Sicheng asks.

Bai Liu didn't hesitate: "Wait for us, don't move around on your own and stay away from those statues."

"But ....." Mu Sicheng was a little agitated, and when he got agitated his lungs itched involuntarily and he started choking violently, "Ahem, Georgia, what if they get to the Hourglass of Time before we do? What do we do?"

"One step ahead then." Bai Liu was unmoved, "We're supposed to be the passive position in this copy, it's normal for them to get an advantage ahead of us, don't make a move when the information isn't equal early on, and besides, what's your best skill?"

Mu Sicheng is stunned.

"If they get it first." Bai Liu said calmly, "Then you steal it back, and with your movement and alertness, there shouldn't be many people in this game who can stop a you who's just trying to steal."

"Is that so?" An extremely shallow teenage voice came from deep within the mines, "I could be one of these people."

The blue-green butterfly flutters past Mu Sicheng, whose pupils are tightly constricted, its long, thin tail dropping a fine dusting of gold, and flutters past, landing on Armand's outstretched index finger and gently shaking its wings.

Mu Sicheng jerked his head over and he jumped back twice, his breath coming to a halt - he had just scouted this mine without noticing at all that there was a man hiding inside.

Armand hangs upside down from the mine, feet together, ear-length hair pinned on one side and hanging down on the other, eyes closed, wearing a pure white and gilt uniform, back straight, like a bat hanging from a rock and resting, and at this moment, finally disturbed by the errant traveller, slowly opening his eyes.

The brown pupils of his eyes reflect in silence the monkey's paw that has transformed. Mu Sicheng, who is showing his teeth to him.

The butterflies resting on the gloves of his white uniform began to flap faster.

Armand gently gathered his legs and dropped lightly from above the mine, not even a hair out of place, as he looked across at Mu Sicheng, his tone unperturbed: "It will not end well for you to be so impulsive and irritable when things go wrong, Mu Sicheng."

"You have the tone of one who wants me to tie my hands." Mu Sicheng flung out his monkey paws in displeasure, his pupils standing up in two thin peaks as he smiled provocatively, "But last time you had something stolen from me, isn't it a bit presumptuous to talk to me in that tone of voice?"

" Golden Dawn's ace recruit?"

"That time?" Armand dragged his jaw in a seemingly enlightened remembrance, "It was just a hairpiece, you didn't steal anything very important, and I didn't need to break ranks and waste time tangling with you."

"But now-"

Armand lifted his eyes and raised his arms to the right, and the butterfly rose from his right shoulder to meet the wind, its wings fluttering rapidly.

"- you are going to steal something that is extremely important to both my brother and my team."

"You can try and see if you can get past my protective layer and escape from the middle of my hurricane as you wish."

[System Alert: Player Armand uses the skill, Summon (Chain Hurricane)]

[This skill deals continuous damage to a player bound in a hurricane by chains until the hurricane stops, skill CD is one hour].

The still air began to move, and Mu Sicheng watched as a huge storm rose from the ground, sucking in all the dust around him, and gritted his teeth as he tried to make a break for it, only to be stopped by Bai Liu's cold command in his headset: "Run, Mu Sicheng, you can't afford Armand's skill damage on your life. "

"You're our ace in the hole, run as hard as you can and live until the end when I, the tactician, let you die, got it?"

"Got it!" Mu Sicheng nodded, he took one more look at the hurricane, gave a toothy middle finger and turned to scamper away.

"Hang him up, get us into the mines, don't let him and Georgia do a skill reset on the same map, and control Armand, that's your main goal for this one."

Mu Sicheng leapt from a high building, narrowly avoiding the hurricane that brushed his legs, and wiped the blood from his mouth as he fell, smiling wickedly: "A piece of cake."

A hurricane of wind, with layers of metal chains wrapped tightly around it, pursued Mu Sicheng as he ran on.

Liu Jiayi, who was travelling at full speed, suddenly turned his head in a certain direction, his lips pursed: "There's a noise in that direction, it's ....."

"It's Mu Sicheng." Bai Liu calmly answered, "He's lured away Armand, our first head-to-head with Golden Dawn, and it's a war of attrition, so we'll have to hurry."

"That should be mine 13 just ahead." Muke glanced at the picture, looked up at Bai Liu, "Below the mine is the bulk of Georgia's force, are we still going to keep our tactics?"

"Well." Bai Liu looked up at everyone in a circle, " Georgia is a strong sub and it's a tight group, so our basic tactic is to play on separate sides, that is, one to one, each person tries to hold back one player to put distance between them and Georgia, so that Georgia can't sub them and reduce the other team's advantage."

"Here's the problem with that tactic though." Tang Erda frowned, "If it's just one stall, it's a total stalemate, then both sides want an ace in

place to break the stalemate."

"I believe Captain Georgia thought the same as I did." Bai Liu smiled, "Except he had his ace on Armand, and I had mine on Mu Sicheng."

"Next, let's see how they perform."

"Now." Bai Liu turned his head to the group of golden humanoid sculptures holding banners at the entrance to the mine, his tone calm, "Let us first enter the most valuable core of this land of gold."

"Get in the mine cart."

The mine car looks small, but it's still a good squeeze. Bai Liu, Team Quan and Tang Erda sit at the front, wrenching down the bars, and the car surges forward.

Liu Jiayi took a look at the fully operational mine wagon and tsked twice: "What a decent man, this Captain Georgia, not even destroying the mine wagon."

"If Bai Liu had arrived first, he would have taken one of the mine cars himself and the other one he would have put a bunch of explosives underneath and blown it up as soon as he pulled the trigger, sending people to Team Quan to heaven."

" Georgia is a prince, it's normal to have a bit of aristocratic manners when it comes to competitions." Bai Liu spreads his hands innocently, "A commoner like me who is looking for value for money, of course I can only set up in all the places I can win, ah, due to my origins, there is no way out."

Liu Jiayi: "..... = =."

Why does this man always make underhanded tactics sound so unusual.

"But Georgia didn't do anything with the mine cart, probably partly out of the inertia of a decent man's mind, and partly because he didn't want to ruin the place." Bai Liu rubbed his chin, "This is his home country after all, and every blade of grass, every mine cart should be precious to him."

"It's certainly more likely to be."

Bai Liu smiles and says, "He thinks he's more likely to win by letting

us into the mines, a map he knows better."

The car rattled along like a rollercoaster and after a few turns, finally entered the large core of the mine.

Even Muke, who has seen a lot of the world, was stunned the moment he entered the large mine, while Tang Erda and Liu Jiayi were stunned straight away, and Bai Liu, who was rarely able to maintain his composure, could not help but exclaim: "What an unimaginable size of mine."

A cave close to the size of three or four large stadiums spans the entire mountain, which has been cut open from the very top, with a large volcanic eruption-like opening running from the top to the bottom, and light shoots in beams from the top into the cave, which is criss-crossed by dozens of tracks that are not built into the mountain or some kind of surveillance foundation at all, but are steel cables suspended down from above the mountain, suspended rigidly up, so that these tracks are suspended in the air.

And on the four walls of the mine were many miners suspended in mid-air, wearing protective suits and working with excavating implements in their hands.

Or, more precisely, a gold sculpture in the style of a miner.

The miners seemed unaware that a plague was about to turn everyone into gold, and they were still working senselessly, some of them laughing and talking playfully to the miner next to him who was hanging to a position with him, and some of them with food in their hands to eat, which should have been his lunch, but had long since rotted.

Miners of all kinds are suspended in mid-air, framed in a moment of their lives, in the form of gold.

The four walls of the cave were covered in gold, not even ore, but gold, and they could imagine what a busy, bustling scene it was ten years ago when this was the land of gold - miners hanging down from the top of the mountain, mining and working all day long, mine cars The miners were running back and forth on the overhanging tracks, transporting the gold they had mined to the gold depot, and everyone's faces were full of smiles.

Rendered by the light of the sky falling from the summit, the gold miners' sculptures and the gold on the cave walls reflect a dazzling

interplay of light that is magnificent.

"That would have been a very sudden change of heart." Muke quickly snapped back, "These miners hadn't come down from the situation of the operation and just hung on like that to be turned into gold."

"Those statues at the entrance, too." Liu Jiayi frowned back, "They look like they just came to protest Georgia's decision to hand over the mine to the Bureau of Heresy Processing right in front of the mine, turned into gold."

"But if it's some sort of change that turns people into gold in an instant ....." Bai Liu pondered, "it doesn't make sense with the animals there at the Gold Dispensary, the animals were there long after the Gold Dispensary closed The animals lived in it after it was closed for a long time, and slowly turned into gold."

"If what is turning the creature into gold is some sort of heresy, there should be another variable in the effect of this heresy on the creature that we don't know about."

"Personally, I'm leaning towards concentration." Bai Liu spreads his hands, "I initially speculated on the concentration of gold dust, the higher the concentration of gold dust, the faster it turns the creature into a sculpture, but once inside the mine, that speculation doesn't really hold up too well, as the concentration of gold dust here isn't actually as high as it is outside."

"So it's not supposed to be gold dust." Muke muses, "Is it possible that it is some sort of other stone dust similar to gold dust?"

"Like some kind of heretical dust?"

"It's possible." Bai Liu looked down the track where the mine car was travelling, "So something happened on the day of the protest that caused the dust from this heresy to spread and turn the people of this country into gold sculptures after they inhaled it."

"It's a bit strange. ....."

Bai Liu clicked on his system panel and lowered his eyes, "Same question as before, we should have reached the highest concentration of heretics, my lungs and body are in significant discomfort, but strangely enough, my life and mental values are normal and I don't show any drop."

"So how did this heretic influence people and turn these people into gold sculpted heretics, or monsters?"

"Want to try attacking the statues now?" Muke inquired, "You can unlock the monster book, it might have an explanation on it."

"It's better to go out and attack again." Tang Erda, who was sitting at the front of the mine cart, looked soberly ahead, "There are just too many gold sculptures here, and if it causes a chain reaction, we'll probably have a hard time escaping."

"And ....."

Tang Erda paused for a moment, "I've been through a lot of games and dealt with heretics a lot in reality, and I don't know if I'm wrong in my senses, but I don't sense heresy or monsters from these golden statues."

"There's nothing offensive about these sculptures ....."

"Yes." Bai Liu dragged his jaw in thought, "The monsters we've encountered in the game before have taken it upon themselves to attack us, the same way the sculptures, the mermaids in the town of Siren would take it upon themselves to attack the hatching players, but the sculptures here, they do seem a little too peaceful towards the players."

Tang Erda whispered a reminder, "But the processing bureau has also housed some less offensive heretics."

Bai Liu pondered slightly, "Not enough clues to draw a conclusion for now, let's move on down the road."

As the wheels of the mine wagon grunted and rolled, undulating through the treacherous cavern, the further in you went, the darker the light, the narrower the road, the greater the number of miners dangling from the walls, Tang Erda switched on the torch she had found in the mine wagon, tapped it and turned it on.

If it was the big cave outside that needed digging to see the gold, inside it was chiselling nuggets off the gold biscuit - the biscuit all around was so golden that nothing could be seen of the mineral soil, only the huge gold walls interspersed with the hard rock patterns that supported the whole cave.

"This is also ....." Liu Jiayi was staggered, "too much, right?"

"This level of gold minerals has lasted for a thousand years." Muke laments, "It's understandable why the people of the Gloren country were in that frame of mind."

"..... No wonder ....." Tang Erda lowered her voice to a whisper, "The Third Council was built at Georgia's own expense, to expand into the sea and guard a giant heresy under the sea, it cost a lot of money at the time, the financial side wouldn't report it, said Georgia overbuilt it, and Georgia paid for it themselves."

"It said it was gold that was given."

"Georgia was very generous with the money, and Su Yang complained to me for a while that the Bureau of Heresy was too strict with its finances, and that it could have been reported. Tang Erda said with a sigh of relief, "The Third Bureau is notoriously generous, and Georgia would pay for anything that could not be financed, and sometimes he would pay for hundreds of millions of dollars. "

"You could tell by the way he gave the money that he really didn't think there was anything to it." Tang Erda looks up at this mine of gold and sighs, "I've speculated before about what kind of birth would raise someone like Georgia who has no attachment to money and a lot of money reserves, and it turns out that's where he came from."

" Georgia such a literal money spinner."

Tang Erda gave Bai Liu a rare tease: "It's the opposite of you, White Tactician."

Bai Liu smiles disarmingly as he spreads his hands, "I'm a laid-off worker, I've earned every cent of my life, so it's a bit difficult to ask me to splash out, Captain Tang."

"But your Heresy Processing Authority finances are quite interesting, it feels like everything is stuck tight."

Speaking of which, Tang Erda held her forehead in pain and whispered, "Stop it, it's a demon department."

"It's not that they're bad people, they're not actually bad people, they're just very timid, like a bunch of hamsters who are terrified of the cold and want to stock up on food." Tang Erda sighed, "The way the Heretic Processing Bureau's finances work is that the Field Department collects heretics, then the Logistics Department takes in heretics, sorts them into categories, tallies them into files, categorises

some of the safe rentable heretics, then the Ministry of Finance gives the go-ahead to rent heretics to countries around the world, making a profit from that, and the money earned keeps the Heretic Processing Bureau running. "

"But many high-risk heretics cannot be rented, not only can they not be rented, but they need some specific environments to house them, such as blood primroses, which have to be placed in a soil-free, bloodless and dry environment or they will spore, and the long-term maintenance of these environments also costs money."

"Not only that, but it costs different amounts of money to go out into the field and encounter heretics."

"Some heretics cost less to house." Tang Erda sighs helplessly, "but the overheads for some heretical internment are extremely large, such as the last Sunshine City, the largest sub-sea heresy Georgia took in, which would have cost billions, if not tens of billions, to take in, but had to be dealt with."

"There are some places where the officials are very good at talking and will reimburse us for a lot of the shelter costs, like Sunnyside where billions of dollars ended up being eaten up just because the officials reimbursed the lion's share, but there are some places where the officials don't care about the heretics and have to deal with them themselves by the heresy handling bureau, like Georgia's Under the Sea Heresy."

"Several of the heretics that have appeared recently have been heretics with high expenses, so that group at the Treasury will be particularly tight-fisted for fear that there won't be enough money when the next one comes out."

"I can understand Su Yang not liking the Ministry of Finance because it really is a bad department to talk to, but I can also understand the Ministry of Finance because the uncertainty of heresy is just too great."

"If you can really put an end to this era of heresy everywhere."

Tang Erda smiled helplessly at Bai Liu: "Those hamsters at the Treasury might hug your trouser leg and howl for daddy."

"I try to do my best." Bai Liu smiles.

Reality, on the Gulo Sea, branch of the Third Bureau of the Bureau of

Heresy Handling.

Inside the island branch, in the processing centre of the underwater unmanned submarine reconnaissance department, a group of men sat sternly at the console, wearing signal receiving instrument helmets that covered half of his head, looking at the underwater detection radar signals coming from in front of the display and seriously reporting.

"Report sir, nothing close to Heretic 0073 at this time, end of report!"

A voice came over the headset, "Keep probing! Georgia, the captain has given orders to make sure no one gets within a kilometre of Heretic 0073 until he returns!"

The team straightened up, "Roger that!"

After the voice in his headset ended, the team member rubbed his eyes a little tiredly and he grabbed the coffee cup sitting next to the console to drink it down, only to realise that it was empty when he lifted it up.

"So tired." The team member next to him stretched his body and stretched, dragging his jaw to look at the display, "How much longer do we have to keep watch, it's been a day and a night."

"A teaser letter is just a teaser letter, is it worth the whole three bureaus raising a fuss?"

Although dedicated to his job, after reporting that team member heard this also echoed somewhat wearily, "..... Although Captain Georgia has his reasons for doing everything, I really don't know what to detect while I'm sitting here. "

"I don't know what it takes to steal a heresy that big at the bottom of the sea."

"Yeah." The team member spread his hands, his voice smiling inside his helmet, two sharp tiger teeth showing at the corners of his lips under his mask, "Been keeping watch here all day, and I don't know how to steal it."

"..... what...how did you steal it?!" Noticing something wrong with this team member, the team member who had finished reporting snapped out of his tired and slackened state, and he realised with a jolt that something was wrong with this team member - that this team

member's posture was too slouchy and distinctly different from that of the well-trained Third Bureau team member, and that the board and strict uniform of the Third Bureau was somewhat ill-fitting on this team member's The cuffs and collar were unbuttoned and pulled up, turning him into a better-action outfit.

To top it all off, the guy had a little monkey logo next to the headset he was wearing - you don't get a logo that cartoonish in the third bureau!

"Who are you?!" The team member, full of fear, was about to radio in, and had just picked up the machine when the suspicious team member across the room raised his hand to punch him down on the neck, in a lazy tone, "Been waiting all day to finally learn how to read how this machine shows location."

"Thanks a lot, dedicated little brother."

A second before he fell unconscious to the ground, the team member saw with horror the other team members who were all on the ground outside.

The team member, or [Mu Sicheng], casually removed the mask from his head and set it aside, folding his feet over the console and leaning back in his chair, casually taking a sip from his coffee, his eyes half-closed as he looked at the display.

" Bai six is really going to get me in trouble ....."

"I can't believe I'm being asked to come to another timeline to steal such a big heresy, it's my official time off."

"Well, let's see exactly how extensive this heresy is ....." [Mu Sicheng] leaned forward and moved a few buttons on the console, an entire scan appeared on the display and he raised one eyebrow lightly. "Not bad for the biggest heretic of all."

He hooked his lips and his right hand turned into a monkey's paw piercing his white uniform glove, "Seeing as the theft was strong enough, let's ask for less overtime this time."

The Lost Land of Gold

Mu Sicheng ripped off his pierced white uniform gloves, pulled off the monkey headset from his helmet, and at the sight of the hip-hop monkey logo stuck through his head, [Mu Sicheng]'s gaze suddenly paused for a moment, then averted as if nothing had happened, and put it back on.

..... It's been so many years that anything his desire generates still carries this monkey symbol on it.

Is Yuan Qingqing ..... such a big influence on him?

It was just a high school classmate, and she'd been dead for years, so it was time for him to move on.

[Mu Sicheng], with his eyes averted at the fading monkey symbol on his dangling earpiece, averted his gaze and turned away.

In-game.

Chased by the hurricane, Mu Sicheng had reached the bottom of the castle - the furthest point he knew from the mine - but the hurricane was still in pursuit, and Mu Sicheng looked back twice, only vaguely able to see the golden hurricane coming towards him in the swirling phoenix eyes. Armand.

Damn, Armand, does it take that long to use?

Mu Sicheng looks at his depleting stamina bar and skill time and grits his teeth and stops - he can't run at full speed anymore and would rather stop and take a skill from Armand, lowering his life.

With Liu Jiayi giving him a life-giving antidote, he should be able to take Armand at least twice, and if he doesn't let Armand interact with Georgia, he should be able to hold Armand off for about three hours, all told.

..... three hours, Bai Liu says he should be able to push this copy through to the end if he moves fast enough.

In fact, Mu Sicheng didn’t understand why Bai Liu is in such a hurry. After seeing everyone inhaling the gold powder and not losing any spirit or life, Bai Liu, with just a little thought, doubles the speed of

the fast-paced confrontation they were doing - the original pace was already fast. The aim was to finish the book in one day within the game time.

But Bai Liu later turned that time into three hours.

This speed confrontation is particularly stressful and demanding for everyone, especially for him as a roaming player who has to consistently hang the main attack.

The speeding hurricane engulfed the slowing Mu Sicheng almost in a blink of an eye. Countless chains staggered in the golden hurricane, binding Mu Sicheng's hands and feet in moments, others grazing his body, the cold metal leaving scars on Mu Sicheng's body as his life began to drop with the naked eye.

Fuck, that hurts!

Mu Sicheng's features are scrunched together.

Armand, in the eye of the hurricane phoenix, slowly walks towards him.

Mu Sicheng said loudly in a stern voice, mentally calculating the time he had to eat the skill: "How can you leave the main team so easily, you're the main attacker, aren't you afraid that your team won't be able to output and will just be sent away by our team in one wave?"

"Our main attack is a great one!"

"You do have a point." Armand, who had stepped in front of Mu Sicheng, raised his eyes, "Your main attacker is quite a deterrent, but I can't let you off the hook for stealing, your theft would cause the thought of bad publicity."

"You, who watched Yuan Qingqing die in front of you, know this best, don't you?"

Mu Sicheng's pupils shrank for a moment at the words, then he gave a vicious laugh and provoked in a mute voice: "..... What nonsense are you talking about, you're starting to talk nonsense, are you that afraid of me?"

"The very act of stealing is unjust." Armand looks calmly at Mu Sicheng, "Once you were tortured by it, and the pleasure you derive from it eventually turns to pain back to yourself."

"I will not let you steal or let my own team be governed, so I will keep you here and return to help."

"How long do you think a hurricane can hold me without your guard?" Mu Sicheng laughed out loud as if he had heard a very funny joke, "I can steal your hairpiece from the hurricane and naturally I can break free from your hurricane!"

"You know I'm not talking about me." Armand's tone was flat, "I'm talking about Yuan Qingqing."

"The logo on your headphones is still a monkey, so you should remember the name, right?"

Mu Sicheng's expression froze completely.

"I know a hurricane of chains without me holding it down can't trap you, so-" Armand lifted his hand, the butterfly resting on his fingertips, his gaze turning condensed, "[I] will stay here. "

"But I will also return to help, in another form."

[System Alert: Player Armand equips Monster Book Form - (Hurricane Butterfly)]

[Butterfly and human soul's swap. Butterfly enters player Armand's body and can act as the eye of a hurricane, continuously causing hurricanes and tracking down suspects, while the human soul enters the butterfly's body and can move freely, causing a new round of hurricanes. this form, when equipped, allows the player to cause hurricanes on multiple points in both directions].

[This form can be interrupted by a mutual exchange after the butterfly's weakness has been discovered].

The butterfly's wings fluttered away, leaving Armand's pupils with all their light lost, leaving only an inorganic, murderous, cold light, and a butterfly symbol above his throat, as colourful as a tattoo, with a sheen flowing from it.

This [Armand] raised his head and stared at the chained Mu Sicheng with emotionless eyes, making a peculiar, creepy sound as if the insects were beating their wings.

"Use the hurricane and kill, Mu Sicheng ."

More intense hurricanes are coming.

Inside the mine.

After passing through countless caves, the mine cart finally reached the deepest part of the mine. Bai Liu They jumped off the cart and looked up at the subtle sky light coming down from the very top, and following it, they could see a golden sculpture bending over and digging for something.

"This man doesn't seem to be a miner." Muke moved over to look as he examined the statue, which was crouched on the ground, looking anxious and digging for something, "Judging by his clothes, he must be a priest of some sort of high standing in this country."

"It's certainly not gold that the priests come here to dig."

Liu Jiayi followed the priest's digging movements and picked twice at the ground, which was covered with mineral soil and scattered gold nuggets: "This hole is not deep."

"It doesn't feel like digging something ....." Liu Jiayi frowned, "It feels like burying something."

"But the question is what to bury?"

"Will it be the Hourglass of Time?" Tang Erda asked.

"Not like that." Bai Liu stroked his chin, "This priest is obviously on some sort of mission to ride out the critical point where the people outside come to protest and drag out the time to come and bury something on the backs of someone who would be of such high status and unavailable that a figure of his stature would be used to do such a grunt work. "

"It makes some sense to come and bury the hourglass of time at a point like this."

"Then this person who asked him to bury something was either the king or Georgia, and only these two were qualified to ask the priest to bury something." Liu Jiayi stared at the sculpture for a moment, then suddenly reached out and pulled something like a silk scarf out of the sculpture's gold dusted coat, "What is this?"

Liu Jiayi shakes the gold dust off the silk scarf, then notices a wedge-shaped black mark on the yellowed white scarf.

"It looks like some kind of stone, traces of the explosion." Liu Jiayi looked closer and halfway through, she suddenly covered her mouth and choked violently, her fingertips spilling gold dust as she coughed and wrapped the silk scarf around her and stepped on the ground to keep it out of the others' reach, "Ahem ..... this is supposed to be the heretic that can generate gold, the heretic that was here shattered, and this silk scarf is what wrapped that heretic."

"This priest came here, too, to bury this heretic, who is supposed to be ..... ahem, the king's man!"

" Jiayi, has your panel dropped?" Bai Liu asked quickly and calmly.

Liu Jiayi coughs hard while tapping on the panel, then shakes his head, "No drop, life and spirit levels are normal."

"Don't mind me, the overall picture is basically out now, ahem, time is of the essence, sort out the information and push the line first!"

"Ten years ago, the gold production in Gloren fell, the people panicked, prices rose, the king got hold of some kind of heresy from the gods to increase gold production again, and wanted to deal with the gods again to get more of this heresy, but the then Grand Prince Georgia did not agree, and this second burst of gold caused many miners to suffer from a peculiar organ Sclerosis disease, and Georgia thought there was something wrong with this gold, some kind of heresy, and wanted to turn the mines over to the processing bureau that dealt with heretics to take them in." Muke quickly deduced.

"And the people at the time couldn't take it and came to protest at the gates of the mine on the day Georgia forcibly handed it over, stalling the Georgia faction who wanted to hand over the cave, while at the same time -" Bai Liu turned his attention to the The king took the opportunity to secretly send the high priest inside the mine with the heresy he already had, in order to bury it underground and make everything final."

"But for some reason, it didn't work out to bury it, and it made this heresy explode."

"It seems you guys have the ability to deduce things after all." A clear male voice came from above, "Since you have guessed my identity, you should know that this is my home map, so why did you follow without thinking of yourself?"

Bai Liu's voice trailed off as he spoke and turned his head to look over,

raising an eyebrow at the sight of the flapping butterfly resting on Georgia's shoulder, "So that's it."

-- No wonder Armand's skill can deal such a wide range of damage with so little presence, it does it in the form of a butterfly.

The [body] draws attention to the attacker with a hurricane, and it's the unassuming butterfly that does the main attacking - a subtle skill, I must say, as if it was made to counteract Mu Sicheng, the fast roaming member of their team.

"I was going to scatter you all one by one." Bai Liu shrugged and held up his hands in a gesture of surrender, "Now it seems you've been guarding us against this for a while, Captain Georgia."

"The Hourglass of Time is in your hands too, isn't it?"

Bai Liu's eyes moved down to the hourglass looming in Georgia's hand and smiled as he asked, "But have you ever wondered, Your Highness, if anyone's tears could fill this hourglass?"

The moment he said that, his right index finger gouged downwards. With a sweep of the tail of his eye, Muke quickly understood the meaning of Bai Liu's gesture and disappeared from his spot, appearing behind Georgia's back in the next second, his sharp dagger jammed in front of Georgia's neck, pinning him backwards.

"Move." Bai Liu ordered calmly, "Follow the previous plan, scatter them one by one and confront them at full strength."

Ornamental pool.

"Bai Liu is at a disadvantage." Lu Yizhan stared at the big screen for a while, thought for a moment and then suddenly said, " Georgia's home advantage is too big, and Armand's skill is like adding another player to their team, which is also hard to handle."

Liao Ke looked helplessly at Lu Yizhan, who had avoided his previous question: "Captain, what I just asked you was not about the game."

"What I'm asking you is what's going on with Georgia's heresy under the sea, and I've called you into the corner of the viewing pool to avoid the Spades, so you don't have to keep me in the dark, do you?"

"This thing has your hand in it at first glance, Georgia was only sixteen ten years ago, how could he have handled the country he

turned into a heretic when the Heresy Authority at the time didn't have the funds or the ability to sink a heresy the size of a country."

"The only person who can do this and keep this in check is you, tell me what's going on and what you've done?"

"Eh ....." Lu Yizhan rubbed his head with a sad face, "I told you; you'll definitely scold me again."

Liao Ke took a deep breath as he propped his hands on his knees, "You speak first, I'll try not to scold, weren't you watching Bai Liu at the orphanage ten years ago, why are you in charge of this again?"

Lu Yizhan covered his face for a moment, but finally, under the sly gaze of his lieutenant, he spoke helplessly: "I was indeed at the orphanage, but the identity of the first captain of the Heresy Bureau set for me by Bai six was still there, but the body I landed in this world line was only fourteen years old, so how could I go over there and take charge? "

"But before walking away, Georgia's matter was reported to me."

"He was seeking cooperation with the members of the Third Bureau stationed closest to Gulohai." Lu Yizhan said with a complicated look and tone, "But the people from the Third Bureau soon realised that it was no small matter and reported the matter to the General Directorate here, and I got the message and was ready to go over to deal with it."

"On the day of the incident, Georgia was ready to close the mines, but because there were popular protests at many of the mines, it was impossible to close them, meaning that the boy had lost the game with Bai six, but he didn't give up then, he contacted the then three boards and wanted to use our strength to hold the mines from the people and then dispose of the gold inside. "

"The members of the Third Bureau field team were led into Gloren country by Georgia, and they lurked in the mines, ready to wait for Bai six to emerge with the gold point stone and take it in."

"But Georgia had no idea that her own father had actually made a private deal with the evil gods to advance the suffering of the nation, had already gotten his hands on the Pointing Stone, and was going to have the high priest bury it in the veins of the earth ahead of time while the people held back Georgia's faction."

"The king did not want to clash with Georgia head-on and chose to do so, wanting to put an end to all the farce."

" The Gloren State was hidden by the Bai six guy, and you had to be guided by someone from the Gloren State to get in, and when I went over there, Georgia came out and guided me without knowing it."

"And at the same time, two waves of men who had both lurked in the mines ahead of time met, and a clash broke out between the priest and his party, who wanted to force a burial in the point stone, and the members of the Third Bureau, who wanted to house the heretics."

Lu Yizhan wipes his face a little wearily: "When Georgia and I entered Gloren country, basically everyone in the country, including all the field team members who were there at the time from the three bureaus, were turned into gold sculptures, except for some small animals that were far away from the mines."

"Only Armand, his brother, who was sent ahead of time to be housed by him at the Third Board, was spared."

" Georgia broke down."

"He felt that he was responsible for all of this ....., whether it was the destruction of the Gloren State or the death of these players in the Third Council."

"The gold dust was still spreading outwards, and to prevent this heretic from turning the whole world to gold, I used my heavy sword to cut the country of Gloren from the sea in front of him, wrapped it in the protective shield of the Heretic's Authority to prevent it from spreading, and then sank the country into the deep sea."

Lu Yizhan closed his eyes, "..... There were still a lot of Third Board members who knew about it at the time, and as you know, while I trusted the Heresy Handling Board members, there were many times when I had to plan for the worst."

"This heresy is so attractive to people that it is hard for anyone to resist the temptation of stealing just a little gold dust up from the heresy at the bottom of the sea and putting some small animals together with this gold dust to create a constant flow of gold."

"So, I used my skills, and I said to Georgia that I would erase any trace of the existence of this Golden Land from the memory of everyone, including you."

"..... He begged me on his knees for a long time, begging me not to erase his memory, even saying that he could stay under the supervision of the Third Bureau and that it was okay to monitor him as a heretic, as long as I didn't erase his memory."

"I ended up keeping Georgia's memory, but the kid knew his stuff and he got himself into the third bureau, made it to the director's position and basically placed himself under the supervision of the Heresy Processing Bureau and me the whole time."

"He felt sorry for the Three Bureaus and for his brother, so he has been working hard to make it up to them, turning the Three Bureaus into warehouses, turning them into the first partial doors for heretics without field teams, but charging himself to be on the front line of taking in heretics, paying for the expansion of the Three Bureaus out of his account, refusing to let his brother into the Three Bureaus, all efforts he has made. "

"Gold for the three bureau expansions ....." Lu Yizhan looked up at Georgia on the big screen and he sighed, "Originally when it was the Grand Prince of the Gloren State Georgia sold a lot of his stuff, saved from the Gold Dispensation in the changes, stored outside, and was going to be used to get the nation through the long winter that would soon be without gold."

"But in the end, this gold was not used to issue to these nationals, but to expand the three bureaus."

" Georgia moved the Three Bureaus to the side of the Gurro Sea, and he kept watch over them, over the sea, over his homeland at the bottom of the sea, forbidding himself to laugh, forbidding himself to be happy, forbidding himself to be irresponsible, wanting to keep everything protected, and slowly becoming what he is today."

"I don't know what Bai six said to him."

Lu Yizhan bowed his head wearily: "But that Georgia boy, whatever happened, hadn't cried since he was sixteen."

"I asked him about it, and he answered me that the gods had fixed his people in that moment ten years ago, that they were painless, and that if only one day he could pay off the thousand-year gold equivalent of the pain owed to the gods for all the people of the Gloren Kingdom, as promised, the deal would stop, time would be reversed, those people would come back to life, and the people of the Three Councils would not die, and The Gloren Kingdom can return to the earth again."

"Everyone will be able to be as happy as they were in the beginning."

"For this reason, he could not shed another tear because of his pain; he would store it up and put it in the hourglass."

"But the game with the evil god ..... was originally full of traps." Lu Yizhan closed his eyes as he took a deep breath, "I sometimes wanted to advise him, but after thinking about myself, aren't I also walking the path of playing games with God?"

"Perhaps he had no other choice or expectation than that, just as I did."

Game on the outskirts of the palace.

The hurricane kept on rolling and Mu Sicheng struggled to get out of the chains, but [Armand] pressed on.

The thing moved very briskly but created a sense of imminence significantly less than the real Armand before it, moving not as if after thinking, but as if it were a real butterfly rounding up its prey, hiding in its chains and constantly closing in on him.

But it's still a pain in the arse.

It wasn't that he couldn't break free, it was just that his hands were trembling.

..... Yuan Qingqing ..... how long had it been since he had heard that name and why did this Armand guy know Yuan Qingqing ?

Why did this one know, why did this one remember, why did this one remind him, when even he himself had almost forgotten?!

[Theft is an unjust thing, Mu Sicheng.]

[It's not right to steal, Mu Sicheng].

The cold male voice and the stern female voice mingle in Mu Sicheng's brain, his pupils tremble with all sorts of stirring emotions, and the scaly powder of a butterfly appears in the hurricane, caught in the gold dust that he inhales.

[System Warning: Player Mu Sicheng has inhaled butterfly scale powder and has become dizzy and psychedelic, his spirit level has begun to drop!]

The moment [Armand] approached him along the chain, a blank Mu Sicheng subconsciously reached out with his monkey paw and grabbed the golden hairpiece on the side of [Armand]'s hair, ripping it off.

The gold hairpiece fell from the midst of the hurricane and tumbled to the ground with a crisp, tinkling crunch.

--The sound coincided with the sound of the bell in Mu Sicheng's memory of the evening study session.

The Lost Land of Gold

"Mu Sicheng!" A loud, angry female voice awoke from a memory he had long avoided, "Why are you stealing again!"

Seventeen-year-old Mu Sicheng lazily raised his head from his desk, his face filled with the displeasure and provocation of being woken up from sleep: " Yuan Qingqing, what's it to you if I steal something?"

"We don't know each other very well, do we?"

"What do you mean, I'm the class president!" Yuan Qingqing slapped the table in anger, "I told you to stop playing pranks, give me what you stole, I'll give it back!"

"I won't give it back." Mu Sicheng stretched out on the table, "Who proves that I took it, show me the proof?"

"I saw it." Yuan Qingqing suddenly calmed down, "I saw you go through Ma Cailiang's bag at noon, and I saw you take his dormitory key with my own eyes."

"I know you're doing this because you hate what Ma Cailiang did before, but you shouldn't punish him in this way either."

"It's not right to steal, fellow Mu Sicheng."

"It's already half past ten, lights out in the boys' dormitory in half an hour, and Ma Cailiang has been in his dorm for half an hour." Yuan Qingqing put his hand in front of Mu Sicheng with a stern expression, "Give me his key."

Mu Sicheng's eyelids droop, and he raises his eyes to survey the squad leader with his pockets tucked in.

He transferred to the school two months ago, and as for the reason for his transfer, naturally, he stole something.

After a couple of minor demerits, he changed schools again. His parents were always ashamed of his habit of transferring him to another school, as far away from where they were as possible, when things went wrong, and it was not uncommon for Mu Sicheng to change schools.

As for the matter of stealing things ..... Mu Sicheng has this fetish, just

like some children like to play pranks, he likes to steal things.

The more challenging something is, the more it can turn someone's face after stealing it, the more he likes to hide the item and admire the look on the other person's face before throwing it out slowly and watching them cry as they hug their lost and found item after the robbery.

Mu Sicheng's parents couldn't stand this habit early on and beat him up many times, but they couldn't change it, and they even took him to a mental hospital once in secret.

What did the psychiatrist say?

[..... Because parents neglect their children for a long time, resulting in this child not getting enough attention during the formative years, when they reach adolescence they will form a kind of rebellion, stealing is actually just a way for this child to attract attention, you should spend more time with him].

This doctor was actually quite right, early on his parents were out working and were leaving him in the care of his grandfather. When these two finished working, it seemed to be the stage where everyone around them started to work on their children, his parents suddenly remembered that they still had a son like him, so they took Mu Sicheng back and brought him up themselves.

Mu Sicheng didn't hate the psychiatrist and had two frank conversations with him - [I just hate it when these people don't appreciate what they have and know to look for it when they lose it, so I want to play a prank on them].

[I understand.] The psychologist was very friendly, [can you try to communicate with them in a different way?]

Mu Sicheng was ready to listen to the psychiatrist and find someone to talk to casually, not that he didn't know he was abnormal, but his parents unilaterally called off the process after a month of therapy without seeing results.

His parents argued with the hapless doctor in the treatment room: "Did I pay all that money to have him talk to you?"

"Will chatting cure him of his bad habit of being a thief? Can talking make him keep his hands to himself? Don't you have some kind of mind control drugs here, don't you have electrotherapy? It's not like

we can't afford it, you put him on them all!"

"Do you know how embarrassing it is for us when word gets out that he stole something!"

Mu Sicheng waited boredly outside the treatment room playing with his video game, his eyes drooping as he watched his parents who were hysterically demanding a refund from the doctor, suddenly not wanting treatment.

It was good that he stole something to make it so difficult for these two.

Many people couldn't understand Mu Sicheng's theft because his family was not bad, or even good, and his parents had worked hard for so long that they had nothing else but enough money to give him.

But money is not given for nothing. Mu Sicheng also needs to do a lot of things, such as do well in exams, have special skills, go out with them, not be embarrassed in front of those people, and have to be a thousand times better than those people's children.

[Those people] are the one that his parents have fought so hard to finally get into, sort of an upper class circle of people who, unlike his parents who came from an average background, most of them came from very good backgrounds, making his parents who came from an average background very stifled, feeling that they couldn't compete with everything, but wanting very much to compete with this group in everything.

"If I had been given such an origin ....." were the words his father used to say when he was drunk.

"If only I could have a mother's family like that ....." were the words his mother used to say when she cried.

His parents disliked where he came from, which he was a lot like his parents - he didn't like it either.

Mu Sicheng was his parents' weapon, because he was good, or at least better than the children of many people in the circle, and that was enough for his parents to raise their eyebrows and praise him for his stamina - Mu Sicheng was sort of the only thing they had over those in the circle.

He got good grades, was athletic, was pretty smart in everything he

did, had a pretty pleasant face, could walk out and be described as handsome by anyone, and could play some extreme sports, which made a lot of kids in that circle look up to him and think he was cool and handsome.

But this adulation and praise only lasted until Mu Sicheng was caught stealing for the first time and then the whole school was informed.

When he returned that day, his parents sat in the living room as if the sky had fallen, his mother was crying with her make-up on, his father had slapped him, and they asked him viciously.

"Why would you do such a thing!"

"Do you know how much you've embarrassed me!"

They scolded him, taught him and transferred him to another school while hoping that he would open up and become the [Mu Sicheng] that made them look good instead of the bad [Mu Sicheng] that he is now.

But again and again, the parents finally gave up on him in disgust and transferred him to class seven at a high school in an eighteenth-tier city - the same high school he is in now.

"Living expenses are called to you every month." His father waved his hand wearily and boredly, "Don't you come back."

Mu Sicheng transferred into this school and was a highly popular schoolboy for a while, but while popularity means someone likes him, there are also people who spy on him, and soon the things that surround him follow and his popularity is at a low point again.

But he doesn't really care, Mu Sicheng is so used to it that he gets more annoyed when someone likes him.

It's not like he hasn't been liked by a bunch of people before, and that's about it. I don't know why this group of high school kids are so after some popular guy, highly popular schoolboy or whatever.

--So thought Mu Sicheng, a sophomore, with contempt.

Although everyone unspokenly rejects him, Mu Sicheng is a bit of a delinquent, tall and athletic, so no one dares to bully him, except to hide away from him, and when someone in the class loses something, they will sneak a glance at Mu Sicheng and whisper a few words, not

even in front of him.

This may have something to do with what Mu Sicheng stole; he was not the kind of thief who wanted money, but rather a bit of a [eccentric thief], or even a [grand thief].

--All the trousers of the boys in the class who like to lift girls' skirts, the wig of the teacher who scolds poor students who can only go to the desk later, the dorm key of the boy who bullies his housemates.

The last one is Ma Cailiang.

Even if they knew that Mu Sicheng had stolen it, they didn't dare to do anything to him after they found out about his family's fortune, and they were too angry to say anything.

The only person in the class who dared to take on Mu Sicheng was the class monitor Yuan Qingqing.

Yuan Qingqing is the head of class 7, with a high ponytail, round face and eyes, so her head looks a bit big.

But the reputation among the students is a little more subtle - Yuan Qingqing has a nickname [Little Official Fan].

Because she is very fond of stewardship.

For example, after she learns that Mu Sicheng has stolen something, she keeps on staring at him, and Mu Sicheng is so tired of staring that he has never met anyone who is so patient with him.

His own biological parents weren't even that patient!

Like now it was eleven o'clock and he hadn't even gone back to his dorm to avoid Yuan Qingqing - he knew she had seen him when he took his keys at noon today and knew she would surely come to pursue the matter, so he purposely didn't go back and this person would surely block him on his way back to his dorm!

Mu Sicheng was going to wait in the classroom until lights out and then go back to the boys' dormitory, thinking that Yuan Qingqing, who was such a disciplined person, would not move around after lights out.

However, Yuan Qingqing was so desperate to find him that she didn't even go to the girls' dormitory until lights out and found him in the

classroom.

Mu Sicheng was really convinced, he folded his hands and pretended to surrender: "Class leader, can I call you class leader, please let me off this time, I will definitely not do it next time."

"I lost my keys somewhere, you told me to go back tonight and look for them, I'll bring them to you tomorrow."

Yuan Qingqing's eyes faltered for a moment and he began to hesitate.

Mu Sicheng tsked inwardly - he had gained experience in fighting Yuan Qingqing.

This man eats softness and not hardness.

Eventually Yuan Qingqing relented, "You can return the key tomorrow."

"I will return it!" Mu Sicheng responded falsely, "So can I go back to bed now?"

Yuan Qingqing paused and moved out of the way, her lips pursed tightly as she stressed again, "Make sure you pay it back!"

The next day, Mu Sicheng walks past the classroom office, carrying buns from the canteen, and as the bell rings for morning reading, he casts a glance and sees Yuan Qingqing, Ma Cailiang and Ma Cailiang's parents, and his class master, Mr. Ren, confronting each other in the office.

The first thing that came out was Ma Cailiang's shrill, altered duck voice: "It must be Mu Sicheng who stole it! Who else but him would be so dirty and love to steal!"

Ma Cailiang's parents echoed with fury: "Why are there such students in the class? And stealing, last night our kids were locked out for more than half an hour because they didn't have a dorm key!"

"It's okay to be locked up for half an hour or so, right?" Yuan Qingqing's strong voice came out. Yuan Qingqing's strong voice came out, " Ma Cailiang had previously locked her roommate out of the door for the night, making her catch a cold, and she is still in the hospital, isn't the nature of this matter more serious?"

"Ma Cailiang has already been written up once for this incident, so

please be careful what you say and don't slander your classmates, there is no evidence that Mu Sicheng has taken your things!"

Mu Sicheng raised an eyebrow at the door and then stopped, he was sure Yuan Qingqing had seen him take the key.

Now this is ..... lying to defend him?

Ma Cailiang and her parents were weakened in the face of Yuan Qingqing.

Mr. Ren, the class master, took the opportunity to intervene: " Ma students, look again for yourself, it doesn't necessarily mean that someone has taken it, what if you forgot it and dropped it somewhere?"

Ma Cailiang was reluctant, but looking at Yuan Qingqing, who was looking at him with upside down eight vertical eyebrows and a serious crossed face, he scowled a little fearfully: "..... Then I'll look for it again."

-- Yuan Qingqing is the class president, the class representative of the class teacher, the vice-chairman of the student council, and the disciplinarian of the class.

Mu Sicheng ducked away and watched with amusement as Ma Cailiang scolded his parents and was annoyed that he could not see what to do.

Ma Cailiang's keys were missing and it could take up to half a month for a new one to be issued, so Ma Cailiang had to dabble with his roommate's keys. It would be strange if he could open the door for him.

Mu Sicheng tosses the key in his hand, admires Ma Cailiang's frenzy, wraps it in a bag of buns and throws it in the trash.

Meanwhile, in the teacher's office.

" Is Qingqing here to deliver this week's discipline check?" The class master, Mr. Ren, was very nice to Yuan Qingqing as he reached out to take the discipline checkbook Yuan Qingqing handed over with a loving smile, "How did our class behave this week?"

--Discipline check is a very boring checking activity in this school, linked to the students' prime points, counted every Monday, if the

students don't have any disciplinary actions for the week, no points are deducted in advance, but since there are so many disciplinary actions, small talk in class counts, tardiness counts, not turning in homework counts, overall, it is a very troublesome The statistics are given to the disciplinarian of each class to do.

Generally speaking, discipline members of other classes will casually water, not too much will turn a blind eye, will not deduct points and give the whole class full marks for the sketchbook, because generally if there is no school leader to inspect the disciplinary behavior, it will not care about the sketchbook.

But if it is ever checked, it is a very problematic matter, especially for the class teacher, who can become a little dangerous at the end of the year if a student has a disciplinary offence that is seen by the head of the school and no corresponding points are deducted when it is checked in the Soto book.

This is why every class teacher repeatedly stresses that disciplinary checks should be done carefully, but very few disciplinarians take this task seriously.

But Yuan Qingqing is the kind of disciplinarian who takes disciplinary checks seriously, and because of this the class teacher is particularly fond of her.

"Let's see ah ....." the class teacher took the vegetarian book, put on the old-fashioned glasses and swept a glance, " Ma Cailiang last Wednesday Guan students outside the dormitory, deducted a week of small red flower, this is no problem ....."

Mu Sicheng, biting into a bun outside the door, rolls his eyes when he hears "little red flower".

Each student's name is arranged down the left side, next to the seven days of the week, crossed horizontally and vertically, and each day's performance is a small grid. This means that the student has passed this day's performance.

The disciplinarians in the other classes were blindly stamped, little red flowers all over, and finished the job. Only Yuan Qingqing would take note of each student's performance each day, and at the end of each week, one by one, they would carefully stamp them against each other.

Mu Sicheng has been secretly spiteful, thinking that the school

authorities who came up with it were brain-dead, and that Yuan Qingqing, who took it seriously, was also brain-dead.

They are high school students, not a kindergarten class, and they are still getting little red flowers, speechless.

"..... eh, this this ..... Mu Sicheng classmate's little red flower is a bit problematic ah." The class teacher's puzzled voice came from inside, "Except yesterday, how did you cover it all."

"He's been given a big demerit, he can't be stamped with a little red flower."

"But the demerit is for what last month's Mu Sicheng did." Yuan Qingqing's voice was stubborn, "This month's Mu Sicheng did not get a demerit, and according to the rules, it is allowed to be stamped with a red flower, teacher."

Mu Sicheng's footsteps as he prepares to leave.

"..... But rules are rules ....." The class teacher had a bit of a bald head and tried helplessly to persuade Yuan Qingqing, "but he made a such a big deal, the school head will see him keep the little red flower and will be accountable."

"They feel that students who have a major demerit are so high up on the list, and it gives the school a bad name when word gets out."

"You can delete it when you get back, Qingqing."

"But ....." retorted Yuan Qingqing, a little anxiously, "Mu Sicheng didn't do anything wrong this month, so why can't he get a red flower? "

"You really didn't do it?" Old Ren, the class master, raised his cup of tea and looked at Yuan Qingqing, "He had something to do with the loss of Ma students' keys yesterday, didn't he?"

Yuan Qingqing is quiet.

The class teacher took a sip of tea and said, "I understand what you have in mind, but Mu Sicheng is not a person who can be delivered for life, Qingqing, you know what I mean? There is no need to shield him for some petty thoughts, teachers have seen this kind of student before and he will definitely continue to commit them in the future."

"......?" Yuan Qingqing asked, somewhat confused, "What little mind, what delivery for life?"

Seeing Yuan Qingqing's look of not understanding, the class teacher finally sighed helplessly, "Anyway, you delete Mu students' little red flower, just delete it."

Mu Sicheng, who was listening outside the door, looked progressively stranger.

He has indeed had many girls like him and has received many confessions and love letters, and is a bit self-conscious about being easily liked by girls, without being narcissistic.

But he really didn't think Yuan Qingqing would like him.

Yuan Qingqing This guy is just too strange, the way he stares at him every day is like a police officer staring at the first suspect, and the way this woman stares at everyone in the class is like this, it's really hard to see the love in this wary and serious look.

He could see the killing intent more than the love intent.

It was the greasy old man who said that off the cuff, right ......?

Mu Sicheng's chewing of the bun gradually slowed as he fell into a pensive mood - am I really so charming that someone like Yuan Qingqing can't escape?

When the class teacher saw Yuan Qingqing had found out the school rules and responsibilities and wanted to argue with him to prove that Mu Sicheng could be given a red ribbon, he interrupted Yuan Qingqing with a big smile on his face: "Here's the thing, Qingqing, there's another problem you need to solve. "

"Aren't we going to change our seats after half term? The class was previously consulted and assigned seats according to their own wishes, but there is a rather problematic matter."

" Mu Sicheng, who had just transferred in before, was sitting alone at the back, but as you know, that seat was temporary, and when the school director saw him sitting alone during his rounds, he said that it was not a good influence, and he was still allowed to sit back in the large group, but when Mu Sicheng called for wishes for a seat before, he, every day, handed in a blank up. "

The class teacher also had a bit of a headache: "..... And none of the other students in the class, and none of them filled in their wishes to sit with him."

"You think of a way, find a classmate in the class to do the work, find a table for Mu Sicheng classmates, of course if these students are unwilling, you can make it clear to them, it's not permanent, it's just sitting for a while and rotating later, after all, everyone is unwilling, this can be considered a chore, we can only say try."

Mu Sicheng listened to the silence outside the door for a moment, and the next second he snorted and turned to step in and say I don't need a tablemate when he heard Yuan Qingqing's clear voice: "I can be a tablemate with him for a long time."

"Huh?!" Now even the class teacher was a bit shocked, "But Qingqing, in the seat will you handed in, it says that he is not the one at the table?!"

Mu Sicheng takes a step inside.

"I'll sit at the same table as him so I can keep an eye on him close by." Yuan Qingqing said very insistently, "Teacher, next month if he doesn't make any mistakes, I will definitely give him a little red flower."

Mu Sicheng: "....."

Classroom teacher: "....."

Why is this little girl still thinking about it!

When Yuan Qingqing really moved in next to him, Mu Sicheng couldn't control his weird expression. On the one hand, he felt that Yuan Qingqing, the woman, was only at the table with him to spy on him, and on the other hand, a voice inside him faintly, kept saying .....

Wasn't it really to get him in person that he was being watched so closely to this point?!

Noticing that Mu Sicheng had been looking at her, Yuan Qingqing turned her head in confusion, "?"

"Three-eighty line." Mu Sicheng forcefully piled the book in the middle of the two, blocking Yuan Qingqing's view of him, "Don't come over,

or I'll get cranky."

Yuan Qingqing looks on in silence at the 38th parallel, which is known as the "38th wall".

Originally, Mu Sicheng thought that Yuan Qingqing would be sitting next to him and that he would have no peace in class and would be nagged all the time, but to his surprise, Yuan Qingqing was an exceptionally quiet girl who, with her head down and her glasses on, listened carefully and took notes after class.

Unlike Mu Sicheng, who has a messy desktop, Yuan Qingqing is a student with a neat and uniform desktop.

All her books are wrapped in plain kraft paper cases, from notepads, to stationery boxes, to notebooks, all with one brand and one pattern - cartoon hip hop monkeys.

Mu Sicheng couldn't help but be curious to see what Yuan Qingqing was doing, and when he glanced over the side of the 38th wall, he saw Yuan Qingqing jotting down notes while writing rapidly in a small notebook next to him with a serious expression.

[Student xx is playing with his mobile phone.]

[Student xx is reading an extra-curricular book.]

[Mu Sicheng's classmate is deserting and peeking at his table].

Mu Sicheng :!!!

Mu Sicheng quickly retracted her head back behind the Sanbae wall, hammering her desk in exasperation, thinking - how can this woman be so single-minded, listening to a lecture and taking notes on others at the same time, and so self-absorbed!

Shit, didn't I like him! How could I think I was spying on her!

What's she got to peek at! Just a strange woman who buys a table of hip hop monkeys!

By the end of class, the quiet Yuan Qingqing from class had completely disappeared, and she chased after Mu Sicheng asking, "Where are the keys?"

"Why didn't you return the key to Ma Cailiang?"

"Didn't you say you'd return it to him when you found it today?"

"I didn't find it." Mu Sicheng spread his hands in disbelief, "That's all."

Yuan Qingqing looked at him, didn't say anything, just clenched his fist, then suddenly spoke, "I ..... saw you put the key back the other day too."

"You didn't want to take it that badly either, so why did you end up taking it anyway?"

Mu Sicheng was hammered with a muffled fist that hit him in the heart, and he said, almost viciously, "None of your business! That's what's wrong with me! I'm just going to steal it!"

"Kleptomania, ever hear of it! What else is wrong with me if you're in charge of heaven and earth?!"

Then he pushed back his own chair and kicked off.

Mu Sicheng thought that when he came back again, Yuan Qingqing would be gone, leaving an empty seat at his table, but she remained quiet, looked at him, and said, " Fellow Mu Sicheng, it's time for class."

--As if nothing had happened.

Perhaps something happened too, when Mu Sicheng peeked in and saw Yuan Qingqing write another entry in her notebook - [Mu Sicheng kicked a chair in an attempt to destroy public property, attempted to do so].

He was a little baffled.

Yuan Qingqing was a very good tablemate, she was clean, polite and helpful, she was always there whenever the class asked for her help, and she would try her best to solve any problem. Mu Sicheng understands why there are so many students in the class who complain about Yuan Qingqing, but every time the class president is elected, Yuan Qingqing is still elected with the first number of votes.

Because she is a very reasonable person, you can say that this kind of person is good to get along with or not, but she is fair to people and doesn't make any difference because of your family, grades or appearance.

Nor do they look at you through tinted glasses because of what you have done in the past.

Mu Sicheng looks at the little rewards handed out in front of him - he didn't do a single thing last week under Yuan Qingqing's watchful eye, and the student who gets a full week's worth of Su-Tao gets a small reward, really small, usually an eraser and a sticker.

But this is the first time Mu Sicheng has got one and it feels a bit amazing - it's amazing that a student like him can still get a reward for being disciplined .....

At least Mu Sicheng himself could hardly have imagined this day.

The small reward is an eraser, in the shape of a hip hop monkey.

The eraser was not issued by the class, it was probably bought for Yuan Qingqing at his own expense.

On the day Yuan Qingqing gave Mu Sicheng the erasers, she went to the office and then seemed to have an argument with the class teacher.

The erasers in the plastic pockets are all regular squares with a number - [59] - written on them in marker.

There are 60 people in Class 7 and 59 erasers, which means that one person has no award.

Who this person is is self-explanatory.

Mu Sicheng is very conscious of the fact that it would be bizarre for the university to allow him to receive an award after the big mistake he made before.

When the first period of study had passed, Yuan Qingqing went out and when he returned, there was an eraser, in the shape of a hip-hop monkey, in his plastic pocket.

Yuan Qingqing gave the rubber to Mu Sicheng as a reward for his discipline the previous week, and when she said this, her eyes were as swollen as peaches, so it looked like she had been crying again since she left.

By the second night, Yuan Qingqing was on the table again, curled up in a ball and sobbing very quietly, and Mu Sicheng, holding the

rubber of the hip-hop monkey, finally asked, "Hey, Yuan Qingqing, what's wrong with you?"

Yuan Qingqing slowly parted her face, her eyes swollen a little more, and she cried very quietly, choking as she did so, "..... I don't understand, why the class master Mr. Ren just won't let me give you the red flower."

"You obviously didn't do anything last week, so why can't you cover it ....."

"I don't understand, the school rules clearly don't say that, Ma ..... burp." She hiccuped and continued to cry, "It's all written down, Ma Cailiang are allowed to cover the red flower, why can't you ah, why can't you cover it if it says you're a bad influence ....."

"That's not fair!"

Yuan Qingqing cried with righteous indignation, but Mu Sicheng couldn't help but laugh, his eyes involuntarily softening as he slumped against the Sanba wall, his tone teasing, "So you went and argued with the old man twice because of this?"

"It's not arguing, it's that it's just not right, I'm just arguing with the teacher." Yuan Qingqing slowly turned her head away again, she was puzzled, "Why is it just you who can't?"

"You're just a regular student in the class like everyone else."

"It's not like you're much of a bad person, what bad influence can you cause?"

Mu Sicheng was quiet for a moment, then tsked, "Don't cry, silly."

By the third night, Yuan Qingqing's mood had returned to normal, and Mu Sicheng watched her with her two large peach eyes, carefully noting in her little notebook.

[Yuan Qingqing classmate cries and wanders off in class.]

[Yuan Qingqing and Mu Sicheng are talking small talk.]

Mu Sicheng: "....."

Fuck, next time he comforts this guy he's an idiot.

The 38 walls began to fade sporadically, and the two men could

briefly exchange glances on the wall, usually ending with Yuan Qingqing looking back in confusion and Mu Sicheng moving away indifferently, and the relationship between the two of them slowly began to become cordial, with him bringing Yuan Qingqing a glass of water when he went out and Yuan Qingqing bringing him a meal in the morning when he entered class at the hour. He would go out and fetch Yuan Qingqing a glass of water, Yuan Qingqing would bring him a meal in the morning when he was stuck in class.

Rumours began to circulate in the class that Yuan Qingqing liked him.

Mu Sicheng laughed at the rumours - it was only now that he saw that these high school students were really less observant than he was, and wasn't it obvious that Yuan Qingqing liked him?

Of course he didn't like Yuan Qingqing, although Yuan Qingqing's book had noted many times that Mu Sicheng had peeked at his tablemates, Mu Sicheng just found it interesting to observe Yuan Qingqing as a fool.

Yuan Qingqing has some very strange and stubborn habits, just like the person's insistence on rules, such as the fact that she must buy a full set of hipster monkeys for her stationery, or the fact that at the end of class on the second night, Yuan Qingqing must lie on the window next to her desk and stare at it for half a day with her eyes fixed on it.

At first glance, Mu Sicheng thought he was looking at his reflection in the window, and would have tensed up half a dozen times to strike a pose that he felt better about.

It was by chance that Mu Sicheng discovered that Yuan Qingqing was not looking at him, but at someone outside.

The seniors at their school are not released on the first and second nights. After two consecutive evening study sessions, they join the freshmen and sophomores in the large recess, which has twenty minutes, and many seniors who have been sitting in the classroom all day go for a run in the playground to loosen up and stay in shape.

The school is encouraging this behaviour, so on the second night the playground will be illuminated and four lights will be played around the whole playground to make it easier for people to see things and not run into each other.

Yuan Qingqing looked out of the window at the exact angle of one of

the lamps, and from that angle, she could see the appearance of every student running under the lamp. She would clutch the pen she was writing with tightly and follow the other student until she lost sight of him or her, and then she would slump down somewhat depressed.

By the next time this person comes running over, Yuan Qingqing will be nervous again.

-- it was as if she wasn't carefully peeking out of the window at this man running, but was in the way of this man's runway, and the whole thing was overwhelming.

It's like when Mu Sicheng peeked at her.

He was the president of the student council, a senior, with good grades, good looks and, before Mu Sicheng arrived, the most popular boy in the school.

Yuan Qingqing often followed this boy to handle the affairs of the student council. The other party came to Yuan Qingqing a few times in class 7 and was very gentle, always smiling and saying, "When I graduate, the student council will depend on you to do something, Qingqing.

Whenever this boy came to Yuan Qingqing, Yuan Qingqing was always very nervous and would jump up violently from his table and come back with his whole expression blank, limp and silly on the table.

It wasn't that Mu Sicheng couldn't notice the difference, but for a few seconds Mu Sicheng's mind stopped working when he noticed the way Yuan Qingqing waited so expectantly and earnestly for the whole recess, just for the few seconds when the boy ran past the light.

"Hey." Mu Sicheng's mind was blank as he heard himself ask nastily, " Yuan Qingqing, you spy on people every night, you don't, like this guy, do you?"

Deny it.

You've been peeking for so long, you haven't even said that you like you, so you must be afraid to confess your love to each other.

Deny that you like the boy.

Deny that I ..... like you, Yuan Qingqing .

Yuan Qingqing, who was slumped against the window, sat up straight, her eyes bright and angry, her face flushed and a little shy, the kind of embarrassment and shyness that comes from having a secret poked out, but soon Yuan Qingqing straightened her expression and she leaned over the table and said, very softly and gently, "Right."

"I like him."

"Maybe I'm not good enough for a boy as good as him." Yuan Qingqing turned towards the window and muttered in a small voice, "But it's not against the rules to like it for a bit."

Mu Sicheng became furious, and his eyes turned red with anger, and he hammered his hand on the wall of the Sanbei, fuming: "What makes you not good enough for him? Your grades are so good, you work so hard, you're so enthusiastic about your classmates! This guy can't run half as fast as me! It's good that you can look up to him! You don't deserve him! Don't shame him!"

Yuan Qingqing was taken aback by Mu Sicheng's sudden outburst and gave a bewildered "ah?" He gave a bewildered "ah?

"And peeking!" Mu Sicheng picked Yuan Qingqing up and angrily dragged her out, "He's just running, if you want to watch, go down and watch, what's the point of peeking!"

"Peep how wimpy!"

Mu Sicheng pushed Yuan Qingqing to the stairway and waved his hand in two impatient go-go gestures, "He's running there just for you to see, so what's the shame, go down and see, to your face, in a big way!"

"I'm allowed!"

Yuan Qingqing went down, confused and apprehensive, and Mu Sicheng took a moment of silence at the empty stairway and walked back, his fists clenched tightly, and took his place.

Mu Sicheng didn't want to look, but he couldn't help turning his head and looking out of the window.

Outside the window, Yuan Qingqing ran to the side of the runway, and the boy actually saw Yuan Qingqing as he ran past where he was again. He seemed to think that Yuan Qingqing had come to him for something, and broke away from the large group of runners and came

to Yuan Qingqing.

Yuan Qingqing waved his hands in disbelief, his face flushed red, as if to explain that there was nothing wrong with him.

The boy smiled and extended his hand, seemingly inviting Yuan Qingqing to do something, as if they were running together.

Yuan Qingqing stared blankly at the boy for a long, long time, gave a little jump of excitement, then nodded frantically and followed behind the boy, running with him, both running and talking, their smiles genuinely pleasant.

Mu Sicheng: "....."

He's going to break the defence.

Mu Sicheng's hands were shaking as he leaned back against the table, closed his eyes and took two deep breaths, even dizzying for a moment - Yuan Qingqing genuinely liked the other man.

The other side doesn't look uninterested in Yuan Qingqing .....

It's just that Yuan Qingqing, a wooden head, is so dull and tolerant that he doesn't notice it at all, and he has a crush on someone until now.

Just ..... Yuan Qingqing ..... really, really didn't have any feelings for him?

So why did she do this to him?

What kind of reason was it that made her insist that he was a not-so-bad person.

Curiosity turned into a strange itch that crawled from Mu Sicheng's heart to his palm, as if some evil desire had turned into a poisonous spider and swirled around his heart and palm, and his fingers twitched spasmodically as Mu Sicheng's gaze couldn't help but look at the small book that sat on Yuan Qingqing's desk.

He hadn't touched anyone else's stuff in a long, long ..... time.

This small book, he had seen Yuan Qingqing would write some daily tips on it, if only .....

Mu Sicheng took a deep breath as he clenched his fists and withdrew

his gaze to the half-used hipster monkey eraser on his desk, his chest heaving violently as he struggled to control his emotions.

There is no need.

As the days went on, Mu Sicheng forced himself to get used to Yuan Qingqing, who went for a run every evening between classes, to the boy who came to the class more and more often, and to the fact that he was able to control his desire to steal something without Yuan Qingqing's watchful eye.

During the last part of his sophomore year, Mu Sicheng was so incredibly peaceful that he even thought he had been able to let go of Yuan Qingqing, just as he had been able to let go of his desire to steal.

Ill-timed desires and ill-timed feelings are about to be removed from his life as he grows up.

The summer after his sophomore year ended, the whole class celebrated their upcoming senior year, and arguably their last craze, by meeting up to go out. Mu Sicheng was not prepared to go, but after a strong invitation from some of his classmates, he annoyingly agreed - after he became honest, many of his classmates who had been a bit afraid of him Even the class teacher has changed her mind about him, and he has become more friendly with the others.

After a long day of fun in the park, the students said their goodbyes and went back to their homes.

Mu Sicheng looked at Yuan Qingqing, who was wearing a long skirt and carrying a school bag, paused for a moment, averted his eyes and spoke, "It's a bit late, shall I see you off?"

When Yuan Qingqing tried to say no, Mu Sicheng quickly added, "I take bus number 7, are we going the same way?"

Yuan Qingqing said suspiciously, "Your house is not on line seven as I remember."

"I'm changing places, I'm renting a house and I'm not comfortable with it so I'm changing." Mu Sicheng spreads his hands, "Rory, just say go or don't go?"

Mu Sicheng has never taken a bus, not to mention the No. 7 line. He always takes a taxi when he goes out, so he faces a very embarrassing situation.

Yuan Qingqing helped him vote, frowning and criticising Mu Sicheng: "You have to talk to your class teacher when you change your house, you live alone and your mailing address has changed, when something happens to you, you won't be able to find it."

"You remember to go back and report to your class teacher ....."

"Stewardess." Mu Sicheng snorted and interrupted Yuan Qingqing, "Mind your own business."

Mu Sicheng grabbed the ring of the bus, and with a glance, he saw a chain around Yuan Qingqing's white neck, with two initials on it, as if someone had put his name on her body to assert his sovereignty - Yuan Qingqing had never worn any accessories before. Mu Sicheng paused for a moment and said, "Did he give you this chain?"

"..... hmm." Yuan Qingqing was a little embarrassed, "He graduated and said he wanted to leave something for me as a souvenir, so he gave me this."

"Just a memorial?" Mu Sicheng asks rhetorically, without sarcasm.

"Because I'm still in high school and he said to wait until I go to college." Yuan Qingqing scratched his head, "Just be my boyfriend."

She couldn't help but giggle a little as she said, "He came to visit my parents, heh heh."

"..... attitude comes together." After saying this, Mu Sicheng fell silent.

On the crowded bus, someone approached silently and reached out a hand towards Yuan Qingqing's backpack, which was violently grabbed by Mu Sicheng next to him, who questioned with a stern gaze, "What are you doing?"

After a bit of drama, Yuan Qingqing and Mu Sicheng got off the bus early and, at Yuan Qingqing's insistence, they took the man to the nearest Public Security Bureau and then parted ways at the nearest bus stop.

"Don't send it off." Yuan Qingqing waved his hand, "My house is just around here, you should go back too!"

Mu Sicheng looked at Yuan Qingqing with his pocket in the distance and let his eyes droop.

This was taken out of Yuan Qingqing's school bag when the thief stole it. When Yuan Qingqing was clearing out her things, she was mainly clearing out her money and mobile phone, and didn't notice that this little book was missing, so Mu Sicheng hid it.

Last time.

Mu Sicheng looks at the small book with the hipster monkey cover and he takes a deep breath to control his shaking hands.

Let him know what is going on in Yuan Qingqing's head and why he thinks that about him, and he will never steal again.

He turned the first page, then stood still.

[Mu Sicheng has not broken any discipline this week, but the teacher does not allow him to have a red flower. I don’t understand why everyone can have a red flower but Mu Sicheng.]

[It's not fair.]

[As a disciplinarian, I should give a small red flower to every student who does not break the rules].

Below is a hand-drawn row of small red flowers with the name Mu Sicheng written next to them.

Every week after that, Yuan Qingqing would draw a row of red flowers for Mu Sicheng as long as he did not break any rules.

And on the last day of the record, Yuan Qingqing recorded.

[Mu Sicheng has not committed any disciplinary offence for two months. After discussing with the teacher, he admitted that his previous behaviour was biased and gave me permission to move Mu Sicheng's red flower to the Vegetarian book for the next term, and this week's informal red flower will be recorded for the last week.]

[I hope that Mu Sicheng will be serious in the future and will not make mistakes again.]

Mu Sicheng held the book and very slowly lowered his head, his breath coming in sharply, his hands clenched tightly, but suddenly he snorted a laugh, and tears dripped from his eyes.

He ..... committed it again.

He had failed Yuan Qingqing, a foolish man who trusted him.

" Mu Sicheng ....." Yuan Qingqing's puzzled voice rang out in front of Mu Sicheng's face, "Why are you still here?"

Mu Sicheng jerked his little book behind him, he looked away and forced himself to calm down, "I waited here for the bus, I didn't wait, why are you back?"

"Oh." Yuan Qingqing didn't doubt it, and she said bitterly, "I went back to look for it and found my little book missing with some of my classmates' performance from last term on it, and it's a pain in the ass to have it missing, and I'm wondering if that thief just stole my book."

"Is that so?" Mu Sicheng took a deep breath, "What if it was you who didn't bring it?"

"It's just a day out, it's not like you have to keep track of who's breaking the rules, and usually when you're not doing anything, you don't carry a book."

"..... seems to be." Yuan Qingqing was wound up by Mu Sicheng and she frowned, "But I remember I brought it with me."

"And what thief would have nothing to do with stealing your book?" Mu Sicheng scoffs, "It doesn't look like it's worth anything."

Yuan Qingqing was furious: "That book records everyone's performance throughout the semester, it's very important!"

"But you have a point." Yuan Qingqing sighed, "Maybe I really did forget it, I'll look for it in school tomorrow."

Mu Sicheng breathed a sigh of relief, but as he looked at Yuan Qingqing who had simply turned away, not suspecting him at all, the unresolved emotion in his chest suddenly came up and he spoke up hauntingly, "Hey, I'm a thief too."

" Yuan Qingqing, why don't you suspect me of stealing from you?"

Yuan Qingqing turned her head and looked solemnly at Mu Sicheng, who looked at her for a long, long time, before saying, "Don't just make jokes like that."

"You spent two months trying to get everyone in the class to trust you."

"Until you make a mistake, I, as class president and disciplinarian, will not and should not suspect you lightly, fellow Mu Sicheng."

"I'm going back, bye, and you go home early too."

Yuan Qingqing waving, ready to leave

Mu Sicheng took a deep breath as he spoke, wanting to say - [I won't do it again, Yuan Qingqing].

But before those words could be uttered, a runaway bus crashed into the station, plastering itself next to Mu Sicheng and jamming in.

Yuan Qingqing's school bag rolled to the ground, its hip-hop monkey contents scattered all over the place, the blood-stained hip-hop monkey headphones rolled to Mu Sicheng's feet as if malfunctioning, the monkey eyes on the headphones began to flash red, screams of pedestrians began to come from all around, and the bus driver climbed down from the window in horror, his face drunk and visibly smelling of alcohol.

Yuan Qingqing's arm drops helplessly from the side of the bus.

Blood splattered on Mu Sicheng's face and his pupils spread.

The little book he was holding fell to the floor, soaked in blood on the last page, the little red flower melting into the blood, no longer readable.

Ornamental pool.

Lu Yizhan looked up at Mu Sicheng on the big screen, bound within a hurricane of chains, his eyes vacant and clearly spiralling out of control with his mental values, and sighed in a complicated way as he remembered the files he had looked up.

The fate of every person chosen by Bai six is at his disposal.

He likes the souls of these people, wants to bring them into his game, and wants these people's skills to be used by him and for him, so Bai six will deliberately design the paths of these people's lives to intensify the core of their desires, to pull them to the maximum, so that the skills derived from their desires are the strongest.

Whether it was Liu Jiayi, Daniel or Mu Sicheng, each experienced this intensification of desire under the manipulation of Bai six.

Liu Jiayi, who could have reconciled with Liu Huai, was induced by Bai six to kill Liu Huai himself, Daniel killed Phoebe with the help of Bai six in the family power struggle, and Mu Sicheng's last hesitation led to Yuan Qingqing's death in front of him. The last hesitation of Mu Sicheng led to the death of Yuan Qingqing in front of him.

Mu Sicheng's desires begin with theft, with the proximity of people he likes and is close to, with the desire to break free from theft, but eventually, with the death of these people, he enters the game and wants to resurrect them, eventually falling into the game of theft and becoming a game machine called the thief, carefully forged by God.

Both times he was hit by a bus, both times because of his own suspicions, and the speed and time difference became the point at which Mu Sicheng could not forgive himself for wanting to run faster, to be more agile, to outrun all the deliberate means of transport in the world and to pull the man who was dying under the wheels.

But he didn't.

Thus, was born the worst and perfect thief in the world.

The Lost Land of Gold

Lu Yizhan closes his eyes.

Mu Sicheng's skills are born in the same way that Georgia's are born

Georgia's skill was to turn back time three hours for reasons other than Armand's - on the day of the accident, Georgia had come out of Gloren's country to find him, to show him the way in.

From the time Georgia left the gates of Gloren to the time he took himself back in, exactly three hours later, Georgia was on his knees, looking in a trance at the gold dust that littered Gloren, muttering only one word.

"..... I'm late."

"It's late ....."

In this world, sometimes human desires are not even human desires, they are just a fun way to collect the pain that God needs.

Games, mines, mines.

After Muke took Georgia down the mine with a flash backwards, Tang Erda quickly pulled out her gun and took on the control player of Georgia's team, Chrissy's eyes glazed over and threw a wall of Bai Liu's sticky flow in front of the control player.

[System Alert: Player Chrissy uses Personal Skill (Non-Newtonian Fluids)]

The volume of the fluid is extensible, but the more extensible it is, the thinner the wall it forms and the less resistant it is to blows, but it is theoretically proven to block any S-rank attack up to 10 metres, particularly effective against physical attacks such as firearms, and is 100% defensible against magical attacks.

[Available for 15 minutes, cd time 1 hour].

The bullet hit the flowing wall of liquid and was instantly swallowed up, Bai Liu stared at this wall for a moment and his eyes narrowed.

Non-Newtonian fluid, said to be the material of some kind of liquid bulletproof vest, effective against bullets and physical resistance,

becoming more solid the harder you push, and almost precisely restraining their main attack, Tang Erda.

But their team has more than one player who can take the main attacking position.

" Jiayi, put on the poison, you defend against Chrissy." Bai Liu quickly ordered, "This skill won't protect against your magic attacks."

"Copy that." Liu Jiayi nodded and stepped forward, flinging his hand out, the poison landing and spraying, instantly staining the milky white non-Newtonian fluid wall a purple-black colour emitting an unsettling poisonous mist, the control bit player shielded behind the shield was instantly encased and surrounded by the stained black wall, his life bar rapidly dropping by a fraction.

Chrissy gritted her teeth as she backhanded the fluid back and glued the blackened fluid at Bai Liu who was standing tall and watching the whole scene.

The fluid possessed by the poison was just the right amount of corrosive, and she was waiting for it!

Now she'll be able to follow Captain Georgia's tactics and switch from defence to attack, taking the main attacking responsibility and surrounding Bai Liu!

Don't think that Golden Dawn's main attacker is only Armand too!

Chrissy's brown eyes burst into light: "Quit the game right here, Bai Liu!"

The black fluid erupts, and under Chrissy's manipulation it spreads out in a ten-meter flow from top to bottom, enveloping Bai Liu in a cascade!

" Golden Dawn played a good match with this offensive and defensive switch." Hearts, sitting in the audience, lazily dragged his jaw on the big screen and commented nonchalantly, " Chrissy's [Non-Newtonian Fluid] clearly restrains Tang Erda, but Jiayi's poison skill also restrains [Non-Newtonian Fluid], after her poison blackens Chrissy's fluid, the fluid becomes corrosive and will This fluid takes on a corrosive quality and will damage her own team members who are hiding behind it, which means that the [shield] is lost."

" Chrissy's [shield] is something that Golden Dawn as a team has

always relied on, if Armand's Hurricane is Golden Dawn's sheathed sword, Chrissy's [shield] is like the armour a knight never leaves."

"I had expected Georgia to become very constrained in their style of play after getting [shields] grubbed by Jiayi, as teams that have relied on [shields] for so long do, with a subconscious fear of losing [shields]."

Phoebe, sitting next to Hearts, was thoughtful: "It's as soft as the Kingsmen you're staying with, isn't it?"

Hearts' commentary voice trailed off as he gave Phoebe a lazy glance, "Captain Phoebe, you're the one who offered to come into the audience and ask me, a retired tactician, to analyse the situation, so the least you can do is to be polite to me, right?"

"I'm sorry." Phoebe apologised courteously, "Please continue with your analysis."

Hearts withdrew his gaze, lowered his eyes and said softly, "But you're right, Georgia does have certain traits that are a bit like mine, which is why the two teams we've been tacticians for have produced two of the strongest shield players in the league."

"If I must describe it, I'm weak and Georgia is protective."

" Georgia is a very protective tactician who seems to be terrified of something happening to his players, even when everyone on the field has immunity from death, he subconsciously hides all his players behind [shields] to keep them well protected."

"So I'm kinda surprised he played this switch from defence to attack, it's not his style of play."

Hearts looked up at the big screen, "But it does seem like a good tactic."

"After Jiayi's poison blackens Chrissy's fluid, [Shield] does fail, but accordingly, Chrissy gets a fluid with a large range of manipulable enchanted attacks, and this fluid also has a barrier function that effectively stops the opponent from defending back since it doesn't allow aggressive people to pass through. "

"A very powerful attack." Phoebe thought for a moment, "If it were me, I'd split everyone up in Fluid and stack my own [Hell's Prayer Song] to drop all the enemy team members' life bar below fifty at

once, and also focus on attacking Bai Liu, stacking all the team members' attacks in a way that would try to send him out of the game in this skill time. "

"What an aggressive tactic, no shields, using all the skills of the players to stack attacks and strongly set fire on the opposing tactician, this will cause a violent counterattack and can easily kill the players." Hearts replied lightly, he paused for a moment, "But ..... Georgia does seem ready to do the same."

"I thought you said he wouldn't use this tactic of sacrificing his players?" Phoebe asked rhetorically with a shrug of her shoulders.

"Because the tempo was pulled up by Bai Liu." Hearts pondered for a moment, "Or rather, Georgia played at a fast pace too."

"With both tacticians looking for a quick resolution to the game, it would be easy to play such over-aggressive tactics."

Hearts eyes half-closed on the big screen, "..... such a fast pace, what the hell are they running from?"

"Yeah." Phoebe cupped her face in disbelief, tilting her head in confusion, "There aren't even any monsters in this one yet, it feels like a puzzle game, just the perfect copy for [Shield] and Georgia's skills to be played, so why is he playing so fast?"

In-game.

The moment the fluid fell to wrap around Bai Liu, Tang Erda turned her gun strongly and fired repeatedly at Chrissy's fatalities as she looked defenceless, her life span dropping rapidly without the protection of her shield and having to concentrate on attacking Bai Liu.

Golden Dawn's control and roaming position quickly closes in to disrupt Tang Erda.

[System Alert: Player Belloc uses skill (Birdcage)] (Control Position)

[This skill creates a birdcage that traps the player inside and prevents them from moving. The birdcage is filled with thorns and man-eating birds that will constantly peck at the player and interfere with the player, and when pecked, it comes with a spirit drop effect].

[Skill lasts 20 minutes, CD one hour].

[System Alert: Player Moore uses skill (Shadow)] (Wandering position)]

[This skill transforms the player into a shadow, blending into the light and shadow of the object. The player's bent shadow can rise up off the ground and grab the opponent in a place without light, but in a place with light it can only stick to the ground below. The enemy's attack on the shadow attack in the ground is considered ineffective, and the attack on the shadow attack on the ground is considered effective, but the attack power is halved.]

Tang Erda was instantly trapped by the birdcage, and a number of real and imaginary lights began to appear around him, constantly attacking him and interfering with him.

But even in this situation Tang Erda was still strong in attack - and with both sides attacking at high intensity, a point less in his attack was a point more likely to cost them the game.

Tang Erda, completely oblivious to the bird that was pecking at him, was cutting his own shadow with a knife, still slipping by life and spirit levels, blood seeping from the corners of his forehead and temples, his dark blue eyes cold as his gun poked out of the bird's cage, firing one shot after another at Chrissy's heart amidst heavy interference.

With both sides giving up on defence, attack is the best defence!

Chrissy's face tightened as she had to partially cover herself with the poisoned non-Newtonian fluid she had drawn out under Tang Erda's powerful attack, creating a very thin fluid shallow shield over her body - a shield that was also poisoned and would keep her life level down, but at least it would protect her from Tang Erda's bullets.

The attack of the team's main attacker was so terrifying that even with her shield on, she could feel the violent impact of the bullets hitting her shield, shaking her chest and giving Chrissy the creeps - she knew how well her shield protected her against bullets, and to be able to hit like that through it. This guy must have a ridiculously high gun attack!

If her shield didn't happen to restrain firearms, she would have been killed by a magazine from this guy!

[System warning: Tang Erda's life value is down to 47.]

[System warning: Muke's life is down to 32].

Liu Jiayi, standing in the centre, gritted her teeth, she had used all her antidote skills on her entrance to Mu Sicheng, the hour had not yet expired and her antidote skills had not yet been reset, she had just used her poison skills, and her move was almost reset, but using the poison swamp move in a place like the mine, stacked with the opponent's [Non-Newtonian Fluid], would have been devastating to them devastating blow.

But now, if her calculations are correct, the lifelines of all the members should have dropped to safety, except for Bai Liu.

The enemy's players were also outputting like hell, nothing like the defensive team Wang Shun had told them about earlier, both sides were hitting at such a fast pace that she couldn't keep up with the healing!

It's time to start cutting back!

Liu Jiayi gritted her teeth and looked towards Bai Liu who was wrapped in a heavy poison barrier and began to choke uncontrollably, bloodied gold dust spilling from the corners of her lips, her heart began to beat at an eerily slow pace as she couldn't stop choking, her pupils spreading bit by bit, her right hand covering her lips where she kept coughing up gold dust and looking down at her left hand.

Starting from the tips of her fingers, little by little her fingers began to be coloured gold, or more precisely, to turn into gold.

Liu Jiayi's breath stopped as she quickly tapped on the system panel, but as her limbs began to turn gold, her movements began to stiffen, and it took several taps in a row to open the system panel.

No problem with life and spirit values?!

Liu Jiayi's pupils tightened.

What's going on?

Nothing out of the ordinary, she didn't trigger any key props, not a single game clue or sign, so why is it suddenly a golden statue?!

Liu Jiayi was reluctantly about to use up her last great skill, the golden distortion was already filling her heart, she was beginning to struggle to choke and cough, her fingers were almost shaking, and the

moment she was about to fling out the poison bottle, six silver rose bullets fell from the highest point and went straight through her heart.

Her fingertips stopped and she looked back incredulously at the spot where the bullet had been fired and slowly collapsed to the ground, blood spilling from the side of her mouth along with the gold dust.

[System Alert: Player Liu Jiayi has zero life and is out of the game.

Tang Erda looked incredulously at the spot where the bullet had just been fired, the gun in his hand had disappeared the moment Jiayi was hit, the only person who could use his gun was .....

Chrissy looked incredulously at the six bullets that had penetrated her barrier - her barrier was impenetrable to any object with an offensive charge, but just now, the bullet with the strongest protection from her barrier, had actually penetrated six of them and killed a player?!

How did this happen?

Chrissy was stunned for a moment as her manipulation of the fluid slackened and the barrier wrapped around Bai Liu fell to the ground, Bai Liu still holding his gun up to where Liu Jiayi had fallen, looking around at all the stunned people, but he had a calm expression, not at all like the tactician who had just suddenly shot and killed a key member of his team, and said with a sense of understanding.

"So, here's the key point."

"It's time."

Ornamental pool.

The presenter was already frozen, looking at Bai Liu on the big screen with the gun still smoking from the muzzle in his hand, and could only let out a stunned, "Ha?!"

The audience exploded.

"Shit, what is this guy doing?!"

"He killed his own team's healer?!"

"Was it an oopsie?!"

"That can't be right?! He fired six shots! If this is an oops, this is fucking outrageous, isn't it?!"

"There's no way that's an ooze, Bai Liu emptied the witch's blood bar all at once! And he's still holding his gun up, looking totally ready to kill or not to kill and then add two more shots!"

"What, what's going on?!" Liao Ke in the audience was stunned, "Did Bai Liu really shoot the gun?!"

"Yes." Lu Yizhan's face clouded as he stared at the golden sculptures in the background of the big screen for a long time before he suddenly stood up, his tone and expression sinking to a frightening level, "I'm going to the third bureau."

"There's a problem with Heretic 0073."

"Wait?!" Liao Ke was shocked, "Now? But Georgia's at the game, there's no one who knows you in the third inning to pick you up, you'd be forcing your way through, something could go wrong!"

"They are very tightly defended!"

"And it's almost time for us to play, so it's not always enough time to log out and come back!"

"I'll find a way to make this quick." Lu Yizhan clenched his teeth and closed his eyes, "I've done something terribly wrong ..... I've taken in the wrong heretic."

Liao Ke was stunned: "The wrong kind of heresy?"

"I shouldn't have taken in heretic 0073," Lu Yizhan breathed deeply, "because it wasn't a heresy at all!"

Liao Ke wonders, "0073 is totally heretical."

"No." Lu Yizhan shook his head slowly, "Bai six, that guy, tricked Georgia, played us all."

"He deliberately induced me to take in the Gloren Kingdom in order to collect the pain of its thousand years of gold, which he had set up long ago in order to collect the pain!"

Liao Ke got up, patted Lu Yizhan on the shoulder and sighed, "..... I'll go with you to the third inning."

"Let's pick the closest point to the Gulo Sea and log out."

By the Sea of Gulo, three innings of heresy treatment.

After Lu Yizhan logged out, he calmly instructed Liao Ke: "Contact Cen Buming and ask him to expedite the approval for me to enter the Third Bureau."

"Yes, Captain." Liao Ke answered dryly, and a few minutes later he handed the phone to Lu Yizhan, " Captain Cen's on the phone, he's asking what you want to do?"

"It's a long story, the situation is urgent, so I'll keep it short." Lu Yizhan replied calmly, "Senior, I need this paper approval from you to save the world."

Cen Buming was twistedly silent for two minutes: "..... waits."

He hung up and after almost a minute Cen Buming's call came back, his tone becoming somewhat condensed, "Something's happened to the Third Bureau."

"Two days ago, they received a strange teaser letter which said they were going to steal Heretic 0073, and the entire Bureau of Three is now under martial law, prohibiting any outsiders from entering or leaving, and the temporary approval couldn't come down."

"Sounds familiar, doesn't it? It's that monkey stealing style, but oddly enough ....."

"The Mu Sicheng of this world is playing in a league right now, and cannot possibly come out to steal Heretic 0073." Lu Yizhan took a deep breath, "If this teaser letter is true, it must be a Mu Sicheng from another world line, and to have a Mu Sicheng, that can only mean one thing."

"- the evil god Bai six intervened in the matter, and he wanted to move heretic 0073."

"I got some special channels to give you another approval, using prophet authority, saying you were a special agent here to investigate the matter." Cen Buming spoke in a cold tone, "But it's hard to say if the Third Bureau eats prophet authority, after all, it's a special product of the First Bureau, and the Third Bureau has no such position."

A special product of the game Lu Yizhan: "..... Thank you Sifu."

Cen Buming laughed coldly and ungratefully, and simply hung up the phone.

"Go!" Lu Yizhan trotted, " Cen Buming should have sent the approvals through, let's try and get into the third inning."

"No." The investigating member of Bureau 3 shook his head solemnly, "The approval we have verified is genuine, we can give you access to Bureau 3 for some information, but I am sorry, we do not give you access to Heretic 0073 as a special agent."

Lu Yizhan softened his tone and spoke with supplication: "The documents have been allowed to pass before, why not today?"

The investigating team member hesitated for a moment and looked at Lu Yizhan who looked pleading, but still spoke up to explain, "Because Captain Georgia said he wanted to be on strict guard today, he pulled the alert of the three bureaus to the highest level and gave a deadly order that no one was allowed to touch heretic 0073 until he returned."

--This is what that teaser letter led to.

Lu Yizhan closed his eyes and took a deep breath, "..... From what I know about Captain Georgia, he wouldn't be so easily alerted to a teaser letter from Cen Buming."

Georgia in this world line had no contact with the thief Mu Sicheng at all and had always been too steady in her work to be so up in arms about a teaser letter before she had even investigated where the other side was coming from, doing a Dora to Red Level 2 alert, not likely the highest.

--Georgia has never used this level of alert in her time as head of the Third Bureau.

The investigator paused, "Since you have the approval of the prophet's authority, you should know that there are people in this world who can dream, or foretell, things in the future."

Lu Yizhan opened his eyes as that sense of foreboding grew in him: "..... you mean?"

" Captain Georgia and Captain Armand both had precognitive dreams a few months back." The investigator looked up at Lu Yizhan, "You should be aware that those of us who watch over the heretics are the most heavily influenced by them, and sometimes we do get some vague revelations from them through this influence, some of which will take the form of dreams."

" Both Captain Georgia and Vice Armand had dreams of such a teaser letter and they thought the person sending it would be a big threat to the three innings, and after we discussed it, we felt it was informative that such a dream was reflected in both captains."

Lu Yizhan's heart sank to the bottom.

..... Dreams, Bai six's favorite way to induce.

It was a seamless set-up that Bai six had been working on for months, unnoticed by the man who had left the Heretic's Bureau.

"One last request, can you ascertain the current status of the crew guarding Heretic 0073?" Lu Yizhan looked up.

"Just contacted, no problem." The investigator nodded, "We'll make another contact now."

Less than a minute later, the investigator returned with a pale face, "The team from ..... guarding Heresy 0073 is lost."

Lu Yizhan exhaled a breath of air from his chest, "You are sending a new team to the island immediately, I can wear the surveillance ring, can I be allowed to follow this new team to the island as an exception?"

..... If the thousand-year gold deal with the Bai six and Gloren nations is not suspended, and [Mu Sicheng] is allowed to actually open 0073 in reality and spread the powder of the gold point stone throughout the world, then all creatures will be turned into gold sculptures in time.

Heresy spreads across the world, the race between the prophets and the evil gods ends in defeat, and Bai six will collect endless pain in this last world line.

And the moment the heresy opens, the Gloren State .....

The hourglass of time must be filled before the transaction can be terminated.

Lu Yizhan looks down at the coin hanging from his heart and holds it tight - new prophet Bai Liu, do you have an idea?

Where do the tears that must be worth a thousand years of gold curdled into pain come from?

In-game.

After Liu Jiayi exited the game, Bai Liu calmly turned his gun around and aimed it at Belloc and Moore, who had trapped Tang Erda, and fired again.

Chrissy gritted her teeth and covered the shield made of non-Newtonian fluids to get in front of Belloc and Moore.

Shortly after Liu Jiayi exited the game and her Poison skill ran out of time, Chrissy's non-Newtonian fluid turned white again without the Poison enchantment, i.e., the [Shield] function was restored.

But Bai Liu continued to fire, unperturbed by the sight of the shield in front of Belloc and Moore, pulling the trigger one after the other and emptying an entire magazine at the flowing solid shield.

Chrissy is confused - her shield is 100% immune to offensive actions such as bullets, so why is Bai Liu wasting skills attacking her shield?

And this guy ..... just killed the most precious member of his team, right?

Even when Bai Liu was doing something to benefit her team, it wasn't just Chrissy who was confused and questioning - what the hell was Bai Liu doing?

Tang Erda, who is trapped in a bird cage, also frowns.

He had hit this [non-Newtonian fluid] shield of Chrissy's and was basically sure that the bullets couldn't get past it, even if they were pulled up to his maximum attack power, and he didn't understand why Bai Liu had to hit it once when he knew that.

Everything Bai Liu had done from earlier to now was incomprehensible to him, but on the field, he, as a main attacker, would never question Bai Liu's actions - even if the opponent had done something as outrageous as killing a healer.

The silver bullets spiral, as if in slow motion, into the milky white liquid shield -

--Then, as if it had hit the air, it sailed through, hitting Belloc and Moore, who were hiding behind their shields and looking stunned.

The bullet entered the chest and splattered a shower of blood that

melted into the fluid, creating a bloody red streak.

Chrissy: "?!?!"

Chrissy's mind went blank for a moment as she subconsciously opened her system panel to see if there was a mistake in her skills, and after double-checking, confirmed that her skill description had not changed at all - she had a shield effect against all offensive actions, especially against firearm-based physical attacks.

As long as the act is offensive, or even a normal act with an offensive mentality, her shields are able to provide some protection, and there has never been this weird situation where a bullet goes through and the high thickness of her stacked shields act as if they don't exist.

It was the same as if this guy had just shot past her shield and killed her own healer ..... It was as if the shield she had protected her players from countless times had completely failed in the presence of this man, in the presence of this strange tactician.

Why would a top-notch shield that clearly defends against even psychological aggressiveness fail in the presence of this man?

What would happen to her [shield] if it failed completely ..... in the presence of such a tactician who would brutally and brutally kill even her own team members...

Chrissy shuddered, feeling a twinge of uncontrollable fear.

Moore and Belloc, already bruised and battered from their confrontation with Tang Erda, were also showing signs of the sculpting of their protective gold, moving slowly and stiffly, and were now completely incapacitated by Bai Liu's shots, as they lay on the ground, holding their legs from Bai Liu's blows, screaming at Chrissy at the top of their lungs They screamed at the top of their lungs at Chrissy: "Run! Chrissy! Run away!"

Chrissy gritted her teeth and ripped off the last layer of light shield fluid protecting her body, doing her best to stack the shield to its thickest circle, completely encasing both players.

With blood pouring from the corners of her mouth, the unshielded Chrissy stood in front of her shield, her eyes fixed on Bai Liu high above.

If [Shield] fails, she is the last shield for the team - this is the

awareness and duty of the [Shield] position.

Bai Liu slowly and leisurely changed the magazine as he took a step down from the heights of the mine, the shell casing falling with a crisp clatter under his feet, and after replacing it, he raised his hand again and aimed the gun at the two members of his team in the shield.

"Bang Bang Bang Bang Bang Bang-!!!"

The bullet grazed the side of Chrissy, hit the shield behind Chrissy and then, as before, passed through as smoothly as if it had hit the air, and the Belloc and Moore inside stopped breathing.

Chrissy's pupils fluttered.

[System Alert: Player Belloc has zero life and is out of the game.]

[System Alert: Player Moore has zero life and is out of the game.]

Blood flowed from the underside of the shield and her fluid shield was completely stained red.

"Why ....." Chrissy fell to the ground in a trance, her fingertips and ankles starting to turn gold, tears falling from her eyes with a glittering sheen like gold dust, she looked at her head with a choked sob as she walked up to her and pointed her gun at Bai Liu, "Why is the [shield] not working?"

"[Shield] is for guard, for protection, [Shield] exists to protect those close to it from harm."

"My desire to protect everyone has not changed one iota, so why does my [shield] fail?"

Chrissy's tears turn to scattered gold dust as she cries, " Golden Dawn exists to protect."

"As Golden Dawn's [Shield], my desire to protect is not to be invalidated! Why can you penetrate my [shield] and kill the one I want to protect!"

"Your desire to protect has never failed, or more precisely, it is because your desire to protect has never failed." Bai Liu raised his gun and smiled up, "It was my bullets that penetrated your shield and managed to kill them."

Chrissy looked up in a daze, the goldenness of her torso had spread to

her heart, which made her exit words jar and hard: "..... Why?"

"Your desire to protect is very strong, as strong as your captain Georgia's." Bai Liu lowered his eyes, a very light layer of gold dust hanging from them, "Your shield would deter even a person with malicious intent from committing a non-aggressive act, a very powerful shield indeed."

"But accordingly, if a person commits an aggressive act, but he has no intention of harming you, your [shield] cannot stop it."

"Like right here and now." Bai Liu laughed softly and aimed the gun at Chrissy's temple, her lips starting to turn gold, "I'm going to kill you, but what I'm thinking isn't that I'm going to hurt you at all."

"What I'm thinking is that I'm not killing you-"

"-rather in saving you."

"Bang Bang Bang Bang Bang-!!!"

Chrissy collapsed to the ground just before she was about to be transformed into a golden statue.

The birdcage that had trapped Tang Erda disappeared and Bai Liu handed over the gun with a smile: "It was an emergency and I needed a long-range weapon, so I borrowed it for a while, thanks to Captain Tang."

Tang Erda, who had been forcibly borrowed, took over helplessly, "Go on, what have you found out again."

"I can't believe Jiayi was sent out of the game with a sudden shot... that was messed up too ....."

"And what a non-aggressive killing theory." Tang Erda tucked her gun behind her waist, turned and choked out a couple of coughs with clenched fists and sighed, "..... What and what is all this, in all my years of using guns I've never seen anyone kill without being aggressive, how do you kill without being aggressive?"

"You're fooling people again, aren't you?"

"No oh." Bai Liu shrugged innocently, "I'm really not lying this time, I really did kill them to save them."

He smiled a gentle smile, "Just the same reason as killing Jiayi."

"Later I might kill you to save you too, Captain Tang."

Tang Erda paused and looked over with a raised eyebrow, "So White Tactician, what do you know again and can you explain it to a confused attacker?"

Bai Liu was just about to speak when the system alert rang.

[System Alert: Player Muke has zero life and is out of the game.]

Bai Liu's eyes narrowed as he pulled out his communication tool and saw the last message Muke had sent him - [Palace, gold dust, tears.]

"True enough." Bai Liu stroked his chin thoughtfully, "It agrees with what I deduced."

Tang Erda waved her hand helplessly in front of Bai Liu's face, "Seeing as how you're not surprised, you set Muke up to be cleared from the game now, didn't you?"

"Yes." Bai Liu replied with a small smile, "I told him to clear the brothers Georgia and Armand out of the mine, at all costs."

"One for two, or the two most favourable people on the other side." Tang Erda frowned, "It's remarkable that Muke has managed to drag it out so far."

"You're trying to say Muke isn't the best person for the job, right? Because there's a key thing that only he can do, let him go." Bai Liu smiles and says, "I told Muke to tell Georgia that he had a way to fill the hourglass."

Tang Erda was stunned: "You knew how to fill an hourglass that early?!"

"Of course not." Bai Liu shook his head honestly, "I lied to Georgia."

Tang Erda frowned: " Georgia should have brought lie detector props into the copy, and as a person of three ..... Golden Dawn origins, the lie detector props in his hands should not be something as cheap as scales, how did you fool him? "

"Oh, this." Bai Liu said calmly, "I lied to Muke too."

"I told him I really knew how to fill an hourglass and he believed me, he really thought I knew, so he went ahead and trusted me enough to tow Georgia, and because Muke really believed I did, so that abject

belief, I thought it was possible to fool Georgia's lie detector prop and let him go."

"Because out of a few players, if I came into a game and told you guys I knew how to fit an hourglass, you'd all be asking questions and if I didn't tell you, you'd all suspect I was lying, but Muke doesn't do that."

"All I have to do is tell him that I know, but now is not the time to tell you, and he will believe it completely and carry out his mission without asking a word more."

" Muke would be 100 per cent blind to me and blind to me, so he was the only one who could do the job and the best person for the job."

Bai Liu rubbed his chin, "He should have been faithful to believe that I really knew how to fill the hourglass when he was interrogated by both Georgia and Armand until his life level was zero, which is why Georgia chose to spend time with him until now."

"....." Tang Erda sighed from the bottom of her heart, " Bai Liu, you are such a beast."

" Georgia they're at the palace now, the location Mu Sicheng reported to me earlier is near there too, we'll go there first." Bai Liu tilted his head and looked towards the top of the mine, "Go out through the mine, I'll tell you about the clues I found while I'm there."

Bai Liu looked down at the time he had recorded and looked up at Tang Erda: "In short, make sure you get out of this game before the gold sculpts."

"If either of you and Mu Sicheng start sculpting gold, I'll kill you myself and send you out."

Tang Erda took a deep breath: "..... I know."

Gloren Palace.

The palace of this long-established golden kingdom is an elegant and dignified white domed complex, with small and large sub-pavilions scattered around the interior of the palace, lined with spacious garden beds and beautifully spaced iron street lamps, the plants in the beds all withered and littered with fallen leaves, a palace that should have looked quite dilapidated, but with a thick layer of gold dust on it, the The palace looked mysterious and luxurious.

Perhaps from an instinctive human desire for gold, this gleaming palace has a mysterious, magical quality that draws people in.

In the middle of the palace, up the largest and longest white staircase, is the largest hall in the palace, where the King of Gloren once received his ministers, priests and messengers, and celebrated with the people the springtime of Gloren's annual mining season, welcoming the golden dust of joy that fell from the sky.

As Bai Liu steps up the first steps to the main hall, Georgia gazes in silence from the king's sitting room in the high building behind the main hall at the golden statue of the king sitting on a long table, his head propped up in his hands and eyes half-closed in exhaustion.

--This was the king at the moment of Gloren's demise, his father.

The butterfly on Georgia's shoulder looks at the Quan family photo on the long table, which is the same as the one on his bedroom cabinet, and its flapping gradually becomes extremely slow.

"This is you as a child." Georgia dropped her eyes, her voice so soft that only the butterfly could hear, "..... This is where you grew up."

"..... Sorry Armand, for modifying your memories and deceiving you, we are not some poor brothers in a distant town, we are the princes of Gloren and it is our duty to save and protect this place."

"I just got a little emotional in my insistence on getting a way to fill my eyes with tears from Muke, and not just because it's a game, but also because of that."

"You think it was an emotional tactical error that I wouldn't save Chrissy and the others without regard for my team," Georgia explained calmly as he lowered his head and he removed his own uniform glove from his right hand, "You think I should have gone back to their aid and provided them with assistance, don't you? "

The butterfly flapped violently the moment it saw Georgia's right hand and flew down to rest on Georgia's fingertips, which were already beginning to turn gold.

"The game is fair to both sides, our team gets the home game and is first to get the hourglass, so naturally, there will be something that limits us accordingly." Georgia took out that hourglass and lowered her eyes to look at the golden sands flowing in it, "These golden sands in the hourglass are actually turned into gold from the pointing stones."

"No wonder Father buried the hourglass in the vein; he should have known that the sands in the hourglass would continue to affect the vein and keep the gold producing."

"From the beginning, he never gave up on the idea of God Xiang seeking a deal."

Georgia paused, then continued.

"Having got the home advantage and being the first to get the hourglass we would naturally be more susceptible to the golden sands of the pointing stones in the hourglass and more likely to gold sculpt, which was our first limitation, and I wouldn't take it lightly to prolong the game at the expense of my teammates' lives when it wasn't clear exactly how this gold sculpt, which doesn't reduce life and spirit values, would affect the players. "

"A victory at the expense of Golden Dawn was meaningless, so I chose

to let Bai Liu off the hook to clear them out of the game."

"I still can't understand what happened to Gloren at that moment, and didn’t understand what this gold sculpting really means." Georgia raised his eyes, he flicked his left hand and a gleaming golden golden leaf bow appeared in front of him, he held it gently and whispered, "..... I can't drag these innocent players down with me and leave them in this deserted Gloren to go through the same thing that the players of the Third Bureau did back then. "

"But I chose to leave you behind, Armand."

"It's not Golden Dawn's mission to win this game and win the league at the end of the day, but it is yours and mine."

" The Gloren Kingdom has been sinking under the sea for ten years, and I have been guarding it by the sea for ten years." Georgia looked at the butterfly in her palm and nudged its wings very lightly with her left hand, "A human life is but a short moment compared to this ancient land of gold, I am not sure how much longer I can guard it, what painful tears would it take to be worth a thousand years of gold to fill this hourglass of time and end my father's deal with the evil gods. "

"[The Seer] told me that copies of heretics corresponding to reality can all be found within the game, and I have sunk to this point in the game in order to find the copy corresponding to Gloren and get a clue to the solution to the [Hourglass of Time] in this copy."

"I have now finally found this copy."

Georgia looked up at his father, who was sitting at the long table with a sad and bitter look on his face, "But in this copy, apart from looking at the people around me again and watching myself sculpted in gold, I actually look the same as I did ten years ago -"

"-without the ability to protect them."

"I still can't fill this hourglass with my pain."

The butterfly flaps its wings, and the wind blows past Georgia's ears, ruffling his long, light brown hair, but he doesn't hear it, he just whispers.

"..... I can't even shed a tear now."

-- like the tears he shed the moment he saw Gloren sinking to the bottom of the sea ten years ago, having shed all his pain.

The sound of unhurried footsteps came from behind Georgia as he gripped his golden leaf bow, turned and drew it back to full strength, raised his eyes and shot an unhesitating arrow at Bai Liu who had come up behind him.

The arrow crosses the air and is grasped in Bai Liu's right hand as he smiles at Georgia, high above the dais, and raises his hands to show he is harmless, teasingly.

"It seems that the prince of this country does not welcome me as a guest."

"I'm just here to talk to you about a deal, not to start off with a knife fight against me, right?"

[It seems that your country, it seems, does not welcome me as a businessman].

Georgia's pupils contracted very lightly as he gripped his golden bow, his right hand, which was about to turn into gold, slightly releasing the arrow.

..... The same commanding view, the same smiling voice, the same black-gloved hands, the same arrows wrapped in harshness and murderous intent shot from within Gloren's high walls.

The same uninvited guests who have come from afar with mysterious powers.

Lu Yizhan's complex attitude towards this man, the ability to trade souls for rules skills, poor tactics, about the same size and height .....

The golden arrow travels through the space between Georgia and Bai Liu as if through time, taking him back ten years in a flash.

If Bai Liu hadn't looked so bad, but had acted with such principles and done so much good, so different from even the Bai six in Georgia's dream, so unlike the God at his core, Georgia would have questioned Bai Liu the first time she met him: "What is your relationship with God? ?"

"That keen?" Bai Liu maintained his hands high in the air and grinned, "As much as I personally don't want to admit it, I'll answer you

honestly as a good faith gesture from the trader."

"I should be considered the unilaterally chosen heir of that evil god who is so idle that he wants to die."

"The Heir ....." Georgia lifted his eyes, his long pale eyelashes gilded with gold dust, the bow lowered in his hand lifted flat once more, the head of it aimed at Bai Liu's heart, "So you've come to fulfil the bargain and collect the nation's pain?"

"No." Bai Liu smiled, "I'm here to end the deal."

"I know the way to fill the Hourglass of Time."

Tang Erda, who was standing guard in front of Bai Liu, was shocked to hear Bai Liu continue to lie in front of Georgia and whispered, "Georgia is the Director of Bureau 3 from interrogation and investigation, she can definitely tell when you are lying!"

Georgia's narrow eyes narrowed very lightly as his raised arrow stalled.

..... This guy doesn't look like he's lying.

The butterfly on his shoulder flapped its wings very lightly, the wind ruffled the long hair at the back of Georgia's head, and Georgia's halting arrow lifted again, the tiny ripples of emotion in his eyes returning to calm and unmarked: "I know, Armand."

"I will not fall back into the trap of an evil god's heir who is full of lies."

The Muke thrown out by Bai Liu earlier passed his lie prop test but never spilled any useful information until the last moment, that could only mean one thing - Bai Liu, the shameless tactician, had deceived along with his own team members, just so he could stall them for time.

"Tch." Bai Liu looked regretfully at Georgia who had drawn her bow to full strength and the butterfly that had begun to flap its wings, "You don't trust me after being tricked once, huh?"

"No one in their right mind would be fooled twice by the same trap, right?" Tang Erda helplessly stepped in front of Bai Liu, " Georgia should have quickly reacted to the fact that you were tricking him with Muke before, but since he was tricked, he might as well clear

Muke out before it took so long."

Bai Liu rubbed his chin and sounded innocent, "But I'm really not lying to him this time, Captain Tang."

"I really know how to fill an hourglass this time."

"..... what?!" Tang Erda turned back in consternation.

Bai Liu looked up at Georgia from high above and said calmly, "Lying does pay off, Georgia won't believe us this time."

"It's going to be a fight before we can have a proper chat."

Tang Erda's temples popped: " Bai Liu, if you're ready to tell the truth next time, don't play this wolf game!"

"Okay Captain Tang." Bai Liu smiled and drew the whip pinned to his waist, "Next time for sure."

Georgia's eyes dropped and the moment he let go of the arrow, the butterfly flew off his shoulder and landed on the edge of the golden leaf arrow shot, instantly being attached to a layer of golden light as the butterfly flapped its wings quickly and the arrow shot over at Bai Liu below in a blazing stream.

[System Alert: Player Georgia used the skill to reverse the time of (Hurricane Butterfly), and the (Hurricane Butterfly) skill was reset.]

[System Alert: Monster Book Form player Armand uses skill (Chain Hurricane)]

Numerous twisting golden hurricanes rose up into the sky, chains surging wildly within them, intertwining in a great flowing net that blocked the front of the palace, the winds covering this great net flowing furiously to churn and twist the predators that entered the hurricane.

The hurricane winds swept the leaves and debris from the ground so high that it formed an inward wind vortex, sucking all the gold dust in the entire country and starting to suck it this way, forming a huge and sticky golden storm that rolled around almost like some kind of solid body. In such a dense golden storm, visibility was horribly low, and one had to be constantly alert to the chains that would come at any moment from all sides, like a heavenly net, and one had to Keep moving...

-- Tang Erda trotted, gripping the gun with her teeth clenched.

Low visibility, moving targets, high interference, distraction for the shooter and the need to keep moving at high speed - it's simply the worst situation for shooting.

Almost instantly, the entire huge open space in front of the palace was swept away by the hurricane, and nothing at all could be seen.

In the meantime, the large screen of the viewing pool.

All that could be seen on the screen was a rolling golden storm, almost like some top-strength sandstorm, and only vaguely visible was an occasional, snake-like twisting chain flying out, and some of the items being rolled up, so that not even the player could be seen in person.

The audience, in such a tight situation, kept their eyes wide open, trying to find out the exact figures of the two players from the big golden screen, but they didn't see anything.

The moderator even requested the use of a magnifying glass to try to find a hint of both players on the big screen for commentary, but eventually had to give up and dryly analyse the battle on the big screen.

"After Bai Liu had sent one of his own players packing, he struck again and again, sending three players in a row, and just when we thought Golden Dawn, a veteran team, was down to two players and about to fall behind, their newcomer Armand struck!"

"Look at this golden storm all over the screen!"

"Armand's skills are high cover, high attack and can actually be used on two fronts, with Georgia's strong support, Armand's skills are infinitely CD-able, which means that one player can be used against two players. That means that on the surface Golden Dawn are down to two players, but in reality, because of Armand, they still have the equivalent of three players and are not at a disadvantage."

"- and that's exactly what happened, as Bai Liu's roaming player Mu Sicheng was held up by Armand's body and is now unable to return to his team, while Armand himself held on to Tactician Georgia and continued to fight, with Georgia He was able to stop the main attacker and tactician on the circus side, with the cooperation of Georgia, and put a lot of pressure on his opponent."

"Golden Dawn's newcomer Armand, who has come to this point in the playoffs with a reputation as a vase for his overly flashy butterfly skills and lack of strong league play, finally cleared his name as a vase in this battle, so to speak!"

The host wiped a cold sweat from his forehead as he looked at the golden storm that had not yet subsided on the big screen and continued to commentate, "The circus side is in a different situation, they are not in a good position!"

"First the tactician goes nuts and sends his side's healing room in a bizarre maneuver, then the main gunner hunter, who has absolutely no way of putting up a fight in such a storm, and finally the roaming players who are being held up - it's clear from watching the tactician's attitude on the field that he's so attached to the roaming players, but up to this up to now, none of the roaming players have shown any effect."

"It's fair to say that in this game, the tactician's play calling and the coordination between the players can only be described in four words - that's [a mess]."

"The Golden Dawn side, although down to two players, worked well together, as brothers, as if they had a connection, and with the help of some simple communication tools, Georgia was able to pinpoint the position of Armand's butterfly in this blind golden storm and shoot It was a delightful combination of arrows to reset each other's skills and keep the hurricane attack going. ....."

The host was still blathering on, but Wang Shun couldn't hear a word of it, he was like an ant on a hot pan, circling around Muke and Jiayi who had withdrawn from the match: "Did Bai Liu tell you the next tactics?!"

Muke and Liu Jiayi looked at each other and honestly shook their heads, "I should have been fooled by Bai Liu."

"But deceiving me is supposed to be part of Bai Liu's tactics, but the rest, I'm not sure."

"Bai Liu won't tell you the rest of the plan so that you can get past Georgia and their interrogation." Liu Jiayi's tone was deep, his arms crossed against his jaw, his eyes looking straight at the big screen as if he knew everything, " This Bai Liu guy's tactics are still as messy as ever."

Wang Shun's eyes lit up, "So little witch, do you know Bai Liu's next plan?"

Liu Jiayi gave a pause: "..... don't know."

Muke: "....."

Wang Shun: "....."

If you don't know, say you don't know! Don't act like you know everything!

"But the host is right, we are at a disadvantage." Liu Jiayi shrugged. Liu Jiayi shrugged, "It's not just that Tang Erda's skills are limited and Mu Sicheng hasn't returned, there's a more deadly point, if I'm right, Tang Erda's attacks will be limited soon."

"Bai Liu would have ordered him not to hurt Georgia."

Wang Shun's eyes widened: "What? No, Captain Tang hurt Georgia ?!"

During the game, Tang Erda's eyes are red from the blast of gold dust as he raises his gun and stares into the storm repeatedly searching for targets.

Armand is almost invisible in this storm as a butterfly, and there is only one target Tang Erda can find, and that is Georgia - as soon as he clears Georgia out of the game, Armand will go into CD without assistance, and then it's just a matter of getting Armand, the last player out of the game and they'll win!

" Captain Tang ." Tang Erda's communication device went off and Bai Liu's calm voice came through, "I know what you're thinking, but Georgia can't be cleared from the game."

"I can honestly tell you that he is the core of this copy, the solution to this copy has to be found from Georgia's body, we both know that the copy will land in reality, if the solution is not found in the game, the copy will cause a lot of casualties when it lands in reality, I promised you when I traded souls with you that I would try to solve every copy and keep reality safe. "

" Captain Tang, calm down, there is scaly powder in this storm that lowers the spirit value."

Tang Erda instantly came to his senses, he took a deep breath,

dropped the gun, tapped the system panel and pulled out the mental bleach, only after restoring his endangered mental levels to above the safe line did Tang Erda reply, "I got it, I won't touch Georgia."

"Is there anything you need me to do?"

"Yes, and it's still a very difficult thing to do." Bai Liu paused, "Can I ask Captain Tang to shoot the butterfly Armand turned into in fifteen minutes during this storm?"

Tang Erda is stunned.

--To shoot a fragile butterfly, only a few centimetres in size and still using the storm to constantly cover itself, in such a completely abnormal, artificially manipulated storm, with less than a metre of visibility, would be arguably impossible for any shooter in the world.

Georgia's ability to shoot arrows at Armand's location during the storm, resetting Armand's skills, is a completely bizarre operation that could be called brotherly telepathy - and that's if they were teammates, could communicate, and Armand cleared out the back completely. maintaining the visibility of Georgia's shot.

Tang Erda is striking from the front, facing the highest concentration of gold dust, with arguably no visibility, having to watch out for Armand's chains and scale dust, and having to shoot the butterfly with a more precise implement like a bullet, which is arguably ten times as disruptive as Georgia's.

And still within fifteen minutes.

Hearts, who was looking at the big screen, rested his jaw and spoke in a lazy tone: "I don't know anything about shooting, but I was blown away when I heard the request."

" Phoebe, you are a professional, do you analyse the possibility of this request being completed?"

Phoebe's face went numb the moment she heard Bai Liu's request: " Bai Liu's request for a hunter to be able to shoot a butterfly in a storm of this magnitude is the equivalent of asking a fisherman to kill a fish no more than thirty centimetres long with a needle in his boat in a stormy sea, with a time limit. "

"There's no way a fisherman, no matter how precise, can fulfil the requirements, at least not for me."

"I have a number of marksmen in my family." Phoebe spread her hands, "If they get a request like that, they are going to be angry enough to assassinate the head of the family in turn - it's teasing them now."

"Instead of going through with this unreasonable request, I think it would be simpler for Mr Hunter to simply kill Bai Liu, the nasty tactician, and change the door."

Phoebe smiled sweetly as she cupped her face and looked at the deep-eyed Tang Erda with a wistful look in her eyes: "The King's Guild would welcome such a powerful attacker."

"Empress, how much do you think I'd offer to potentially poach Jiayi along with Hunter?"

Hearts is delicately silent for a moment.

He could understand Phoebe's thoughts on the matter. After his departure, the King's Guild had lost one of its aces and was in need of someone, while Tang Erda's high-intensity main attack suited Phoebe's strong tactics.

"It depends on how much Bai Liu is willing to sell to you." Hearts eyes smiled, "It's unlikely that you expect the Wandering Circus people to switch to another guild on their own."

"But if you ask a little higher, Bai Liu should be perfectly willing to sell his players to you."

"I suppose you contacted them privately on the island? No one wanted to go, did they? I've made the connections and created opportunities for you."

Phoebe fell into an eerie silence as she pounded her leg with a grimace: "..... I just can't figure out how a no-nonsense and egotistical tactician like Bai Liu can get these people to follow him so much?"

"Hunter has several guilds poaching, and I know the highest guild, Kabala, has already offered six million points a month and the highest access to the prop vault - this is basically the equivalent of poaching with the authority of the vice president level, and it's not asking the other party to leave now, but is willing to wait until next year That's a lot of goodwill."

"The hunter rebuffed it on the spot!"

"..... and Jiayi ....." Phoebe took a deep breath to control her gradually grimacing expression, "as long as Jiayi is willing to come, I'm willing to be her sub control position and main attacker. She'll be the tactician."

"She's clearly no worse than Bai Liu and has the ability to dominate a team, but she just turned me down!"

Hearts looks thoughtfully at Jiayi, sitting on a bench next to the big screen.

..... guilds that have a feeling they are going to lose this year, and those that have already lost, are starting to prepare for next year's league, and these guilds are like hungry wolves that are starting to fixate on the fat meat that is the Wandering Circus.

The Wandering Circus guild does not have enough members, has a special structure and an average inventory of guild props, so there is nothing worth grabbing. The most valuable thing in the whole guild is the members of the tournament, especially Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda, who not only have valuable skills, but also their performance in the tournament is so outstanding that many teams who feel they are just one good player away from the championship are coveting them. The team was in awe.

These guilds are eyeing up the wandering circus and are just waiting for the moment it is eliminated to divide up the players inside.

--Sometimes these guilds will strike before they are even eliminated. Last year's killer sequence saw a number of changes in the middle of the sequence, all of which were poached by other guilds.

I wonder if Bai Liu, the ego guy, can hold his members steady .....

"I think it's strange though." Phoebe quickly calmed down after venting her frustration and anger, she looked to the big screen and inquired thoughtfully, " Bai Liu This guy has a pretty good eye for picking his players, highly in line with you."

"But this thief, Mu Sicheng, I remember when you did the measurement when you dug him up, it was medium to high, right?"

" Bai Liu actually let this guy be the ace in the first game of the playoffs ....." Phoebe frowned, "He doesn't have the ability to be the ace, does he?"

Hearts lifted her eyes and gave Phoebe a quick glance: "Why do you say that?"

"Because not many guilds are looking for him." Phoebe spreads her hands, " Muke though not many guilds dig him, but this I can understand, as an assassin, he seeks to have a low presence and kill in one hit, so it's normal for him to have low popularity and not much guild attention, and indeed not many guilds can eat this particular skill."

"But Mu Sicheng is a roamer and by definition the player who should be attracting the most attention, but still no one is digging him up, which can only mean one thing -"

Phoebe hit the nail on the head: "He's not good enough to get people's attention."

"As a rover, he is not an advanced match with his teammates, and his instinct to hang away from the main attack is a bit green, because his intelligence panel is not high, so he relies on the rear for all the analysis of intelligence when running the map, as a rover, his basic qualities are overall mediocre to low, the bright spot is not much other than high attack speed and high movement speed, there are not many other points. "

"And in a key event where he carried a significant part of the load, high attack speed and high movement speed, two of his rare traits, didn't come into play in either one."

"The same rookie was hung up by Armand, who signed up for the league almost at the same time as he did, and the same opponent who restrained his skills. Mu Sicheng has not escaped from the chain storm until now, causing the pressure to move all over to the main attacker and Bai Liu."

"I don't understand why Bai Liu has given him the ace position, Jiayi with his double-sided monster book and the strong Mr Hunter are both better suited to be the ace of this game, he's not exactly a quality roamer."

"And you were in the last game." Hearts returned nonchalantly, "It was hanging on to three players by such a not-so-quality roam and wearing down Liu Ji."

Phoebe was stunned.

"Watch the game not only for the result, but also for the process." Hearts looked up as he said calmly, "Don't be so impatient in your work, Phoebe, and don't judge an enemy so easily until the last minute."

"I did give Mu Sicheng an upper-middle rating, but that was before Mu Sicheng met Bai Liu."

"The Mu Sicheng that we have now is not the Mu Sicheng of three months."

" Bai Liu has brought out the innermost desires of this thief and inspired them."

In-game.

Inside and outside the palace was a raging, brutal hurricane, and the twisting chains inside almost trapped Tang Erda, who gritted his teeth and tightened his grip on his gun.

In such a storm to attack a butterfly with a bullet ..... Bai Liu can really give him a hard time.

But the tactician gives a difficult problem and the main attacker has only one option - to do it with all his might.

Fifteen minutes, which is just about the time it takes for Armand to run out of skills, during which time there is bound to be a break in skills, and Georgia will shoot arrows to renew Armand's skills, but there is a very slight gap between the two skills.

Within this void, the hurricane will break for a moment, will weaken, and if there is a moment when it is most likely to hit a butterfly hiding in the midst of the hurricane, it is at that moment.

There is only one chance.

Fifteen minutes had passed since the last break, and it was almost time for the next one. Tang Erda slowly clutched the gun in his hand and raised it smoothly, aiming it somewhere in the air, he took a deep breath, resisted the itch that rose from his throat and the urge to choke and cough, and counted down silently -

Ten, nine .....

Tang Erda's palms were oozing with sweat and his back was tense as

he looked in some disbelief at the wall of gold dust in front of him - the last time he had shot this nervously was the first time he had been in the third game of that target test.

What grade did he take that time ......?

It seems to be--

First.

Outside the palace.

Mu Sicheng, trapped in the hurricane by his chains, kept his head down, relying on the antidote Jiayi had left behind to keep him going until now, but instead of slowing down, the doll's attack had been getting stronger, and the hurricane had continued - that could only be because the guy's being had gotten a skill reset.

But now he has run out of antidotes and is basically at the bottom of his life.

It's not that you can't actually resist, it's just that ......

It hadn't waited for the command to resist.

There was a raucous murmur of electricity in the headset and Bai Liu's calm voice came out of it, "Good work."

"It's time for us to reap the harvest."

"Wait until Captain Tang hits the butterfly, which will briefly interrupt Georgia's match with Armand and stop him from resetting his skills, and the butterfly on this side will disappear, at which point Armand on your side will revert to being a normal player."

"Remember your mission before the game started?"

Mu Sicheng looked up slowly, covered in blood, his hands and feet trapped by chains in the wind, and snorted, his voice hoarse: "No need to remind me, my memory is not that bad."

"- Killed Golden Dawn's ace recruit, lead attacker Armand, didn't he?"

"Hmm." Bai Liu's voice was tinged with laughter, "Go on, ace thief of our team."

Tang Erda slowed the rate of his breathing, gripped his gun with both

hands and raised it to his ears, the pupils of his eyes stopped somewhere as if frozen in time, and with his heightened concentration hitting him, everything in Tang Erda's field of vision became frozen as if in slow motion replay, the golden shards in the wind became audible, the sound of chains interlocking and rubbing rhythmically in his ears, and his afterglow passed through The golden storm that was coming to a halt, the sight of Bai Liu, who had lashed out his whip and was moving quickly towards Georgia above the palace, the butterfly that was hidden in the slow fall of gold dust, flapping its wings.

He could almost see the butterfly's wings flapping in the air, spreading out in ripples of gold dust.

The hurricane is about to stop.

Four, three, two .....

Georgia drew her bow to full strength; he looked straight ahead at Armand and was about to let go when the butterfly that Armand had turned into flew back sideways and drew closer to the direction Georgia's arrow had been fired. -

--hit it.

If he misses Armand, allowing Armand to renew his skills, Bai Liu, who is close to the centre of the eye of the wind to stop Georgia, will be instantly killed by Armand's chains.

He has to hit it!

One!!!

The hurricane has stopped.

"BANG--!!!"

"Shoo-!!!"

The moment Tang Erda pulled the trigger, Georgia released the arrow and the silver rose bullet and the golden arrow left the string almost simultaneously, the bullet and arrow spiralling through the falling wind field towards the butterfly, cutting two strange trajectories through the air.

Hit it!!!

Tang Erda gritted her teeth and Georgia's eyes condensed.

The bullet struck the arrow that came at the same time, grazing the butterfly's nimble feathers by only a faint margin and sending it flying.

No hits!!!

Neither side hit!

The moment they saw their opponent's attack failing, both Georgia and Tang Erda wasted no time in taking a follow-up shot, with Georgia drawing his bowstring again and aiming it at the butterfly flying closer and closer to him, while Tang Erda aimed her gun at the butterfly, ready to fire another shot.

This time, it will be a hit!

--In the eyes of Georgia and Tang Erda, such strong and determined conviction can be seen.

"It can't be delayed any longer." A soft male voice came from the palace, "Our wandering crew can't wait that long."

All his attention hit on the arrow and Georgia's pupils flinched, he jerked his head back to look above the palace behind him, Bai Liu whipped out his whip with one hand and stood smiling on the pointed eaves of the palace, " Captain Tang said it was hard to notice your surroundings when you were shooting, so it really was."

Bai Liu, while he had just been concentrating on fighting Tang Erda and aiding Armand, had silently used the cover of the storm to jump on top of the palace!

The arrow in Georgia's hand went up with a roll of the whip, and he quickly disarmed it, summoning it again to aid Armand in his pursuit, but it was too late.

This gap is enough for Tang Erda to fire.

"Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang-!"

Tang Erda emptied her magazine in one go and five bullets were fired at once. The butterfly could not avoid it and was hit on the tail, shuddering in the air and dissipating into a gust of wind.

Hit it!

[System Alert: Player Armand's Monster Book form is disabled.]

On the other side, outside the palace.

The hurricane ceases abruptly, and Armand returns to his body. The

butterfly lying on his shoulder closes its wings and wraps itself in a cocoon, falling into a deep sleep, only to reawaken and summon the hurricane after an hour of CD.

Oh no!

Armand grimaced and gritted his teeth as he landed and turned to run in the direction of the palace - without a main attacker, his brother was just a support, and in the hands of that Bai Liu guy, there was no way that would end well!

Everything that had happened in the last world kept replaying in front of Armand's eyes, and the Georgia who had been captured by Bai six and then released, without a trace of emotion in her eyes, after her mental downfall, kept flashing in front of Armand, making him almost lose control of his emotions.

"I saw [the future], Armand." The Georgia of the last world sat with hollow eyes in front of Armand and muttered, "..... Bai six turned the heresy 0073 on, he spread the word to the world about the existence of a bit of goldstone here and he started smuggling the heresy to the world ."

"And so many, many people in the world, like the Gloren nation at one time, chose to be on the side of God and chose the [future] they wanted."

"I knew what was going to happen, but there was nothing I could do to stop it."

"So I'm really wrong?"

"Because God exists, because human desire exists, everyone will always choose gold, and gold is inexhaustible, right?"

"..... And for what have I done all this, all these ten years that I have held on to and guarded?"

He had been erased from his memory and did not understand what Georgia was saying to herself at that time, but kept on comforting her brother in a pale and clumsy way, hoping that he would get strength from here and get better.

But how could his brother, who bore an entire overthrown nation, who bore that [future], be well?!

Tears leaked from Armand's eyes as he ran as hard as he could towards the palace, and as he did so, Armand realised what was happening and quickly ducked his head to avoid a sharp monkey claw that grazed the side of his neck.

Blood instantly gushed out.

"Finally, you're back, been waiting for you for ages." Mu Sicheng grabbed the ground, his whole eyes were red, his ears became sharp, there was a tail wagging behind him, his hands dragged the ground and shook, his body drew longer than a metre, his whole body gave a strong sense of oppression, he licked his mouth in an evil way, cracked his sharp teeth and laughed, "Trying to escape in front of me is really out of your depth."

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng equips Monster Book form.]

[System warning: Player Mu Sicheng's spirit level has dropped below 40, entering the Berserk panel.]

"I'm surprised you're not dead?" Armand's eyes narrowed.

Another hurricane, another scaly powder, and this guy actually lasted this long ..... Bai Liu actually gave this guy all the antidotes that the witch refreshed?

"Trying to kill me?" Mu Sicheng snorted with a sidelong glance, "I have you to thank for helping me lower my spirit level, otherwise I wouldn't really know how to access the berserk panel before following Bai Liu guy's orders-"

The pupils in Mu Sicheng's eyes snapped up and his five fingers merged into clothed claws and stabbed at Armand's neck with ferocious coldness, "-Kill you quickly!"

Armand dodges left, a trail of blood appears on the side of his face, his hair slowly falls to the ground and when Armand looks up again, his eyes change completely and Mu Sicheng is stunned by the look in his eyes.

-- a completely different look from the guy's previous calm, bemused look that looked exactly like he'd seen him through and experienced everything; it was the kind of look that only a beast that had been violated into its domain, hurt its important family members, and was therefore aroused to ferocity could have.

Armand's expression was fierce, twisting his pretty face as he shook his arm with his right hand and flung it to the left, throwing out a huge set of arrows, a heavy set almost as tall as a man - if Georgia had been here, she would have recognised it as Armand's previous skill weapon.

As children Georgia and Armand practised archery, Georgia with an elegant and light bow and Armand with an inaccurate one, but in order to learn archery with his brother and be as good as he was, he tried to be brave and forced himself to take up the longbow - a bow about the same length and width as young Armand's body.

When Armand was a kid, he suffered a lot practicing this bow, he cried after every practice, he was so bruised that he couldn't even walk, but he didn't give up, and when Georgia would carry him back, she would ask him, "Why do you have to do something you're not good at and make such a mess of yourself?"

"Because my brother is doing it too." Armand leaned over Georgia's back and said very quietly, "Brother isn't very good at bow and arrow either, is he, with wounds all over his hands, so why is brother practising it?"

Georgia was silent for a moment: "A king practices martial arts to guard."

"I practiced so that I could keep you from practicing, you don't have to push yourself."

But Armand persevered, and later, when Armand's first skill was derived, even though he could not remember anything, his skill weapon was built, and it was this exaggerated wooden longbow.

Armand gripped his longbow with fury and looked coldly at the Mu Sicheng before him: "Get out of my way!"

" Mu Sicheng, get out of my way, if I can kill you the first time, I can kill you the second!"

"And a second time?" Mu Sicheng laughed coldly and turned his hand to strike the monkey claw with a biting attack, "What kind of daydream is that? You can kill me the first time before you say so!"

Armand spun out of the way, dodging Mu Sicheng's sharp monkey claws coming at his face, pulled back, turned around and stepped on the string of his longbow, gripping it with one hand, a thick arrow the

size of a small tree appeared in the air, his face spewing with anger as he aimed the head of the arrow at the speeding attack, a monkey claw grabbing the top edge of the longbow at Mu Sicheng's heart.

"Go to hell!"

Armand lets go of his foot and the full string of the longbow jolts, sending a jolt through Armand, who is stepping on it, and Mu Sicheng, who is holding the top edge of the longbow with one hand.

The arrow left the string and Mu Sicheng was caught off guard and was toppled straight out by the thick, heavy arrow, which hit the ground hard and exploded into a huge cloud of golden smoke.

Armand looked at the spot, clenched his longbow, and turned without hesitation towards the palace, and the moment he did so, the smoke was like a bombardment, and the huge arrow that had struck Mu Sicheng through was thrown back, the bloodstained arrow grazing Armand's shoulder, and Armand whirled around to dodge it, then he paused and looked almost in astonishment at the bottom of the arrow He then looked, almost in shock, at Mu Sicheng, who had almost run like lightning, who had appeared in front of him in a flash.

Mu Sicheng's abdomen was a large bleeding hole, caused by Armand's arrow, and Mu Sicheng's eyes were fierce as he struck Armand in the abdomen with a claw: "Who gave you permission to go? You're so proud of yourself!"

Armand's pupils and body jolted from Mu Sicheng's punch, vomiting a mouthful of blood as he was sent flying over ten metres away.

"I'll never let you ....." Mu Sicheng wiped the blood from the side of his own mouth, "Ahem, one step back to the aid palace."

Armand staggered to his feet, propping up his longbow, his uniform in tatters, his description a wreck, his pretty face, which he had himself critiqued as a vase, scuffed and bloodied on the ground, his light brown eyes bursting with a light of a kind never seen before as tears fell from them, and he stomped on his longbow, using his bloodied hands to aim it full of arrows at Mu Sicheng, who was charging this way Heart.

"I must go back!!!"

"There's the last of my family there!!!"

"Get out of the way!!!"

In the viewing pool, the host watched the gruesome battle on the big screen, saw Armand's hands strangled to the bone by the sharp bowstring, and was speechless for a moment, finally sighing tersely: "..... believes that after watching this battle, no one will ever describe Armand as a vase again. Armand ."

"This is a lead attacker who gave everything he had to guard the tactician, and he did everything he could."

"It was a wonderful confrontation!"

"It's not just that." Hearts flicked a glance at Phoebe, who hadn't spoken since earlier, "This presenter's view is still a bit shallow, you analyse it."

"And Mu Sicheng ." Phoebe finally spoke, her head down, her brow furrowed and her tone a little heavy, "To fight Armand to this extent ..... this guy ..... isn't even on the regular roaming path. "

"You've finally found it." Hearts raised his eyes as he looked at the big screen, "The normal roaming is based on the idea of attracting the attention of the opponent's main attack, distracting the main attacking fire, reducing the pressure on the team's defense, and at the same time being able to go back to the team's support at any time, keeping up with the team and taking the opponent by surprise."

"But Mu Sicheng is not a wanderer cultivated along those lines."

"Mu Sicheng is a player with clear strengths and weaknesses." Hearts calmly analyses, "His skills are stealing, he has high movement speed and is very good at disrupting the enemy, from that point of view he is a very good player to be a roaming player, but accordingly, because of his own experience, he is not very cooperative, he is impulsive and he is less analytical when running the map, these are all minuses for him to be a roaming player, so I give Mu Sicheng a medium to high rating."

"But Bai Liu has given Mu Sicheng a whole new roaming route based on his own personality and skills."

Hearts looks to Phoebe: "What do you think is the most important attribute of wandering?"

"A disruption to the enemy's main attack." Phoebe replied quickly.

"Hmm." Hearts intones, "What do you think is the best kind of wander, in terms of this head trait?"

Phoebe pondered slightly, "A wanderer who can always interfere with the enemy's main attack."

"Wrong." Hearts laughed very softly, "It's the roaming that kills the opponent's main attack."

Phoebe was stunned, then she blushed, "So last game Mu Sicheng that guy was the one ....."

"You realise that." Hearts lowered his eyes, "That's what happened last game, you think that according to the normal tactical flow, Mu Sicheng, the roamer, would have quickly retreated back to defend the big unit and you would have been able to take advantage of the situation, that's why you chose to spend time with him, but he died and wouldn't retreat until he switched one for one and replaced Liu Ji, the main attacker in our team. "

"You think it was Mu Sicheng getting out of control, a fluke, but then you look at Golden Dawn this time."

Hearts rested his jaw and looked at the two men fighting on the big screen with a smirk on his face.

" Bai Liu's orders to Mu Sicheng were presumably not to stall the main attack at all, but to kill it."

"That's extreme." Phoebe was speechless, "What kind of wanderer does that?"

"But don't you think that's a very useful solution?" Hearts spreads his hands as he smiles, "The biggest thing wandering does is distract the main attacking fire, so isn't killing the best solution?"

"And now it looks like Mu Sicheng is close to successfully implementing this programme twice."

Phoebe fell into an eerie silence, and soon she was staring at the big screen with a deep expression, as if she had an understanding: "How much do you think I'd offer Mu Sicheng for him to jump our guild?"

"....." Hearts sincerely suggested, "Why don't we switch guilds and dig in?"

In-game.

Mu Sicheng leapt at the arrow, and with a few quick dashes, his silhouette flashed in the air and appeared in front of Armand, holding the longbow in his left hand, using it as a fulcrum, and using the force of the dash, his body turned into a stump with his waist, and kicked Armand in the jaw with his right foot.

"Ka-ching-!"

Mu Sicheng's eyes were red with rage as he shouted, "Take another step!"

Armand's entire face was deformed by the kick to the left, the shattered bone fragments in his mouth dry heaving as his body went slack, letting go of the longbow with a loose hand, his body flipped back and looked like it was going to fall to the ground, but the next second Armand summoned his longbow again, he landed on one hand, his right eye glancing to the left in the blood, his eyes full of monstrous fire as he propped up the longbow and his body on his left knee, his right foot on the bowstring drawn to its maximum.

"Do you think you can stop me?"

Armand raised his voice hoarsely, "You're just a thief who died under me!"

Mu Sicheng's face changed.

The string clanged tautly and the longbow emerged, its tip aimed at Mu Sicheng's head above the bow. Armand rolled over and let go of his foot, the string sent the arrow out, and the bow nailed the dodging Mu Sicheng in the shoulder blade with a powerful force that carried him straight backwards for dozens of metres.

He let out a muffled grunt of pain, and the gold dust on the floor grazed two whitish drag marks on both feet.

[System warning: Player Mu Sicheng's life value has dropped to 9, and will soon be zero!]

Armand propped up his longbow and staggered to his feet, blood dripping from his jaw, his voice broken and cold: "You're at the bottom of your life."

"Give it up, Mu Sicheng, you are no match for me."

"Beg for mercy now and I can still give you a piece of my mind."

"..... ahem, painful?" Mu Sicheng lay on his back, a large hole in his right shoulder and a large hole in his abdomen, both oozing blood, but he laughed out loud, "You're a man who grinds his way through things, and only just going crazy and fighting me is considered painful."

Armand didn't say much, he calmed down the moment he saw that Mu Sicheng couldn't move, stamping his bow on one foot and drawing it full: "After this game, we won't see each other afterwards either."

"One last piece of advice before I send you out."

"Stop stealing things."

"Tch." Mu Sicheng reluctantly propped up his upper body and tossed a bloodstained cocoon ball in his hand, raising an eyebrow, "Sorry about that."

"And I just stole this from you."

Armand's pupils flinch - that's a cocoon ball of CD skills formed by his hurricane butterflies that can't be taken into the panel!

If Mu Sicheng steals it, even if he sends this guy off, he won't be able to use the [Hurricane Butterfly] skill in the second half!

"Give it back!!!"

"Wasn't that just righteous ..... ahem." Mu Sicheng propped himself up on the ground and stood up shakily, his tone harsh, "Said he had some advice to give me?"

"Now it's my turn to give you advice."

Mu Sicheng took the cocoon ball between two fingers and waved it from side to side, snickering, "Never let your guard down against a thief you've been in close combat with."

Armand's face finally went completely cold: "At a time like this, you are pursuing such unjust acts to determine the winner ....."

He had really looked away before to believe that the other side wasn't that bad either.

Mu Sicheng is indeed a born thief.

"You'll never stop hurting people with this childish behaviour to please yourself, so many hard lessons that you don't remember all of them."

Mu Sicheng clenched his five fingers together, clutching the cocoon ball in his hand as he looked up, blood dripping from his jaw, his eyes narrowing slightly as if he had heard a big joke and snorted very softly, "Pleasing?"

"You think I steal to please myself?"

"What do you know, to judge me like that ....."

Armand paused, struck for a moment by the look in Mu Sicheng's eyes - the man was smiling, but his eyes were very silent.

-- it was like the look in his eyes when he was killed and killed him too in the last moment of his last life.

The day before, pre-match pep rally in the Guild Room of the Wandering Circus.

" Mu Sicheng ." Bai Liu looked down at the paper without raising his head, "You stay for a while."

The back of Mu Sicheng's neck froze as he was about to leave, then he slumped to the table in dismay and shot a look of help to Tang Erda and Muke, who shook their heads with a smile, while Tang Erda showed her hands helplessly, saying there was nothing she could do.

Only after everyone else had left did Mu Sicheng come up next to Bai Liu and whispered, "Have you really thought about it and want me to be the trump card down the field?"

"Aren't you the one who's been screaming about being an ace all day?" Bai Liu glanced up slightly at Mu Sicheng before dropping his eyes back to the papers, his tone natural, "Are you scared now that you're really being asked to play?"

Mu Sicheng sat up straighter in an instant and waved his hand in a serious manner, "That's bound to be impossible!"

Bai Liu gave him a look, "Then why the reluctant look?"

"Just ..... my skills as you know, well of course they are." Mu Sicheng slowly slumped back down again, "But it's the playoffs, and it's the

first game of the opening season."

"..... Everyone's skills are so cool, I'm just a stealer, if I become an ace, will people see it and say that our guild is underhanded?"

Bai Liu stops flicking through the papers, his eyes half-lidded, his fingers unconsciously twirling the coins - a thoughtful gesture.

Mu Sicheng's heart lifted with Bai Liu's thoughtful movements, his fists clenched in a dry jest, "Right? Haha, you don't think it's appropriate either, do you?"

"It's true that you're a bad player." Bai Liu nodded, "But I don't think it has anything to do with your skills, my tactics have always been known for being underhanded, which is kind of what our team is known for."

Mu Sicheng: "....."

Why can this man say such things about himself with a straight face!

"On the contrary, it's you." Bai Liu stares thoughtfully at Mu Sicheng, "Why do you have a negative attitude towards stealing when it is clear that the core of your desire is to steal?"

"....." Mu Sicheng feigned composure and averted his eyes, "stealing is a wrong act in itself, isn't it?"

"Doing the Wrong Thing ....."

Mu Sicheng's tone slowly sank: "..... has a price to pay."

"To judge whether an act is right or not, we should not look at the act itself, but at the result of the act, right?" Bai Liu spoke in a calm tone, "It's a little too biased to judge good or bad just by what the act itself is perceived to be in the public perception."

"For example, in the eyes of many people, an existence like [the orphanage] is good, an existence like [the house] is good, and an existence like [the church] is good."

"But The Loving Home is bad, as are Five Buildings and The Witch."

"Actions in themselves are not good or bad; it is the actions that lead to the results that are good or bad."

Mu Sicheng looked at Bai Liu, his voice trembling very softly, "What

about, what about the theft?"

Bai Liu looked at him levelly: "In reality, it's bad."

"But here, it's just a game."

"No one would condemn a thief in a game, just as no one would condemn a dragon in a fairy tale."

"Because you didn't do any damage."

Mu Sicheng stared blankly at Bai Liu.

[Hey, Yuan Qingqing, people like you should hate thieves like me, right? Why are you at the table with me?]

The girl with the round face and long ponytail looked up from the mountain of homework, looked at him seriously and replied.

[Because it's not like you've really done anything bad].

[Your stealing from those people is like playing a game, a lot of times you end up giving it back, you don't look like a really bad person, fellow Mu Sicheng].

[Bad guys don't like hip hop monkey rubber.]

"There are other strange questions you can ask me all together, no charge." Bai Liu put his head down again and flipped through the papers, "I kept you down because I thought you had a lot of questions you wanted to ask me; I don't have too many questions per se about you you being an ace."

"What if ..... if my theft has caused a very bad effect?" Mu Sicheng asked, head bowed and very softly.

"Can you make up for it?" Bai Liu asks calmly and rhetorically.

"I'm doing my best to make up for it." Mu Sicheng replied in a trembling voice.

"Then go and make amends, wait until the amends are done, and apologise to that person properly." Bai Liu replied flatly, "If the person can forgive you, then you've made amends, if not, then just keep making amends."

"You should be aware of that, shouldn't you?"

Mu Sicheng took a deep breath, "I did."

-- It was with this awareness that he entered the game, fled from those players, and stayed dead on the run, surviving to this day.

He wanted to resurrect the people who had died through his fault.

Bai Liu hmmm'd and asked, "Any other questions?"

Mu Sicheng leaned over the table and looked up very shallowly, the pupils of his eyes seemed to have tears in them and his voice was a little muffled: "..... Bai Liu, will you always be my friend?"

"In a broad sense, I should be considered your soul-bonded person, and I will remain in this relationship with you for as long as your soul exists, which you personally consider to be a friend." Bai Liu replied lightly, and he paused for a moment, "In a narrower sense-"

"Well, I'll always be your friend."

The Lost Land of Gold

The sticky red blood dripped from the tips of the blackened monkey's paws, and Mu Sicheng looked up, his expression never so calm: "I don't know where you guys come from with all your strange assumptions about me."

"But I'm not stealing to please myself."

Mu Sicheng closed his monkey paws and rolled his knuckles inward, the butterfly cocoon jarred restlessly in his palm, then was crushed, shattered into a wind that dissipated from his fingertips, his eyes haloed with a vigorous emotion -

-- Killing intent.

"It's just a game, and people's actions can lose their meaning."

"I am stealing to atone for my sins."

"- it's like, you kill to protect."

Mu Sicheng clenched his fist into a claw and came straight at Armand's heart, Armand's pupils clenched, he drew his longbow and gritted his teeth on the string.

"Go to hell, Mu Sicheng!!!"

"Go to hell, Armand!!!"

The smoke clears, and amidst the bloodstained wooden longbow and the scattered cocoon of silk, two men have fallen, bereft of all life.

Mu Sicheng's monkey claws slit Armand's throat, Armand's bow and arrow pierced Mu Sicheng's heart, and they fell in a pool of blood, choking and coughing as they moved towards each other, reluctantly trying to attack again, but eventually falling to the ground, clutching their weapons in their hands in disbelief.

Never gave up protecting his tactician until the last moment.

--The most important person in your life.

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng has zero life, exit the game].

[System Alert: Player Armand has zero life and is out of the game.]

Ornamental pool.

" Golden Dawn is down to Georgia." Phoebe mopped her face with one hand and tsked regretfully, "It's a foregone conclusion."

"What a loser, obviously a veteran tactician, but actually lost to a newbie team."

Hearts squints: "If you have time to connote me here, why don't you go watch another match, the killer sequence match has started, right?"

"Yes, to the invisibility cloak." Phoebe patted her knees and sat up, she glanced at Hearts, "I'm going to go over and check it out, do you want to come along and watch? You've watched every Slayer Sequence match before."

Hearts brought his gaze back to the big screen and was quiet: "..... I won't be going over there."

Ornamental pool number one.

Bai Yi and Bai Jiamu's eyes were hollow, sweating coldly, their souls rising to the heavens: "Shit, shit, shit! The God of Reverse and Liao Ke are not here! "

"It's almost time for us to play! What are we going to do? How can we play a team game without a tactician!"

"Oh." Spades suddenly looked up as he turned his head, looking to Bai Yi and Bai Jiamu, his tone indifferent, "I was approached by the Reverse God earlier, saying that I should play a single match first, and you guys should play a double match, playing a quick match to get double points, the Reverse God said that we were now capable enough to kill the match early when we played against the Invisible Cloak. "

"He said there was an 80 percent chance the other team would forfeit the corps game because they didn't want to play extended overtime, and we won."

"If unfortunately, the other side didn't forfeit, then he should be back by that time too, so we don't have to worry."

Bai Yi and Bai Jiamu look slyly at Spades: " Spades."

Spades nodded, "It's me."

"You lizard dog!" Bai Yi was furious and punched Spades with his fist, "The gods have told you about tactics, why didn't you tell us? Wasn't it fun watching Bai Jiamu and I almost cry in fear while you dozed off by yourself! Ah!"

"You are so nasty! Who the hell did you learn to be bad with! And playing with your teammates' feelings now!"

In-game.

Tang Erda and Bai Liu only stopped taking control of Georgia when the system beep sounded for Armand to exit the game.

Tang Erda let out a long breath as a cold sweat broke out all over his body - Georgia had been rushing desperately out of the palace for the last ten minutes, and he and Bai Liu had barely managed to defend themselves against it.

If Bai Liu's weapon hadn't been a whip that excelled in multiple defences and had such strong mechanics to judge, Georgia might have actually been able to run away from them, which would have been a problem.

"Well, you're the only one left on the team now, Georgia's captain." Bai Liu smiled as he sat down on the bench and held out his hand to Georgia across the table, "Now that the game is won and lost and we are no longer in any kind of adversarial relationship, perhaps we can sit down and talk in a friendly manner?"

Tang Erda looks subtly at Bai Liu across from Georgia who is tied solidly to the bench with his whip: "....."

That's not exactly a friendly attitude, is it?

As expected, Georgia turned her head indifferently, "You can kill me to win the game, there's nothing to talk about between us."

"How can you say there's nothing to talk about if you haven't talked." Bai Liu uses three fingers to conjure up a small hourglass from his glove as if by magic - something Tang Erda has just retrieved from Georgia's body, a disastrous search as evidenced by Georgia's now dishevelled clothing.

Bai Liu smiled amiably, "What if I said that I did have a way of filling the hourglass of time?"

"As you know well, there is no point in lying to you at a time like this when you have already taken the victory, so I do have a solution."

Georgia's expression moved slightly, but she kept her lips tightly pursed and did not speak.

Bai Liu turned his head to look at Tang Erda who nodded, "I used a prop to turn on the sound shield, so for ten minutes the audience couldn't hear your conversation."

"So that we can talk safely." Bai Liu smiled, "First of all, Captain Georgia, what I want to say to you is that you know that your nationals-"

"-are all still alive?"

Tang Erda was stunned, and Georgia paused, "I know they are not dead, they are just golden statues waiting for the moment of reawakening."

"No, no, no." Bai Liu shook his head, "They're still alive."

"Alive ......?" Georgia's mind was slow to realize something, but he quickly self-denied the answer, "..... No way, the Heresy Processing Bureau called in special equipment to scan them and they really are just golden statues with no human physical activity."

"Yes, physically, all their organs have been completely hardened and are indeed gold." Bai Liu looked up, "But on a psychological level, they are still human."

"Because they have a soul, they can feel."

Georgia's expression froze completely.

Outside the game, on the surface of the Gulo Sea, the three sub-islands of the Bureau of Heresy Handling.

Lu Yizhan and Liao Ke had their hands and necks put on surveillance rings and then followed the newly-assigned Third Bureau crew on board the boat, making their way towards the floating island in a calm and dangerous sea.

" Mr. Lu ." Liao Ke and Lu Yizhan piled into the stern of the boat, he spoke with concern, "You said heretic 0073 is not a heretic, what is going on?"

"The people inside are just turned into gold, but they're all still alive." Lu Yizhan took a deep breath, then said, "If I let [Mu Sicheng] open the shield I set up ten years ago, and the waters flooded into the Gloren, all those Gloren who were still alive would have drowned."

"Still alive?!" Liao Ke was amazed, "You couldn't have taken this kingdom in without checking at all, they're still alive, why didn't you notice?"

"Because these sculptures are really completely gold in terms of examination, in terms of weight, density, and electromagnetic wave detection." Lu Yizhan closed his eyes as he clutched the guardrail, "..... And I was also baited by Bai six under Georgia's narrative."

"You remember when I said that Georgia and Bai six played a game that said if he won, he could suspend the deal and if he lost, he would have to pay for the pain of all the nationals."

" Georgia, understood by normal logic, took it for granted that he would pay for all the pain, and Bai six played a play on words with him, and the original words he said were - [Whether it was the pain of that nod to a thousand years ago, or the pain of this nod to now, at that time, the price of all the pain is paid by you together.]"

Lu Yizhan's tone is sullen: " Bai six was talking about the result and Georgia thought it was the process, he was fooled by Bai six."

" Georgia thought the deal stood, then it meant that the nationals would not deliver pain, the nationals' time was fixed, they would not suffer or have a hard time, they would just wait for the moment Georgia completed the deal to wake up and then they could go on with their lives as normal."

"But if, according to Bai six's consequentialism, the present Georgia did not pay for a thousand years of suffering, then the bargain naturally does not hold, and he can rightly charge those nationals for their suffering. "

"..... It was an oversight on my part to not anticipate that Bai six could actually keep someone alive in the form of a golden statue to collect pain."

"You shouldn't be too hard on yourself." Seeing Lu Yizhan's shoulders tense up, Liao Ke let out a long sigh, wanting to say a few words of advice, but in the end he didn't say anything.

At that time, Lu Yizhan had to deal with Bai Liu's affairs and Bai six, and it was not enough to break him into eighteen pieces.

The more everyone tries to save, the more likely it is that no one will be saved, Captain Lu.

" Bai six lied to you." Bai Liu's tone was placid, "Your nationals may have turned to gold, but they are all still alive."

So when it turns gold, neither the life nor the spirit value drops - because that is just another gesture of survival, not some heresy.

"Don't you think it's strange, Georgia ?"

"Ten years have passed since this place sank to the bottom of the sea, and ten years have passed since that explosion, it should be dead and silent, but here gold dust still falls from the sky in a steady stream, as if something is still alive and sprinkling gold dust from the sky to the ground in a steady stream."

"Have you ever wondered where all this gold dust comes from?"

Georgia looked up, his eyes hollow as he murmured softly and asked rhetorically, "Where ..... did all this gold dust ..... come from?"

Bai Liu flicks two fingers and clips out a piece of paper - a message Muke sent him before he left - and he repeats the words softly, "Palace, gold dust, tears."

"This is what my team member left me before he left, what he thought was the key decoded information."

"My guess would be that he started going gold in the middle of your interrogation of him, and he left tears behind during your interrogation, which he then found turned into gold dust, and I saw this in your player Chrissy - she turned into a gold heretic when I shot her in order to send her out of the game."

"She broke down in tears, and her tears turned to gold dust."

" Georgia." Bai Liu said calmly, "This golden dust is the final solution to the hourglass of time you have been searching for."

"These are the tears shed by these citizens who have been trapped here for ten years and have been looking forward to your return day and night."

Behind Georgia, a drop of gold slowly falls from the eyes of the golden statue of the king, leaning on a tabletop and sitting on a bench, diffusing into the air as a golden powder, turning into a trajectory that slowly disperses through the long-silent kingdom.

"They are waiting for me to return ....." Georgia rhetorically asked in a daze, "I have trapped them here for ten years, immovable and untouchable, and it is my single-mindedness that has tortured them to this point."

"How could they wait for such a treasonous grand prince?"

"People shed tears because they have feelings." Bai Liu raised his eyes, "They stay under this sea like statues for ten years, waiting until the ground is full of gold dust, their hearts are like yellow stones, and there is no more golden sand swirling in the air, but the moment you step into this place, the gold dust that fills the sky begins to flutter again and fall on you in droves."

"They have feelings for you, Georgia."

"You're the only person in the world who would make himself as hard and indestructible as a statue to protect them, stubbornly guarding them for ten years on the beach, who else could they wait for but you?"

Georgia slowly drops her gaze to the hourglass in Bai Liu's palm, lost in memory.

Gloren In the spring the innocent children and townspeople would grind the gold mined from the first mine cart into gold dust and sprinkle it into the sky on those they wished to bless.

In those days, a young Georgia would walk down there and his hair and shoulders would be covered in a thick layer of gold dust, sometimes more than his father, who would mutter and complain that Georgia was just too popular with the nation.

The men laughed and joked and shouted in jest, letting the gold dust fall over the hem of his coat and long hair: the

" Georgia!"

" Georgia!"

Georgia looked back at them and thought to herself - if only this

scene, under his protection, could last forever.

Ten years later, his body was once again covered in gold dust, and Georgia turned her head to look out of the window platform, where the nationals who had waved gold dust at him from the stage had long since ceased to be, and the banners they held outside the mines to drive him away had been transformed into gold statues, while the king, whom he would have laughed and complained was too popular, was now standing beside his chair, sorrowfully contemplating how he could conceal the pointing stone from him and bury it in the ground.

He had, after all, failed to protect it all.

Georgia closes her eyes.

A tear falls into the hourglass in Bai Liu's hand, and the golden sand in the hourglass begins to flow, the thick gold dust floating throughout the kingdom turns into a visible golden track that drags the hourglass wrapped in Bai Liu's hand and pours into it.

In the midst of the golden sands flowing, Georgia opened his eyes wordlessly, his golden sculpturing having pervaded his heart, so that even his voice became soft and harmonious: "..... Is it here, at this moment, that my bargain with the gods has finally begun to be fulfilled?"

"I suppose so." Bai Liu looked at the hourglass that was about to start rewinding in his hand and smiled, "Better to make a deal with God than to make a deal with me."

"Heir to the Gods?" Georgia raised her eyes and asked back in a soft voice, her eyes all but lightly resistant, "..... As the Grand Prince of Gloren, I am grateful that you told me all this and aborted the deal, but I will not make any more deals with you at the cost of the nation's suffering. "

"No." Bai Liu laughed softly, "I don't want you nationals or your pain."

Georgia asks, "What do you want?"

Bai Liu looked at him: "Your soul."

The moment Bai Liu's words fall, the hourglass suspended in Bai Liu's palm fills up and reverses.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has collected all the Tears of the

Hourglass of Time, the hourglass is full, time will start to rewind back to ten years ago, please be ready to travel back in time!]

The golden sand in the hourglass, wrapped in the gold dust turned into tears, began to flow in reverse and everything around it began to reverse as gold dust everywhere flew into the sky and the gold leaf on the statue of the king sitting at the long table began to fall off, revealing the man inside.

Tang Erda reached out to grab Bai Liu, whose eyes had suddenly dissipated, but the moment she did, she only caught a handful of golden sand.

Georgia also turned into golden sand and disappeared into the copy.

[System Alert: The Lost Land of Gold game is cleared, player Tang Erda exits the game, player Bai Liu, Georgia triggers the plot and enters the DLC - The Land of Gold Ten Years Ago]

Tang Erda opened her eyes again and was already in the viewing pool, which Muke instantly surrounded.

"What's going on?" Muke asked, forcing himself to be calm, "The big screen has gone black, which means there's a game over and I saw you guys' pass, why are you the only one logged out?"

" Where's Bai Liu?"

" Bai Liu was left in the game." Tang Erda took a deep breath, "He triggered the spur."

Across the viewing pool, Armand stares deathly at the extinguished screen as he rises to his feet, clenching his fists in resignation - What about Georgia?

Why didn't his older brother log out?

" Armand!" The team member next to him looked at Armand's bruised hands and shoulders and panicked, trying to pull Armand back, but Armand was so bruised that he had nowhere to go but to shout, "You're not even strapped in! Where are you going!"

"The game's over, the captain will be fine! You're so badly hurt, don't go anywhere!"

The thought of Georgia spending time with that Bai Liu guy was too

much for Armand to keep his cool, and he braced himself to stand up and walk towards the big screen, despite his half-tied, exposed shoulders.

"Hello." Armand barely maintained his politeness to talk to the employee by the big screen, "The game is over but our team's tactician is still in there, can you keep the little TV on so we can see what's going on inside?"

"I'll pay for that part of it."

"Or be able to open the portal again to allow us to access ....."

No sooner had Armand's words left his lips than an arrogant, threatening voice came from beside him.

"Hey! Our president is still in there! Open up and let me in and bring him out!"

Armand pauses with a sense of urgency, and Mu Sicheng seems to hear a sound coming from this side of the room and stops, both turning their heads at the same time and looking at each other across the big screen.

Mu Sicheng, blood still dripping from the large hole in his right shoulder, grabbed his employee by the collar with his left hand in a vicious and threatening manner, and saw Armand snort and tsk in a moment of displeasure.

Half of Armand's face is a bloody mess, and he gives Mu Sicheng a cold glance, as if he didn't exist, and turns his head to continue his conversation with the staff.

The voices of the two men overlapped again.

"Is there any way I can get in?"

Mu Sicheng exploded and rolled up his sleeves to fight Armand: "What are you doing in there! You want to fight Bai Liu?"

"Come on, let's fight again right here! You Little Bai face are my loser!"
-

"You are no match for me." Armand looked calm, with an expression that looked like he was speaking calmly, but with his backhand he summoned his longbow, "I advise you not to go in there again, if I can

kill you a second time, I can kill you a third."

"Ha?!" Mu Sicheng seethed, "I'll show you who really killed who!"

The players from both sides arrived and were very helpless.

" Armand, you calm down, we are not allowed to log back into the game ..... nor are we allowed to fight in the viewing pool."

Wang Shun pulled Mu Sicheng, who was about to run at him, with his head in his hands, and he was in tears: "God Mu, don't make a scene, our team will get a yellow card!"

"But Bai Liu isn't out yet ....." Mu Sicheng clenched his fists as he lowered his voice a bit, "..... If I clear main attack a little faster, then ....."

"I'm still too slow."

" Georgia's still in there." Armand's lips tightened, tears shifting in the pupils of his eyes, "I can't leave him in there alone."

"He never leaves me alone."

There was a moment of silence from the players on both sides.

" Armand ." The team handed Armand the bandage, sighing, " You've done a great job, it's us who haven't, trust the captain, he's a strong and awesome guy."

" Georgia will definitely finish this game in the Land of Gold properly and come out to meet you."

"He won't leave you alone."

Wang Shun helplessly and amusingly picks up Mu Sicheng, who is already unsteady on his feet: "If you're slow and slow, then what am I?"

"You've done well enough, you should have looked around before, before when you logged out of the game with Armand, the whole viewing pool was filled with spectators cheering for your great performance."

"You proved Bai Liu's choice was the right one."

"President he will be able to wrap it up properly." Wang Shun picked

up Mu Sicheng, who had his head bowed and his jaw dropping blood, or whatever it was, to the floor, and patted him on the head with a smile in his voice, "then came out to meet you and compliment you on a job well done."

The desire to protect something and someone is probably common to people who have something they want to protect.

Why do people shed tears?

Is it because of the pain?

Armand covered his face with a bandage and clenched his fists very hard, but his shoulders still shook from his vocal sobs.

Is it because you resent your own incompetence?

Mu Sicheng's face was so screwed up that his features were contorted, but he could not control the water that fell from his eyes, and he gritted his teeth and wiped it away with his monkey paw, not wanting to face himself like this.

Is it because of weakness or loss?

Sitting in the audience, Hearts lifted his eyes, surrounded by a fading crowd, all of whom had gone to catch the next round, while Hearts sat quietly in place, like a movie audience waiting for a non-existent egg.

"Can you give me an answer?" Standing at the gates of Gloren, Bai six smiles and holds out his hand, an hourglass filled with tears that can reverse time, while he smiles and asks Bai Liu, who suddenly appears in front of him, "Why do people shed tears?"

"The reason people shed tears." Bai Liu raised his eyes as he looked across at Bai six, "It's because of feelings."

The Lost Land of Gold

Next to the panicked king and priests, the guards of Gloren looked blankly at the Bai Liu who had suddenly appeared at the entrance to Gloren and asked, "Is this your guest?"

--The hourglass of reversal brought Bai Liu to this moment, ten years ago, when he met Bai six, who was trading with the King.

"No, he's not my guest." Bai six explained with a smile, "but I do look forward to his visits."

"I've been looking forward to this visit, for ten years."

"The moment you came here ten years ago and made a deal with these people, you knew that ten years later I would enter the game, get the hourglass, and reverse time to come to you?" Bai Liu's tone was unruffled as he asked, "That's a lot of work."

Bai six laughed softly, he shrugged his shoulders as if helpless, "There's nothing I can do about it, I have an appointment with Mr. [Prophet] and I can't interfere with you on my own initiative."

"But when you enter the game and come to me voluntarily in time travel, you can't call me interfering."

"When did you guess that the monster in this copy was mine?" Bai six inquired with a smile as he opened his hand to block Bai Liu's whip, "How hostile, to hit me with a monster book as soon as I come over."

There are monsters in every copy, but in this copy of The Lost Kingdom of Gold, Bai Liu did not find any.

Neither the gold dust all over the ground, nor the goldified animals everywhere, nor the goldified people at the entrance to the mines, belong to the category of monsters, but a copy, it is impossible to have no monsters - then the answer is obvious.

"The key is time." Bai Liu raised his eyes as he looked at the monster book panel that surfaced on his system panel, "Monsters don't exist in the Land of Gold ten years from now."

"- but rather the Land of Gold ten years ago, after the hourglass was reversed."

[System Alert: Congratulations to Player Bai Liu for unlocking the Monster Book - The Lost Land of Gold (1/2)]

[Monster Name: The Evil God of the Land of Gold]

[Attack Value: ????? (Undetectable, can be unlocked)]

[Attack Method: ?? (cannot be fully detected, may not be unlocked)]

[Weakness: ?? (undetectable)]

"Quick reaction time." Bai six caught the long whip Bai Liu flung at him between two fingers and cocked his head with a grin, "I've cooperated with you to unlock the monster book, in return can we talk peacefully about something else?"

"- like the Prince of Georgia who is about to shoot an arrow at me now on the walls?"

A golden arrow shot through the air, piercing between the two men, Bai Liu withdrew his long whip and looked sideways at the young Georgia on the wall with her bow drawn full.

Bai Liu's arrival is a clear distraction from the prince's hostility towards Bai six - Georgia, now only sixteen years old, is frowning and pointing her bow and arrow warily at Bai Liu, the unexpected visitor who has appeared outside Gloren's gates.

"You can't have two of the same soul in one dimension." Bai six's voice contained a smile, "You bring Georgia back from ten years ago, and he becomes what he was ten years ago."

"It seems that your efforts to acquire this prince's soul are going to be scrapped."

Bai six spreads his hands and laughs, "- Georgia ten years ago doesn't remember that you helped him guard Gloren and were uniformly hostile to both you and me."

"This copy has two pages of the monster book." Bai Liu shifted his eyes from Georgia to Bai six, "There's another monster besides you, it's a dotard, right?"

"Hmm." Bai six sighed, "Apart from the fact that you don't want to, you're really the perfect candidate for the successor to the evil god."

"This is the hourglass filled with tears." Bai Liu held out his hand and

raised his eyes to Bai six, "In accordance with the bargain you made a thousand years ago, the deal between Gloren, the Land of Gold and you is terminated, I give you the hourglass and you give me the goldstone."

When Bai Liu opened his palm and the hourglass filled with tears was revealed to everyone, everyone was stunned, even Georgia, who had once again filled her bow on the wall, stopped and slowly lowered it.

"This is-!" The king exclaimed incredulously, looking at the hourglass with a look of anticipation or resistance that he didn't know whether to expect, and cautiously looking closer, "The Hourglass of Time!"

"I can certainly suspend the deal." There was a lot of indefinable meaning in Bai six's smile, and with a glance at the somewhat pale priest next to him, he said with a soft smile, "But after the deal is stopped, if anyone still wants to continue trading gold with me for the next thousand years, I naturally won't refuse."

Bai six opened his palm and on top of it was the hovering Pointing Stone, he smiled and asked, " King of Gloren, would you like to choose [Hourglass of Time], or [Pointing Stone]?"

The king looked at the two objects with a struggle in his eyes - an old, worn hourglass overflowing with tears and having survived countless storms, and a shiny, golden and opulent, brand new pointing stone.

When being thus clearly revealed to him, everyone who has grown up in the land of gold will, out of an instinctive desire to grasp the nod to the stone that can bring gold.

"Your Majesty!" The priest raised his voice as he looked at the king who was caught in a state of indecision and was on the verge of jumping up and down with anxiety, "The amount of gold mined this spring is less than a tenth of what was mined last year, and without more gold, many people will starve to death!"

The guards also exhorted urgently, "Your Majesty, choose the golden stone!"

"Father!" Georgia tumbled from the walls with a leap, rarely had he acted so inappropriately, but at this moment the young prince could not care less about royal etiquette, he ran over and spoke with a calm but gasping look, "Please do not choose the pointing stone."

"Select Hourglass."

Georgia looked insistently at the king with those brown eyes: "You knew how terrible it was to fill this hourglass on the night you lost your mother, do you want to make all the citizens of Gloren go through this pain once more as a way of paying God for the pain he wants?"

"Your Royal Highness!" The priest was anxious and helpless, "Don't make trouble, without this golden stone, many people will starve and freeze to death in Gloren this winter!"

"But if you take this golden stone." Georgia's eyes did not avert, he looked straight at the king, "and the winter of Gloren, after a thousand years, will never pass."

"Will Gloren still exist then?"

"Will it become a land of nothing but misery, buried at the bottom of the sea and disappearing into thin air because it has to pay back the thousand years of gold it owes?"

The priest was stunned, and even the guards paused numbly in their exhortations.

The king's eyes were complicated and struggling as he said feebly, "But Georgia, that too is a thousand years away ....."

"For King Gloren, who set the deal in the first place, we are also a thousand years away." Georgia looked up and he whispered, "But for us, this moment, this time, there is no millennium; winter is winter."

"So for a thousand years after this moment, when the Gloren nation faces a thousand years of gold to be repaid, will their winter not be winter?"

"Father, you taught me to be a responsible monarch to the nation and to exist for the happiness and joy of the people of Gloren."

Georgia gripped the bow in her hand: "The nationals here, not only of the present, should also include the future, should they not?"

The king fell into a long silence.

The priests and guards also ceased to speak, and all were silent.

Eventually, the king took a long breath and he looked up, his eyes a million complex tangled emotions dissipating into sand: "I choose

Hourglass."

"That was unexpected." Bai six smiled lightly as he collected the gold stones and turned to Bai Liu, "Did you expect Georgia to be able to convince her father?"

"No." Bai Liu replied calmly as he handed the hourglass to the king and lowered his eyes, "I just believe that human tears can have some unexpected effects."

"I was able to beat you the first two times on unexpected emotions, so-"

"- so you still made the same choice this time, you chose to trust in human emotions and then you won me a third time." Bai six smiled amusingly as he handed Bai Liu the gold point stone, "I don't understand it, but it does seem interesting."

"As a reward for your win over me, the gold point stone is for you, and of course there is another gift for you, which you will find out when you leave the game."

"But for now." Bai six looked to Georgia, who was staring at him hostilely, gave a courteous off-hat salute, then said goodbye to the king before finally looking to Bai Liu and smiling, "It seems I'm not very welcome here as a businessman."

"I'll just go ahead."

With a casual swipe to the left, Bai six creates a silver-blue swirling door, he smiles and waves to Bai Liu, turning away, "I look forward to our next meeting."

"-that would have been in ten years."

Bai Liu watched the silver-blue door close, then slowly released his hand from clutching the whip - the sense of oppression Bai six brought was too strong, and if he didn't follow the other man's steps, the god who was so idle that his brain grew a bag might do something to force the deal, and then there would be nothing he could do to stop what had happened to Gloren.

But now ..... Bai Liu drops his eyes to look at the nugget in his hand, grips it, and turns around to prepare to log out of the game as well.

[System Alert: Congratulations to player Bai Liu for collecting the

Monster Book - "The Lost Land of Gold" (2/2)]

[Monster Name: Pointing Stone]

[Players can exit the game and receive a special prop reward for collecting the Monster Book of the Land of Gold].

Although he hadn't gotten Georgia's soul, he had worked hard and hadn't gotten anything - but he had expected that he wouldn't get Georgia's soul, and the man was very defensive and wary of him, and when he made that request, Georgia looked at him with a look of scrutiny and murder. and murderous intent.

How should I say, should I say worthy to be the director of the interrogation three bureau, obviously he has made it this far, but still did not relax his guard, look at him still like looking at a prisoner.

-- obviously he's really just an enthusiastic citizen who likes to collect souls.

Bai Liu sighed regretfully in his heart.

..... Georgia Soul's skills, so good, it's a bit of a shame he can't get it, but it can't be helped, he doesn't get everything as he wants it.

Outside the game, his teammates should be waiting, and there's no point in wasting any more time, so Bai Liu gathers himself and is just about to exit when a somewhat raw male voice calls out to him, "Wait."

Bai Liu turns his head and raises an eyebrow.

The young prince, barely maintaining his poise in his presence but with a slight blush on his face, held out his hand and apologised sincerely, "It was not my intention to attack you just now, I am sorry."

"Although I do not know where you came from, your arrival did save Gloren and I should not have done such a rude thing to you."

Bai Liu maintained a subtle expression as he looked at Georgia until he had the feignigly composed prince flushed and his eyelashes trembling as he pleaded, "If you cannot accept my apology, I will ask for a penalty when I return, the amount of which can be determined by you until you are willing to accept my apology!"

Bai Liu: "....."

It's not necessary.

It's been a long time since he's cheated on a child, and he's a little out of practice. Maybe Lu Yizhan's comment [Don't cheat on children] really got into his head, and he didn't even remember for a moment that there was a way to cheat on young Georgia.

To be more precise, he really didn't expect that Georgia, the serious and aloof-looking head of the Third Bureau, would be so ..... young

Innocence.

In Bai Liu's case, the word naivety is usually associated with being a good liar.

"I accept your apology." Bai Liu quickly puts on a humane and friendly smile as he takes Georgia's hand and gives it a firm shake, "No need to be so polite with me and say salutations, we're not so rusty after ten years."

"I can say that it is at your behest, ten years later, that I have come here to bring you the hourglass."

"Me in ten years ....." Georgia's expression was a little puzzled, "What does that mean?"

Bai Liu smiled softly with downcast eyes, "You can understand that I am someone from [the future], and that you are a very remarkable person ten years from now, who filled the hourglass with your own tears to save your kingdom, and entrusted me to send it ten years ago, wanting to abort Gloren's deal ten years early."

"And you really did succeed."

"Is that so?" Georgia looked at Bai Liu for a quiet moment as he took a deep breath, "Then I'm really in trouble with you ten years later."

"It's not really a problem, is it?" Bai Liu was all business, "We're soul buddies, it's normal to do you this favour."

"Soul ..... best friend ....." Georgia pursed her lips calmly for a moment, her ears reddening a little, "Are you and I, so intimate ?"

Georgia, who comes from the Crown Prince, has been very hard on himself since he was a child and has almost no friends of his own age, because before friends are friends in his eyes, they are his nationals

and he has a responsibility to them, that cannot be too close to them, which is not in keeping with the code of conduct of the Crown Prince.

His only close peers were his brother, Armand, who worshipped him blindly.

It was the first time he had ever met someone with an hourglass, risked time travel to save Gloren from a disaster, his future friend, and it was at the level of soulmate ..... Georgia took a deep breath and even became a bit overwhelmed: "I can trust you with Gloren's affairs to you, you ..... you must be someone I trust."

Bai Liu nodded fervently, "Exactly."

"You invited me to play a game with my team at Gloren ten years later and we won, and your brother cried so much because he lost the game that we comforted him for a long time."

Bai Liu is a nonsensical, unchanging blatherer.

" Armand really ....." Georgia laughed helplessly, his eyes softening considerably, "Ten years on and still so childish."

"But even as a friend, I can't let you make this trip to help me for nothing."

Georgia sincerely asks, "Is there anything you need?"

"Although the Gloren is in a difficult position at the moment, there is no sense in leaving the man who saved us all empty handed, I have a resource of gold stored away in advance and can draw some of it to you, of course it is mundane and you may not like it." Georgia quickly explained, "It's just Gloren custom that we give gold to our best friends as the highest form of valuing and courtesy."

Bai Liu let out a long sigh in his heart - Georgia, from now on you and the whole Gloren crew are my good friends.

May you bring gold to treat me often with courtesy.

"No need for gold." Bai Liu raised his eyes, "I want your soul."

Georgia was stunned: "A soul?"

"If trading for gold is Gloren's highest standard of friendship." Bai Liu smiles, "Then trading my soul is the highest standard of friendship I can have for my best friend."

"Best friends of the soul is not just an empty phrase, it's a real connection that exists."

"So Georgia." Bai Liu looked up, looked at Georgia, held out his hand and asked softly, "Will you sell me your soul?"

Georgia was stunned for a long, long time before she reached out her left hand and gently placed it in Bai Liu's palm: "..... If it is only my soul alone and not the suffering of all the nation, then as a thank you for saving Gloren."

"I can deliver my soul to you."

"But you can't use it to do harm to others and cause pain."

"I usually only do bad things that make people happy." Bai Liu smiled, "Thanks for the trust, Captain Georgia."

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu trade successful, exit the game].

Meanwhile, the real world.

On the isolated island, Lu Yizhan rushed into the control room with the team, who were strewn across the floor, the investigators' faces white with fear, Liao Ke quickly crouched down and reached out to check the sides of their necks and looked up to Lu Yizhan to report, "Just fainted, all alive."

Lu Yizhan is relieved.

Luckily it was [Mu Sicheng] who came, if it had been any other circus members, they would have been met with a trail of corpses.

"The console was unplugged, and coffee was spilled, but the damage was minor." A member of the team looked up as he checked the instrumentation and said, "I'm overhauling it right now and it'll be working in no time!"

"All right!" The team member was pleased to see the operating screen light up, "I'll see if the robot on the underwater patrol is working properly!"

The screen spreads out in a circle of radar waves.

"On!" The investigator let out a long breath as he braced himself against the console, "Check out Heretic 0073!"

"The energy shield is still intact, it hasn't been damaged, we've caught up!" The team member's face was full of elation, "He shouldn't have dived to 3,000 metres underwater yet, the robot didn't detect it!"

"I told you." The team member next to him covered his thumping heart and gave a reluctant smile after the robbery, "We can only bob around underwater at 800 meters in our submarine, how can a thief, without the help of tight equipment, just dive down to 3,000 meters and steal a ..... "

"Beep-! Beep-!"

A disturbing red dot appeared on the large screen being detected, flying close to 0073's shields at a speed visible to the naked eye.

The smiles of all the team members froze on their faces, the hands and voice of the team member who was operating trembled, his face was one of uncontrollable fear: "Investigation Captain, check, a object is detected approaching 0073's shields at high speed!"

"If the other side keeps going at this rate, it will hit the shield in less than a minute!"

"What kind of monster is this ..... that's 3,000 metres under the sea and it can still move at such a high speed, won't it be affected by the water pressure?!"

"What the hell kind of creature is it?! Is it a heretic?!"

"Never let this man break the shield and take the heretic!" The investigator's eyes were red as he looked at the fast moving red dot, his breath catching and his chest heaving, before turning his head sharply to the operations team, "As I recall, when Captain Georgia built this island guarding Heretic 0073, the funds were mobilised on a military scale and were based on a standard of protection against a nation. "

"This island, stocked with missiles and underwater tracking torpedoes, is big enough to blow this guy to smithereens!"

"What?!" It was Lu Yizhan's turn to turn white with shock, he was so stunned that he couldn't stand it, "Does Georgia still have this stuff for the island?

When did it happen!? The missiles are there?! That's too much!

But the other Tribe members were not surprised:" Captain Georgia has always armed the Tribe's repository on this scale."

"We have those in this Council too."

Lu Yizhan was dizzy and weak in the knees - he wondered why Georgia had been so calm after receiving the advance letter and hadn't even reported it to the General Directorate, when it was the General Directorate and the sub-islands armed on such a scale!

Rebuilt the three bureaus, built floating islands, and armed the storage room with them, and previously helped Su Yang report part of the funding for the five buildings, but Georgia never applied for funding reports to the General Directorate, and never paid for them himself, leading him to know nothing about them .....

Georgia, how much money does this guy have on his hands!

No, no, no, this is not the time to think about that!

"It's still outrageous to use these!" Lu Yizhan shook his head frantically as he tried to hold down the investigator's hand that was trying to push the button to launch the missile, "The other side has no intention of hurting anyone, maybe we can negotiate properly!"

The investigator replied coolly, "It's too late."

"Let's blast him first and then negotiate!"

Lu Yizhan: "!!!"

How do you negotiate when you've blown it up! Let God negotiate with him after the bombing!

What's going on? Isn't the Third Board in charge of storage! Why are they all so aggressive!

Lu Yizhan tried his best to stop it, cold sweat was breaking out on his forehead and he was screaming in his heart - Bai Liu, hurry up, I can't stop you anymore!

A torpedo blast might not really kill [Mu Sicheng].

The circus players in the other world lines are all monster panels in reality now, with the monster book on, [Mu Sicheng]'s movement speed is very fast, if the torpedo flies over and [Mu Sicheng] dodges it then, allowing him to notice that someone at sea is sniping at him, he

must be enraged, and with this man's impulsiveness, he might actually do something irreparable!

Normally, [Mu Sicheng] doesn't destroy stolen items when he steals them, but get pissed off and this guy might just poke the shield under the surface, and that would be a disaster!

"Five hundred more meters and it's going to hit the outer edge of the shield!" The team shouted anxiously, "Survey leader, what do we do?!"

"Please don't get in my way, Your Excellency." The investigator raged as he pushed Lu Yizhan out of the way and went to the operating panel, raising his hand to press the red button that symbolised the emergency.

Meanwhile, below the surface of the sea.

[Mu Sicheng] hovering at the bottom of the sea, he looked at the golden country in front of him and raised an eyebrow - no wonder that Bai six guy had to steal this, it was such a valuable thing.

..... But how do I take it away?

[Mu Sicheng] After a moment's thought, he looked towards the golden glowing shield on the outside of this golden house - in any case, whether he cut it up and took it away, or used a prop to pack it away, this obstructive shield should be broken.

But ..... Bai six the guy was so busy, he shouldn't like to make a mess of stolen goods, if he broke the shield, the contents would be a mess and he would be accused of stealing recklessly, the last time he got a famous painting back he scratched a corner, the man smiled at him for two days and he got a chill down his spine.

Tsk.

So annoying.

After thinking about it, Mu Sicheng decided not to pierce the shield and used his largest space prop to fit it back in - but unfortunately, the space prop did not have enough extension to fit in the upper space encased in the shield.

Then this can't be helped.

--To be reluctantly accepted as a soggy trophy by the eventful Bai six.

Below the surface, Mu Sicheng rubbed his fist, threw out his monkey paw and advanced against the shield. On the island, the standoff between Lu Yizhan and the investigator went into a fever pitch, but Lu Yizhan's face sank as he saw the small red dot pause slightly and then move forward against the shield, saying something bad.

Probably because it wouldn't fit, [Mu Sicheng] decided to poke through the shield after all!

Just as Lu Yizhan took a deep breath, ready to draw his heavy sword and tell the investigator that he was ready to go down and forcefully stop [Mu Sicheng], the voice of the operator next to him began to grow confused and alarmed, "Investigation Captain ....."

"Heretic 0073's sea depth figure is decreasing ....."

"It seems to be ....." the operator looked dully at the survey leader, "coming up on its own."

Mu Sicheng, who was about to make his move on the sea, watched as the soon-to-be-stolen kingdom slowly rose from the ground, and the scene inside, which had been dead and silent, began to change rapidly as if time had been turned backwards, and the gold on the people who had been transformed into gold sculptures fell away in pieces, and the gold dust fell from the ground to the sky like rain recovered by the gods.

Time is turning backwards, gold is melting, islands are boiling, and the kingdom that has lain dormant at the bottom of the sea for ten years awakens at the moment when the deal with the gods is over.

Both of [Mu Sicheng's] eyebrows were raised slightly, backing away from his figure and letting the island rise upwards from in front of him without making a move as he looked irritably at the Gloren nationals who were alive and well in the shield, hugging each other and howling loudly.

It's all alive?

What the hell, Bai six, didn't he say he didn't steal from the living?

On the island, Lu Yizhan lets out a long, deflated breath and sits down in a chair, shakily holding a cup and pouring some hot water to slow things down, while the team next to him looks at the rising heretic 0073 with a completely dazed expression.

" Captain." The operations crew snapped dully, "Heretic 0073 is going to rise to the surface, do we fire the missiles to shoot it down?"

Lu Yizhan, who was drinking water, choked on his lungs and trachea: "Ahem!

The investigating team member shook his head in a trance, "..... or not."

"I always felt ..... if we did that, tomorrow Captain Georgia would sink us in the sea."

"Captain ....." the operations crew member stared at the display and eh'd strangely, "The red dot under the sea that was near the heretic 0073 shield is missing."

Lu Yizhan looks over as he chokes and coughs, then turns his head to look at Liao Ke, both of them with a look of relief at last.

Mu Sicheng] does not steal from the living, nor does he like to steal [living things]. Seeing the scene of Gloren's revival, this rebellious thief by nature would never obey Bai six's orders.

Although [Mu Sicheng] did something wrong, in Lu Yizhan's case, it was not a crime worthy of death.

Liao Ke looked at Lu Yizhan, who was slumped in his chair, holding a cup with empty eyes and drinking water - so even in that emergency situation, Mr. Lu tried his best to keep [Mu Sicheng] alive.

Even if they are enemies, Lu Yizhan will not pronounce the death sentence until they have made a fatal mistake.

--because [the Inquisitor] needs to stay awake and sane.

This is an absolute standard that cannot be overstepped as a [judge].

Lu Yizhan, the absolutely sober and sensible judge, was helped out of the third bureau by Liao Ke, who, after thanking him for coming to his senses, was then investigated by Liao Ke and Lu Yizhan in earnest - an investigation that lasted all night. More than 3,000 questions were asked.

By the end of the questioning, Lu Yizhan felt that his privacy and dignity as a human being had been completely lost.

Lu Yizhan stayed up all night, seeing the next day's sun was dizzying

and walking with his left foot tripping over his right.

Liao Ke was helpless and amused again and sighed, "..... you were so badly injured in the last game, your soul is only half full, you should have rested well, but you have to go to work during the day, take Spades and the others to practice at night to prepare for the playoffs, and at the same time you have to deal with Bai six, and now you are still You're made of iron and you're rotting on your own."

"But it's good to see that everything has come to a safe end." Lu Yizhan let out a long breath and shook his head and smiled too, "..... has been pretty good lately."

"In the league Spades has been able to hold his own and is working well with his teammates."

"That's true." Liao Ke also laughs about this, "It's always nice to be able to stop and wait for your teammates."

Lu Yizhan and Liao Ke logged into the game once quickly after disembarking, making sure the Killer Sequence match was over before moving on to the three-game investigation process.

"The match turned out exactly as you expected." Liao Ke said, "The Invisible Cloak forfeited in the middle of the double, we killed the match early and now the whole game is talking about the killer sequence, saying it kind of set a precedent for killing a match early in the playoffs, the betting odds we were already the lowest."

The lowest betting rate means that this guild is most likely to win, so betting on this guild to win to is not a big return - which means that in the eyes of many viewers, the most likely team to win this year's championship is the Killer Sequence.

"It's really high profile ....." Lu Yizhan headache, "I would have liked to have practiced properly for the team competition."

"It can't be helped." Liao Ke reassures him, "It happened out of the blue and there's nothing you can do about it, but you don't have to worry about us being too high profile, our buzz is high but it's not the highest."

Lu Yizhan asked, "Bai Liu, their team?"

"Hmm." Liao Ke laughed, "I heard Georgia got out and approached Bai Liu and pressed him about what he'd done to him, said he seemed

calm but sounded annoyed and said Bai Liu had lied to him about being his best friend or something."

"Saying that he stole his soul, the whole meeting was in chaos and the two parties almost fought."

"And then what happened?" Lu Yizhan listened with great interest, "What happened?"

Liao Ke nodded: "Then Bai Liu took his Team Quan and logged out of the game, leaving Georgia with a cold face as if something terrible had been done to him, saying that Bai Liu must pay him back, and then logged out of the game as well, probably to find Bai Liu in reality. "

"Now there are already rumours that Bai Liu made light of Georgia during the game's, and Georgia is holding him responsible."

Lu Yizhan: "..... = = What kind of outrageous rumour is this?"

"But there are quite a few people who believe it." Liao Ke spreads his hands, "We have a member of our guild who is convinced of this rumour."

"Spades was gone by the time we logged into the game and Bai Yi said he logged out to look for Bai Liu, so if he ran fast, he might have collided with Georgia who was looking for Bai Liu."

Lu Yizhan: "....."

It's over!!!

Bai Liu's rental house.

"There's really nothing between me and him." Bai Liu held up his hands calmly, "I just played a normal game and won him."

"But you're looking at him with lust." Spades clenched his fist in expressionless condemnation, "You're gluttonizing him."

Bai Liu averted his eyes, his tone subtle, "..... Don't sound so strange, I just crave his gold."

Usually aloof, why are you so perceptive at times like this?

Playoffs

" Bai Liu ---!!!"

The door slammed open, and Mu Sicheng burst in with a flourish, lifting Bai Liu up to make sure he was okay before he let out a long breath and collapsed onto the sofa: "..... I'm glad I'm not hurt."

"I told you Bai Liu is fine." Tang Erda, who followed, explained helplessly, "You were the only one of us who came out with an injury."

Noticing Bai Liu's questioning gaze, Liu Jiayi gave an OK gesture, "Don't worry about this guy, he's already been healed in the game, he's alive and well."

Muke closed the door with a smile, paused for a moment when he saw Spades sitting in front of Bai Liu, and then sat down as usual: "What about Georgia?"

Bai Liu explained the whole process of getting the soul note to the team.

"So that's it." Muke seemed to understand, "No wonder Georgia reacted so strongly."

"That's totally a tricked out soul note, isn't it?" Liu Jiayi was speechless, "And Bai Liu you really like to cheat children, cheat Georgia who trusts you so much, doesn't your conscience hurt?"

"It was a bit." Bai Liu honestly spreads his hands, "but at the point where he said he'd send his best friend gold, the conscience suddenly disappeared and there was no way it could hurt."

Liu Jiayi: "....."

What a frankly shameless man!

"But that's not an option." Tang Erda's temples popped as he listened, his head hurting as he rubbed them, " Georgia is the head of the Third Bureau, his soul notes aren't that easy to get, Bai Liu."

"What's wrong with that?" Mu Sicheng didn't feel anything at all, he leaned back on the sofa, relaxed, took an apple, tossed it twice and held it in his mouth, crossed one foot on the coffee table and spoke arrogantly, "If he took it, he took it, what else can he do to us!"

Bai Liu swept a calm glance at Mu Sicheng's feet resting on his coffee table, "Put them down."

"..... Oh." Mu Sicheng put it down honestly, holding an apple and eating it, his tone arrogant, "Big deal, we'll just fight, we're all just defeated!"

"It's okay in the game." Tang Erda looked up and explained seriously, "But not in reality."

"In addition to the power of the Third Bureau of the Bureau for the Treatment of Heretics, Georgia was also a former prince of Gloren, and although Gloren is now sunk, he still has a lot of political power in him that he can call upon, and as far as I understand, he can arm the Third Bureau with the standards of state protection, and he trains members of the Third Bureau in the same way that he trains confidential informants. "

"To have gotten all this armed equipment and cultivated this airtight heretical storage depot of the Third Bureau in a world where news circulates speaks volumes about his ability."

Mu Sicheng's expression grew heavy as he listened, his chewing mouth slowly moving: "Is ..... so horrible?"

"It's not just that." Tang Erda sighs helplessly, " Georgia has money on her hands, even we in the Heretics Authority are not sure of the amount."

"I had only heard that Georgia was rich and that he had a very substantial amount of gold on hand at first, but we all thought that refurbishing the three bureaus, building the floating islands and arming them was enough to spend all his savings, but from the recent feedback from Su Yang, that wasn't the case."

" Su Yang said that Georgia also helped to reimburse a sum of money for five buildings, which is not a small amount, and the fact that Georgia could easily take it means that he still has savings."

"How can he be so rich?!" Mu Sicheng wondered, "He's only a few years older than me, right, does it make sense to be so rich?!"

"Few people can come up with such a huge amount of money at any time, even my family can't take it easily ..... " Muke wistfully said, "The amount of money makes me think of an institution. "

Bai Liu looked over: "What institution?"

Muke replied, "The Land of Gold Trading Bank."

"Thanks Uncle Xie, ah, asking about this bank because I've suddenly become a bit interested in the president of this bank, I've heard he's a young and talented man and would like to meet him if I get the chance." Muke said with a smile on his face to the phone, "I've been thinking about starting a business lately, so it would be good to develop my contacts."

There was a hearty laugh from the other side: "It's good that junior has an idea, but the founder of this bank is not even available to us, so I'm sorry I can't help introduce you."

"Nothing, nothing." Muke smiled, "Just getting to know each other, too."

"To be clear, I do know something about it." The other side pondered for a while and spoke with a sigh, "A young man with a big background, I'm told."

"Ten years ago, there was a mysterious gold trading organisation, near the Gulo Sea, this organisation traded large amounts of gold outwards, with reasonable gold prices and pristine gold mines, and was considered a big trader of gold exports all over the world, but no one ever found the exact location of this organisation, and then one day, this organisation suddenly disappeared."

"Then shortly afterwards, a young man appeared at a bank who brought in a large amount of gold and used it as collateral to buy up many banks that were about to go bankrupt, and then used the gold as bank stock to set up the Land of Gold Trade Bank - a bank that only accepts gold as the general equivalent for everyone for trade, and the security was so ridiculously tight that there was never any loss of trade goods, so many of the great men were fond of using this bank as an intermediary office, and would also store all their family fortunes here."

"It is also one of the largest and most famous trading banks in the world."

"But with your family's business, it seems that few go through this bank, so why the sudden curiosity about this?"

Muke smiles and snorts: "I'm going to develop the overseas trade

market recently."

"Quite all right." The other side smiled cheerfully, "I'll be waiting for your good news then."

Muke hangs up the phone and turns to the group of people waiting next to him: "It's almost certain that Georgia is the one who founded this bank."

Tang Erda looked a little strange as he glanced at Bai Liu, who was in deep thought next to him.

..... It turns out that this bank was established by Georgia.

The world line where Georgia became part of Bai six's team also had a bank that worked with Bai six to smuggle, also using gold as a general equivalent as collateral, and Muke used this line to move the smuggled heretics - Bai six collected the heretics, Muke sourced the merchants, Muke provided the protection. Georgia set up the bank to provide the medium of exchange and Daniel provided the protection of the arms along the way - it was a one-stop shop!

No wonder it's growing so fast!

"Is the head of such a bank ....." Bai Liu rubbed his chin thoughtfully, "very rich?"

"Yes." Muke nodded, "If Georgia really is the founder of this bank, then I can totally understand him coming up with that much money."

"And if I have his soul, won't I ..... " Bai Liu's tone gradually became meaningful.

Spades eyed him sharply, "Your lust for him is spilling out again!"

Bai Liu: "....."

Two days later.

The moment the phone alarm went off, Bai Liu reached out to press it, but was held down and pinned back by Spades, who hadn't opened his eyes yet. He held Bai Liu's hand and took the phone away, his voice a little lazy: "..... No game today, sleep."

Bai Liu struggled to get up from Spades' arms and reached for his phone, but was rolled over by Spades, who buried his head in Bai Liu's shoulder and bit him, causing Bai Liu to hiss.

Spades voice is muffled: "..... It's cold, don't get up, sleep some more."

Bai Liu's chest tightens as he nudges Spades, who doesn't move, and he realises that if he doesn't lounge in bed with the lizard, the lizard won't let himself get up easily.

"If you want to stay in bed, say it properly." Bai Liu eventually gave up the motion and looked at the ceiling, his tone calm, "Who taught you that you can say you're cold and stay in bed?"

Spades, a lizard whose body temperature is on the cold side, has sometimes rolled onto the floor and slept through the night before, he is more used to the cold.

This is usually what this lizard uses to trick Bai Liu into staying in bed after seeing some of the people around him and learning it.

Spades pauses: "..... Lu Yizhan says you don't have to get up early if it's cold."

Bai Liu understands.

It is indeed Lu Yizhan.

This man is so spoiled with the people he has taught and brought up, what a mess he has been teaching.

--Bai Liu, who has also been spoiled to the point of not liking to get up early at all, thinks calmly.

Bai Liu's job is in the gaming industry with relatively relaxed working hours from 8:30 to 9:00, but Bai Liu's rented house is remote, so he has to spend an hour and a half on commuting by underground or bus every day, and Bai Liu is a person who does not like to be late and buy breakfast outside. Bai Liu is also a person who doesn't like to be late and doesn't like to buy breakfast outside (mainly because he is poor and eating out is expensive), so he usually has to get up at 6 or 7am, make breakfast, catch the underground and arrive at 8:30am.

In summer, it's fine, but in winter, the moment you leave the blanket and all the heat is gone, even a person like Bai Liu, who would risk his life for money, would ask himself at that moment...

--Do I really want to get up now for a few hundred dollars for full attendance?

Winter always comes extra early and cold in Mirror City.

Sometimes Bai Liu will take a shared electric bicycle in the morning instead of taking the underground to print out some documents or files.

The tiny bits of snow falling on Bai Liu's face, his scarf and black coat, the slightest puff of white air, the snow hanging from his eyelashes, with his face, is actually quite a beautiful scene, to the extent of attracting some college girl to ask for his contact information in a print shop.

But usually by that time, Bai Liu has lost all desire to go back to the office tomorrow without any desire to buy a pair of discounted cotton hats and socks.

The supervisor who has a lot of things to do will most likely not pay him anything for his work injury.

During his first year at work, before Fang Dian's accident, Bai Liu had a less cold time.

When winter came and the temperature dropped, Fang Dian and Lu Yizhan would send clothes and electric blankets, telling him to sleep with the air conditioner on at night, and to buy a small electric hot water bag for his office (which was later investigated and punished by his superiors for violating the rules on electrical appliances).

Fang Dian and Lu Yizhan both had the keys to his rented house, and in Bai Liu's words - the company had bought him personal accident insurance, and you, as beneficiaries, would be the first to come and collect my body if I died in the rented house.

The tone of voice was as if he had frozen to death in his rented house.

Fang Dian laughed at his bad luck, Lu Yizhan often opened the stove at Bai Liu's side, usually when Bai Liu came back at eight or nine o'clock after work, and when he opened the door there was a hot meal and a warm room, with the sound of people and talk, Fang Dian sat behind the table and watched him. shoulder and yell at his stupid boss for checking out his electrical violations.

Because no one else was investigated, but Bai Liu's was.

But after Fang Dian's accident, this not-so-cold winter came to an abrupt end when Bai Liu would not allow Lu Yizhan to come over.

After Bai Liu was getting used to the cold winter alone, Spades began to appear every night, taking over his bed and sleeping with him in his arms.

Sometimes Bai Liu would have to use adult methods to exhaust Spades and then push him to the side of the bed to sleep by himself.

But usually Bai Liu's own energy has been completely depleted by Spades the day before, and Spades is still full of energy, so he still wakes up the next day frozen to Spades holding him.

So even though Bai Liu doesn't work anymore, he still wakes up every day after 6am.

"It's not the alarm clock." Bai Liu tapped Spades on the shoulder and motioned for him to move aside, "It's Lu Yizhan, let me take it."

Spades paused and dawdled away as Bai Liu propped himself up to get the phone - by this time it was the third time Lu Yizhan had called, and if it wasn't an emergency Lu Yizhan wouldn't have called so early to wake him up.

Bai Liu was wearing loose pajamas, and as he passed over Spades the neckline wavered a little, and the marks left inside were clearly visible. "

Meanwhile, the call came for the fourth time and Bai Liu picked it up: "What can I do for you?"

"Are you just up?" Lu Yizhan spoke apologetically, but soon became anxious again, "Have you seen the news on TV?!"

Bai Liu gave a warning glance at Spades, whose hand was still reaching into his shirt, while replying to Lu Yizhan, "No, why?"

"Eh, it's the Gloren thing, didn't you help them sort out the deal, then they floated up from under the surface and came back to the surface." Lu Yizhan explained headily, "The good thing is that no one saw this incident apart from a few people from the Bureau of Heresy Handling, the previous Gloren had been a very secretive and low key country because it had been hidden by the Bai six, everyone knew about the existence of the country but few knew the geographical location of the country."

"But after getting back above the sea yesterday, because the deal was suspended, Gloren could no longer hide it and just face it."

Bai Liu was dressing with one hand while holding up his phone, his tone calm, "Well, and then?"

"Then now all the international news media are reporting on this country that has suddenly appeared and there are already quite a few people linking it to the country that supplied the gold before." Lu Yizhan sighs, "They realise that Gloren is rich in minerals and because of that, a lot of countries are trying to establish diplomatic relations with Gloren."

"There is no gold in Gloren now, but there are still plenty of rare minerals, and Georgia behind them, still a worthy befriender."

"And Georgia's soul is in my hands." Bai Liu had an epiphany, "He's come to the country I'm in?"

"Yes." Lu Yizhan had a headache, "Although it's a private visit, Georgia is a prince and the head of the three bureaus, and I heard he's also the founder of some bank, I can't stop either one of them, and he asked you by name to receive him, he should be arriving this afternoon."

"Even if he's a prince, he doesn't have the right to ask me, a laid-off employee, to entertain him, does he?" Bai Liu was justified, "I'm just a laid-off employee."

"Right." Lu Yizhan spoke in a sultry tone, "But who made you say you were someone's best friend?"

" Georgia said he had travelled a long way to meet his soulmate, so it was a private outing, which only some insiders know about at the moment."

"It's normal to be hosted when you're all soul-best friends, don't you think so, Bai Liu ?"

Bai Liu: "....."

..... since Georgia has said so, will he bring gold over to him .....

Spades sat up in bed as he locked eyes with Bai Liu, the sleepy lizard's eyes instantly went cold: "Your eyes ....."

"There is desire."

Bai Liu calmly hung up the phone, "Because I just got touched by you and kind of want to do it."

Spades had been doing a bit of work in the morning and he seemed to realise what was going on, following Bai Liu around very coolly all morning, as if he was going to play in a league match.

"What's going on??" Mu Sicheng looked incomprehensibly at Spades who was standing at the door with a murderous look on his face like he was ready to assassinate someone, his head was filled with questions, " Spades, what's the point of guarding the door?"

Liu Jiayi stares at Spades with amusement for a moment: "We're in for a treat."

Tang Erda and Muke are discussing matters with Bai Liu in the study.

" Georgia came looking for me." Tang Erda says helplessly, "I knew it was only natural, but I really didn't expect it to happen so quickly."

"Do you have a strategy for dealing with it?"

Bai Liu was calm: "There's nothing to deal with."

"He's not going to do anything."

"Also." Muke pondered seriously, "The soul is already in Bai Liu's hands, the initiative is on our side, the other side should not dare to do anything rash."

"Of course the other side if they really want to do anything against Bai Liu." Muke smiles gently and jokingly, "- otherwise we could still tear up the ticket."

Tang Erda: "....."

He always had the impression that Muke was not joking.

"It won't come to that." Bai Liu lifted his glass and took a sip of water and said slowly, " Captain Georgia is a good man, he wouldn't do something that crossed the line."

Tang Erda looked at Muke and Bai Liu, the two riddlers, and sighed, "Count me in for overthinking, it's best if nothing happens."

"But Bai Liu, Spades, what do you do with him, he's so hostile to Georgia and doesn't act as disciplined as the norm, if he does anything and is taken as an assassin of the Crown Prince, the guy will be wanted."

Bai Liu's hand stopped as he picked up his glass, and he spoke with some rare bitterness, "..... I don't actually quite understand why he's hostile to Georgia."

"I don't really like Georgia, or to be more accurate, I only like him as a person."

"But Spades might not feel the same way?" Tang Erda inexplicably felt like he was choking on a mouthful of dog food as he painstakingly offered advice based on his barren relationship experience, "You talk to him?"

"But I don't know how to talk to him either." Bai Liu stroked his chin with a learning expression, "Is that what you call, not giving each other enough security in a relationship?"

Tang Erda struggled to answer, "Maybe?"

"But usually there's a trigger for this kind of situation." Muke, who also has no experience in relationships, calmly analyses, "Did you do something to make Spades uncomfortable?"

Bai Liu was deep in thought, "Let's see ....."

A terrible scene formed in the house!

--Two people with no relationship experience are teaching relationship tips to the only person in the room who has relationship experience.

And the man actually listened!

3pm.

Spades and the others sat in the house while Bai Liu went to the airport to pick up his people.

The expressions on everyone's faces were stony, especially Spades, expressionless and murderous, sitting upright on the sofa, wearing the formal clothes Bai Liu had changed him into before he went out, looking quite in keeping with the name of his guild - Killer.

Even Muke, as calm as he is, was a bit fidgety by the end.

In the game, the feeling is there, but in reality, the oppression of Georgia status is several times more oppressive.

The Crown Prince, a real Crown Prince, even one who had seen as

much as Muke, was meeting the Crown Prince for the first time in person, and he had no idea how Bai Liu managed to keep his composure.

Bai Liu went downstairs for a bowl of beef noodles before leaving, called Lu Yizhan to ask if Georgia would reimburse him for the taxi ride to the airport, and then took the taxi after he was sure it would be reimbursed.

Mu Sicheng slumped on the sofa absentmindedly swiping his phone, which he threw away in annoyance after a while.

On my phone, no matter what app, it's full of news of Gloren's current life.

This ancient and uncontested golden kingdom has finally emerged, and their prince has of course rightly become the biggest focus of attention - young, handsome, from a distinguished and noble family, understated and mysterious, all the media are frantically seeking pictures of the prince, and everyone is talking about the pair who have not emerged until now.

And no one knew that the prince was about to appear in Bai Liu's rented house.

Mu Sicheng annoyingly turned the phone over, face down - what a prince, a prince, just one of his losers!

And even with that thought, that weird feeling of irritability lingered - the guy he had fought to a standstill, that high and mighty guy, was really a prince?

This is outrageous!

Can such a man be a prince!

"Ding dong-!"

The door slammed and Bai Liu's voice came from the door, "Come in and change your shoe covers, the floor has just been mopped."

There was a long interval before Armand's voice came through gritted teeth, "..... knows."

" Armand, don't be rude." Georgia's cold rebuke came, then there was a moment of silence before Georgia's softly inviting voice came in,

"Excuse me Mr Bai Liu, shoe covers, what are they?"

The group waiting inside the door to greet them: "....."

I don't know why, but the tension has suddenly disappeared.

The door was opened from the outside and Lu Yizhan's helpless face appeared: "Don't bully the prince of another country, Bai Liu, the other party is a guest at the house, behave like a host, will you?"

Bai Liu averted his eyes without moving, "..... It's not like I invited them to be my guests."

The implication was that since the other party was not a guest I had invited, it was fine for me not to do my best to behave like a proprietor.

Lu Yizhan: "....."

Bai Liu, you could be a bit more childish.

Lu Yizhan, fearing that Bai Liu would cause trouble, sacrificed his only day off for the week to accompany Bai Liu to the airport.

But why ..... why this is the day!

Lu Yizhan wept in his heart - today was the day he and Fang Dian had agreed to go and pick out their wedding gear, a day he had been looking forward to for a long time, and then Georgia suddenly arrived and it all went to pot.

Fang Dian was very understanding and went off to help with kindergarten duty with a big smile, but Lu Yizhan had a heart attack and was still having trouble getting over it.

I don't even want to host some prince or save the world, I just want to get married!!!

Let me get married!!!

Lu Yizhan is in tears.

The venue for Georgia's reception was initially set to be the Heresy Bureau, but after Georgia pointed out that he was visiting on a personal basis and just wanted to see the local area, something had to be avoided - it had to be a visit to a friend's house.

One might even say that Georgia came for Bai Liu.

Lu Yizhan can actually understand Bai Liu's displeasure. Bai Liu is a very territorial person, and people who are not well connected are very resistant to being visited, or visited without being greeted, but who told this guy to cheat people out of their souls? Lu Yizhan can also understand Georgia coming straight at Bai Liu. He carries too much on his back, and after having his soul taken away, he can't just quit the Heretic's Council like Tang Erda did, or give up his guild like Hearts did.

Nor can they entrust their responsibilities to Bai Liu as they have done.

Georgia is, after all, a crown prince.

Lu Yizhan sighed as he thought of the Georgia who had knelt in front of him ten years ago, tilting her head and begging for her memory not to be erased, and looked at the back of Bai Liu as he walked through the door.

..... Georgia is not a bad person, let's hope both sides can talk it out.

Lu Yizhan followed Bai Liu through the door and he turned, reaching out kindly to gesture for the two men behind him to come in, "No need to be formal, please come in."

"I beg your pardon." Georgia looked down slightly, dressed in an obviously well-chosen outfit with embroidered patterns on the cuffs and waistband that didn't clash too much with his own style, and the gold hairpiece on his head had been replaced with a light tassel-textured knot, showing that he had made an effort to understand the culture of the place, looking noble and polite.

"Where are the shoe covers, please?"

Georgia asked, and Armand followed, looking a little tighter than Georgia, dressed in a suit a little less youthful than Georgia's, his arms and legs gathered like some kind of chivalrous martial arts trousers, his hairpiece a small dangling jade fan on his head, his eyes repulsed, his lips pursed.

"Excuse me."

"No shoe covers." Lu Yizhan wept and laughed at Georgia's serious look down at her shoe covers, "There are slippers for you."

Bai Liu's eyes glanced over his shoulder and noticed that Armand and Georgia, the two customers, had neatly arranged their shoes after changing them, and Georgia had even helped him to arrange the others' shoes as well.

That's a very polite attitude, to say the least.

Isn't ..... a bit much?

Noticing Lu Yizhan's condemning gaze, Bai Liu finally straightened up and showed some proprietorship, coughing lightly, "What would you like to eat tonight?"

Georgia and Armand sat down on the sofa in an orderly fashion, Georgia looked up at Bai Liu with her hands on her knees and said in a serious and solemn voice.

"No need to break the bank."

"I've looked up the common foods here and learnt some recipes, so if you don't mind, please let me cook."

The whole room was silent, everyone was frozen.

Even Lu Yizhan's expression turned into, "..... = mouth = ."

How can you put up with such humiliation, Georgia!

Lu Yizhan explains, somewhat awkwardly, " Georgia, we don't normally let guests cook on our side."

Noticing the stares of the others, Georgia coughed very slightly and seemed to be embarrassed to tighten his grip, but explained coldly.

"..... At Gloren, when we go out to a friend's house, it never makes sense to have a friend cook, it's the guest who cooks."

" Gloren is a closed place and few people can get out and as a result, Gloren people rarely make friends outside and those that do are very happy to have friends who can get good food from them, bright gold, anything good in the world, Gloren people are willing to share it with their friends. "

Georgia looks up at Bai Liu.

"-including the soul."

"I have come here with no hostile intent, just to meet you and negotiate some matters."

"I have not been informed before I came, so I ask for your indulgence."

Bai Liu leaned against the door with his arms around his chest, he looked down at Georgia calmly for a moment and then spoke, "What kind of cooking do you do?"

Georgia's manner became slightly constrained as he straightened his back, coughed lightly, and reported as softly as if he were talking about some list of dangerous red heretics, "..... ma po tofu, boiled pork slices, steamed sea bass, and some vegetarian dishes."

"..... are all learned from reading recipes in the past two days, not too much."

Armand adds stiffly, "I can make scrambled eggs with tomatoes."

Mu Sicheng snorted a laugh and Armand's hateful gaze followed as he said, irritated and vicious, "-and fried rice with eggs!"

Bai Liu gives Mu Sicheng a faint glance and warns him to behave himself, but Mu Sicheng turns his head away and covers his mouth to stifle his laughter.

Help!!! How can someone announce fried rice as a dish!

When Bai Liu heard the name and didn't say anything, Georgia lowered her voice and asked softly, "Don't you have anything you like?"

"I don't hate it either." Bai Liu finally showed a little smile, "Thank you for coming as a guest, it's also my first time hosting a friend and I'm not in order, I hope you don't take offence."

Sensing Bai Liu's softening attitude, Georgia's face lightened and his light brown eyes inexplicably softened: "This is my first time visiting a friend's house, so I hope you won't take offence."

Bai Liu spreads his hands, "We don't make our guests work all afternoon to cook a big meal here, our hosts usually cook."

He smiled, "Ever had a hot pot?"

"Fondue?" Georgia asked suspiciously in return, "It seems to be a difficult dish, I'm told you have to boil the base two or three days in

advance."

"No need to go to all that trouble, it's all ready-made hotpot base products now." Bai Liu shrugs, "But even so, I'm not good at making it, I usually go out to eat."

"But it's not very convenient to go out for hotpot because of who you are, so let's do it at home."

Armand's suspicious and wary gaze went to Bai Liu and he narrowed his eyes, "You know such complicated dishes?"

-- Bai Liu This guy doesn't look like he knows how to cook, and the food in their country is so hard to cook, is this guy's hotpot really edible?

He's been learning how to scramble tomatoes and eggs for two days!

Bai Liu smiles: "I didn't do it."

Noticing Bai Liu's sweeping gaze, Lu Yizhan: "....."

Playoffs

Lu Yizhan stood up helplessly on his knees and took up the task with a smile, "I know, I'll go out to buy food, what do you want to eat?"

"I'll have the yellow throat!" Mu Sicheng was the first to actively raise his hand, "And tripe!"

"I don't know if there's anything fresh left at this hour." Lu Yizhan takes out a note and looks up at Georgia and Armand, "You two are the guests, so you order first, anything you don't like or want to eat?"

Georgia shook her head, "There's nothing I don't eat."

"What's a yellow throat .....?" Armand frowned, "What's tripe again?"

Mu Sicheng clutches his chest in contempt, "You don't know what you're talking about, this is what you have to order at a hot pot!"

"And what are those things?" Armand questioned, "You don't look like you know exactly what these are either."

Mu Sicheng's expression of contempt froze on his face.

He didn't really know what they were, he just knew they were tasty.

"The yellow throat is the aortic vessels of the cow, cut from the heart and then turned over and washed over and over again, turned over and torn off the membrane of the vessels inside, reshaped into sections, blanched for a few dozen seconds and ready to eat, it's crunchy and has a vascular crunch to it." Muke explains with a friendly smile and a gentle tone, "Tripe is the stomach of a cow, turned over and washed three times, there are lots of tentacles layered inside, all of which are used by the cow for digestion."

"And yes, we eat brains, they're delicious."

Armand: "!!!"

What horrible parts are these! What a horrible thing for people to eat here! Is it heresy!

Armand's face instantly went white with shock as he pointed at Mu Sicheng and stated in horror, "I don't eat anything he eats!"

Mu Sicheng: "....."

There is an inexplicable feeling of being offended.

When Lu Yizhan left, Bai Liu turned his head sideways to Georgia: "Go to the study, we'll talk about your soul."

Georgia let out a long breath as he stood up and sincerely thanked him, "Thank you."

When Bai Liu and Georgia went to the study, Spades, who had been in a murderous mood before, was calm after seeing Georgia and didn't intervene or stop them from the beginning to the end. Are you afraid Bai Liu and Georgia will run away?"

Spades looked up at Mu Sicheng for a moment, his tone flat: "It won't run."

Mu Sicheng was full of interest: "Why? You were so alert before."

"Before Bai Liu talked about him, there was desire." Spades lowered his eyes and answered seriously, "But after meeting, there was no desire."

Mu Sicheng was filled with questions, "What does ..... mean?"

Liu Jiayi, who had been watching the drama in silence, couldn't help himself = =.

The previous talk about Georgia Bai Liu having desires was not about Georgia as a person, it was about his money, and seeing Georgia face to face, not seeing money, Bai Liu certainly did not have desires.

Spades' perception of Bai Liu is amazing, and although he doesn't understand it at all, he can feel it, and Bai Liu's personal feelings are invisible in front of Spades.

Liu Jiayi silently sipped his drink from his cup and sighed - if Bai Liu ever had second thoughts, he would probably be discovered by Spades as soon as he stepped through the door.

Tang Erda looks into the study and the breath she had just let go of is lifted again.

..... wonders how Bai Liu will negotiate with Georgia.

Inside the study.

Bai Liu sits on the sofa in front of the bookcase, and Georgia sits in the

chair, a little repulsed at first by the slightly dark atmosphere of the study, and the layout - it reminds him of the dream.

But the moment Bai Liu turned to his side and switched on the floor lamp, the warm orange light flooding the room, Georgia was stunned.

On the sofa in this room are two coats, one of Spades' and one of Tang Erda's. On the floor are a few books that have been opened and not cleaned up, with Muke's handwriting on them, a fruit tray on the desk with fruit candies, mandarin oranges and melons, a half-peeled orange next to it, and a small pile of melon shells, which it is obvious that Liu The pile of melon shells, which can be seen at first glance, is the work of Liu Jiayi and Mu Sicheng.

A lively and messy atmosphere of life comes over you.

"Sorry, I haven't had a chance to clean up the study." Bai Liu gestured for Georgia to sit down, "Is that okay?"

Georgia relaxed completely and he smiled very softly, following Bai Liu's gesture to sit down, his tone even a little wistful, "It's fine."

"..... When I was younger and took Armand to do things in the Third Council, there wasn't much time and the house was cluttered like this."

"It is true that I was wrong to have cheated you out of your soul notes on the pretext of being a soul best friend." Bai Liu admitted his fault with a good attitude as soon as he sat down, "..... if you ....."

"Did you lie to me?" Georgia laughed in a rare flirtatious way, his eyebrows softened in the warm yellow light, the seriousness of the stereotype was diluted in this atmosphere, "Aren't you the best friend of my soul?"

Bai Liu paused, and he smiled back, "Indeed."

"You have memories of that time when I traded souls with you?"

"Hmm." Georgia lowered his long eyelashes as he recalled, his tone dazed, "Though it did start out angry and even alarmed, I was terrified that you would use my soul to hurt someone I cared about once you had it."

"But you've actually been protecting them, even better than I have."

Georgia looks up at Bai Liu: "- either Gloren, Armand, or Mr Lu Yizhan."

" It is true that Gloren cannot have a crown prince whose soul is controlled by others." Georgia's tone was calm, "But I have often wondered, am I really fit to be the monarch of this kingdom?"

"The path they chose, the naive aspirations and the courage to face the world now full of apprehension, I have worn out in the intervening decade."

"..... went back to Gloren before and people welcomed me with joy, hugged me and cried bitterly praising me for doing the right thing in the first place, that they shouldn't close themselves off and huddle up and live a life of indifference, but go out and face the world and take on everything that was thrown at them. "

"I should have been relieved by that."

Georgia was quiet for a long time before she continued in a soft voice: "But I only felt fear."

"The more heretics I experienced and the more tragedies I saw during these ten years, the more I became afraid, and I slowly became what the Gloren nation was when I wanted to protect them completely from the dangers in the world."

"Even Armand, who stands next to me and fights with me, makes me uneasy."

"I know it's not right." Georgia dropped her eyes to her empty palms, "But what kind of right can last a thousand years?"

"There is no right that lasts a thousand years." Bai Liu spoke plaintively in reply, "And why chase after a right that lasts a thousand years?"

"One can only survive for a hundred years, and to be able to trace ten years of being right is a very great thing."

Georgia was stunned.

"There is only one thing that I know of that has survived for a thousand years -" Bai Liu said calmly, raising his eyes, "- and that is the evil god. "

"But as far as his existence is concerned, it's a mistake for everyone now."

"It's just surviving for a thousand years, in pursuit of some kind of right being, and then to put it another way, maybe the pursuit of some kind of survival for a thousand years in pursuit of some kind of right being might all end up going to the same extreme as the evil gods."

"- it's like if you go after protecting your nationals for a thousand years from all harm, that protection will end up being a harm."

"It's like the Gloren of old."

Georgia lapsed into silence.

There was the noisy sound of Lu Yizhan returning from his sale outside the door, and Bai Liu turned off the light and got up to go out: "From my personal point of view, I think you're still fit to be king."

"..... why ....." Georgia asked in a very soft voice in the darkness.

Bai Liu replied calmly, "Because you're a good person with a brain."

"Your decisions are not always absolutely right, but you certainly try to avoid mistakes that hurt people, and that's enough."

Lu Yizhan knocked on the door, "Are you ready to talk? I'm ready to cook!"

"All right." Bai Liu pushed open the door and swept Lu Yizhan, who was poking his head around, "Negotiated."

Lu Yizhan looked at Georgia's normal face as she walked out behind Bai Liu and breathed a sigh of relief: "It's good that the negotiation is done."

Georgia takes off her coat, hangs it on a hanger and takes the dishes from Lu Yizhan's hand in a very natural gesture: "I'll help with the cooking."

Lu Yizhan was startled and subconsciously tried to snatch it up: "No need Georgia!"

Georgia looked pale, but held it in her hand, seemingly without force, but the bag of vegetables deflected silently his way: "Since I am here as a guest, there is no reason for the host to do it entirely by himself."

"..... It is rare for you to be our guests here." Lu Yizhan face with a smile, under the hand secretly make, not moving to pull the food bag this way, "always is I cook, also no guests play hands, you guys have a good rest, wait to taste my hand can be."

The bag of vegetables was moved back.

Georgia's tone was condensed: " Mr. Lu, I've studied the food here carefully, and Armand can testify that I'm very good at it too, so why don't you take a day off and try my work?"

Lu Yizhan smiles and snorts, "Really? I don't believe it."

" Bai Liu also complimented me on the home-cooked taste of my food, and there's no reason to make a guest cook when they've come from afar."

The bags went back and forth, and Georgia and Lu Yizhan politely fought a dozen rounds, with the bags going back and forth like tug-of-war ropes between them, but not in anyone's hands.

"Is this what the top tactician pulled before?" Muke seemed to understand, his gaze staring solemnly, "Pulling for so long without hurting a dish."

Mu Sicheng's eyes widened as he watched, his mouth open wide: "..... What is this?"

Liu Jiayi examines it half-heartedly and comments seriously, "..... cultural exchange it might be."

Playoffs

Eventually both parties reconciled (on the surface) and went into the kitchen to cook together, and as they walked past Bai Liu with their bags of vegetables, Georgia's faint voice came through: "If I ever decide I want to be king of Gloren."

"I will seek you out to redeem my soul."

"Until then, I'll leave it to you to take care of it for me."

Bai Liu spreads his hands: "Then you can get the money you need to trade the soul of King Gloren. "

Georgia's eyes smiled: "Naturally."

Spades, who had been calm, suddenly turned his head towards Bai Liu, his gaze fixed on Georgia, the knife he was peeling an apple with clenched in his hand, and Tang Erda, who sensed that something was wrong with him, was quick to hold Spades down, while Mu Sicheng, who was next to him, was frightened by Spades' sudden outburst of aggression: "What are you doing? "What are you doing?"

"The way Bai Liu just looked at Georgia ....." Spades said gruffly, "had desire."

Mu Sicheng: "There is, there is desire?!"

Liu Jiayi: "....."

Gee, it's really because of the money!

Bai Liu, who was unaware of all this, walked over and sat down next to Spades, and naturally took a bite from Spades' pitted apple, noticing the subtle looks he received from the group, Bai Liu raised an eyebrow: "This apple, am I not allowed to eat it?"

"..... You can't do something like that!" Mu Sicheng came over to Bai Liu, glancing at Armand, who had been sitting on the sofa without saying anything, while whispering to Bai Liu, "You've got Spades, how long has it been since you've fallen in love with Georgia!"

" What's so great about Georgia! Ah! Just good looking, rich, a good cook, and a prince of some sort!"

Mu Sicheng himself was saying that Georgia seemed nice enough, and couldn't help but make a hard turn: "But look at his brother, he's a pain in the ass! Spades doesn't have such a nasty brother!"

Armand, who had been warned a million times by Georgia not to act on impulse before leaving the house, took a deep breath and clenched his fists.

..... cannot cause trouble for its older brother.

"Look at his brother, he doesn't know how to do anything, and he speaks badly ..... " Mu Sicheng doggedly pushed his ear, "I feel like he doesn't have good ears either, he doesn't even hear me when I scold him like that. "

Armand's forehead is bruised.

"And my defeat!" No sooner had Mu Sicheng's smug remark been uttered than Armand sprang to his feet, and in an unbearable rage he pleaded, "Who is your loser!"

"Eh ah still not convinced!" Mu Sicheng also stood up, rolling up his sleeves and pointing at his opponent's nose to scold him, "Didn't you? I cleared you out of the game!"

Armand retorted angrily, "Nonsense! I'm the one who cleared you out of the game!"

"I'm the one who cleared you out of the game!"

"It's me!"

When Bai Liu takes a bite of the apple and says [Mu Sicheng], Georgia comes out of the kitchen with her cuffs on and looks at Armand with a warning [Armand], and the two angry men freeze like a child with its collar pinched.

Mu Sicheng grunted coldly and sat back with his chest clasped.

Armand turned his head in anger, his fists clenched to death.

The two of them remained in a cold stalemate for a while, when Mu Sicheng suddenly spoke out of the blue: "I was the one who asked you to leave."

"It's me-" Armand turned his head quickly, fuming with rage.

"Well -" Muke rounded off with a smile and he grinned, "since no one can convince anyone, why don't we have another match?"

Mu Sicheng was quick to accept: "Than what!"

Armand looked at Muke with some caution - he had a feeling that there was something unpleasant about this smiling fellow, and he was about to refuse when he heard Mu Sicheng say provocatively, "Or what a prince, you wouldn't dare to compete with me, would you?"

Armand felt the string in his head snap.

"Whatever the comparison is." Armand looked over calmly, "I'm up for it."

"Whoever loses." Mu Sicheng raised an eyebrow and added nastily, "Just draw a kingpin on the face of whoever does!"

"Playing so big." The smile on Muke's face grew milder, "A bit of friendly, normal play, then."

"Playing with the hands? The rules are simple - one hand on top and one on the bottom on both sides, and the person below reaches out and hits the hand above, rotating after the hit, purely on reaction."

Mu Sicheng simply responded, "Play!"

Armand sensed that something was wrong, but if he gritted his teeth, he answered, "Let's do it!"

Half an hour later.

Lu Yizhan was surprised by Mu Sicheng and Armand when he came out with the pot in his cotton gloves: "What are you two doing?"

Mu Sicheng and Armand turned away from each other with hostile faces, and neither spoke up.

Georgia looked at Armand with his little turtle face and took a deep breath, " Armand, do you have the manners of a prince?"

"Let them play." Bai Liu was fine with it, he was looking down and clipping Spades' nails when he looked up and smiled, "You don't have to worry about etiquette when you're playing with friends."

Armand and Mu Sicheng are both a meal.

Mu Sicheng muttered irritably, "Who's friends with him ....."

"I'm not going to be friends with him." Armand turned his head coldly, "Just a loser."

--This is a real learning curve.

Mu Sicheng instantly exploded, "Who's the loser! You only won once more than me, come again if you dare!"

"Again, then again." Armand shot back indifferently, "It's just the difference between winning you once and winning you twice."

"I ....." Mu Sicheng rage.

"All right." Lu Yizhan helplessly interrupted the two men's endless argument and said with a smile, "Sit down and eat."

But by the time they sat down to eat, the two, who had just been bouncing around, fell into an eerie silence, holding their chopsticks, the backs of their hands so red and swollen they were blistered, like two giant steamed buns, and it took all their strength to shakily squeeze their chopsticks as others used them to pick up the food, let alone reach into the hot pot to fish it out.

The table was full of aromatic dishes, eaten steaming hot, but the buzz was all for others, not them.

Mu Sicheng: "....."

Armand: "....."

..... misses the mark.

"Ding dong-!"

Lu Yizhan stood up to answer the door and explained with a smile, "It's my lover, I asked her to come straight here for dinner after work, do you all mind?"

Of course no one would mind, Lu Yizhan had spoken to Georgia before and Fang Dian was already an old acquaintance to those on Bai Liu's side.

"Shit, shit, it's cold outside!" Fang Dian jumped into Lu Yizhan's arms as soon as she entered the door and put her hand on Lu Yizhan's chest to keep him warm, making Lu Yizhan shiver, but she laughed out

loud, "Look at you!"

"Stop it." Lu Yizhan helplessly covers her hand tightly in her palm, intending to say something about Georgia, only to frown at the touch of her hand and say, "Your hand is so cold, and you rode here again?"

"Didn't I tell you to get a taxi on such a cold day?"

"How expensive is a taxi, how cool is a bike ride!" Fang Dian smiled and gave Lu Yizhan a hug, she felt the hot smoky air on Lu Yizhan's body and squinted comfortably, "..... It's not worth spending money on a taxi, why not have more delicious food tonight! "

Lu Yizhan paused and opened his mouth to say something when Fang Dian looked over his shoulder curiously, "Didn't you say there were foreigners here today? Where is it?"

--She was clearly a distinguished guest, and when she said it, it sounded like she was visiting a tiger in a zoo.

Lu Yizhan nodded at her with a tearful smile and turned to introduce her, "This is Georgia, and this is Armand, a new friend of Bai Liu's who has come to stay with us."

Georgia and Armand stood up and nodded politely, "Hello."

"Hello, hello! Bai Liu's friends are my friends!" Fang Dian shook Georgia's hand warmly, "You're very welcome to come and stay with us! Eat and drink well!"

Fang Dian even pulled Bai Liu, who was eating, from the table and scolded him with a smile, "You're not eating anything! Your friend is standing and talking to me! Your friend is standing and talking to me! "

Bai Liu: "....."

Georgia: "....."

Armand: "....."

Georgia looks at Fang Dian with an inexpressible respect, Armand looks at Fang Dian with a certain horror.

How dare this woman hit Bai Liu, the great demon, on the head!

When Fang Dian saw that Bai Liu did not open his mouth, she raised

her crossed arms and hammered him on the head again: "Say something! You're eating like an idiot!"

Armand shrank back a little in fear.

She actually hit it again!

"My friend." Bai Liu reached out to introduce himself, his eyes dark, his tone inexplicably distressed, " Georgia, Armand ."

Fang Dian nodded in satisfaction, "That's a good boy with good manners."

Bai Liu: "....."

Georgia and Armand began to look at Fang Dian with the same reverence as the top of the food chain in the house.

Fang Dian was a little confused by the look and reached out, "Why are you looking at me?

"Okay." Georgia and Armand sat down quickly, then looked straight at Fang Dian as if waiting for their next command.

Fang Dian continues to be confused: "? Clip the food."

"Okay." Georgia and Armand ate their food quickly, with a swift movement, Armand holding back his shaking hands for fear that if he disobeyed the most fearsome human in the family, he would receive a beating.

"Eat your food, eat your food!" Fang Dian greeted him happily, holding Bai Liu's shoulder with one hand, her face full of excitement, "Not bad, you've made friends with foreigners, and you're so handsome!"

"Insightful! Worth a drink!"

" Mr. Lu!" Fang Dian looked starry-eyed at Lu Yizhan, "I want a drink!"

Lu Yizhan decisively refuses: "No, you're recently sober."

Fang Dian instantly collapsed into a ball on the table, tearfully gestured out, "Honey, give me a sip, I haven't eaten at Bai Liu's for a long time, I'm happy, just one sip!"

Lu Yizhan began to falter as his throat rolled and began to falter.

Fang Dian looked blearily, "Honey, honey~"

Lu Yizhan shakes violently and slowly covers his face in defeat: "..... Just one sip, no more."

Fang Dian raised her hand and cheered, "I love you Mr. Lu!"

Lu Yizhan: "....."

He then knew that once he had achieved his goal, Fang Dian's [husband] would be gone.

Playoffs

"I've got a couple of nice bottles of wine down in the wine cabinet." Muke asked with a timely smile, "How about I bring them up to wake them up and drink them together?"

The red wine was brought up, and as the glasses were exchanged, the group of people who were not very good at drinking soon became drunk. I didn't expect that... ....."

"You two foreigners, you're good drinkers, you're bad, hiccups, you got me drunk!"

Georgia, the bad-hearted foreigner who was poured a lot of wine by Fang Dian but didn't get drunk because he was very drunk, honestly admitted her mistake: "..... was rude."

Armand is actually a little drunk, but he's a good drinker and can barely keep up appearances, and now he's looking on with a bemused expression at Mu Sicheng, who is rolling around in a drunken frenzy.

It was childish of him to get angry with such a person before.

A drunken Mu Sicheng oh so raises his hand and arrogantly yells, "The prince is my defeated champion!!!"

Armand quickly yelled back in anger, "Who's your loser you drunken monkey!"

" Armand's drunk." Georgia sounded apologetic as she held Armand down, "I'll take him away later."

Lu Yizhan, who doesn't drink much, smiles helplessly, "It's fine."

"Before I leave, I'll bring you a present." Georgia placed on the table two bags that he had been keeping handy by the shoe cupboard, he moved and spoke gently as if he didn't think there was anything in what he was taking out, "A few small tokens, I hope you'll like them."

Georgia takes the contents of the bag out.

Bai Liu's eyes glued for a moment, Lu Yizhan almost spat out his soup, and even Muke froze for a moment.

Drunken Fang Dian looks closer, touches it, says in a daze, "What is

this, a golden statue ....."

On the table are two gold figures, one of Bai Liu and one of Lu Yizhan, one arm high and overflowing with gold, Bai Liu's being his single figure and Lu Yizhan's being a double figure, dressed in a black suit, with a bride with a blurred face on his arm.

"This is a gift from Bai Liu's friend." Georgia introduced in a calm tone. Georgia introduced in a calm tone, "This is Mr. Lu's welcome gift, as I didn't know what Miss Fang Dian looked like before and thus hadn't had time to carve the face yet, I will leave the craftsman here to carve it to look like Miss Fang Dian."

"No need!" Lu Yizhan waved his hand in horror, "This gift is too valuable for us to accept!"

Bai Liu's eyes narrowed as he pointed to Lu Yizhan's sculpture and asked sharply, "Why is his double, twice as heavy as mine?"

"Don't be so righteous in questioning other people's gifts!" Lu Yizhan angrily slapped Bai Liu on the head, "Give me a good chance to refuse someone else's expensive gift!"

"Please don't refuse." Georgia was sincere, "You and Bai Liu are both people who have helped the Gloren nation and it would be an insult to us if we couldn't even get a thank you gift the size of an ordinary Gloren family."

Lu Yizhan breaks down and covers his face, "!!!"

Is this already the level of thank you gift for your average family!

This is outrageous!!!

"Then accept it." Bai Liu said as he frankly reached over to take the sculpture, "A gift from a friend, and there's no point in refusing it."

You're quick to admit a friend at a time like this!

Lu Yizhan cried and laughed to stop Bai Liu's hand from reaching out, "You really can't ....."

Georgia stares at Lu Yizhan: "Are you really going to humiliate us with your refusal?"

Lu Yizhan: "....."

Georgia, is serious.

Eventually it was wanted.

"So why is Lu Yizhan's gold sculpture a double?" Bai Liu asks sincerely, "I must have given more credit to Gloren than he did, right? It's only logical that I should get twice as much gold as he did."

"Because the one for Mr. Lu is a wedding present." Georgia explains, "So it's for two."

Bai Liu stared at the golden sculpture twice the size of the one on the table, rubbed his chin, and glanced at Spades, who had been eating in silence, and fell into a pensive mood.

"So you get a double-weight gold sculpture for getting married?"

Spades: "?"

Lu Yizhan looked at Bai Liu with that familiar calculating look in his eyes and had an unsettling feeling, "What are you up to, Bai Liu ....."

Bai Liu muttered, "In that case -"

He turned his head to Georgia and said seriously, "I'm getting married too Georgia, give me double the gold sculpture, my boyfriend is 5'9" and it should cost more gold to do it in equal proportions ....."

Lu Yizhan broke down: "Don't get married frivolously over such things!"

After giving away the gold, Georgia took Armand and left.

"So there's still this kind of bonus to be had for getting married." Bai Liu was thoughtful, "Even the gold is double, no wonder everyone wants to get married ....."

Lu Yizhan collapsed face down on the sofa, as exhausted as if he had wrestled a hundred elephants: "..... No one at all but you would get married to eat such a bonus."

No more holidays for him .....

Lu Yizhan was in tears thinking, "Oooh, I want to get married!

Next day.

A hungover Mu Sicheng wakes up with a splitting headache next to the sofa and finds a small gold sculpture of himself the size of a hand, carved in the form of him being punched in the face and furious.

"????" Mu Sicheng held up the small sculpture and stood up angrily, "Which idiot carved up the way I was beaten?"

Bai Liu, who had just woken up and was holding up a cup of hot water, said casually, "Oh, this, Armand asked me to give it to you last night."

"It says it's carved down the way you lost to him, so you can remember your disastrous defeat."

"Who lost badly! He's the one who lost!" Mu Sicheng was so angry that he had to throw the sculpture in the trash, "Who wants the dog he gave us--"

"- it's a solid gold sculpture." Bai Liu, holding the cup of hot water, added the second half of the sentence without delay, "You can give it to me if you don't want it."

Mu Sicheng froze in his attempt to throw it, he slowly let it go for a moment, hesitated for a long time, took a bite from his mouth and then said in confusion, "Shit, it's soft, it's really solid gold!"

"Yes." Bai Liu replied slowly and leisurely, "A prince, after all."

--Bringing a meet-and-greet gift to a friend is not too shabby.

"Pack up and get into the game." Bai Liu raised his eyes, his tone calm, "The draw for the next playoff game comes out today and we have to get ready for the next game."

Game in the Wandering Circus Guild meeting room.

Wang Shun rushed into the conference room, he took a deep breath and propped his hands on the desk, "The results are in."

All eyes look over.

"The Deer Hunter." Wang Shun's face was a meaty tightness, "Our next opponent, the Deer Hunter."

General Directorate of Heresy Handling, lowest level of the basement.

This is a place where heretics who are very dangerous and have not

yet found a reasonable way to be housed are held as over custody, and only those in captain-level positions are allowed to take the lift and come here.

After the riots started by Bai Liu, security was further tightened and in order to come here, you had to fill out a series of application forms and even bring a surveillance ring, in addition to asking for a captaincy.

Cen Buming, after putting a surveillance ring on his wrist, swiped open the lift with the captain's ID card and pressed the button for the bottom floor lift.

The lift went all the way down, he was draped in his Heretic Authority uniform jacket, an eye patch over his left eye, one arm around his chest, silent, the hem of his shirt and the top of his boots still with blood that hadn't had time to be washed, and the voice of the team member came over the surveillance ring, " Captain Cen, only stay fifteen minutes."

"Hmm." Cen Buming responded faintly, "Got it."

The lift finally landed on the last floor and slowly opened up, before which was pitch darkness, some heretics are not fit to be held in sight, so it has always been pitch dark here, only on either side of the road in the very middle, there would be faint illumination, and the air was filled with a fishy smell of seawater -

--the same disgusting scent as on Bai six.

Cen Buming moves in, the soles of his boots tapping on the metal floor with a steady, orderly footfall, something unspeakable surges in the darkness on either side, but the moment they get close to Cen Buming, they cower back as if smelling danger from a more dangerous kind.

The smell of seawater in the air creeps away again.

Cen Buming walked calmly through the darkness as if he hadn't noticed all this, and the supervisors listening to the footsteps lamented that if they hadn't known that this was a place for very dangerous heretics who hadn't found the right way to be housed and dealt with, he would have thought that their Captain Cen was not at the bottom of the pile, but walking around the playground.

Of course, tyrant instructors like Captain Cen don't usually do such time-wasting things.

But Captain Cen doesn't usually go to the last level either, and although he has access to it, he hates it so much that he rates the bottom level of the Directorate of Heresy as [a place that shouldn't exist].

"Such unculturable and dangerous heretics should be executed in time." Cen Buming comments indifferently on this final layer of heresy, "Otherwise one day these monsters will cause even more harm."

At this point, Captain Su Yang would argue disapprovingly, "This is not in line with the philosophy of the Heretics Bureau!"

"We exist to house heretics and deal with heretics, not to execute them indiscriminately!"

"You mean this naive idea from the [prophet] who died ten years ago?" Cen Buming sneered, "He's dead, it's time for that philosophy to change."

"Such naive fools who try to save even heretics will not end well."

"You!" Su Yang, a good-tempered man like him, was so angry with Cen Buming that he took a deep breath, " Captain Cen, I know that Team 2 is mainly in the field and there are many times when they are in head-to-head combat with heretics, and there are more or less casualties, so it's normal for you to have a grudge against them."

"I also know you really hate the [prophets] who set up this set of mechanisms."

--Yes, Captain Cen hates everything about [the Prophet] so much that whenever a team member brings it up, even if it's just small talk, he coldly interrupts: "Don't discuss a dead person in front of me."

This is one of the reasons why few people in the current game know that [prophets] exist.

"But you've also recently invoked the Prophet's access." Su Yang questioned to the point, "If Captain Cen hates everything about the Prophet so much, then why did you invoke the access he left behind?"

Cen Buming's lips were pursed into a straight line as he said nothing, his face so dark it could drip water.

Su Yang softened her tone: "We'll talk about the last layer of heresy later."

"I absolutely disagree with indiscriminate destruction, it goes against the very reason the Heresy Bureau was established - we are not looking for hostility towards heretics, but a more reasonable attitude and approach, to take them in, to hold them, to work out their weaknesses, we as Heresy Bureau members, the moment we step into the moment we set foot in this place-"

Su Yang raised her eyes, "The line between us and the heretics is blurred."

"What is done with the heretics is being done with us."

Cen Buming keeps moving in, gradually the light around him brightens, the heretical numbers on the door valves on either side are clearly visible - 0056, 0055 .....

These heretics had been imprisoned at a very early stage, but after all this time they had still not sought a reasonable way of being housed.

When he reached the number 0009, Cen Buming's steps stopped, and he looked up at the cold metal door for a long time.

"I don't care about the other heretics." Cen Buming's tone was cool, "but the destruction of Heretic 0009, should be on the agenda."

"Heresy 0009?" Su Yang frowned, "But that's a top secret file that [The Prophet] has set down as a heresy that must not be moved or destroyed easily, so why did Captain Cen suddenly mention destroying this heresy?"

Cen Buming looked down at Su Yang with his clear yellow right eye, his tone indifferent: "Because it's getting out of hand."

In the darkness of the tunnel, only the faintest halo of light falls on Cen Buming's shoulder patch, glowing coldly as he stands in front of the door, as if to merge with the heretics swarming around him.

A table was placed in the door and there was only one thing on the table and that was a gun.

Cen Buming walks over, pushes the gun away, looks at the heretic 0009 file pressed under the ring, drops his eyes, reaches over and turns it over -

--[Heresy No. 0009]

[Heresy Name: Generation Hunter Cen Buming].

[..... original generation of hunters, in 0317 the world line spirit completely downgraded, there was the first riot, revoked the hunter position, outlawed the prophet authority, transferred to the second detachment leader, handed it over to the third detachment leader, namely the second generation of hunters Tang Erda ... ...]

[..... so far the world line has no intention to hurt anyone, has a tendency to recover, stay on duty under observation .....]

In world line 0317, Cen Buming shoots and kills six people suspected of selling rose perfume in Bai six's [Truth or Dare] game - and the gun in this room is that gun.

Five of them did sell, but one was only involved and had not yet had the time to sell.

Lu Yizhan outlawed Cen Buming as a hunter and held Cen Buming of that world line under regulations until the end of that world.

Cen Buming died in the room where he was being held.

Lu Yizhan thought that by the next world line, Cen Buming could forget everything and start all over again, and that he would never again involve Cen Buming in his game with Bai six, and that Cen Buming could simply exist as the original captain of the second team of the Heretic's Bureau.

Catching the heretics he wants to catch, training the players he wants to train, drawing his gun to protect those he wants to protect in a precarious world, and not going to extremes because he knows too much.

But what Lu Yizhan didn't realise was that Cen Buming had already become a heretic in a cycle of over 300 lines as a hunter.

His memory could not be cleared, his soul jumped between world lines called [Cen Buming] carriers, like a monster that could not stop killing with hatred and could only remember, forever, those who had caused harm - this was the price of being a hunter, this was the pain that had to be delivered after having participated in the game.

-The Evil One smiled and said he would always remember.

He was a [hunter] who had been abandoned by the [prophets].

Cen Buming still remembers the look in Lu Yizhan's eyes when he found out he had memories - shock, disbelief, sadness.

Lu Yizhan then took him in as a heretic for the record, even retaining his position as captain of the second team and simply monitoring him.

" Lu Yizhan ." Cen Buming watched Lu Yizhan clutch his chest as he worked on his file next to him and said calmly, "Since you think I did wrong last world, you don't want to use me as a person."

"You might as well kill me."

"What's wrong is wrong, and you don't have to show me mercy."

Lu Yizhan's pen, which was writing, gave a lurch as he lowered his head and continued writing, his voice flat: "..... You've died once, and you've paid for your sins."

"The last world line is the business of the last world line, this world line is the business of this world line, and if we settle scores across time and space, then everyone will have to pay a different price for what they haven't done."

"What's the difference?" Cen Buming asked back, unmoved, "It's all the same soul, the same me."

"One more time like that and I'd still make the same choice."

"But this world line of yours." Lu Yizhan finally looked up, a clear determination in his eyes, "It's not done yet is it?"

Cen Buming and Lu Yizhan looked at each other for a moment and he slowly averted his eyes, "..... Lu Yizhan, don't you get it ....."

"No matter what world line it is, the people who do the wrong thing don't change."

"I will, one day, do the same thing as that world line."

The pen in Lu Yizhan's hand was still for a long, long time before he dropped a stroke, his voice inaudible: "..... wait until you actually do."

"I will kill you with my own hands."

-- just like Fang Dian, who killed the rebel second team leader.

Cen Buming closed the file of heretic 0009 and he turned to leave the room, before finally leaving, he looked back at the end of the cloister, the heretic numbered [0001].

--The heresy called [Future].

The reason that none of the heresies on this level can be accommodated by ordinary methods, apart from the danger and uncertainty, is that the heresies on this whole level are more or less related to people - some are heresies in human guise, such as 0009, and some are heresies with human carriers, such as [eyetun food].

To destroy this layer of heresy is to destroy the person himself, so Su Yang is not wrong in that statement.

But the only heresy that Cen Buming doesn't know what people are associated with is [the future].

It is said that everyone who has peered into the [future] has gone mad, and the only one who hasn't is Bai Liu.

Cen Buming didn't peek into the [future] because he had already guessed what his [future] would be like, and that Lu Yizhan guy didn't peek into the future either; the man rarely even made prophecies, and was always reluctant to use a skill like [prophet] when he clearly possessed it.

Cen Buming asked Lu Yizhan why he didn't want to.

Lu Yizhan always giggles and scratches his head: "Because I don't want to know."

"I was afraid that [the future] would look different than what I thought it would look like."

" Captain Cen ." The voice of the team member reminded from the surveillance ring, "Time's up, come up."

Cen Buming's eyes paused for a moment and turned, his back towards the darkness, his voice steady, "Hmm."

"Give me a half day off tomorrow, I have something to do, no field trips."

The team replied, "Yes, Captain Cen ."

In-game, Wandering Circus Guild, meeting room.

"The date of the tournament is tomorrow and there are four teams advancing to the semi-finals, apart from us, there are Deer Hunter, Killer Sequence and Gamblers Guild." Wang Shun sighed, "The ones who have the right to draw are the Killer Sequence and the Deer Hunters, and we were drawn by the Deer Hunters."

Mu Sicheng looked a bit spine-chillingly at the system panel Wang Shun had clicked out, "Their team, is there that, what, psychotic, clown?"

"Daniel the Clown, the Deer Hunter's ace main attacker this year." Wang Shun's voice trembled uncontrollably as he said the name, "Skill ..... soul crushing gun."

"CD fifteen minutes a round, after a round of shooting can shoot a green bullet, the bullet hit immediately soul shattered, the death-free gold medal is invalid ..... It is said that also died under this gun players, also can not be resurrected, the whole will be in the game directly dissipated, even log out of the game can not do. "

"This is the most dangerous and discussed skill of the year, and because of it, Joker's popularity has skyrocketed since midseason and is currently at number nine."

"And their team's president and tactician [Buming's Executioner] came in third, behind Reverse God and Spades, the second team to have two teams in the top 10 in popularity this year, excluding the Slayer sequence."

Wang Shun took a deep breath as he reached out and tapped the system panel, his tone and expression strained.

"The Executioner's skill is [Death Ring], and as we've covered before,

this [Death Ring] can generate many kinds of torture props, one of the most terrifying of which is a well."

An image popped up of a dark well, in which a myriad of monsters seemed to be swarming, reaching out with sticky blood-stained hands, trying to claw their way upwards and down, the edges of the well's mouth glowing an unnatural silvery blue.

"The name of this well is called the [Well of Sinners], which can trap people whom the executioner identifies as guilty inside, and it is absolutely impossible for players trapped inside to get out on their own, and most of the players who have not been able to get out of this well have died in reality."

Wang Shun took a deep breath, "- even when an exemption exists."

"This skill has a thirty-minute CD, but again, this skill lasts for the same thirty minutes after it is activated."

"I believe you understood this skill description when you heard it." Wang Shun exhaled slowly, "Both the Executioner and the Joker have skills that some have speculated are rules skills."

"- Simply put, it's [God-given skills]."

"The only good news for us is that both the Joker and the Executioner can only target one person at a time with their skills unleashed, the [Well of Sinners] can only swallow one player at a time, and the bullets can only shoot one player at a time."

Wang Shun reluctantly smiles.

There was silence on the field, no one answered, Tang Erda's face was devoid of any emotion and a murderous aura spread around him as he spoke very slowly, "By all means, kill the Joker at the very beginning."

"Never let his bullets touch."

Playoffs

After the meeting, Bai Liu stayed behind to discuss with Wang Shun.

"I have investigated the players who died at the hands of the Joker and the Executioner in the previous matches." Wang Shun opened the system panel and handed it to Bai Liu, "It can be seen that the Joker kills at random in the tournament, but the Executioner controls him, so the players the Joker actually killed were not the ones the Joker wanted to kill, but the ones the Executioner wanted to kill."

"In short, the Joker is the executioner's killer." Bai Liu summed it up succinctly as he pondered, "But it's a bit odd, the Executioner isn't weak in his own skills, he can even ignore a death warrant, so why would he need the Joker's hand to kill?"

"Well, I thought that was a bit odd too." Wang Shun sighed, "Apart from that, there's another strange point, I went to investigate these players who died at their hands and found out that these players were more or less involved in the smuggling of heretics."

Bai Liu raised an eyebrow; "Oh?"

"Like this Kabbalah guild wanderer who got his head shot off by a clown last game." Wang Shun taps on the system panel, points to the guy on it and says, "You remember this thing called [Blood Lingerie]? A heresy used by a group of investors to clutch the blood of children to renew their lives."

"This wanderer is one of the hitmen that one of the investors keeps in the game, as his bodyguard."

"Didn't all those investors get locked up?" Bai Liu asked.

"Yes." Wang Shun nodded, "but not all of the people in their vicinity are being held, and some of these people are players and can use various props to cover up and escape."

Bai Liu seems to understand: "So the Executioner has struck, punishing them in the game."

"And what you said, why did the Executioner use the Joker's hand to carry out the execution, it wasn't actually like that before." Wang Shun slid the panel to the next page, "When the Reverse God was still in Deer Hunter, the main attacker's hand was the Executioner himself,

this warband generally did not kill people, and the Executioner would release the players locked in before the game ended even if he used the skill [Sinner's Well]."

"But after the Reverse God left the Deer Hunter, the Executioner took over the tactician's position himself and he handed over the main attacker's duties to the newcomer Joker."

Wang Shun took a deep breath, "Then something changed."

Bai Liu narrowed his eyes as he looked at the densely arranged, greyed out pictures of players on the panel, "He's starting to kill people."

Community Counselling Room.

Lu Yizhan's shirt is half removed to reveal his right shoulder, still unhealed from Daniel's bullet wound, and Liao Ke, wearing rubber gloves, changes Lu Yizhan's dressing, disinfects the wound that will never heal, then presses the cotton, wraps the bandage and sighs.

"This wound won't heal." After changing, Liao Ke tapped Lu Yizhan on the shoulder, "Get up!"

Lu Yizhan was jolted by the slap, grimacing and shouting, "Mr. Liao, what are you shooting at?"

"Does it still hurt?" Liao Ke laughed, "I thought you had the guts to block Daniel's soul-crushing shot, that's enough to scrape your bones, and you're still crying out in pain?"

Lu Yizhan looked sad: "At this time, you're still making fun of me."

"Down to play the Gambler, against that old fox Charles." Liao Ke took his gloves off and threw them in the medical bin, pressing the death-free disinfectant twice to wipe his hands, "How do you set the tactics?"

" Charles will probably play a fake game, first a wave of counterattacking mad pursuit to suppress us and pull up their win rate, then forfeit and surrender when the win rate is at its highest, he should press us all the way at that moment." Lu Yizhan put his shirt back on and buttoned it up, his expression composed, "If he wants to play, let's play along with him to the end."

"So that means it's not a hard fight." Liao Ke nodded knowingly and the conversation turned abruptly, "What about Buming, what are you

going to do?"

Lu Yizhan's hand stopped as he reached the last button, and he lowered his eyes without speaking.

"..... haven't you guys made up yet?" Liao Ke was a little surprised, "I thought you asked me to ask Little Cen for help with that earlier thing, you two have talked."

"Not really Mr. Lu, you two have been the front and back team in over 300 world lines before, and have fought in numerous fights, big and small, how come you two have been in a cold war for so long over such a small matter this time?"

"I never fought with him, he beat me unilaterally and I never fought back, okay?" Lu Yizhan spread his hands helplessly.

"But you can be a bit of an underdog sometimes." Liao Ke nodded approvingly, "You and Little Cen agreed at the beginning to stay at the Deer Hunter to defend Bai Liu and win the league, but then you ran away when it came down to it, and delegated your cards to Bai Liu.

"If I were Little Cen, I'd beat you up too!"

Lu Yizhan was quiet and sighed, "So I know it was my fault too, he didn't hit me back even when he did ....."

" Little Cen usually beats you up and it's over." Liao Ke asked suspiciously, "Why this time ....."

Lu Yizhan was silent for longer this time as he fastened the last button and said very softly, "It touched his bottom."

"We don't share the same philosophy, this is not something we can talk about."

The superficial peace he had spent over 300 world lines trying to maintain fell apart at that moment, and Cen Buming stood outside the door, calmly holding his gun up to him and saying, "One more time, and I'll still shoot.

It's as if Lu Yizhan couldn't get at Bai Liu the first time he saw him again.

For Lu Yizhan, what you haven't done is what you haven't done.

As far as Cen Buming is concerned, what's done is done.

"A philosophical disagreement?" Liao Ke frowned, "Is this about Little Cen killing those people? That's how you've been setting Little Cen up for work before."

"His status is that of an executioner, shooting players who have crossed the line is exactly what he should be doing as a hunter who walks the line between the Heresy Handling Authority and the game, and you would have him do that in Deer Hunter, so why would you say the philosophy is not compatible?"

"It's not the same." Lu Yizhan was quiet for a long time and shook his head, "Because he doesn't believe in [the Inquisitor] anymore."

"His execution, which lost the [trial] aspect, is something I cannot endorse."

The executioner who had lost his [judge], the hunter who had been abandoned by the [seer], acted more and more paranoid, he began to execute according to his own perceived judgement, but now at least there was no time when the line was crossed, and the people killed were indeed those who deserved it.

But when will he cross that line and become the subject of execution by the Judge?

Liao Ke was stunned and he too fell silent, and it was a long time before he spoke, "Are you going to [judge] him?"

"I hope that day doesn't come." Lu Yizhan looked up with a smile, his eyes a little red, "I don't want to judge him."

"..... Had I known, I wouldn't have wanted a hunter."

Liao Ke sighs with a complicated look in her eyes.

It's kind of ridiculous for a prophet to say he knew about it.

But Lu Yizhan is like that. The more people he cares about, the more last-minute he is, the more he is afraid to see the end. In that skill, [Listening to God's Words], God has already written the end for each of them, and Lu Yizhan only has to prophesy to get a glimpse of it.

Lu Yizhan doesn't believe in that ending, doesn't dare to see that ending, doesn't want to see that ending -

-- he would have preferred to struggle like an ordinary man who knew

nothing until the last moment and then fall into the end of God.

Cinchimani family.

After Phoebe took the power of the guild and came back strong, her father disappeared - or smelled bad and ran away would be more accurate.

This man has always been arrogant and conceited, thinking he can accept life and death, measuring and testing everyone by it, but when it comes to this moment, he is still timid and far less calm than the two children he has raised.

Before leaving, the man is determined to leave Phoebe in a bit of trouble, leaving a suicide note handing over Phoebe's heirship to Daniel and, even more troubling, Daniel, who has been out of sight all this time, is really back and he's about to turn eighteen.

In five days' time, Daniel's bar mitzvah will be celebrated and, in accordance with Cinchimani family rules, the child who comes of age will inherit, and he will be the new head of the family on his eighteenth birthday.

It's not such an easy task, at least not for Phoebe, the powerful former heir to the throne.

She already holds most of the Cinchimani family's power, and with the Guild behind her, if Daniel were to take power, he would have to kill Phoebe to succeed, but obviously, that would not be easy.

The head of the family disappears, leaving behind a letter to replace his successor, and the eldest son, who has been missing for over a month, suddenly returns, accompanied by a coming-of-age ceremony.

--The entire Cinchimani family was caught in a stormy atmosphere, the servants were trembling as they wiped down the decorations, they could smell the gunpowder and blood in the air.

While everyone expected a confrontation between Phoebe and Daniel before the bar mitzvah, the current de facto head of the family, Phoebe - Cinchimani, calmly approved the bar mitzvah and invited a large number of distinguished guests to make it a rather large event.

All those who were waiting for the struggle were dumbfounded.

Everyone in the Cinchimani family knew what Daniel's bar mitzvah

meant, so they became more and more confused about Phoebe's intentions - Phoebe was even more unpredictable and unpredictable than her father, it had to be said, and no one could read her mind, which made everyone more afraid of her. This made everyone more afraid of her.

Although she was only sixteen, no one thought Daniel would succeed in wresting power from her hands.

The day of Daniel's birthday will surely be the anniversary of his death.

It may have been a grand bar mitzvah or a grand jubilee laying ceremony.

Across the long, dark corridor, looking down from the jogging platform of the corner staircase on the first floor, were servants earnestly cleaning up and beginning to adorn the surrounding area with all sorts of expensive decorations, all in advance of the ball in five days' time.

While Phoebe rests one hand on the fence, her eyes downcast, her long, curly blonde hair falling from her shoulders, silently watching those in front of her, Daniel leans against the stairs, grinning and fiddling with a flower plant placed by the stairs, his attire somewhat more casual than Phoebe's modest attire, with unwashed grease on her face and a bloody footprint as she walks.

"A coming-of-age gift for me?" Daniel gave a cheeky smile, "You're really in the mood."

"Aren't you afraid I'll kill you?"

The servants below were silent, their backs bowed and pretended they heard nothing.

Phoebe looked down at Daniel and said, "Are you really ready to betray?"

"I've never been loyal to you." As if he had heard a very funny joke, Daniel shrugged his shoulders and laughed provocatively, "And what is this talk of betrayal?"

Phoebe did not answer.

Daniel withdrew his eyes in bemusement as he bounced and hummed

a little tune past Phoebe, his tone a twisted excitement, "Godfather would be so happy to get this family."

Daniel bounces one bloody footprint after another, spreading deeper and deeper into the cloister until the light cannot be found.

Phoebe withdrew her eyes and looked at the bloody footprints he had left on the ground, then with a glance at the flowers where Daniel had scratched his fingerprints, she said, "Replace the bouquet."

When the servant came up to change the flowers, he was shocked: "These are your and Mr Daniel's favourite flowers, why are they caught like this?

"Change it." Phoebe lowered her eyes, " Daniel doesn't like the flower now, so naturally he will hurt it."

--Finally, it's come to this.

Next day, rental house.

Du Sanying was sitting next to him, hesitant to go forward, when Mu Sicheng saw him like this, he grabbed him and squeezed Du Sanying's shoulder: "What's going on, why haven't you come out these days?"

Du Sanying backed away quickly, shaking his head frantically as he pressed himself against the wall in terror: "Don't come near me!"

"You're about to play a game and it's going to be bad luck!"

Mu Sicheng was unconcerned and waved his hand: "You can't have any more bad luck than this Bai Liu guy, he's our tactician, what do I care about your bad luck?"

Bai Liu: "..... Indeed."

"Why have you been avoiding us lately?" Mu Sicheng asked suspiciously, "I was looking for you to come out for dinner yesterday, but I couldn't find you for half a day and called to find that you had run out."

" Wang Shun said you don't even come to our games anymore, what's wrong with you?"

Du Sanying bowed his head and his voice was weak: "..... Aren't you guys playing a very important playoff game, I'm afraid what if I'm there and you guys are unlucky and you lose ....."

There was a silence from several people.

Bai Liu was calm - he knew why Du Sanying didn't come to see him, but he didn't like to force people, so when Du Sanying was really resistant, Bai Liu wouldn't chase after him like Mu Sicheng did to ask Du Sanying to come to dinner to see him. But if Du Sanying was more hesitant and less resistant, Bai Liu would extend the olive branch.

For example, now.

"So do you want to come and watch?" Bai Liu enquired softly, "Today is the semi-final, four to two."

"It should be a great game."

Du Sanying's eyes clearly wavered and he bit his lower lip, but did not say anything.

But it didn't go away either.

"Come and watch if you want to." Bai Liu doesn't push, "It's no fun for Wang Shun to watch the game alone, so it's good for you to keep him company."

"What do you want to see before you see it?" Mu Sicheng slips Du Sanying a hand and vows, "Then you must come and see it!"

"I'm telling you, you should have come to the last game, I was an ace last game and my opponent got beaten ....."

Mu Sicheng chattered on and Du Sanying tried to run away in panic, only to be held down by Muke next to him with a smile: "It's also an important duty as part of the Wandering Circus to see us win the title."

"But just in case ....." Du Sanying's eyes welled up with fear, "you guys get off my back!"

"I don't want anything to happen to you!"

"Not so much." Liu Jiayi waved her hand, "To say that you'd let something happen to us, you'd still have to come in behind Bai Liu."

Tang Erda nods rather approvingly.

Seeing that the crowd was about to pout at Du Sanying, Bai Liu came to the rescue by extending his hand and raising his eyes, "Wanna come

into the game with us and watch the game?"

"If it wasn't for your help, we wouldn't have made it this far, and you deserve to be a part of witnessing our victory."

Du Sanying was stunned for a long, long time before he trembled and placed his hand on Bai Liu's palm, and he gave a hard, choked up sob: "You will win!"

Even if he could only remember seven days, he could feel that these people were his last friends in this world, and they were so important to him that he was willing to use all his good fortune for the victory of these people.

--Even if he has to live the rest of his life in misfortune, that's fine.

Game on, viewing pool 2.

The crowd was twice the size of the last one, and Mu Sicheng was almost shocked when he entered, so dense were the heads that you couldn't even see their faces.

"The Deer Hunters are very popular this year." Wang Shun took a deep breath to adjust his mind and explained, "Plus we won against Golden Dawn earlier and it's the semi-finals again, so our win is more uncertain than the killer sequence against the gamblers' guild where the winner is probably already decided, so the crowd for this one with particularly large."

"The betting rate has also had a particularly erratic opening move, having gone up and down three times, with a high of four and a low of just under 0.3."

"As mentioned in the pre-match meeting, the heart of this match lies in the Executioner and the Joker, the Executioner is very aggressive and the Joker, although a newcomer, has a high defense, I estimated that he can resist at least one full shot." Wang Shun let out a breath, "And both the Executioner and the Joker have a big skill that can jump death-free gold discs to death in the opening chapter, [Sinner's Well] and [Soul Crushing Gun], if they get circled, it's not just a matter of attrition ....."

"Deaths outside the [Well of Sinners] venue, Shattergun has absolutely no way to revive ....."

"I won't let the team get hit by a bullet." Tang Erda spoke abruptly, his

gaze condensing, "Opening the chapter, I will control the Joker."

Wang Shun gave Tang Erda a complicated look.

Both [The Executioner] and Joker are in the main attack configuration, a very rare [double main attack] team, which puts a lot of pressure on the opponent's main attack, so their ace in the hole is, of course, Tang Erda, who has the most experience and the best psychological profile.

"Take it easy, take it easy!" Mu Sicheng proudly came over, he put one arm around Tang Erda and one hand on Bai Liu's shoulder, "And I'm an ace wanderer!"

"So, what if they have a double main attack, I can clear them out just the same!"

"Don't take it lightly." Bai Liu turned his head calmly to look at everyone as he tugged on his gloves, his gesture of readiness for battle, "Once you see Daniel make a shooting move, remember how we agreed?"

"The nearest team member quickly clears the team member targeted by Daniel, never let Daniel get a shot." Liu Jiayi repeats with a stony expression.

"Hmm." Bai Liu raised his eyes, "That's our most important tactic for this game, please keep that in mind."

"Both teams have forfeited the single and double matches and will proceed directly to the team competition." The host waved his hand, "The team competition is about to begin, please ask both tacticians to come forward and shake hands."

Bai Liu turns as he steps up the steps, while on the other side, Cen Buming removes his blindfold and, eyes downcast, places the [Death Ring] on his right hand.

The moment he puts the ring on, his appearance changes, gradually becoming a different image, his own, and Cen Buming turns coldly to the incredulous eyes of his team members and steps onto the stage.

Across the street, Tang Erda's pupils flinched at the sight of Cen Buming in this form.

Bai Liu also raised an eyebrow, he quickly calmed down and extended

his hand with a smile, "So it's Captain Cen, nice to meet you."

Cen Buming looked down at Bai Liu indifferently without reaching out, "You were testing my identity the first time we met, you already guessed who I was, right?"

"Hmm." Bai Liu doesn't shy away from acknowledging it, smiling, "Mr. Cen Buming, the Generation Hunter."

Cen Buming gave an unnoticeable pause and quickly snorted sarcastically, "It seems that Lu Yizhan didn't just give you the prophet status, he even told you these things."

"-there's really enough trust in you [the werewolf]."

"He didn't explicitly tell me who you were, but he was in your group before." Bai Liu's attitude was the same even after being ridiculed, " Lu Yizhan wouldn't stay in a guild for no reason, he's [the Inquisitor] and you're [the Executioner], so your identity is a good guess."

"He is no [inquisitor]." Cen Buming's right eye reflected a sharp and eerie light like a hawk in the daylight shining down from above from the ornamental pool, "There is no such unjust [judge] in this world."

"He ceased to be worthy of being [an Inquisitor] when he chose to stand entirely on your side and rely on his singular trust in you to save the people of this world."

"You were the mistake in the middle of his trial."

"And I, as [the executioner], need to right that wrong for him to continue with a fair trial."

Ornamental pool No. 1.

Lu Yizhan's heart skipped a beat and he choked out a few coughs, covering his chest in an attempt to stop the inexplicable feeling of unease, but to no avail, his heart was beating faster and faster, as if something was about to happen that he really didn't want to see.

"What's wrong?" Liao Ke came over worriedly, "Is the wound hurting again?"

"It's okay." Lu Yizhan's face was pale as he gripped the heavy sword resting at his side, trying to find some sort of courage among the Fang Dian look-alike weapon, "..... just a little sick at heart."

Liao Ke looked across at the team ready to take the field and said with relief, " Charles the old fox won't be that desperate, at most he will apply pressure early on and will definitely forfeit late on."

"..... hmm." Lu Yizhan forced a smile, he was silent for a long time, then suddenly asked, "What do you think Cen Buming will do after he takes Daniel and meets Bai Liu?"

"..... is that what you're worried about?" Liao Ke was stunned, but he quickly sighed, "Actually I don't think Little Cen is as dangerous as you think, he has Daniel with him, on the one hand he is carrying out the execution, on the other hand he is also supervising Daniel, with him Daniel hasn't done anything out of control so far."

"Like your guardianship attitude towards heretics, I consider Little Cen to be Daniel's guardian."

In fact, Lu Yizhan thought so too, and Cen Buming had done so before, which is why Lu Yizhan did not intervene to deal with Cen Buming's use of the Guild to house Daniel.

"And for Bai Liu ....." Liao Ke sighed, "should I say you are in authority or overly worried?"

" If Little Cen really wanted to do it to Bai Liu, he would have done it by force when Bai Liu was eighteen years old, and the fact that he was stopped by you shows that Little Cen was hesitant in his mind."

"You also said that Little Cen was aware that it was wrong for him to do that and that's why he kept asking you to kill him."

"He ..... just couldn't get past himself."

"It's like you can't give up on saving any of the good guys." Liao Ke let out a long sigh, " Little Cen couldn't stand to let any of the bad guys get away either."

"He was too afraid of a repeat of what happened in the first world line, too afraid that some innocent people would die because of his hesitation."

"And this is the last world line."

Lu Yizhan bowed his head, he clenched his fists and said nothing, then he stood up, "I'll use the skill of [Listening to God's Only Words] ....."

"I equip [Prophet] Monster Book Identity to take a look at ....." Lu Yizhan's mouth and hand tapping out the skill panel were shaking as his eyes reddened, "Just a glance... ..."

"I take a look at the ending written by Bai six to Cen Buming and Bai Liu."

"Mr. Lu." Liao Ke pulled Lu Yizhan back, his eyes complex and indistinct, "Have you forgotten? You are no longer a prophet."

"If even you don't believe in your own chosen [prophet], how are you going to get Little Cen to believe?"

Lu Yizhan's hand that wanted to tap on the skill stopped, and he finally sat back helplessly, his eyes drifting off as he murmured softly, "..... you're right."

"I'm ..... no longer [a prophet]."

The host of viewing pool one raised his hand to signal, "Will both tacticians please come forward to shake hands?"

"Go on Mr. Lu." Liao Ke patted Lu Yizhan's shoulder and advised, "Play the game first."

Lu Yizhan took a deep breath and walked across to Charles.

At the same time, Cen Buming finally reached out and took Bai Liu's hand, speaking indifferently, "There is nothing to say between us."

"There doesn't need to be much conversation between the executioner and the person being executed."

Cen Buming withdrew his hand and turned to leave. Bai Liu looked down at Cen Buming's distant back, the sensation of the Death Ring still lingering in his palm.

Bai Liu didn't chastise anyone as he had done before, but rather calmly watched Cen Buming walk away.

--This man is serious.

He had really turned on him.

"Get ready to log into the game." Bai Liu returned to his team, his tone flat, "Do whatever it takes to snipe the Joker."

"Yes!"

Everyone said yes, except for Mu Sicheng who asked, a little confused, " Bai Liu, you only told us the focus of our siege, who is the focus of the other side's siege?"

Bai Liu opened his mouth to say something, but when he saw the eyes of all the players looking straight at him, he stopped: "We're not sure yet, we'll see when we get into the game."

"It's not you, is it?!" Mu Sicheng was a bit nervous, "Shit!"

"No." Tang Erda shook her head with certainty, " Bai Liu will be the safest person in this copy."

"Because there's no way for a clown to shoot him."

"I think so too." Liu Jiayi replied after some serious thought. Liu Jiayi thoughtfully replied, "I asked Phoebe, and she said that Daniel really likes Bai Liu, to the point of being jealous of all the players around Bai Liu."

"- along these lines, it should be more likely that people around Bai Liu were sniped by the Joker."

It was clear that everyone was inexplicably relieved to hear such dangerous news.

"That's good." Muke laughed lightly, a rare genuine smile, "We can go to war without shooting at Bai Liu."

"I have reservations about that, after all, there's not just the Joker on the other side, there's [the Executioner] too." Bai Liu spoke in a calm tone as he walked towards the boarding portal on the other side of the big screen, "Stay alert and get into the game first."

The moment everyone was about to log into the game, their previously playful expressions disappeared and became heavy.

Mu Sicheng had been exhaling and exhaling, the relaxed and loud look he had just given was gone, his hands so stiff with tension that he could hardly move them, Muke clutching his dagger, his eyes downcast, walking with slightly heavier footsteps than usual, Liu Jiayi repeatedly opening the system panel, his face stony as he confirmed his healing skills.

Everyone felt a sense of oppression like never before, coming from the skills of Daniel the clown.

..... Even if it is swallowed by Cen Buming's [Well of Sinners], the worst that can happen is that the exemption will be invalidated and the person will die, but as long as there are enough follow-up points and the soul exists, there is still a chance of resurrection, but if you are hit by the Soul Crushing Gun, there is really no room for maneuvering.

Not even the game, can save a player who has been soul crushed.

Tang Erda could not be clearer on this point.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and slowly unclenched his fists, which had been clenched all the way and were beginning to tingle, trying to calm his muddled brain down.

..... Daniel was actually on the same team as Cen Buming, which simply turned his perceptions upside down, and while each world line had different change points, there had never been such a volatile change.

The change is simply comparable, as he, the hunter, joins Bai Liu's team.

Was it a coincidence? Was it the butterfly effect of him joining Bai Liu's team? Why is Cen Buming on the same team as Daniel and what is he doing?

But it is useless to think about this now, the priority is to win the other side in order to explore the answers to these questions.

Tang Erda's dark blue eyes widened as he stared at the back of Bai Liu, who had walked into the entrance, and tightened his grip on the gun in his hand...

-- This time, he would never let his tactician, in front of his own face, touch that bullet.

[..... is loading the game .....]

[System Alert: Both players have logged into the game "The Drowning Man from the Future"]

[The (Deer Hunters) vs. (Wandering Circus), a five-man team match, officially begins].

Bai Liu opened his eyes and he was suspended in a deep, dark universe, or more precisely, he was wearing a spacesuit, equipped with safety connectors around his waist, suspended not far from a space station, with his side Fang Ke to see a huge spacecraft connected to the station.

And all around him and behind him, this vast and silent space was not the way he had seen the universe before in books or picture books, but was made up of many Earths, orbiting this huge spaceship according to some kind of law, no meteorite belts, no different shapes of stellar spheres, only one thing - the Earth shrouded in a halo of light.

-- exactly the same world line in the shape of a ball of light that Bai six had once shown him.

Behind these "earths" are scattered, broken halos of starlight, all of which glow a slight silvery blue, making one feel dizzy and very uncomfortable when looking directly at them for a long time, making one feel like sinking into some kind of deep sea, giving rise to a feeling of drowning.

Bai Liu soon discovered that looking directly at these silvery-blue halos for long periods of time would bring down one's spirit level, and he squinted - this familiar glow reminded him of a certain god.

[System Alert: You are a player who has jumped the world line and come outside the world line].

[God rejoices in your growth and welcomes you, and He presents you with His supreme masterpiece, the (game system)].

[Activate main quest: Please land the airship, find the key on the airship, control this airship and fly to the place where the world lines meet at the centre - the place where the temple is located].

"..... please return to the hatch." A mechanical announcement came over the internal radio of Bai Liu's spacesuit, "Oxygen is running out, please return to the hatch."

Bai Liu turned his helmet and looked through the transparent face window structure to see the hatch attached to the end of the safety cable moving slowly. He gripped the cable and pulled inwards, floating lightly to the hatch and retracting.

The hatch closed and a mechanical voice came from the top: "Scanning, adjusting environment in progress, activating gravity and air systems, simulating biological survival environment, please do not remove your spacesuit ....."

"Simulation complete, please enter the interior."

A white gas rises from the bottom and the feeling of floating disappears, a gravitational pull on his feet appears and the weightlessness disappears, he lands on the ground and another hatch opens in front of him.

Looking squarely past it, there is a whole metallic webbed corridor, where one can see various types of mechanical arms in operation, which place something contained in a square on another assembly line, and another mechanical arm stamps a stamp on it - [Transport Object: 0616 Worldline Reality].

[Shipment of goods: Dried Leaf Rose Graft (Heresy)]

Bai Liu slowly unscrewed his helmet and hung it aside as he walked towards the inside of this large factory-like spaceship, his eyes downcast as he surveyed what was being produced on each assembly line.

[Shipping to: 0408 World Lines (Game)].

[Transportation object: Flaming Torch (Prop)]

[Transportation object: Water bubbles (prop)]

" Bai Liu--!" In the distance, came the sound of Mu Sicheng running, panting as if he was afraid Bai Liu would touch something on the assembly line, exclaiming, "Don't touch those things!"

"I won't touch it." Bai Liu looked at Mu Sicheng who ran up to him and raised an eyebrow, "You've touched it?"

Mu Sicheng, whose face bears the marks of an attack by a robotic arm and abrasions on the sides of his face, grimaces: "I hit it when I was running too fast."

"The mechanical arm here is the one that attacks people, I originally thought it was a monster from the monster book and fought the mechanical arm for a while to trigger the monster book, but it wasn't, it was just a simple mechanical arm."

"This copy doesn't need to trigger the monster book." Bai Liu drew his eyes back from the production items on those assembly lines and spoke in a calm tone, "This whole ship, it's the backend of the system."

"Every box we've seen is a monster."

"The backstage of the system ……?!" Mu Sicheng was shocked, "You mean this place, is the backend of the system?!"

"So why are we logged in?!"

Bai Liu quickly realised that something was wrong and he turned to Mu Sicheng: "Didn't you get the system alert?"

"The background to what's going on here is [the system's back office]."

Mu Sicheng looks at Bai Liu in confusion: "No ……"

"We didn't get any system prompts, we were just told to go along with you to find the key to get to the top level and then for you to get control of this ship."

"It's clear that you're to accompany me to the top, isn't it?" Bai Liu's tone was surprisingly calm, "I'm the only one who can do this, none of you can, can you?"

Mu Sicheng looked over at Bai Liu, who nodded somewhat dazedly,

"..... Yes."

"It was made clear that it was to accompany [player Bai Liu] up to the very top and get control of the ship."

He had never seen Bai Liu s face look so ..... ugly before.

"What about you guys?" Bai Liu stared at Mu Sicheng, "What is the identity assigned to you by this game?"

Mu Sicheng also sensed something was wrong in Bai Liu's attitude and he clicked on his system panel and handed it to Bai Liu to see, "It's this."

And the moment Bai Liu saw Mu Sicheng's identity on the panel, his pupils tightened.

[System Alert: Mu Sicheng has been stripped of his player status after jumping out of the world line]

[Re-verify identity.]

[Real Identity: 0658 Worldline Transport Product, Humanoid Heretic, No. 0004--]

[- Mu Sicheng, capuchin thief].

[System ship backstage soul storage location - Level 1.]

Bai Liu's breathing stops.

--This ship, this system, not only produces and transports heretics, monsters and props to all worlds, but also stores the souls of all players who have entered this game.

Liu Jiayi, Mu Sicheng, Tang Erda, Muke, Lu Yizhan ..... The souls of these people, he owns half of them.

This system backend, has the other half.

[System warming note: When you own the ship, you own the system itself].

[Possessing the last pass to become an evil god.]

..... This is not a game at all.

Bai Liu turned his head slowly as he looked out the transparent window at the 658 [Earths] that were orbiting this ship, the pupils of his dark eyes reflecting the silvery blue of space - the 658-world line.

-- He landed on the reality that led to the final [future].

The Drowning Man from the Future

Mu Sicheng looked at Bai Liu's unprecedented expression and was stunned for a moment before he began to report, "..... I've met up with Jiayi and the others, on the last level, there are plans for the ship's construction, shall we go down and have a look?"

Bai Liu's voice started to soften because he was not right.

"Let's go." Bai Liu narrowed his gaze and headed for the lowest level, halfway down, he suddenly spoke up, " Mu Sicheng, the other side's siege is focused on me."

Mu Sicheng was shocked: "What, you? Then talk to Tang Erda quickly, and move the main attack protection focus to you ....."

"No." Bai Liu looked up at Mu Sicheng, "The main focus of protection will be you, and I've already negotiated with Tang Erda."

Mu Sicheng was anxious: "But the siege is on you! You know Tang Erda, the main attacker, will put your orders first on the field, he'll believe whatever you say, and if you say the siege is on us, he won't doubt you at all!"

"When they come around, they won't be able to stop them!"

"Even if the siege focuses on me, I won't be able to stop it at all." Bai Liu's tone was cold, so cold that it carried a sense of menace, "Neither you nor any of the team, will ever be able to put protecting me first."

"I know you're impulsive, have a keen sense of movement and combat awareness, and move fast enough that when the time comes, you'll be the first to rush to my defense, so I'm warning you in advance, absolutely not."

Mu Sicheng was about to say, when Bai Liu looked at him with eyes so dark that no light could penetrate them.

" Mu Sicheng, that's an order."

"Are you going to disobey the tactician's orders on the field of play?"

Mu Sicheng opened his mouth, but finally gritted his teeth and said, "..... I know."

So what exactly happened and why was Bai Liu so ..... nervous.

Mu Sicheng had never seen Bai Liu play the game so tightly, even hostilely. Even in a life-or-death situation, the guy could talk and laugh, but now, before the game had even started, he looked like he had seen something extremely scary, and there was not a single expression on his face.

It's just ..... a game, ah, the worst that can happen is just to admit defeat and walk away.

Bai Liu walked forward, a little glad that he was wearing such heavy and cumbersome clothes, otherwise Mu Sicheng, with his sensitivity, would have noticed that his hands were trembling in his clothes.

But from the look on Bai Liu's face, there was no sign of him, so calm that anyone would have thought he was still in control of the situation.

In fact, he also didn't understand why his hands were trembling, why his heart was beating so fast, why he was so ..... scared when he guessed what Bai six was going to do.

Don't die.

Bai Liu heard a voice deep inside himself saying very softly, a very soft, teenage voice - aren't you a monster.

[Don't die in front of me, Xie Ta.]

[You're the only friend I have, the only person who will come near me anymore].

Bai Liu took a very hard breath, he turned his head sideways and raised his hand slightly to shield his eyes from Mu Sicheng's expression, clenching into his hand to force himself to calm down and not be carried away by his fear as he began to analyse.

This is already outside the world line, then this is not a game, there is no such option as quitting the game, he just can't talk to them yet, this extreme situation will make the group fight tooth and nail to keep him ..... and there is a rather dangerous uncertainty with this outside the world line scenario - -

-- Bai six can log in to this ship at any time, as it is located outside the worldline and logging in does not interfere with the worldline.

If Bai Liu were to take on Bai six single-handed, he wouldn't be afraid, but it's not just him here, it's .....

Yes .....

Bai Liu closed his eyes as he remembered the smile of Bai six in the fifth building, holding up his soul sniper rifle and aiming it at the others.

[Having feelings makes you weak, Bai Liu.]

Mu Sicheng pushes open the door and a warm dampness comes over him, mixed with a warm glow, Tang Erda looks at him with a worried frown, Muke hands him a cup of warm tea and Liu Jiayi pauses in his speech.

"What's wrong with you?" She sensed something and frowned, "You look so pale, Bai Liu."

"Not really used to the environment here." Bai Liu took the warm tea and took a sip as he laughed lightly, his eyes dropping as if he was not concerned, "The ship construction plans are somewhere, I'll take a look."

Liu Jiayi stares suspiciously at the side of Bai Liu's face, and Muke looks away, clearly wanting to ask more questions, but Bai Liu quickly brings their attention away.

"This ship, it's a four-layer construction." Bai Liu looked at the diagram of the ship hovering over the maneuvering board, looking from the bottom to the top, then nodded to the last layer, "Here we are, the fourth layer is a production line for some monsters, and further up, a production line for some core heretics."

Liu Jiayi's eyes fell on Bai Liu's face without moving as she opened her mouth to analyse, "I suspect this is the system's back office."

"I saw the label on the box."

Bai Liu's fingers pause for a moment, and he quickly and calmly picks up, "That's my point too."

"Not only that." Tang Erda's brow tightened, "I also suspect that this is Bai six's worldline archive."

"Look at this picture, you guys."

Tang Erda swiped the ship's diagram and a brand new diagram emerged, a layer with the locations of 658 Earths, alongside various notes and archival instructions.

"..... This would be the world line we're in, no archive point has appeared yet, it's still in the game running." Tang Erda took a deep breath and tried his best to calm down before continuing his analysis, he tapped the previous [Earth], "But here, here, it's all in a game over state."

" Bai six have contaminated these world lines with heresies, and these world lines have been game over and archived."

"I don't think that's right." Muke looked to the floating diagram and tapped the tabletop to ask a question, "If the game is over in these worlds and has entered a state of archival point time stop, then there should be nothing and nothing needed in these world lines, so why are those assembly lines still producing a steady stream of props and heretics to transport to these supposedly game over when we come up from the fourth level of the world lines?"

"There's only one reasonable guess."

Muke looked up at Bai Liu, who had been silent: "That's the game in these world lines, it's not over yet."

"Impossible." Tang Erda denied with a quick shake of her head, "By the time I left each worldline, the entire worldline was so heavily contaminated by different heretics that most of the players in the game had been transformed into monsters and left behind, and game operations had ceased."

"I watched the game operations stop and confirm our failure before I was allowed to jump to the next world line, and with the world being heretical at that point and everyone in reality generating suffering and basically being tainted by heresy to the point of sanity and being a monster, Bai six didn't even have the need to continue running the game to reap the pain anymore. "

"Is that so?" Muke seemed to have an understanding, "If that's the case, what's up with all these props and heretics that are still being transported to these already archived world lines?"

Liu Jiayi stared at Bai Liu and narrowed her eyes a little: " Bai Liu, do you have any idea?"

"My thoughts are that-" Bai Liu's tone was flat, his head bowed and his expression unreadable, "the game between [the prophet] and [the evil god] did end in these world lines, [the evil god] as it were, used These world lines all ended with [the Prophet]'s defeat."

"But [the evil gods'] game in these world lines is not over yet."

Tang Erda realised what was going on and he remembered with a jolt what the [Tang Erda] he had met in the fifth building had said to him -

--Time still flows after you have left.

The suffering of all, continues and circulates, endlessly God Xiang offers, without a moment of cessation.

"I used to wonder why a heresy like [Dried Leaf Rose], which drains the life force of everyone, was put into every world line." Bai Liu continued in a calm tone, "Clearly this thing does not conform to the principles of the [evil gods], [Dried Leaf Rose] causes death, and a dead person is incapable of producing pain or value anymore."

"The heresy He likes would be the one that sustains one's base vitality, that keeps one awake, with a certain faint hope of not being able to give up, and therefore endlessly produces suffering."

"-as in the Land of Gold?" Muke asked softly and rhetorically, "Because they know Georgia is watching over them, the people will always have hope and wait for Georgia's return, won't they?

"Hmm. " Bai Liu's fingers against the console curled and his tone lowered, "Without hope, there is no pain, without ever having gained, the loss is numb."

"The pain that the dried-leaf rose can cause is indeed colossal, but only for a period of time, and in the later stages, everyone grows numb."

"Later, I understood why He allowed [the dried leaf rose] to appear and spread anyway."

Bai Liu looked up, his gaze fixed on the 658 images of the Earth in suspension: "- because he can keep time going round and round."

"He just needs to set the archive point at that moment when everyone is suffering the most, and then when everyone is about to go numb, he

rewinds the clock and jumps to that archive point, making the time loop and the people inside will produce a constant stream of suffering."

"The mechanism sounds familiar, doesn't it?"

"Isn't this ....." Muke looked incredulously at Bai Liu, "- a copy of the game? "

"So the copy we log into each time is not a copy of the game at all, but some place in these contaminated world lines where archive points have been placed and are cycling constantly?!"

Bai Liu closed his eyes: "..... Yes."

"The heretics and props that were transported over there, the heretics were used to reset the copy and redistribute the contaminated copy to keep it the same as before, the props were not distributed to people in that worldline, but to players who logged into that worldline [game copy]."

"-that is, ourselves."

"The game [of the evil gods] continues in a more brutal way in the world lines where these [prophets] lose their games."

"It's the same with our own worldline, if we can't win the game, [the evil gods] will arrange copies of other worldlines that are cycling into our reality in the same way."

"No wonder ....." Muke sat back in his chair in a trance, "no wonder it's like that."

"And Bai six is worse than that, right?" Liu Jiayi's face was also very ugly, "We also met some NPCs who jumped out of the loop in the middle of the game, most of them were people who had traded with the evil god, so these people are real, they have the memories of the loop and are being tortured in a constant stream."

"-that's how they deliver suffering to the evil gods because of their dealings with them afterwards, isn't it?

--A constant loop of seven days of gameplay, increasingly realistic and realistic NPCs, and major game characters who jump out of the loop after trading with the evil god, and who trade with him with hope in their hearts, only to end up becoming more and more miserable, after

being logged in by the player, in a variety of ways.

The Doctor from the Ice Age, Alex from the edge of the forest, the zombie Taoist from the village of Yinshan, Xiaokui from the festival of evil gods .....

"If we lose the game with the evil god this time." Liu Jiayi looked straight at Bai Liu, "And become such an NPC in someone else's game, yes?"

"No." Bai Liu raised his eyes, the pupils of his eyes dark, his tone clear, "You won't."

--because it's, like, the last world line.

"This system airship is equivalent to a large transit centre, transferring players from the 658 world line we are in, to copies in other world lines, and then transferring them back after the game is over, and distributing rewards and points at the same time." Bai Liu quickly continued his analysis, "Not only that, this ship is also the equivalent of a large heretic smuggling ferry."

Tang Erda, sensitive to the term "smuggling heresy", quickly looked at Bai Liu: "How?"

"On my way here, I paid attention to the source of the assembly line from which this ship produces heretics." Bai Liu continued calmly, "It was not produced using some raw material, but was extracted up from the void from various world lines."

"That is to say, Bai six first contaminates the worldline with heretics, and after the heretics have been produced in this worldline in a constant stream, then extracts the heretics from this worldline with the system backend, stores them in this huge system backend ship, and contaminates the next worldline with the heretics stored in this ship when it enters the next worldline. "

"The equivalent of all the world lines that have failed have been turned into heresy production factories for Bai six."

Bai Liu looks over at Tang Erda, whose face is dark as hell.

"That is, as long as there is a worldline in Bai six's hands that continues to function to produce heretics, then he can continuously use the system backend to extract heretics from that worldline and then distribute them as rewards to players who have logged into other

worldlines, using players from these new worldlines in the game to smuggle heretics to new worldlines. "

"As long as the game exists, there are players who will enter the game out of desire, and the Heresy Authority will never be able to house all the heretics he smuggles over."

"Even if you kill the derivative Bai six in every worldline, the largest backstage ship of the smuggling system outside this worldline still exists, you cannot stop the spread of the heresy, before He said that the game is over when you kill the derivative Bai six, it is not, Bai six has misled you."

"He has deceived you, and derivatives are not the key at all."

" Bai six has been cheating from the start."

Bai Liu was quiet for a moment: "As long as the game exists, as long as this system exists in the background, you can never win against Him."

"Then how about blowing up the backend of the system?" Mu Sicheng, who had been leaning against his chest, spoke up coldly as he looked straight at Bai Liu, "Blow it up, the system doesn't exist, the game doesn't exist, and it's all over."

Bai Liu icily vetoed, "No."

"This system backend, it should never be blown up."

Mu Sicheng tsked irritably, "Didn't they say that with this system in the background, you can never win Bai six? Why can't it blow up?!"

Liu Jiayi and Muke looked over at the same time, and Tang Erda paused, his gaze condensed, "The backstage of this system is full of heretics, best destroyed."

Bai Liu shifted his gaze away from the men, his breathing unsteady for a moment, "..... show me your assigned status in this game."

Mu Sicheng was still angry because Bai Liu had been mean to him earlier, so he didn't say anything, but now when Bai Liu asked, he replied, "I showed you."

"I'm guard number 0004 here."

Liu Jiayi extends the panel, "I am the guard of 0601."

"I'm the guard of 0005." Muke raised his hand in gesture.

"I am a guardian of 0002." Tang Erda looked to Bai Liu, "Our task as guardsmen is to escort you this you get control of the ship and become the captain of this ship."

Bai Liu looked at the panel displayed in front of him with misty eyes, trying his best to control his emotional reactions, his breathing and heart rate, not to show any hints in front of these people.

[System Alert: Player Tang Erda Muke Liu Jiayi has been stripped of his player status after jumping out of the world line].

[Re-verify identity.]

[Real Identity: 0658 Worldline Transport Product, Humanoid Heretic, No. 0601/0005/002]

[Rose Hunter Bloodline Witch Assassin]

[System ship backstage soul storage location - Level 1.]

[System warm reminder: Only real players can see the real, the world you see with monsters is not the same.]

Bai Liu looked around slowly and opened his mouth as if to say something - because in the backend of this system's ruling, players are also heretics, which is why your skill status is called Monster Book.

You are also monsters.

Your soul ..... is also bound to this system backend.

So the system backend, not to be blown up.

"Let's follow the flow of the game first." Bai Liu gripped the cup of warm tea as he lowered his eyes to the ripples in the water, his voice inaudible, "First win the game and get out of here."

..... hands stop shaking.

Any more shaking is going to be seen.

"Okay." Muke followed Bai Liu's words, he looked at Bai Liu's bloodless lips and couldn't hide the worry on his face, " Bai Liu, are you seasick?"

"A bit." Bai Liu choked out a cough with a clenched fist and continued to look at the hover map as calmly as ever, "We know all about the two layers of construction diagrams underneath this ship, the second layer, from the description, seems to be full of documentation for the various world lines, recording specific information on archive points and world lines."

Mu Sicheng snickered, " Bai six, this idiot has time on his hands, remembering a whole layer."

"The archival points of the world line should of course be well documented; this is very important documentation." Tang Erda looked towards the second level, his brow had been furrowed ever since he saw the image, "I've seen it before in one of the top secret files when I inherited the [Prophet] authority, the Heretic Processing Bureau also has an archive point."

"It's an archive point for recording [prophet] parties."

Tang Erda looks to Bai Liu: "You've seen that archive site."

"- Heresy 0001, named [Future]."

"It's said that's where [the prophet] recorded the archive."

"But I've never seen it." Tang Erda's eyes were dark, "because even the prophet who recorded these [archive points] said it was [the future] that would be maddening after looking straight at it."

"[The prophet] said that hunters are absolutely forbidden to watch [the future]."

Bai Liu asks, "Why?"

Tang Erda paused, "Because something terrible will happen."

"This, right here, is the ship's control room?" Liu Jiayi fiddled with the console, zoomed in on the picture and pointed to the first top compartment on the uppermost level of the ship and said, "At the top of the ship, labeled level 0, there is a large door underneath, this is where we should be looking for the key to open this door and enter to take control of the ship."

"But this ship is a straight ladder design, somewhat similar to the Heretic Authority." Tang Erda said as she stared at the ship's construction diagram, "To get to Level 0, you have to go through Level

2 and Level 1 first."

Bai Liu looked at the ship's construction diagram, and after a moment's silence, put down his cup of tea, propped himself up on the table and rose, "Let's go, then."

"Go to level 0."

Muke glanced at the teacup, which still had ripples in it that hadn't dissipated.

He pursed his lips and looked up at Bai Liu's departing back.

Second level of the airship, archive point and worldline information reserve room.

Cen Buming realised where this was almost instantly after logging into the system ship, he sneered at the misleading information given on the system panel and quickly ordered, "Head for the upper levels of the ship!"

He'd like to see what this bitch Bai Six has recorded.

Cen Buming gritted his teeth as Lu Yizhan's voice, calm as if he had already seen everything, came to his ears - [Stop interfering, Sifu].

[The future may not be what you think it is, but all in all, not a BAD ending].

What does he know about this guy who repeatedly turns his back on his original intentions?

The prophet, who only dares to spy on God's script piecemeal through his own skills, gets a bunch of bullshit poetic prophecies that he can't even read, and has a powerful heresy like [Future] in his hand, which can clearly see fragments of [Future], but is actually used as an archive point by Lu Yizhan, who hasn't seen the future of the world even once?

Cen Buming wanted to watch it, but Lu Yizhan seriously stopped him from doing so, so Cen Buming beat Lu Yizhan up, but Lu Yizhan still let him beat him up, but firmly refused to let him watch [The Future].

Cen Buming has since learned to ignore this heresy.

Lu Yizhan and Cen Buming listened to all the good and bad endings as jokes, he didn't believe a word of it because he knew Lu Yizhan .....

The only future ever seen -

-is his own future.

[Master, I am actually quite weak as a person, and I dare not look at the future of anyone who has had dealings with me].

[I don't want to be a prophet at all. I fear that everyone's future is not what I expect it to be.]

[I'm afraid I won't be able to save anyone].

Lu Yizhan stood beside the drill ground, the wind blowing back and forth the uniform he wore as captain of the first detachment, Lu Yizhan turned back to him with arched eyebrows and a smile.

[But I've seen my own future.]

[That's a good future.]

Cen Buming, moving towards the uppermost level, said coolly, "Go further up the level."

"Don't look out of the window, it lowers your spirit level."

Cen Buming walks past the huge transparent window that glows with luminescence, his head bowed, and his desperate figure stretched long and wide across the floor.

--long enough to be practised in line with the shadows cast into the cabin by 685 world lines.

Outside the windows of the ship one can see the flow of stars, the silvery-blue dust of debris surrounding each earth, slowly flowing through space, as if jellyfish in the deep sea were surrounding their falling prey, shimmering out in a halo of light that is obviously very beautiful, like the artificially created beauty of an aquarium, but just gives one the feeling of drowning, after entering the deep sea.

It always makes one feel as if one cannot find a place for one's existence in this vast and infinite universe, only to keep sinking and sinking, unable to find where the ship lands.

Like the eternal night of the pole, the mountain village forever hidden in the gloom, the darkness before the fireworks of the annual festival -

--Sunken Sea of Mermaid Wishes.

"Won't we look two levels down, Captain?" A team member asked in a soft voice.

"Don't bother looking." Cen Buming strides forward without looking back, the Heretic Authority's team badge on his shoulder glowing shimmering in the silver-blue light, his tone calm and cold, "It's all just heretics and monsters who only use destruction."

Cen Buming walked up to the lift leading to the ground floor, he paused for a moment, reached out and pulled the straight stairs open and stepped in.

"In this game, it's just a matter of moving forward."

"Ka-da-"

"About to enter the first level."

The lift runs upwards and then stops. The moment it opens, Cen Buming, who is walking ahead of everyone, looks up and his expression and movements stop for a second or two when he sees the structure on the ground floor.

--The dark corridors, the faint smell of seawater, the labelled heretical shelters on either side, the heretics hiding in the shadows and stirring to come closer.

It's exactly the same as the bottom of the heresy handling bureau.

--the so-called [humanoid heresy] shelter.

Cen Buming paused for a few seconds, then lifted his steps and stepped out of the lift, "Let's go."

The other three members of the two teams were wary of the environment, they had never been down to the bottom of the Heretic Authority, but this was at first glance a common configuration for the Heretic Authority to house heretics and had turned their heads to Cen Buming with a serious tone, "Captain, this is the same environment as ..... we work in the same."

Daniel followed him curiously, surveying the first level of the ship with amusement, "So this is where you weird one-eyed dragon works?"

"Don't talk about the captain like that!" A member of the team got

angry and tried to argue with Daniel.

Daniel's eyes narrowed and he was about to draw his gun when Cen Buming barely missed a beat as he flipped his hand over and pinned Daniel's grip behind his back, sending him to the ground.

Cen Buming's eyes looked down, his right foot on Daniel's struggling shoulder, that hawk-like right eye held a warning and a murderous intent, his voice low and hoarse: "You can call me whatever you want."

"One-eyed dragon, one-eyed blind, whatever."

"But don't let me see you pull a gun on one of my team members."

"Otherwise-"

"You'll just kill me?" Daniel answered with a playful smile, unconcerned.

"I'll kill Bai Liu." Cen Buming said indifferently, "one second before you were about to meet him, engage him, and have him recognize your abilities."

Daniel's expression darkened completely as he stared sorrowfully at Cen Buming, taking a few moments before putting the gun away in his hand, Cen Buming withdrew his foot as Daniel patted the dust off himself, tsked in annoyance, and asked in boredom, "... . why are you here?"

"Can't I just go down and kill the crew and show the Godfather what I can do?"

"Not until you find the key and master the secret to getting through this game." Cen Buming looked cold, "Even if you put a gun to your godfather's head, he wouldn't give you a second glance."

"He's not as attached to the players as you might think, and Bai Liu cares more about winning and losing games than he does about the inconsequential circus members."

--after all, it's in other world lines that can casually disintegrate their crew with a soul-crushing gun just for being badly used brutes.

"..... That's true." Daniel rubbed his chin and smiled somewhat pleasantly, "Not important exactly."

"I don't want the godfather to have something important, it will just get in the way of him moving forward."

"..... those crew members, don't shoot them until it's necessary." Cen Buming stepped forward and opened his mouth abruptly, "That's an order from the tactician."

Daniel looked curiously at the side of Cen Buming's face, whose expression was unmoving, and raised an eyebrow, "I thought you didn't like them?"

Cen Buming didn't say anything, he looked away somewhat unpleasantly, examining Daniel with one eye half closed, his tone low, "-and that doesn't mean I want you to kill them with a soul-crushing gun."

"And only when it's not necessary."

Cen Buming's tone returned to coldness as he clenched his right hand with the Death Ring: "I will kill them myself if I have to."

The silver ring is cold and cutting, and the grip feels like holding on to a razor blade with an uncomfortable sharpness.

..... He clearly logged into this game with Bai Liu with an execution mentality.

But for some reason, the sight of this corridor reminded Cen Buming of that night when Bai Liu was caught by Tang Erda in the Heretic's Bureau and Lu Yizhan used his captain's pass to access the last floor to stop Bai Liu, who was about to release all the heretics.

At that time, Cen Buming was notified that someone had used the prophet's authority and rushed back.

He also rushed to the last floor, then watched indifferently as Lu Yizhan raised his hands on the screen and said, as he stepped in front of Bai Liu, who had raised his gun, that if you want to do this, you should kill me first.

At that moment, Cen Buming was even expecting Bai Liu to shoot Lu Yizhan, he was standing by and could have saved Lu Yizhan's life in any case, and at that moment, Bai Liu had also crossed the line. Yizhan had no reason to stop him.

He no longer had to get caught up in the logical paradox of [the other

person must have done something bad in order to be executed] with Lu Yizhan, a stupid, one-track minded person.

The game ended at that moment too.

But Lu Yizhan just waited, just held his hands up and waited for Bai Liu to put down his gun, and from Cen Buming's perspective he could see the light shining in Lu Yizhan's eyes, his hands were shaking, his voice was shaking, but Lu Yizhan was still smiling: "I told you, until you really do something wrong, I will never will never pull a gun on you."

"-in that case, if you're really going to do something bad, then please kill this incompetent me before you really do it."

Cen Buming knew of Lu Yizhan's hesitant attitude towards Bai Liu, but at that moment, Cen Buming saw, apart from Lu Yizhan's shaking hands, that

-- Bai Liu's hand, gripping the gun, was also shaking.

The shaking is so slight, so subtle, that Lu Yizhan, a fool standing at close range, wouldn't necessarily notice it, because Bai Liu's expression is so calm.

But Cen Buming found out, he even found out, that this shrewd and vigilant, cold-blooded monster who double-checks the loyalty of even his own soul-possessing team members, and even kills them at the slightest sign of betrayal, even when Bai Liu didn't notice that there was another one hiding in the shadows of the place because his attention was all on Lu Yizhan.

This is incredible.

--It's like the first time Cen Buming met eighteen-year-old Bai Liu, bruised and wet, crawling out of a wishing pond on the school hill and rescuing a classmate who had ill will towards him.

By that time Bai Liu was unconscious, but he had a death grip on that classmate's hand and didn't let him drown - and it was the hand of a classmate he harboured murderous intentions for.

This is the first time that Cen Buming has shown mercy to a derivative of [Bai six].

Cen Buming hides in silence in the shade and watches as Lu Yizhan

steps forward to pick up Bai Liu, whose mind is already blurred, his hands rolled helplessly off Lu Yizhan's shoulders, looking only half as wide as Lu Yizhan, weak as a small animal without a nest and without any shelter.

At that time, if Cen Buming had wanted to kill Bai Liu, he might not have needed a gun, he would have simply pushed him off Lu Yizhan's shoulders and Bai Liu would have fallen to the ground, curled up in a ball, and frozen to death on the hill behind the school.

Lu Yizhan took Bai Liu to the entrance of the hill and then hurried back to deal with the aftermath of the heresy in the wishing pond, bowing with his hands together and asking Cen Buming: "Please look after Bai Liu for me and see that he gets back to the dormitory properly."

Cen Buming, with his hands on his chest and his face full of indifference, rightly tried to refuse, but Lu Yizhan looked up at him with a straight face: " Bai Liu, as the first person you want to execute, don't you want to observe more and get to know him better?"

"I don't really want to know more about the prisoner I'm putting to death." Cen Buming turned his head coldly.

"At least until the execution." Lu Yizhan, however, was very insistent, "Let's see if he's really the one you want to execute, right?"

Cen Buming was quiet for a long time as he was forcibly pushed up the hill by Lu Yizhan, following a deflated Bai Liu as he watched him return to his dormitory.

Eighteen year old high school student, thin shirt, wobbling twice with one step, choking and coughing every now and then, needing to rest against the wall to continue walking .....

Cen Buming withdrew his eyes in annoyance, a strange and violent emotion rushing through his heart.

For a moment, he even wanted to rush down and ask Bai Liu, why did you stop when you were clearly trying to kill that stupid fat guy who was bullying you?

Why do you have to get yourself into such a mess!

Why do you want me to see this side of you?

..... Such a Bai Liu is so much like a human being that he has no way of treating him as a heretic.

Cen Buming couldn't kill this guy who shivered in the lake from the cold, who buried himself in Lu Yizhan's shoulder and wept silently, who pulled his bullying classmates back from death and whose hands shook when he drew his gun on his friends, as brutally as he could kill a monster.

--There was no way he could kill this living, breathing, emotional, tearful, painful Bai Liu.

But do ..... people really change?

So many world lines, and in each one, so many heretics who have done the same wrong, who have harmed countless people, who have died again and again under his gun, showing their ugly faces because they were sunk in lust -

--Not to mention the aggregate of desire itself, a derivative of the evil god Bai six.

..... Just by changing the name and having some meagre emotional connection, do people really change that much, even against the original purpose of their birth?

Cen Buming had no way of believing that he couldn't be like that fool Lu Yizhan, over six hundred world lines later, and still have the ability to trust a monster; he could only be alert, kill, and choke out any danger in the cradle -

--This is the reason why the hunter was born in the first place.

The Drowning Man from the Future

"Confirm the hatch to level 0 first." Cen Buming gathered his thoughts and ordered calmly, "Look for the type of key to the hatch and start your search on level 1, being careful not to run into any of the heretics here, and try not to engage in combat until you have encountered the enemy and expended yourself."

"Yes, Captain!"

The team scattered, even Daniel, who was less than honest, was warned by Cen Buming and started actively searching for the key.

"Captain, judging by the hatch, the key should be a reverse cross about 10cm long, with a circuit." The team member who was confirming the hatch turned his head sideways, "After touching the hatch to level 0, a text alert popped up, which should have indicated the location of the key."

Cen Buming looks up: "What's the tip?"

"[The drowning man from the future]." The player said, "-and one more sentence."

"[Judge Against God, Final Judgement Result]."

The pupil of Cen Buming's right eye constricts very slightly and he turns sideways, looking towards the end of the cloister - where it is stored, is Heretic 0001.

--The heretic named [Future].

..... from [future] drowning .....

Cen Buming's heart pounded wildly for no apparent reason, and he started towards the end of the corridor, the light fading a little in his clear yellow right eye, his face an almost uncanny grimace.

Lu Yizhan's soft, calm voice rang in his ears.

[I want to create a special place with the last layer of the Heretical Authority].

[I want to use this layer to place a particular kind of heresy].

[--Humanoid Heresy.]

The closer he got to the last heretic, the more chaotic Cen Buming's breathing became, his mind was going blank, and all that remained was Lu Yizhan's laughing voice.

[The last layer of the Heretic Authority are all humanoid heretics, they are either spiritually descended humans or heretics with humans as their carriers, they are not ordinary objects or monsters but have become this way under the manipulation of the evil gods, and it is not fair to judge them in the conventional way].

[They're people, not monsters.]

[..... I was wondering if I could approach them in a more appropriate way, by exploring their genesis to avoid them becoming heretics again in the next world line].

With a shimmering light in his eyes, Cen Buming took a deep breath and recalled how he had answered Lu Yizhan: "I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

He sneered: [Lu Yizhan, are you always so whimsical? Who will take the risk of exploring the causes of heresies, and who will bear the risk of these unstable heresies in the process?]

Lu Yizhan thought hard and replied: [..... What do you think about the position (of guardian)?]

[Assign to heretics (guardians) and let the guardians take the risk.]

[Even if you set it up, who would want to be in a thankless position like (guardian)?] Cen Buming's expression grew more and more sarcastic, [I think you're really stupid and crazy, not only do the bad guys want to save, but now even the heretics want to save.]

[The Heresy Authority has enough work now, heretics are popping up all the time, every heretic in the house needs a team member, you set up the position [of guardian], who do you have doing it?]

[And heretics are people?]

[Even if humanoid heretics do start out with a human side, how do you prove that they can always maintain human consciousness, feelings?]

Cen Buming looked grim: [Even behind Captain Yu's eye-tunnel food, she kept attacking her teammates, devouring the eyeballs of the ones she once least wanted to hurt, how can you be sure that these heretics

really possess human characteristics all the time?]

[A humanoid heretic is still a heretic after all.]

[They will all eventually become complete monsters.]

Cen Buming remembers that moment when Lu Yizhan was silent for a long, long time, then lowered his head and said in a very soft, yet insistent voice: [..... I'm sure heretics can keep human feelings all the time].

[What did you use to determine that?] Cen Buming sneers, [with your naive fantasies?]

[The Bureau of Heresy Processing is a place of evidence, and if you can prove to me that there really are heretics who can remain human consciousness without hurting people, I will agree to your whimsical proposal].

Lu Yizhan looked up at Cen Buming for a long, long time and opened his mouth as if to say something, but in the end not a word came out, just a scratch of his head and a light smile.

[..... Well, I can't prove it.]

[You are right, the proposal is indeed whimsical, no one would want to be a guardian].

[I'll be the guardian of all those heretics, then].

[You!] Cen Buming is furious, [Lu Yizhan, I really don't understand what you're thinking sometimes!]

[Are you a spy sent by the heretics? Why do you have to be on the side of the heretics? Why are you so sympathetic to these heretics?]

Cen Buming's icy sneer: [I sometimes really suspect that you are a heretic, Lu Yizhan.]

Lu Yizhan smiled with a curved eyebrow, he didn't retort: [Probably.]

Cen Buming walked one step at a time to the 0001 heretic at the end of the cloister, he raised his head, reached out his hand and touched the metal sealed room, at once a warm luminescence spread out and the metal sealed door opened and the light fell on Cen Buming's trance-like face.

A pillar made of transparent material was filled with a silvery-blue, seawater-like liquid, and in the midst of it was suspended a sleeping soul, who floated quietly as if drowning.

He is wearing the uniform of the first detachment, his smiling eyes are closed, there are very slight bubbles around his mouth and nose, his expression is relaxed and serene, and on his chest hangs a reverse cross pendant, about the size of the key to the hatch on level 0.

Cen Buming's expression went completely blank as he looked at the file of instructions on the electronic screen that popped up next to this pillar and floated in the air.

[Heresy 0001 name: Future].

[Category: Humanoid Heresy]

[Carrier proper: the spirit of Lu Yizhan, the prophet of the generation].

[..... Lu Yizhan, the prophet of the generation, was spiritually descended in world line 658 and transformed into a heretic, transported to all world lines through the system backend, and imprisoned as heretic 0001 in the deepest part of the Heretic Authority .....]

[A harmless humanoid heretic with self-awareness that has been attempting to let others know what will happen (in the future) by showing an unfortunate future to everyone who has watched it, trying to circumvent the future by doing so, but after inadvertently causing people to go insane, has adopted a self-imposed closure and has begun to discreetly show the future... ...]

[Conceptual Being, no entity .....]

[The process of creation: Because in the game of the evil gods, the prophet has to pay a painful price for each world line equal to the opening of the world line, eventually the evil gods chose to collect the pain of a generation of prophets in this way].

[He transformed the prophet into the (future) itself, a humanoid heretic that can only exist as a concept, that has emotions and consciousness, that does not want to harm anyone, that wants to save all mankind, that comes from the final world line and knows the end of all world lines, so it will do everything it can to reveal the future to the world, so that the world can avoid that future].

[But man himself fears (the future) and will fall into madness after glimpsing (it).]

[All it does is struggle feebly, but even knowing the end, the future incarnated by the prophet will never cease to struggle, and it will remain so painfully present because it has hope in its heart, imprisoned as a heretic in the deepest recesses of the earth as the unanticipated future itself].

[At the end of the game in World 658, whether the Prophet wins or loses, as part of the deal he made with the Evil God at the beginning, the soul of Lu Yizhan, the Prophet, will be recycled to the system background.]

[- And his soul, which will exist forever as a carrier (of the future).]

Cen Buming stopped in front of this illustrative file for a long, long time, without saying a word, then very slowly bowed and hammered the ground hard, his head bowed, his hair hanging down to make out his expression, droplets of water sliding down his jaw.

[I have seen my future].

Lu Yizhan smiled at him and said: [That's a good future].

Where is this considered good enough!!!

Cen Buming gritted his teeth, his eyes red, his mind and chest on the verge of burning with emotion as he struggled to keep himself from pulling out and beating the sleeping spirit of Lu Yizhan, who was locked in a pillar.

..... No wonder the guy was so anxious to find Bai Liu from the deer hunters to be the next generation of prophet successors, no wonder the guy kept saying he was coming to the end of the line, no wonder .....

Lu Yizhan, on the verge of not being able to hold out and becoming a heretic, had to pass on what was still in his hands before he became a heretic.

..... Why would he ignore it?

The connection between [Prophet] and [Future], why had he overlooked it? It was clearly right in front of him, but he had never thought of this layer.

For how could Lu Yizhan, who was always so silly and persistent, have descended mentally to the point of becoming a heretic?

How can it be a heresy!

He can mentally descend, Tang Erda can mentally descend, and everyone is mentally descending little by little over 658 long and desperate world lines into a humanoid heretic on the verge of losing control.

Of course he would.

Lu Yizhan is the closest to the evil god [prophet], he is the one who delivers the most pain ……

Cen Buming closed his eyes as he took a deep breath and clenched his hands.

…… first took in the cult of [Future] in the 0006 world line, when Lu Yizhan had seen his own [Future].

In other words, this guy knew from the sixth world line what would follow - he would keep losing, losing 657 world lines, losing until he became a heretic.

Lu Yizhan knows everything.

He knew he was going to lose the game from the moment he started it.

But Lu Yizhan didn't say anything, he pretended he didn't see that kind of future, turned to him with a smile and said it was a good future, and then reluctantly, doggedly, struggled alone with a known failure [future] until now, accompanying everyone to the last world line.

After the end of the last world line, he will become [future] forever.

What are you thinking about Lu Yizhan ?

What kind of future did you see when you entrusted everything to Bai Liu?

What exactly do you see in the future in the last line of ……?

Propping himself up on his knees, Cen Buming slowly stood up and looked up at Lu Yizhan's soul, suspended in the liquid, emitting a faint

luminescence.

--Show me the future as you see it for once.

Lu Yizhan .

An icy mechanical tone came from the system ship: [Warning! Warning!]

[Touching heresy 0001, about to be contaminated!]

A snowy white light blossomed before Cen Buming's eyes as he gripped the key to the reverse cross and closed his eyes.

Second level of the system ship.

Hearing the system beep from the floorboards, the circus party who had walked to this floor and were rummaging for information stopped moving and looked up.

" Cen Buming they're up there." Tang Erda gazed solemnly at Bai Liu, "Just as you guessed, what do we do next?"

"They didn't come down and stayed on the first level, so that basically means the odds are that the key is on the first level." Bai Liu analyses calmly, and as he sees Mu Sicheng preparing to move up, he raises his hand and presses down in a gesture of stopping

"But we're in no hurry to go up there for now."

"Wait a little longer."

Mu Sicheng stared at Bai Liu, his tone a little impetuous: "What else do you want to wait for?"

Bai Liu gave a pause: "..... waiting for the right moment."

Now even Tang Erda sensed that something was wrong with Bai Liu and he looked over, frowning and asking; "The right time, what is it?"

Bai Liu's mind works faster than theirs, especially in scenarios like this, where he can figure out the key points of the game but can't explain them to his teammates in a few words, so Bai Liu will often order things to be done first and come back to explain them later.

But never has it been so vague ..... at first glance when it comes to stalling for time.

Bai Liu is a tactician of extreme tactics, he never avoids his opponent's attacks and prefers to win first, with a surprise attack, without giving his opponent a chance to counterattack.

But in this copy ..... Bai Liu has been circumventing the encounter between the two sides.

Tang Erda looked at Bai Liu, hesitant to ask, but in the end he did not.

-- Bai Liu, what are you afraid of?

You've never ..... been afraid of the game.

Bai Liu looked up, his unperturbed look again, "The right time is after the Joker and Cen Buming have spent their first skills."

"After that, we were able to have fifteen minutes of safe attack time."

"But how are we going to drain their skills if we don't even go up there?" Muke looked up at Bai Liu and asked softly, "Are you going to use roaming as bait to hang the main two skills first?"

"If that's the tactic, I can go up there and try it."

-- Muke's assassin skills are roaming and controlling, Bai Liu is usually used for raid reactions, and he held up Georgia and Armand's two main opponents in the last round.

"No." Bai Liu said calmly, "I'll go up there and wear out my skills."

Everyone frowned at this statement.

"You're the tactician, the heart of this team, you can't roam for shit!" Mu Sicheng's tone was so strong that he stared at Bai Liu with a dark look in his eyes, "Muke and I can do this job, you can't!"

Liu Jiayi also shook his head disapprovingly, "I can follow up with the match and open a poison swamp to control the field so they can easily roam, but you, as the tactician, are not allowed to take the lead in roaming."

"Even if it does come to your turn to strike, it will be if we all fail."

"It's too risky for you to go straight up there."

Bai Liu wrapped his arms around his chest, his index finger tapping his elbow once or twice, and lowered his eyes without speaking.

Sure enough it turned out to be what it is now.

They did not yet know that there was some other half of their own souls on this system backstage, nor did they know that they had been stored as heretics in this ship, which was not supposed to be their copy of this round, but rather that they were passing to some copy of another world line and jumping to this staging platform in the system backstage, when they were intercepted by Bai six, allowing them to forcefully land on They were intercepted by Bai six when they passed to another worldline and jumped to this transit platform in the system backend, forcing them to land on this ship and using it as their copy for this round.

Bai six, the psychopath, had a purpose, and since he had intervened to land them and Cen Buming on this ship, he must have had something in store for him.

And this backhand is mostly related to Joker's skill; Bai six himself has unlimited access to the Soul Crusher, and if Bai six has also landed on this ship, this translates to having two Soul Crusher guns on this ship, one of which has not yet CD'd.

Frankly speaking, Bai Liu is not sure.

So he was keen to get the Wandering Circus out of the way, he would rather be on his own against Bai six.

But therein lies the problem.

This is the backend of the system and Bai Liu has determined that the option to exit the game in the system panel is useless. With no automatic exit from the game, Bai Liu has only one option to get these players out of the game - to actively clear them out.

However, ... Bai Liu is not sure whether the conceptual prop created by the system, the Death Free Gold Medal, is in effect here in the system backend.

This is essentially a place outside the game where props are produced, it is not known if the props have an effect, and if they don't, Bai Liu is killing them by clearing them out.

So that means Bai Liu has only one option - to get control of the ship, as the system requires, and then fly this ship down to the 658 world line and bring them back inside the game lobby or to the ground.

But in the process of getting control of the ship .....

Bai Liu can't guarantee that those around him aren't acting, just acting, too many elements of danger on this whole ship, Bai six could land at any moment with the other half of their souls hidden inside the ship, the Joker's soul-crushing gun and Cen Buming who has obvious murderous intent towards him .....

He was in fear that there was no way to safely take everyone off the ship.

[Feelings that make people vulnerable.]

Bai Liu's pupils flinched as he heard Bai six's flippant laughter in his ears, cascading like waves of water.

[You were already strong enough to fight me, but just because you brought these people with you, you have become so weak].

[They're just a liability to you.]

[Throw away the tiredness so you can become strong enough].

[You can kill me.]

Bai Liu turned his head, Bai Liu's voice disappeared, the universe outside the window was like water ripples, spreading out like ripples, as if someone's laughing voice had fallen like a stone, smashing out an echo, Bai Liu looked at the vast silver-blue universe with no boundaries, Bai Liu's dark pupils were devoid of any emotion, he showed a rare empty expression.

..... this space looks .....

..... seems to have swallowed Xie Ta's water ten years ago.

Who is this water ..... going to drown today?

Bai Liu's heart palpitated for a moment, but he quickly gathered all his expression and turned his head, his eyes half-closed, his tone flat: "On the field of play, it is the consensus of all to take orders from the tactician."

"My tactic is that I go up alone first and after I drain the opponent's double skills, you guys come back up."

Muke pursed his lips, Liu Jiayi blushed strangely, Mu Sicheng

hammered the fence in anger, trying to say something but holding back under Bai Liu's cold warning glare, and even Tang Erda, the main attacker who never disobeyed Bai Liu on the field, frowned and objected: "One person? "

"That doesn't make sense, Bai Liu, even if you go up there to draw skills, at least bring Mu Sicheng and Muke with you, so it's easier to play together."

"No need." Bai Liu turned, his back unmistakably calm, the light coming in through the window gilding him with a bright, silvery-blue glow, "I'll be fine up there alone."

Advertisement

"I'll draw the skills and you guys can come back up."

[Bai Liu, you're hesitating.]

Bai Liu's laughing voice, which was far away and close, spread around Bai Liu again, murmuring softly as if in a nightmare -

-- [You don't even dare to look back at their expressions].

[Is it so fearful that they will drown on this ship?]

Bai Liu's walk towards the lift paused for a moment as Bai six's voice in the air continued with a laugh.

[Why the fear?]

[Haven't we already seen this about their future?]

[I have to be honest with you, that future was not something I showed you on purpose, it was a future that another well-meaning guy, fighting tooth and nail, sacrificing himself to show you, wanted you to avoid.]

[- but still you have come here, guided by fate and me, to this future].

[At this moment, you and they are both drowning people from the future].

"I won't let a future like that come." Bai Liu stepped into the lift and he heard his voice reply very softly, "I won't let anyone drown in front of me again."

"-even in the future, no."

Bai six retorted with a smile, [But you are only a human being].

[The future destined by God, but only the overthrow of God.]

[If you want to overturn the future you've seen, there's only one way to do it - become the next generation of evil gods].

Bai Liu didn't answer, he lowered his head and drew his long whip from his back, clenching the end of it and exhaling slowly as the door to the straight staircase slowly closed behind him.

He didn't turn to look into the eyes of those staring behind him until that last moment, and if he had to do it all over again, Bai Liu felt he should have turned and looked.

--After all, that was the last time I saw them in their entirety.

The Drowning Man from the Future

The doors open in both directions and Bai Liu slowly looks up to see Cen Buming, his eyes red and his hands clenched, standing outside looking at him.

The hatred, disbelief, deception, and murderous intent in the man's eyes finally boiled over into the worst he had ever imagined.

"So that's the future the idiot saw ....." Cen Buming's face twisted into a grimace, the sneer he grunted out of his throat was like blood, he staggered, completely out of order, but extremely fast. In the blink of an eye he was in front of Bai Liu, grabbing him by the collar and pinning him to the ground, punching him in a fury, "How can you ....."

Cen Buming's voice and fists trembled, tears shifted in his eyes and his voice broke and rasped, "How can ....."

"In the [future], kill Lu Yizhan with your own hands!

"You already knew that didn't you! You've seen [the future] before! You must have known the future, Heretic 0001, was Lu Yizhan himself!!!"

"He raised you with his own hands, stood in your way again and again, did everything he could for you, forewarned you of everything, and you killed him!!!"

"Do you have a heart, Bai Liu!!!"

Bai Liu's whip stalled, his pupils shrinking to a tiny dot, all the incongruous pieces of his memory instantly connecting, his whole body feeling like it had fallen into icy water, entering a dazed and unreal state.

On the day of ....., yes, he had seen [Future], he had seen a small TV in the heresy [Future] showing footage of the future and a man who was recording archive points, wearing the uniform of the captain of the first detachment, and he took it for granted at the time that Lu Yizhan existed in this heresy as a prophet and was simply using He took it for granted that Lu Yizhan existed in the heresy as a prophet and was simply using the heretic's savings place to record the archive points.

He thought the heretic was whichever little TV was showing [the future].

He really didn't expect ..... didn't expect .....

Bai six chuckled softly in Bai Liu's ear, who was in a dazed state - [It's normal that you didn't think of it.]

[Because you didn't expect that there would be human beings in this world who could be self-aware after being used as a carrier for heretics, did you? No one would have thought that the little TV in the future is not a heretic, but that Lu Yizhan is the one who is moving around.]

[That's its soul trapped in the future.]

[Even I didn't expect Lu Yizhan to be trying to save you after what he had become.]

[It thus survives consciousness, and it believes that you can change the end of the world line.]

[-even if it had already seen the future of all world lines.]

Bai Liu pulls out his whip and shakes Cen Buming off his back. He stands up on the ground, his chest heaving violently, and when he looks up at Cen Buming, the silvery-blue glow of space through the see-through window is reflected in the pupils of his dark eyes.

The light spreads out on the surface of his eyes as dots of light that float upwards, like bubbles exhaled by a drowning man in the deep sea.

658 lines of the world turn outside the window and the light in Bai Liu's pupils dissipates, like the last bubbles exhaled by a drowning man dissipating into the deep sea.

..... is still able to maintain consciousness as a heretical carrier.

He should have thought of it, he knew it, he had seen it.

The Lu Yizhan who looked up from the last prison in the Rose Factory, covered in faded petals, smiled and said it had been a long time, the Lu Yizhan who sat on the sofa, wiped his eyes and choked up and said 50 per cent...

--the one who, as if losing all strength, stood relieved before him and

said in a daze.

[I'm getting old.]

[Behind me, there is no longer a living soul].

Lu Yizhan of ..... .

He should have thought of it, why didn't he?

At this moment, even Bai Liu himself is a little confused, as there are so many pieces of facts that have been put together that only one more layer of reasoning is needed to reach a conclusion.

Why didn't you think of it?

"You have no feelings!!!" Cen Buming roared hoarsely as he gripped the Ring of Death and flung a long black blade in the silver light of the Ring, slashing at Bai Liu's head, "You did that on purpose!"

"You lied to Lu Yizhan! You knew everything, you took advantage of his trust in you and made him delegate his authority [to the prophet] to you!"

"And then you kill him again! And then you win the game!"

"Is playing with mortals and scavenging pain so much fun for a monster like you?!"

Cen Buming stabbed Bai Liu in the shoulder, pinning him to the wall of the lift, and hissed in anger, "You set this up from the beginning!"

Bai Liu looked up slowly as he gripped Cen Buming's knife, clenched it and pulled it outwards, his tone broken and hoarse: "No ....."

Blood ran down the palm of his hand where he held the blade.

"I didn't lie to Lu Yizhan ....."

"I just ..... didn't know heretic 0001 was him."

"You just what?!" Cen Buming withdrew his knife and slashed down, drawing it and slashing again, brutally jamming the blade into Bai Liu's throat and pressing, "You saw Lu Yizhan in the future, how could you not know that?!"

Bai Liu blocked with his whip, the blade and the whip made a harsh

interlocking sound as the lift doors slowly closed and began to sink, Bai Liu reached his foot out and stepped on the lift door, his shoulder caught in the knife, blood stained his white shirt and slid down, staining a large area in moments.

..... can't get the lift to close down.

If they see him like this, they will definitely get involved and then the situation will be uncontrollable.

The knife in Cen Buming's hand got harder and harder, jamming into the bone in Bai Liu's shoulder, his voice had the coldness of fury at its height: "Answer me, Bai Liu --"

"Stop with this inferior excuse that I don't know about, I know how smart you are, there's no way you didn't push out that Heretic 0001 was Lu Yizhan--"

"- Did you offer to watch Heretic 0001 at that time just to irritate him and make him suffer more for your harvesting?!"

Bai Liu opened his mouth, he couldn't really answer.

For a moment, Bai Liu himself is dazed by Cen Buming's assertive questioning - is he really an emotionless monster, so he deliberately can't push it out, so Lu Yizhan can be tortured and everyone can lose the game?

But clearly, that's not what he thought.

Bai Liu's voice reappeared, soft and smiling: [It's really fun to see you in pain and confusion.]

[I have been watching you and can tell you the answer as to why you have not deduced-]

[- You actually had a premonition, but people have a fear of things they care about, like Lu Yizhan running from the future, and you're running from the fact that there's a Lu Yizhan in Heresy 0001].

[You are afraid, you don't want to, so you refuse to acknowledge that the heretic, that is Lu Yizhan himself].

[- It's like you always think you can change the future that God has ordained].

"It seems you can't answer that." Cen Buming coldly withdrew his long

knife as he flung his hand out, the Death Ring slipping from his ring and taking the form of a well, "And I have nothing to say to the sinner."

"Go into the well and repent for what little is left of your life."

[System Alert: Heretic 0009 Cen Buming uses Monster Book Skill - (Sinners Well) on player Bai Liu]

[This skill imprisons someone the Heretic himself deems guilty in a well full of monsters; if the imprisoned player does not emerge from the well before exiting the game, he dies in the well (this skill ignores the death-free token), with a cooldown of thirty minutes.]

The whole system ship began to turn at that moment, jolting so hard that the well of sinners that had taken shape on the landing veered to the left, just above the long whip that Bai Liu was holding in front of the lift doors, which closed in Bai Liu's constricted pupils and flew down amidst the vibrations of the system ship.

Bai Liu fell forward, he stepped over Cen Buming to block the door and stepped on the well of sin, which began to swallow him up, Bai Liu threw out his whip and grabbed the loop in the lift, pulling himself down, he looked up, a very faint light in the pupils of those dark eyes on his blood-stained face.

"I ..... might actually be a monster."

"But I have feelings."

Cen Buming looked at Bai Liu, who was unconscious and in tears, and his brain felt like it had been hammered by something, sobering him for a brief moment from the intensity of his emotions.

The Bai Liu in front of me, who is unconscious and in tears, is the same Bai Liu who was curled up on Lu Yizhan's shoulder six years ago, in tears of peace.

[Look at the person you are going to execute].

[He's really not a monster, he's a human being].

Cen Buming's heart clenches for a moment, and as his heart clenches so does the well of sin, to the point where it wraps around Bai Liu's feet and stops, going from the size of a lift shaft to the size of a fist.

[System Warning: Heretic Cen Buming has a shaken mind and is unable to treat player Bai Liu as a sinner and is imprisoned in the (Sinner's Well), the (Sinner's Well) skill will soon be disabled.]

"Really." Bai Liu's voice, which had been floating in Bai Liu's ears for some time, finally came to life, "I didn't think Mr. Hunter would let you go after all this."

"I didn't expect to go soft on you after all, Bai Liu."

A black-gloved hand poked out from the edge of the well, ripping open the narrowed opening like a book, and peeked through the silvery-blue glowing mouth, grabbing Bai Liu's foot and dragging him downwards.

"The game still goes on." Bai six in the well, smiling, says to Bai Liu, "Then I'll have to intervene artificially."

Bai six, holding out his hand, he smiled and said, "Your soul, just go into the well with me and play some other game."

"You're the only humanoid heretic soul I have left on this system ship, Bai Liu."

At the same time, the lift doors slowly opened and Mu Sicheng and Muke, who had been anxiously guarding the lift doors, looked back and saw Bai Liu slowly falling down.

Muke's expression froze.

"What did you do to Bai Liu--" Mu Sicheng's pupils narrowed, and his hands quickly turned into monkey paws as he shot into the lift with one foot on the fence, the tip of his paws going straight for Cen Buming's throat, his voice furious. "--did what?!"

Mu Sicheng pushed Cen Buming into the lift and attacked like a tiger, Muke caught Bai Liu and passed him to Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda behind him.

"Keep an eye on him." Muke took a deep breath, "Mu Sicheng and I will go up first, you wait for the next lift once we've cleared the area up there."

Liu Jiayi nods solemnly, and before Tang Erda can say anything, Muke follows Mu Sicheng into the lift.

The lift closed in the middle of a violent fight and Tang Erda wanted to follow, but Liu Jiayi stopped him.

The calm little girl was in a state of shock, her hands trembling as she tugged at the corner of Tang Erda's coat, her eyes grey: "Tang Erda ....."

" Bai Liu, out of breath."

Tang Erda quickly half-crouched down as he checked Bai Liu's signs, and his expression hardened, he was more experienced in the game than Liu Jiayi and had seen this happen a few times: "..... Bai Liu's soul has been pulled out of his body. "

"Bai Liu, who logged out of the game, will die if he can't get his soul back."

"Until then, we must never let anyone destroy Bai Liu's shell, otherwise the life value will clear and the shell will automatically diminish, and then even if the soul comes out, it won't be able to log out of the game without the shell as a carrier."

"..... What will happen then?" Liu Jiayi looked at Bai Liu, who was not even breathing, and tried hard to control herself from crying out.

" Bai Liu's soul ....." Tang Erda paused, "will then remain on this ship forever."

"Go up first, you can't let Bai Liu's body and soul get too far apart, otherwise the connection will be broken and the subsequent fusion will go wrong."

The lift slowly opened and Cen Buming practically wrestled the two wanderers who had attacked him like mad out of the lift, the violent commotion on this side of the lift attracting the Deer Hunter crew who had gone elsewhere earlier, including Daniel who had been casually looking for his keys.

Daniel's bored expression changed and his apple-green eyes lit up at the sight of Muke and Mu Sicheng, who had been thrown to the ground by Cen Buming.

"Ciao～" Daniel crouched down and waved his right hand at Muke and Mu Sicheng on the ground with a grin, "Finally, I see you-"

"-my godfather's useless trash subordinates."

The comical clown mask on Daniel's face was askew as he smiled a very excited smile and drew the green sniper rifle from his back, "I can finally kill you all and give my godfather less of a burden!"

"Don't shoot at them!" Cen Buming drew his hand and sliced away Daniel's sniper rifle aimed at Mu Sicheng, and he chided coldly, "Obey orders in the league!"

The gun in Daniel's hand was knocked out of his hand and he shrugged, boringly stowing it behind his waist, "OK, if you have to force it."

Mu Sicheng leapt up at that moment and slashed Cen Buming in the side of the neck with his claws forming a knife, his tone vicious: "Who wants your kindness!"

The lift opened again, and this time it was Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda who came up, Tang Erda in front of Bai Liu's torso and Liu Jiayi, who also looked very cold and stern, looking at Cen Buming with an almost angry condemnation in his eyes - able to extract The only skill he could have guessed was Cen Buming's well of sinners.

After all, only Daniel's Soul Crusher and Cen Buming's Sinner's Well are rules skills.

The only way to get Bai Liu's soul back is for Cen Buming himself to open the well of sinners and spit Bai Liu's soul out.

Tang Erda picks up Bai Liu with her left hand and places him in the corner, her right hand flings out a gun and drives it straight at Cen Buming's head, while Daniel, who has just hidden the gun behind himself, looks at Bai Liu's torso, his lips curling slightly, his apple-green eyes flaring out like a savage beast that has caught a whiff of something fishy.

"The Godfather ....."

The clown smiled wryly, "I even dreamt about you last night."

"-that's a beautiful dream then."

"But what about when I wake up and you're not with me and it turns into a nightmare."

He drew his soul sniper rifle, his face hidden beneath the mask twisted with excitement, and to everyone's surprise, the Joker aimed the gun

at Bai Liu lying on the ground, the muzzle of the sniper rifle coalescing with disturbing green energy, and everyone heard the sound of a green bullet capable of shattering souls being loaded.

"How can you lie so peacefully on the ground and dream when you see my first face?"

The clown said briskly and cheerfully.

As if in slow motion, Tang Erda's pupils tightened and he quickly retreated back to defend, raising his gun to aim at Daniel.

Bai Liu's torso cannot be attacked!

Liu Jiayi held onto Bai Liu for dear life, using her body to shield Bai Liu as much as possible, her eyelashes trembling with fear and helplessness, Muke gritted his teeth and tapped the panel to use [Flash Strike] -

--but all over the field, the fastest, it was the last man.

Mu Sicheng stepped in front of Bai Liu with a speed that was almost invisible to the naked eye, his face expressionless, a blank space before he could even think.

But he stepped in front of Bai Liu.

In Daniel's eyes, there was a tasteless scowl, the back of Mu Sicheng in his sights - he'd expected that if he aimed his gun at the Godfather, these guys would be scrambling to get killed.

Didn't Cen Buming say he couldn't target other players?

He didn't.

It was these stupid players who came over to get themselves killed.

Daniel laughed nastily as he pulled the trigger.

-- It only takes a little more thought for these useless pieces of rubbish to see how he could have shot his own godfather?

His targets, since the beginning, have been these fools who are not in their right mind and think how important they are to the Godfather.

Green bullets are shot.

Muke's pupils flinched, and he threw out a dagger to hit Mu Sicheng squarely in the back of the head, and Mu Sicheng was shaken by the blow and fell forward into Bai Liu's arms.

The one that hit him first was still the bullet.

Pale fire blazed through his body in an instant, and Mu Sicheng's mind was able to think instead in this moment - so this is what it feels like to be shot with a soul-crushing gun ……

Wang Shun is right, it really hurts, it's like a thousand knives scraping through your body at the same time, being cut into a million pieces.

But what is even sadder is the feeling that the thought is fading away.

It is as if your life, in this moment, has no meaning, and everything you have struggled for and survived for, is no longer interesting.

The fire reached Mu Sicheng's face and he struggled to lift his eyelids to look at Bai Liu in front of him, sleeping with no life at all, and suddenly smiled as tears fell from his eyes and then flowed down in a steady stream.

…… Now I don't even have a soul.

Are you still my friend, Bai Liu ?

I wish I could ask you to your face, you thin-skinned bastard ……

But now ……

There seems to be no way out.

Mu Sicheng's eyelids drooped and the fire burned upwards, trying to consume the last vestiges of him, and the last thing that stopped his thoughts were the words that Bai Liu had said to him the first time he played the game with him -

-- [I promised him that I would save him].

Mu Sicheng pulled back and smiled as he disappeared completely into the firelight, leaving no trace of his presence.

I don't believe you, Bai Liu.

[System Alert: Player Mu Sicheng's soul is shattered, confirmed dead, exit the game].

The Drowning Man from the Future

The Well of Sinners.

Bai six, legs folded, arms crossed, sat on the towering corpse of the monster as if on a throne, smiling and looking down at Bai Liu with a crooked smile, "I have cleaned the inside of the Well of Sinners to welcome you."

"Of course by the look on your face, you don't seem to like it here very much."

"Oh yes, that was the same look you had when you first saw me in the fifth building." Bai six tilted his head slightly, his smile becoming friendly, "Of course, now your expression is much more emotionally exposed-"

"Are you, in fact, hating me?"

"By the way, I never tell lies as far as God is concerned, remember the friendly reminder I gave you back in the fifth building?"

Bai six's right hand curled against his jaw, and he let out a soft laugh as he lowered his eyes, "I say the first person to die will be Mu Sicheng."

The moment he said this, a burning sensation suddenly came from inside the gloves Bai Liu was wearing, his fingertips burned, and his expression froze as he instantly turned them into his wallet.

The wallet was opened, and Bai Liu saw the soul note with Mu Sicheng on it burning fast and then turning into ashes.

Bai Liu pauses as he maintains the position of opening his wallet.

The ashes drifted down the cracked seam of the old purse and fell to the ground.

"Bai Liu, do you know what you look like now?" Bai six's eyelids dropped indifferently, his mouth tilted with a very light smile, "You look like a tramp who dropped an insignificant coin, and then fumbled around on his knees looking for it."

"- a poor tramp with only so many working coins, and who kept them unused in his wallet because he couldn't be bothered to keep them,

and looked after each one to shine."

"But as much as you look after them, coins are just coins, they are only worth so much and don't increase in value because you can't part with them, rather they will take up space in your wallet."

"They are not worth keeping in your purse, make room for them and give up these burdens."

"You'll be able to fit more, and more valuable, notes in your wallet."

Bai Liu flung his hand violently to the right, throwing out the white bone whip, his emotionless mask of expression finally disintegrating completely to reveal a hideous interior: "Don't call them worthless paper money in front of me!!!"

"They are human, they are souls!!!"

The white bone whip was thrown hard, lifting all the monsters, and Bai six jumped down from the mountain of monsters high above him, he laughed and drew his black bone whip and threw it down at Bai Liu.

"It's a human being, it's a soul, so what can it be?"

Bai six smiled softer and softer: "It's just a toy for the gods."

"To exist or to perish is but a thought, a word, of God."

The black whip struck the white bone whip, and the unabated force pushed the whipping Bai Liu straight out and into the bottom of the well, where Bai Liu was shaken and his whole body scattered, and the sound of cracking bones came from him.

Bai six rolled up the whip with one hand, gathered it up and walked nonchalantly towards the fallen Bai Liu with a smirk in his voice: "-like now."

"I say it will be Muke who dies."

"-then he would really be dead."

On board the airship.

Cen Buming looked at the place where Mu Sicheng had fallen, his expression was frozen, as if he had not expected things to go in this direction. ...

Can't get over it.

Everything was out of control.

Muke's eyes swept to the spot where Mu Sicheng had fallen earlier, his mind stirred with emotions and confusion, but when he lifted his eyes and saw Bai Liu's still sleeping face, his mind was emptied of only one thought -

-- he wants Bai Liu to leave the game alive.

So the emotions were suspended and the mind was set in motion again under an almost cruel command.

Cen Buming's Sinner's Well skill has already been used once and the next CD is in thirty minutes, so no threat for now, but the Joker is clearly out of control, he has fifteen minutes on his skill CD and he can keep attacking Bai Liu and the others with his Punch for those fifteen minutes.

Muke gathered his thoughts and thought calmly - as an assassin, he was going to kill the most threatening opponent to his team.

-- just like Bai Liu's usual orders.

[System Alert: Player Muke uses skill (Flash Strike)]

Muke lifted his dagger and prepared to enter the flash, thinking that his look at the moment would be calm, cruel, even grim, but if he had a mirror, he would find his expression at the moment like the surface of a lake without wind and waves, very calm and composed -

--It's like Bai Liu's usual expression.

[I'm here, just leave it to me].

Bai Liu is always there, they don't have to worry about anything but bumbling and recklessness, growing up quickly in the most dangerous of games, and Muke only has to look back to see Bai Liu standing not far behind them, watching over them with a calm look in his eyes.

-- obviously a guy about his age, but always looking so reassuring.

Muke is a man who is terrified of death. From the moment he entered the game, his greatest fear was to die, and he would have knelt in front of a small TV to keep from dying, begging others to save him. Three months ago, he would never have imagined that he would be a

one-man assassin and willingly be used as leverage to be thrown out by the other team over and over again in exchange for his death for the team's maximum benefit.

He hated that. As a heart patient who would only live for twenty years or so, he hated the idea of people sharing and taking advantage of his life, which was the most precious thing he had.

But Bai Liu can.

Because Bai Liu would never really let him die.

So he was really willing to die for Bai Liu.

Muke stepped into the glitter, as he had done before, headlong and righteous.

The next moment, Muke stepped out of the flash and appeared behind Daniel, his eyes cold, the dagger in his hand glinting with a sharp edge, Daniel was unable to react and was stabbed in the throat with Muke's falling dagger, blood gushing out and staining his clown mask.

"It's you?!" Daniel's face snapped, becoming twisted and angry as he realised the person behind him was Muke, " Muke ?!"

-- his most hated competitor!

An incompetent coward who covets the meaning given to him by the Godfather! A man who cannot live at all without his godfather!

Muke's attack was so intense that it took his breath away, and Daniel was caught off guard and soon covered in paint, but he was soon frantic too, and with a grin not unlike the one on his clown mask, Daniel gathered his sniper rifle and aimed it at Muke again.

"This bullet, which I have set aside especially for you, was also given to me by the Godfather." Daniel smiled slyly, "It would be an honour for you to die by this bullet, too, die when you deserve to die."

The sniper rifle in Daniel's hand suddenly emitted a silvery-blue glow, while the outer ring of Bai Liu's glove, shielded by Tang Erda and moving downwards, suddenly glowed in the same way.

Liu Jiayi turned his head to look at the outer ring of the glove and his pupils tightened - this was the outer ring of Bai Liu's glove that the residue from the furnace had refined when they had gone to Hua

Ganzhong's place to refine the weapon, and they had used many methods to fail to remove it. The ring was the core of Daniel's soul sniper rifle, and Mu Sicheng mocked that the Joker was some kind of godly dog licker who couldn't get it off no matter what.

--It's like Bai Liu's soul is stuck to Bai Liu.

Liu Jiayi looked up sharply at Muke, who was fighting Daniel in front of her, and the moment her childish voice came out, she cried out, "Run! Muke!"

Tang Erda, who was covering Liu Jiayi's retreat, quickly realised what was going on and drew his gun, aiming it at Muke's back and firing through clenched teeth.

--- As long as he clears Muke out before Daniel does, Muke won't have his soul shattered!

[System Alert: Heretic Clown approaches Desire Core player Bai Liu, receives stimulus, skill changes - (Soul Crushing Gun) skill can be reset once, no cooldown required.]

The green light converged again at the muzzle of the gun and silvery rose bullets flew through the air Xiang Muke's head, Daniel's eyes glanced at the successive silver bullets and he did something crazy that no one expected, he let Muke's dagger plunge into his heart, turned in front of Muke and blocked Tang Erda's shot for Muke He then burst into a blood-curdling fit of laughter and pointed his gun at Muke's heart.

--shoot out.

"DIE!!!"

Muke's eyes remained calm for a moment, then widened and sparks spread rapidly through his heart.

"How dare you try to kill me!" Daniel, however, laughed and raged uncontrollably, two fierce emotions rushing across his face in a frenzy of madness, "You're just a tired man who won't live long, you're not even worthy to compete with me for a place next to the Godfather!"

As if one shot wasn't enough, he fired his sniper rifle at the limbs of the fallen Muke, who was bouncing on the ground as the Joker swept his body around and around.

"Die, die, die!"

Tang Erda, his eyes red with blood, wanted to stop this, what had happened to Su Yang, but as he approached, he saw Muke, who had fallen to the ground, turning his head with great effort, his expression still pale, his pupils already lax, and saying to him, word by word, in a muzzle.

[Take him away.]

[Leave me alone.]

Tang Erda stopped in his tracks, and after a two-second pause, he turned around, picked up Bai Liu with one hand and the sobbing Jiayi with the other, and strode down the road, his veins all rippling.

Muke has Daniel's memories! He guessed that Daniel's skills might be able to be reset!

He did it on purpose!

The moment he sees Tang Erda walk into the lift with Bai Liu and the doors slowly close, Muke finally relaxes the last of the nerves he had been trying to tense, his grip on the dagger loosening for a moment before Daniel steps on and crushes him, but he can't even feel it anymore.

Muke looked laxly at the top of the ship, his thoughts drifting far, far away.

..... has only survived so far, but apart from not being with Bai Liu in the championship, I don't seem to have any regrets.

He had once feared death so much, but in this moment he did have a surprising peace of mind, remembering the first time he had seen Bai Liu because he had laid him off. Bai Liu's dark eyes could not hide his dislike, but nevertheless held out his hand to him and said, "It's the second time you've seen me, but it doesn't look like you remember me. "

"But that's okay, we're in a brand new relationship now."

Muke was clutching Bai Liu's hand just so he could live a little longer. He was a coward who would have given up everything to live, so before he met Bai Liu, his mantra was always - [If I could do it all over again, I would never have been a heart patient, I would never

have done anything.]

He is bored with everything in his world and always tries to start everything over because he doesn't want to die and feels that by starting over, he can avoid death.

But now, the moment death does come, Muke is in a trance-like state of mind, thinking...

-- If he had to do it all over again, he would have to have a heart attack too, go into the game with a heart attack, bawl in the game out of fear, then catch Bai Liu's eye with his desire to live the moment he passes by, then follow him again when Bai Liu reaches out his hand to him, and say to him --

-- I knew I was about to get the short life I dreaded most.

But I am no longer afraid.

I will be an assassin, brave enough to protect you until the end.

Please, take my cowardly soul, will you?

[System Alert: Player Muke's soul is broken, confirmed dead, exit the game].

The Drowning Man from the Future

The well of sinners.

He stepped on Bai Liu's shoulder and pinned him to the bottom of the well, looking down at Bai Liu's expression and raising an eyebrow in amusement.

"Let me guess, on your face, is that water from the bottom of the well, or is it your tears?"

The soul notes in the old wallet burned to embers, silently extinguished in the shallow water at the bottom of the well. Bai Liu closed his eyes and a tear slipped from his left eye, falling into the water at the bottom of the well with the ashes.

"People cry, because of their feelings, right?" Bai six smiled gently and kindly, "That's the answer you gave me ten years ago."

"In you, feelings seem to be something of value, but at the moment, I see only that they make you weak, they make you afraid, they make you miserable -"

"You bought them, for two hundred and ten points, but you paid much more than that."

"- It's already a bad deal, Bai Liu ."

Bai Liu draws his hand out with a white-bone whip, knocking Bai six back as he raises his head, his hair spreading in the fight, the ends dripping down.

Bai six smiled and tilted his head, "A murderous look."

"I do strongly encourage you to kill me, but before that-"

Bai six also drew his black bone whip, he laughed lightly and looked sideways at the white bone whip in Bai Liu's hand, "You can't kill a god with something like that and weak feelings."

The white bone whip came out of his sleeve and shot straight at Bai six's face like an arrow from the well water.

The blood spilled out, and Bai six was shaken by the blow, but he only stood for a moment and pulled out the bone whip that had been

inserted into his shoulder, smiling with increasing satisfaction.

"Has it come to the point where you can hurt me with something like that?" Bai six smiled softly, his eyebrows arched, "True to form, my chosen heir."

After Bai six pulled out the bone whip, his wound was still oozing blood, but it soon healed.

"But still, a friendly reminder that this is the backstage of the system, beyond the world line, which is already the domain of the gods."

"Once again, all mortals are as fragile as ants, and can be reduced to ashes with a single word or thought."

Bai six looks down at the ashes seeping out of her old purse.

"You can't kill me, not as much as you can hurt me in this place with such a rudimentary weapon, how does that sound in your human terms?"

"-with mortal strength, can you compare yourself to the gods?"

Bai six seemed to find the phrase very amusing and read it with a smile.

"Interesting points, but I have to regret to tell you that this set of ideas cannot be generalised here in the Evil One."

"In this world, the evil gods are the amalgamation of all human desires, and no human can overcome their own desires, so no human can overcome the evil gods, so unless you are willing to take over as the new evil gods, you cannot leave here with human power, and then you will have to watch them outside in order to protect you --"

"-one after the other died."

Bai six's eyes were half closed and he rubbed his chin thoughtfully, "Speaking of which, who is it now?"

"I think it was Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda ?"

Liu Jiayi hastily covers Bai Liu's heart as she looks up: " Bai Liu's torso has hardened!"

"He's become like a statue!"

Because it's so far from the soul, that's what happens when the body and soul disconnect!

Tang Erda gritted his teeth as he drew his gun, "I'll surround Cen Buming and make him release his soul."

--Can't kill Cen Buming, if the other guy is cleared out of the game straight away, something will happen to Bai Liu's side whether his soul in the sin well is taken out of the game or the sin well stays in the space on the ship!

"Joker ....." Liu Jiayi pulled at Tang Erda, her hands and voice trembling but her expression doing her best to remain calm, "to lure the Joker away from Cen Buming or Bring Bai Liu's torso over to receive the soul, the outer ring of Bai Liu's glove will reset the Joker's skills and he'll be able to fire again."

"..... I'll distract the clown while you bring Cen Buming over."

Liu Jiayi took a deep breath and calmly explained, "I'm too weak to move with Bai Liu or do the main attack against Cen Buming, but I can do roaming tasks like luring the Joker away."

"And now that Bai Liu is unconscious, I am the second tactician on the team and you, as the main attacker, should follow my orders."

Tang Erda's teeth are clenched: "..... but ....."

"There is no but!" Liu Jiayi tilted her head, her grey eyes glistened with tears, but her expression had calmed down, "Things are urgent, there is no better way now, it has to be this way first, the Joker has a fifteen minute skill CD, as long as you keep him away from Bai Liu, the Joker's skill cannot be reset, nothing will happen to me, as long as you get Bai Liu's soul from Cen As long as you get Bai Liu's soul out from Cen Buming, it's all over."

"I'm sure you can do this, Captain Tang."

Tang Erda's brain buzzed at Liu Jiayi's call of Captain Tang - Liu Jiayi had always had a problem with him because of what he had done before, like hating a relative he didn't like very much, never calling him uncle or honorific, calling him Tang Erda when he was in a good mood, and a big idiot or a big man when he was in a bad mood.

It was the first time the little girl had ever called him Captain Tang.

Liu Jiayi's voice began to tremble a little as she took Tang Erda's wrist in both hands, her palm cold: "I will believe in you as Bai Liu believes in you!"

"..... And if Daniel gets close to Bai Liu during your fight with Cen Buming, his skills can't avoid resetting." She shuddered and took a deep breath before standing up, "I'll have my poison skill ready to suicide out of the game in time, you don't have to worry about me."

"I don't have Mu Sicheng the monkey, and Muke the deadhead, then, then ....."

Liu Jiayi clenched her fists and raised her hand to wipe her eyes, her voice vicious, as if she were cursing, but with a sobbing tone: "- so stupid! To save Bai Liu, you didn't even give yourself a chance!"

Tang Erda eventually agreed with Liu Jiayi's tactics and silently picked Bai Liu up on his back and tied a bandage around his body before the increasingly rigid shell fell off.

"As soon as I get out, I'll quickly fire a Poison Swamp move skill to control the Joker, and you take your time to take Cen Buming away." Liu Jiayi explains the tactic with a strong sense of calm, "I'll try to delay the Joker's movement, but when I can't, I'll use the Poison skill on myself and kill myself to get out of the game."

"When the time comes, you will retreat in time and not fight for long." Liu Jiayi's tone carried a warning, "because neither will I. Without me to cover you, something could easily happen, so I will kill myself and you will have to retreat."

"You have to know how to keep your head above water, you know?"

Tang Erda nods in silence.

Liu Jiayi closed her eyes as she tried to relax her tense body: "The chance is only this once, but surviving is the most important thing."

"I'm a tactician who hates it when people go out of their way to do things outside of their ability and then die in front of me, you know me on that."

"Let's go!"

They reentered the first level.

The moment the lift door opened, Cen Buming seemed to be arguing furiously with Daniel about something, but Liu Jiayi's mind went blank, and she was unable to listen to what the two men were saying to each other.

Even though she is blind, her hearing is always the best and she can easily hear every word of a conversation at this distance, Bai Liu even joked that when her eyes are better, she will have a unique advantage in hearing English in high school.

The grades will definitely be better than his English language scum.

At that time, she answered with justifiable pride and contempt - that's natural, the score is at least twice as high as yours, Bai Liu.

Bai Liu would just look at her with a smirk and say - I only get 40s in English sometimes, and you get twice as many?

She would say, quite breathlessly, that you're just plain rubbish, were you asleep during your English exam?

Bai Liu smiles and says, "Maybe so.

Now Bai Liu is literally passed out behind her, but she can't stop smiling at all.

Is the sleeping Bai Liu so frightening?

The pupils of Liu Jiayi's eyes were grey and dull, and the moment she stepped into the lift, she waved her hand and said hoarsely to Tang Erda behind her, "Go!"

[System Alert: Heretic Liu Jiayi uses personal skill (Poison Swamp)]

Liu Jiayi's eyes were fixed, biting her lip as she carefully navigated through the fog, her pupils narrowing as she saw a green sniper rifle and quickly rolled to lean over.

"Cough ....." came Daniel's choking cough from the poisonous fog and he yelled in annoyance, "Come out! Little blind man! I know you let the poisonous mist out!"

Liu Jiayi hides behind a load-bearing pillar on the ship, calm as if it were a precision machine, constantly manipulating the swamp's toxic fog as it flows around Daniel, the gas separating him from Cen Buming and pushing him towards the lift.

--As long as we can get this lunatic to the next level, Tang Erda's side of the mission will be absolutely safe.

But to get to the next level, the range she put at the beginning of the poison swamp would be a bit out of reach, and then she would need to make up another poison skill to cover the range where Daniel is now active.

Liu Jiayi clicked on the panel, she looked at the antidote and poison skills for a moment, the antidote skill had long since gone into CD, she pulled out all the antidotes and took them to Tang Erda.

--There is only one poison skill left in the major.

The skill she used to kill herself.

Liu Jiayi felt that her mind and thoughts had never been so clear and calm.

From the tactician's point of view, there was no need to expend so many big moves skills for a player who was already unconscious, especially when two players had already been lost, in fact what she hadn't told Tang Erda before was that if this chance didn't work out, she should simply give up on Bai Liu.

It's not worth it.

Even if Bai Liu dies and she loses this tournament, there are guilds that want her, and there are guilds that want Tang Erda, and to be precise, Liu Jiayi wants to win the tournament and resurrect Liu Huai after getting the wishes and points, and that's the same with any guild. To be honest, if she joins forces with Phoebe, she has a pretty good chance of winning the title next year.

It's not like you have to follow Bai Liu to win the competition, so why do you have to save him?

From her personal point of view, Bai Liu is just a shameless, big bad guy who cheated her soul with two red bean cakes and asked her to find the money. This guy is a villainous persona in any way, with no truth in his mouth, always thinking about getting money, cheeky not to mention not supposed to have any feelings for her.

She is not really a fool, unlike Tang Erda Mu Sicheng Muke, who is not in her right mind, so why should she really go to this extent for Bai Liu?

It's not necessary.

[Which family do you choose?

Bai Liu sat beside her bed and calmly asked her, "There are two families who like you very much, go with whichever one you like."

[This braid look kinda suits you].

Bai Liu laughed at the messy braids the others had made for her, and she grumbled in frustration, holding her chin in her hands, as Bai Liu stepped forward and gently unwrapped them, giving her a neat and nice new whip: "But Jiayi still looks better like this."

[There's Phoebe on the island, want to come along?]

Bai Liu smiled and said, "I don't think you hate Phoebe."

"Want to try and make friends with her? You don't have any friends your own age that you can play with yet, do you?"

Liu Jiayi stared fixedly at the panel for three seconds, she tapped on the poison skill and held the poison spray in her hand, not crying, not sad, calm as could be.

She is also a fool.

On the other side, Tang Erda overpowered Cen Buming almost explosively, fighting on Bai Liu's back like a frenzied, bloodthirsty beast, taking out two blockers in a matter of minutes, severely wounding a third, and beginning a tug-of-war with Cen Buming.

Tang Erda was shot by Cen Buming, who broke his left arm by Tang Erda, and the two hunters, on the verge of madness, fought on the ground as if they had lost their minds.

"Why did you have to kill Bai Liu!" Tang Erda shouted at the top of his lungs as he gave up on the gun and raised his fist and slammed it into Cen Buming's face, "He didn't do anything bad at all!"

"In his life, he's never done a single bad thing in his life, in his life, he's a good man!"

"He saved the children in the orphanage! He saved the people who were poisoned by the dry leaf rose! He saved all the members of the Heresy Authority on the plane transporting the heretics to the glacier! He saved all the people in Russell Cemetery!"

"He's probably saved more people than you as a second team leader!"

"Who the fuck are you to put him in a sinner's well!!!" Tang Erda's deep blue eyes burned with a furious and desperate light, and there were tears falling along with the blood on his fists, "He's not a sinner!!!"

"Put him out!!!"

Cen Buming was punched by Tang Erda until his face was dented, blood cascaded from the cracks and cuts, the hand with the death ring trembled, he clenched it and choked and kicked Tang Erda away: "..... Who said I wasn't letting go?"

"Get out of the way, I'm opening my skills!"

Even Tang Erda froze for a moment, puzzled and confused, and released his grip on Cen Buming's collar, he hadn't expected it to go so well, but Cen Buming really didn't seem like a man who would drive such a player at such a moment, and he saw Cen Buming grit his teeth and adjust his Death Ring two or three times.

..... What's going on is that from just now, there is no way to open the closed well of sinners.

It's his well, there's no way it would not even open for him, unless it was .....

--his subconscious thought that there was really a sinner in the well, and that this sinner was a sinner who must never be opened and let out.

And this man was, in his clear opinion, an unpardonable sinner.

Cen Buming's eyes sink.

Just now in the lift, the light was dim and overgrown, and he didn't really see very much of what was going on, except to see a hand appear from his well and pull Bai Liu's soul back, which he had previously thought was the work of some heretic disguised as a sinner he had put in the well, but now that he thought about it, it could only be a guy.

-- Bai six.

Tang Erda watched as Cen Buming lowered his hand, his expression

turning condensed again as he pulled out his gun and pointed it at Cen Buming's head, "Open the sin well and let Bai Liu out."

Cen Buming was silent for a while, he looked up, "I ..... can't put Bai Liu ."

--because there was another sinner in the well who was highly similar to him.

He cannot fully distinguish the difference between Bai Liu and Bai six, and the well of sinners formed by his desires and subconscious mind will only judge them both as sinners, so he cannot open it.

"So ..... you were just teasing me, were you?" Tang Erda's expression grimaced as she raised her hand and threw the butt of her gun at the side of Cen Buming's face, "Your well why can't you open it?!"

"Open it!"

Tang Erda stared at Cen Buming, then he suddenly realised something and jerked his head towards the dissipating swamp of poisonous fog - Cen Buming was stalling for time!

Jiayi's big move is running out of time!

But Jiayi never gave him the signal!

From the edge of the poisonous fog, Tang Erda sees a scene that causes him to suffer a cardiopulmonary arrest as Liu Jiayi, holding a bottle of poison spray, hides in the looming fog and slowly forces Daniel back into the lift - and then puts one foot in the lift herself.

This is not the same tactic Jiayi told him at the beginning!

Jiayi said at the beginning that she was going to kill herself with her poison skill, but now that she's used up all her skills to screen back and distract Daniel, soon Daniel's Soul Crusher skill cooldown will expire, and by the time she's in the lift room with Daniel, the poison skill cooldown hasn't expired and she has absolutely no way to kill herself quickly, and Daniel has a gun.

-- Liu Jiayi is sure to get hit with a soul-crushing gun!

"Little blind man, those are the only skills I remember you having." From the almost dissipating poisonous mist came the Joker's eerie laugh, "Now it's my turn to show off my skills."

[System Alert: Heretic Daniel skill is on cooldown, do you use your personal skill (Soul Sniper Rifle)?]

[OK.]

In the dissipating fog, a gun with a green glow appears, aimed at Liu Jiayi, who is walking towards the lift.

As the lift doors slowly closed, Tang Erda looked blank as she saw Liu Jiayi, who had a gun pointed at her, turn to her side, look at him quietly and nicely through the gap in the closing lift doors, then suddenly smile sweetly and wave to him and Bai Liu with the natural gesture of a little girl going to school to say goodbye to her family, and she mouthed the words --Bye.

Captain Tang, brother of Bai Liu.

Tang Erda drew his gun and fired wildly at Liu Jiayi's back as the lift was about to close, while Cen Buming also concentrated, quickly transforming his death ring into a black pistol and firing at the fading green gun point.

"Aaaahhhh-!!!" Tang Erda went berserk, equipped with an entire monster book, shooting so fast with his spirit level down that he was just a stump, not caring anymore, his eyes red with blood, "LET HER GO!!!"

Daniel was also mad, and he chose to shoot at Liu Jiayi despite this intense fire coverage: "- you self-righteous, tired people!"

His blood-stained face was cruel and hideous, his apple-green eyes bursting with a shocking light in the darkness, and a heartfelt, delighted smile on his face: the

"All of you, to hell with me!!!"

"Without you, the Godfather can be my God!!!"

Green guns, silver guns, black guns, all firing at the same time, dense bullets weaving through the diffuse toxic mist, sliding out rays that enveloped the lift like an inescapable death cage.

Cen Buming's bullet sends Daniel's wrist flying, but he still shoots the green bullet that symbolises the shattering of a soul, which grazes the side of Liu Jiayi's face and instantly ignites into white fire, enveloping her grey eyes in flames.

She was trembling with pain, but at the moment, the little girl's hand was still on the button that closed the lift.

--she wanted to take the clown away.

This way the rest of ..... will be safe.

These are guys that she has given her all countless times to save ..... family and friends, and it makes no sense for her, as a witch, to let them die here.

She's a witch.

The witch said that tonight was a Christmas Eve.

The Drowning Man from the Future

Inside the sinner's well, the old wallet burns once more, bruised and battered, and Bai Liu, standing up once more, raises his head, water dripping from his jaw.

"This time you'll get hurt again." Bai six smiled at the Bai Liu, "No more witch's cure will save you."

Bai Liu clutched the white bone whip, which began to spread black from the end, and the blackness was so strong that in a moment it reached the end of the whip, and a silver-blue glow began to flow around Bai Liu.

"Wow." Bai six raised an eyebrow, finally smiling pleasantly, "Finally figured out you're ready to take over the position of evil god, have you?"

Tang Erda shot Liu Jiayi's back as hard as she could, Liu Jiayi fell in his gaze, his expression hollow as he staggered to stand but stumbled twice and failed to do so, the doors of the lift completely shattered in the bombardment just now, unable to close, Daniel's hand stuck on the edge of the lift, he had been blown off his right hand by Tang Erda, but he Daniel's hand was stuck on the edge of the lift, his right hand blown off by Tang Erda, but he managed to climb up with his left hand stuck on the edge.

"..... Only you are left." Daniel, bombarded with blood and flesh by Tang Erda, crawled hard on the ground, tilted his head up to look at Tang Erda, who was on her knees, motionless, and cracked her mouth with a grin that was crazy to the extreme, "Once I kill you, the Godfather's last liability will be gone."

Tang Erda looked towards Daniel, who was only half of his body, dragging himself across the floor, his mind blank, unable to think at all, his face splattered with all kinds of human blood, and muttering and repeating Daniel's words.

"..... It's just me."

A metre in front of Tang Erda was the blood of Mu Sicheng when he had been shot, the lift was covered in blood, it was impossible to tell whether it was Daniel's or Jiayi's, three bodies of deer hunters were at his feet, Cen Buming had been shot by him when he had just gone berserk and was now lying dead or alive on the floor, looking up from

the middle of the chaotic and dilapidated corridor There was a pool of blood and a trail of bullet holes from when Muke had been shot by Daniel in his frenzy.

Indeed ..... is all he has left again.

Everyone, all dead.

Tang Erda slowly lowered his gun, his expression hollow and still.

Daniel's consciousness is blurred, but there is a belief in his heart that is so insistent as to be unbelievable, a twisted faith that sustains his tattered body as it moves, and he looks into Tang Erda's disoriented dark blue eyes and laughs contentedly.

"Ahem, once you're dead, the Godfather can give it all up and become a god!"

--that beautiful dream he had last night, that's what it told him.

Daniel lifted his bloodstained face, his clown mask having fallen off in the chaos of the fight, revealing a young, untouched face, looking straight at Bai Liu with those clear apple-green eyes and a smile as attached as a beast that has found its support, his expression almost somewhat naive as he reached out, propping himself up with only half a hand, to touch Not far away, his eyes are closed to his godfather.

"padrino (godfather) ....."

"Daniel sara'il tuo fedele credente (Daniel will be your most faithful believer)."

[System Alert: Heretic Clown approaches Desire Core player Bai Liu, receives stimulus, skill changes - (Soul Crushing Gun) skill can be reset once, no cooldown required.]

The clown drew his gun and aimed it at Tang Erda again.

The well of sinners.

In the old purse, before the last soul note had finished burning, the next one began to burn again, the ashes leaking through the cracks like black rain falling to the bottom of the well of sinners.

Bai Liu's neck was wrapped in a whip and he hung him up as if he were a dead corpse, his limbs dropping helplessly, except for the old wallet clutched in his right hand.

The blood kept seeping down Bai Liu's body, falling to the bottom of the well and spreading out, and the white bone whip that had fallen into the well water not far away was blackened to the point where only a thread of white remained.

"What are you hesitating about?" Bai six stepped on Bai Liu's bone whip with a pleased smile, his eyes downcast as he whispered, "What value can this thread of your persistence, this thread of your conscience, be of any value if you keep it?"

"The bum who has trouble filling his old wallet, the bum who diligently controls himself as a good man, will only end up like this."

"Any bad man in this world can trample on your most precious possessions and reduce you to nothing, as I have done."

"You were born to be a bad person, the worse you are the more valuable you are, the worse you are the richer you are, but instead you waste your talent to be a good person who is honest and over the top."

"Being the bad guy, you can be the factory manager who monopolises the world's perfume industry, the investor who invests in an orphanage to renew his life with children, the property developer who controls all the land, the mayor who sacrifices the pain of teenage girls to develop his town," Bai six explains in slow, unhurried tones, "they're all very rich, fulfilling their wishes, and doing well."

"And by being good, you can only become a heretic like Lu Yizhan, Cen Buming, Tang Erda, and even a woman like Fang Dian, who is so powerful that she is almost a god, has to sacrifice pain constantly under my control as a bargaining chip because she wants to save people."

" Bai Liu, if you had chosen to be the bad guy in the first place, you would have been the evil god of everything by now."

"Be a good man." Bai six's smiling eyes arched, "You'd just be a poor bum."

"- a result that I didn't tell you at the beginning when you entered the game by way of skill names?"

"This is the game of the evil gods, and in a world where evil gods exist, good people don't end up well."

"-because the evil gods find that, well, boring."

Bai Liu raised his head slowly, his voice hoarse from being strangled by the whip and the bone spurs sticking into it, but still clear: "I don't find good men boring."

"They ..... cough." Bai Liu grabbed the whip strangling his neck and pulled it brutally outwards, blood spurted out, but he still didn't stop and replied hoarsely, "are very valuable souls."

"I have enough of them in my wallet."

"With them, I never felt like ....." Bai Liu lifted his eyes, his features twisted and livid with anger and extreme emotional shock, his eyes were unshed tears, " ..... what a bum!"

"If indeed you have to become an evil god to put an end to this uninteresting world you have forged."

Bai Liu took hold of the whip, which became pitch black throughout, and he raised his eyes, which turned a thorough silvery blue: the

"Then I will become an evil god."

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu Desire Core changed, Monster Book changed - (Poor Tramp) changed to (Heir of the Evil God)]

[Player Bai Liu Equipped with Monster Book Identity - (Heir of the Evil God)]

Bai six looked at Bai Liu, shrouded in a silvery blue glow, and curled his lips: "Finally, this moment has come."

"My heir."

A black whip snapped out of the system ship, knocking Bai six out of it. Bai six retreated to the ground and Bai Liu stepped on the floor of the ship, backhanding another whip at Tang Erda, who was on the ground with grey and white flames burning.

[System Alert: Player Tang Erda has zero life and is out of the game.]

Bai Liu didn't stop when the whip swept, but continued straight and hard at Daniel on the ground.

Before Daniel could see Bai Liu, the manic grin on his face turned into a confused expression, "Godfather?"

"I am not your godfather." Bai Liu looked up slowly, his silver-blue eyes had an inorganic coldness to them, and raised his hand, flinging the whip straight down, "-that was just your dream, I never served as your godfather."

"You're just a clown that needs killing in my eyes."

Daniel's pupils constricted as he reached out to grab Bai Liu, but only caught the whip that Bai Liu flung at him, which threw Daniel's broken upper body straight out of the ship. Only his apple-green eyes remained fixed and unbelieving on Bai Liu, who was calmly looking away from the ship.

"Godfather." Daniel said slowly, mouthing his words as he held out his hand like a drowning man begging for help on the shore, his eyes laxly opening, "..... help me."

Bai Liu stood at the broken window, not moving, watching Daniel drift away and disappear into space.

[System Alert: Player Daniel has zero life, exit the game].

Bai six raised his eyebrows at the scene and stood up straight and pulled back as he smiled up and bowed courteously in acknowledgement, "You already have the power and necessities to become an evil god."

"The rest will need to be granted to you by the temple."

"I'll be waiting for you at the shrine."

"I hope the next time I see you, you will still retain your sanity."

With these words, Bai six pulled back the hatch and, with a soft laugh, fell backwards and disappeared without a trace.

The hatch closed again, and Bai Liu looked ahead at the wretched deck of the ship before him, motionless, and only after making sure that Bai six had really left did he take a step forward, dragging his long black whip.

Bai Liu swayed a little, quickly settled, then took another step, swayed again, and on the third step, as if drained of every ounce of strength, Bai Liu held onto a nearby wall, lowered his head and gasped for breath, his silver-blue eyes hollow.

The black dye on the whip pulsed as if it were a substance, spreading from his fingers at the end of the whip, upwards, attacking every inch of Bai Liu's sanity.

Bai Liu finally knew what the dye was that dyed this black whip black.

-is desire.

It is from 658 world lines, from all the players who have entered the game, and from the strong desire of the humans who will enter it.

This desire, using the bone whip as a medium, does not stop for a single moment, pouring into Bai Liu's brain and body, as if these intense desires, which have no place to go, continue to find a vehicle, otherwise they would drive the hosts that generate them insane.

Bai Liu is the vehicle for this.

[I want to be promoted so badly, so badly, if only my boss had suddenly died in a car accident, annoying old man, why isn't he dead yet, I want to run him over with my car].

[..... don't want to attend class, the class teacher has to be seriously ill, right?]

.....

All sorts of desires converge, enrich, and follow the whip into Bai Liu's brain. He breathes hard, trying to quell the effect they have on him, but no sooner does he take a step than more enters his shell and affects his soul.

He felt that his soul had become a vessel, on the verge of being stretched to transparency and losing its original shape by these desires that would not never cease to arise.

Is this the reason why evil gods do not have souls?

The soul simply cannot maintain its usual shape under the impact of such desires, and if it is to be maintained it must resist the effects of these desires on him.

But these desires are like water spreading from all sides, leaving one breathless, unable to climb the shore, without even a break, and resisting desire is like a person who has no driftwood and has been

struggling to drown in the sea, but if one lets oneself sink into desire and falls to the bottom of the darkness .....

He really will be the next Bai six.

Bai Liu slowly slid to the floor, his back against the wall, his head tilted back and breathing hard, his eyes clouded and unfocused like a man about to drown, his hand holding the whip slowly dropping to the floor and touching the reverse cross key held in the hand of the fallen Cen Buming.

He turned his head sideways and looked at the key.

--This is the key prop of this game and the last prop he needs to become an evil god.

It is also the game they landed into and stayed with him until the end, trying to guard what he found.

Bai Liu took hold of the key and, propping himself up on his knees, he stood and stumbled, holding onto the wall, towards the hatch on level 0.

The moment he grips the key and pushes in the hatch, level 0 slowly opens and the first level of the ship, starting at Bai Liu's feet, gradually lights up with circuits, each closed heresy opening one by one, turning the otherwise gloomy first level into a brighter one.

Bai Liu lifted his head.

The moment he saw what was before him, it was as if his brain, which had been blurred by the onslaught of desire, was emptied of everything but the sight before him, and the emotions that very slowly came up and the heat at the edges of his eyes.

All around him were the souls of the players who had entered the game. They were, or more appropriately, they were strange shapes, like monsters, like human-like creatures, with pupils filled with lust, lust that could even be felt by Bai Liu through the vessel, their eyes rolling and staring at Bai Liu, their mouths cracking open as if they were looking at some mouth-watering delicacy, and before The moment Bai Liu turns his head and looks at them with those silvery blue eyes, the monsters, or rather the player's soul, shrinks in fear.

They are held in pillar-shaped containers filled with silvery-blue liquid, just as Bai Liu did when he first saw Tavel in the small town of

Siren.

Bai Liu breathed lightly as he walked forward, reaching out to the humanoid heretical souls numbered in single digits and reaching out to touch the surface of the already empty vessels.

Tears slipped from silver-blue eyes.

[658 Worldline Heresy 0004]

[Name: Capuchin Thief Mu Sicheng (Soul Shattered)]

[658 Worldline Heresy 0005]

[Name: Muke the Assassin (Soul Broken)]

[658 Worldline Heresy 0601]

[Name: Witch Liu Jiayi (70% soul fragmentation, unable to revive)]

[658 Worldline Heresy 0002]

[Name: Tang Erda, Rose Hunter (75% soul fragmentation, unable to revive)]

The columnar container of souls shattered into millions of fragments, floating slowly in the silvery-blue, seawater-like liquid, like the bubbles of a drowning man's breath remaining inside, telling those who are still alive that their souls are here.

Looking in through the large hole broken off the edge of the ship, the floor is crisscrossed with the blood of different people, and the deep blue of space is orbited by 658 world lines that run slowly along some set trajectory, converging towards the central behemoth of a system backstage ship.

The silver-blue universe is drifting with glittering flecks of dust and debris, there are traces of wilting roses withering, the mermaid seems to wake up from the bottom of the sea, looking at the mirror exploding over the fire and sighing, the sun in the polar sky overlaps by a quarter, following the last afterglow, the fallen god peers into the future, it sees the gun that shattered its soul falling into the sea.

The evil god named Vagabond has finally made his way here.

He had uncountable soul notes, money, honours, laurels and victories already to wear on his head, he had it all.

He lost his best friend, his family, and himself.

He has nothing.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has gained control of the system ship].

[Congratulations to player Bai Liu for passing the game.]

Lu Yizhan was distracted several times during the game, and if Charles hadn't wanted to lose so badly, he might have had a tough time, and as soon as he finished the game, he rushed after Spades, who was in the lead, to the No. 2 viewing pool.

Lu Yizhan's heart sank as he entered viewing pool 2 and saw the whispering, confused audience and the blackened screen.

--Something's happened!

As soon as Spades scanned the big screen, his eyes glazed over and he jumped down with his backhand on the audience, directly next to Wang Shun in the centre of the viewing pool.

"I don't know!" Wang Shun was also desperate, "Bai Liu, after they logged into the game, the big screen went black and the host called for maintenance several times, but no response at all!"

"Did anyone log out halfway through?" Lu Yizhan asked with a strong sense of composure.

Wang Shun shakes his head helplessly.

Du Sanying stares deathly at the big screen, deathly clutching his fingers, biting his lower lip and cowering in the corner, away from anyone.

"Someone's logged off!" The crowd shouted excitedly, "Which team is it!"

"The Deer Hunter's!"

"Wow shit, three people logged out at once!"

"Wouldn't that be a sure win for the Wandering Circus?"

"Look, look, look, someone else has logged out!"

"It's the deer hunter side again!"

"Holy shit, it's the Joker and the Executioner!"

"It's all cleared out, the battle is fierce!"

"The circus has won?!"

Lu Yizhan turned his head sharply to look over at the deer hunter.

For a moment Lu Yizhan and Cen Buming looked at each other, but Cen Buming looked away.

--This is what this guy does when he feels guilty.

Lu Yizhan's heart jolted, a long-lost feeling of fear and loss of control returned to him, and he looked, dazed and incredulous, towards the waiting exits of the wandering circus.

The moment Wang Shun heard that the other side was all cleared out, he didn't have time to breathe a sigh of relief when he saw two men slowly fall out of the boarding exit on his side.

One Liu Jiayi, one Tang Erda, scabbarded and double-blinded.

Wang Shun was stunned and before he knew what was happening, he and Lu Yizhan, who was running next to him, subconsciously rushed forward to catch Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda.

Before Lu Yizhan and Wang Shun could really catch the two men, they disappeared from their hands.

Wang Shun's mind went blank as he reacted to what had happened and looked up at Lu Yizhan across the room.

--This is exactly the same as the last time Lu Yizhan and Spades were hit with the Soul Crusher.

This also means that .....

"Their souls are not completely shattered." Lu Yizhan squeezed the words out almost through his teeth, his face completely pale, "..... but I don't know how shattered it is and if it will still wake up."

"What about Bai Liu?" Wang Shun heard his voice shaking as he asked the question almost in fear, " Bai Liu hasn't logged out yet, so is he also ....."

The audience was once again in an uproar.

"Someone else has logged out on the circus side!!!"

Wang Shun's head snapped up and he looked over to see Bai Liu walking out of the boarding area in one piece, without a scratch on him.

The moment he saw Bai Liu's eyes, the smile on Wang Shun's face froze.

Meanwhile, the presenter on the big screen waved his hand vehemently: "The system has determined that the winner of the league is -"

"-The Wandering Circus!"

"Let's congratulate the Circus President and Tactician, Bai Liu!"

There were screams and cheers from the crowd, many of whom were so excited that they took their clothes off and waved them onto the field, not knowing what was going on in the game, but simply being lustful gamblers, betting on the right side of the game to win and feeling genuinely happy to have doubled their points.

The whole room was on its feet, and someone put two fingers in his mouth and whistled, in a shrill voice, laughing as he did so: "Wandering Circus! Gods forever!"

" Bai Liu, awesome!"

"Team Brand New Man is in the final!"

"Not exactly your standard brand-new guy, but it's pretty strong, they've got a lot of quality newbies, and that assassin and that thief are both really good."

Laughter came from all directions, while Bai Liu stood motionless at the exit, staring into the eyes of a rigid, motionless Wang Shun, with no trace of popularity left in his eyes.

Water dangled from the ends of his hair.

Wang Shun opened his mouth, his face blank, and he looked behind him at the empty, closed boarding gate, and stopped incomprehensibly.

Where are the other two?

Stray Circus, and two unlisted players?

He wanted to ask, but always felt that he was being cruel to Bai Liu with this question, but Bai Liu seemed to read his eyes and lowered his eyes and answered his question in a very soft voice: "They didn't manage to log out."

"..... soul was completely shattered away."

The moment the words came out of Bai Liu's mouth, Wang Shun shuddered violently, his tears falling only now, and he could only keep, incomprehensibly, repeating, "How could ....."

"How so?!"

Lu Yizhan looked very slowly towards Bai Liu, who must have had a very strange expression at the moment, a mixture of fear, confusion, pain -

-and the odd look of frustration.

Bai Liu looked at him, as calm as the surface of a lake where no ripples could be made by falling rocks, and then looked at Lu Yizhan in a quiet and peaceful manner, and then said in the tone of voice that he would not want him and Fang Dian to go to his room in the future when he informed him that he would live alone when he graduated from university.

" Lu Yizhan, I'm going to be an evil god."

"Keep standing in my way and I'll really kill you this time."

Lu Yizhan's heart was empty, very lightly empty, like a feather falling to the ground, a bubble floating up to the sea, and he thought that at this moment he would cry, he would shed tears, he would break down, but when he really came to this moment, he could not feel any emotion.

It was as if he had waited a long time for the sword hanging over his head to finally fall, only to find that it had rusted itself, a very dull and painful lynching, nowhere near as painful as he had first thought.

But it does leave one dazed, mind blank and unable to think.

-- it was like 317 world lines, and he felt the same way when he saw

Cen Buming pointing his gun at those people.

He had expected this day to come, he had long seen in [the future] that there was this scene, he had even watched literally as the sword fell and killed him, only he was resigned to it and so was resisting with all his might the future that God had given them.

But at this moment, Lu Yizhan felt very deeply that the illusion of peace, which he had tried so hard to maintain until now, had finally disintegrated in this moment.

The real world, at dawn.

Mu Sicheng sits hollow-eyed at the bus stop outside the school, not far from a car that is driving out of control towards him, the dazzling light of its headlights illuminating the side of his face.

He was wearing those monkey headphones, his eyes out of focus and a key clutched in his hand.

--Not the key to his dormitory, but the key to Bai Liu's rented house, where he had planned to live in the future.

Because he didn't want to go home or be alone, he wanted to stay with his friends.

He wanted to stay with Bai Liu.

So Bai Liu gave him the keys and said with a calm face that the rent was one thousand five hundred a month, and he angrily cursed the other man for his lack of conscience and snatched the keys away.

The dazzling light of the headlights approached him.

Serenity Villas.

The nanny pushed open the door, ready to clean as usual, and was a little stunned to see Muke lying on the bed; she remembered that Young Master Muke had gone out last night, and had smiled and said that he would not return tonight because he had something important to attend to.

Why are you back all of a sudden?

" Young Master Muke?" The nanny inquired tentatively and softly, "When did you get back?"

Muke suddenly flips off the bed, covering his heart and curling up into a ball, his lips have turned a reddish-purple colour and his whole face is clenched in pain.

The nanny's face was instantly white with shock and her scream woke everyone up, "Get a doctor!!!"

" Young Master Muke is having a heart attack!!!"

"Help!!!"

After a flurry of soldiers, the family doctor in his crooked clothes looked at the heartbeat monitor next to him with a grimace, "How did it suddenly deteriorate like this?!"

" Muke was so much better before!!!"

Muke in bed, wearing a simple breathing mask, his eyes drifting out of focus, he struggles to turn his head a little to look at the photograph on his bedside table -

--It was a group photo, or maybe that's not the right word. He had secretly saved and printed out a drawing of the Quan family photo from Fang Dian's circle of friends and put it in a frame.

Muke looks at each person in the frame and finally his eyes rest on Bai Liu's portrait and he smiles very lightly, his eyelids dropping down.

..... has had things in his life that would make him feel happy before he died.

Enough already.

The doctor looked at the zeroed heartbeat with a horrified face, "Hasn't the ambulance come yet!"

Residential building.

Xiang Chunhua pushes open Jiayi's bedroom door and she looks at the bulge on the bed for a moment, "Jiayi?"

-- Didn't they say they were going to play in the game today and specifically warned them not to go into the game to watch, that it would affect her, distract her and make her play badly, so why did they come out on their own?

Game over?

But Jiayi usually finishes the game at Bai Liu's place before being sent back by Bai Liu, so why did she log out of the bedroom today?

Does it mean a race?!

Xiang Chunhua's heart fluttered, a sense of foreboding came over her, she took three steps and lifted the covers, then her pupils shrank, her face went white and her voice was sharp: " Jiayi ?

Liu Jiayi cowered in the cup, shivering, apparently unconscious, huddled in a tiny ball with her doll, her shoulders and body trembling, her eyes covered in blood and bleeding all the time, her fists against her side, her mouth whimpering very softly.

"Brother, I'm in pain ....."

" Bai Liu, I'm in pain ....."

"Don't hit me, don't hit me ....."

" Liu Fu!!!" Xiang Chunhua wrapped Liu Jiayi in a blanket and shouted anxiously, "Call a car, let's go to the hospital!"

" Jiayi is injured!"

The taxi arrives at the entrance to the hospital and stops. Xiang Chunhua rushes to the emergency department with Liu Jiayi in his arms, Liu Fu anxiously at his side, as they run past the stall selling red bean cakes.

A sweet fragrance wafting through the air.

At the entrance to the neighbourhood where Tang Erda lives, Su Yang sorts out the things Tang Erda left behind at the Heretics Authority and did not take with her.

" Tang Erda." Su Yang knocked softly on Tang Erda's door, then frowned, "Not in?"

I don't think so. At this hour, it was just the time when Tang Erda, a guy with a regular routine, got up for his morning walk. He didn't see Tang Erda downstairs for his morning walk and thought that he had brought his things up because Tang Erda hadn't gone out.

Su Yang was about to go downstairs, drop his stuff off at the doorman and call Tang Erda to pick it up himself, when he turned around and, out of an instinct that comes from years of dealing with danger, Su

Yang thought he smelled ..... blood.

He turned his head and his expression froze as he looked towards the closed door.

Su Yang quickly went downstairs to inform the security guard and asked him to open the door with the spare key Tang Erda had left at the property.

" Captain Tang!"

Bai Liu logged out of the game from his rented house and he was surrounded by people who wanted to chase him and ask him a lot of questions, but that's how he logged out.

A man sits motionless in his chair in the study.

Tang Erda's and Spades' coats are still on the chairs, Muke's books are on the floor, and on the table are the fruit plates that Liu Jiayi brought in and Mu Sicheng knocked the melon rinds off the table.

Bai Liu's mobile phone vibrated and he picked it up, and Su Yang's anxious voice came through.

"Bai Liu, are you home? I suspect that Captain Tang was attacked by a heretic, he was very badly injured, I took him to the hospital under the administration of the Heresy Board and he is being resuscitated now."

"His number one emergency contact on his phone is you, he has no family or other friends that he contacts regularly, and right now he's in serious condition, can you come over for a minute?"

"I'll send you the address."

Bai Liu was quiet: "Good."

Within a second of putting the phone down, it rang again, and Bai Liu picked it up with Xiang Chunhua's panicked voice on the other end.

"President Bai, Jiayi has been injured! We took her to the hospital, but we don't know what her injuries are, the doctor is looking at her, can you come over?"

Bai Liu paused, "I'll be right over."

Before he could hang up this phone, a new call came in.

"Hello? Are you Mr. Bai Liu, the parent of Mu Sicheng?"

"I am his counsellor, we can't contact his parents at the moment, the first emergency contact on Mu Sicheng's mobile phone is you, he had a car accident this morning, his situation is very urgent, he is being rescued, can you come over quickly?

"Hello? Mr. Bai Liu? I'm Master Muke's butler, he's had a heart attack!"

"I would like to ask you if you know of any triggers for Master Muke's heart attack when you were with him recently? The doctor said that if he doesn't get it under control, Master Muke is going to ....."

It was a very strange state, Bai Liu could calmly pick up the phone and put it down again, map out the address of the hospital he received and the route he would take, then put the phone down, stand up on his desk and even add a coat, Bai Liu looked up at the familiar and unfamiliar things in the orange light in front of him.

The cozy picture these things made up gradually disintegrated in Bai Liu's eyes, disintegrated into something he could not understand, like something unreal that dazed him a little -

--did it really exist?

These people ..... these people who were leaving him, who were dying, had really been all around him, in this narrow room, laughing and joking, turning to him and smiling, saying, Bai Liu --

--We'll be with you until the end of the game.

Has ..... ever been?

Or is it all just a self-projected fantasy of emotional satisfaction for him, a human being considered by all to be a psychopath, a monster, a heretic, because he has been excluded from the mainstream of society?

For example, he sees a sunny and lively university student Mu Sicheng on the street, a well-groomed and sophisticated young master Muke in his private styling studio, the most talented child Liu Jiayi advertised on TV, and a serious-looking Tang Erda on a mission passing by.

And he's just a ..... gloomy and withdrawn monster who self-imagines this scene because he fantasizes and wants to be friends with these people.

--his high school homeroom teacher would tell him that a monster like you can only make friends through fantasy.

Maybe he did.

It would be nice if it were really a fantasy.

Bai Liu thought as she lowered her eyes.

He had always hated his high school homeroom teacher, but at the moment, he was really thinking that it would be nice if it was all, as Xu Wei had said, really all in his head.

Bai Liu took the keys and went out the door.

Three days later, the game was on.

Bai Yi cautiously poked Spades, who was upside down: "..... That, Bai Liu, how is he?"

Spades was quiet for a long, long time before he replied sullenly, "I waited for him at home for four days."

"But he hasn't been back for the last four days."

"He didn't come home and he doesn't know where he went."

"I feel like he doesn't want to see me."

"So ....." Bai Yi sighed as he sat next to Spades, glowering for a moment before speaking softly, "That's right, it's going to be a long time with a death in the family... ..."

"There are crematoriums to go to, filings to be made, relics to be disposed of, ID cards to be cancelled and funerals to be purchased, there's a lot of process ....."

"When my family died ..... I was also too busy to go home and didn't want to go home and see anyone."

The meeting room fell into silence.

Bai Jiamu leaned against the wall in silence as he reluctantly found a way to say, "Where is the Reverse God, have you seen him?"

Bai Yi shook his head, "I don't know, the Reverse God hasn't been back in the game since that day. "

"He told me he was going to take care of some work stuff and would definitely be back before the final." Bai Yi let out a long sigh, "But that face, it was as ugly as a dying man."

Bureau of Heresy, First Bureau, main entrance.

Lu Yizhan is followed by Liao Ke, who stands longingly and pauses with his head tilted.

Liao Ke let out a long sigh, "You're going to revert to being a first team captain and deal with Cen Buming yourself, aren't you?"

"Well." Lu Yizhan was quiet for a long time, "I made a deal with him."

"If he did do something that crossed the line, I would have tried him myself."

Lu Yizhan walks in.

Meanwhile, the Cinchimani family hall.

It was nighttime, and the hall was lit up like daylight with all sorts of accessories, with men and women coming and going in formal dresses and formal attire, talking intimately, distantly or demurely on the dance floor with an ineffable nobility and a carelessness towards the next person.

Hearts in the corner, dressed in a long dress gown and wearing white lace-trimmed gloves above his elbows, raised his glass of red wine to the man in the suit next to him and then took a sip, in a light tone.

"Although I don't know why you asked me to bring you here, I hope you don't regret what you've done yourself."

Bai Liu raised a glass of red wine and returned it to him in a gentlemanly manner, his tone calm: "Why do you think I'll regret it?"

Hearts paused, "Because I have a feeling, you're not very sensible, right now."

"In a way I can understand your irrationality, but to this extent I'm still a little surprised."

Hearts was quiet for a moment before he looked over at Bai Liu who was sipping his wine with his eyes downcast: "I thought you ....."

--didn't care that much about them.

At least not enough to care enough to offer to come to him for help to bring to Daniel's bar mitzvah in the Cinchimani family, looking as if he was going to do it himself in reality.

Hearts helped secure an invitation to the bar mitzvah and brought Bai Liu into the Cinchimani family as a male companion, as promised, and then Bai Liu and he waited in this corner for the party to begin. something more dangerous filled in the gap."

Bai Liu quietly sipped his wine as he looked up at Hearts and smiled very lightly, "Thought I was what?"

With this smile, something very dangerous about Bai Liu dissipated and became cleared, but became more uncomfortable to him.

Hearts shook his head, "..... nothing."

" Jiayi is really all right, isn't she?"

Bai Liu replied with a very light smile, " Jiayi is fine, she is recuperating in hospital."

Hearts stared steadily at Bai Liu for a moment, then withdrew his gaze and nodded, counting that he had heard.

--nothing to see.

He couldn't see anything.

Hearts had tried three times before the banquet to find out about Liu Jiayi, but Bai Liu's smile was unmistakable, and Hearts was unable to find out anything.

At the end of the game, after Hearts was sure that Liu Jiayi was injured, he tried to search the hospital where Liu Jiayi was, but he didn't know where Bai Liu had hidden her and Hearts couldn't find her. He chose to accede to Bai Liu's request and negotiate with him, asking him to tell him about Liu Jiayi.

But all I got was a message - [Jiayi is fine, recuperating in hospital] and nothing more.

Hearts looks down at his reflection in the red wine glass and takes a very light sip.

Liu Jiayi's injuries must have been related to the mad clown, and with Phoebe also threatened by the clown, he was ready to take on Daniel

himself, when he didn't expect Bai Liu to approach him about coming to the Cinchimani family.

As soon as Hearts saw it, they knew what Bai Liu was up to.

He was starting ..... to cross certain lines that he had always abided by.

The guests around the room burst into a clamour and leaned around the corner of the terrace, and Hearts looked back, leaning over to Bai Liu and explaining softly, "The party has begun."

From the flower-filled staircase came Daniel, dressed in a plain white suit and a small green bow tie, his hair moussed back to reveal his trademark features and beautiful apple-green eyes, but his own expression was less beautiful, one of rage, irritation and a kind of bewilderment as if he had been kicked in the face by someone who was at a loss.

It was as if something had happened that he could not understand in the extreme, as if the person for whom he had been pursuing had abandoned him.

Bai Liu's eyes were averted as if he hadn't heard them, and he didn't understand them either, but Hearts was fiddling with his bracelet, his eyes half-closed, his rosewood lazy, and then the bracelet suddenly lit up, and Hearts' expression sank.

--This is the signal for the connection between Phoebe and Hearts.

Sending this red warning signal means Daniel has made a move on her.

-- Daniel really wants to kill Phoebe for power at this birthday party.

"It's about to get messy in here, Phoebe's ready to fight back." Hearts raised his eyes as his tone turned icy, "I might not be able to care about you later, so if you can't block it, get in the game."

"I'll go to Phoebe first."

Bai Liu looked up at Daniel on the platform and replied in a soft voice, "Yes."

Hearts took a deep look at Bai Liu and finally said nothing and turned to leave.

As Hearts notes, however, the hall below quickly became chaotic when Daniel appeared, and conversations among the guests became bizarre, with everyone sizing each other up and trying to figure out what the other was up to, Daniel seemed to find the scene boring and his clothes constricting, so he went up to the first floor to change and make a scene.

Bai Liu also took advantage of the chaos to go up to the first floor, he followed silently behind Daniel who was about to change his clothes and called out to him in a soft voice, " Daniel."

Daniel was changing his clothes when his unbuttoned hand stopped and he turned his head incredulously, his eyes shining and his voice rising noticeably, "Godfather!"

"You've come to my Bar Mitzvah!"

Daniel took two steps and stopped at the safest three metres of Bai Liu's distance. He tilted his head as if hoping Bai Liu would touch him and half-kneeled with great reverence, his right hand clenched in a fist against his chest in reverence, his tone one of anticipation as he finally landed on his feet.

"I knew you still needed me."

"None of them are worthy to serve you on your path to godhood, only I, only a believer who can serve you as a god, can follow you!"

Bai Liu lowered his eyes to Daniel's becoming frenzied expression and he curled his lips, not a light in his eyes, "As your bar mitzvah gift."

"-want to come into the system with me and play a game for once, Daniel ?"

The Evil God's Game

Heresy Authority, Trial Court.

The snow-white marble execution dome was surrounded by empty space.

At the centre of the execution table was Cen Buming, handcuffed and chained to his hands, sitting quietly on a seat in the round table, looking up at Lu Yizhan, who had changed into his first team uniform, and was in the mood to taunt Lu Yizhan: "How long have you been wearing this?"

"The return of the prophet, such a prestigious event, won't the Heresy Authority order you a new one?"

Lu Yizhan put on his gloves in silence, he took the gun from the execution table, raised it to Cen Buming, and took a deep breath: "Trial of heretic 0009 for assault at 6.17pm."

"Judgement Heresy Name, Generation Hunter Cen Buming ."

"The Inquisitor, Lu Yizhan, was reinstated as Captain of Detachment One three hours ago."

"Heretic Cen Buming, answer me -" Lu Yizhan looked Cen Buming straight in the eye, his gaze never looked so cold and sharp, "Did you hurt, or kill innocent people in the game? have you harmed, or killed, innocent people?"

"Did you harbour the heretic Daniel with the intention of using him for evil in the process?"

"Did you play the role of a coercer in this murder by letting the clown hurt Muke and Mu Sicheng who had done nothing wrong?"

"Were there moments when you could have prevented a tragedy, but because of your own obsessions you had to condemn innocent people as sinners to vent your resentment and anger at not being able to save others under so many worlds?"

"Have you, in the course of your reincarnation, become so overwhelmed by hatred that your purpose is no longer salvation, but revenge, and you no longer have the means to see reasonably the humans and heretics around you, to distinguish between them -"

"- Heretic 0009, have all that you can see become the object of your future execution?"

Cen Buming didn't dodge Lu Yizhan's eyes as he replied, "Yes."

"So you should have killed me a long time ago, Lu Yizhan."

"There is no need to provoke me." Lu Yizhan's tone did not rise or fall, "I will not kill you because of my own emotions, I will only judge you for the wrongs you have done."

"Two dead victims, Muke, Mu Sicheng ."

"Two victims of serious injuries, Tang Erda and Liu Jiayi."

"I want to know what you did in this game, why they died, why they were seriously injured and what was your role in it?"

"You left out one other person." Cen Buming looked up and he said without a ripple, " Bai Liu ."

Lu Yizhan's pupils flinched.

He had a hunch ..... he would really fire that shot today.

Cen Buming continued in a clear and articulate manner, "I took Daniel into the guild in the first place to shatter the soul of Bai Liu in this world line, and your leaving this guild made me realize that you could no longer be on my side and that I had to kill Bai Liu on my own, but I was required by the rules of the game not to interfere directly with Bai Liu's life, so I chose a compromise yet complete solution to the problem -"

"That would be getting Daniel into the guild."

"But there's no way Daniel could have shot Bai Liu." Lu Yizhan calmly retorts, "Your plan is full of holes."

"Right." Cen Buming looked calmly at Lu Yizhan, "So I told him that if you were strong enough and your value was high enough for your godfather to see you, he would surely choose to come to you."

"-and the best way to prove your power is to defeat your godfather."

"If you win your godfather in the middle of the game and clear out the people around him, he will definitely come to you."

"I was inducing Daniel to kill someone, and I knew that if I moved anyone around Bai Liu, Bai Liu would definitely move against Daniel in reality, and if any innocent person around Daniel was killed by Bai Liu while Bai Liu was moving against Daniel, then it would be impossible for you to let him go again. The only way to get rid of him is to kill him. "

"And Daniel, the family, is going to do something to him and it's going to involve someone else, and as soon as Bai Liu does it, there's no turning back for him."

"That was my plan from the beginning."

"From the looks of things." Cen Buming even sneered, "The plan is being executed well."

Lu Yizhan was quiet for a moment: "You were in the game, what did you do?"

Cen Buming tilted his head as he looked at Lu Yizhan, his face cold, "I put Bai Liu in the Well of Sinners, standing by while the Joker shot and killed, delaying the duress so that his skill Soul Crusher could keep CDing."

"-caused the serious injury of Liu Jiayi and Tang Erda, the death of Muke and Mu Sicheng."

"Are these ....." Lu Yizhan took two deep breaths as he spoke with a slight tremor in his voice, "what you intended in the first place, or did you unintentionally cause this to happen?"

Cen Buming was quiet for a long time this time, looking at Lu Yizhan with those clear yellow eyes and speaking in a calm tone.

"It was my purpose in the beginning and the result of what I led to, and I sought mercy."

"I fully meet the criteria for your trial, carry out the sentence, Lu Yizhan."

Lu Yizhan gripped the gun, he looked at Cen Buming silently for a long time, seeing his eyes redden, then he gritted his teeth and broke off the safety: "Heretic 0009, trial over."

"The verdict of the trial is, guilty."

Cen Buming closes his eyes.

In-game.

As the monsters were slaughtered and the level was about to be passed, Bai Liu looked at Daniel who was jumping for joy and smiled softly, "Daniel, would you like to make a deal with me?"

"Of course I do!" Daniel turned around excitedly, "What is the deal you want to make with me, Godfather?"

"I tell you, tonight, I'll kill Phoebe and get the whole family, and I'm willing to give the whole family to ..... if you want."

"Oh no, no, no!" Daniel quickly contradicted himself, his eyes shining at Bai Liu, "It's a deal is it! I know the Godfather's rules, it has to be a paper money deal! No giveaways!"

"Then Godfather you can just give me a dollar!"

"For one dollar, I'll sell you the entire Hinchmani family!" Daniel compared a one.

"No, I don't want your family." Bai Liu spoke in a flat tone, "I want your soul."

Daniel was dumbfounded, but he soon jumped up in ecstasy: "Of course!"

"When do we trade!"

Bai Liu: "Right now."

"Yes!" Daniel knelt reverently on the floor, his head tilted, his eyes all cautious expectation, like a child expecting his father to stroke his forehead and praise his usefulness, "I am perfectly willing, to offer my soul to the godfather."

"One point?" Bai Liu looked at him and asked lightly, "Is that okay?"

"Of course!" Daniel took the point coin Bai Liu handed him with great treasure, tucked it away, and tilted his head with a sunny smile, "This is the best bar mitzvah gift I've ever received."

"Is that so?" Bai Liu lowered his eyes, eyes hidden by long lashes, "I have one more game to play with you."

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu uses player Daniel's system panel to use his opponent's personal skill - (Soul Crushing Gun)]

Bai Liu drew his sniper rifle and pointed the fading green glow at the frozen Daniel, Bai Liu's gaze was devoid of emotion: "This game is-"

"- I will fire a shot into the sky, and your bullet will fall back to the ground depending on the ruling, and that shot may kill you."

Daniel was confused and puzzled: "Godfather?"

But he quickly accepted the move that Bai Liu would shoot and kill him, and with only a slightly regretful shrug, he closed his eyes, "If the Godfather finds the game of killing me interesting."

"Then the godfather will kill me."

"I am only the property of my godfather, who certainly has the right to do with me as he pleases, and I will not fail to recognise my place like those fools."

Bai Liu turned the gun back around, turning the sniper rifle into a miniature toy gun as he did so, and he put it back into Daniel's hand.

The gun coalesced into a bullet point of light aimed at Bai Liu, who looked at Daniel, whose expression instantly became frightened, and said softly with downcast eyes, "-and it could have killed me."

"You fire this one, and guess this one -"

"Will it kill you, or will it kill me?"

"Bang-!"

"Bang-!"

The gunshots in the courtroom and in the game rang out and stopped at almost the same time.

Bai Liu logged out of the game, Lu Yizhan took off his bloodstained gloves and they both paused for a moment before moving on again.

The doves that were startled into the sky by the gunfire at the edge of the courtroom and the flowers that fell to the ground from the Hinchmani family from the corner of the staircase where they were hit by a guest, all intermingled in a messy mass, the broken red of the flowers, and the scattered white of the doves, merging into a colour

like blood at the end of the gunfire.

From behind Bai Liu came the terrified screams of the guests.

" Daniel shot himself!"

Cen Buming, who was sitting in a chair behind Lu Yizhan, slowly collapsed. Lu Yizhan covered his eyes and slowly adjusted his breathing as his mind recalled the last words Cen Buming had said to him.

[Brother.]

[Only accompanied you to here in the last world line.]

[I'm the one who broke my word.]

On the sixth day after the semi-final, burial is appropriate.

Muke's funeral was organized by his housekeeper, which was extravagant, but for some reason, it was also done very quickly, and Muke's parents did not show up from the beginning to the end.

Bai Liu asks why.

The housekeeper wiped his tears and said with some sadness, " Mr. Mu's father had prepared for Mr. Mu's death a long time ago, this burial kit and procedure Mr. Mu's father had prepared when Mr. Mu was a teenager, but he had never used it, now Mr. Mu really ..... used it immediately. Now Mr. Mu is really using it immediately."

"As for what Mr. Mu likes and dislikes, I don't know who to ask other than you, Mr. Mu and his parents have never been close and Mr. Mu's parents don't know what he likes and dislikes.

Mu Sicheng's funeral was basically organized by Bai Liu, but Mu Sicheng's parents only showed up in a hurry at the end of the ceremony.

Mu Sicheng's parents met with Bai Liu twice, ate twice, thanked him, said they wanted to settle the funeral expenses with him and gave him a red packet, which Bai Liu refused. The funeral of their son.

However, there is still no intention of taking over the funeral process for Mu Sicheng.

Realising what was going on, Bai Liu politely accepted the money and

said that if there was nothing serious, you could go home and come back when the funeral was over.

Mu Sicheng's parents let out a long breath, and their faces, which had just been crying and still had tears on them, showed that obvious expression of relief and relief, as if they had left behind some big burden: "We are very busy at work, so we really can't help him organize his funeral properly, we will take care of the money here, the budget is less than 200,000, you look after it, organize it properly, make sure to give my son a good funeral. Make sure you do a good job for my son's funeral."

Bai Liu agreed and quietly watched the parents leave.

He could sense that Mu Sicheng's parents had grieved over Mu Sicheng's death, but the grief was so shallow that Bai Liu wondered to himself - was it normal for them to grieve like that, but not for me to grieve like that, to be a psychopath or a monster, to grieve over his friend's death? I'm a psychopath or a monster who is so upset about his friend's death that he can't rest even if he takes revenge?

Maybe he really was a monster all along.

And the monster realizes at this moment that the emotion of shedding tears between people can be so shallow.

Muke's parents also came to see him once. The parents, who were both very elegantly dressed, sat across from Bai Liu in a dignified manner, restraining their tears while expressing their sadness in a subtle way, thanking him for taking care of Muke, the exact words of which the distracted Bai Liu could not remember.

Bai Liu only remembers looking at the boy sitting next to them, who was not much younger than Muke, who had a slightly dull look in his eyes, and who looked somewhat like Muke, but, unlike Muke, always looked at him with a very light and gentle smile, and looked at him with some fear.

Or maybe it was that the way he looked at him at the moment was just terrifying.

" Mr Bai Liu?" Soon Muke's father noticed Bai Liu's sight and with his scalp tingling a little he stepped in front of his illegitimate son, his tone weak, "Excuse me, are you looking at Xiang Muke's brother, is there something wrong?"

"Is he Muke's brother?" Bai Liu took a sip of water and spoke calmly as if he were having a casual conversation, "How come I've never heard Muke mention it before?"

Muke's parents paused somewhat awkwardly before Muke's father cleared his throat and said, "We don't have anyone to give a speech either, so it's a good idea for Muke's brother to go up and give Muke a eulogy."

"A lot of people from our side of the family will be there, and we'll also take this opportunity to introduce Muke's brother to everyone, there hasn't been any proper opportunity before ....."

Oh, coming to him turned out to be the point.

Bai Liu was suddenly enlightened.

It turned out that Muke's funeral was to be used as a stepping stone to announce to everyone the new heir to the Mu family, to announce to the world that Muke, the oldest son with a heart condition who had been a drag on them for 25 years, was dead and that they now had a new, healthy, unstable and untimely heir to the Mu family, and to hope that he, Muke's apparent friend, would behave himself. friend will have the sense not to get into anything.

Bai Liu put down his glass of water and looked up at the brother, "If you let him show up at Muke's funeral."

"I'll be able to make Muke's funeral, his funeral."

Bai Liu says gently, to the horrified gaze of Muke's parents, "Now I have two funerals on my hands."

"-and I wouldn't mind one more." Bai Liu said with smiling eyes and tenderness.

The part of Muke's brother's speech was then cancelled.

The day of the funeral, early in the morning, at the internal hospital of the Heretic's Authority.

Bai Liu stands in the corridor and looks over at Tang Erda and Liu Jiayi lying in their beds in the ward, both on ventilators in the transparent critical care wards on either side of the corridor, surrounded by a pile of testing instruments, covered in various wiring and magnets, their blood pressure and heartbeats high and low, fast

and slow, their faces on ventilators, their brows all furrowed as they breathe unevenly into the respirator spewed a mist that looked very faint.

With the help of Su Yang, Bai Liu transferred Liu Jiayi to a hospital within the Heretic Authority, which is why Hearts could not find out.

"He's been in a coma for almost a week." Su Yang stands in the corridor with Bai Liu, who looks on worriedly, "Why isn't he awake yet."

"Was it attacked by some heretic and hurt so badly?"

-- Bai Liu told Su Yang that both Tang Erda and Liu Jiayi had been attacked by heretics, and Su Yang did not doubt that both had indeed detected significant levels of contamination.

After visiting Tang Erda and Liu Jiayi, Bai Liu had to leave for the funeral, and the site of Mu Sicheng's and Muke's gravesite was chosen with the help of Su Yang, who had this to say -

"The Heretic Authority often has casualties, so they have good relations with many cemetery developers." Su Yang smiled bitterly helplessly, "I didn't expect to be able to use that connection for you."

"I thought it was only people in the Heretic's Authority who needed to be in constant contact with the cemetery estate agents."

When Bai Liu left the hospital, the sky was already cloudy and he wore a full black suit with only a white paper flower pinned to his chest. As the funeral was in the open air, Bai Liu took a long black umbrella to the cemetery to prevent the rain from dampening the flower.

He had the foresight to bring an umbrella, and halfway through the funeral it did rain.

The first to start complaining were Mu Sicheng's parents, whose voices were very quiet but were heard by Bai Liu.

"Why isn't ..... finished yet?"

"Has the bill for the funeral come through yet? How much did it cost?"

"That's not bad. ....."

"You don't have to say it, it's just this one time, you won't have to pay

for Mak Si's living expenses in the future, it's equivalent to this money just being given to him in advance."

"Luckily we were already thinking about test tubes when we found out Mako IV was stealing ....."

"Eh, that's it, we don't owe him anything, don't join our family in your next life, it's not meant to be."

Bai Liu stands in the rain with a long-handled umbrella, droplets of water hanging from his long eyelashes as he slowly lifts them.

The discussion then began with Muke's parents, whose faces were sad and in tears, but the words came out with a strange sense of relief.

"..... Cole is a good boy, after all these years."

"But it's better to be gone, gone so he doesn't have to suffer."

"And we don't have to be tortured."

"It's good for everyone."

Bai Liu lifted his eyes, and his tone was flat, with an elusive indistinctness and chill through the rain curtain.

"There is no need for a third person, other than the deceased, to feel relieved at their death at this funeral."

"If so, please leave."

The funeral was solemn, Bai Liu, a shifty, unpredictable friend of the deceased, made everyone a little wary of him, and Mu Sicheng's parents were the first to bow their heads in anxiety and leave, while Muke's parents wanted to stay and run the funeral for a while longer, but under Bai Liu's watchful eye, they too left with nerves on their heads.

In the centre of the two already placed headstones, only one Bai Liu remains, holding a long-handled umbrella.

He looked down at the black and white photograph of the two men on the headstone, suddenly lowering his umbrella over Mu Sicheng's photograph and taking off his own black suit jacket over Muke's headstone.

Bai Liu, dressed in a white shirt and drenched in the rain, looked quietly at the two headstones and bowed deeply three times.

After bowing, Bai Liu walked back alone in the rain, stopping in the middle of the walk.

Not far away stands Lu Yizhan.

In front of Lu Yizhan is the headstone of Cen Buming, standing on one knee in front of it, holding a long grey umbrella, taking a cigarette from his breast pocket and lighting it, placing it on the headstone, silently propped up against it with his umbrella, waiting for it to burn out.

The rain drizzled between the two.

Lu Yizhan stood up, he put away his cigarette which was wet from the rain, turned around and was stunned for a moment when he saw Bai Liu, then subconsciously handed over his umbrella, blurted out, "Why don't you bring an umbrella out ....."

"Leave the umbrella to Muke and the others." Bai Liu says calmly.

Lu Yizhan's handing of the umbrella stops in mid-air.

Bai Liu and Lu Yizhan stare silently at each other through the grey umbrella that stagnates between them, as if there are many people standing underneath the umbrella when there is no one under it.

Perhaps it was because they both knew that they would never be able to walk under one umbrella again.

Lu Yizhan slowly lowered his umbrella and placed it next to Cen Buming's headstone.

Without umbrellas, they walked in the rain at a safe distance of three metres apart, without a word, towards the outside of the cemetery, and as Lu Yizhan walked he began to dig into his breast pocket, taking

out the packet of cigarettes for Cen Buming and shaking it to get one out, only to find the box empty.

Lu Yizhan looked towards a kiosk outside the cemetery, where a large umbrella was propped up and a bench was underneath it.

Bai Liu walked over and Lu Yizhan bought cigarettes. While he was buying cigarettes he noticed that the kiosk actually had a freezer selling ice cream and he looked into the freezer and smiled a little for some reason at the strawberry lovelies, but the smile soon disappeared without a trace.

"A pack of cigarettes." Lu Yizhan was quiet for a moment, "Plus one of these, how much in total?"

Lu Yizhan took the food and went to sit on the bench, he sat on the left side of the bench and Bai Liu sat on the right side of the bench, he paused and handed Bai Liu the lovely multi in his hand: "Want to eat?"

"No." Bai Liu refused flatly, "It's not good."

"....." Lu Yizhan took it back in silence, he peeled off the outer skin and took a bite, the sweet and greasy texture made him panic inside, he paused and smiled with red eyes, "It's really not very good. "

"It's too sweet."

Bai Liu was quiet for a long time, then he suddenly held out his hand, and Lu Yizhan looked over at him in confusion: "I've already eaten half of it, do you want me to buy you another one?"

"It's not that." Bai Liu said calmly, "I want to smoke."

Lu Yizhan is utterly baffled.

"You don't hate ....."

"I want to smoke one." Bai Liu's hand was still splayed as he repeated it again with downcast eyes.

Bai Liu took Lu Yizhan's lighter and lit it himself. He bit down on the cigarette, his eyes half-lidded, the flickering light of the fire reflected in his dark pupils, and the white smoke that lingered through his long, drooping eyelashes scattered into clumps of fragments.

Bai Liu stopped after one puff, propped his hands on his knees and slowly bent over, looking at himself reflected in the puddles on the

ground, his expression confused, and breathing deeply.

Drops of water fall from the eyelashes.

"So bitter." Bai Liu whispered, "The smoke is so bitter."

"So the smoke is so bitter."

Raindrops drip from the edges of large red umbrellas, there is a finished cigarette on an ashtray on either side of a bench that has been briefly sat on, and there is a finished cutie pie in the bin.

Lu Yizhan stands to the left of the bench and asks softly, "Are you sure you want to go this way?"

"I thought you were going to say again why I had to go against you." Bai Liu stood to the right of the bench and raised his eyes.

"No more." Lu Yizhan shook his head and he opened his mouth, "There is no other way for you to go."

Bai Liu looked calmly at Lu Yizhan: "You don't have any more either, do you?"

Lu Yizhan didn't say anything, he was just silent.

"I'll see you at the game then." Bai Liu turned away, his tone faint, "I knew you'd stop me."

"But I'm not going back either."

Lu Yizhan watches Bai Liu walk a little way to the other side, pauses for a moment, turns around and walks away to the other side.

They have finally come to this point, too, of going their separate ways.

Bai Liu returned to his rented house, changed out of his rain-soaked clothes and took a shower, as the tournament was tomorrow and he had to go into the guild today to discuss the final with Wang Shun.

For example, which are the backup players for the final on ……?

In-game, Wandering Circus Guild, meeting room.

The meeting room was empty and Bai Liu was the only one sitting on the stage. Wang Shun was dazed after two sentences on stage, and Bai Liu had to ask him to stop after two sentences.

"I really don't know what to say." Wang Shun touched his face, all with a bitter smile, "President, how can you fight when you're alone?"

"You haven't spoken to me now about the finalists' names."

Muke and Mu Sicheng ..... are out of the question, Tang Erda and Liu Jiayi are still around, but both are in a coma with serious injuries and can't log into the game at all, leaving Bai Liu alone.

"I'll fight alone." Bai Liu said very calmly.

Wang Shun was dumbfounded: "A man ..... beat?!"

"Hmm." Bai Liu lowered his eyes, "There's been a precedent for that, hasn't there?"

"That's Yuan Guang's special skill!" Wang Shun instantly understood, "But President you don't have his soul note, I remember you said ....."

Bai Liu looked up, "I have it now."

" Bai six gave it to me."

Wang Shun is utterly baffled.

After Bai Liu left, Wang Shun sat alone in the conference room, looking at the places where people would have sat and where Bai Liu had sat before, his mind empty of the information he had stored, unable to think of anything.

He had a clear sense that something had changed.

Both he and Bai Liu.

After taking care of the final, Bai Liu went back to his rented house, and as soon as he did, he heard a kind of cautious sound coming from downstairs.

--That's where Muke and the others lived before.

Bai Liu quickly went downstairs and pushed open the room where the noise had been made to see a terrified Du Sanying sprawled on the floor: " Mr Bai Liu!"

"What are you doing?" Bai Liu's eyes swept across the floor and stopped at the large mass of already packed clothes, he lifted his eyes, "You're leaving?"

"Yes." Du Sanying curled up behind his curtsy, he hugged his knees and tried his best to stay away from Bai Liu, "I-I'm ready to go back to the sanatorium, Mr. Bai Liu."

"I've contacted the people over at the sanatorium, and when I go over there, they'll prepare the cubicles I'll be kept in underground, I can have food brought to me via a food truck, and a change of clothes delivered to me by a pull-tube, and I'll never run into anyone again."

Bai Liu was quiet for a long moment: "It's not your fault what happened to them."

The words were the last straw for Du Sanying and he broke down and cried hysterically, shaking his whole body: "It's my fault!"

"If God Mu hadn't touched me, Muke touched me, they wouldn't have died!"

"If Tang Erda and Jiayi hadn't come up next to me, they wouldn't have been hurt!"

"It's all my fault! I never should have been friends with them, never should have come here, never should have met such nice people like them!"

"I've done them in!!!"

Du Sanying slumped to the ground, crying until she was in near spasm, vomiting, propped up on the floor and sobbing tears: "I've done ..... them in."

"You ran into me, too." Bai Liu reached out to pull Du Sanying to his feet, his voice still smooth, "But nothing happened to me."

"So it's not your fault."

Du Sanying raised his head, his eyes lifting from Bai Liu's hand reaching for him and landing on Bai Liu's calm face in an indescribable trance, "..... you okay?"

"How can you be okay?!"

" Mr. Bai Liu." Du Sanying choked back tears, "Obviously you're the one who got the worst of it from me."

"You've been victimized by me, and there's nothing left but you."

Eventually Du Sanying was picked up by the nursing home. He cried on the floor until he had a panic attack, and whenever Bai Liu came near him, he would become so frightened that he would even harm himself, falling to his knees and kowtowing frantically, begging Bai Liu not to come near him, as if he had a complete breakdown.

So Bai Liu stood at the door, as he had done when he picked him up, and quietly sent him away.

Du Sanying finally turned back while shedding tears, and he kept apologising.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry ..... Mr Bai Liu."

Bai Liu returned to his rented house and, looking at the complete silence, he realised as an afterthought that -

-- he was really, totally alone.

" Bai Liu ." Someone called his name and Bai Liu looked over in a daze as he saw Spades walking out of the room.

Spades walked up to him.

Spades hugged him with all his might.

"You're back." Spades said.

Bai Liu's expression is confused and confused as he is held tightly for a moment. It is cold now, but the body Spades is holding him in is warm, so warm that he feels like he is hallucinating, that he is not alone.

So warm.

Bai Liu asked in a trance, "Hello ..... hot."

It's so hot that it's coming out of the neckline.

"I've had a long body wash with hot water." Spades replied in a low voice, "I wish I could give you a warm hug when you get home."

Bai Liu slowly closed his eyes, he gave a very soft muffled sound and buried his head in Spades' shoulder.

"It's warm."

They lie in bed, hugging each other, Bai Liu curled up in Spades' arms, his eyelids drooping, his face full of exhaustion, soon to fall asleep.

He had dealt with so many things in the meantime that when he was actually able to relax, that long-suppressed feeling of exhaustion instantly rushed up to take his whole being to dreamland.

Half asleep, Bai Liu felt Spades rise as if to leave, and before he was fully conscious, Bai Liu took hold of the corner of Spades' coat and murmured unconsciously.

"..... Don't go."

"I'm already alone, you can't go."

Because it was agreed that when he was alone, Spades would show up to keep him company and would not leave.

Spades leaned down and gave him another firm hug, "I'm going to take another hot shower."

"I'm not hot anymore."

Bai Liu shrank into Spades' arms, his voice muffled, "..... It's okay."

"Don't go."

"I don't want to be alone in this house."

"I'm scared."

So Spades paused and quickly fell asleep, taking Bai Liu into his arms, he rested his jaw against the top of Bai Liu's head and patted Bai Liu's shoulder, his eyes radiating a very light silvery blue: "Don't be afraid."

"I will always be there for you."

Bai Liu goes to sleep.

Spades looked at Bai Liu's sleeping face and he dropped his eyes and kissed Bai Liu's forehead, "I love you."

" Bai Liu ."

"I won't leave you alone."

Spades closed his eyes and he too went to sleep.

"At last." Bai six laughed softly as he appeared in Spades' dream, emerging from a dark void and saying to Spades with a smile, "I thought you'd always deny me access to your dreams."

Spades turned his head and the moment he saw Bai six, the dark dream world brightened up and everything around him became visible.

The waves lapping at the shore, the ancient temple, the stone table standing in front of it, the prophet on the verge of complete petrification, and the evil god sitting on the other side of the stone table with a smile on his face.

The evil god smiled lightly and asked Spades, "You were so resistant to my entering your dreams before, why did you agree this time?"

"Could it be that you have considered a different outcome to the deal I, the evil god sacrifice, had spoken to you about?"

"You said that I, Bai Liu and Tavel, had to have one soul to guard the door." Spades tilted his head as he spoke in a flat tone, "You said it wasn't me Bai Liu loved, it was Tavel, and that if I looked at Bai Liu and Tavel living happily together on each world line, guarding it all from the other side of the door, the pain I generated would be up to the standard of a gatekeeper."

"So you asked me if I would keep the door, become the new evil god, and could grant a wish in exchange for it."

"Yes." Bai six spread his hands and he laughed lightly with regret, "It's a pity you turned me down."

"After that, Tavel's spirit entered your body and you and he were together with Bai Liu in a state that had not yet merged."

"I am very curious about your soul, the first time I have seen my own creation produce a soul."

Bai six smiles and stands up, and the next moment he appears in a flash on the shrine, looking down at Spades standing beneath it.

"It is so interesting that you have created a soul because of your love for Bai Liu, and a dream world because you have a soul and feelings, and that your newborn dream world can reject my visit."

"It shows, in a way, that you also have the potential to become a new evil god."

"Because you can deny desire."

"And at this moment, what desire has made you give up denying me-" Bai six smiled and spread his hands, "-that you should allow me to enter your dreams?"

Bai six curled his lips in amusement, "Let me guess-"

"Is it because of Bai Liu ?"

Spades bowed his head in silence.

"I told you that your soul's presence as a vessel would only prevent Tavel from awakening, and at this moment, you feel that your presence is not of any use to Bai Liu." Bai six took one step down from the top of the temple, lowering his eyes and whispering softly, "What you feel Bai Liu needs at this moment, is a human being who can embrace him warmly."

"-not you, a monster who is so cold that you need to make yourself roll over and over again with external objects."

"He needs the one he loves, not you, a turtledove who prevents the one he loves from awakening and only imitates, born to kill and suffer as a derivative."

A black whip appears in Spades' hand and he clutches it tightly.

Bai six smirked, "- even your weapons are something Bai Liu rejects with disgust."

"He was unwilling to accept this weapon until the last moment, whereas you have been using it since birth."

Spades The hand clutching the whip loosened one finger, one finger at a time.

The black bone whip fell to the ground and shattered into points of light.

"I believe you have understood for yourself that your creation was merely a design I made to be Tavel and Bai Liu, the two heirs I had my eye on in pain." Bai six smiled softly, "But there was a little accident, you have the same appearance as Tavel, and Bai Liu looks at

you with the same eyes as Tavel."

"You have a soul because of his feelings for Tavel."

"Simply put, your soul was created as a monster because you stole Bai Liu's love for Tavel."

"And for now, if you give up Bai Liu and choose to become an evil god yourself, he won't have to become an evil god, Tavel can awaken and be with him, and the others won't have to fight back for my existence, and everything can be happy."

"-only at the expense of you, the accident."

"Your heart aches for Bai Liu's solitude now, but isn't that solitude what you caused?" Bai six let out a careless soft laugh, "If you had chosen to become the new Gatekeeper at the Evil Ritual and not keep stealing Bai Liu's love for Tavel for your own selfish love, none of this would have happened."

" Muke and Mu Sicheng will not die, Tang Erda and Liu Jiayi will not be seriously injured, Bai Liu will not be so alone and in such pain."

"Isn't this all because you've deluded yourself into wanting to be with Bai Liu?"

"You must have felt how much pain Bai Liu was in, how he blamed himself internally and felt it was all his fault, didn't you feel horrified when you hugged him?"

"Obviously you're the culprit?"

Spades' chest rose and fell slowly, his fists tightening and loosening, loosening and tightening.

"Do you think that your company will really make Bai Liu happy?"

Bai six gave a soft laugh, "Now you see."

"Your company is the thing that causes Bai Liu the most pain."

Spades' pupils flinched.

"So?" Bai six walked up to Spades and held out his hand to him, smiling inquiringly, "This is your last chance."

"Are you willing to make a wish to the evil gods and pay the price of

your soul to become the new evil god and stop what is happening to Bai Liu?"

Spades slowly lifted his head, his hair lengthening to long, curly silver-blue locks, the pupils of his eyes turning silver-blue, and countless spheres levitating around him, his tone earnest.

"I make a wish to you."

Spades is surrounded by the wind and his soul is lifted up and Bai six floats around him in an endless sphere of silvery blue light, and the temple disappears into a vast silvery blue universe in which 658 world lines, which have become settled, float around Bai six.

Bai six holds the 658th orb lightly in his hand, his face illuminated by the warm glow of the orb, he smiles with compassion, " Spades, what would you like to wish from me?"

Spades said very gently.

" Bai six, I want to give this person behind me all the happiness that an ordinary person in this world can have."

"I want him to have company at the loneliest times in his life, I want everything he's suffering for to dissipate, I want everything he's lost to be recovered."

"I want to have someone to play his favourite horror games with all the time."

Spades raised his head, his silver-blue eyes filled with a very light shimmer: "I think he and the one he loves will never be separated."

"They can meet in a human way, be together in a human way, and end beautifully in a human death."

Bai six curled his lips in a smirk: "What a greedy creation, these add up to much more than one wish, what would you pay for them?"

Spades was quiet for a long time before he spoke in a very soft voice: "I would give my soul for that."

"I have a soul now, and I will be the next generation of evil gods, as you wish, to guard the gate forever."

Bai six smiled up, "As you wish."

--Human emotion is such an interesting thing.

Bai six looks at Spades and Tavel, who have almost merged, and smiles.

--From the beginning to the end, there is no such thing as a vessel producing a soul.

Spades was never a vessel, and the soul inside him was, from the beginning, a soul sealed by Tavel himself, but even Tavel himself was fooled into believing that Spades had a soul too.

Emotions make people foolish, make them miserable, make them weak, and make them deceive themselves.

Tavel wished for his soul because of his own feelings, but because Bai Liu was also his soul, Bai six also wanted Bai Liu's soul, so he did not actually grant Tavel's wish, and the deal was not made.

So the belonging of Tavel's soul has always been free, not in his hands, but always in the form of Spades, an NPC in the game.

But even he, Tavel, did not know that the deal had been struck, that his soul was already in the hands of Bai six, and that the game's incarnation, called Spades, was merely a vessel.

Tavel made the same mistake as Georgia in believing that when the deal was done, Bai six would obey the outcome, but it wasn't.

The evil gods also have the option of reneging on the deal.

And this time, Bai six tricked Spades into sacrificing his soul to him in the same way again.

The same monster, the same lover, the same way of deceit, his creation is clearly not a foolish thing, but it will step into the same pit again because of the blindness of its feelings.

The evil creature who brings misfortune will always wonder about himself and whether he should really be by the side of his beloved.

Is it true that His company brings only pain.

Although he will still not get Spades' wish or his soul in the end, his favourite heir is about to arrive at the temple and he doesn't want anything else to happen to Spades, or Tavel for that matter.

--with this deal, he can trap Spades in the past.

Bai six lowered her eyes, "You said you didn't want Bai Liu to be alone."

"But Bai Liu has always been alone."

Bai six arched her eyebrows: "Would you like to go back in time and be with him in his loneliest moments?"

Spades stops in his tracks as he leaves.

"Bai Liu at the age of eighteen, isolated and bullied by everyone, he doesn't remember Tavel and has no one around him, just one step away from stepping into the game, or even dying."

"He was very, very lonely."

"He felt from the bottom of his heart that he was a monster and he wanted someone to be there for him."

"He's scared."

"Would you like to see Bai Liu at that time?" Bai six whispered, "That would be part of your wish, wouldn't it? Not to have any of Bai Liu's time."

"Don't you want to go and have your own memories with Bai Liu before you do become an evil god, forever alone, watching over the bliss of being with Tavel? Then at least in the midst of endless emptiness and desire you have something to remember instead of keeping on licking that little stolen love in Tavel's skin."

"Don't you want Bai Liu, who doesn't remember anything, to say to you that I like you?"

"If you miss this opportunity, you will never hear it again after I have fully granted you your wish."

Bai six laughed briskly, "Evil gods don't dream."

"Don't you want to give yourself one last bit of fodder for your beautiful dreams?"

Spades turned, Bai six looked into his eyes and smiled.

--Everything was going the way he had written it [the future].

The next day, Bai Liu woke up, empty, with only some warmth remaining.

Bai Liu touches the temperature, drops her eyes, and suddenly exhales very softly.

He got dressed and logged into the game alone.

In-game.

The killer sequence is a mess, and Liao Ke is in a tizzy: " Where are the Spades?

"There's a game coming up, where's he gone?"

Bai Yi and Bai Jiamu sounded weak: "Probably because they didn't want to fight Bai Liu and ran away ....."

Lu Yizhan, sitting next to him, closes his eyes.

It's not that Spades couldn't have done it.

There is no one who wants to hurt the current Bai Liu more than he does.

"Let's switch to Zhou Gong for the team match." Lu Yizhan let out a long breath as he propped himself up on his knees and stood up, "If he doesn't want to play, let's not force him, let's go."

Liao Ke walked up next to Lu Yizhan, a situation that now had everyone on edge, and inquired worriedly, "Where is your soul note in Bai Liu, fighting, nothing will happen to it, will it?"

"Only half a sheet." Lu Yizhan's voice was steady as he stepped into the viewing pool and looked across at Bai Liu standing alone, his eyes still inevitably loose for a moment but quickly calming down, "If Bai Liu can't come to full agreement with my will, there's no way he can log into my panel with this half soul note."

"The Bai Liu from before might still have the possibility of using my soul note."

Lu Yizhan looked across to Bai Liu with a slightly baffled look in his eyes, "But now ..... it's impossible."

The host waved his hand excitedly, "Will both tacticians please come forward and shake hands!!!"

"The Wandering Circus side is actually playing solo!"

"The president of Russell Cemetery has soloed out of the plug before, but that was in mid-season, which is unheard of in a playoff final match!"

"I can imagine that if Bai Liu does win this game in this way, the Wandering Circus will be the team to beat next year!"

Lu Yizhan was just about to step forward when he saw Bai Liu across from him calmly raise his hand: "We're not giving up the singles."

The presenter was stunned, "Wait!"

" Bai Liu says their team won't give up the singles!!!"

"That means, he has to fight a single match!!!"

The host was thoroughly excited, his voice almost hissing as he held up the microphone, "Does that mean that Bai Liu is going to take on the Killer Sequence solo, in pairs, and in a group match all by himself!"

"My God, this is unheard of!"

"He's only got one get-out-of-jail-free card! Then there's two games where he can't use his exemption!"

"That's just crazy!"

"Let's see how Killer Sequence will take it!" The host turned to the Killer Sequence side, "This madness will also give the Reverse Gods, who have been playing it safe, a headache, right? After all, Bai Liu won the single match against the strongest single player, Spades, and the single match will also consume the gold medal, so the Reverse Gods side will probably choose to forfeit ..... "

Before the moderator could say anything, Lu Yizhan also raised his hand, his voice steady: "The killer sequence side will not give up the single."

"Out of the race, the Inquisitors against the Gods."

The presenter was stunned: "Out of the race, the Reverse God himself?!"

Liao Ke and Bai Yi were both stunned, Bai Jiamu completely

overwhelmed and dumbfounded as he watched the calm and collected Reverse God prepare to take the field.

" Captain Lu!" Liao Ke saw Lu Yizhan going up and couldn't help but shout out what he wanted to say.

Lu Yizhan turns his head over and smiles heartily, "Someone has to stop him before he really goes and does something bad."

"I've watched him grow up, there's no sense in watching him go on to become an evil god."

Lu Yizhan turned back to Bai Liu who approached him, took a deep breath and got up to walk forward, "I spoke to him."

"He's really going to be the bad guy in front of me, and the first bad thing that does-"

"-it would have to be to kill me."

"I'm not going to die, I'm not going to let him be the bad guy."

Lu Yizhan stepped up next to the viewing screen.

Bai Liu reached to his left, he let go of the death free card in his hand and raised his eyes, his tone flat, "I forfeit the death free card for this match."

Lu Yizhan paused for a moment as he also took out his own immunity card, looked across at Bai Liu, and then slowly put it down: "..... this game, I also give up."

Two exemptions from death fall to the ground.

The whole room was in an uproar.

"Wow!" The host snapped his fingers and intoned, "Another single match where both teams give up their immunity!"

"That dooms the odds that one person will die in this game!"

"And it's a single match between the tacticians of both sides, so that means that whoever's tactician dies in this single match-"

"-whichever team is the first to lose the game!"

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu Against the Gods confirms that he will

not use the Death Free Medal in this match].

[..... game screening in progress ..... game loading in progress .....]

[Game loaded successfully.]

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu Against the Gods has logged in to the game copy "The Temple of Nightmares"]

Bai Liu entered a magnificent temple and opened his eyes.

He entered into the ultimate nightmare.

The Temple of Nightmares

When Bai Liu turned around, he saw Lu Yizhan, also standing in the temple, a very narrow map, narrow like an arena, like their mission.

[System Alert: The person who kills the opponent and walks out of the temple wins the game].

[The victor gets an audience with the evil god.]

They were separated only by a dilapidated pool, surrounded by pillars crawling with damp plants, and they raised their heads to look at each other, between the daylight and the wind that fell from the vault of heaven into the pool, with its damp sea air, with old memories that made discomfort tighten again.

"Why did you ....." Lu Yizhan took a deep breath, "give up the get-out-of-jail-free card?"

Bai Liu calmly asks in return, "Why did you give up?"

They lapsed into silence again.

For Bai Liu knew, and Lu Yizhan knew, that having come this far, with the exception of one of them dying, this game called Evil God -

--Impossible to end.

"I will never let you, this time." Lu Yizhan smiled with relief, his eyes brimming with tears as he hefted his heavy sword and said hoarsely, "I will cut you down here!"

Bai Liu drew out his all-black bone whip, his eyes flat and unruffled: "That would be best."

Reality.

Fang Dian was not surprised to find that Lu Yizhan was no longer there when she woke up early. Although it was a public holiday, Lu Yizhan had never had a weekend, not to mention the fact that he was scratching his head about his new position, crying and hugging her waist, complaining that he might be busier in the future.

When exactly can we get married?

Lu Yizhan sighed worriedly; he always said this, but the last time he

complained he rarely mentioned it, and even Fang Dian gave him an astonished look.

When Fang Dian agreed to his proposal, she was in a trance for two days, giggling in her sleep.

However, Fang Dian is not too anxious to get married, as it is a lifelong affair between two people, not an urgent one.

There is a long way to go.

Fang Dian got up and stretched out, and started to clean up the house. While she was cleaning up, she was planning in her head whether to give Lu Yizhan and Bai Liu, two guys who don't care much about themselves, some clothes or something, and have dinner together tonight.

She slowly pulled out a small red velvet box from under the bed, with a letter underneath.

Fang Dian raises an eyebrow in amusement - after all these years, Lu Yizhan's hiding places haven't changed.

She was about to put it back as if she hadn't seen it and turn the letter over when she accidentally caught sight of the time it was sent - same city courier, that's today, so she would receive it today.

But why wasn't it sent?

Lu Yizhan is not the kind of person who forgets to do something. The fact that he hid this and hid it under his bed means that it was important to him, so why didn't he send it?

Fang Dian paused in the act of putting it back, she took the letter and the small box out with some confusion, and after a moment's hesitation, opened the letter.

[To the wife of the family.]

[It's a bit out of place to call you that, but forgive me for calling you that anyway.]

The black bone whip came crashing down from the sky into the pond, sending waves into the air. Lu Yizhan raised his heavy sword to block the whip, but the strength of the whip was so terrible that it smashed him right into the wall of the temple.

Lu Yizhan slammed against the wall and choked out a cough, the wound on his right shoulder from that soul-crushing gun hurting so badly that he let go and his heavy sword fell.

Bai Liu stepped out of the smoke from the whip, his eyes cold and unforgiving, and brought another whip down hard on his face.

[System Alert: Player Inquisitor of the Reverse Gods uses personal skill (for taijutsu)]

This is the skill of Wu Ruishu, the Bai six who believes that there is always a world line and that the good boys are the righteous judges of the cross.

Fang Dian knelt beside the bed and read down word by word.

[Even though you don't remember, you used to teach me many things, and there are many people who have taught me many things, but they are no longer there].

[I'll always miss them because the only things I have left in me are from them, and I wouldn't have lasted this long without those things].

[And what has really kept me going so far is my faith.]

[My faith, which you gave me, Captain Fang.]

Lu Yizhan caught Bai Liu's full strength whip with a hard Taiji palm, then used his strength to turn the whip back around, and drew his heavy sword again with his backhand, hissing angrily, "World line overlap!"

"Leave the temple, Bai Liu!!!"

"I will never let you become an evil god!"

"You also--" Lu Yizhan swung his heavy sword down viciously, smashing it against Bai Liu's open whip, tears slipping from his eyes, "-- -didn't want to be this evil god at all, did you?!"

[I have judged many monsters, sinners, and heretics].

[These things originally had clear boundaries in my eyes, but the further I went, the more I found that whether they were monsters, heretics, or sinners, the line between them and normal human beings was so clear that even I, the judge, could not tell which should be judged and which should not.]

[So, the moment I became a heretic myself, I was confused, Captain Fang.]

Should I be like Cen Buming, who judged all the heretics to protect more humans, or like Bai Six, who accepted all the heretics?

[I don't know how to choose the right one.]

[The more I came to the end, the more hesitant and confused I became. I was not a qualified judge or a qualified saviour, but those who were good judges and saviours, had left me.]

When I was at my most lost, I met Bai Liu.

[Bai Liu, who is only fourteen years old].

Bai Liu's whip collided with Lu Yizhan's spatial folding skill and fell to the floor in fragmented pieces, Bai Liu's entire right wrist was broken, Lu Yizhan's heavy sword was stuck in the wall, his shoulder was covered in blood, and his chest was heaving violently as he braced himself from the floor to stand.

Half of Lu Yizhan's face was red with blood, and Bai Liu's shirt was soaked with blood that only the back was white.

They looked at each other and simultaneously gave up using their weapons and lunged at each other with their bare hands.

Fang Dian turns the letter over a page.

[Bai Liu, aged fourteen, is a very peculiar child, I thought he was a monster, but he cries, laughs, loves story books, even remembers a random word of mine, gets up in the middle of the night to read for his school exams, and coldly warns me not to get ahead of myself when I find out that he's not reading because of my words, but because he wants to].

[He ..... doesn't look like a monster.]

[You told me not to look at the world with the eyes of a monster.]

[Whatever their future may be, they are, at this moment, human beings.]

[I am human, Bai Liu is human, Cen Buming is human, the former second team captain is human, we are all human, we have desires, we have feelings, we have things to fight for, we have an ending we want

to achieve -]

[- There are people who want to be protected.]

[Reality is reality not because the game cannot be logged in, but because in reality, there are things we want to guard for, even if they are just a toy to the evil gods, but for us, it is something worth giving everything for, becoming a monster for, and even turning from a monster to a human again for.]

[A monster cannot always be a monster, nor can a man always be a man.]

Lu Yizhan pinned Bai Liu to the ground and, with tears streaming down his face, punched him hard: " Bai Liu! You can't go on any longer!"

"You've done enough to win this league!!!"

"Keep going and you'll lose more!"

Lu Yizhan squeezed Bai Liu's shoulders and arms and wrestled him to the ground over and over again - a tactic he used on the prisoners.

Bai Liu's body is drenched in blood, his arms and legs are covered in bruises, but Lu Yizhan is no better, his nose is bruised and battered, and his eyes, always distressed or gentle, are filled with some unprecedented intensity as he stares at Bai Liu, motionless and dead, as if ready to charge.

They brutally and unmercifully wrestled with each other.

Lu Yizhan, however, had tears leaking from his eyes, and he raised his hand to wipe his own eyes, making his face a bloody mess, before looking up and questioning him with a choked sob: "Bai Liu, what is the meaning of your existence?"

"- just to be the monster standing opposite me?"

"Aren't you alone?"

[..... The ten years I've spent with you and Bai Liu have been the happiest I've lived in a long time.]

[I often forget my duty in the midst of your company, forgetting that I am in a game with an evil god, which I know is a game, but because of your presence, how I wish it were reality].

[My reluctance to bring game props into reality and exchange game points for real currency is all because of my self-avoidance].

[I wishfully thought that if I used less of what I had in the game, the game would come to this world even a minute slower, and I always did this struggle of not being able to do anything about it, but I've seen the future and know that it's not going to be what I want it to be.]

[The end and the future, both as promised].

[- It's like I knew from the beginning that I couldn't have a wedding with you, couldn't marry you].

"But I don't want to be alone." Bai Liu tilted his head, his face deformed by Lu Yizhan, only his dark eyes still clear, his voice hoarse but still clear, "I'd rather be a monster surrounded by them."

"I don't want to be one either."

Lu Yizhan's pupils flinched.

He saw Bai Liu crying.

"What else can I lose ....." Bai Liu stood up slowly, his voice hoarse as he raised his bloodied face, "Wasn't my loss of all my future doomed the moment I was chosen by the gods? "

" Lu Yizhan, you have seen this future, haven't you?"

"You know I'll even kill you myself."

Bai Liu tilting his head, a heavy sword levitates from his hand and is held tightly in his grip.

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu uses Player Reverse God's Soul Note to log into the System Panel and use the skill - (Reverse God's Inquisitor)]

Lu Yizhan looked somewhat dazedly at the heavy sword in Bai Liu's hand - it was his heavy sword.

I knew from the moment I met 14-year-old Bai Liu that I would end up with him.

[A game that lasted ten years, and in the end he won.]

The only thing I didn't know at first was why Bai Liu cried when he won a game against me, he always likes to win and should have a smile on his face at the end, but I finally understand now.

[Because he lost his best friend].

[Captain Fang, I've been saving this ring for a long time, with my salary, and the first time I saw it I thought it would look good on you.]

[Although it is quite inappropriate to say this already, but this letter, with my guts, will most likely not be sent even if I write it in the end, so I will write it-]

[- Marry me, Fang Dian.]

The heavy sword penetrated Lu Yizhan's heart and he slowly slid down, a large stain of blood staining his heart as he collapsed on Bai Liu's shoulder.

Bai Liu tilted his head, his expression blank, it was clear that he was the one who did it, but in the end it was as if he was the one who died.

"Right no ..... up." Lu Yizhan's eyelids slowly fell as he slid down the heavy sword that ran through him from Bai Liu's shoulder to the ground, blood spilling from the corners of his mouth, a relieved smile actually on his face, "In the end, it was, self-inflicted, that stood in your way ....."

"..... made you kill your best friend with your own hands."

The Temple of Nightmares

[System Alert: Player Bai Liu has won the final game].

[Ask player Bai Liu, looking towards the pool.]

Bai Liu lowered his head as the smashed and bloody pool parted from the sides and rhythmic applause emanated from within.

"A fine duel." Bai six stood next to the suspended Fang Dian, who smiled and said, "The way you executed her lover, you've got a bit of my style."

"I have just allowed her to merge with the memories of this world line, and to watch with me the entire execution of her lover, the prophet."

"It just so happens that the seer has lost the game as well, and you saved me a few moments of work by helping me execute her in front of her."

Fang Dian slowly lifted her head, with tears in her eyes.

Bai Liu looks at Fang Dian, who is hanging from the ceiling, and the moment he meets her eyes, he is frozen in place.

[God gives creatures, lovers, friends and loved ones].

[And then deprive it thereby from the side of creation oh, as a way of creating suffering and brewing souls.]

"Enough of catching up, let us now enter the ritual of the evil god's succession." Bai six slid his finger down, and an old carved door appeared at the bottom of the pool. Bai six opened it a crack, and behind it countless orbs of silvery blue light instantly poured out.

Bai six instantly merged into these spheres, and only his laughing voice remained: "That is, kill me, the old god, and you will become the true god."

"But your current power is nowhere near enough to kill me."

"You've come this far so I can talk to you about the duties of working as an evil god."

"I believe you already know that I am a product of the Gate, that I was

born to guard it, that on one side of the Gate is an endless stream of silver-blue tainted heretics, and that on the other end is a constant stream of worldlines born from my body."

"But do you want to know how the door was created?"

Bai Liu half-squinted as a mass of spheres converged in front of him, a halo of light so dazzling that he could not open his eyes. He looked in Fang Dian's direction and reached out to grab them, but Fang Dian was instantly swallowed up by these dense spheres and could no longer be seen.

The last person around him also disappeared.

The spheres form a wall around Bai Liu, confining him and preventing him from moving, and Bai six's voice is hidden within them, laughing and smiling.

"Originally there was no gate, the more ancient gods, when creating the worldline, found that human desires always lead to the destruction of the world, that their desires give birth to strange heresies that pollute the world, and in order to keep the worldline running peacefully and to keep the guardians of humanity, they spoke of the dangerous desires generated by all worldline humans coming together. "

"And to imprison these desires, they created the Gate and me, and I am the guardian of the Gate, the incarnation of the Gate, and all I have to do is purify and bear the desires of mankind, as well as imprison the dangerous desires of mankind forever on this side of the Gate."

"So on one side of the door is light and order, and on the other side is chaos and darkness, and I can only allow the worldline of light to come to the light side and the worldline of darkness to come to the dark side."

"But in time these gods too fell away, and only I remain, for the desires of men are endless, and as long as their evil desires exist for a moment, I exist for a moment."

Bai six Dropping his eyes, he looked at the sphere of light around him and nodded lightly with a sigh.

"I had existed alone for too long and began to grow bored with the whole guarding humans thing, so I let the dangerous desires and

heresies on the other side of the gate through."

"A funny thing has really happened." Bai six's laugh drifted further and further away, "I found that without the door as an objective constraint, there was no difference between the world lines on either side of the door."

"Everyone generates the same evil desires."

"I am becoming more and more bored with the whole guarding humans thing, but when I was created, I could not leave this door and unless someone more suitable comes along, I will have to remain as a door."

"But to keep the door, one needs to be able to stay awake and sane all the time in the face of desire and pollution and be a strong enough soul in its own right."

"I have tried many approaches in different world lines and found that pain is an important criterion for selecting the quality of the soul. "

"The more distressed the soul, the more it can stay awake in its desires."

Bai six laughed softly, "And I've been looking for you for so long, and I've finally found you, Bai Liu."

The sphere dispersed in a flash and Bai Liu appeared in front of him, smiling lightly as he looked at Bai Liu, whose pupils tightened for a moment.

"Your soul is strong enough to bear all the desires of the world line, and you are a better evil god than I am to be a gatekeeper."

"Now that I have opened the door, the heretics and monsters on this side of the door will flock frantically to the other side, and on the other side, all the normal world lines, of course-"

"-including the 658 world line where you are."

Bai six nudged the door, which had only been gaping open a crack, and a silvery-blue mass of light burst out of it instantly.

The moment Bai Liu saw the door open, the silvery-blue dust inside quickly coalesced into a ball of light, with all sorts of strange and otherworldly images flowing through it, with hideous and distorted

faces, while on the other side, the 657 world lines that had been contaminated by Bai Liu were slowly approaching the door, interspersed with the sphere of light and darkness. -The 658 worldline where he was.

"The change of the evil gods requires the opening of the door, and after the door is opened, both sides of the world line will come closer to the middle of the door." Bai six smiled softly, "For the last evil god, that is, I, am about to fall, and at the moment of my fall the door will disappear and the two sides will merge, and the darkness will come to the side of the light and the light to the side of the darkness."

"That is to say, the sides of the door will be inverted."

"And all you have to do is to absorb all the desires of the world line in this moment of inversion and stay awake, and the turnover is complete."

Bai Liu raised his head, blood dripping from his jaw, his voice hoarse, "And what about you, do I not have to kill you?"

"No need." Bai six finally smiled and stepped fully out of the ball of light, "I myself am the embodiment of desire."

"When you absorbed all your desires, I ceased to exist, or rather, you were born in my place."

"But accordingly, all the memories of my existence, all the memories of what my derivatives have done in 658 world lines will also be absorbed by you, which is equivalent to you becoming a collection of us."

Bai six smiled a very friendly smile, "And I don't know if you'll still be you at that time."

"-or maybe, you turn out to be the next me, too."

"Now, the turnover begins."

"Oh, I forgot the friendly reminder." Bai six smiled at Bai Liu, "During the turnover, you, as the door, are immovable."

"- you can only be alone, watching all the lines of the world being polluted, degraded and destroyed before you."

"Who said he was alone!" A heavy sword was flung out of the sphere

of light, severing the sphere that imprisoned Bai Liu, and a harsh, crisp female voice came from the sphere, "And I'm beside him!"

Bai Liu's expression was stunned the moment he fell from the wall of the ball of light, and he even stumbled a little from his injuries as he fell, and was helped to stand up.

"Is everything okay?" Fang Dian's voice and smile were the same as ever, "I'm not too late, am I?"

"Why ....." Bai Liu tilted his head incredulously, and for the first time he could hardly contain, kept dropping tears, "and stood by me?"

"I'm going to be an evil god."

"So what?" Fang Dian said calmly, "Evil gods are human too."

"There can be good and bad evil gods."

"If you do become an evil god, I'm sure you'll be a good evil god."

[I think Bai Liu will be a good boy.]

"A good evil god?" Bai six gave a soft laugh, "Nonsense."

He drops his eyes and swings his hand downwards, the door opens fully to Bai Liu, and the silvery-blue dust inside comes swiftly like a blizzard at Bai Liu's face, instantly transforming into all sorts of monsters and heretics that hideously invade the world line on this side of the door.

In just an instant, Bai Liu's eyes turned silver blue as countless human desires and dreams flooded into his brain, bludgeoning his soul into nothingness and immobility.

..... don't.

It took almost all of Bai Liu's strength to turn his head sideways and look at the shimmering 658 worldline, which was darkening and dulling in a silvery blue glow and was about to go to the other side of the door.

..... He doesn't want to forget this world line.

He did not want to see this line of the world destroyed in front of him.

Even if he becomes an evil god, even if he will have endless world

lines in the future, the world line that has brought him this far, he doesn't want to have to watch its destruction like this.

"I will not allow any of the world lines to be tainted." Fang Dian held up her heavy sword and stepped in front of Bai Liu, standing in front of the door to the endless stream of heretics coming at her, she tilted her head back, looking fierce and determined, and swung down with her heavy sword raised high, "And I won't let Bai Liu see his world line tainted!"

"Judgement of Light!"

A huge halo of pure white light erupted from Fang Dian's decapitated heavy sword, forcing all the monsters to scream and retreat behind the door, while Bai Liu stared in awe at Fang Dian's back against the light.

She held her heavy sword flat in her right hand, her voice firm and calm in the dense light: "I will never let the heretic take a step beyond the gate."

In the midst of the confusion, Bai Liu, already somewhat blurred in his consciousness by his desire, remembers only that he saw the heretic on the other side of the door keep crawling out and being hissed back by Fang Dian, who stood beside him again and again, tapping him on the shoulder to keep him awake, protecting them again and again with her body in front of the world line and him.

Never back down, never admit defeat.

Bai six sighs, "You are truly the most defiant human being I have ever met."

"Ahem ....." Fang Dian wiped the blood from the side of her mouth and looked up with a smile, "It's not like I'm not defeated."

"I know I can't win against you, so I just don't want to lose."

"The people I love are standing behind me, their souls, their beliefs are sustaining me, and if I concede defeat so easily -"

Fang Dian's eyes were red and she smiled as she waved down her heavy sword, "- then is it not true that the value of their sacrifice is as light as you, the evil god, say?"

At the end of the battle, Fang Dian, bruised and bloodied, stood in

front of Bai Liu, who looked up at her and said very softly, "I killed Lu Yizhan."

"I know, I saw it." Fang Dian paused for a moment as she resisted the heavy sword to her shoulder again and let out a deep breath, "But I didn't just see you kill him, I saw the letter he left me."

" Lu Yizhan's letter tells me that he has known this ending for a long time and that he accepts it."

"So I'm sure you know that too." Fang Dian turned her head, the woman covered in blood was actually smiling brightly at the moment, she even winked at Bai Liu, "So I'm guessing this is just a little game of cheating played on the evil gods by friends joining forces for good is it?"

"I don't want to pry into your little secrets."

Fang Dian swung her heavy sword again to kill the heretic and her voice became heavy and strong: "But when it's all over, no more of this messing around!"

The door was getting closer and closer to Fang Dian, Bai Liu saw Fang Dian staggering to her feet with her heavy sword propped up, her shoulder and back covered in wounds, she looked back at Bai Liu at that moment as if she suddenly had a heart to heart, she smiled a little, the wind blowing her long hair, she said to Bai Liu with a muzzle smile.

Don't be afraid to part with the one you love, Bai Liu.

[We will meet again eventually].

[I believe you will bring us all back to this world].

The Temple of Nightmares

The door leaps forward, swallowing a smiling Fang Dian whole, and a polka-dotted butterfly hair rope falls in the air.

Bai Liu falls slowly from the cluster of spheres, a ball of light levitates from his body, the ball of light slowly floats away, Bai Liu is lost in thought and reaches out his hand, he sees the shiny black leather glove appear on his hand, he hears Bai six's laughter in his head.

[You have fully integrated me.]

[Now you are the new evil god].

Next, fuse the desires of derivatives from other worlds, and you will become even more powerful.

"Fusion ..... so that's it." Bai Liu lowered his eyes and looked motionlessly at this polka dotted butterfly hair string that had fallen at his feet, "Those derivatives, like me once, are your carriers, right?"

"Those derivatives also won the game, wanted to become gods, and you did make them gods as you made me gods, but soon after they merged with your consciousness, or desire, they were consumed by you."

"What you're looking for is not a new evil god, it's just a new carrier."

I can say yes, I can say no. Bai six smiled softly and replied, "I just can't find a vehicle that won't really consume me, they all sink too easily into my derived desires.

[If you can really make me disappear, I'd appreciate it.]

"I will not merge the desires of those derivatives." Bai Liu lifted his head and waved his hand, countless worldlines scattered around him, he clicked on the first one and his pupils lit up with a halo of light, "I will not be your new carrier either."

"Let the game of the so-called evil gods end with me."

Bai six's voice was a little startled: [What are you doing?

Bai Liu raised his eyes, "I'm going to load all the world lines, the original archive points you set up, and kill all your derivatives before

it all starts-"

"-including myself."

A silver-blue light continues to spill out of Bai Liu's body, and the threads of the world that Fang Dian had protected to the last have gathered around Bai Liu, a warm glow illuminating Bai Liu's face, which seems to have many expressions, but also seems to have no expression at all, leaving only a calmness that has already thought of an ending for itself.

Bai Liu holds out his hand and he drags up a worldline, the light of which has become mostly cloudy, hovering restlessly from side to side in Bai Liu's palm, trying to pass through Bai Liu's body and reach the other side of the door. Bai Liu drops his eyes and probes his hand into this worldline and he holds something.

[System Alert: Evil God Bai Liu loading world line reset point 001.]

[So that's it.] Bai six laughed lightly, [You wanted to become an evil god in order to obtain the initial reset points for each world line from me and gain the power to reset all world lines, I'm curious how you guessed that I hid the initial reset points in the world lines when I gave you so many archive points on the ship.]

"Because ....." Bai Liu looked up at the world line, "they are all telling me not to be afraid of parting, that we will meet again eventually."

"Then there must exist something, something to start over with."

"And this is a game, and the only thing the game can start over with is a reset."

[Indeed.] Bai six said with amusement, [But Bai Liu, think about it, a reset does allow the game to begin again, as well as a new convergence of their shattered souls from this universe].

[But one's memory does not reset.]

[After you reset, they are stripped of their player status again and are just a bunch of NPCs, so they won't remember you as a player anymore, any trace of your existence, anyone else's memory of you, will disappear with you, never to be found again].

[- including their feelings for you].

[And isn't that what you want most now? After the reset, the friendship of Mu Sicheng, Muke, Tang Erda, Liu Jiayi, the affection of Fang Dian and Lu Yizhan, and even the love of Tawil will all be gone, and you will even be considered an enemy because of your identity as an evil god.]

[Are you going to guard them alone with 658 memories that no one cares about after they've been reset?]

[That's not very fair.]

The muddy Worldline 001 enveloped Bai Liu and he slowly dropped to the ground, a scene where Worldline 001 began its showdown, opposite him were the Temple's ongoing confrontation between the Massive Cross Judgement Army and Bai six .

Bai Liu saw the youthful Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian who embraced him, he stood still for a moment watching the scene, soon he was discovered and the group looked in dismay at the second Bai Liu who appeared in the temple, Lu Yizhan and Fang Dian quickly drew their heavy swords and aimed at him with hostility in their eyes: "Who are you? "Who are you?"

[You see, human emotions are so fragile.]

[If they don't remember you, they won't have feelings for you].

Bai six said with a smile.

"But I remember." Bai Liu raised his eyes, "I won't forget."

Bai Liu looked at the Bai six who was in the process of agreeing a contract with Fang Dian, drew his gun and pointed it at him, his tone calm and unruffled: "I will never forget it."

"It is these things that have transformed me from a derivative of you, to Bai Liu."

[You're a madman.] Bai six's voice took on a laughing tone, [Is this how you came up with the idea to kill me? Make yourself my final carrier, make sure I don't have the ability to create new carriers, and then kill all of them, and while it's true that I won't exist anymore, you'll cease to exist yourself.]

"Then cease to exist." Bai Liu lowered his eyes as he did not look behind him at the Heretic Authority that had become noisy and

astonished, "I do not like a world where gods exist."

Bai Liu pulled the trigger, and the moment the bullet passed through Bai six, Bai Liu's body leaned back and shook violently as if he had been hit.

His shoulders were cracked and Fang Dian and Lu Yizhan looked on in dismay at the evil god who had slain him and wanted to ask something, but Bai Liu paddled out the door, opened it and turned away.

The next second, the world flickered into darkness and shut down.

[System Alert: Worldline 001 is erasing player Bai six's game trace and is resetting.]

.....

[System Alert: Evil God Bai Liu Loading World Line Reset Point 006]

The moment fourteen-year-old Bai six was about to extend his hand to trade with Wu Ruishu, Bai Liu icily extended his hand and flung out his playing cards, sending Bai six's right hand flying.

At the same time, Bai Liu's right hand began to shatter and the statue of Wu Ruishu in the temple began to awaken.

Bai Liu watches Lu Yizhan shakily patting Wu Ruishu's bewildered face, drops his eyes and turns away.

[System Alert: Worldline 002 is erasing player Bai six's game trace and is resetting.]

.....

[System Alert: Evil God Bai Liu loading 0317 world line reset archive point]

Bai Liu was at the window when Bai six opened his mouth and asked to play a game of truth or dare with Lu Yizhan, and the moment he pulled out his gun at Cen Buming, Bai Liu also pulled out his gun and aimed it at Bai six who was smiling at the game in the interrogation room inside.

At the same time, the records of Cen Buming's file were silently erased from the files of the Heretics Administration.

Bai Liu The chaps spread to the back.

[System Alert: World Line 0317 is erasing player Bai six's game trace and is resetting.]

.....

[System Alert: Evil God Bai Liu Loading 0369 World Line Reset Archive Point]

On the league field, as Daniel went berserk and shot Su Yang, Bai Liu pulled out his whip, knocking Daniel's gun away and pulling out his soul-crushing gun at the same time, aiming it at the Bai six next to him.

The game ended early with Tang Erda, white as a sheet, embracing Su Yang.

Bai Liu's shattering spread to his thighs and arms, and Tang Erda's record in the Heretics Authority disappeared.

[System Alert: World Line 0369 is erasing player Bai six's game trace and is resetting.]

.....

[System Alert: Evil God Bai Liu loading 0658 world line reset archive point]

Bai Liu comes to the orphanage where he was ten years ago, and he meets himself at the age of fourteen before he met Xie Ta, eating alone, reading alone, and keeping the church alone.

[Are you really going to kill him?] Bai six asked with a soft smile in Bai Liu's brain, [Those Bai six were indeed bad derivatives that smuggled in a lot of heretics that polluted the world before.]

[But this one in front of you, you should know better than anyone.]

[Just an ordinary human child].

Bai Liu stood at the back of the church, his eyes downcast as he watched this child sitting alone in the first row of the church reading a book by himself for a long time. Fourteen-year-old Bai Liu was reading the storybook of the long, thin ghostly figure, reading it intently, but there was no one next to him, only bits of green shade falling on his writing through the church windows in a kind of hazy

interplay.

As if aware of the presence of someone, the fourteen year old Bai Liu turned his head and he saw Bai Liu, who raised his gun and pointed it at the other man.

How would a fourteen-year-old behave when faced with someone who wants to kill him for no reason?

Bai Liu can no longer recall, he only vaguely remembers imagining that someone would come and kill him and then he would .....

The little Bai Liu in front of him looked at him quietly for a moment, then closed his eyes.

"Are you here to kill me as a monster?"

"Then you kill it."

..... themselves would accept someone killing themselves.

Because he was a monster, it was only natural that he should be killed, that he should never have existed in a world without his own kind, that's what everyone around him told him at the age of fourteen, and that's what he took for granted.

No one cared for him, no one understood him, no one ..... loved him.

Bai Liu placed the gun on the church table, he sat down next to little Bai six, opened the first page of the storybook, lowered his eyes and whispered, "I'll finish this book with you."

"I'll kill you after I see it."

Little Bai Liu dutifully sat over, and after a pause he stole a glance at Bai Liu sitting next to him and whispered, "Can you watch it twice before you kill me?"

"I really enjoyed the book."

Bai Liu was quiet for a moment: "Yes."

He turned his head sideways and looked calmly at little Bai Liu who had pushed the book his way to share it with him and thought - in the next ten years, there will be many people who will come to you and read with you.

They love you and will cook you delicious food, play the most dangerous and scary games with you, huddle with you in a cramped house to keep warm and give you every birthday, and you will spend the long winter days in the middle of a steaming hot pot like the beautiful families in your most hated fairy tale books, and you will never be alone again.

But sorry.

I'm going to take them out of your [future], now.

As the storybook turned to the last page for the second time, Bai Liu drew his gun and pointed it at little Bai Liu, whose body stiffened and trembled as he closed his eyes, then Bai Liu lowered his eyes as he slowly turned the gun upside down and pointed it at his head, his voice soft and calm: "He was indeed not wrong."

"The person who did the wrong thing and shouldn't exist is me."

"Bang-!"

Gunshots rang out.

[System Alert: World Line 0658 is erasing player Bai Liu's game trace and is resetting.]

All world lines are reset, and Bai Liu's shell is like a tree that withers for a moment. In just a few moments, his shell dissipates into a field of fallen leaves, and he becomes a floating soul, sinking ever downward, downward.

He sank into the silvery blue of space, descending slowly through the deep sea of space, descending again, a halo of light illuminated Bai Liu's face, and he opened his eyes in disorientation as he saw the system backstage ships suspended in the middle of the universe, and the no longer orbiting backstage ships, all resetting, once again to pure white 658 world lines.

[My carrier is your soul. Bai Liu's laughter rang out again, [As long as your soul is not destroyed, I will always exist.]

[Have you the courage to destroy your own soul and let you disappear with me?]

[But if you destroy your soul, there will be no one left to guard the door to protect these freshly reset world lines from contamination].

Bai Liu turned his head and he looked into the deepest part of the universe at an ancient carved door that was still open, a steady stream of silvery-blue dust spilling out of that door, trying to contaminate the lines of the world after those resets. Bai Liu floated down and he gripped the pull ring of the carved door and took a deep breath, trying to pull the door tight.

..... is just a little closer, and as soon as he pulls it tight, this game is over.

[..... How did I get such a stubborn derivative as you, there is no way to close this door.] Bai six spoke with a helplessness and a sigh, [Like the door of one's desires, it never closes for a moment and needs to be guarded at all times to keep heretics and monsters from overflowing.]

[You have crushed all the carriers and cannot absorb the power of desire. With your current energy, there is no way to close the door, and forcing it shut will only break your own soul.]

Bai Liu slammed the door with all his might and his soul became deflated as a result, his voice hoarse: "..... There are ways you can close it forever."

"Didn't you tell me that in the witch's copy?"

"[The moment the brave and suffering soul leaves the body, it becomes a jewel, a jewel that fills the cracks of desire]."

"Now my soul, is it not just such a thing, this door, is it not just the seam of desire?"

Bai six lapsed into silence, and after a long interval, whispered: [Just a theoretical approach].

[If you do that, you really don't exist in the world at all, Bai Liu.]

[Your soul will become the key that closes this door, and exist on it forever, but you have consciousness, memory, and feelings, and you will become the living mass of gold in the land of gold, the mass that fills the hourglass with just ten years of suffering, and you, a soul that has been turned into a key, and you will so keep suffering with desire for millions, millions, and billions of years- -]

[- It's really not fair to you just to save the humans who have given you a modicum of affection].

[It's not a fair deal.]

"But feelings are not something that can be traded fairly." Bai Liu laughed very softly as he reached out to touch the door, a halo of light shifting in his eyes, "I think it's worth it enough."

At the moment Bai Liu's hand touched the door's handle, another hand also gripped Bai Liu's. Bai Liu stopped moving as if he had been electrocuted and looked at the hand in a daze before someone hugged him tightly from behind.

"I'm sorry." Xie Ta embraced Bai Liu's soul as he shed tears, "I'm too late."

"I'm sorry." Xie Ta repeated those three words very softly, "I'm sorry I remembered too late, I was too stupid to make you wait too long."

He turned back from the past and finally remembered everything, but the moment he saw Bai Liu's soul, he knew that things were irreversible.

Bai Liu has become the new evil god.

"It's too late to say you're sorry." Bai Liu let go of his hand, he tilted his head back, embraced Xie Ta, closed his eyes and said very softly, "I'm leaving you."

"No!" For the first time, fear was visible on Xie Ta's ever-cloudy face, and he couldn't stop the tears from falling, suspended in the air as droplets of water.

Bai Liu smiled, his forehead pressed against Xie Ta's, stroking away the tears on his face, his tone soft: "You're scared too, Xie Ta."

"Then how come you didn't know I'd be scared too when you left me in the first place?"

Xie Ta lifted her head, tears dripping from her jaw, her voice trembling softly, "I'll stay with you."

"I'll keep the door with you."

"You can't keep me company." Bai Liu curled his mouth very shallowly, "I don't want you to stay with me."

"I want you to wait for me."

"I want to torture you, I want you to know how painful it was for me to wait for you in the first place, I want you to know that I am somewhere deep in this universe, but you cannot come to see me, I want you to live a happy life but be unhappy when you think of me."

"-I will collect pain from your hands like an evil god."

"I have not charged anyone with pain since I became this evil god, and you who offer me pain are my only devotee."

"God will grant any wish of the sole believer."

Bai Liu drops his eyelashes very gently, he closes his eyes and kisses Xie Ta who embraces him in tears, unwilling to let him go.

"So pray devoutly."

Bai Liu fell into the door, his eyelids drooping and his soul attaching itself to the gap in the door: the

"..... We will meet again eventually."

The door closed and a violent silver-blue glow erupted from the other end of the door.

[System Alert: Evil God is changing, door double-sided world is about to be reset ..... reset failed ..... reset again ..... detected door is closed, can't reset .....]

[Warning! Warning! The door has been blocked, the system is unable to take energy from the other end of the door, low on energy and about to shut down .....]

[Game system off.]

The Final Future

Ten years later.

Mu Sicheng sat on the curb with a skateboard in one hand, holding a cone and licking it as he watched the entertainment news on the big screen in the mall across the street - [Liu Jiayi, a nine-year-old child prodigy, has entered secondary school with highly educated parents, admitting that he was born with the child and has no knack for nurturing it].

"Tsk." Mu Sicheng spat with narrowed eyes, "This world of internal scrolls, you start reading at the age of three."

"Fourth Brother!" Liu Huai came over with a bag of fried chicken, sweating, and handed Mu Sicheng a bottle of Coke, "The Coke you wanted, fried chicken to eat?"

"Didn't I tell you not to buy fried chicken?" Mu Sicheng said with some displeasure.

"You invited me to eat fried chicken before, and I thought I never got to treat you back, so ....." Liu Huai scratched his head, and he gave Mu Sicheng a cautious look, "Fourth Brother, you're not happy, are you? "

"Not really." Mu Sicheng took the bag, took a bite out of it with two fingers, and then turned his head and gave Liu Huai a fierce look, "I told you not to keep such accounts."

"Are you going to buy me a kidney next time I give you something expensive as a favour?"

"..... What about your father's case?" Mu Sicheng saw that Liu Huai was still arguing with himself about the topic that they had argued about countless times, so he impatiently interrupted and changed the subject, "Did you win the case against the domestic violence offender?"

"It was a bit difficult to gather evidence, but the villagers were willing to testify." Liu Huai smiles coyly, "So it's going well."

"Do you still skateboard, Fourth Brother?"

Mu Sicheng sat up from the bench and threw his empty Coke can into

the bin in a shooting pose, then clapped his hands together triumphantly, "Back to work."

"It's going to be finals, go back and revise, you draw me the key points, I'm basically not listening in class, I don't know how these teachers can talk so hypnotically ....."

"..... Fourth Brother, don't blame the teacher for your own sleepiness, you still have to listen well to your major ....."

Liu Huai said, glancing back at Liu Jiayi on the big screen in the commercial street, he was in a trance for a moment, Mu Sicheng followed his gaze and raised his eyebrows: "Speaking of which, this prodigy and you have the same surname eh, five hundred years ago they were family, right? "

"It feels like your sister."

"How can a brother like me have a sister who is so good?" Liu Huai laughs as he sighs a little and looks towards Liu Jiayi, who is wearing a small dress on the big screen and is being interviewed by the media in a decent manner, "But I do have some kinship with her, she's my cousin's daughter, her mother got into university that year and was called over by my dad to tutor me, but I was beaten up so badly by my dad at that time that I was afraid of whatever he did. scared."

"I was afraid she'd get beaten up when she came over as well, and I really didn't want to study, so then this was dropped."

"My cousin is very smart, and her daughter is really good too." Liu Huai smiled very gently as he looked at Liu Jiayi, "I have an eye for Jiayi and always feel that she and I might actually be brother and sister in one life."

"But it's still not better."

Liu Huai smiles with a brow arched: "Otherwise she would have to suffer a lot to be my sister."

Mu Sicheng was just about to say something when his phone rang and he looked down to see - [Caller: Yuan Qingqing].

He paused for a moment before picking up, "Hello?"

"Hello? Mu Sicheng." Yuan Qingqing's voice was as serious as ever, "The class dinner is this Saturday at 6pm, and there are currently

thirty-six visitors, so you are invited to come."

Mu Sicheng, while speechless at the tone of what a business invitation this is, spat, "..... Didn't we get together last month, and then again this month?"

"It's Mr. Ren's 60th birthday this month, so we're all getting together to celebrate his birthday." Yuan Qingqing explained seriously, "I've looked at the exam schedule of your college, you have an exam next week, right? If it's urgent and you need to revise, I'll help you Mr. Xiang explain, so you don't have to make up this point, you can congratulate your teacher alone when the time comes and the thought is there."

"..... I'm pretty much done reviewing, it's not like I can't go." Mu Sicheng's toes stomped twice on his skateboard and asked charmingly, "Do you bring family?"

Yuan Qingqing was crisp and clear: "Bring, he's coming with me."

Mu Sicheng was silent for a twisted minute, angry: "He's a man, why is he so clingy! He has to go with you on everything, can't he leave you a little privacy!"

"......?" Yuan Qingqing was confused, "He's with me, what's wrong?"

Mu Sicheng took a deep breath: "It's nothing, I'll be there then too, please let me know."

He paused, "Class president."

"It's what I should do." Yuan Qingqing gave one more instruction, "To come to dinner on Saturday, remember to study more and don't fail your classes."

Mu Sicheng hangs up the phone, squats down and repeatedly pushes his skateboard twice, his whole being falling into a kind of fleshly emo. Liu Huai next to him pats Mu Sicheng's shoulder sympathetically, he is already used to this intermittent state of lost love from his opponent.

"Learn to let go, Fourth Brother."

Mu Sicheng gets up, clips his skateboard angrily and points ahead, "Go, go back and review!"

A group of tall, well-trained men in civilian clothes walked past Mu Sicheng, led by a man with dark blue eyes who stared sternly ahead as the voice of another man came over his headset.

" Captain Tang, the heretics have entered the mall, we have cleared the cinema of visitors and the rear infiltration squad has cooperated."

Tang Erda takes a deep breath: "The former Captain Fang is also ready to collect ....."

A sudden noise erupted in the mall in front of him and Tang Erda, with a glint in her eye, rushed in and then stared at Cen Buming, who had finished housing the heretics.

Tang Erda lowered her eyes to the box of heretics being stepped on by Cen Buming and ground her back teeth before she reluctantly lowered her temper and spoke, "This seems to be the heretic we've been staring at, Captain Cen."

"Hmm." Cen Buming gave a slightly cold nod, "Took you in, no thanks."

Tang Erda took a deep breath as he lifted those untamed dark blue eyes and rolled up his sleeves to reveal a bit of inappropriate aggression.

Su Yang at the other end also saw the situation and was helpless to discourage him, " Captain Tang, calm down!"

"Don't start a fight with Captain Cen in public!"

"It's okay to have a confrontation without being in a public place, right?" Tang Erda stared obscurely at Cen Buming's back as he returned triumphantly with the heretic in tow, "Can I beat him up in his cubicle at the Heretic's Bureau?"

"If you want to get cut by Captain Fang." Su Yang sighed helplessly.

Tang Erda's back stiffened when she heard the name Captain Fang.

" Captain Fang just beat you both up for fighting last time." Su Yang held her forehead, "It's only been a week, Captain Tang, and you're still injured, right?"

"Cen Buming is still wounded, and he's taking it upon himself to cause trouble!" Tang Erda was full of anger, "I told you that we have to

divide the field missions among the three teams, it's like taking his job, he's crazy to take the field missions assigned to us, what's wrong with him?!"

"It won't pay him a penny more to take in one more heretic!"

In the meantime, above the mall.

Muke, exquisitely dressed, was propped up against the fence, his long eyelashes dropping as he looked out over the mall at the heretics coming and going, and his tone was cold: "Who's that?"

"Why do you say let's shut down the mall just to shut it down?"

"Some people from the special department." The butler explained in a cold sweat, wondering in his heart how this young master with his volatile temperament suddenly had the nature to patrol his family's chain of malls today, "It's normal procedure."

"Oh yeah?" Muke returned nonchalantly, his eyes dropping in boredom, "All right, go back."

"I don't want to go to the party tonight."

The butler was shocked: "Young master, this is not possible, the master has been preparing for half a year for this banquet, just to launch you as the Mu family's heir!"

" The heir to the Mu family." Muke sneered twice in a meaningful way, "That's not what he thought when I was in bad health."

The housekeeper sighed with mixed feelings and said periodically, "But aren't you getting better now."

"It must have been a blessing from God that you became healthy."

Muke pauses for a moment.

God's blessing?

When he was unhealthy he did want the position of heir to the Mu family very badly, but when he got better he got everything he wanted, but he was extremely bored with everything he saw.

-- it was as if they had been traded for the most important thing he had.

He was always irritable and empty inside.

Muke was quiet: "I don't want to go to the party."

"Let his own bastard son come."

The housekeeper was alarmed and followed Muke's lead, discouraging him with a stern word of advice: "You can't be so capricious, Mr. Mu ....."

In the meantime, the Heresy Handling Authority.

"You're too willful and presumptuous." Lu Yizhan, sitting inside the Heretic Authority, was also speechless, leaning against the wall with his chest clutched, looking at Cen Buming, who was healing in the medical room, and asking helplessly, "Why do you always go and rob the heretics of the third team?"

Cen Buming purses his lips with a grimace.

Yu Fu, wearing a white coat, gave Cen Buming a gentle glance: "Tell me if it hurts?"

--then a hard stitch.

Lu Yizhan was so shocked that he looked at Cen Buming, who was just a little bit paler, and felt a little bit of sympathy: "Fang Dian beat you up, why don't you listen?"

--And you've messed with Fang Dian, Captain Yu has been hard on you for treatment, so it's double torture!

Lu Yizhan exclaims, "Why are you so stubborn? ....."

Cen Buming pauses: "I just ....."

"I always feel that if I take in one less heretic, a lot of things will happen, and I have to take in a lot of heretics, non-stop, in order to do that."

Seeing Lu Yizhan and Yu Fu both staring at him, Cen Buming pursed his lips and looked away, his voice stiff: "..... Just some premonitions of my own."

"I won't next time."

"There haven't been that many heretics lately that we need to be

nervous about Captain Cen to this extent, have there?" Yu Fu smiled as he collected his healing equipment, "It's all within normal limits."

"The number of heretics before was indeed abnormally high, but after a certain point it became largely normal, within the load of the Heretic Authority, although there were still a large number of dangerous heretics of the red level, but-"

"- There are Fang Dian and Xie Ta, two humanoid weapons that can handle oh."

" Xie Ta ?" Cen Buming frowned at the name, "I still don't approve of Captain Fang using him as a member of the heretic intake."

"He's a heretic in his own right and also prone to contamination, and even with a surveillance ring there's no guarantee he won't get completely out of control ....."

As he spoke, Xie Ta, with a thumb-thick black surveillance ring around his neck, wearing a Heretic's Authority uniform and boots, walked through the doorway, a man with a long, elongated body and a special black invisible eye, but still with a silver-blue halo around the edge of his pupil, a man who, even in his regular uniform, had a strange coldness and inhumanity about him.

Perhaps because of her distinguished face, Xie Ta always looks cold and unpopular.

Even now, when he hears Cen Buming talking about him behind his back, Xie Ta's eyes do not wander, and he walks through the door of the medical room without a glance.

Cen Buming who was caught red-handed talking small talk: "....."

"Captain Cen should learn how to deal with colleagues properly. Yu Fu smiles and jokes, "It's not a good idea to talk about your colleagues behind their backs, otherwise you'll get beaten up by them in a sack one day if you hear about it again."

Cen Buming, who has already been beaten up by Tang Erda in a sack: "....."

Xie Ta lowered her eyelashes and knocked gently on the door of the office of the Commander of the Judicial Cross.

Fang Dian's cheerful reply soon came from inside: "Xie Ta, right?

Please come in!"

Xie Ta pushed the door and walked in. Wu Ruishu was guarding the desk, clutching a file, and pushed his glasses up in a formal manner, bowed to Xie Ta as a greeting, then turned to Fang Dian and said, "The number of heretics has indeed gradually returned to normal recently, far less than before. Team 3 field teams are currently investigating."

"I see." Fang Dian nodded as she took the papers Wu Ruishu handed her and said with a smile, "It's hard work, I'll just read the rest myself."

Wu Ruishu blushed and waved his hand excitedly: "It's not hard Captain Fang!"

"I, I'm going out first!"

He avoided Xie Ta when he walked past, and it was clear that he was still a bit scared.

"He's not quite used to working with you yet." Fang Dian smiled as she put down her papers and made a gesture to Xie Ta to sit, "How are you getting used to working at the Heretics Authority?"

" Spades, or do you prefer the name Tawil?"

The Final Future

Xie Ta sat down, he shook his head in silence, "Just call me Xie Ta."

The door of Fang Dian's office was knocked again. Fang Dian looked at Xie Ta, who shook her head to indicate that she did not care.

Lu Yizhan pushed in the door and was stunned to see Xie Ta sitting opposite Fang Dian: "Spades is here too."

"It's called Spades, it's called Xie Ta." Fang Dian corrected, "New world line, new weather, don't keep using old names."

"Okay." Lu Yizhan obeyed the order, and changed it quickly as he was told, " Xie Ta is here too."

" Mr. Lu, close the door, you sit too." The moment Fang Dian saw Lu Yizhan close the door, he instantly lost the serious image of a serious Captain of the Judgment Army of the Cross, and slumped backwards in his office chair, his eyes lax, "..... I'm so tired, I've finally dealt with all the heretics from the previous world line. It's time to take a break."

"Good work." Lu Yizhan poured Fang Dian a glass of water, a little distressed, "The number of heretics has not been so outrageous lately."

"The essence of heresy is evil desire." Fang Dian said as she sipped her water, " Bai Liu closed the door so that the desires on the other side couldn't spill over into this worldline, a worldline where everyone's desires formed heretics wouldn't be so many, within a normal range, though it would be quite a few, at least it would be barely manageable."

Fang Dian said, and the smile on her face faded.

When the name Bai Liu was mentioned, the expressions on everyone's faces disappeared.

Xie Ta suddenly got up, and said a polite goodbye: "I've finished my assignment and will go back first."

Fang Dian watched with some concern as Xie Ta left, closing the door behind her, she covered her eyes and let out a long sigh, "In this reset world line, the only people who still have memories are the three of us, you, me, and Xie Ta."

"I don't even know how you managed to keep all three of our memories from Bai six." Lu Yizhan pats Fang Dian's shoulder and sighs too.

Fang Dian replied in seconds, "A cheat, how else can you keep it, but only for three people."

"How do you cheat?" Lu Yizhan inquired with great curiosity.

Fang Dian smiles, "Some unique cheating techniques."

"..... I don't know when Bai Liu will come back." Fang Dian said and got melancholy again, she lay back and looked at the ceiling, lost in thought, "It's been ten years since the reset, and Bai Liu hasn't come back."

"I sometimes wonder if that plan you had with Bai Liu to cheat is really working?"

Lu Yizhan Half silent: "I don't know ....."

It was a very unsure plan from the start, Lu Yizhan didn't even know if Bai Liu would go along with it and was even more surprised than Bai Liu when he finally chose to.

It was a plan to cheat from the edge of the dense forest where Bai Liu first met the game's Lu Yizhan, also known as the Reverse God.

Lu Yizhan, after seeing the future, is sure that Bai six will use various means to make them move along this future, such as Bai Liu becoming an evil god and Bai Liu killing him, since in the future, no matter how much they struggle, Bai six, the god, will interfere with them to move towards this future, why can't they act out a future scene that Bai six wants to see for Bai six? Why can't they play out the future that Bai six wants to see for Bai six?

Bai six gets the results he wants to see, and they decide what process they want.

--This process they wanted was the world line [Dense Forest Frontier].

Bai six wanted to delegate the status of [Heir of the Evil God] to Bai Liu in the world line of the borderlands of the dense forest, and the delegation of this status required the disappearance of the old god. heir] identity.

As long as Bai Liu accepts this identity, but does not fully accept it, then the old gods of this worldline are dead in name only, and the new god, Bai Liu, has not yet been born.

The old evil god has fallen, and a new god has yet to be born, a godless worldline whose nominal successor to the evil god is Bai Liu, then Bai Liu is destined to get this worldline.

Then as soon as he got this world line, the subsequent Bai Liu which used Bai six to bend over and enter the game stored in the system background soul blocked the door, he still had half of his soul in his own hands - that is, in the orphanage, little Bai six sold him the soul.

--That's his soul too.

Bai Liu will be able to completely wash away his identity as an evil god by using this half soul to re-land from the world line of the dense forest frontier, and instead of being a vessel for all his desires, he will be able to return to the world line as a normal human being.

But therein lies the problem .....

Lu Yizhan took a very sad sip of tea: "This cheating scheme is very fickle."

"It's true that we didn't expect Cen Buming and Daniel to get out of hand among us and everything that followed just completely fell apart."

Lu Yizhan paused, "I'm not sure how much sanity Bai Liu maintained at the end, whether he remembered the plan or not, or even if he could remember that he was Bai Liu, a human being, and not an evil god, or a key to a locked door, after he had blocked it."

"There are many more people here waiting for him."

"I hope he finds his way back."

"It's almost time for him to enter the game in the first place." Lu Yizhan let out a long breath as he stared blankly at his own reflection in the teacup, "That was the last worldline archive point that could be fused in with the dense forest frontier."

"If you miss it, he'll never come back."

Xie Ta returned home alone, having used his bonus and salary from

the Heresy Authority to buy the small house - the rental house where he and Bai Liu had lived together back in the day.

He clumsily followed his memory and renovated the house to look like that.

But the people who lived with him are no longer there.

Xie Ta opened his wardrobe and all that was hanging in there, apart from the uniform of the Heretic's Authority, was a very large and worn long, thin, ghostly leather puppet costume. position.

Bai Liu .....

I have well in pain.

When are you coming back?

The stars in the sky turned and aligned in some sort of trajectory, giving off a strange silvery-blue glow as a shooting star slid down.

Mu Sicheng's eyelids fluttered as he fell into a strange dream, a dream of many demons, a dream of Yuan Qingqing's death, a dream of something so unbelievably real, so real that he seemed to have actually experienced it -

-- dreamed of a strange man reaching out to him, wearing a white shirt.

[- Yes, I will always be your friend].

Mu Sicheng's eyes snapped open.

Liu Jiayi, who has just come out of an interview in the studio, receives the mineral water handed to her by her parents and her eyes suddenly go grey for a moment before she stops drinking.

"Around here ....." Liu Jiayi looked up very slowly at her parents, "do they have red bean pancakes?"

Her mother looked at her and was shocked: "Why are you crying, Jiayi?"

"Did I cry?" Liu Jiayi shed tears unconsciously as she covered her heart and murmured in a trance, "I don't know ....."

"I just have a sudden craving for red bean pancakes."

At the party, Muke, glamorous and crowded, looked down at his obsequious bastard son with his glass of red wine, and at his father, who was showing off his financial skills, and his irritation reached a crescendo.

..... might as well get a heart attack and leave this life early.

At least with heart disease you will encounter .....

As the idea flashed through Muke's mind, he was struck by a sudden shock.

Will meet ..... who?

Tang Erda was back at the Heretic's Office, with a grim look on his face as he watched over the heretics, and the interrogation room opposite was empty, no one had been in there for a long time, the last time anyone had been brought in for interrogation was Cen Buming.

He didn't like the interrogation room and never went in there, which Cen Buming used to make fun of him several times in a sinister way.

Normally, Tang Erda would have been fine with Cen Buming taunting him like this, and he did, but it was the interrogation room .....

Tang Erda's eyes fell steadily on the interrogation room, and he took a deep breath.

He always felt that he had, somewhere, done something very bad and subjected a person to something very tragic.

But he had never been in an interrogation room.

..... Who is this person who has left him with an unforgettable guilt and indebtedness in his heart?

When Xie Ta opened his eyes the next day, the Muppets on his body had more bruises, the house in front of him had something that said something about the popularity of the books in the study spread themselves out, fruit trays and melons appeared that he had never bought, the four corners of the table showed signs of nibbling, and on the bottom shelf of the fridge, there were two expired Cutie-Doos.

His pupils flinched.

..... This is ..... world lines are overlapping?

Xie Ta rushed out, his mind blank as he looked around the world.

So where could Bai Liu be?

The wax museum in the town of Siren no longer houses mermaids, thieves on the last last train of the night are caught red-handed stealing, the statues of the gods in the church in the broken orphanage have collapsed, and the scent of perfume in the rose factory has become mild and bland.

A moment when time and fate crossed paths and the fallen gods granted happiness to the Old Believers.

And the Old Believers never forget.

" Mu Sicheng, it's time for a birthday celebration, where are you running to!"

"Jiayi, Jiayi-chan, the interview is about to start, the studio is over there, Jiayi-chan! Where are you going!"

" Young Master Muke, later the Master will come to talk to you about the right to distribute shares in the Mu Group, this meeting is very important, you must speak to the Master properly ..... Young Master Muke where are you?!"

" Captain Tang, wait let's go rob the second team of heretics to take it out! You made a deal with us yesterday ..... eh, where's Captain Tang?"

The heart that lurks beneath the glacier, the sparks that fly in the dense forest.

I hate you.

I love you.

"This is Heresy Processing Bureau, Antarctic Bureau 4! Hello Mr. Spades, may I ask if you need us to send a special plane to pick you up and bring you here for your mission?"

"Has anyone new turned up at .....?"

"That's not true."

The evil gods traded feelings and pain for sacrifices, and on the shrine, the floating anchor was fished up for the first time to a reality other

than the game.

" The Heresy Authority branch here in Luming County hasn't seen any suspicious people show up either, Mr. Spades."

"Wearing a white shirt and suit trousers, about 176, good looking, any portrait? If so, we'll post a search notice for you then."

"Lest you call and come and ask for it every day."

Foolishly thinking she was not getting love, the anchor stubbornly travelled back in time to meet the lonely teenager under Qiao Mu.

"Hello, this is Qiao Mu Private High School."

"It's you again."

"..... We assure you that there has never been a student called Bai Liu in our school, have you remembered the wrong school? Please don't call again."

Verified over and over again, disappointed over and over again, the devotee begins to wonder if the gods are deceiving him or her.

Is he really coming back?

After spending the whole night searching all the addresses, Xie Ta, as usual, had no luck. He was ready to return to his rented house, but the moment he inserted the key into the door, Xie Ta was stunned - the lock he had left behind before he left was unlocked.

He pushed the door open.

The man standing next to the window, wearing a white shirt and suit trousers, stared blankly into the rising daylight at the man who was looking at him with a smile on his face.

Bai Liu stands against the light, his smile arched in his eyes.

"I'm back."

"Do you want to join us for hotpot tonight?"

The Final Future

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Of course, the hotpot didn't work out, but Xie Ta broke out.

When Bai Liu was held down on the bed, the evil god lord, who had been a key without a sex life for years, hadn't reacted to what his devotee was up to and was still catching up with great interest, "I can't believe they've all learned to live on their own, I think I left back in the day ..... Well."

Then there was no more then.

It is the next afternoon when Bai Liu opens his eyes. He wakes up slowly, and as soon as he moves, Xie Ta wakes up quickly next to him.

Bai Liu: "..... Give a mouthful of food before you do it."

Xie Ta dressed Bai Liu, pressed him to the bed and kissed him for a while, asking, "What do you want to eat?"

Bai Liu lazily nuzzles Xie Ta's neck, eyes half-lidded, and asks with a smile, "What can you do?"

Xie Ta is of course ..... will do nothing.

He had been eating in the Heretic's canteen all year, on missions all day, with few days off, usually falling asleep when he came back, and occasionally not, cuddling with a Muppet all night.

"What do you want to eat?" Xie Ta stared straight at Bai Liu, "I'm learning now."

Bai Liu: "....."

That's not necessary, I'll probably be over-starved by the time you learn.

After Bai Liu asked Xie Ta about his salary and current balance, the penniless evil god lamented in a mixed voice: "I didn't think you'd have a car, a house, five insurance and a pension, and a monthly salary of over 10,000. ....."

"You've lived the life I could only dream of back then."

Xie Ta said, "It's all yours."

Bai Liu was so relieved to hear this, he gave Xie Ta a kiss and smiled: "Let's go out to eat, your treat."

"Have the hotpot."

Xie Ta didn't know how to drive a car, but he remembered that Bai Liu liked to drive a motorbike, so he bought one, but he didn't usually ride it to and from work because he could move faster on his own than on a motorbike, so he kept it there.

"Wow." Bai Liu surveyed the garage and his eyes glowed, "You even have a garage."

" Lu Yizhan asked to buy it." Xie Ta explains, "saying that the house with a set of garages would be more convenient to live in and would be more valuable, and you would like it more, so you bought it all."

Bai Liu gave the bike a couple of twists, the handles were brand new and Xie Ta had never really used them before.

As if he had thought about it a thousand times in his head, Xie Ta naturally put on his helmet and then wrapped it around Bai Liu's waist, pulling him back and spreading his legs around Bai Liu, whose back was pressed against Xie Ta's chest, so tightly that he paused for a moment.

"You loosen up a bit." Bai Liu said.

"Why?" Xie Ta didn't let go.

"The motorbike is jarring to drive." Bai Liu euphemistically states, "It will react."

Xie Ta's tone was natural: "It's normal to react to you."

-meant to react and didn't let go, just held on, he didn't feel anything.

"....." Bai Liu exhaled while his face heated up, he had been a key for ten years, and all of a sudden he came to earth, and for a moment he didn't quite understand if the rituals of this world were not quite the same as before.

Bai Liu wondered from the bottom of his heart why this lizard, could

still say such things so openly?

Hasn't he been a human being for ten years?

"No, it affects my driving." Bai Liu's tone went down firmly. "You go a bit further back."

Xie Ta paused, barely a centimetre loose, "Oh."

It sounded light in tone, but there was just something reluctant about it.

Anyway, when he finally got the motorbike out of the garage, Bai Liu was driving and heard the phone ringing on the road with Xie Ta behind him, but Xie Ta didn't answer it, so Bai Liu asked, "Who's calling?"

His smile faded a little, "Still coming to you on break, been making so many phone calls, you guys have a good relationship, right?"

After all, ten years had passed and it was only natural that Xie Ta should have an intimate relationship other than his.

Xie Ta's voice is a bit muffled: "It's a good relationship, but I don't want to talk to him right now."

"He pays my salary."

Bai Liu's tone became more sincere after a pause: "Take it, you have to support me, you can't lose your job."

Xie Ta answered the phone and Lu Yizhan's hysterical, broken voice came from the other side: " Spades, is Bai Liu at your place!!!"

Xie Ta paused for a moment, held the phone a little further away and lied lightly, "No."

"Absolutely!!!" Lu Yizhan was practically yelling, "Bureau 4 and I said you didn't even call over to ask about Bai Liu today, you must have found Bai Liu, give me Bai Liu you lizard!"

"I'm telling you, we have a lot of things to consult him on our side, all very important and serious matters, you are not allowed to sneak in and hog him all by yourself ..... dood ....."

Xie Ta hung up the phone with a blank face, tapped out Lu Yizhan's identity card, blacked it out, paused, and then turned off the phone

again before tucking it back into his pocket with relief.

Bai Liu was driving his motorbike, the wind whistling in his helmet, he didn't hear much of what Xie Ta was saying, and after hearing Xie Ta hang up the phone, Bai Liu casually asked, "What did your boss tell you?"

"I told him my lover was back." Xie Ta said shallowly, "He said he'd give me two more days off to spend with you and not worry about work for a while."

Bai Liu is eerily silent for two minutes.

What kind of boss is there in this world?

How had he never come across it before?

Bai Liu parked his motorbike outside the shop, took off his helmet, locked it up and turned his head to Xie Ta with a smile on his face again, "Then let's have a good rest for a couple of days before I go out to look for a job."

Xie Ta, who was taking his helmet off, gave a start when he said, "..... looking for a job?"

"Yeah." Bai Liu takes it for granted, "I don't have any money now, I'll have to eat later, so of course I'll have to find a job."

"But I don't know what kind of suitable job I can find anymore."

Bai Liu speaks with some heartfelt bitterness: "Although the world lines have merged, most traces of me are still erased, I have no qualifications, no work experience and not many jobs that I can do."

Despite being an evil god with many strange abilities, these abilities don't make a living, and Bai Liu doesn't want to earn money with them.

"I'll have to ask you to feed me for a while." Bai Liu smiled, and he leaned over very gently and whispered in Xie Ta's ear, "I can pay you in kind for feeding me."

Xie Ta: "!!!"

What a good thing ..... No, Xie Ta took a deep breath, shook her head, shook the jumbled thoughts out of her head and looked straight at Bai Liu: "Aren't you going to see them?"

This is what he finds strange, Bai Liu came back only to him, so far not even Lu Yizhan contacted him and went to look for a job two days later and stayed with him in between .....

Is this not going to meet those people?

Bai Liu lowered his helmet and turned his back to Xie Ta, his voice calm: "There's no need to meet, is there?"

"They don't even remember me."

Xie Ta was stunned, and he was about to say that Fang Dian and Lu Yizhan remembered you, when he saw Bai Liu turn to him with a smile and say, "And knowing me would be an unmitigated disaster for all these people, wouldn't it?"

"The me that knew them before didn't bring anything good to them, and the me that knows them again now doesn't seem to bring anything other than interference with their already good and peaceful lives now."

"So it's still ....." Bai Liu raised his eyes and he intoned a smile, "That's all it takes."

"I just need to be with you."

Xie Ta's words of explanation reached his lips and were interrupted by Bai Liu's last words, which stopped on the edge of his mouth as he stared at Bai Liu, slowly repeating his words, "..... only with me, with me?"

Bai Liu nodded with an unmistakable natural attitude as he turned to Xie Ta and smiled almost a little warmly, "Yeah, with you it's fine."

Xie Ta's gaze straightened: "Good."

"Then it's just with me."

They went into the hotpot restaurant, meanwhile, outside Xie Ta's house.

Mu Sicheng hammered the door of the room with a grim look on his face, "The man is not here."

"I called Bai Liu's phone earlier, but I couldn't get through, he's probably just arrived on this world line and hasn't got a phone yet." Muke pushed his gold-rimmed glasses, the white light on them

flashing as he explained in a gentle tone, "I can't rule out the possibility that Spades the lizard didn't want us to have access to Bai Liu and wanted him all to himself, so he deliberately didn't get Bai Liu a phone."

"It's not to rule out the possibility." Liu Jiayi, wearing sunglasses, she's a celebrity now and wears them when she travels, clutches her chest, her tone icy, "Yes more than likely."

"Don't incriminate Spades yet." Tang Erda called Xie Ta while taking a deep breath to reassure the group, "I work with him, he's calm and steady, he doesn't look like this kind of person, I'll call him up later and ask around ....."

"Beep - the number you have called is switched off, please call again later ....."

A group of people stared straight at Tang Erda.

Tang Erda: "....."

Spades, you dog lizard!

Bai Liu finished his hot pot and he walked out of the hot pot restaurant to the dull street lights and light snow falling from the sky.

These things dawned on him for a moment.

In the door, the passage of time was not perceptible, and he had forgotten that there were actually such things as seasons in this world.

Xie Ta took off his jacket and put it on Bai Liu's shoulders. Bai Liu was stunned for a moment as he gathered his jacket and found some warmth on it: "You ....."

"There's body heat."

"Well." Xie Ta looked at Bai Liu very quietly, his voice as soft as falling snow, as if he was afraid to scare him away, "I had it right after you shut the door."

"I still have a heartbeat."

Xie Ta placed Bai Liu's cold hand on his chest and raised his eyes to look at him intently and seriously: "Now it's a fast dance."

Bai Liu's long, snow-fallen eyelashes trembled as he looked at Xie Ta's

handsome, unrealistic face in the streetlight, leaned over and slowly closed his eyes.

--This scene now is so perfect for kissing.

Xie Ta also embraced Bai Liu's shoulders, and he leaned down, eyes downcast, to kiss.

Xie Ta instantly reached out with his right hand and grasped it, his gaze cold as he turned his hand to throw it back.

"Spades, the dog lizard!" Mu Sicheng came cursing, his eyes red as he looked at the stunned, thinly dressed Bai Liu under the streetlight, and opened his mouth to curse, " Bai Liu, you're no good either!"

"I can't believe you didn't tell us when you got back! Did you not treat us like friends!"

Bai Liu was at a loss for words, he didn't know what to say, "I ....."

Mu Sicheng lunged forward, shouting hysterically as he did so, "You beast!"

He cried and hammered Bai Liu: "You're just happy to torture us! Seeing us suffer for you!"

"The new evil god set huh!"

"Don't hit Bai Liu." Muke quickly came to the rescue, looking at Bai Liu, his eyes also glowing red, and took two deep breaths before he spoke with difficulty, "But you really didn't do the right thing this time, Bai Liu."

Bai Liu, who thought Muke would be on his side: "....."

He apologised in kind, still with a little smile on his face, "Well, I was wrong."

"You're such a big animal!" Liu Jiayi raised her hand and pelted Bai Liu with a snowball as she cried, "Buy me a lifetime of red bean cakes!"

The grin on Bai Liu's face was becoming more and more obvious as he raised his hand to deflect Liu Jiayi's snowball and pretended to plead, "I'm unemployed right now, so it's a bit difficult for me to fulfil this requirement."

"Who cares!" Liu Jiayi cried and yelled at him, "Buy it for me!"

"Okay, okay." Tang Erda saw that Bai Liu's lips were white with cold, he quickly took off his clothes to give Bai Liu a hand, only to see that Bai Liu already had one on his shoulders, Tang Erda frowned and picked it up, "Who gave you that jacket, so thin?"

"Drape it over me."

Xie Ta stares coldly at Tang Erda's jacket from the side.

But there was no stopping it.

He has always had a poor sense of temperature, so his clothes are light, and his jacket is indeed a little thin for Bai Liu now.

But that's okay, this winter is sure to be warm and lively.

" Bai Liu, go and buy a coat." Xie Ta said.

Chapter End Notes

> This translation is a personal project born out of my admiration for 壶鱼辣椒 and their extraordinary ability to craft a story that transcends borders. My goal was to bring their voice to a new audience while remaining true to the essence of the original work.
>
> Working on this novel has been an enriching experience—one that deepened my appreciation for the nuances of language and the universal themes that connect us all. I hope this translation conveys the heart of the story and allows you, the reader, to experience its magic as I did.
>
> Thank you for joining me on this literary journey. Translating this book was a labor of love, and I’m grateful for the opportunity to share it with you.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!

Table of Contents

Preface
The small town of Siren
The small town of Siren
The small town of Siren
The small town of Siren
The small town of Siren
The small town of Siren
The small town of Siren
The small town of Siren
The small town of Siren
The small town of Siren
The small town of Siren
The small town of Siren
The small town of Siren
The small town of Siren
The small town of Siren
The small town of Siren
The small town of Siren
The small town of Siren
The small town of Siren
The small town of Siren
The small town of Siren
The small town of Siren
The small town of Siren
The small town of Siren
The small town of Siren
The small town of siren
The small town of siren
The small town of siren
The small town of siren
The small town of siren
The small town of siren
The small town of siren
Lobby
Lobby
Lobby
Reality
Reality
Reality
Lobby
Lobby
Burst Last Train
Burst Last Train

Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Burst last train
Lobby
Lobby
Reality
Reality
Reality
Reality
Reality
Reality
Reality
Lobby
Lobby
Lobby
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home

The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home
The Loving Welfare Home

The Loving Welfare Home
Lobby
Reality
Reality
Reality
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Bureau of Heresy and Dangerous Treatment
The Rose Factory
The Rose Factory
The Rose Factory
The Rose Factory
The Rose Factory
The Rose Factory
The Rose Factory
The Rose Factory
The Rose Factory
The Rose Factory
The Rose Factory
The Rose Factory
The Rose Factory
The Rose Factory
The Rose Factory

The Rose Factory
The Rose Factory
The Rose Factory

The Rose Factory
The Rose Factory
The Rose Factory
The Rose Factory
The Rose Factory
Reality
Reality
Reality
Reality
Reality
Reality
Reality
Reality
Reality
The Game Pool
The Game Pool
The Game Pool
The Game Pool
The Game Pool
The Game Pool
The Game Pool
The Game Pool
The Game Pool
The Game Pool
The Game Pool
The Game Pool
The Game Pool
The Game Pool
The Ice Age
The Ice Age
The Ice Age
The Ice Age
The Ice Age
The Ice Age
The Ice Age
The Ice Age
The Ice Age
The Ice Age
The Ice Age
The Ice Age
The Ice Age
The Ice Age

The Ice Age
The Ice Age
The Ice Age
The Ice Age
The Ice Age
Reality
Reality
Reality
Reality
Reality
Reality
Reality
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands

The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Dense Forest Borderlands
The Game Pool
The Game Pool
The Game Pool
The Game Pool
The Game Pool
The Game Pool
The Game Pool
Reality
Reality
The Game Pool
Pre-season
Pre-season
Pre-season
Pre-season
Pre-season
Pre-season
Pre-season
Pre-season
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village

Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Yinshan Village
Pre-season
Pre-season
Pre-season
Pre-season
Pre-season
Pre-season
Pre-season
Pre-season
Pre-season
Pre-season
How to Own Five Buildings
How to Own Five Buildings
How to Own Five Buildings
How to Own Five Buildings
How to Own Five Buildings
How to Own Five Buildings
How to Own Five Buildings
How to Own Five Buildings
How to Own Five Buildings
How to Own Five Buildings
How to Own Five Buildings
How to Own Five Buildings
How to own Five buildings

How to Own Five Buildings
How to Own Five Buildings
How to Own Five Buildings
How to Own Five Buildings
How to Own Five Buildings
How to Own Five Buildings
How to Own Five Buildings
How to Own Five Building
How to Own Five Building
How to Own Five Building
How to Own Five Building
How to Own Five Building
How to Own Five Building
How to Own Five Building
Pre-season
Pre-season
Pre-season
Pre-season
The First World Line
The First World Line
The First World Line
The First World Line
The First World Line
The First World Line
The First World Line
The First World Line
The First Word Line
The First World Line
The First World Line
The Challenge
The Challenge
The Challenge
The Challenge
Living Together (Extra)
The Challenge
The Challenge
Evil God Festival - Boathouse
Evil God Festival – Boathouse
Evil God Festival – Boathouse
Evil God Festival – Boathouse
Evil God Festival – Boathouse
Evil God Festival – Boathouse
Evil God Festival – Boathouse
Evil God Festival – Boathouse

Evil God Festival – Boathouse
Evil God Festival – Boathouse
Evil God Festival – Boathouse

Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
Qiao Mu Private High School
The Challenge
The Challenge
The Challenge
The Challenge
The Challenge
The Challenge
The Challenge
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky

City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
City in the Sky
Playoffs
Playoffs
Playoffs
Playoffs
Playoffs
Playoffs
Playoffs
The Lost Land of Gold
The Lost Land of Gold
The Lost Land of Gold
The Lost Land of Gold
The Lost Land of Gold
The Lost Land of Gold
The Lost Land of Gold
The Lost Land of Gold
The Lost Land of Gold
The Lost Land of Gold
The Lost Land of Gold
The Lost Land of Gold
The Lost Land of Gold
The Lost Land of Gold
Playoffs

Playoffs
Playoffs
Playoffs
Playoffs
Playoffs
The Drowning Man from the Future
The Drowning Man from the Future
The Drowning Man from the Future
The Drowning Man from the Future
The Drowning Man from the Future
The Drowning Man from the Future
The Drowning Man from the Future
The Evil God's Game
The Evil God's Game
The Temple of Nightmares
The Temple of Nightmares
The Temple of Nightmares
The Temple of Nightmares
The Final Future
The Final Future
The Final Future
Afterword